Blood

by The_Lord_of_Chaos

Summary

Harry's sent reeling when he learns that Professor Snape is his bio dad, and if that were all he had to deal with, he'd probably be all right, but he's got werewolves, escaped convicts, a stubborn Dark Lord, and his own inner demons to deal with. Starts third year. Rating mostly for violence. Story deals with mental health, bigotry and child abuse. See more notes inside.

Notes

I'm so excited, this story is finally done after over five years of planning and writing. I've long been a fan of the Snape as Harry's dad genre and I like to think that I've added my own twist to the tale.

I know that this chapter borrowed quite a bit from cannon, but I do intend to largely diverge in many areas. This won't just be third year if Snape was Harry's dad. For those who are interested I've got a few trigger warnings and content advisories. If you like surprises, please skip ahead. Warnings for extreme violence, aftermath of off screen torture, child abuse, food uncertainty and other similar issues, a character's crass comment about rape, suicidal thoughts, internalized-homophobia, PTSD. For just a general content advisory, and some of this is very much a big spoiler, but people took issue with me not warning them that Harry becomes a werewolf (People seem concerned that this is going to become a furry or dom/sub sex thing so here is me saying it's not, at all. Nothing against that, but Harry's
pretty young in this story and I didn't have any interest taking it there). Also this story has a minor transgender character and several main characters who are not straight. It should go without saying that if any of this isn't your thing then you are free to turn back now. So now without further ramblings from me...

See the end of the work for more notes.
Birth

Being a wizard who wasn't allowed to do magic, Harry thought, must be like being a fighter pilot who'd been grounded. Considering his racing broomstick locked up in the cupboard under the stairs, along with most of his other magical items, Harry felt he had a very good idea how a grounded fighter pilot felt. Harry was a wizard: he performed spells with a wand, flew high up in the sky at dangerous speeds on a broomstick, brewed potions in a cauldron, and occasionally went on adventures with his best friends. He even went to school in a magic castle, Hogwarts School of Witchcraft and Wizardry. Unfortunately, having only had two years of magical training under his belt, he was relegated to being about as magicless as his muggle relatives, the Dursleys. Over the summer holidays, the Decree for the Reasonable Restriction of Underage Sorcery dictated that he wasn't to perform any magic whatsoever.

The Dursleys were the family that Harry had lived with since he had been an infant and his parents had been killed. However, the Dursleys had never treated Harry like he was a child in their care, much less like he was family. The Dursleys had an obsession with being normal, especially with being perceived by their neighbors as being normal. The problem was that they had an extreme intolerance of anything they perceived to be abnormal. Thus magic, and by extension their wizard nephew Harry, was likely at the top of the list of things they considered to be unwelcome in their house. Why his Aunt Petunia and his Uncle Vernon hadn't sent Harry off into the foster system the moment he had been left on their doorstep, Harry didn't know. There were certainly times he wished that they had.

At the moment, Harry was lying on his bed in his bedroom, or rather Dudley's second bedroom, which Harry had been moved into when his first Hogwarts acceptance letter had arrived when he was soon to be eleven. Prior to that, the cupboard under the stairs had been his bedroom, and it was days such as the one he was dealing with that made him sort of almost wish he could still fit down there. At the very least, it kept him out of the way. It was a rainy day and Harry had decided to stay inside with a book. Not one of his magic books of course. As far as the Dursleys knew, all of those were locked up in the cupboard. Harry, however, had several of his school books under the loose floorboard next to his bed. It had been a risk, picking the lock on the cupboard and sneaking them out, but he had summer homework to do, and didn't feel like telling his professors that he hadn't done it because his relatives hated magic. Not that they'd been able to tell that a few books were missing, it was his wand that his uncle checked for regularly, to make sure it was still locked up in the cupboard. The book that he was reading was an old worn book that he had pulled out of the grab bin at the library. It wasn't the peak of literature, but it kept him from going stir crazy on a rainy day with nothing else to do.

Unfortunately, at that moment, his cousin Dudley also felt that he had nothing to do while stuck inside on a rainy day. This was quite untrue though, Dudley had just about every toy imaginable, several computer games, and a host of books that he had never read sitting in his room. Yet for the boy who had everything, it seemed, there was only one form of entertainment that never seemed to grow old.

"Hey Potter," he said in the same manner his mother occasionally said the word freak.

"Hmm?" Harry said, not looking up from his book.
"Let's play a game Potter," he said. "Come on, it'll be fun."

"Fun for you, I'm sure," Harry said. Dudley's games didn't really allow for fun for all. Harry continued to keep his face in his book, as though he wasn't concerned that his very large cousin was standing in his doorway. "What did you have in mind? Harry hunting, smash the ponce, cops and robbers, or have you come up with an other excuse to rough me up?"

Harry wasn't a little kid, he'd faced down a dark wizard, slew a basilisk, and saved his best friend's sister's life. He knew he was in a precarious position at the moment, but he was well past putting up with Dudley's horrid games.

"Well if you'd rather just skip to the end..." Dudley hefted his meaty fist nonchalantly.

"The end where you wind up with another pigs tail, you mean?" Harry asked. "Or maybe it's donkey ears this time."

Dudley's hands flew to his backside for a moment before he regained his composure. With a smirk he said, "You can't, Dad locked up your wand, he checks for it now and then, you can't do anything."

"Didn't stop me that time at the zoo, or any of the other times I didn't have it. We can do magic without, you know. The wand just makes it easier. No, I shouldn't have any trouble dealing with you."

Dudley hesitated a moment before, "Then what? you'll be expelled. You can't do that stuff out of school. That letter said so."

"That was last year's warning," Harry said. "If I'd done magic again then, sure, I'd have been in some trouble. But this is a new summer. I've still got one warning this summer."

"You're bluffing," Dudley said.

Harry was bluffing, he really didn't know what would happen if he did any magic, and he certainly couldn't be certain of any accidental magic if he needed it. It had been hit and mostly miss when he was younger.

"You willing to risk a rat's nose to find out?" Harry asked.

"Dad'd beat the shite out of you. There's still a bunch of time till you go back to school."

"It'd be worth it though," Harry said lightly, his face still in his book, as though he was enjoying the prospect of seeing dudley with a rat's nose and that his uncle's anger wasn't that much of a concern for him.

"Prove it then," Dudley challenged.

"What?" Harry asked. "You want me to waste my freebie? With most of the summer still ahead of me? No, I'll hold on to it for now, unless I need it."

"You're so full of shite Potter," Dudley said it angrily, but Harry could hear a bit of fear in his voice.

"No, I'm not," Harry said, feeling a bit bolder. "But you know what else I'm not full of, not any more." Harry turned finally to Dudley. "Fear. I'm not afraid of you any more, not like you're afraid of magic. So why don't you get out of my room, and close the door on your way out. I'm not
"I'm not afraid of your stupid magic," Dudley said, clearly more angry now, and with a menacing step forward Dudley said, "I've got a good game in mind though."

"No..." Dudley's least favorite word to hear was about as far as he got before Dudley crossed the room. Harry tried to scramble up from his position on the bed, but Dudley shoved him down. Suddenly Dudley was on top of him, and Harry was vividly reminded of when they had been younger, and Dudley would pin him down and pummel him. Dudley didn't even bother to pin his arms, as scrawny as Harry was, there was very little he could do against Dudley's massive frame. Dudley punched him in the nose.

"Ouch, you stupid..." Dudley's hand clamped down over his mouth.

"I'm not stupid," Dudley said fiercely. "You're stupid. Stupid stupid stupid. Poor pathetic Potter's stupider than a sack of shite. You know what Potter? You talk too much. I wouldn't want you to say anything else so stupid." The pillow under Harry's head was ripped away, and then it was over his face. Harry had trouble breathing and suddenly he felt a panic inside his chest. Harry's arms started flailing about wildly and largely ineffectively while Dudley's free hand started digging its knuckles in between Harry's ribs. He was suffocating; he couldn't breathe. He tried to turn his head to the side so that he could gasp a breath but it felt like he was pinned in place, like someone had their hand on the back of his head forcing his face into the scratchy surface of the pillow. He couldn't breath through his nose, which was currently clogged with blood and snot, and as he gasped for breath through his mouth, it felt like the material of the pillow filled his jaws. Merlin, he was going to suffocate to death. His own cousin was killing him. He started to feel faint. Suddenly the pillow was ripped off of his face.

"Just say it, I dare you," his cousin was saying through clenched teeth. "Just say I'm stupid one more time. See what happens."

Harry was furious with his cousin, more furious than he felt he had ever been before, he wanted to scream and yell at him and tell him exactly how stupid he was, but in the moment, no words came out. Furious with himself now, he lashed out in about the only way he could see how. He spat in Dudley's face. Dudley quickly returned the gesture and punched Harry in the short ribs. He wiped the saliva off his own face and then started smearing it, along with his own, over Harry's face, spit mixing with blood from Harry's nose. Harry was still gasping for breath. Then Dudley's hand was clamped down over his face, and with his one uncovered eye, Harry could see Dudley's face hovering over his. His cousin gathered some phlegm from his throat and let it slowly creep out of his mouth. A line of spit getting closer and closer to Harry's eye. Harry tried to squirm out of the way, but he couldn't budge. Harry started to panic again as the disgusting contents of his cousins throat inched down towards his eye. Suddenly though, it felt like his cousin wasn't on top of him anymore, though he could see him still hovering over his face. Dudley now had a look of bewildered panic on his face. And Harry could see with both eyes now, Dudley's hand wasn't on his face anymore, though now it looked like Dudley's forearm was coming strait out of Harry's face. An instant after Harry noticed all of this, he realized that he felt like he was falling. His vision went black momentarily and then he landed with a thud on the floor under his bed. His cousin gave a shout of alarm. Harry didn't even think twice before rolling out from under the bed and making a dash for the door. Racing down stairs, he suddenly thought that it wouldn't be so bad to spend the afternoon in the rain.

"What's all this ruckus," his uncle said, stepping out of the kitchen. Harry could hear Dudley's thundering footsteps behind him.
"Dad, dad. Harry did you know what on me," Dudley cried out, and Harry's heart plummeted into his stomach.

His uncle gave a roar as Harry tried to squeeze past him for the front door. He had been quite good at this when he was younger. Yet as he had grown older, though he hadn't grown that much, it had become harder to slip through his uncle's grasp.

"What did you do to my son," his uncle roared, pushing Harry against the wall.

"Nothing," Harry said. "I didn't do anything to him, I swear."

His uncle smacked him in the face. "Don't you lie to me boy, now what did you do."

"It was an accident," Harry said. "It didn't even do anything to him, look at him, he's fine."

Uncle Vernon looked Dudley over with a critical eye, but seeing that nothing seemed to be wrong with him, he turned his thunderous gaze back towards Harry.

"First that bloody phone call from one of your freak friends, now you're using your unnaturalness under my roof on my son. Up to your room boy, now, I'll deal with you in a minute." He let Harry go and pushed him in the direction of the stairs.

Harry trudged up, passed a triumphant looking Dudley, and then walked into his room. He could hear his Uncle checking on Dudley, and Dudley giving some sob story. Then he heard what he had been dreading, the sound of his Uncle coming up the stairs to his room. He'd managed to avoid this for most of the summer by staying mostly under the radar.

About ten minutes later an owl arrived from the ministry. This of course just renewed his uncles anger. Harry didn't get to read it for a while, and after he got over the fact that he wasn't being expelled, Harry became quite embarrassed over the overall tone of the letter. The Improper Use of Magic Office had basically written to say that they had detected anomalous magic and admonished him that a boy his age should have better control over accidental magic. Harry rather thought that, living with the Dursleys, it was a wonder he didn't lose control more often. All in all, Harry figured that it was probably the worst day of summer so far, and hopefully the rest of summer too. Yet as Harry settled in to sleep that night, sore from earlier and generally angry at life the universe and everything, he found he couldn't hold on to his misery as a feeling of peace suffused him and he felt oddly content as he drifted off to sleep.

It was a few days before Harry was allowed out of his room for anything besides chores, and the fairer weather saw Harry wandering the streets of Little Whinging. Luckily, he didn't have to worry about the neighbors seeing any bruises from the events of the days prior. He had never bruised easily, something Dudley had taken full advantage of growing up, and the few small bruises he had had had already faded by the time he'd been allowed outside again.

The summer had been grinding along very slowly, but though it had seemed like ages, Harry's birthday was almost upon him. Tomorrow he would be thirteen. His birthday of course had never been a cause for celebration, but as he worked on his homework after his relatives had gone to sleep, Harry found himself repeatedly looking at his clock as it wound it's way towards midnight. After a while, Harry put his homework away, under the loose floorboard by his bed and just waited.
Harry wished Hedwig wasn't off flying; in two minutes the clock would strike midnight and he would be thirteen. He rather wished he had some company, though at least Hedwig wasn't locked up in her cage and he could keep in contact with his friends, unlike last summer. Still though, she had been gone for a few days and Harry rather missed having company at Privet Drive that didn't glare at him. Harry glanced back at the clock; only one minute to go.

He looked out of his open window and did a double take. Silhouetted against the moon was a bizarre looking creature that looked to be flying right towards his window. A moment later, Harry saw that it wasn't one creature but four, four owls flying towards Harry's window. Harry recognized Hedwig, his large snowy owl, who his friend Hagrid had given him for his eleventh birthday. She was carrying a small package bound in twine that she clutched in her talons. Also in the cluster of owls was Errol, the Weasley family owl. Errol was a very old owl, and he looked to be having trouble with the package he was carrying, Hedwig and a small brown barn owl carrying an envelope looked to be helping the disheveled looking owl to carry its package. The last owl, flying just below the other three, was big tawny owl; it was carrying a largish parcel with an envelope on top.

Harry went to the window and opened it all the way. The lone owl swooped through and dropped its delivery on Harry's bed. The three tandem owls stopped at the window sill and Harry quickly relieved poor Errol of his package before taking the exhausted owl to Hedwig's cage where he could drink some water. The brown barn owl left its large envelope on Harry's desk and flew out the window without taking a moment to rest.

Harry turned and greeted Hedwig, who preened under his attention as he took the package from her talons and offered her his other arm to latch on to. Harry grabbed the package that Errol had brought and walked over to his bed, happily chatting with Hedwig, who was affectionately nipping at his shoulder.

Harry set Hedwig to perch on his bedpost as he picked open the package that Errol had brought. Inside he found a letter, a newspaper clipping, and an odd crystal with a scrap of paper rolled around it. Harry turned the clipping over after seeing a partial article about stellar alignment and was rather surprised to see the entire Weasley clan in the photograph standing in front of a pyramid and waving enthusiastically towards Harry. Harry read the accompanying article.

'Ministry of Magic Employee Scoops Grand Prize,' read the article title. It looked like Arthur Weasley, Ron's father, had won a drawing at the Daily Prophet. The family was vacationing in Egypt where Ron's brother Bill worked as a curse breaker.

Harry grinned broadly, the Weasleys were the best family he knew; the summer prior they had taken him into their home, saving Harry from a full summer with the Dursleys. They were also, however, very poor and Harry couldn't think of anyone else who more deserved to win such a prize. Harry turned his attention to the letter, which was from his best friend, Ron Weasley.

Ron, it seemed, was having a great time in Egypt. His brother Bill was giving them tours of all the ancient tombs in the area. He would be getting a new wand as well. Harry rather wished he was in Egypt with his best friend at the moment.

Harry unrolled the paper from around the crystal and saw that Ron had sent him a Sneakoscope, a magical device that would let him know when someone untrustworthy was around. Harry grinned as he picked up the sneakoscope and placed it on his nightstand. Next Harry turned his attention to the package that Hedwig had brought him, on top was a letter from Hermione, his other best friend.

Hermione, it turned out, was in France with her parents and seemed to be enjoying herself a great deal. She too asked if he would meet up in London in the week before term. Harry didn't know
what he would tell them. He wasn't even sure how he would be getting to the Hogwarts Express that year. The Dursleys had been less tolerant of him this summer than they had started out the summer before. Though it was still better then the end of his stay with them last summer when he had been locked in his room with bars on his window.

Harry smiled at Hermione's letter and then eagerly eyed the parchment around his present, though he was sure that Hermione had just sent him a book judging by the shape and weight of the package. Harry dug some owl treats out of his nightstand and gave them to Hedwig.

"What a good girl you are, carrying this all the way from the continent, and in time for my birthday too." Hedwig looked proud under his attention and Harry started tearing at the parchment.

When he opened the package, however, he was very pleasantly surprised to see that it was not a large book, but a broom servicing kit. Harry wished that he had snuck his broom out of the cupboard under the stairs as well. He missed flying almost as much as he missed his friends during the summer. Harry turned to the last package. On top was an envelope bearing the Hogwarts crest. Harry saw that the package was from Hagrid. Untying the package and unwrapping the paper, Harry was very surprised when whatever was inside opened up and then snapped shut before it slid off of his bed with a thud and darted under.

Harry's heart seemed to stop for a moment as he stopped to listen for any signs that his relatives had awoken. As moments passed though, the only sounds he heard was a snoring from his cousins room and a slight scurrying sound from under his bed. The last thing he needed was another fight with his uncle, and waking the man up in the middle of the night, with whatever strange creature was under his bed, was a great way to start a rather unpleasant one.

Harry crouched down rather nervously. Hagrid would never send Harry anything he thought was dangerous. However, Hagrid had named a ferocious cerberus Fluffy, and had thought that raising a baby dragon in his small wooden cabin was a good idea. Hagrid just didn't have a normal sense of what was dangerous. Harry saw whatever the thing was huddled against the wall under his bed. Harry reached under his bed for it but had to stifle a yelp as it chomped down on his hand. Luckily, it didn't seem to have any teeth. Harry backed up as the thing started moving towards him. Once it was out from under his bed, Harry was bewildered to see that it was a book. He lunged at it, flattening the thing with his body. Harry awkwardly took his belt off and wrapped it around the book and buckled it tight. Picking it up by the strap, Harry read "The Monster Book of Monsters' across the spine. Harry read the note that came with the book and was quite alarmed to see that Hagrid thought the biting book about monsters would come in handy in their next year. Harry frowned; he really hoped Hagrid hadn't gotten a new pet he wanted help with. Harry picked up the letter from Hogwarts and broke the seal. It started rather like he expected last years had started, if he had ever gotten that letter, until he got to the part about Hogsmeade. The village by the school, third years and above were allowed to visit during certain weekends, provided they had a signed permission slip.

Now that really did put a damper on his birthday spirits. The Dursleys never liked to do anything that made Harry happy; they would never sign the form. Harry had heard about the town of Hogsmeade from older students, and he dearly did not want to be the only third year who was stuck in the castle while everyone else was having fun in the town.

Harry got up to put the letters on his desk but had to grab his pants to keep them from falling down. Dudley's hand me downs certainly had more than enough room in the waistband for Harry, as scrawny as he was. Harry rummaged around for a spare belt and found one in his closet. Formerly Dudley's, it was of course too big for him and would need a new hole for the buckle, but for the moment Harry was content to just tie the two ends together. Harry put his birthday gifts away in the
space under the loose floorboard. He was about ready to go to sleep when he spotted the envelope.

In the excitement of receiving birthday presents, he had forgotten the plain brown owl that had left its delivery on his desk. Harry picked up the letter, which was addressed to Mr. H. Potter, and opened it up, removing another envelope with a piece of parchment wrapped around it.

To Mr. H. Potter,

The enclosed envelope was left with our owl service, Streep's Owl Delivery, on 14 September 1981 to be delivered on 31 July 1993. The delivery of this letter concludes this transaction, there are no pending charges. We hope that you are satisfied with the services rendered and that you will consider Streep's Owl Delivery for your future owling needs. Please find below a listing of our services.

Harry disregarded the rest of the form letter and looked at the envelope with some trepidation. 1981? What could anyone have wanted to tell him now from when he was a baby. Harry turned the envelope over, on one side, written in green ink was just the word Harry. On the other side, sealing the envelope was a red wax seal depicting a lion on a hill top.

Harry nervously opened the envelope, choosing to tear the paper rather than break the wax seal. Inside were several sheets of parchment and a photograph. The first thing Harry noticed was that the letter had been written by two people. Some paragraphs were written with neat blocky letters, but the majority of the letter was written in smaller flowing cursive. Harry pulled the picture out of the envelope and stared at it with wide eyes. It was his parents, and in his mother's arms, smiling happily at something behind the camera, was himself, holding in his pudgy little hands a piece of board paper that said, 'Happy Thirteenth Birthday Harry'. Harry stared at the picture for a while, watching as his father looked down at the baby and then back at the camera with a grin and a wave. Harry turned to the letter.

My Dearest Harry, the letter started, and Harry's breath hitched, because surely there were only two people this letter could have been written by.

My Dearest Harry, he read again and cherished the words. If you are reading this, as only you can read this, then today you turned thirteen. Happy birthday my dear, you must be so big now. Though it is hard to imagine, since you are currently not much bigger than the cat.

Happy birthday Harry, the writing changed, his father's writing. I'm sorry we can't be there for your special day, but if you're reading this, then your mother and I have died. I can only hope you have had a happy childhood, though the trouble our world finds itself in now has often left me worried about your future.

Today you turned thirteen, his mother continued. Many see this as the beginning of when a young boy starts to become a young man. There are things that your father and I intend to tell you when you're older, but in case we are not there to help you process this information, we decided that this is an age when you might better handle this on your own. Though I do hope, however, that you have someone in your life who you can trust with this. Whether you are ready for this or not, though, this is when you need to know what we have to tell you.

This story started a long time ago. Your father and I met our first day at Hogwarts, we were sorted into the same house, Gryffindor. Unfortunately we did not get along; it wasn't until our seventh year that we started to become amicable, and by the end of that winter term, we had started dating.

Your mother said I had had some growing up to do before I became tolerable. I say my overwhelming charm just takes some getting used to.
Harry smiled, he knew so little about his parents, and anything they put in about themselves felt like something important about himself.

This isn't the story of how I married your father though. It is the tale of the first wizard I had ever met. When I was nine, I had done some accidental magic in the park, and a boy who lived in the area saw. He was the one who told me I was a witch, and about the wizarding world. His name was Severus Snape, and we soon became friends. A little over a year after that, we both received our Hogwarts letters. I was so excited, and so happy to already have a friend who would be going with me.

Harry certainly hadn't been expecting that, though he knew that Snape had gone to school with his parents. The thought of the man being in any way associated with his mother turned his stomach.

My first big disappointment came during the sorting. I was very happy to be sorted into Gryffindor, but sad that my friend had been sorted into another house, Slytherin. As I soon found out, our houses were supposed to be rivals. We stayed close friends, however, though this caused us some trouble from time to time. Severus was a brilliant student, and he always challenged me to do better than I'd thought I could. One of the things I wish he hadn't done well in, though, was his studies into the dark arts. Severus had had, at times, a rather traumatic childhood, and he came from a very broken home. I think he would be the first to say that I shouldn't be making excuses for him, but I do think that he always sought a power that could protect him from the many hurts in his life. Through it all I tried my best to be a good friend to him, though that often meant overlooking some of the things he got up to when I wasn't around. It was in our fifth year that we started dating. Unfortunately, this was also around the time he started to associate with some of the older students in his house.

Harry was really starting to reassess his earlier thought about learning more about his parents. Why was his mother telling him this? And how could she have dated Snape of all people?

As I said, Severus was a brilliant student, but it wasn't until our fifth year that he really gained the notice of his peers. Before then, I'm afraid, I was his only friend in the school. There were some in his house, like Lucious Malfoy and Belatrix Lestrange, who saw his skills and thought he would be useful to them.

This was the beginning of dark times for the wizarding world. You likely already know what the cause was. A dark wizard named Voldemort had started to raise followers. He preached blood purity and called for a new social order. While in the beginning, he and his followers did not commit any crimes publicly, there started to be many disappearances, and unexplained deaths. Mixed families found dead in their homes; supporters of equality who suddenly went silent. Malfoy and Lestrange were supporters of this dark wizard, and they often preached blood purity in the school. Not openly, of course, but they started drawing support from within their house and from the rest of the school as well.

I suppose I shouldn't have been, but I was shocked when I first saw Severus in a crowd of Malfoy's hangers-on. Unlike the dark magic, I couldn't ignore this. I confronted him; asked him how he could listen to a man like that: a man who thought I shouldn't be allowed in the wizarding world, much less the school. He told me that he wasn't there to listen about blood purity, but that a friendship with Lucious Malfoy would be good for his future. Malfoy, he said, could get him the best apprenticeship, the best job. Of course, what neither of us said was the obvious: there was only so much study one could do into the dark arts at Hogwarts, while old families like Malfoy's had access to many books that should never have been written. He assured me that he could never hate me for being a muggleborn.
Whatever his reasons, I felt that it was up to me to save him from the dark path he was walking. In the months that followed, I felt at times closer to him that I had ever felt to anyone before. I could not stop him from following the Dark Arts though, nor could I deafen him to the words of Lucius Malfoy or blind his ambitions that led him astray.

It was a few months later, in the middle of OWLs week that our relationship ended. Severus had always had an easily bruised ego, and a need to feel that he could take care of himself. One evening by the lake, a couple of other boys in our year had been bullying him, and I came to his defense. He cried out that he didn't need my help, and called me a mudblood.

I thought I would interject here, his father wrote. I was one of the boys who had been in the altercation with Snape. We had had a long rivalry, and he gave as good as he got. But I must confess that my behavior that day was abhorrent, and while I don’t regret our rivalry, I do regret the side of me it brought out. If there's one bit of fatherly advice I'd like to impart in this letter, it's that you should never use another's misdeeds to justify your own. I knew that Snape practiced the dark arts, and I used it as justification to act out my own hurtful instincts. There was no justification for what I did that day, and I hope that you can avoid the regrets that I amassed in my youth.

His mother continued. After those words passed his lips though, thoughts of his defense fled my mind and I fled the scene. I was incredibly hurt, entirely betrayed. I had been called that word a number of times before, but never by someone I cared about. I started to wonder if Severus had been harboring feelings against muggleborns for a while, and I had just been in this separate class in his mind.

I refused to talk to him for the next few days, and when I was ready to listen to him, I had already made up my mind. He begged me to forgive him, swore he would never say anything like that again, and told me that I was the only person he cared about. I forgave him, though I didn't tell him so; I wanted our relationship to continue, I wanted to forget that day had ever happened, and most of all, I wanted to guide Severus away from Malfoy and his sycophants. But I couldn't. I had something far more important to do, someone else I had to protect. In the days after that evening by the lake, I started to notice some odd symptoms and a simple spell showed me that I was pregnant. I trust that I do not need to go into detail to explain how this came to be. I will only say that at that age I was easily lost in the the wonder of such a relationship, and that I hope you understand the importance of responsible decisions in your youth. One indiscretion can change your life greatly.

Harry wasn't prone to cursing, but he started a quiet litany of words he had learned from Ron and his teammates, dreading what would come next.

There was only one person who could have been the father, and suddenly I was faced with a horrible dilemma. I couldn't trust that Severus would be able to handle having a child with a muggleborn. I couldn't risk raising a child with a man who felt contempt for his blood status. I wouldn't allow my child to grow up surrounded by the dark arts.

At the same time, I did wonder if a half-blood child could help me convince Severus to cut ties with Malfoy, and help to turn him away from the dark arts. In the end though, the choice was simple. I would protect my child, so I severed ties with Severus, and decided to keep the knowledge of my pregnancy from him. I hoped that he would someday be the person I could trust and raise a child with, but I knew that at that moment, he wasn't.

Harry was struggling to keep quiet as he read. Did he have a half sibling somewhere? Had they been adopted; one of his older classmates? The thought of it was almost as exciting as it was
disturbing. He returned to the letter for answers.

There was one big issue though; magic might have helped to hide the fact that I was pregnant over the next nine months, but I couldn't have hidden the birth of my child, and the timing would leave little doubt in Severus's mind who's child it was. I started reading books about pregnancy in earnest, and in secret. I didn't know exactly what I was looking for, but I was desperate for some sort of solution. I found it two months later, in a book I had picked up in Diagon alley. A potion that would halt the growth of the child inside of me, place it in a sort of stasis until I was ready to have a child.

I was relieved to have found a way to hide you from Severus, and also, becoming pregnant at sixteen was terrifying. I brewed the potion, and I took it. I carried that child for five years, until you were born Harry.

Harry's mind went sideways. That was impossible. There was no way he could be Snape's son. He started to breath heavily, the letter almost forgotten as he started to pace his room. There was just no way!

It was seeing himself in the mirror that brought him back to reality. He had pictures of his father, he had the one that had come with the letter right there on his desk, and he looked just like him. Maybe his mother had been wrong, maybe the potion hadn't worked right and she had lost the pregnancy, and she just happened to become pregnant again right before she decided to have him. Nodding reassuringly to himself, Harry turned back to the letter.

After I had taken the potion though, I felt quite a bit of shame. A hidden pregnancy: I felt like I was hiding my indiscretion by lying to everyone and keeping a child from his father. But I was never ashamed of you Harry. You were my constant companion. I always knew you were there, inside of me.

In my sixth year, I avoided all contact with boys, and threw myself into my studies. In my seventh year, I was made Head Girl, and though I did not feel that I deserved it, I took the position, determined to do my best. Your father was made Head Boy.

Snape was such a bastard, Harry thought. Treating his mother horribly, hurting her like that. Harry was so angry on her behalf, he couldn't understand how she could write this letter like there could still be some sort of good in the man. Like there was anything redeemable about him.

I had previously not gotten along well with James. Between his feud with Severus and a general sense of entitlement, I couldn't stand him. However, growing up changes us in many ways, and I had started to notice positive changes in your father during our sixth year. He started to treat people better, and as the conflict outside the castle walls started to affect those of us inside, he started showing true leadership to many students who were unsure of what their futures held. Still, I did not like that he was Head Boy beside me, and I still had some animosity towards him for his past. As the year went on though, as we worked together and truly got to know each other, I found his new personality to be much more than just tolerable. Though when he asked me out towards the end of our seventh year, I was still hesitant. Not because of his past, but because of mine. I was pregnant with another man's child. I told myself that it would not become serious, that it would last until the end of the school year, and end when we entered the adult world. I didn't expect to fall in love, I didn't expect to find myself planning a future that involved him, and I didn't know how it would work with you. The end of the school year came and the end of our relationship was nowhere in sight. I knew I had to tell him about you. Figuring out how was tricky, and your father being your father completely took the matter out of my hands when he asked me to marry him. So I told him everything right then and there. I was afraid that it would all be over, but it wasn't.
I told your mother that I would love her no matter who's child she carried, and that I would love any child she bore into our marriage. I was right too.

Your father accepted you with no reservations, and I accepted his proposal without any myself. We were married four months later.

Yet the conflict in the wizarding world continued to escalate. Your father and I both worked against Voldemort and his followers, the Death Eaters, under the leadership of Albus Dumbledore. One night, while responding to a Death Eater revel, I was hit by a curse that hurt me badly. I made a full recovery, but I almost lost you. I couldn't carry you and fight, so I decided it was time to have you. I had wanted you to be born in a peaceful world, but I knew that if I continued to fight, it would have been lucky if you had been born at all. Five months later you were delivered, a little premature, though by now you had been inside of me for fifty nine months.

During much of the time after we graduated Hogwarts, I heard very little of Severus, except that he was associating with known Death Eaters. Shortly before you were born though, we heard, from various contacts, that Severus was brewing potions for Voldemort. There was no question in my mind that he could never know about you.

Now, wrote his father. I can just imagine you reading this right now. You're probably thinking that you look an awful lot like me. This is by design, rather than by nature. Sirius Black, your godfather, introduced me to an old ritual, it was once commonly used for adoption, where a parent can imbue a very young child that is not theirs by birth with a part of themselves. Shortly after you were born, we gave you a potion with my blood, and I cast the charm that would make you my child by more than just marriage. This is why you look so much like myself, or as much as a baby can look like his father. The point is, I am your father, forever and always, but just as there is a part of me and your mother in you, there is still everything you got from Snape too, you just can't tell anymore by looking at you. Sirius is the only one besides us who knows any of this.

That is why we are writing this letter, his mother continued. We did not write this letter just to tell you about your unusual heritage. I do not know all of what you have inherited from Severus, but I do know that you have a hereditary illness from him. There is no need to be alarmed. It is easily treatable. It is a magical variant of an illness called hemophilia, and it basically causes your body to produce insufficient quantities of the blood cells responsible for clotting your blood when you bleed. There is a spell that treats this, but it is not a cure. It is a fairly simple spell, and lasts throughout early childhood. However, as children with this illness begin to mature magically, the magic that they use and encounter starts to wear away at the spell that acts in lieu of the cells that they are lacking. The spell has to be cast again. The older a child gets, and the stronger they become magically, the shorter this spell lasts. During early childhood, the accidental magic you perform is fairly limited, and has little effect on the spell. When you are young, just starting Hogwarts, the amount of magic that you use and is used on you is small, the spell will last an additional four and a half years, on average. By the end of your schooling when you are using powerful spells and practicing things like human transfiguration on one another in class, the spell is worn away quickly and it should be updated every year. You have only been practicing magic for the past two years, so this letter gives you quite a bit of time before you need to worry about this. Even so, you should check the strength of the charm when you get back to Hogwarts. I have included detailed instructions with this letter on how to do so, as well as how to renew the spell when the time comes. Properly managed, this illness should never affect you.

I hesitate to add this next bit, but I cannot tell you about Severus without telling you the rest of his story. Not long after we decided to have you, we went to a meeting with Albus Dumbledore. We arrived early, early enough to see Severus leaving the Headmaster's office. I asked Albus what he had been doing there, but he told me that he could not tell me. A few months later, just after you
had been born, Albus told us that Voldemort had targeted our family; that someone close to Voldemort had told him so. He would not tell me who. Perhaps it is wishful thinking on my part, I do not know if this is true, but I feel certain that it is Severus. I hope that he has turned his back on Voldemort and his hateful ways. I want him to be Dumbledore's source, but I can not trust that he is. I wish that I could have saved him, I wish that he could know that I forgave him the moment he apologized. The mistakes he has made in life are his own, but I hope he is safe, and I hope he finds peace. For his safety, this paragraph will disappear after you read this, though again, you are the only one who can read it.

The paragraph disappeared at that moment.

Anyone else who tries to read this letter will see stories that your father and I have written about our past. If you wish to see them yourself, simply tap the parchment with your wand and say 'revelo' to change the letter back and forth.

I hope that you are well, and that you are well cared for. I hope that this letter never needs to be delivered. I hope you know that we love you so very much. Happy birthday my son, may your year be filled with joy and peace.

Happy birthday Harry, you and your mother are the best things in my life. Whatever happens, whether we're there to celebrate your birthday with you or not, know that we are with you always, his father finished the letter.

Harry stared at the letter for a moment, not really taking it in anymore.

"It means nothing," he murmured quietly. He nodded to himself. It meant nothing, nothing whatsoever. Snape wasn't his dad, not in any meaningful sense of the word. He hadn't been there when Harry had been a baby. He hadn't held him or played with him. He hadn't fed him or cared for him. He hadn't done anything for Harry. All he'd ever done was mock him and try to get him expelled. And how messed up was that? He'd spent every moment together with the man being ridiculed and glared at, and the guy was really some weird bio-dad. Harry became angry as he thought of all the times he had been locked in his cupboard as a kid, alone and dreaming of someone coming for him, of finding out that his parents weren't really dead and that they wanted to take him away. Well that dream had come true, in part, and what a nightmare it had become.

Harry was about to scream with all of the anger rushing through him, his breathing was out of control and he was ready to start pulling out his hair. But he didn't. A calmness suffused him, his eyes grew heavy, and he felt at peace, like he was lying on the grass in the park on a bright and sunny day.

"It doesn't mean anything," he said to himself again, a comfort this time, not a denial. He didn't need Snape, he didn't need a father, he wasn't that kid anymore. He just needed to sleep, and think about the rest of the letter in the morning.

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Hermione,

Thank you for the broom repair kit. I can't use it yet, my brooms locked up with the majority of my school stuff, but for now I'm sure I'll enjoy being able to read the book that came with it. The holiday's been fairly boring so far, all I really have for company are Hedwig and my school
assignments. I hope you're having fun in France. I'll try to meet you in Diagon Alley but no promises.

Harry

Like the letter to Ron he had just written, this one omitted most of the unpleasant aspects of his summer. Like the letter he wasn't thinking about. He wouldn't send the letters yet, he didn't want to send Hedwig off after she had been gone for so long. Harry got up and started getting ready for the day. He had woken early despite his late night and had started writing his friends to keep his mind from wandering elsewhere. Pulling a clean shirt on, Harry found himself glancing at the loose floorboard where the letter from his parents was hidden. Out of sight but not out of mind by any means. Harry made his way downstairs.

Before he turned to the kitchen though, he noticed a special alert on the television. Five faces appeared on the screen. Four men, and one very deranged looking woman.

"The public is warned that all five of the escaped convicts are extremely dangerous and should not be approached for any reason. Police also caution that this man," the center picture enlarged on the screen. The man was almost feral looking and Harry was revolted to see that it looked like he had filed his teeth down to points. "Fenrir Greyback, has on numerous occasions attacked children, and has several charges of child kidnaping. Police suggest that parents keep a close eye on children playing outside."

Harry blanched at the thought of a man like that loose on the world.

"The number at the bottom of your screen is a hotline, anyone who sites any of the five escapees or has any information about their whereabouts should call immediately. For more information and up to the minute updates turn to our sister station Channel 4 News. We now return you to your regularly scheduled programming." One of Dudley's programs returned to the screen and Harry walked into the kitchen. That woman had stuck out, not her deranged face, but the name below it, Belatrix Lestrange. He felt like he had heard the name recently.

"Where've you been?" his aunt asked severely. "Don't make me drag you out of bed in the mornings, you won't like it."

Harry rolled his eyes as he took over the breakfast preparations only to feel his aunt slap him upside the back of his head.

"Don't you roll your eyes at me you horrid boy. Why I've put up with you all these years I have no idea, but the least you can do is show a little respect."

Hoping he could head her off Harry gave as about a polite "yes aunt Petunia," as he could, but she just continued to rant under her breath, while she set the table, covering topics such as: Harry's several unsavory qualities, that freakish business under her roof, and her own saintly patience. Harry had heard it all before and did his best to ignore it while he worked on breakfast. Not wanting to dodge any frying pans, Harry kept all retorts to himself.

Uncle Vernon walked into the kitchen and his Aunt stopped her tirade. As much as she liked to complain about Harry, she wasn't about to get her husband in a lather about it.

"Wonderful breakfast Petunia," his uncle said as he sat down at the table.

"Dudley sweetums, breakfast is ready," his aunt called to Dudley who was still watching television.
Harry finished putting the breakfast on the table and went to eat his breakfast over the sink.

"Now," his uncle said, putting down his fork, a while later. "As you both know, today is quite a special day."

Harry almost choked on his toast. The Dursleys never remembered his birthday, much less treated it like something to celebrate. His aunt glared at him while he coughed a bit. "A special day?" Harry asked once he was settled.

"Don't you pay attention boy? Marge is coming to visit, her train will be coming into the station soon. Actually I want to get to the station early, I don't want Marge waiting for me with those murderers on the loose."

"Murderers?" his aunt said worriedly. "What are you talking about?"

"It was on the radio earlier when I was shaving. Five murderers escaped from prison last night. There's a large manhunt underway."

"I saw them on the tellie," Dudley said excitedly. "They looked deranged."

"My goodness," said Aunt Petunia. "Where did they escape from."

"Could be anywhere, from all the information the news report gave," his uncle said gruffly.

"They could be walking down the street right now for all we know," Aunt Petunia said, getting up to look out the kitchen window as though she actually expected to see them doing just that. "Maybe we should go with you, I wouldn't want to be home alone without you if one of those people turned up."

"That's a wonderful idea Petunia. We should head out now then," his uncle said.

"I haven't finished my breakfast yet," Dudley wailed. "And I don't want to go, I can look after myself."

Harry tried not to snicker at Dudley's complaining, he had already eaten more than Harry was going to eat over the next few days.

"Now Diddy-darling, we just don't want anything to happen to you while we're gone. Tell you what, since you're such a good boy, and you're missing out on breakfast, we can stop for ice cream and doughnuts on the way home. How about that darling?"

Dudley had to think for a moment while he shoveled some more rashers and eggs into his mouth.

"One more thing though," his uncle said, turning his attention to Harry. "We couldn't tell your aunt about that bloody school you go to, so we've told her that you attend St. Brutus's Secure Center for Incurably Criminal Boys."

"What," Harry exploded, forgetting under the injustice to be quiet.

"And that's the story you'll be sticking to if you know what's good for you," his uncle said darkly, standing up from the table so he could gain height over Harry.

Harry just gaped at the unfairness of it all.

"Make yourself useful while we're gone and clean up the kitchen," Aunt Petunia said as she collected Dudley and walked out of the room. Harry just stood there for a moment, listening to the
With the Dursleys gone, Harry took his time to eat his breakfast at the table before he cleaned the kitchen. At least, he decided, he got to eat a decent breakfast. Then he took a moment to pick the lock on the cupboard under the stairs, he needed a new bottle of ink. He looked longingly at his wand, but left it where it was lest his uncle notice that it was missing. It wasn't like the escapees were actually wandering Little Whinging.

Harry went upstairs to his room to put the bottle away. When he pried up the loose floorboard though the first thing he noticed was the letter from his parents. He sighed and figured that he should deal with it while he had some time to himself. He had no desire to read anything about Snape though, so he only reread the part about hemophilia, and then flipped to the pages that discussed spell work which he hadn't read the night before. By the time he had finished reading it, he was fairly confident he would be able to handle any spell casting by himself, but he wouldn't be able to check anything until he got back to Hogwarts, and that was what worried him.

The letter said that the average kid wouldn't cast or encounter enough magic to wear away the spell till they were in the middle of their fifth year, but Harry wasn't an average child. What effect had magical snake venom and Phoenix tears had on him, or fighting off Voldemort over the stone, or for that matter surviving the killing curse. That was all strong magic. Still though, after looking at the symptoms of the untreated disease, Harry doubted that the spell had worn off yet. The fact that he hadn't bled to death earlier in the summer proved that. Still though, Harry had no idea how strong the spell was or how much longer it would last. Unless he wanted to write an adult wizard and explain his predicament, though, there wasn't much Harry could do until the end of summer. In the end, he was probably being paranoid. He was fine, and he had plenty of time. He didn't need to worry about anything, besides Marge coming to visit. And the Hogsmeade permission slip, Harry realized as he put the parchment away. He had completely forgotten about Hogsmead after reading the letter from his parents the night before. Whatever hopes Harry might have had the night before for getting the form signed were shattered by Marge's impending arrival. As strict and unpleasant as Uncle Vernon was with Harry, he had always stepped things up when she visited, like he wanted to impress her with how domineering he could be with his small nephew.

Harry gathered up one of his homework assignments and went down stairs. With the house to himself, he relished the idea of working on his homework in the open. He worked until he heard his uncle's car pull up. It was time to put away his magical things and pretend to be a well behaved hoodlum who didn't speak unless spoken to. It was when he was putting his homework away that he remembered where he had heard the name Belatrix Lestrange. His mother had mentioned her, one of Voldemort's supporters. Unless there were a lot of Belatrix Lestranges out there, and Harry doubted it, then that woman on the news alert was a witch, and likely all five of the escapees were magical. That was probably why neither of the news reports had mentioned where they had escaped from. They'd escaped from a wizards prison, and likely could be anywhere in the country. If they were all supporters of Voldemort, Harry had a feeling he would not be having an uneventful school year.

Chapter End Notes

I wanted to do a shout out to althor42's The Horcrux Within on FF.net for which I am the Beta. It is a wonderful story so far and I'm really looking forward for the next chapter to work on. So now without further ramblings from me...
Also: I've seen a couple people comment in the reviews that Hemophilia is passed on the X chromosome, so Harry could not have inherited the illness from his biological father. They are correct and I want to thank them for caring enough to comment, however I was aware of this before I wrote the story. I have a variety of reasons for choosing hemophilia and fudging the details, but in the end, it was mostly for convenience. I felt that the nature of hemophilia would provide dramatic plot points and fit in with one of the overall themes of the story. I am not a doctor and I hope that no one reads this story as medical fact. If my altering the facts of this serious illness offends anyone, I apologize. For the purposes of this story, Harry has a magical variant of the illness that a boy can inherit from either parent.
Death

Chapter Notes

Small warning, if you're bothered by gore, you might want to skip the backyard scenes.

Disclaimer: Even if Harry Potter was my own original creation, I wouldn't own the rights to it. My employer would. Yeah, my contract keeps me from writing original fiction. All props to JK Rowling.

Also: The views of the Dursleys are their own and not mine. I have very different views on criminal justice.

See the end of the chapter for more notes

Death

"Now if I've said it once, I've said it a dozen times, hanging's just the only thing to be done with people like this," Marge said as she sipped her tea on the sitting room sofa next to Dudley. It had been common the past couple of days to hear her talk about her opinion of the criminal justice system in the United Kingdom.

"I quite agree," Uncle Vernon said, from his armchair. "They should make the people responsible for their sentences responsible for whatever they get up to now that they've escaped." Uncle Vernon and Marge always seemed to agree on everything. It was odd to hear them discuss anything really, the two of them just reiterating each others points and both seeming to feel that the world would be such a better place if everyone else saw it as they did. From her spot on the window seat, sipping her tea, Aunt Petunia would make noises of assent now and then as the two siblings discussed the death penalty while her son Dudley sat on the couch with his aunt, ignoring the conversation for the biscuits, his tea forgotten.

"Of course there are quite a number of people responsible well before that," Marge said, picking up on her brother's comment. "It isn't just murderers who get off easy, it seems everyone gets a free pass these days to just continue on in their abominable ways. Why I'd put good money down to say that if we hadn't lost the old ways we wouldn't have to deal with such riffraff. Now I can all but guarantee that all of these criminals probably started out small, and all they received was probation, and then they just got worse and worse. There was a time when they'd cut off your hand for thievery. Bring that back, and I bet you'll see the crime rate plummet."

"Too true, too true," Uncle Vernon said as he reached over to pick up a biscuit from the coffee table.

"And it's just like dog training, most people who work with dogs will tell you, you don't blame the dog, you blame the owner."

Harry didn't need to wonder what Marge's dogs said about her. They were all mean and I'll tempered.

"Of course I'm not saying you're to blame for this one here", she jerked her head towards Harry.
Harry had been hoping they would ignore him for the rest of the afternoon. Earlier they had ganged up on him for 'glaring' at his tea.

Harry had become well practiced that day in restraining himself from rolling his eyes. This was the fifth time during tea that he had been brought in as an example.

"I've seen you with the boy, and you are an excellent disciplinarian, Vernon, but there's an exception to every rule of course. Now and then it doesn't matter how you raise them, sometimes you just start with nothing but dross and nothing's going to polish it up."

"I know what you mean," Uncle Vernon said glaring at Harry. "Knew he was rotten from the beginning, always something off."

"Of course with parents like that what can you expect? A boy won't be much different from his father." Well Harry certainly wasn't much like Snape, but what about his dad?

"I mean just look at our Dudley here," Dudley didn't even look up at the mention of his name. "He's well on his way to being a good man, just like his father."

No, harry thought, Dudley wasn't that far off from his father. He thought it amusing that Marge had just gone from arguing nurture to nature without seeming to see any contradictions. What had he gotten from his parents, he wondered. Besides his eyes from his mother and his face and hair from his father, he didn't really know of anything he could attribute to them. He had reread the letter the day before and he tried to think back, to how his parents had written the letter and what they had told him about themselves. He couldn't think of anything about them that reminded him of himself. He wished he could use his wand so that he could see what anyone else reading the letter would see, stories about his parents, probably not about unwanted pregnancies. As uncomfortable and angry as parts of that letter had made him though, it did help distract him from Marge's presence and her frequently offensive words.

"Do they use the cane on you at that school of yours, boy?" Marge suddenly asked Harry. "Not that I expect that it will do anything for this one, but it is the principal after all," she added in an aside to her brother.

Harry had to remind himself that school meant St. Brutus's and not Hogwarts. He glanced at Uncle Vernon, not sure which answer to give. The man gave a brusque nod.

"Yeah," he said. "All the time."

"Clearly they aren't using enough force if you can be so blazè about it," she turned to his uncle. "You should write his school, tell them they have your permission to use extra force with this one."

Snape would probably like that, Harry thought. Actually that reminded him of his permission slip, and gave him an idea on how he could get it signed. He'd be in terrible trouble though.

"Actually," he said, his heart rate already picking up from the danger of his idea. "That reminds me, I'll be right back," and with that he walked out of the room and ran upstairs. He grabbed the Hogsmeade permission slip from under the loose floorboard in his room and then ran back down stairs. He picked up a pen from the kitchen before he walked back into the sitting room.

"It's the corporal punishment permission slip for St. Brutus," he said handing the form and pen to his uncle. Uncle Vernon, of course, could see exactly what the form was for, but he wasn't about to say so with his sister right across the room, and he wasn't about to not sign it either. "I'll be in so much trouble if I don't get a signature," he added. "You just need to sign right there on the bottom
to give them permission to use the cane."

"Make sure to let them know they can use extra force with the boy," Marge told her brother.

Uncle Vernon was giving him a murderous look and for a moment Harry was worried he'd tear the paper up regardless of Marge being there, but then he gave Harry a nasty smile and signed the form before handing it back to him.

"Well," Harry said. "I'll just go put this away with my school things, and try to stay out of trouble this school year."

Marge snorted as though she doubted that Harry had any intention of doing so.

"Petunia dear," said Uncle Vernon, "why don't you show Marge your tulips. I hear they're the envy of the neighborhood."

He didn't have much time, but he didn't really need much either. He shot upstairs and once more reached under the loose floorboard and grabbed the letters he had previously written Ron and Hermione. Hedwig flapped out of her cage, seeing the envelopes.

"Here girl, I don't have any time, so I need you to take these straight away."

Hedwig hooted and grabbed the letters securely in her talons along with the rolled up permission slip. Harry opened his window up wide and his snowy companion was off. A moment later heavy footsteps outside his room announced Uncle Vernon's arrival.

"You think you can back me into a corner boy?" His uncle thundered from the doorway. "You'll soon see that I always win. The only place that form's going is the shredder. Now hand it over."

Harry didn't know if the smile on his face was nerves or the knowledge that he had already, in fact, won. It certainly wasn't for what was about to happen. "I don't have it anymore, you're too late."

"To late?" His uncle bellowed, but then his eyes darted to the open window and then to Hedwig's empty cage. He slammed the door as he walked into the room.

Still worth it, Harry told himself as his stomach clenched and a sweat broke out on his brow.

Later, if anyone noticed the gash over his eyebrow, or his slight limp, they didn't say anything.

It was all they showed on about half of the channels on the television for a couple of days. Dudley had been throwing fits each time one of his shows failed to air. Marge said he was being assertive. Harry thought he was being insensitive, but he kept that to himself.

Though it wasn't the first thing that had hit the news since the convicts escape that Harry could attribute to wizardry, it was by far the worst. First there had been two families found gruesomely murdered in their homes, neighbors from the second one had reported strange lights and noises from the house. The next day a man in London had been found dead on the sidewalk with no apparent cause of death. The telecaster had noted that he had been dressed eccentrically. The most recent event was on an entirely different level though.

"Arson investigators initially struggled to find the source of the blaze that tore through the London Museum of Science, but are now finding pieces of a powerful incendiary device. The CTC has
released an image from a nearby security camera moments before the fiery blast. They have confirmed that the man caught on camera is none other than Alexander Beckett, one of the five now infamous escaped convicts who have led police on a massive manhunt with nothing but dead ends."

The Dursleys, as well as the rest of the muggle world, now thought that the escaped convicts were terrorists, and Harry supposed that they were right, but none of them really knew what they were dealing with. Though if the Dursleys were concerned that a few hundred people had been burned alive, they weren't inclined to show it. It was business as usual at the Dursley's home, and since it was Marge's last night, there was to be a small party. Aunt Petunia had been in the kitchen all day preparing for the dinner and Harry had been dragged out of his room on occasion to help. When he wasn't washing dishes or stirring pots, Harry had been listening to the radio in his room trying to sort out news that tied into the wizarding world.

"Boy," his Aunt hollered up the stairs. Harry groaned as he rolled off of his bed. He hoped Aunt Petunia didn't need more potatoes peeled, he hated peeling potatoes. Harry walked down stairs, glad at least that only Aunt Petunia was home at the moment. Uncle Vernon had gone into the office for a couple of hours to handle some crisis, and Marge had taken Dudley shopping for his own presents.

"Chop those onions, and don't be sloppy about it, I want them all the same size," his aunt said as he walked into the kitchen. She could be as exacting as Professor Snape could be with his potions ingredients. His mouth curled into a frown as he thought of the man. "And watch the mixer, don't let the cream get too stiff." The stand mixer was out on the counter, whirring at full speed.

Harry got to work, hoping to be able to escape the kitchen as soon as possible, and for a while he worked in peace while Aunt Petunia made herself a sandwich for her lunch.

"Are they your sort?" she asked out of the blue.

Harry didn't need to ask who she was referring to.

"I think so," he said.

"Why can't your sort just leave decent people alone, always causing problems. We'd have been well off if they'd found all of you in the Middle Ages." Harry couldn't be sure if she was upset for the people who had died, or if she was just upset to have to hear about magic encroaching on her normal world.

"They didn't find anyone in the witch hunts, they just burned a bunch of your sort at the stake," he emphasized the 'your sort' the same way Aunt Petunia said it. No doubt she wished Harry would be burned at the stake. "Besides, even if they had, it wouldn't have stopped my mum being born a witch."

Aunt Petunia threw down her spreading knife and stormed over to him. "Don't you say that word in my house," Aunt Petunia hissed.

For a moment he tensed up and no words wanted to follow. He berated himself for feeling like that though. "And which word is that?" Harry said finally, turning towards her, with an emphasis on 'which'.

She slapped him, and then the two of them just looked at each other for a moment.

"Witch, witch, witch," he exploded, yelling at her for the first time he could ever remember.
"Magic, hocus pocus, abra cadabra, The sky's not falling, the neighbors aren't staring, the world doesn't end when we talk about magic."

Aunt Petunia looked frightened at first when Harry went off, but then a look of fury suffused her. For a moment, Harry was worried she would grab a frying pan, or worse, a knife. He noticed belatedly that he had still been holding the chef's knife when he had been yelling at her. Yet then, out of nowhere, his aunts gaze turned to the stand mixer, still running at full speed.

"Ohhhh," she cried. "I told you to watch the mixer, why can't you just do what you're told, you horrid boy." She shut off the machine and grabbed the bowl, as though their previous argument had never happened, as if magic and her sister hadn't been brought up in the same sentence. For all that she'd seemed to hate the imagination, Aunt Petunia was very good at pretending that problems didn't exist, or in this case, replacing one with another.

"Were you trying to make butter?" she asked scathingly, scraping the bowl out into the trash. She opened the door of the refrigerator and then slammed it shut. Harry was still just staring at her, not sure if he should just pretend with her that their argument hadn't taken place.

"Here," she said, thrusting a five pound note in his face. "Take that and go pick up some more cream from the store. Heavy whipping cream, and certainly no half and half. And be quick boy, don't you dare try to ruin my dinner."

Harry just grabbed the money and walked out, grateful to be out of the house. He walked down the street at a quick pace. Now that he'd calmed down, he was immensely relieved to have gotten off so easy, it was lucky his uncle hadn't been home at the time. Still, he shouldn't be pressing his luck, the sooner he got back with the cream the sooner his aunt could forget that she was angry with him.

It was three blocks from Privet Drive that Harry noticed him, out of the corner of his eye. Someone was staring at him. He turned to look and see who it was, but no one was there. He looked around for a moment before continuing on his way. As he continued on to the store he continued to feel like someone was watching him. Twice he turned around at the sound of footsteps to find nothing. He felt an itch between his shoulder blades and he picked up his pace. He dearly wished his wand wasn't in the cupboard under the stairs.

Reaching the main street, Harry was glad that he was surrounded by people. Pedestrians, motorists, and the odd bicyclist bustled about him. The feeling that he was being followed abated and he enjoyed just being in the crowd.

Walking into the market, Harry made a beeline towards the dairy and was in line at the counter less than a minute after he walked in. The checkout girl looked at him askance, and Harry didn't know if it was for his oversized hand-me-down clothing that still bore several of Dudley's food stains, or the handprint that was probably on his cheek. Harry just stared at the counter until the transaction was over. Heading towards the door, he once more took off at a fast pace, oddly enough, he wanted to be back on Privet Drive quickly. Of course all too quickly, he was off the busy street and back on the suburban streets of Little Winging. Once again, the feeling that he was being watched returned, and Harry found himself looking over his shoulder repeatedly.

"Well well well, little Harry Potter, out on his own," a gruff voice said behind him. Harry whirled around and firmed his stance when he saw who it was. He looked slightly emaciated, and he had a slightly feral look about him, but he had a calculating look in his eye as he gazed upon Harry with a predatory air.
"I wonder what he would think if he could see you now, you look ready to piss yourself. Well I'll make you into something, you're mine now. You'll be the first of my new pack. I don't need to wonder what he would think of that."

Harry didn't know who 'he' was, but he knew who the man in front of him was. Fenrir Greyback, the convict the news said went after kids. Well he couldn't have Harry.

"I'm not your anything," he said to the man, and as angry as he was, he had to force the words out. He was trying to hide just how well he knew that he was up a creek without a paddle.

The man smiled at him and took a step forward. Harry wasn't sure if he should try to run or fight, neither option seemed like it would help him very much. He put up his fists like he'd seen people do on the telly.

Greyback laughed, "you don't even have your wand out, boy. Or did you leave it at home?"

"I don't see yours," Harry said, swallowing thickly. The man was close, maybe he could grab his wand away from him. Though maybe, if he was lucky, Greyback hadn't gotten his hands on a wand yet and running would have a better chance.

A wand was suddenly in the man's fingers, twirling about as Harry's eyes followed it longingly before it disappeared again up his sleeve. "It's former owner didn't need it anymore," he said with a wicked grin. "But I won't need it to take you." He suddenly looked like an animal ready to pounce, and flight won out in Harry's internal debate. His hand darted out, the carton of cream sped at the man's face as Harry turned to run, but the carton was batted out of the way as the man seemed to pounce. Harry dodged and turned towards the nearest house, making a beeline for the side gate.

He could hear Greyback laughing as he gave chase, it almost sounded like a howl. Harry vaulted over the low fence and tore around the side of the house and into the backyard. He was at the back yard fence in a moment, jumping over that as well. It was perhaps fortuitous that Harry had been made to play so many games of Harry hunting when he was younger. He knew the back yards and alleys of Little Winging very well. Of course, he still had three blocks to go to get to Privet Drive.

As he ran, jumped, and occasionally ducked his way through the back yards of Marigold Lane, Harry got the impression that Greyback was letting the chase go on longer than it should have lasted. The whole time, he felt like Greyback was right at his heels, and the sounds the man made as he hooted and hollered made it seem like he was enjoying the chase immensely.

Harry got to the end of the block and put on a burst of speed as he crossed the street. He was getting close to home where the wards were supposed to keep him safe. Yet he knew that he was flagging, he wouldn't be able to keep up the pace. The question was, could Greyback? He hopped a fence on the other side of the street, he ducked under a jungle gym and jumped over a half deflated kiddie pool. He ducked into the next yard when he was tackled to the ground. He landed hard, his glasses sat askew on his face and he felt rough hands flip him over and hold him down.

"That's close enough to your fancy wards, I think. They've been quite frustrating, I've been trying to pay you a visit for some time. So good of you to wander into my den."

Harry struggled against his grasp, but the man was on top of him and held him firm. Greyback grasped his face, and Harry could feel his long nails dig into his skin. He could see every one of his pointed teeth as he grinned down at him. He looked elated. Harry felt as though his whole being revolted at the feel of the man on top of him. He knew he should be screaming for help, but he couldn't. It wasn't as though anyone could help him anyway.
"That bastard took everything from me, everything, and now I get the last thing he had left to care about. But you'll see boy, I'm really setting you free, you'll thank me some day. Now where will I mark you."

"Get off that boy," a woman shouted. Harry couldn't turn his head to look, but it sounded like it came from the house who's backyard he was in. He heard a sliding door open.

"Stay inside," he shouted as well as he could with Greyback clenching his face. "He's dangerous."

"I said get off of that boy, now," the woman said, ignoring Harry's warning.

Greyback grinned down at Harry and the hand grabbing his face twisted his head to the side so that Harry could see. The woman was older, maybe in her sixties, and she was carrying a fireplace poker. She was walking towards them. Greyback's other hand came up, his wand suddenly grasped in it.

"Let's have us some fun," he said nastily. Harry didn't want to see what he was going to do to her, but his head was still pinned to the side. He tried to grab the man's arm but he couldn't move it, so he started clawing at his face, digging at his eyes. Greyback snarled and backhanded Harry.

"Hey," he heard the woman shout. The next thing Harry knew, Greyback was howling in anger and leaping off of Harry. The woman, it seemed, had taken a swing at him, the hooked end of the poker had torn a rip in his arm, blood seeping out. Now it was the woman who was screaming as Greyback pounced on her. Harry scrambled to his feet, terrified as he took in the scene.

Greyback looked like a wild animal mauling the woman, who was struggling tooth and nail against the man. Then he spotted the wand; both the poker and the wand lay in the grass, forgotten by both their respective wielder in the fury of the attack. Harry quickly grabbed the wand and shouted out 'Petrificus Totalus'. The wand, it was clear, was a very poor match for Harry. Still though, it had part of the desired effect, Greyback had stopped attacking the woman. He turned his head towards Harry with a snarl, his face covered in blood not his own. Harry rather wished he had grabbed the poker rather than the wand.

Harry dove for the poker as Greyback dove for Harry. Once more the man was on top of him. Greyback's bloody face looked inhuman. And Harry used the poker braced in both hands to keep the man's gnashing teeth away from himself. Unfortunately it was a losing battle. Greyback was fairly slim, but by a thirteen year old's standards, he weighed quite a bit, and it was all Harry could do to keep the man's mouth away from him as the man's long sharp nails clawed at him.

Greyback stiffened suddenly though, and colorful pieces of pottery rained down around him. He snarled turning around, Harry forgotten, as he turned to face the source of what had hit him over his back. He turned just in time to get hit in the face. A garden gnome, Harry noted. Harry tried to swing the poker at Greyback's distracted torso, but the leverage was all wrong and Harry was ignored. Then suddenly Greyback wasn't on top of him, and a gardener's spade sailed through where he had previously been. Harry scrambled up, ready to fight, but suddenly he was flung to the side, he hit a patio table and fell in a clatter. Greyback had his wand again, and he didn't want to toy around any longer. Greyback brought his wand down in a sharp movement and roared words that Harry didn't make out, and was glad he hadn't either; he rather didn't want to know how to make someone's chest explode. Where the woman had stood, face bloodied, already looking ready to keel over, but with another object to throw in her hand, there was now just a gory mess. Harry knew instantly that she was dead, how could she not be? He paused momentarily in getting up, and noted Greyback's gleeful look as he took in his carnage. Why hadn't she just stayed inside and called the police? If she'd only have listened, she would be alive still; and Greyback would have likely taken Harry already. Harry felt like he would throw up.
"Is everything alright over there Ms. Adler," a man's voice called over the fence. Greyback turned his wand in the direction from whence the voice had come.

"No!" Harry called. Greyback glanced his way. Harry decided he'd do the man a favor and run in the opposite direction. Luckily, that way was Privet Drive.

He was over the fence before he heard Greyback's angrily decide to leave the muggle man and pursue Harry. Once more, Harry was hopping fences, ducking under bushes, and running around swimming pools. However this time Greyback wasn't toying with him. He was gaining fast, and Harry knew that when he caught up, the chase would be over. Harry came to the last house on the block, it was a straight shot to the other side of the street, no obstacles, and it was likely where Greyback would capture him again. Yet Harry kept running. He shot out into the street, just as a black BMW turned the corner at a fast pace. The driver slammed on the brakes, but Harry knew that he was going to get hit. He jumped, landing on the hood of the car with a bone jarring impact and rolling up onto the windshield. The driver started honking the horn and Harry briefly glanced inside to see that he had been hit by none other than Uncle Vernon, who was quite red in the face and looked to be turning the air inside the car blue. He glanced behind him, Greyback had stopped when Harry had been hit, and now looked like he thought the chase was over. Harry got a foot underneath himself and leapt off the hood of the car. He was running when he hit the ground, his head turned to see what Greyback would do. Greyback didn't bother going around the car, he jumped up onto the hood and leapt off after Harry. Soon the man was right on his heels and Harry knocked over some trash cans as he raced along the side of a house to slow the man down. It did little good, Greyback was about to catch him. Harry was gasping for breath at this point. He saw up ahead, lying in the grass of someone's lawn, a cricket bat. Time to fight, he thought. He dove for the bat, coming back up, he turned to face Greyback, ready to swing. He heard a thud, and looked just in time to see Greyback fall down. 'Had it been accidental magic?' Harry wondered. Greyback, though, was up in a flash. He put his hand up, and Harry got the bat ready. But it looked for all the world like Greyback was pushing against an invisible barrier. The blood wards, Harry realized. They had reached the edge of the blood wards and Greyback could go no further. The man howled in fury.

"Go run on home now boy. You'll be mine soon enough," Greyback said. He pulled out his wand, turned in on himself and disappeared with a crack. Off in the distance, in the direction where he had left poor Ms. Adler, he heard two more cracks. Harry dropped the bat, and turned towards Privet Drive.

"You dented my car boy!" His uncle roared when Harry walked through the door. The man soon had Harry pressed up against the wall.

"Where's my cream?" Aunt Petunia asked sharply, seeing Harry's empty hands.

Though he knew better than to expect it, Harry still would have liked to hear: 'Are you all right?'; "What happened to your face?"; or "Who was that man chasing you?"

"There was a man chasing me, a dark wizard," he said.

"Don't say that word in my house," Uncle Vernon yelled, back handing Harry across the face.

Harry spat out blood, not caring about his Aunt's clean floors. "Don't you get it? That doesn't
matter right now. Someone's trying to kidnap me, or kill me, or something, and he killed a woman who got in his way," Harry said angrily.

"Those people?" Aunt Petunia asked.

"Yes," Harry said. "One of them at least was a supporter of the guy who killed my parents."

"Get out of my house," Uncle Vernon said coldly.

"What?" Harry asked.

"I said get out of my house. You've got murderers after you? You're putting us in danger, you're putting my family in danger. I've had far more than enough of you. If killers are after you, chasing you through our own neighborhood, then it's time for you to leave, and good riddance."

"No," Harry said. "The wards, he can't get through."

Marge and Dudley chose that moment to return.

"What's he done now?" Marge asked, taking in the scene.

"He has people after him," Uncle Vernon said darkly. "Drug dealers."

Marge gasped, while Dudley just looked confused. "We'll all be killed." She said.

"Which is why he's leaving," Uncle Vernon said.

"Of course," Marge said. "He must leave immediately."

"Aunt Petunia," he said, looking at her. He didn't know what he expected, but she had taken him in.

Petunia was frowning, she wouldn't look at him, she wasn't going to help.

"Fine," he said. He pushed past Uncle Vernon and ran upstairs.

"The door's down here boy," his uncle called up the stairs.

"I'm getting my stuff," Harry called back.

He ripped the linen off of his pillow and opened the loose floorboard next to his bed and shoved everything he had stored there inside. He went down stairs where the Dursleys were all waiting. Marge was going on about Harry being rotten from the core. Harry interrupted, facing Uncle Vernon.

"I'm not leaving without it," he said.

Uncle Vernon blustered at his tone, but he turned to the cupboard under the stairs and unlocked it. Harry pocketed his wand, feeling immensely more confident with it once more in his possession. He grabbed his trunk and dragged it to the door. Aunt Marge opened it for him. Harry walked out, almost expecting to be attacked the moment he stepped outside, but that was silly. The wards had seemed to extend out about a block and a half past the house.

He turned around, not sure if there was something he should say or do, but the door was already being shut in his face.

It was stupid, he thought, to feel abandoned by the Dursleys at that moment. It was not as though
they had ever cared for him. But it didn't stop him from feeling messed up to have been kicked out
of the house.

What should he do, where could he go? Neither of his friends were even in the country, and he
would only put them in danger besides. He should be hiding somewhere, but he hardly had any
money on him, certainly not enough to live on his own until school started. He thought about
trying to contact Dumbledore or the ministry, but what if they tried to make the Dursleys take him
back.

Did he want to go back? No, that was even more messed up than feeling abandoned by them in the
first place, he thought. He would be better off this way anyway. He didn't need them; he would
manage on his own.

He would need money, so he'd have to make his way to Diagon Alley. But how would he get
there? He would have to fly, he had his broom and his invisibility cloak, but what was he going to
do with his trunk? Even if he could tie it to his broom, it would be horribly dangerous to try flying
with it unless he used magic to make it lighter. Did he dare? He'd really be in trouble if he got
kicked out of the Dursleys and Hogwarts on the same day. But wasn't evading a crazy dark wizard
a good justification? But then a sickening thought occurred to him; he had done magic, he had used
Greyback's wand. That, though, was definitely justified. He was worrying himself over nothing.
Besides, the spell had been so weak, the ministry probably hadn't even picked it up. Still though,
what to do with his trunk?

A thought struck him. Aunt Petunia's friend Veronica lived down the street, but Harry knew she
was on vacation. The house would be empty. He could leave his trunk in the back shed and then go
to Diagon Alley to get money exchanged. Then he could take a taxi back here, pick up his trunk
and then go anywhere. His decision made, Harry dragged his trunk down the street and parked it
inside Veronica's backyard shed. He had had to climb over the fence and unlock the gate from the
other side. Fastening the cloak so that it would not flap around while he flew turned out to be quite
difficult, but in less than fifteen minutes, he was up in the air. Flying wasn't as fun without the
wind in his face, but after the day he had had, or rather the past weeks, it was very liberating to
leave the ground. Harry had pulled out the broomstick compass that had come with the kit
Hermione had gotten him for his birthday, and he knew the general direction of London. It was
less than thirty miles away and on a Nimbus, the trip would be quick indeed.

A few hours later, as Harry started to get very cold from flying so long, he reflected that he had
missed a key factor. Finding London had indeed been fast, he had gotten there in less than twenty
minutes. Finding the entrance to Diagon Alley in all of London, however, had turned out to be
most difficult. Especially since he had very little experience navigating through London in the first
place. The sun had set and it was getting dark, and Harry was getting fairly desperate. He was
about ready to find a tube station and attempt to recreate his first trip to Diagon Alley with Hagrid,
when suddenly, he spotted the familiar sign. The Leaky Cauldron; he had arrived at last.

Touching down, he got off of his broom, but stayed under the cloak. He walked into the pub. He
had enough for a meal, so he thought he'd warm up inside before he headed to the bank. He walked
up to the counter and called for Tom, the proprietor. When the man just looked around, Harry
realized that he was invisible. He pulled off the cloak with a sheepish smile.

"Sorry," he said. "But I..."

"Mr. Potter," the man exclaimed in a whisper. "Oh you're alive."

"Why wouldn't I be?" Harry asked, whispering with him.
"Why because you were attacked by Fenrir Greyback, and then you disappeared," the man said. "Come, and put your cloak back on, I'll take you into the private dining room. You shouldn't be seen, they could be watching out for you." The older man ushered him into the back. Harry hadn't thought anyone would know about the attack.

"Well I escaped," Harry said. "Came here."

"Well thank Merlin," Tom said. He showed Harry into a small dining room and had him sit down. "How bout a bowl of stew while I go contact the ministry, tell them to call off the search." He waved his wand and a steaming bowl appeared in front of Harry. It smelled delicious, and Harry realized that he hadn't eaten since that morning.

"Sounds great," he said. He'd rather not involve the Ministry, but if they were searching for him he supposed it was unavoidable. Tom left and Harry eyed his stew for a minute before he started eating. It was as good as it smelled.

Not five minutes later though, the door burst open, and Harry nearly burst out of his skin. His wand was in his hand in a moment, but he recognized the first man who entered. He almost did a double take when he realized that it was the Minister of Magic. A man in a red robe followed him in and then old Tom followed behind.

"Oh Mr. Potter, I'm so glad to see that you're alright. You've had us quite worried," the minister said jovially.

"I'm sorry," Harry said, "I didn't realize you knew I'd been attacked."

"Oh, but of course we knew. Underage magic near the home of the Boy-Who-Lived. With what's going on. Of course we sent someone to investigate. We thought the worst when we saw that dead muggle, especially when people in the neighborhood reported seeing Fenrir Greyback chasing a boy of your description. Then when we checked with your relatives and they said they hadn't seen you all day. Why, he shouldn't have even been able to find where you live. No no Mr. Potter, we've been quite worried indeed. However did you escape?"

"That woman saved me," Harry said sadly. "She'd be alive right now if she hadn't intervened. I managed to get within the wards after he killed her." She really had saved him. And Harry didn't really know why. As it turned out, Marge wasn't the only one the Dursleys had sold on the St. Brutus's story. Most of the neighborhood had heard the gossip. And even if she hadn't heard about the latest rumors, Harry had had a lot of rumors following him for some time. He'd long gotten used to being the pariah of the neighborhood. Maybe she hadn't recognized him. Regardless though, she'd saved him, and she hadn't even thought of herself. Even after she had been attacked herself, she had kept on going. Harry wouldn't have had to ask her what house she was in if she had been a witch. She'd have been a Gryfindor, no doubt. She'd be alive if he had taken a different route.

"How tragic, you must be exhausted. Now Harry, I understand why you thought you had to try to contact the wizarding world, but let's get you home," he said, as though he had solved all of Harry's problems. Harry didn't think that the minister meeting the Dursleys was a good idea at all. Harry didn't think the minister was concerned with a dead muggle.

"Wait," Harry said. "I can't go back."

"Why ever not lad," the minister blustered. "I'm sure you'll be safe there."

"Well..." Harry thought. "It wouldn't be safe for them," Harry said. "Greyback said he'd been
waiting for me to leave the wards. What if he sees my uncle on the way to his work, or my aunt on the way to the market? He could hurt them. But if I'm here, he'll stop hanging around the Dursley's home."

"Would he be safe here?" asked Tom.

"Well of course he'll be safe, said the Minister jovially, suddenly brightening, "That's what I keep telling the public. The Ministry has the situation under control. Diagon Alley is safe. Why, did you look at your dining room Tom? Filled with people, because they know the Ministry will protect them. This isn't the old days with You-Know-Who, these are five individuals who'll soon be caught, you mark my words."

The man in the red robes frowned but he didn't say anything to contradict the Minister of Magic. Tom was nodding though.

"Now," said the Minister. "Dimitri here will take a look at some of those injuries. Greyback certainly put you through the ringer."

"You weren't bitten, were you?" Dimitri spoke for the first time.

"Sir?" Harry asked.

"Greyback didn't bite you, did he?" The man asked.

"No," Harry shook his head. "He tried, probably would have too. But it's like I said. That woman saved me."

He wasn't sure why the man looked at him so seriously while he answered.

"Yes," said the Minister. "Well I'll be off, plenty to do."

With that, Fudge walked out. Dimitri pulled out a bottle of some potion and flicked his wand at it. Some of the potion zipped out and smeared itself on his face. Not at all pleasant, but his face started to feel better.

"Anything else?" the man asked.

"Um, there's some scratches on my arms," Harry said, holding them up. He was pretty sore all over from the car, but it wasn't like anything was broken, and the Auror was looking at him all seriously and Harry just wanted everything to be done with.

His arms received the same treatment and the man left brusquely.

"Alright," Tom said. "Why don't you finish that stew, and I'll get your room ready."

Harry dug into his supper, finally feeling as though he could actually relax. Things were looking up. He wasn't at the Dursleys anymore, and it looked like he'd have the run of Diagon Alley until school started, and Harry would be able to do his homework in peace.

At that thought though Harry groaned. He had left his trunk in Surrey. He didn't look forward to going to get that. He got up. He'd go tell Tom he had some errands to run in the alley. No need to start another search. Still though, better than one more night with the Dursleys. Though he'd go back and spend the rest of the summer there if he could take back what had happened to Ms. Adler.
"Headmaster, the Potter boy..." Professor Severus Snape started as he ran into the office of Albus Dumbledore.

"Is safe and sound," the old man said calmly. "Or at least he has not been injured seriously or captured. He will, however, be spending the rest of the summer holidays in Diagon Alley."

"What?" Snape demanded, not taking the seat that his mentor indicated to him.

"It seems that after escaping from Fenrir Greyback, Mr. Potter made his way to Diagon Alley. The Minister himself went to see him there, to assure that Harry was alright. Somehow, in the end it was decided to leave Harry at the Leaky Cauldron. It seems that Harry is convinced that his presence on Privet Drive will endanger his family."

"The boy must be behind the wards, he will not be safe in Diagon Alley."

"Alas, I did implore Cornelius to change his mind, but he would not budge. I do believe that he wishes for Harry to be a symbol of the continued safety of the alley. There are of course several Aurors guarding the alley, but I do agree that in this climate, Harry needs more protection. Fenrir Greyback spent twenty years evading the ministry before his capture, and Bellatrix Lestrange would have no qualms killing Harry in front of a dozen Aurors. No, I will not feel well until Harry is once more behind the wards of Hogwarts."

"And until then?" Severus asked.

"Until then, I have faith that you will fulfill your oath to your utmost ability," Albus said with confidence.

Snape groaned.

"Does it grate on you, after all this time?" the headmaster asked.

"Potter grates on me," was Snape's only response.

"Do not worry about your start of term duties, I will purchase any potions that you do not have time to restock."

"I'll be needing more Polyjuice," Snape said as he stalked out of the office.

Chapter End Notes

Well, what did you think. Action isn't really my forté, but I think this turned out well. I hope you like where this is going, and that you'll find some good fics to read before I post again.
Masks

Hey, welcome back. I hope you all enjoy this chapter, there were some scenes that were a real pleasure to write.

See the end of the chapter for more notes

Masks

Being able to walk down the winding path of Diagon Alley was a freedom that he quite enjoyed. The sun was shining, but it was a relatively cool day and the friendly hustle and bustle of the wizarding shopping district gave Harry a vague sense of anonymity. Indeed, he hadn't had anyone stare at him or his forehead since he had walked out the back of the Leaky Cauldron.

It had been a year since he had last walked the alley, and while there were many new products for sale and a few new storefronts, nothing really had changed. Harry wondered if he were to travel back in time a hundred years, if the alley would look as it did now.

Harry saw a silly little children's toy in one of the windows and went over to get a closer look. It was a small figure dancing whimsically about, every few moments it would pop, and take on a new appearance; new clothes, a new face. From its hands, feet, and head, strings led upward, so very high up, where Harry couldn't see. It wasn't anything Harry wanted, it had only caught his eye as a curiosity. The more he looked at it though, the more it made him uncomfortable. He couldn't say why, but the sight was beginning to disturb him. There was a sick sensation in his stomach.

Pop

Black disheveled hair, glasses, green eyes, and a scarred forehead. Harry turned around to see if anyone else was looking at the display window. He turned back around.

Pop

He saw his reflection in the window this time, and suddenly he knew why no one had been staring at Harry Potter. The green eyes and glasses were still there, now shrouded in long, black, greasy hair over a large hooked nose. He gasped when he realized the resemblance. Suddenly it wasn't sunny; a dark cloud rapidly moved in overhead, blocking the sun. The air chilled and his breath fogged up the window in which he was staring at his bizarre appearance. He looked around to see what everyone else thought about the rapid change.

No one seemed to notice, but where previously the hustle and bustle had been pleasant, it was suddenly crowded and overwhelming. There were people milling about everywhere, walking quickly, not stopping to look at the windows.

Pop

Harry turned around to look back into the window. Despite everything else, he was relieved to see that he once more looked like himself. Someone bumped into him, then someone else, neither person turning around to apologize. The stream of people increased, and Harry soon found himself
pressed against the side of the building trying to keep out of everyone's way. Someone bowled him over. He fell hard, scraping his palms and knees. He looked up.

This time the man stopped and turned around, and Harry froze. The tall man loomed over him and looked at him with loathing and disgust.

"What are you doing with my face?" James Potter demanded.

Harry gaped at him for a moment. "You gave it to me," he finally said.

"I didn't give my face to a killer," the man said contemptuously.

"No, that wasn't my fault. Greyback killed her," Harry said desperately, still sprawled on the cobbled street.

"You led him right to her," his father said accusingly.

"I tried to warn her; she wouldn't save herself," Harry cried.

"You should have saved her," his father said, his voice laced with disappointment and scorn.

"I tried," Harry said desperately. "The wand didn't work."

"No," his voice thundered. "You didn't make the wand work, you failed. You might as well have killed her yourself. You should be with Greyback now. It was all your fault. You deserve what he did to you and more. You could have stopped him. You had the power to stop him but you wouldn't let your magic work. It's all your fault, all of it, everything he did, everything you did. You deserve him and worse, and you don't deserve to be my son."

Harry's insides felt as cold as the chilly air around him. "No," he said, though he knew he had no defense. "No, I saved that man. I led Greyback away from him."

"You ran away, you coward," James Potter spat. "I'm glad I'll never have to see you again." He turned away.

"No, wait," Harry called out, his hand outstretched. But no one was there. He was alone in the alley, still sprawled on the ground. He brought his knees up towards his chest, wrapping his arms around himself. He tried very hard to forget what he had just heard. Why couldn't he forget it?

Suddenly, someone grabbed him by his shirt and pulled him up. He found himself pressed up against the window he had previously been looking through, looking into the angry face of Severus Snape.

"You can't forget it though, can you," he hissed. "You can't forget me. You will always know."

"It doesn't matter. You're still nothing to me," Harry shouted into the man's face, not caring how much bigger the man who had him pressed up against the wall was.

"I could have been," he said, now sadly.

"You wouldn't have cared!" Harry accused.

"You'll never know," Snape said, disinterestedly.

"Good!" Harry yelled in his face.
Snape’s features twisted in disgust.

"Mudblood," the man spat. Suddenly Snape burst into a thousand fluttering bats who swarmed around Harry, scratching at his face and arms, before disappearing.

No sooner had the bats gone then Harry saw something moving out of the corner of his eye. He turned in time to see a woman with red hair disappear around a bend in the alley.

He tried to call out for her to wait, but nothing came out out. He started running after her. She would understand, she would still care.

He turned the same bend she had disappeared behind, just in time to see her disappear around another. His voice was gone, if he could only just say something she would come for him, she would find him. On and on he ran, never quite catching up, never seeing more than a glimpse of her around the corner, but he had to keep running. He could never stop running.

He turned a corner and ran into...something. The chill was gone, and he knew he didn't have to run anymore. He knew he was safe. A sigh escaped his lips and he knew he could talk. He knew he didn't need to say anything. He closed his eyes and everything faded.

Waking up was gradual. It took him a moment to gather his bearings. He was in his room, in the Leaky Cauldron. It had all been a dream.

Of course it had been, he thought. His parents were dead and Snape didn't know anything. Neither of those things were going to change. He briefly thought about what his father would have thought if he had seen what had happened the day before in Little Whinging before dismissing the thought. He knew he hadn't killed that woman, Greyback had. Still though, he felt bad that she had died because of him. James Potter would have probably fought Greyback from the get go. Harry wished he still had Greyback's wand. He wanted to know if the wand had just been a poor match or if he, Harry, had failed in casting the spell against Greyback. There was nothing for it though, he'd just have to make due not knowing.

He rubbed the last of the sleep out of his eyes and scratched behind one of his ears before he looked at the clock. Time For Lunch, it said in blurry letters. He'd slept through the morning. Of course he had been up all night getting his trunk. That, luckily, had gone off without a hitch, though Tom hadn't exactly been happy when he realized that Harry had gone back to Surrey, and Harry had now promised multiple times not to leave Diagon Alley.

Harry grabbed his glasses and got ready for his day. Pulling a school robe on over his muggle clothes, Harry made his way down stairs and greeted Tom who had him seated at the bar with a sandwich and chips moments later.

"So what did they do?" Harry asked Tom as the man cleaned up behind the bar after the lunch crowd. He really had slept in rather late.

"Who?" Tom asked, though Harry thought he knew very well who.

"The five who escaped from prison," he said. "I think I've heard of one of them being a follower of Voldemort." Tom flinched which Harry tried to ignore. "But what about the rest of them?"

"Well, it really isn't a very pleasant story now, is it. They were all supporters of He-Who-Must-Not-Be-Named. All of them except Greyback were Death Eaters," Tom said.

"Death Eaters?" Harry asked.
"His most loyal followers, the ones who killed for him. Not that Greyback didn't kill for him, but He wasn't going to give his mark to a werewolf, now was he?"

Harry's heart skipped a beat. "A werewolf?"

"Yes," Tom said. "Worse than following You-Know-Who, he's been a menace for some time. Purposely turning people, especially children. He had a pack for a while, those were bad times besides all of You-Know-Who's business. Most of them were captured though, or killed. Those five who escaped were all captured in the weeks after you got rid of Him. They all committed atrocities, I don't mind not telling you about over your lunch, or ever for that matter. The aurors will deal with them now, don't you worry about them. You just stick to the alley, they won't show their faces here where everyone would know them."

Harry readily agreed not to go out into muggle London while he thought about what he had just heard. It was easy enough for Tom to tell him not to worry, but Harry had a werewolf after him who wanted to turn him. Did Greyback blame Harry for getting caught? Did he think he would never have been caught if Voldemort had never been vanquished? The man had talked about someone else, someone who had cared about Harry. Had this other person captured Greyback? If so, who, and where were they now?

"Well now, off with ya," Tom said. "Go enjoy the alley."

Harry realized he had finished his food. He thanked Tom and walked out back, tapping the brick wall to get into the alley.

Much as in his dream, the alley hadn't changed much since the year prior. Harry's first stop was Quality Quidditch Supplies of course, but by the time he returned to the Leaky Cauldron that evening, he had explored the whole length of the alley, something he hadn't been able to do the two other times he had been in the alley. There had been something odd though. He had begrudgingly gotten used to the red robed Aurors every which way looking at him, as though they were waiting for someone to attack him. There was someone else though, or several someone else's who were doing the opposite. It had taken him a while to notice the first one, but by the time he reached Madame Malkin's, he realized that the same sandy haired man had been in his vicinity for a while. Oddly though, he seemed to be watching everything but Harry. The man was constantly scanning the crowd and the rooftops, looking into every shadow and side way. About an hour after he had noticed him, another man took his place when Harry wasn't looking. Still always in Harry's vicinity, still looking every which way, with the same blank disinterested look on his face. So Harry figured the Aurors who were supposed to be watching the alley were watching Harry, and whoever was supposed to be watching him was watching the alley. Harry figured if whoever was supposed to keep an eye on him didn't want to introduce themselves, then Harry wasn't about to strike up a conversation. It wasn't as though he needed a child minder.

He made it back to the Leaky Cauldron a little after the dinner rush and, thoroughly exhausted, ate his supper and went to bed.

Even though he started to spend most of his time catching up on his summer homework, the days following his arrival at the alley seemed to fly by pretty quickly. It helped that said homework was being done worry free, now that he was away from the Dursleys. It helped even more that there were a few denizens of the alley who occasionally helped him with said homework. Though he'd
never say so to Ron, or Hermione for that matter, it was actually enjoyable to do a History of Magic essay seated outside a shop on a lazy Sunday afternoon. Of course it helped that said shop was an open aired ice cream parlor whose proprietor was an amateur historian who made learning about the inception of the International Confederation of Wizards sound exciting. It also really helped that said proprietor, Florean Fortiscue gave Harry free sundays while Harry worked out in the open.

"Now you see," Mr. Fortiscue said excitedly. "The death of Nathaniel Gladwell didn't only clear the way for Elton Finch to lead the delegation from Scotland, it brought some of his biggest opponents onto his side. Of course Finch would be the one to bring forward the Dewey-Trent Compact, which many historians think was the only thing to stand in the way, later, of the Dark Lord Rhineheart. A century of history altered, because one man found himself in a duel the night before the first confederation."

"What was the duel about?" Harry asked between hastily scribbled notes.

"Ah, now that is a story, isn't it. You see, there had been a gala the night prior to the duel at the Gladwell estate. Now who was it?" Mr. Fortiscue ran into the back of his shop and started searching for a scroll. He came back, scroll in hand. "Ah yes, According to the scholar Eaton Thump, Miss Julia McKay, betrothed to Gladwell's soon to be killer, Aston Bradley showed up to the party wearing robes of a similar color and design to Mrs. Gladwell. Mr. Gladwell came up on her from behind, mistook her for his wife, and became quite familiar with her before he realized his mistake. Bradley demanded satisfaction and found it the next morning. Gladwell had been something of an isolationist, and would never have helped strengthen the ties between the northern and southern factions of Britain. Everything changed because two women had the same taste in evening attire."

Mr. Fortiscue had a broad grin on his face as he told the story, Harry could tell he really loved the complexities of history.

"Are there a lot of stories like that?" Harry asked. "Where something small made a big impact on history."

"Why Mr. Potter, if there's one thing I've found while studying history, it's that we are all just one mistimed sneeze away from causing the next Great War, or from stopping one. Now have you ever heard the tale of Alal Myre and the great dragon escape of ten eighty eight?"

Harry was about to answer in the negative when a small gaggle of children entered the shop with one very tired looking witch. Fortiscue's eyes lit up even more and he was soon behind the counter, happily talking to his customers, his hands flying about, assembling their decadent confections.

"Ah hah," Mr. Fortiscue's voice carried over the babble of the children in response to something one of them had said. "And just who's birthday is it?"

"Mine," said a little boy, raising his hand. "I turned seven," he said, holding up six fingers before correcting himself. Harry smiled to himself. Even with the Dursleys, there'd been an innocence to being seven that he missed. He'd lost it soon enough, growing up in that household.

"Well now, what flavor does the birthday boy want."

"Strawberry," the boy said excitedly.

"Well that strawberry's just going to have to come with my extra special birthday treacle." The boy's eyes lit up as the sugary syrup was drizzled over the ice cream. The frozen treat was topped
with whipped cream and handed to the little boy. A few minutes later the children and the mother of the birthday boy headed out to Quality Quiditch, the children all excitedly talking about their favorite teams.

"Now, where were we?" Mr. Fortiscue asked.

"Dragons," Harry said.

"Ah yes, dragons," The historian said, hurrying to the back to his scrolls. "Have you ever wondered where the Hogwarts motto came from?"

A couple of hours later, Harry walked out of the ice cream parlor with his book bag over his shoulder. Spotting a likely candidate for this hours watcher, Harry gave a cheery wave and was quite surprised to get a very cheerful wave back. The watcher had never waved back before, or even acknowledged Harry's existence. Harry looked around for another likely candidate but didn't spot any. The odd thing was, the watcher never looked the same, but always acted the same. Over the days since Harry had taken up residence in the alley, there had always been a watcher when he left his room, wether he was in the dining room of the Leaky Cauldron or all the way at the other end of the alley. Yet the watcher changed every hour, and he had never seen the same watcher twice. It was always someone new, and he never saw them make a switch. He only ever knew who it was because they all acted the same. The same blank expression, the same roving eyes, the same fluid gait, always ignoring Harry when it was him they were following.

The Aurors littering the alley were a different story though, Harry knew most of them by sight if not by the name on their badges, and many of them would give him a polite nod as they kept their watch on the alley.

Harry passed Tooling's Charm Stop, a store he had only visited twice, but always caught his eye, and was often on his mind. Jane Tooling owned and worked the shop, where she performed complex charms work for clients and sold a variety of charmed items. He had gone in with some questions for his charms homework. He hadn't needed much, he was decent at charms, but he had been fascinated with the variety of useful objects in the store; items that were very handy for an underage wizard who couldn't do magic outside of school. Still though, he had lived so long without money, as though he were truly impoverished, that while often tempted, he rarely splurged on items he thought were pricy, even when he could afford to. Harry had made one exception though, an item he would have dearly liked to have had when he was escaping privet drive, a shrinking sticker. He could just slap it on his trunk and then put it in his pocket.

However, it wasn't the many fascinating items that kept him thinking about the shop. The thing was, the spell his mother had written about, the one that would tell him if the charms that managed his hemophilia needed to be strengthened, was something that he could easily ask Madame Tooling to cast on him for a small fee, but then Harry wasn't sure he wanted anyone to know that he had the illness. What if someone put it all together. He didn't want anyone to know that he was in any way shape or form related to Snape, and he would be damned if he would give anyone reason to talk like that about his mother. It was just a little maddening not knowing if he was on the brink of bleeding to death or not. Harry passed the shop without going in.

Harry made his way further down the alley and stopped at the apothecary. He didn't spend half as much time there as he did at the ice cream parlor, for obvious reasons, but Mr. Ashwinder had been
a big help in understanding his potions homework. He didn't have the same flare for describing potions that Mr. Fortiscue had for history, but he certainly knew the subject well, and he had a lot more patience for questions than Professor Snape did.

"Now what questions do you have for me today Mr. Potter?" Mr. Ashwinder asked as Harry entered the shop.

"Umm," Harry started trying to remember the terms from his book. "I'm having trouble understanding Bates' third formula."

"Howard Bates or Erman Bates?" Mr. Ashwinder asked.

"There's two of them?" Harry asked.

"They were brothers, both of them potions researchers, and both of them, unfortunately, have third formulas."

"Um," Harry pulled out his potions book and flipped through, finding the right page. "Erman Bates," he said.

"Ah, yes, Erman Bate's third formula is used to adjust the aqueous ratio in potions. Now, at school, you brew potions in a highly controlled environment with highly standardized ingredients. As well, most of the potions you will have brewed so far are not highly sensitive to the subtle differences. But when you brew some of the more volatile potions, you must make adjustments based on elevation, ambient moisture, temperature, and the aqueous density of the potions ingredients used."

"The book didn't really explain how to use the formula," Harry said.

"What book are you using?" Mr. Ashwinder asked.

"Intermediate Potions Brewing for Students," Harry said looking at the cover of his book. "It's the book assigned for the class."

"That book used to be called The Home Reference Guide for Intermediate Potions Brewers," Mr. Ashwinder said with a grimace. "It was written as a reference guide for those already competent with potions. I dare say the publisher changed the name to expand their sales."

Harry could just imagine Snape reading the book, thinking that it made sense to him, and assigning it to his students. That was, by and large, how he taught.

"Do you have a book that could better explain the formula?" Harry asked.

"Top shelf on the right, Anna Morrellie's Subtle Science. That should be a good supplement to what you have."

Harry walked over to the book section and quickly found what he was looking for, glad for an excuse to buy something. While Mr. Fortiscue and Mr. Ashwinder were both very knowledgeable about their respective subjects, Harry could tell that Mr. Ashwinder wasn't as enthusiastic to be playing the summer tutor as Mr. Fortiscue, so Harry always made sure to buy something when he came to pester the man so he wouldn't feel like he was being too much a bother. He did have several more stirring rods, beakers and potions ingredients than he really needed, though.

Harry wondered how many other students would be able to accurately explain Bate's third principle, and what Snape's face would look like when he read Harry's summer essays. With Mr. Ashwinder's help, they were turning out rather well. Snape would probably still find a reason to
give him a bad grade.

"Does Professor Snape ever buy stuff here?" Harry asked. He had been wondering if he would run into the man at some point in the alley. Really, he half expected to see the man every time he visited the apothecary. Not that he wanted to, of course. The less he had to see Snape the better. He looked at the door a moment wondering if the man would suddenly walk in.

"Oh he drops in from time to time. Though he owl orders mostly. Waldorf's in Hogsmead may be more convenient, but they can't beat my selection," he said proudly.

Harry payed for the book and walked towards the door. "Thanks for the help Mr. Ashwinder," he called over his shoulder, right before he walked into someone.

"Mr. Potter," Snape's cold drawl cut off the apology that was on the tip of his tongue. Harry's head snapped back around to face the man who now towered over him. "I should think that with people out at this very moment for your blood, you would have the sense to watch where you are going."

Harry just stared up at him, frozen, his mind blank. No witty reply coming to mind and his tongue locked up. Their eyes locked for a moment until Snape broke away with a smirk. He walked past Harry as if he had forgotten that he was there. Harry turned to follow him with his gaze before he shook himself and walked out the door angry with himself.

He wasn't some little kid, and he wasn't afraid of Snape or anything, so why had he frozen up just from seeing him?

Harry walked down the street towards the Leaky Cauldron with a scowl on his face. He wished he had said something to the man, though he didn't know what.

Of course I would have to run into the boy on the one day off I've had in over a week, Severus Snape thought, his dower face souring.

"It must be nice having students like that in your classroom," Alexander Ashwinder said from behind the counter.

"I beg your pardon," 'Xander wasn't much one for being facetious, and Severus usually attempted to reign himself in when he dealt with the man, so it was odd to hear him speak so.

"Students like Mr. Potter," 'Xander said in all seriousness. "He's quite studious and inquisitive. He's been in here almost every day with questions about potions making and ingredient properties. It must be nice to have students who care about the subject."

"I do hope you haven't been doing his homework for him," Severus glowered. It would be just like Potter to take the easiest route and get all of the answers from someone else rather than a book. Since Granger wasn't around, he supposed the boy had turned to bothering the people of Diagon Alley for the answers to his summer work.

"Of course not," 'Xander glared. "I'd be charging him for that. I just point him in the right direction. He just bought Subtle Science for further reference."

"Morrellie spoon feeds the reader; students need to work for knowledge, they need to use their
'Xander chuckled. "That explains it. How did the moonglow work out for you?" he asked, changing the subject before Severus could ask what had been explained.

"I'm sure it would have worked out fine if the fire bulbs hadn't been disturbed by our resident poltergeist the evening they were supposed to bloom," he said with a scowl. Moonglow was very rare and didn't last more than a few days, and fire bulbs only bloomed once every month. It would be a while before he would be able to attempt the Starlight Elixir again.

"I could have had some on hand if you'd ordered ahead of time."

"I prefer to collect my own ingredients when I can," Severus sighed. "That being said, I've heard rumor that Arlington Grove managed to get a good cross of nightshade and kingsbane this year and I need you to place an order for me. With a reputable cultivator," he added.

"Don't want to make the trip out there and collect some yourself?" 'Xander asked with a wry grin.

"For an ingredient this rare and as difficult as it is to collect it properly, I would gladly put up with a trip to the states. However, I do not currently have the time to do so." It was entirely Potter's fault that he did not have the time, and if some incompetent American cultivator sent him bad ingredients he would gladly find an excuse to give the boy a detention.

"I'll see what I can do, and owl you when I've got something set up. Did you need anything else? Maybe some wolfsbane," he said pointing to a shelf that was almost empty.

"Wolfsbane? Why should I need any of that?" Severus asked.

"Well there is a savage werewolf on the loose you know," 'Xander said with a grin.

Severus took another glance at the almost bare shelf. "I suppose the good witches and wizards of Britain think that belladonna will protect them from Greyback."

"I keep telling them they'd practically have to shove it down his throat to do any good, but they still buy it like it's going to keep them safe," 'Xander seemed to find the whole thing very amusing.

"And you're selling it at a galleon an ounce?" Severus asked, having noticed the sign below the plant that grew like a weed.

"The market adjusted, and I adjusted with it," 'Xander said with a shrug.

Severus shook his head with a grimace, the world would be such a better place if it wasn't filled with incompetent idiots. 'Xander of course just thought the whole thing to be some sort of joke.

"Well then, I look forward to your owl," he said, turning to go. "And do take care. You may be unlikely to cross paths with Greyback, but Beckett would gladly terrorize the alley."

"Now a Death Eater would have to be insane to set foot in the alley with as many aurors as there are keeping us safe here."

"Beckett is insane," Severus said as he walked out.
Disturbingly, Harry had been all but unable to stop thinking about Snape that evening. The man was less than nothing to him. But he had been something to his mother, Lily. What had she seen in him? Was there something he hadn't seen in the man, something that would have made him worthy of his mother's love.

In the letter, his mother had said that Snape had had a horrible childhood. Maybe she had used that to excuse his horrible personality. But there had to have been some redeeming quality about him, or else, what did that say about his mother.

Besides, Harry had had a rather horrid childhood, and he wasn't anything like Snape. Though there was one area where Harry had to admit he paralleled with Snape. Snape had stopped Harry from falling off of his broom in first year. He had gone out of his way to save Harry, like Harry had saved Ginny during his second year. It may have been that Snape was just trying to settle an old score with James Potter when he did it, but that had to say something for the man, didn't it? Of course then there was the fact that both of them had worked in Harry's first year to stop Voldemort from getting the Philosophers Stone.

Yet these things only said that Snape wasn't all bad, not that he was a good guy. He certainly wasn't a nice guy, and when it came to qualities that Harry looked for in a father, not being the absolute worst person on Earth wasn't really a qualifier. Not that he was looking for some sort of father figure. He was beyond needing anything like that. He didn't need a father, and he certainly didn't need Snape.

Two days later, and the third time since his run in with Snape that he found himself leaving the apothecary without seeing the man and he was annoyed with himself for being disappointed.

"Hey Harry, over here," A familiar voice called out as Harry was walking out of the apothecary. He turned around and spotted Oliver Wood, the Gryffindor Quiditch Team Captain.

"Hey Olie," Harry said, running over to the older teen, banishing the thoughts that had been mulling in his head.

"Have you been to Quality Quiditch yet?" Oliver asked.

"Only about a dozen times since I got here," Harry said with a roll of his eyes. He might not be as enthusiastic about the sport as Oliver, but Quiditch was still the most fun he had ever had, full stop."

"No, I meant today," Oliver said, grabbing Harry's arm and enthusiastically dragging him a few shops down. "You haven't seen it yet."

"Seen what," said a slightly exasperated Harry.

"This," said Oliver with reverence, stopping in front of the Quality Quiditch display window.

"Wow," said Harry.

"I know, right?" Oliver said, with a goofy grin. "She's beautiful, isn't she?"

"Yeah," Harry said. It was. Harry had never seen a broom like it before, and he owned a racing broom. "The Firebolt," the blazing letters proudly proclaimed.

"I've been reading about it in Witch Broomstick for weeks," Oliver said. It's supposed to far outstrip the Nimbus line. Today's the first time they've been publicly available, the leagues have been buying them as fast as they can make them. Can you imagine if our team all had these. Or
even just you Harry. You'd be unbeatable."

"Price upon request," Harry pointed out, having read the bottom of the poster board behind the broomstick. "I think even Lucious Malfoy would choke on the price of equipping a whole team." Though Harry might be able to afford one, if he wanted to drain his vault. It was actually really rather tempting when Harry thought about it.

"Yeah, but just imagine," Oliver said.

"Yeah well, just imagine Slytherin after we kick their butts for a second year in a row, with the same teams and the same brooms," Harry said with a grin.

"We'll it's Hufflepuff I'm worried about this year," Oliver said.

"Hufflepuff? We steamrolled them last time," Harry said.

"Last time was two years ago, it's practically a whole new team, and Diggory's no slouch," Oliver said, after he figured out the muggle word.

"Diggory?" Harry asked, unfamiliar with the Hufflepuff player.

"He made seeker last year, now he's captain of the team this year," Oliver said.

"He made captain after one year?"

"From what I've heard he was practically captain last year. Jenkins was so busy with NEWTS, Diggory pretty much took over all of the responsibilities."

"Is he a good seeker?" Harry asked.

"He's a bit big for the position, but he's a really good flyer. Really, he's a bit like you. Though you're better. I've never seen anyone outside the league fly like you," Oliver said, ruffling Harry's Hair. Harry blushed at the compliment.

"So what about Ravenclaw this year?" Harry asked

"Another team we haven't played in a while," Oliver said. "Actually, come to think about it, you've never played them. But don't worry, I took careful notes last year during their games against Hufflepuff and Slytherin. Thing is, they'll have a new captain this year and two new players to boot. We'll have to wait and see who gets chosen during their try outs."

"Anyone I should look out for?" Harry asked.

"Brian Turner has a good arm, and he always targets seekers more than the chasers," Oliver said.

"As long as no one curses the bludger," Harry said. "I think the Weasleys can keep me safe."

"Their seeker's not bad," Oliver went on with his assessment. "Not great, mind, but definitely not bad. Her name's Cho Chang"

"Well we'll beat them all this year," Harry said. Though the last two years, something had always come up to stop them from playing all of the games of the season.

Oliver shook his head. "This is my last year Harry. It doesn't matter that we have the best team. We have to train the hardest, we have to want it more than anyone else."
"That shouldn't be any trouble, with you as our captain," Harry said with a grin. "We won't let you leave Hogwarts without the cup. Even if we have to sabotage your grades so you'll have to come back next year."

"Don't tempt me," Oliver said.

"Let's stop looking at brooms we can't afford and go get some ice cream," Harry said.

Oliver shrugged and they turned towards Fortescue's.

"So are you going to go for the league when you graduate?" Harry asked.

"Of course," Oliver said. "I've already..." He stopped talking with an abrupt yell of "Hey!" as a stranger in a cloak barged in between them, bumping into Harry.

Harry stumbled and the stranger grabbed his arm to steady him, or so he thought. The next moment, he was being roughly turned around, so he could face the man who had grabbed him. Harry tried to grab for his wand, but found his whole torso wrapped up in the man's large arms. He looked up, and gasped.

Though the face was different, there was no mistaking those sharp pointy teeth, or the predatory grin. It was Greyback.

"Activate," Greyback said, and Harry suddenly felt a tug behind his naval. Suddenly there was a bright flash and a bang and Harry and Greyback were flung apart violently. As Harry flew through the air, he watched as Greyback disappeared into nothing with a furious look on his face.

The landing on top of a display table of used books was very rough, but Harry was up on unsteady feet with his wand in his hand as soon as he had his bearing.

Rough hands grabbed him and he brought his wand up, a hex on his lips until he saw who it was. It was his watcher. The man didn't say a word. He just looked Harry up and down, let go, and walked away, blending in to the crowd of onlookers. Two red robed Aurors were making their way through the throng towards Harry. Oliver was suddenly in front of Harry.

"Are you all right?" Oliver asked.

"Yeah," Harry said. "What happened? How'd we get blasted apart like that?"

"It was that same man who came up to you just now, he cast something at the two of you."

"What happened to Greyback? That didn't look like apparition."

"That was Greyback?" Oliver asked.

Harry nodded.

"Well that looked like a portkey, he was probably trying to drag you with him when he activated it," Oliver explained.

Harry was about to ask what a portkey was, when the Aurors arrived. The two boys were separated and Harry was taken to the Leakey Cauldron, while the whole of Diagon Alley and the surrounding area were searched.'
There was hardly anyone in the Leakey Cauldron when Harry woke up the next morning. He looked around as he walked to his normal seat at the bar, as if he would find all of the patrons who usually busied the pub hiding behind one of the tables. Of course he didn't need to look far for his watcher, he tried giving a wave and was rewarded by being completely ignored.

"Where is everyone?" he asked Tom as he took his seat. Tom he noticed looked fairly grim.

"Ah, well, there was an incident in Hogsmeade yesterday evening. One of the Death Eaters," Tom didn't much look like he wanted to carry on.

"What happened, was anyone hurt?" Harry asked.

Tom hesitated.

"Oy, I thought this came with three eggs, not two," someone said across the room.

"Ah, be right over," Tom called back. "Here you go," he said to Harry. Harry watched Tom as he started dishing up a plate of breakfast for the him. He didn't come back to the bar while Harry was eating.

On his way out of the Leakey Cauldron, he passed by his watcher.

"Thanks," Harry said, knowing he wouldn't get any response.

The two Aurors monitoring traffic into Diagon Alley didn't try to stop Harry; he still had the run of the alley, though now he had to wear a necklace with a charm to block portkeys and apparition. Harry had learned all about portkeys the night before while he waited for the Aurors to finish their work.

Harry tapped the bricks to get through the wall, and found that the alley was similarly deserted. He thought there might just be more Aurors than there were shoppers. He didn't need to look to see that his watcher had followed him out; walking as if he had absolutely nothing to do with Harry. He wondered what would happen if he took off running, or if he tried to head down Knockturn Alley.

There was a news stand not far from the Leaky Cauldron, and it didn't take Harry long to see what had even the Aurors on watch in the Alley looking grim.

'Hogsmead Auror Adjunct Office Incinerated By Death Eater,' the headline said. Harry just stared at it for a moment before he quietly bought a copy and went to read it in his room at the Leaky Cauldron. He didn't feel like spending the day roaming the alley.

Three Aurors and ten office workers had been killed by Fiend Fire. A few people had escaped with minor injuries. The article noted that it was lucky so many had been deployed at the time or more might have been in the building when it was attacked. The Aurors thought that Beckett was behind the attack, since Fiend Fire was what he had used to attack the muggle museum.

Harry's attempts to work on his homework that day were frequently interrupted with day dreams about running into Beckett in the alley. These turned into thoughts about Greyback and the rest of the Death Eaters. What was stopping any of them from setting the Leakey Cauldron ablaze like they had the Auror building? Was he putting everyone in danger just by being here?

By the end of the day, Harry realized that how he saw the wizarding world had been changing
since he was eleven. When he'd been younger, and going to Hogwarts for the first time, everything had felt like jumping into a fairy tale. A magic castle, an evil wizard. He had seen the wizarding world with a rather simplistic view, and anything that didn't fit into it had seemed distant. Now it wasn't just a magic school and an evil wizard. It was a magical community, with a government and prisons and a police force. That evil wizard had an organization, the Death Eaters, and right at that moment they were lurking in the shadows, waiting to strike. At least one of them was waiting to strike at Harry.

That night he dreamed of a massive world where he was very small. Every way he looked, something lurked in the shadows. Harry walked up so he was right next to one of the towering buildings before he suddenly leapt back in fright. Where his fingers touched, the building caught ablaze. The fire was spreading quickly. He took a few more steps back, only to look at the ground in horror. Wherever his feet landed, they left fire in their wake. The fire spread like little rivers running through the cobblestone. the fire was coming for him. He turned and started to run. The buildings around the first one were on fire too. He ran and he ran, leaving footprints of spreading fire behind him. Whenever he looked over his shoulder, everything behind him was in flames. He ran and ran, but he was so very small, and he could not go very fast. Suddenly the fire was all around him, he had nowhere left to run.

Harry woke to Hedwig nibbling on his ear. She did this from time to time, when he had bad dreams. Harry stroked her feathers for a while, half awake, half asleep, before he fell into a restless sleep.

When Harry woke the next morning, he knew what he had to do. If crazy murderers were after him, then he had no business putting anyone else in danger. He could just imagine the Leakey Cauldron in flames with a laughing Death Eater outside, or someone like Mr. Fortescue meeting the same fate at Greyback's wand as that woman had. He was putting everyone around him in danger and he needed to leave.

He hadn't ever really unpacked, so getting ready was quick and easy. He placed the shrinking sticker on his trunk and slipped the miniature into his pocket. He turned to Hedwig, he'd have to leave the cage, he should have gotten more stickers.

"Fly to somewhere nearby, then come find me this evening, I should be wherever I'm going by then," he told his owl, who was giving him a disapproving look. Harry flung his invisibility cloak over his body and made his way down stairs. Tom probably wouldn't come to see why Harry hadn't been to breakfast for a couple of hours, at which point everyone would find out that The-Boy-Who-Lived, was no longer in Diagon Alley. Everyone would be safer if the guy with the target on his back was nowhere to be found.

Harry walked out the door to his room and said goodbye to the place that had been a rather nice temporary home.

Sitting in the dining room of the Leakey Cauldron, Severus could feel that the Polyjuice Potion he had previously imbibed was wearing off. He threw the hood of his cloak over his head, applied a notice me not charm to himself, and then drank from one of the potions vials inside of his pocket.
He stood up and left some money on the table as the changes began to start. He felt his skin ripple, his hair shortened, and he could feel his whole body shrink slightly as he assumed a new body. The process over, he walked over to another table and sat down, removing the charm and lowering the hood. He didn't have to wait long.

"Good morning, welcome to the Leakey Cauldron. What can I get for you?" Tom asked, having walked up to the table.

"Coffee, black," Severus said, and then proceeded to act as though the man wasn't there. The bartender liked to draw guests into conversations, and Severus wasn't going to have any of that. Old Tom walked off and returned with a coffee which he set on the table.

Severus scowled, Potter was usually up well before Severus had to take another dose. The boy hadn't left the Leakey Cauldron after he had read the Prophet, and Severus wondered if he planned to do the same again. Of course the boy had still come down for meals so it seemed that the Potter spawn was having a lie in. Either that or he was up to no good. It would be just like him to decide he had to stop Greyback or Beckett, like he had the Stone and the Chamber. His ego and Gryffindor stupidity would likely leave him compellled to do something himself, especially if he ever heard about Black.

No sooner did he think about the cursed man, than he realized that something was off. He paused and tried to take in the whole room. There was something that didn't belong. Footsteps, but no one was up and walking. He closed his eyes, trying to pinpoint the sound. Someone was invisible. He thought of the staircase, where anyone trying to get at the boy would have to go, but the footsteps were not going towards the stairs, they were moving towards the door. Potter, he thought, with a sneer on his face. Potter in his invisibility cloak. How had Albus known?! The door opened, seemingly of its own accord. He got up quickly and caught the door as it was closing, and walked past the two Aurors stationed outside, hidden from muggle eyes.

He couldn't hear any footsteps going either way on the street, but out of the corner of his eye, he saw a loose page from a newspaper flatten on the sidewalk. He turned and walked quickly but silently towards the paper. Soon he could hear soft footsteps ahead of him, and he followed a while, until the two of them were in front of an alleyway. His arm swung wide in front of him, colliding with something unseen, he grabbed it, an arm, and dragged it and its owner into the alley. There was a small struggle until the invisible figure froze and said, "oh," in Potters voice. Severus reached out and pulled the invisibility cloak off of Potter's head. The boy looked upset and anxious, he kept glancing towards the street, he clearly didn't like having been dragged into an alleyway by a stranger, but he didn't seem overly afraid of Severus.

"What were you thinking, leaving your protection, you fool? I suppose it is no concern of yours that half the Auror force is keeping you safe, or that two days ago, a feral werewolf tried to abduct you," he hissed at the boy.

"Well that's just it, isn't it? They should be protecting everyone else and trying to catch all those convicts, shouldn't they, not protecting me. And Greyback can't try to attack me if he doesn't know where I am," the boy said, as if this was obvious.

"You just don't think, you never think Potter.." he paused at the boy's intensely puzzled look.

"Professor..." the boy began, and Severus's hand was over his mouth in a flash.

"Again, you just don't think. I am disguised for a reason," he said through clenched teeth. No one could get him as angry as this boy could, not so quickly. "Put this on," he told the boy. "Stay silent, and we will discuss this back at the Leakey cauldron." It wouldn't do to stay in this unprotected
alley any longer.

The boy scowled but he threw the cloak back on. Severus of course didn't trust the boy at all. His hand on the boys shoulder he jabbed his wand at the boys chest and incanted a quick tethering charm, usually used by parents of small children, but useful in other endeavors. He would make sure the boy followed him back if he had to drag him there. Potter of course put up a small protest but Severus silenced him with a flick of his wand and started to walk towards the Leakey Cauldron. The boy followed without giving any more trouble.

They soon entered the wizarding pub and Severus sat down in a corner booth and cast a number of privacy charms.

"Remove that damned cloak," he said to the boy who he had heard take the seat opposite himself. The boy was glaring at him. He gestured towards his mouth petulantly. Severus sneered and removed the silencing charm and the tether.

"Look, thanks for saving me from Greyback the other day, but you don't need to watch me anymore. I'm just putting everyone else at risk just sitting here. I need to go somewhere else, I need to hide out until I can go back to Hogwarts. That pyromaniac could set the whole Leakey Cauldron on fire."

"The Leakey Cauldron is protected, you are protected, which you would not be if you were out on your own. Once they realized you were outside of any wards, they could start rituals to track you and find you, or are you capable enough to block such magic?"

"If I keep moving, they won't be able to catch me, all of these Aurors are just sitting around, doing nothing but guarding me. They should be catching those mad men."

"Those Aurors and more would be looking for you, instead of looking for Beckett if you went missing. The alley would then become much less guarded and would then be a nice soft target for Beckett."

"Well that's stupid," Harry said angrily. "I'm just one kid, they can't just throw the manhunt away to look for me just because of something that happened when I was a baby."

"It doesn't work like that Potter," Severus sneered. "You can't just use your celebrity when it's convenient and then expect everyone to ignore it when you want. Do you even realize what you did when you asked the Minister to let you stay here?"

Harry shook his head.

"You are the symbol of a safe wizarding world. The minister wants you right here, showing the rest of the wizarding world that everything is safe and sound. Have you even been reading the prophet or do you even care what happens outside of your own tiny insignificant world?"

The boy glared at him but didn't offer any words of defense and Severus smirked. "Daily stories about the Boy-Who-Lived enjoying the alley, letting the world know that the ministry has everything under control, and that it is safe for everyone to go about their daily lives ignoring the fact that the ministry is no closer to catching anyone than they were before they all managed to get wands for themselves. No Potter, the minister will not let you disappear, I doubt he'll even let you hide in your room for another day."

"I wasn't hiding," The boy said defensively.

"More the fool you if you weren't," Severus said. "Now have I made myself clear? You won't try
to leave again?"

The boy nodded. "This is stupid," he said. "It's like they care more about what everyone thinks than they do about catching those people."

"And yet we would not be in this mess if you had not decided to play the martyr and just stayed put behind the blood wards. Now, you're going to get up, leave this booth, and go about your day. Keep that damned cloak in your pocket and use it if anything goes wrong. Do not try to apprehend anyone, and for Merlin's sake Potter, stop waving every time you see me, you cretin."

Potter glared at him for a moment, and Severus was ready for another argument, but then the boy got up and walked away, shoving his cloak into his pocket, not looking back.

Walking away, Harry did his best to bury the anger coursing through him. No one could get under his skin as well as Snape. If he was honest with himself though, he was more angry with the situation than anything. It wasn't his fault he had been kicked out of his house. Not that he was about to tell Snape anything about that. Probably the worst thing though was that Snape had been right about just about everything. Harry had found out he had been living in a trap, a canary in a gilded cage with a hole in the top and a cat circling below.

Yet beyond all of that, there was something else. The man's hurtful words were usually enough to make Harry angry, but after this encounter, Harry realized that he was angry because of who Snape was, he was embarrassed to have looked a fool in front of the man. It made sense in a stupid sort of way. The man was like some sort of bastardized sperm donor, but Harry didn't feel that he should feel any different about the man, he wasn't any real sort of father. Harry didn't need a father anymore and he certainly didn't want Snape as one. The man was nothing but the worst teacher at Hogwarts.

So why had Snape's contemptuous sneer left Harry with a hollow feeling inside?

Besides all of that, what was the man doing acting the body guard? He had already satisfied any debt he may have owed James Potter. Harry briefly entertained the horrifying thought that perhaps Snape knew of their relationship, but quickly dismissed it. If Snape knew, then he was sure as hell showing it in a weird way. Besides, he had no way of knowing. The only person who knew was Harry, and he was going to keep it that way. Or was he? He still didn't know anything about Sirius Black, the godfather mentioned in the letter. Not for the first time, Harry wondered what had happened to him. He certainly hadn't been in Harry's life. Harry frowned. The man was probably dead.

It would have been nice if his night off could have been put to something more relaxing than tea with the Headmaster, but recent developments had lead to the need for more planning. Now that that was out of the way, there was one thing he wanted to know.

"How did you know the boy would try to leave this morning?"
The headmaster smiled ruefully from behind his half moon glasses.

"Harry has, in some areas, a great sense of responsibility. It made sense that he would try to remove himself from the Alley after the Hogsmead attack."

"But you didn't think he would leave that day or in the middle of the night. You knew it would be the next morning."

"Why Severus, I have worked with young people for so long, I dare say I have an instinct for how they think."

"Some might think that Trelawny was more reliable to you as a seer than she seems."

"Perhaps she is," the Headmaster said. "She did tell me that I would regret choosing the maroon drapes for my office come summer and I was quite surprised to find that she was right."

Severus gave his employer a bemused glare.

"Suffice it to say," the Headmaster continued. "That I do believe that young Harry has taken your words to heart, and will not attempt to leave what security he has."

"You should have bound him to that house the moment they escaped," Severus said.

"Some things need to happen in their own way," was Albus's response. One of a few phrases Severus heard whenever the man's decisions seemed to make sense only to himself.

They continued their tea in silence, and Severus left to return to his post.

Chapter End Notes

Well I hope you all enjoyed this chapter. I really liked writing the dream sequences, but don't worry.

I want to do a shout out to lesswrong's story Harry Potter and the Methods of Rationality on FF.net. It's one of the most epically original takes on Harry Potter fan fiction I've ever seen. The plot is well structured and the characters, dialogue, and action are all very engaging.
Demons

Chapter Notes

I hope you like this chapter.

Disclaimer: I don't own Harry Potter and I don't make any money off of this story.

See the end of the chapter for more notes

Demons

Though he had resolved to stay in Diagon Alley, Harry hadn't felt like leaving the Leaky Cauldron after his rather unpleasant talk with Snape. From what he could see from the window in his room, the Alley still looked little better than deserted, and Harry didn't feel like mingling with the grim looking Aurors, who had just lost some of their own. He was going a bit stir crazy though, and the next morning he had decided to stop cloistering himself and get back into the alley.

Snape was right, though it galled to admit it to himself. Short of Hogwarts, Diagon Alley was the safest place for him. The universe, it seemed, wasn't satisfied with this self admission though. That morning, as he sat himself at the bar for breakfast before he headed out, Harry discovered that Snape had been right about another thing: Harry was Fudge's PR piece, and the man wasn't about to let him hide himself away.

"Harry!" said a jovial voice behind him.

He turned around and was surprised to see the Minister of Magic standing behind him, with two red robed Aurors flanking him.

"So good to see you again. Just sitting down to breakfast I see, why don't you join me, I was just about to have something to eat myself. Tom," he called to the Leakey Cauldron's proprietor. "Why don't you set us up in the back."

Tom of course obliged, and Harry soon found his breakfast plate being removed and himself following Tom to the private dining room in the back of the inn. Fudge had an avuncular air about him and threw an arm over Harry's shoulder as they walked to the back, asking generic questions about his studies and his time in the alley. Harry managed to force out some awkward, quick answers through the lump that had suddenly formed in his throat caused by discomfort, but Fudge didn't seem to notice. The whole thing made him uncomfortable, there was just something about it that seemed so fake. Harry wanted to throw the Minister's arm off of him and walk in the opposite direction, but he supposed that one did not do that to the Minister of Magic.

One of the Aurors went in before them and checked the room before the rest of them entered. Before Harry knew it, he was seated across from Minister Fudge, two plates of hot english breakfast before them and the two Aurors and Tom were leaving them to eat alone. Harry found himself rather nervous to be dining alone with the man. Why on Earth did the most powerful man in wizarding UK want to eat breakfast with him? The night he had left the Dursley's was one thing, but this was just bizarre.

Harry didn't know quite what to say to the man, but this didn't seem to be an issue since Fudge
seemed quite content to guide the conversation, and only needed small nods and 'mmhmm's from
Harry to keep going. Harry found himself pushing his food around his plate for the most part, while
Fudge seemed very capable, somehow, of both eating a good bit, while also talking just as much
without talking with his mouth full. Harry started to idly wonder if magic was involved somehow.
Then he realized that the room was quiet and he focused back on the minister who seemed to be
waiting for some sort of response from Harry.

"Sorry," he said.

Fudge just smiled at him genially but with a hint of condescension.

"I was just saying how it must be nice to know that security procedures have been tightened on the
alley. Now you can get back out there and enjoy your freedom," Fudge said lightly.

Though he had already been uncomfortable eating with the man; now his entire appetite
disappeared as Snape's prediction came back to mind. He had, of course, already planned on
returning to the alley, but he wanted to test something first.

"I don't know," Harry said. "Maybe it would be safer for everyone if I just stayed in here. I
wouldn't want anyone else to get hurt like Ms. Adler did."

Fudge momentarily looked confused at the name of the dead Muggle woman, before he looked on
Harry with a faux look of fond exasperation.

"Harry," he said. "Everyone's safe again. The ministry won't let anything happen. Now what will
the public think, with the Boy Who Lived hiding like this?"

"Oh, I don't expect they'll notice," Harry said. "I'm no Tacheous Worth or anything," Harry said,
thinking of a Quiditch player who had been in the news a lot lately.

"Not notice you? Why Harry of course they notice the Boy-Who-Lived," Fudge said as if Harry
was just being modest. "That's why you have such a responsibility to help people feel safe again."

"But are they?" Harry asked.

"Yes," Fudge said emphatically. "People are safe, the Ministry is keeping everyone safe. And we
all have to do our part to keep everything moving along. Why there are people hiding in their
homes, and shop keepers with nary a customer and it's all pointless, and what's more it's fixable.
You can fix it Harry."

"I just..."

"Harry," Fudge interrupted, a strained smile plastered on his face. "I trust that you will help the
public with this. I would so much hate to think that you wouldn't," he said with a firm intensity.

Harry was suddenly reminded that Fudge had sent Hagrid to prison only a few months prior, on no
evidence whatsoever. He had done it to placate the public. While he didn't think that the Minister
had any reason to throw him in prison, he didn't really want to see what he might do if Harry
directly challenged him.

"I will always help the public," Harry said. Though not necessarily the ministry, he thought.
"Really, I've had some shopping to do, I should head out there," he said, excusing himself from the
table.

"Have a good day Harry, it was good dining with you," The Minister called after him.
Harry made a noncommittal noise as he passed the two Aurors flanking the doorway. It was pretty embarrassing to be coerced into doing something you were already planning to do. Even worse to find that Snape was right. Speaking of the devil, there he was, sitting so he could see the doorway to the private dining room and the entrances to the Leaky Cauldron at the same time. A different face, as always, but Harry could see the same evaluating look on his face as he seemed to look at everything and nothing at the same time. Harry walked past him without giving any indication that he knew the man was there. He went upstairs and grabbed his book bag, checking to make sure his invisibility cloak was tucked safely inside. He walked outside, knowing that Snape was a distance behind him.

The alley was little more populated than it had been the day prior. Shoppers here and there, walking with a purpose, not stopping to mingle or window shop, just walking towards their destinations, so they could get home as quickly as possible. Diagon Alley was just plain depressing as it was. Stone faced Aurors everywhere, scared shoppers moving about, and on the cover of every newspaper and magazine on the paper stand by the Leaky Cauldron, a picture of a burned patch of ground, what was left after the attack in Hogsmead.

Harry spent the day trying to follow his usual routines, but there was a pall over the whole thing. Though he wasn't very active that day, he returned to the Leaky Cauldron that evening feeling exhausted, and when he fell asleep that night, he dreamed of fire.

Peter waited nervously in the old cottage, the unconscious forms of its muggle occupants still lying prone in the next room. He glanced with trepidation at the clock on the mantle. The meeting should have started two minutes ago. He knew that this wasn't a long time to wait, but it felt like an eternity. An eternity while he was sure a herd of Aurors were going to burst through every door. Of course the arrival of those he awaited wasn't that much better, in his opinion. Suddenly, there was a loud crashing noise, as the front door of the cottage was smashed through. An angry witch stormed in, her thin black robes flowing behind her skeletal frame as her sunken black eyes took in the room and its occupant.

"Petrificus Totalus," she said, her wand pointed at Peter. Peter's eyes widened as the spell flew at his face, shields and counter curses leaving his mind. His arms snapped to his sides, and his legs stuck together, stiff as boards, and all he could do was look at the ceiling as Belatrix started walking around him. He could hear her talking to someone, but there was nothing in his head except the panic that had been growing since before she had arrived.

Suddenly Peter's body was floating, he righted in the air, and the spells on him all canceled and he stumbled as his feet hit the ground. He found himself facing three wizards, and one heavily scowling witch, who were all staring at him. Rookwood, Beckett, and Dolohov had come in after Lestrange, and it was Rookwood who brought his wand down having just released Peter. They all had their wands out and Peter realized he had dropped his own when Belatrix had arrived; he eyed it on the floor, but did not move to pick it up.

"Give me one good reason I shouldn't turn your brain to mush and feed you to a manticore," Belatrix demanded.

"I can get you Potter," Peter was quick to say. "And Dumbledore, if you dare."

"Lead us into a trap, you mean, like you led your Lord."
"I merely told him exactly what you would have told him if you had known their location. I told him just as I told him everything else; I told him their location in good faith, as I was always faithful to our lord."

"Faithful?" She shrieked. "Crucio," she cried out, only to have her wand pushed to the side by Rookwood. Peters knees gave out at the near miss, and he found himself picking himself up off the floor a moment later.

"Let's hear what he has to say before we turn his brains to mush, yes?" said Rookwood.

"I was faithful!" Belatrix shrieked at Rookwood. "Beckett was faithful, even you were faithful in your comfortable position as a spy. He's been sitting on his own wand this past decade doing nothing. He was never a believer. He bore our lord no true loyalty, he just wanted a piece of his power."

"That's true," said Peter, "I was never a believer, but that doesn't matter, the end result is the same. I need the Dark Lord to succeed, now more than ever, and I haven't been doing nothing," Peter bit out. He knew that his life hung in the balance, and he was the only one who could save it. It was a good thing he had come prepared to make this argument.

"I have positioned myself next to Potter, Dumbledore, and a number of their supporters. I am ready to strike and I am ready to collect information. Just as your own brother-in-law has done at the ministry."

"You should have been searching for our Lord, aided in his return."

"And wound up useless in Azkaban as you did? Or get lost in the Himalayas, or Merlin knows where else. The Prophesy is not complete, so we know that the dark lord will come back. I simply chose to be in a position to aid him when he returned. In one night, we can destroy the vanguard that stood in the Dark Lords way, and when he returns, we will all be rewarded immensely." And Peter could stop living as a rat.

"And how will you do that exactly," Rookwood asked. "It seems unlikely that a dead man could be positioned to do what you have claimed."

Peter grimaced; he rather didn't like showing people.

"A, um, a demonstration is in order," he said. He closed his eyes, focused inward and with a pop, he was Wormtail the rat. He transformed back into Peter. The four escaped convicts just stared at him in surprise.

"I'm, ah, the youngest Weasley boy's pet rat. He shares a dorm with Potter at Hogwarts. Kill me, and you take an asset away from your lord."

"The rat suits you quite well," Dolohov said, speaking for the first time, his voice hoarse, and his head hanging slightly to the side. His eyes though, were focused piercingly on Peter. "We could use a rat, I suppose."

Rookwood was looking at him speculatively, and Belatrix looked murderous, but not like she was actually moments away from killing him.

"How will you get me into Hogwarts?" Beckett asked.

"You are not burning down Hogwarts," Belatrix said thunderously.
"I could take out Dumbledore and Potter, and destroy that bastion of muggle borns."

"Potter and Hogwarts belong to the Dark Lord. The castle is his birthright as the Heir of Slytherin," Rookwood said. "And you're a fool if you think you could kill Dumbledore so easily."

"Your sole purpose right now is keeping the Aurors distracted while we find the Dark Lord. You getting captured in Hogwarts will only be a hindrance," Dolohov said scathingly.

"You don't want Potter?" Peter asked despondently. He had been sure Potter would be one of their targets. He had waited twelve years, positioned himself to be ultimately useful to the Dark Lord. But the Dark Lord had yet to come back, and he was so very tired of being a rat; of being a pet. The Dark Lord would return, that they knew, and when he did, Peter would be rewarded, but who knew when that would be.

"Potter's day will come," Rookwood said with an intense rasp. "Dumbledore's as well, I assure you. The Dark Lord will wait no more. We will find him, and we will restore him, and we will not risk being captured to do what is the Dark Lord's right."

"But.."

"Go back to your post. The Dark Lord will summon you when it is time. Bare faith and allegiance until then and you shall be rewarded," Rookwood said imperiously and clearly dismissively. He turned back to Beckett and started talking very condescendingly towards him, but Peter wasn't paying him any mind. It had to be soon, it just had to. He didn't know how much longer he could last.

"Enough, we all know this," Dolohov said, to whatever Rookwood had been saying. "We have been here too long."

"Yes," Rookwood said. "We have tarried." He turned to leave, not even giving Peter a sideways glance. "Be good," he told Beckett. "And be loud."

Belatrix gave Peter one more murderous glare and turned to follow Rookwood. Dolohov left after her. Beckett, muttering about fire, reached into his robes and disappeared. Peter raised a trembling hand up to his face. The end had been in sight, yet he still had long to go, too long.

He bent to reach for his wand, which was still on the floor when the remains of the splintered door were brushed aside by a man who stormed in. Peter lunged forward grabbing his wand, but the man paid him no mind. He walked into the center of the room; his intense, almost feral looking, eyes scanning everything before he stopped and took a deep breath through his nose, which was then let out through clenched teeth. He nodded to himself.

"Fix the door," he said, not looking at Peter.

Peter just stared at him for a moment, and Greyback turned his head to look at him with just one of his mad eyes. Peter turned his attention towards the door, which he repaired quickly, though it now looked decrepit.

"So, tell me how you can get me into Hogwarts," Greyback told Peter.

Peter was somewhat flummoxed, he hadn't been expecting that.

"I can't," he said. "I..."

"So tell me how you will get the boy out."
"I, I can't do that," Peter exclaimed.

"Then what were you promising them, mister inside-man?"

"You heard Rookwood, Potter belongs to the Dark Lord," Peter said, ready to disappear if Greyback took his words as a challenge.

"So you can get me into Hogwarts," Greyback said.

"Yes, but," Peter started.

"The Dark Lord is not here," Greyback said fiercely, an intense look on his face. "I am, and I know your little secret and I can find you wherever you go and make you a midnight snack. I get Potter. He is mine, and when the Dark Lord returns, if he returns, I will give Potter to him for my due. Now, how do I get into Hogwarts."

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Two more muggle buildings were firebombed in the following weeks; the Canterbury Cathedral in Kent, and a barracks building at the Catterick Garrison in Yorkshire. Both attacks were timed for maximum loss of life. Beckett was caught on CCTV again; this time at the Garrison. Yet he hadn't made another appearance in the wizarding world, and despite the panic currently happening in the muggle world, the wizarding world seemed to be forgetting their previous fear and had gotten back to their daily routines. If Harry had been so daring, he would have snuck out into the muggle world to get a newspaper. No muggle papers were sold in the alley.

A couple of weeks after the Hogsmeade bombing, Harry could almost believe that it had never happened, at least, judging by how it was business as usual in Diagon Alley. The usual hustle and bustle had returned; with whole families walking about, witches and wizards window shopping, and hawkers calling out wares at passing shoppers. However, when he looked closely, Harry could see a tension. A mother holding her children close, a man looking at passers by suspiciously, and just in general, the feeling of the world waiting for the other shoe to drop, not caring that it already had, twice, in the Muggle world.

Regardless of what else was happening in the world, Harry was fairly excited for the upcoming two days. Firstly, because Harry was at that moment awaiting the Weasley's and Hermione's arrival at the Leakey Cauldron, and secondly, because the next day, they would be boarding the train at Kings Cross Station, on their way to another school year at Hogwarts School of Witchcraft and Wizardry. While Harry wasn't looking forward to having to actually interact with Snape on a regular basis, Hogwarts had always felt like his home, more than anywhere else, and he eagerly awaited being able to return with his friends.

Harry got out of bed, the last remnants of sleep falling away as he stretched and rubbed his eyes. He changed into his school slacks and dress shirt and threw a plain robe over the ensemble. Looking in the mirror, he found himself looking at his own face, rather than the clothes he was wearing. He frowned for a moment and tried to imagine himself looking more like Snape than his father, like he had in his dream from weeks prior. He scowled at himself and walked out the door of his room.

Sitting down at the bar, Harry greeted Tom, who said hello to Harry, gave him some breakfast, and went off to take an order from a couple sitting in a booth.
Harry glanced around casually, his eyes passing over a disguised Snape, who, as usual, had only a black coffee in front of him.

"So," said Tom, who had returned to the bar. "Are you excited to be returning to school tomorrow?"

"Very," said Harry. "It'll be good to see everyone again, and be able to use magic."

"Can't quite remember how I managed when I was your age," Tom said with a wry grin. "I don't think a day goes by when I haven't cast ten spells before I've even opened the Cauldron."

"Well," Harry said. "I've only got two and a half more summers to get on with."

"Don't be too eager to grow up," Tom said. "You can't go back to being thirteen."

Harry smiled and said, "Yeah," before turning back to his breakfast. Really, he thought, you could tell most kids to enjoy their carefree youth while they had it, but Harry wasn't sure he had ever been carefree. He doubted he would ever look back at being thirteen and wish he could go back to what he had now. He could do without annual attempts at his life, crazy dark lords, and terrorists. Of course, nothing said he wouldn't have to deal with it when he was older as well.

He had just gotten up from the bar stool when he heard an excited "Harry," from behind. He turned around in time to see a mass of bushy brow hair as he received an enthusiastic hug from his friend Hermione.

"Hey Hermione," Harry said while hugging his friend, and trying not to get any of her hair into his mouth. "How was France?"

"Oh it was… Wait forget France, what's this about someone trying to kidnap you?" Hermione said.

"How'd you hear about that?" Harry asked.

"I read the paper, why didn't you say anything in your letters?" Hermione said with a frown.

"You were having fun in France, I didn't want you worrying," Harry said with a shrug.

"Oh that's nice, now every time I go on vacation I can worry about all the horrible things you are keeping to yourself."

"Well maybe if you didn't just assume something horrible was going to happen to me you wouldn't worry so much. Honestly, it's not like something is always going on," Harry said. Hermione just raised an eyebrow at him.

"Alright, so something horrible probably will happen," he said. "But that's not the point."

"And the point is?" Hermione asked.

Harry opened his mouth to reply, but found he didn't actually have a point. He shrugged. "I suppose I can give you a heads up the next time something big happens." He almost choked on the words thinking about Snape sitting across the room. That Snape was his father was something he certainly wasn't planning on telling anyone.

"But you are alright, aren't you?" Hermione asked.

"Well yeah, I'm not the one who wound up dead," Harry said.
"Wait, Fenrir Greyback is dead." Hermione said in surprise.

"What, no, I thought you said you read about it in the paper."

"I did. It didn't say anything about anyone dying." Hermione said, now very concerned.

Harry himself hadn't actually read any of the articles that mentioned either of his attempted kidnappings, but he had assumed that the woman who had died saving his life would have been mentioned.

"Ms. Adler, she lived in my neighborhood. She attacked Greyback; she's the reason I got away, but Greyback killed her," Harry said with a touch of anger and sadness.

Hermione looked aghast for a moment before Harry suddenly found himself in another hug. He was rescued by the timely arrival of Ron.

"Oy," called Ron from the cleared space in front of the Leakey Cauldron's fireplace, the flames behind him turning green. "That's long enough, let the man breath. He's got people out for his blood, he doesn't need anyone trying to squeeze the life out of him." Harry was rather grateful for the reprieve and grinned at Ron, who was crossing the room towards him while Percy Weasley stepped out of the green flames. The two boys slapped each other on the backs by way of greeting. Harry didn't have long to wait before he was surrounded by Weasleys. He was, of course, happy to see them all, even Percy, but he was somewhat put out to find out, after various greetings and some antics from the twins, that the Weasleys senior intended for everyone to stay together that day as a group. Harry had been planning to go off with Ron and Hermione alone, and having Snape as chaperone was bad enough.

The Weasleys and Hermione all got rooms in the Leakey Cauldron and Harry waited for them all to settle in. The twins were the first downstairs and Harry suspected they had just dropped their trunks in their rooms and come back down.

"So how's our team's favorite seeker doing after a summer of no flying," Fred asked coming up next to Harry and putting an arm over his shoulder.

"Probably gone mad, I bet, getting up to all sorts of trouble," George said from Harry's other side, throwing his own arm over Harry's shoulders.

Harry ducked down from the both of them and turned to face them. "I'm your only Seeker," he said with a grin. "Besides, I did get to fly, I flew all the way from Surrey to the Leakey Cauldron."

Here the twins looked impressed.

"No, really?" Fred asked.

"How'd you avoid getting spotted by the muggles?" George asked.

"Well," Harry said. "It took me a while, but I managed to fasten my invisibility cloak so I could fly with it."

"You have an invisibility cloak," George said, incredulous.

"Yeah, it was my dad's, Ron's never mentioned?"

"He probably wanted us to think he was sneakier than he was, getting around the castle at night like that."
"Still though," said Fred. "Flying to London seems pretty tame for this one. Are you sure you didn’t slay a dragon, or discover that you could speak to fish."

"No, nothing like that," Harry said, assuming they meant other than narrowly avoiding getting abducted by a werewolf.

"Well surely you stopped some sort of heist here in the alley," George said. Harry shook his head. "Pulled off a heist?" Another head shake, though with a grin. "Discovered some sort of innate and rare magical ability?"

"No," Harry said. "Well yeah, sort of, actually. It was just accidental magic, I guess, but I passed through solid matter."

"Are you serious?" asked George.

"Yeah," said Harry. "I wondered afterwards if there was a spell to do that. It might make getting to classes easier if I could just run through walls."

"If that's the best you can think to do with the ability to walk through walls, then I'm not sure that I want to continue affiliating with you," said George.

"Escape from Filch?" Harry asked.

"There you go," said Fred, ruffling Harry's hair. "Right after you've planted a dozen dung bombs in his office. Still, I've never heard of anyone doing that," said Fred.

"Yeah, you're probably the first," George commented.

"First what," Ron asked, having just come down from his room.

"First bloke who could stand being in the same room as you for more than five minutes," Fred told his brother with a wicked grin.

Ron stuck his tongue out at him.

"Oh honestly Ron, you would think you were still a first year," Hermione said having just come back from settling into her room.

"They started it," Ron said.

"Oh let's not start anything boys," Mrs. Weasley said, the rest of the Weasley clan in tow. "We've got enough to do today without your squabbling about."

"We could run our errands faster if we split up." George said.

"And have you causing mischief throughout the alley? I think not. Now come on."

The seven Weasleys, plus Harry and Hermione walked out of the Leaky Cauldron and up to the barrier to Diagon Alley. Mrs. Weasley pulled out her wand from her hand bag and tapped the bricks to get into the alley. The bricks started turning and rearranging themselves pulling away from the center. Harry had seen this all a dozen times before, but he could still remember the wonder he had felt the first time he had seen it. George, on the other hand, looked like he was seeing the magical gateway for the first time, and Harry wondered if, in his own lack of enthusiasm, he was beginning to take magic for granted.

They went all over the alley, Mrs. Weasley in the front, leading the group, Mr. Weasley in the back
making sure no one fell back to window gaze, and Harry in the middle. It didn't take Harry too long to realize that Snape wasn't following, and suddenly Mrs. Weasley's insistence that they all stick together made more sense. She and Mr. Weasley were now his chaperones; Snape had likely gone back to Hogwarts to prepare for the start of term the next day. Of course, while he would prefer the Weasleys senior to Snape any day, their close proximity put a damper on discussing anything other than trips to Paris and Egypt.

They stopped at Flourish and Blotts to pick up books, and Madam Malkin's for robes. Harry said a small good bye to Mr. Ashwinder at the apothecary, and reminded himself to try to guide their group to some of the other shops he had frequented so that he could say good bye to many of the people he had become fond of over the summer.

Harry found himself rather excited, though not as excited as Ron was, for their last stop. Olivander's hadn't changed since Harry had visited on his eleventh birthday, and Ron was practically bouncing on his heels like a soon to be first year as he eagerly awaited finding his new wand. Mrs. Weasley gave Ron a slightly exasperated look as they went in, probably recalling the exact circumstances under which Ron had broken his hand-me-down wand. Of course, fifteen minutes later and a good two dozen wands tried, she looked very proud when Ron found his wand. It was a very different process from when Harry had gotten his wand. Ron didn't just randomly swish various wands, he cast a spell with each one, with a great variety of results. The wand he chose however, or rather the one that chose him, made itself apparent when Ron first picked it up. It didn't make a scene like Harry's had when he had first held it, it was just apparent when he picked it up that it was his wand. Ron's face lit up, and he looked at the wand like he had never seen one before, and almost imperceptibly there was a hum, a tingling sensation as from the air itself, like magic was in the air. Then it was gone, but Harry didn't need to see Ron cast Glaucius on the glass of water to know that he had the right one, though the water froze solid instantly. Mr. Weasley was beaming, and Mrs. Weasley gave her son a big hug. Mr. Olivander started putting wands away, and Harry realized he had half expected some sort of crazy story to be attached to this wand.

'I remember every wand I've ever made, Mr. Weasley, every wand. It just so happens that the wood for this wand came from Merlin's staff.' Harry smiled at the thought.

Ron's excitement was somewhat short lived when Mrs. Weaselsy snatched up the wand and put it back in its box and into one of her shopping bags.

"I don't need it getting broken before you even get to the train," she said in the face of his mutinous outrage. "Now let's be on our way, it's almost sunset and I don't want us out after dusk," she said, and they were on their way before Ron could retort, while Mr. Weaselsy quickly paid for the wand.

Mrs. Weasley tried to herd them back to the Leakey Cauldron without stops, but she couldn't prevent even Percy from stopping once more at the Quidditch shop to ogle once more at the Firebolt on display. Harry and Hermione managed to convince her though, to stop at Toolings Charm Stop. Harry had mentioned the variety of items geared towards young witches and wizards unable to perform magic over the summer and with her birthday coming up, Hermione's parents had left her with some extra money to buy herself a present. Mrs. Weasley had given them all a strict ten minute deadline and let them loose in the shop. There was a wide variety of charmed items and Harry very soon found that his money bag felt very heavy in his pocket.

Time flew quickly and the trio soon found themselves making their way towards the front of the shop where Madame Tooling was having an amicable though low volume discussion with the twins. Madame Tooling excused herself when they approached the counter, but not before George
held out his hand to shake hers.

Hermione, out of all the cool items in the shop, had chosen a book mark, which would make any magical book look like a mundane book to a muggle eye as well as keep her place. Ron and Hermione had a small argument about the items relative merits while Hermione paid for her item. "I couldn't read any of my text books while I was in France," Hermione said.

"But it's a mokeskin pouch," Ron said, pointing at the item. You could keep a dozen books in there.

"I could also go an entire year without pocket money, but I think I'd rather not," Hermione said, placing a few coins on the counter.

Harry wound up buying silencing insoles for his shoes, a nice compliment to his invisibility cloak.

"Are there any charms I can perform for you today?" Madame Tooling asked after they had checked out.

Just one, Harry thought, but that could wait till the next day when he could do magic himself.

"No thanks," Ron said, and they were soon being ushered out of the shop by the Weasleys elder.

Soon enough they were ensconced within the Leakey Cauldron, their purchases upstairs, and the whole lot of them surrounding a large table set for a family style dinner. Percy was expounding on how the school year would be different with him as Head Boy, something he had talked about quite a bit throughout the day. Harry, Ron, and Hermione were trying to ignore him, and the twins were making fun of Percy's new position. It almost felt at times, as though they had never left Hogwarts, as though they hadn't spent the past several, very eventful, weeks apart. At other points, Harry could almost feel the weight of everything that had happened, everything that hadn't been said, and the dark events of their world pressing down on him and separating him from his friends.

Harry almost wished that they were alone and he could tell them everything. Yet from the letter, to the encounter with Greyback, to being thrown out of the Dursley's home, he didn't feel like he could really talk about any of it. Oh, he would tell them a bit about the two attacks, and about Snape technically being his watchdog. But he didn't really want to talk about how he hadn't even had his wand on him, or how Ms. Adler had died so horrifically. And the Dursleys; it almost seemed normal to him, how they treated him. And when he had been eleven, he had almost been a bit surprised at how upset his friends got when he talked about them, so he had stopped long ago. It was a subject no one ever really brought up, and even if it wasn't, getting kicked out was quite a bit different from doing all of the chores. Snape and his mother especially though, he didn't want anyone, not even his friends to know about. Yet at the same time, it made him feel like an impostor. He had identified as an orphan his entire life, and that was typically how others saw him; the boy who's parents had been ripped from him, forced to grow up without. Yet he did have a father, and now it was his own choice to do without. Not that Snape would take him in if he knew, or treat him like a son if he did. Not that he'd want him to do either, because he didn't need either, he was doing just fine on his own.

"Harry dear," Mrs. Welsley's voice broke into his clouded thoughts, and Harry realized he had probably been staring off into space. "Did you want some more brussel sprouts?" she asked, and Harry realized he had probably been staring at the sprouts.

"Oh, um, yeah," Harry said, and Mrs. Weasels scooped some more of the green vegetables onto his plate, smiling warmly at him.
"So, Harry, Hermione, which of the elective courses did you choose this year?" Mrs. Weasley asked.

"Oh, well I've got Care of Magical Creatures, and Divination," Harry said.

"Divination was never my favorite course," Percy said officiously. "I have never regretted taking Arithmancy, and I'd say there are a good dozen practical applications for Ancient Runes in your daily life."

"Don't be silly, Percy," Fred said. Percy bristled.

"If there's anyone who needs to see who's hiding around the next bend, it's Harry." George said, pantomiming some vicious beast ready to lunge.

"Divination doesn't work like that," Percy said pompously.

Fred opened his mouth to say something, but Mrs. Weasley beat him to it. "Hermione dear, what about you?"

"I chose all of them," Hermione said.

Ron laughed. "You can't take all of them, there's too much overlap."

Percy of course had his own two cents to put in. "While I admire your studious drive, Hermione, I'm afraid Ronald is right. There's just no way for you to take all of the classes. Don't worry though, Professor McGonagall will make sure you get the classes that will help you excel."

Hermione didn't seem to have an argument against that but she didn't look at all like her hopes of taking all of her classes had been quashed. Harry figured if there was anyone who could manage all of them, it would be Hermione.

"So, Ron, how are the Cannons doing this season?" Mr. Weasley asked, and Ron started telling the table enthusiastically about the Cannon's latest almost win.

Quidditch talk took up the majority of the rest of the dinner conversation, and after tea and dessert, Mrs. Weasley was sending them all to their rooms.

"Now we're all getting up early tomorrow, so make sure you all go to bed soon, and make sure your trunks are packed tonight." She turned to the twins, "and no one is to step one foot out of the Cauldron tonight."

"Guess we'll wait till dawn," Fred said.

"Night Mum," George said as they hurried upstairs. The two had their heads together, conspiratorially before they had even reached the second landing.

Harry headed upstairs. He didn't have to wait long though, soon Ron was sticking his head into the room and letting himself in.

"So," Ron said. "Are you going to tell me now, or are we waiting for Hermione?"

"We'll wait for Hermione," Harry said. "Tell me about Egypt."

For all that Ron seemed eager to hear about Harry's adventurous summer, he was very ready to tell Harry about every detail of his trip to Egypt. Ron was telling Harry about George trying to scare Ginny, dressed up as a mummy, when Hermione knocked and entered the room. Harry could tell
that something was bothering her, but figured that she, like Ron wanted to hear what had happened with Greyback.

He wound up giving them a somewhat watered down version of events, including the fact that during the second encounter, it had been Snape who had saved Harry from being spirited away.

"Snape?" Ron asked aghast. "Why would he be watching you."

"Dumbledore's orders I think," Harry said. "It put a bit of a damper on things with him constantly watching me." Though oddly enough, he had felt somewhat safer knowing someone was guarding his back.

"Do you know why he's after you?" Hermione asked suddenly, her intense eyes focused on Harry.

"Not really, he kept talking about someone else, like he was going after me to get back at someone else," Harry said. And wasn't that all to familiar. Greyback was just a way more creepy version of Snape.

"Could it be your dad?" Ron asked. "Maybe he captured Greyback during the war."

Hermione frowned.

"No," Harry said. "All the fugitives got captured after Voldemort fell."

"Um," Hermione said, she looked awkward, like she wasn't sure if she should be saying something.

"What is it?" Ron asked.

"Well," Hermione said. "I heard your parents arguing before I came in..."

But whatever she had overheard Harry would not find out that night. At that moment, there was a knock at the door and Mrs. Weasley poked her head into the room. She frowned when her eyes fell on Hermione, but it was quickly replaced by a smile that was graced upon them all.

"All right, you lot. Time for bed, we're up at six tomorrow and you all need your sleep. Ron did you finish packing?"

"No Mum," a slightly red faced Ron said.

"Well you'd best get to it, I'll be by your room in ten minutes to say good night."

Ron got up and left the room, soon followed by Hermione.

"Good night, Harry," she said as she made her way out of the room, and to Mrs. Weaselsy, "Good night."

"Good night, Hermione dear," Mrs. Weaselsy said.

Then it was just Harry and his best friend's mum in the room.

"Well Harry," she started. "There won't be much time tomorrow so I'm making the rounds tonight. Have a good school year, and please stay safe. There may be a horrible person after you, but it's not your responsibility to catch him. Just please, whatever might happen, whatever you might hear, remember that there are adults there to keep you safe, and to capture Greyback."

"Well it's not like I'm going to go looking for him," Harry said. Really it was Snape he would
expect to accuse him of wanting to run after Greyback, though he probably wouldn't look like he was concerned about Harry if he did.

"Harry dear," Mrs. Weasley said, and Harry suddenly found that she was standing much closer with a hand on each of his shoulders, and a serious expression on her face. "I will always be grateful, so grateful that you rescued my baby, but can you really say that you didn't go out looking for the Chamber, or that blasted stone for that matter. You could have died both times; you almost did." Harry almost felt like she was as concerned for him as she would be if she were talking to Ron, and Harry wondered if she would be having a similar talk with her other children. Yet Harry didn't think he had any placating answer to her concerns for a moment. He had researched the stone and he had tried to solve the mystery of the Heir of Slytherine. But going after Snape, or rather Quirel had never been his goal, nor had facing Tom Riddle and the Basilisk. He had been trying to get the stone and Ginny, not fight anyone. His pause had been too long though.

"Just promise me, please Harry. Promise me that you, Hermione, and my Ronnie aren't going to go on any more of these adventures."

And suddenly Harry understood.

"I promise Mrs. Weasley," he said, smiling in what he hoped was a reassuring manner. "It's not like anyone could get into Hogwarts anyway."

Mrs. Weasley rewarded him with a smile and a quick hug.

"All right now, you make sure to get plenty of rest, you all have a big day tomorrow."

She walked towards the door. "Good night Harry dear." And she was gone, to kiss her children goodnight.

Despite her urgings, Harry found that he didn't get much sleep that night.

Breakfast the next morning was a rushed affair. Ministry cars arrived not long after they woke up to escort them to Kings Cross, or rather, to make sure Harry arrived without being abducted. Harry wound up riding in a car with Mr. Weasley, Percy, and George. He was a bit disgruntled to have found himself separated from Ron and Hermione, just as George seemed upset to be separated from Fred.

The two cars arrived at Kings Cross in no time at all, the magical cars having slipped through lanes and even cross traffic. Mr. Weasley was constantly looking out the windows, and Harry wasn't sure if he was looking for a possible threat, or if he was just indulging his fascination with all things muggle.

Harry hadn't expected Aurors to be stationed in the muggle parts of Kings Cross, but there were; they just weren't dressed as Aurors. Men and women in business suits were positioned all over, and Harry could recognize the familiar stance in all of them that he had seen in the Aurors of Diagon Alley. Every one of the men had an Auror red tie, and all of the women wore an Auror red blouse. He could even recognize a couple who had held regular Alley posts. Harry wondered why they had bothered changing out of all of their robes, since all of them seemed to be unnoticeable to the muggles swarming about.
"The charms are only applied lightly," Mr. Weasley explained, when Harry asked. "Otherwise the muggles would walk right into them. It's not strong enough to stop them from noticing something so out of place as robes."

There were two Aurors standing guard outside the barrier to platform nine and three quarters who both nodded to Mr. Weasley when they walked up. Mr. Weasley and Percy went first, walking through the barrier casually, both having made the trip many times before.

"Wait just a moment dears," Mrs. Weasley said, as the twins made to go next. They looked at her expectantly, but she just stood there a moment, like she was waiting for something. Then she nodded her head and said, "All right, Harry, Ron, you go next." The two boys shared a confused look with the twins and walked towards the barrier. Harry half expected to crash into it, like he had the year prior. He closed his eyes, the moment before he reached the barrier, but found himself continuing on through. He opened his eyes again, and found himself on the other side, the Hogwarts Express shining in front of him.

The train was a very welcome sight, two years prior, it had taken him from the Dursleys and to a new world of magic. Now it would be taking him back to Hogwarts, and hopefully away from the madness of his summer vacation. That image and that hope was somewhat spoiled by the sight of a dozen red robed Aurors patrolling the platform.

The twins came through next, soon followed by Ginny and her mother. Soon all nine of them were gathered together off to the side of the platform. They were not late, so there was no rush to get on the train, and there were several hugs, admonishments, and pats on the back. Harry tensed when he found himself getting a hug from Mrs. Weasley, with a 'stay safe', whispered in his ear, a reminder of her plea for her children from the night before. He nodded his head, an affirmation of his promise.

"All right now," a new voice said, an Auror, walking up towards them. "We need to keep the platform clear, so students need to get on the train and parents need to move on." Harry noticed, for the first time, that the usually crowded platform wasn't. Mrs. Weasley looked like she was about to protest, but Mr. Weasley put his hand on her shoulder and she just scowled at the man.

"Have a good school year," Mr. Weasley said, by way of parting words. The seven children made their way to the train.

"Right, well, have a good trip," Percy said magnanimously. "I have to go conduct the prefects meeting." His chest was puffed out and his Head Boy badge stood out prominently.

"Those poor prefects," Fred said dramatically. Percy shook his head at him and walked towards the front of the train.

"Welcome back students," said an excited voice from behind Harry. "Have you found compartments yet?"

"Professor?" was Hermione's surprised reply, and sure enough, when Harry turned around, he saw the diminutive form of Professor Flitwick standing in the train corridor.

"We are conducting things a tad differently this year, but not to worry, you'll be getting to Hogwarts all the same. Now run along and find a compartment for your journey."

"It's good to see you Professor," Hermione said as they headed down the train corridor looking into train compartments to find empty ones.
Ron waited a moment until they were out of the Professor's earshot.

"'Good to see you', honestly, as if we wanted to ride with Professors the only time we can do magic without anyone looking over our shoulder," Ron said scathingly.

"Did you have any plans I should know about?" Hermione asked. "You realize they're here to keep us safe, not to spy on us."

"That depends," George said.

"Is Snape on the train," Fred asked.

"What if I need to curse Malfoy?" Ron asked.

"You shouldn't be cursing anybody," Hermione said in exasperation.

"It's probably better if you leave the mischief to us," George said, to which Ron scowled.

The twins found their friend Lee Jordan and parted from the group. Further down the corridor they passed Professor Sinistra, who directed them to an empty compartment further down the train car.

"Um, there's something we should talk about," Hermione said somewhat awkwardly once they were inside the compartment. "Maybe."

"Ginny, could you give us a bit," Ron said without missing a beat.

"And the annual mystery hunt begins," Ginny said grabbing her trunk, and clearly a bit put off. "Don't worry, I won't get underfoot."

Ron had the grace to look guilty.

Hermione didn't say anything, even after Ginny left, and Harry thought she looked very conflicted.

"Is this about what you heard last night?" Harry asked.

Hermione nodded.

"Oh, it's not like I've never heard my parents arguing before, just spill," Ron said

"All right, but Harry, just promise me you won't go looking for Greyback," Hermione said.

"Why does everyone think I'm going to go hunt down Greyback?" Harry asked.

"Just promise," Hermione said.

"I already did," Harry said, somewhat heatedly. "Ron's mum made me promise last night."

"She did?" Ron said, surprised.

"She wanted to make sure I didn't drag... that we wouldn't all go off looking for him like he's the Stone or the bloody Chamber of Secrets," Harry said.

"So they were arguing about whether or not to tell you not to look for Greyback?" Ron asked.

"No," Hermione said. "They were arguing about whether they should tell you why he's after you."

They both looked at her expectantly.
"You're sure you won't..." Hermione started.

"Hermione!" both boys exclaimed.

"He killed your godfather," Hermione said, now in a rush. "I didn't hear everything, but it has something to do with why he's after you."

Harry opened his mouth to say that he didn't have a godfather, but of course, he didn't. He didn't have a godfather like he didn't have parents. All lost the same way, it seemed.

"What?" Ron asked.

"That's all I heard, really, it was mostly just them going back and forth on it."

There was a silence for a moment, and then, "Harry?"

"I'm fine," Harry said. Both of his friends just stared at him. "Really, it's not like someone I knew just died. Just someone else I never got to know." He scratched his scalp and avoided looking at Hermione.

"I just figure it would help to know why the guy's after you," Ron said.

"Was it Mrs. Weasley who didn't want me to know?" Harry asked.

Hermione looked to Ron, as though asking his permission to rat out his mom. Ron just shrugged.

"It's okay," Harry said. Both of his friends looked at him in surprise, neither expecting him to be okay with any of it. Neither of them understood what Harry understood; that Mrs. Weasley was very afraid for her children's safety, and that Harry's search for justice would lead her youngest son right into a very real danger.

"If Mum should be worried about anyone looking for Greyback, it's me. Have you seen the bounties on all of their heads?" Ron said.

"Oh, honestly," Hermione said.

They talked about the matter a bit more until the train started moving, their journey to Hogwarts begun. It wasn't long before Ron brought out his chess set, and Harry had the relative silence for introspection.

Dudley didn't have a godfather, and unlike parents, Harry didn't have much of a concept of what a godfather did, or what role one would have played in his life. Would Harry have lived with the man? Would he have visited him at the Dursley's? Did it matter? Harry didn't know.

Chess lasted for a while, and then there was conversations about their respective summer vacation. Harry wound up giving a somewhat watered down version of his own time that summer.

Hours passed, and so too did the snack laden trolley. Their train compartment now strewn with sweet wrappers, chocolate frog cards, books, and the occasional wandering chess piece was not how Harry would have liked to first be seen by his school nemesis, Draco Malfoy, but then again, Harry rather liked to avoid the pretentious, entitled boy as much as possible.

"Potter," Draco's drawled, entering their compartment flanked by his hangers on, Crabbe and Goyle "Been howling at the moon lately?"

"Piss off Malfoy," Ron said
"I'm rather surprised you're willing to be in the same compartment as him, Weasel, but then again, your family has always associated with the lower sorts," he sneered, casting a deriding look at Hermione.

Harry's hands balled up into fists. "Well I'd rather associate with werewolves than the murderers your family hangs around with."

"Werewolves are murders; they're savages, just like you are now," Draco said to Harry, a sneer on his lips.

"What are you even on about?" Hermione said.

"Don't you know?" Draco said, as if he was delighted to find that he could spread whatever he was there to spread. "Potter's been turned into a werewolf, look, you can see it in his eyes. He'll be kicked out of the school for sure, and then it's only a matter of time before he's captured again by Greyback."

"Oh, push over, Harry wasn't captured by Greyback," Ron said. "He got away; you don't know anything about it. But I do. Greyback was You-Know-Who's enforcer, he kept the Death Eaters in line. I bet your father pissed himself whenever he was in the room."

Draco pulled his wand quickly and pointed it at Ron.

"You take that back," he said angrily.

Harry and Ron were on their feet instantly, pulling their wands out of their pockets, Ron's new wand sending out a couple of sparks.

"Put your wands away," Hermione said. She was looking out the door as though expecting a teacher to swoop in and give everyone detention.

But Draco suddenly found himself no longer flanked, Crabbe and Goyle had retreated into the train corridor, they looked uncertain and their eyes were focused on Harry. Did they actually think that he was a werewolf?

Draco, missing his backup, no longer looked like he wanted to be in the compartment either. Draco's shoulders arched back and he seemed to be restraining himself from yelling at his two cohorts. Then he turned calmly and walked out of the compartment, as though he had merely become bored.

"I bet he'll eat you first Weasley," he said casually over his shoulder as he stalked down the corridor, Crabbe and Goyle following after him.

"Of all the stupid nonsense," Hermione said.

"Yeah," Ron said. "What's he on about? A werewolf. Right Harry?"

"No," Hermione said loudly. "You almost started a fight with teachers everywhere. I don't know about you but I don't want to start out the school year in detention."

"He drew his wand first," Ron said heatedly.

"Did he actually convince Crabbe and Goyle that I'm a werewolf?" Harry asked, changing the subject.
"Those two idiots will believe anything," Ron said.

"Yeah, well it wasn't long ago that everyone thought I was the heir of Slytherin," Harry said.

"If anyone's silly enough to believe that, they'll all feel like fools when they realize that it's a full moon tonight," Hermione said.

"It is?" Ron said, sounding worried.

"There's a werewolf trying to kidnap Harry and you haven't kept up with the lunar cycle?" Hermione asked.

Ron gave Harry a look. "Didn't think of that," he said apologetically.

"Neither did I," Harry said. "Still, they'll believe just about anything if I'm not careful. Let's just hope no one tries to put Wolfsbane in my food."

"Still though, shouldn't we be worried about this full moon thing, what if Greyback comes after Harry," Ron said.

"He would be hard pressed to get on board in human form, I don't think he'll be able to get on as a werewolf," Hermione said.

Ron seemed somewhat mollified but still looked out the window for the moon. It had gotten dark, but they couldn't see the moon with the cloud cover.

It wasn't long later that the weather outside took a turn and rain started splattering on the windows. Hermione had started quizzing the two boys about their summer homework when the train started to stop somewhat quickly.

"Are we there yet?" Harry asked.

"Hasn't been long enough, I don't think," Ron said with a bit of trepidation.

"It's still too early," Hermione said. They all started looking out the window, but with the light in the compartment against the glass and the dark outside, they could see little more than their own reflections. They definitely could not see the lights of Hogsmeade or its train station.

"I don't like this," Hermione said. "This could be an attack."

Ron pulled out his wand, soon followed by Harry and Hermione.

"You said Greyback couldn't really do anything with the train under the full moon," Ron said.

"Yes, but the others could," Hermione said, chewing on her bottom lip in worry.

Even Harry had to admit, he had started to think of only Greyback as being a direct threat to him.

The lights suddenly went out in their compartment, and no light came through the glass in the compartment door.

"Lumos," Hermione said, the soft glow of her wand casting the compartment in shadow and an eerie light.

They could hear worried voices from elsewhere in the train car, and a few doors opening and closing. A cold order was barked out and some of the noise stopped.
A deep chill leech into Harry's bones and he started to shiver, a sharp pall suddenly came over the compartment.

"H-Harry mate, are you alright?" Ron asked sounding worried.

Hermione put a hand on his shoulder. "Harry?" She asked.

"Wait," Ron said, now sounding really scared.

"It's so cold," Harry said.

Hermione looked at him in confusion.

"Hermione," Ron started to say something, but he suddenly threw his arms around himself with a gasp. He was soon followed by Hermione who gave a sharp shiver, the light from her wand dimming until only a faint flicker remained.

The door slid open, and in came a cloaked and hooded figure. Harry felt a sense of dread from deep within, and from somewhere, Harry could hear screaming. Someone was in trouble, Harry thought, but he knew down to his soul that he was powerless to help. Ron pointed his wand at the figure, its face hidden, the only part visible its pale and desiccated hands. Harry knew that he should be doing the same, but he didn't have the strength to. Then it started to draw its breath; a dry death rattle. Ron's wand fell from his hand and both of his arms encircled himself. That was the last thing Harry was aware of what was happening in the train compartment. The yelling was getting louder, and he was so cold and scared. It was a woman, a woman was yelling, she was begging, Harry wished he could go to her, but he couldn't. There was a high pitched laugh, but then it all changed, there was a brief silence and for the briefest of moments Harry felt warm and safe.

The whole world around him seemed to shift, the cold was back, so cold it made him ache. His feet were dangling, thrashing about, and the pain in his arm the only indication of how he was being held up. A red, angry face the only thing he could see, an enraged voice the only thing he could hear, he wanted to apologize but no words would come out, and then a wet snap and pain was the only thing he could feel.

There was a warring inside of him and then...shift.

He was running, he could never stop running. He turned his head to look over his shoulder. He could see the other boys chasing after him. Pierce has a wicked grin. He turned his head back around, but not in time to see the crack in the pavement. His foot met an immoveable object and suddenly he was flying through the air. He lands hard, half on the sidewalk and half on the street, his hands and knees scraping painfully, his glasses and one of his too large shoes flying free. He tries to put one foot underneath himself, to leap up and keep running, but a hand grabs his shirt and yanks up and Harry briefly experiences a choking sensation, before another hand grabs his shoulder and he is flipped over onto his back. The cold ground seems to leech all of the warmth from him. He's out of breath, and he's tired and he wishes that he were at the Dursley's in his cupboard. Someone punches him in the stomach, and he feels sick. He tries to break free but it's no use. He's miserable with pain and frustration and he just wants to run away, but he can't. He can hear Dudley wheezing as he approaches, trying to catch up, Harry knows what will happen. A hand yanks up on his shirt and it rips, he knows how that will be received by his Aunt. His throat becomes soar and his eyes sting, and he knows he's about to cry, but he can't, not in front of them, not in front of Dudley. His cousin catches up and he can't see well enough to say whether Dudley is angry to have needed to run, or happy to have caught Harry. Either way, it doesn't change much. The first tear falls.
He tried to wrap his sheet around himself tighter, a futile attempt to keep the cold out. He had been awake for what seemed like hours. He couldn't sleep when it was this cold.

Surely he was dying, how could he not be when he felt as sick as he did. He lay on the cold kitchen floor as his uncle came into the kitchen and took one look at the mess on the floor before turning his attention to Harry, his face quickly reddening, and angry words spewing forth. The first blow falls and he really truly wishes that...

They were laughing, everyone was laughing, and Harry didn't understand. It wasn't even funny. There was probably something he didn't understand, something about him. He knew he was different now, but he still didn't understand why it was funny. It never made him laugh, whatever it was. He wanted to do something, or say something so that they would stop, but he knew that it would only make things worse. He stayed silent and hated himself for it. He picked himself up off of the floor, and walked away, fighting the same tears that hadn't fallen for almost a year.

It echoed on and on in his head. He couldn't get it out. He had had to get out. Away from where everyone could see him. They would see, they would see he was such a freak. They would know. They could see. They could tell.

He kept running. He didn't know where, he didn't care. He had just had to get out. Even though he couldn't get it out of his head. The cold rain pelted down as he ran and he wished it could wash him away.
He couldn't breathe, his already panicked mind verging on hysteric. It was all his own fault. He was going to die and he could have stopped everything, if he hadn't been so scared. He wished he could go back in time, and that this day would never come. He wished someone would save him, but knew that no one would, since he hadn't even tried to save himself.

The cold left him and he felt warm. He was safe. He drifted off into unconsciousness.

I really hope you liked this chapter, and that you'll tune in next time for the next chapter.

Small Confession, one of the things that delayed this chapter was this fic I found called Prince of the Dark Kingdom on FF.net. It is a very good WIP. The only issue is that it is well over a million words long. Took me forever to get up to the progress mark. It's longer than the first four Wheel of Time books combined. I think the stories on it's last arc, or close to it. I do recommend it to anyone looking for a fic that will occupy them for a long time. Also the Wheel of Time.
Bruised

Chapter Notes

I go back to work soon, but fear not, for my true passion lies here, in-between bouts of granite chunks of writers block, and I just found a chisel.

See the end of the chapter for more notes

Bruised

"Anyway, I bet the Headmaster knows and he's keeping it quiet. He wouldn't want everyone to know that his Gryffindor golden boy is a deranged werewolf. If I can get proof, father could probably get him expelled."

Severus smiled at the thought of Potter and his rabid friend in front of the school board, being stripped of their Hogwarts Crests. Yet still...

"Your father is no longer on the board Draco, he has burned bridges there and it is important that you keep that in mind. If you loose sight of that, there could be a power shift, and it won't be in your favor. Besides, I should hope that with third year starting, your schemes will no longer entail getting your father involved."

"Father still has clout with Chromarty," Draco said, ignoring everything else Severus had said.

"Something the rest of the school board is very aware of, believe me."

"Still, they'll expel Potter if they find out he's a werewolf," Draco said confidently.

"I take it you have not yet checked the full moon calendar, or you would know that the full moon rose approximately ten minutes ago. Sadly, I do not hear the tortured screams of Potter's cohorts." Though he could almost hear Black, Pettigrew, and Potter screaming in terror as the monster in their dorm tore them apart.

"It is?" Draco asked, extremely disappointed. "It doesn't matter, I can work with that. If he thought it was bad with everyone thinking he was the Heir of Slytherin, just wait until everyone thinks that he's a werewolf. I can make this work, I just have some thinking to do." With that, Draco turned in the direction Crabbe and Goyle had run some moments before.

"Yes, please do," Severus said to himself, as he removed the privacy ward he had previously erected.

While he would certainly enjoy seeing Potter being taken down a peg, he had hoped that Draco would aspire to be more than Hogwarts rumor monger. He scowled at the compartment that he knew housed Potter. When Draco had entered, he had had some hope for an excuse to put the boy in detention before he even reached Hogwarts, but it wasn't to be. The boy's brashness had taken up much of his time over the summer, and Severus planned to get that time back from him through detentions throughout the year, he would get back from Potter what Potter had taken from him. He remembered quite vividly a detention he himself had served in his third year after Potter had gotten him in trouble, two hours of gutting stink slugs. That would be Potter's first detention this year.
It wasn't much later that Severus noticed that the train was slowing. He checked his pocket watch in alarm. It was too early for them to have arrived at Hogwarts; something was wrong, it must be an attack. Severus took out his wand as the train came to a halt. Potter should have been portkeyed directly to Hogwarts. Now he would have to save the brat once more, or die trying. Perhaps Lily would greet him on the other side; but no, she wouldn't want to see the man who had destroyed her family. Her blood was on his hands, she would no sooner greet him than she would the Dark Lord. He would be as alone in death as he was in life. Though how many of those that he had killed would haunt him; would torment his eternal rest. Rest, or damnation.

Odd, how he didn't even recognize the effects of the dementor as it approached, not until he saw his own breath before him and the abomination was soon gliding past him. Did it know how close he had been to living in a hole on that blasted rock it hailed from?

It was looking for those who had escaped it, but it wouldn't find them, not here. It was hopeless.

The thing went from compartment to compartment. It had no eyes to see, but it would know when one whom it had fed upon before was near. However there was little chance that any of them were here, Severus had already checked.

It stopped in Potter's compartment. Why had it stopped? Had it found someone? He needed to do something, but he couldn't think what. It was hopeless anyway. It came to him though, he needed a Patronus. He couldn't hope to be able to summon one, but he had to try, he owed too much to Lilly not to try. He needed a happy thought, but none were forthcoming. He needed a memory. His mind was running rampant. He needed to bring order to the chaos. Occlumency; he needed to clear his mind.

He focused, he fought; and slowly his mind became a haven once more. Now he needed a memory, a happy one, he grasped back, he would have to go far back. It was hard, even with a clear mind, the dementor's effects made it so hard to think of a happy memory. A memory surfaced, he was twelve and the satisfaction he had been feeling faded as the fifth year Slytherins who had just chased off Potter's gang had him pressed against a wall, now that they were out of sight of others. He had embarrassed their house with his weakness.

Severus put the memory away, there was no happiness there. He grasped for another, his simple task made difficult by the oppressive weight of the dementor on his mind. Another memory surfaced, but he put it away quickly when it became clear, his father yelling at his mother while a seven year old Severus sat in his seat staring at his empty dinner plate. He wouldn't find many happy memories at home.

He grasped at another memory, but knew instantly that it was no good. He felt it immediately, the jealousy and the hurt, as he saw Lily walking down the hall next to Potter, the look in her eye the same as it had once been around him, before he had ruined everything, before Potter had ruined everything. Lily though, Lily had been his joy. Before he had lost her, she had made him happy. Before he had driven her away. He turned back in his mind, back to before, when they had been happy, when they had been innocent.

He grasped for a memory, and there was music. He didn't like it. He was dancing, he really shouldn't be. Really if anyone saw him moving so awkwardly, with two left feet, which you wouldn't see if he were dueling, he would probably die on the spot. Yet none of that mattered, not when he had this girl in his arms. Lily was smiling so broadly, beaming up at him as they moved about the unused classroom to the tune of some oddball muggle musician. He would have stayed in that moment forever, if he could have.

"Expecto Patronum," he said. There was a bright flash of silvery light and a magnificent specter
appeared, the sight of it shocking him. It was a doe. Yet that was Lily's; it had complimented her husbands. His was a panther. When had it changed? He hadn't cast a Patronus since before her death.

His Patronus walked up to him and he felt its protection through the clarity of Occlumency, enjoyed the memory that had summoned it from afar. He scanned the hallway, looking for the dementor. Where was it? Had it left Potter's compartment while he struggled? Had it left the train car? He looked in the first compartment on his left, full of crying first years.

"Eat chocolate," he commanded, before he continued checking each compartment, his Patronus following after him. Half way down the train corridor he could feel it, even through his Patronus. He checked two more compartments before he found what he sought. Of course it was still in Potter's.

The wraith stood in the compartment with the three Gryffindors. It did not turn around when Snape entered, but it did perceptively stiffen at the presence of his Patronus. There was Weasley, both arms up, his hands grasping his hair as he rocked back and forth. Granger, tears running down her face, her arms wrapped around herself was staring at Potter who was unconscious on the floor, twitching and jerking occasionally. Of course Potter wouldn't be able to handle the dementor. What did he know of misery? With a thought, his Patronus charged forward, and the dementor fled the compartment.

The Granger girl was now at Potter's side, calling his name urgently. Likely in her demented mind, she was convinced that whatever was wrong with her friend was very dire. Weasley too now seemed to be coming out of his stupor and was showing concern for the boy on the floor.

"Do cease your histrionics, Potter will be fine," he snapped, turning to leave and ensure the dementor hadn't stopped to feast in another compartment. "And eat chocolate," he said through clenched teeth. Honestly, a whole train car of children he had to tell to eat chocolate. His reputation would be ruined.

He entered the train corridor and made sure that the dementor finished its job and left quickly. As he did so, he started collecting his thoughts and organizing his mind. Odd how quickly and naturally Occlumency came back to him; like flying on a broom. He hadn't practiced Occlumency in almost twelve years, not since Voldemort had been vanquished and it was no longer necessary. Not since Lily had died and it had been so much easier to wallow in grief and anger than it had been to bring order to the chaos of his mind and face the whole reality of what he had done.

He pulled a vial out from his robe and downed it in a swallow as he followed the dementor out of the train car and stepped out onto the space between cars. He watched the wraith fly off to the milling mass of its brethren, a swarm of shadows. He put a hand on the Patronus at his side. He thought of Lily and his mind went back to the boy in the compartment he had just left.

It was odd that Potter should collapse like that, odder still that the dementor had been so drawn to him. Perhaps the boy had a weak constitution. But no, an image sprang to mind, the foolish boy standing next to an unconscious troll. Could the boy be ill? It would explain the loss of consciousness. He would have Madame Pomfrey check the boy that night. He could just see the boy laid up in the hospital wing, milking an illness for all it was worth, just like his father, always looking for attention. Yet unbidden, images sprang to mind of many times over the summer when the boy had hid his scar and attempted to duck the notice of the other patrons of the Alley. Severus scowled and almost stopped occluding that moment; it was so much harder to see what you wanted to when you were occluding.
Harry's return to consciousness was slow, and he thought he could hear someone crying. Not like before, someone had been screaming before. Harry opened his eyes. His right shoulder and elbow were sore as well as his neck. He also felt fairly melancholy but oddly comforted at the same time. He looked around, he was on the floor. Hermione was next to him, she had been crying, and now that he was looking at her she was wiping her eyes. He found Ron on his other side. He felt like he should know what had happened, but he didn't, his mind was foggy and the events of that afternoon were jumbled in his head.

"Here," his friend said, holding a chocolate frog in front of him. "This'll help." Harry noticed that Ron had chocolate at the corner of his own mouth. He also noticed his somewhat haunted expression.

"What happened?" Harry asked, taking the chocolate and sitting up.

"A dementor searched the train," Ron said. "It was awful."

The train was moving again, Harry noticed.

"Professor Snape drove it off," Hermione said.

"Took his time, didn't he," Ron said mulishly.

"He even told us to eat chocolate, which has helped," Hermione said giving Ron a pointed look.

"I don't remember any of that," Harry said. "Who was screaming?"

Hermione and Ron shared a concerned look.

"No one was screaming Harry," Hermione said, sounding a little worried.

Harry was confused, nothing they said made sense, why didn't he remember anything, and why hadn't they heard the screaming, he was sure a woman had been screaming something, though he couldn't remember what. Why had all of those old memories popped up?

"You passed out when it came in," Ron said. Harry looked at him incredulously. He couldn't have passed out. Well, he had a couple of times growing up at the Dursley's, but there had been reasons then.

"What is a dementor anyway?" he asked.

"Dementors guard Azkaban," Ron said, he sounded somewhat far off. "They just suck the happiness out of you and make you miserable. They're why no one's escaped Azkaban before, escape's a happy thought, see?"

"Well why'd I... why'd it make me unconscious?"

"I dunno, maybe that just happens to some people," Ron said.

There was silence for a bit, and Ron grabbed another chocolate frog and started gnawing on it absently.

"You don't seem affected by it," Hermione said. "Not like we are," she continued with a frown. "It's more like you're upset about passing out than that you've been affected by the dementor."

"I don't know, maybe because I wasn't awake it didn't affect me the same," Harry shrugged. He didn't feel as miserable as Hermione and Ron looked. He certainly was far from happy, and he had
a headache for some reason, but both of his friends looked like they were in a world without sunshine. He wouldn't say that he was unaffected, but Ron had a point.

"But you were," Ron said. "You were twitching and jerking the whole time."

Harry ducked his head, very self conscious at the moment.

"Oh Harry!" Hermione exclaimed. "Your neck."

"What?" He asked.

"You must have hit something when you fell, you're getting a horrible bruise," she said, now next to him, pulling his collar down to get a better look. She prodded it.

That wasn't right, Harry didn't bruise easily, he never had, no collapse was going to bruise him like that. But then, the spell... What was the spell? He had memorized it. What was it? He couldn't think. His head still as foggy as it had been when he woke up. He needed to see the spell. It was in his trunk.

"I need my trunk," Harry said, standing up and climbing up on his seat to get at the luggage rack. He had to pause for a head rush.

"Harry, you should sit down, if you hit your neck like that you could have a concussion," Hermione said, sounding very worried. Of course that just worried Harry even more, could he be bleeding in his head?

"A concussion?" Ron said. "Harry's a wizard, a fall like that isn't going to hurt him too bad."

"Look at his neck," Hermione said.

"I really need my trunk," he said urgently, shifting things around on the luggage rack.

"Harry," Hermione said plaintively.

"Ron," Harry said.

Ron got up and helped Harry get his trunk down. Harry opened his trunk and was somewhat struck by a high pitched whine coming from somewhere within that he ignored. It took him a moment to remember where he had put the letter, which was odd, since he did remember specifically putting it in his trunk.

"Need help mate?" Ron asked.

"Um," Harry started to say yes, when he saw the folded up letter sticking out of his copy of Quidditch Through The Ages.

"I think we should ask Professor Snape to take a look at you," Hermione said.

"Are you mad?" Ron asked.

"Or a Prefect," Hermione said.

"I'll be right back," Harry said, standing up. "Got to use the loo."

"If you feel nauseous, that's a sign of a concussion," Hermione said, very worried now.
"I'm fine," Harry said. "I'll be right back"

He left the compartment quickly and headed down the hall to the loo. Of course it was occupied; it sounded like a boy was crying inside. He probably wouldn't be getting in anytime soon. Should he wait or look for a loo in another train car. He could be bleeding to death on the inside at that moment for all he knew, though he didn't know much.

He looked down the corridor; it was empty. Harry looked at the letter, quickly finding the two spells. He focused, which wasn't easy, and cast the diagnostic spell. His wand glowed red. The blood spell had worn off. It shouldn't have yet, but then, external magical forces wore away at it, and Harry had probably been exposed to more of that since the spell had been cast when he was a baby than most children his age. At least it had lasted as long as it had, it had probably been on its last leg when he had been at the Dursley's that summer. Harry shuddered at the thought of how many times he had been seriously injured over that time.

Yet it had lasted, and long enough too, though just barely. He could do magic on his own now. His fuzzy head had worked its way into a splitting headache, but Harry focused on the blood spell and cast it upon himself without further delay.

He didn't feel any different. Would he? The letter didn't say. He cast the diagnostic spell again, and the tip of his wand glowed a vibrant blue. He checked the letter again. Blue meant it was at full strength. He sighed in relief, he would be fine.

He turned to go, but the crying from the loo caught his attention. He felt like he should just let whoever it was be, but found himself knocking on the door anyway.

"Hey," he said. "Are you alright in there?"

"Go away," a distraught voice said.

"Alright," Harry said. "Just wanted to make sure you ate some chocolate after the dementor left."

"Justin said we can't, 'cause Professor Snape told us to, so its probably bad. He told me all about him, and now I know than I'm going to hate Hogwarts, and I'll be sad all the time, and I should just go home and be a squib," the crying boy said miserably.

"Are you a first year?" Harry asked.

"Yeah," came the reply around sniffles.

"Well," Harry said, not really sure what to say. "The thing about Snape is, even though he's really mean, he takes some things very seriously. Actually, he's saved my life a couple of times, so if he says you should eat chocolate for the dementor, then it's probably a good idea. I know I felt better after I had some."

"Really," the boy asked.

"Yeah," Harry said. "Do you have any chocolate?"

"No," came the reply from the other side of the door.

"I've got a chocolate frog in my pocket, if you want it," Harry said digging out the chocolate.

There was a pause and then the door slid open. A miserable face peered out, truly, Harry suspected prisoners on their way towards execution probably looked happier. He took the chocolate from
Harry's hand and Harry wondered if he should go, his job done.

"Is Justin your brother?" he found himself asking.

The young boy nodded his head, mouth full of chocolate. "He said Professor Snape tests experimental potions on first years."

"You know, one of my best friends, his big brothers told him first years had to fight a mountain troll for the sorting, which is silly."

The boy looked worried. "Justin said they test us on how many first year spells we learn before we get there. But he just told me today, I haven't had time to study."

"Don't worry, the sorting's easy. It isn't even really a test. Just focus on what house you want and you'll be fine."

"How does it work?"

"It's a surprise, but don't worry, you'll be fine," Harry repeated.

"Ok, um, thanks for the chocolate," the boy said with faint trace of a smile. He returned to his compartment.

Harry leaned against the wall of the corridor for a moment and closed his eyes. His headache was still going strong and he was glad the conversation was over. Figuring he should get back to his compartment before Hermione came looking for him, Harry turned around and froze. Half way down the corridor, hidden in the shadows was a tall black cloaked figure. Easy guess who it was. How long had he been there? Long enough to hear the spells Harry had used? Snape would know what they meant, at least in part. Yet Snape didn't say anything, didn't even look like he was paying attention to Harry.

Harry walked back to his compartment, not looking at Snape. He hoped the man hadn't heard what he had said to the boy.

"I was beginning to worry," Hermione said when Harry walked in the door.

"Beginning to?" Ron said. "You were worried the whole time."

"No need to worry," Harry said. "I'm fine really."

Ron tossed him a bar of Honneydukes finest as he sat down, which he managed to fumble.

"What did you need to read in the loo?" Ron asked.

"Um," that had him stumped. "Look we'll talk about it later."

Ron nodded, but Hermione wasn't so easily placated. In the end though, Harry wasn't about to tell any version of the fact that he had hemophilia, with Snape right outside the door. Assuming he hadn't already seen everything.

Harry put the parchment back in his trunk and this time paid attention to the high pitched noise.

"What's that?" Hermione asked.

"Isn't that the Sneakascope?" Ron asked.
Harry found the crystal that Ron had given him for his birthday.

"It might be a bit wonky," Ron said. "Or maybe Malfoy's in the next compartment."

Harry just shrugged and wrapped the crystal in an old sock, glad to muffle the noise that seemed to rebound around the inside of his head. He closed the trunk and with Ron's help, hoisted it up onto the luggage rack, while Ron explained to Hermione what a sneakascope was.

The rest of the trip was fairly uncomfortable. Harry had wanted to rest his eyes because of his headache, but Hermione had practically panicked at the thought that he might have a concussion and had resolved to keep him awake. At least he was able to keep her from getting Professor Snape to check on him. Her decision to look up dementors in one of her extra books hadn't helped anything. The picture inside and the description of how a dementor fed were disgusting, and what Harry couldn't get out of his head was the only part of the picture where one could see any part of the dementor beneath it's cloak, it's hand, looking like little more than bones with taut pale skin stretched over it. Like a body left to dry out in the desert, like death. All in all, between the lingering melancholy, the headache and the ache in his elbow and neck, Harry rather wanted to skip the feast and head to bed when he got to the castle.

The students getting off the train in Hogsmeade were a rather somber bunch, and Harry hoped that the mood of the school would improve during the sorting and the feast. The first year students were separated from the rest and were gathered around Hagrid, the very large and tall man standing out among the tiny first years. Harry waved to the man as they passed.

The next rather rude shock of the evening came when they got to the carriages. They looked just like the carriages that had carried Harry to the train station at the end of each school year, except that those carriages had been carried by magic, the hitches where a horse would have gone were always empty. Yet now the same carriages had no empty hitches, they were occupied, but not by horses. If dementors rode horses, Harry thought that this was what they would look like. Pure black hide, stretched out over a horses skeletal frame, with two great wings, like a bat's. Harry stopped in his tracks to stare at the specters.

"You alright mate?" Ron asked. Ron didn't seem to think anything of the death horses.

"I'm fine," Harry said. "Just wondering about the weird horses."

"What horses?" Hermione asked.

"Those horses," Harry said, pointing at the carriages and having little patience at that moment for stating the obvious.

"Harry, there's nothing there," Hermione said.

"Maybe you were right about that concussion," Ron said to Hermione.

"I'm not concussed, I'm not seeing things, I'm fine," Harry said a bit heatedly, his headache flaring up around the loudness of his own voice in his head. "Back me up here," Harry said to a forlorn looking Neville who had just walked up to their carriage with Ron's sister.

"Huh?" Neville said, seeming surprised to find attention upon himself.

"You can see the weird death horses, right?" Harry demanded.

"Um," Neville stammered looking fairly confused and worried.
"It's alright Neville, Harry hit his head on the train, but he'll be better after he sees Madame Pomfrey."

"I do not need to see Madame Pomfrey," Harry said, turning around and getting into the carriage.

Ron and Hermione followed, and a moment later Neville and Ginny got in as well. The carriage started moving and Harry was somewhat relieved for the awkward silence. Neville kept shooting Harry worried looks, like he was worried he was locked in with a crazy person. Though, as he calmed down, Harry started to wonder if he really was seeing things, otherwise, why hadn't everyone else seen the horses.

"So, Neville," Hermione broke the silence. "How was your summer?"

On anyone else, Harry would have said that the look that flashed over Neville's face was dark, but he had a hard time attributing something like that to Neville.

"Um, well," Neville said, his mind clearly somewhere else at the moment. "Gran' took me to Spain, though we had to come back early; my granda's turned a bit ill."

"Oh, I'm sorry to hear that. What did you see in Spain," Hermione asked politely.

The two carried on the conversation for a bit more, neither one seeming to be that interested in the conversation. The whole carriage was rather subdued. Harry had started to think about what to tell Ron and Hermione about the hemophilia when the carriage approached the school gates and Harry saw just a flash of a black cloaked figure outside the window when everything seemed to stop as an image of a woman's body exploding filled his head and he felt like he had plunged into the Great Lake in the middle of winter. It passed quickly though and he found himself slumped over half leaning on Ginny, who had tears in her eyes that she hid quickly behind the sleeve of her robes.

"Are you okay, Harry?" Neville asked, his face a haunted mask as Harry righted himself.

"Yeah," Harry said, now hoping that Neville would believe Hermione's nonsense about a concussion. He didn't know why he was reacting to Dementors differently, but he really didn't want others to know about it. Things were bad enough without everyone knowing that he was weak.

It took him a moment while staring at his lap to notice the chocolate frog Ron was holding silently in front of him.

"Thanks," Harry said, to which Ron shrugged.

The rest of the ride up to the school was silent as everyone gnawed on chocolate.

Getting out of the carriage, Harry was almost surprised to see that the horses were still there, but he didn't say anything this time. He walked up the stairs, managing to bang his hip on the guard rail, not being entirely with it at the moment. Hermione gave him yet another concerned glance. With luck he could slip up to the dormitory and just go to sleep without anyone noticing.

Hermione didn't need to keep track of him, however, since Professor McGonagall was waiting for them when they walked into the entry hall.

"Mr. Potter, Miss Granger, please follow me," she said when she spotted them.

"We need to see Madame Pomfrey," Hermione said, casting a worried look at Harry, as Harry glared at her. "I think he has a concussion."
"That is in fact part of the reason I am here to collect you, now come along so you don't miss too much of the festivities."

They both turned to follow her, and as they passed the doors to the great hall, Harry could see Snape properly, with the man's own face, for the first time since he had literally walked into him in the Alley. The man gave him a piercing look, and Harry turned his head away; before scowling at his own behavior. Harry really didn't feel much like enjoying any festivities.

Their head of house led them to a small room not far off from the entry hall where it happened that Madame Pomfrey was waiting for them.

"Oh dear, you look awful, come here and let me take a look at you," the matron said to Harry. She turned to Hermione. "Did he lose consciousness suddenly or gradually?"

"Gradually," Hermione said. "And he was sort of twitching a bit. But I think he has a concussion, he's developing a big bruise on the back of his neck, he must have hit something when he fell, and he seemed drowsy and he was seeing things."

"Seeing things?" Madam Pomfrey asked, seeming alarmed.

"I wasn't seeing things, they were there," Harry said defensively.

"What exactly did you see, Mr. Potter?" Professor McGonagall asked.

"Winged horses," Harry said. "Pulling the carriages."

Professor McGonagall and Madam Pomfrey both gave him pitying looks.

"Those are thestrals Mr. Potter," Professor McGonagall said. "They have always pulled the carriages, but only those who have seen death can see them."

Harry took in a sharp breath and he heard Hermione gasp as his thoughts turned to the woman who had saved him.

"Enough said about that," Madam Pomfrey said. "Let's take a look at this head of yours."

She put one hand on the back of his head suddenly and Harry practically flinched while her other hand withdrew her wand and brought it up to his head.

"Oh, don't look at me like that," the matron said as she tapped the tip of her wand on the top of Harry's head, followed by his temples and right between his eyes while murmuring an incantation. She looked him right in the eyes; or rather, right through his eyes, and frowned.

"A bit more serious than a concussion it looks dear, your brain was bleeding, but it's stopped. Most likely your magic protecting you. Now, let's make sure nothing else is wrong," she said before waving her wand over Harry's chest. Harry felt a warm energy in his rib cage

Madame Pomfrey frowned. "It looks like Greyback did a number on you over the summer," she said. "I'd heard you only sustained minor injuries."

Harry momentarily panicked at the thought of where some of the injuries she was seeing had come from. Would she be able to tell if she looked closer.

"Um, a car actually," he said. "I got hit by a car while he was chasing me across a street."

"And did you tell anyone Mister Potter," Professor McGonagall asked sternly.
"It wasn't going very fast," Harry said defensively. "Sorry." He was used to dealing with pain over the summer. Good at ignoring it.

"You have numerous small fractures," Madame Pomfrey said. "Some more on the mend than others. You're lucky, your internal organs don't look to have sustained much damage."

She tapped his head again with another incantation and Harry felt the headache clear rapidly. She then started taping her wand on various places around his body muttering the same spell, healing the fractures. Harry was about ready for the floor to swallow him up by the time she was done poking and prodding, though he'd forgotten what it felt like to be completely without pain as now not only was his head cleared, but all the little aches in his joints and in his ribs had completely vanished.

"Well there's no medical reason for him to have passed out," the matron said, getting back to the original topic.

"So why did he faint then?" his professor asked, and Harry's face flushed red at the terminology.

"Not enough research has been done on the effects of dementors, but different people react differently, Potter just had a strong reaction it seems."

"Should he stay in the infirmary tonight?" Professor McGonagall asked, and Harry's eyes opened in shock.

"With a head injury, yes, for observation," Madam Pomfrey said.

"What?" Harry said. "I feel fine. I don't need to sleep in the infirmary."

"Perhaps he can still attend the feast," Professor McGonagall said, ignoring his protests. "I dare say he will not be outside of observation there."

"Yes, that should be alright," Madam Pomfrey said to the professor.

She turned to Harry and Hermione. "Have you two had any chocolate?" She asked.

"Yes," Hermione said. "Professor Snape told us to eat some."

"Good," Madame Pomfrey said. "Make sure to drink the hot chocolate tonight. There should be pitchers at all of the tables. And you Mr. Potter, I'm half tempted to tell you no quidditch if I can't trust you to take an injury seriously."

"What? No! I'm sorry. I'll be good," Harry said quickly in a near panic.

"See to it that you are," the matron said.

'Well," Professor McGonagall said. "That seems to be in order, Mr. Potter if you would step outside, I have a small matter to discuss with Miss Granger."

Harry wondered what she could have to say to Hermione in private, when he had just had a medical exam with an audience, but he walked out without saying anything.

He stepped outside with Madame Pomfrey and waited for Hermione to emerge.

"Remember Mr. Potter, hospital wing, right after the feast," Madame Pomfrey said as she made her own way to the great hall.
With his head no longer feeling like it was going to explode, and outside the company of his friends, Harry's mind turned over some of the memories dredged up by the dementor, replaying some moments in his head, analyzing them, judging them, playing the games of what-if. He stopped himself with a scowl. There was no point in thinking about any of it, and it certainly wasn't a good way to start the school year.

Harry was brought out of his reverie when the door to McGonagall's office opened. The Professor and Hermione walked out.

"Thank you, Professor," Hermione said to Professor McGonagall in parting as their head of house took the passageway that lead to the door behind the head table, and Harry and Hermione turned towards the entrance hall.

"What did Professor McGonagall want?" Harry asked.

"What," Hermione said, seemingly surprised that Harry would ask such a question. "Oh, she just wanted to talk to me about my class load this year, I'll be taking a few more than most other students." She paused. "Are you alright?"

"Oh, yeah," Harry said. "My head feels much better now."

"No, I mean about everything else," Hermione said, looking at him with worry.

"What everything else?" Harry asked, suddenly worried that Hermione somehow knew everything he had been hiding, as she often did.

"You know," Hermione said with some exasperation. "The dementors and the thestrals, and everything that happened over the summer."

"Well sure," Harry said. "I don't know, I'll be fine." And as they walked into the Great Hall, he started to feel like he would be. The atmosphere was a bit more subdued than Harry was used to a Hogwarts feast being, but between the floating candles, the smell of chocolate in the air, and the general sense of being home, Harry was suddenly glad that he hadn't slunk off to the dorm when they had arrived at the castle.

The two of them soon spotted Ron and made their way to the seats he had saved them at the table. Harry noticed that they had missed the sorting and very briefly wondered where the first year from the train had been sorted.

"Have some chocolate," Ron said, poring some of the steaming beverage into their mugs from one of the many carafes lining the otherwise empty table. "What did McGonagall want?"

Harry wasn't about to say that he had had a check up while surrounded by other students, and was saved from having to say anything by Professor Dumbledore, who rose up at that moment to give his start of term speech.

"Welcome students," his voice filled the room. "I am excited to see the school filled once more with young minds, all here to learn and explore the wonders and the mysteries of magic. I have only a few start of term announcements before our feast may begin. First, it is my pleasure to announce that this year we will be having two new professors. Professor Lupin, our new Defense Against the Dark Arts Professor, could not be here this evening, but he will be in bright and early tomorrow morning for classes. As well, while not quite new, our very own groundskeeper, and the Keeper of the Keys for Hogwarts school, shall now henceforth be, Professor Hagrid, our Care of Magical Creatures instructor, since Professor Kettleburn has decided to retire with what remains of
Harry looked over at Hagrid in surprise; of course the man would assign a biting book. He found himself smiling genuinely though as he applauded the announcement. Hagrid, Harry could see, had tears in his eyes, and was clearly very proud of his new position.

"The Forbidden Forest," the Headmaster continued with the usual warning. "Is off limits to all students due to the large quantity of very dangerous plants and animals found therein. As well, our caretaker Mr. Filch would like me to remind all of you that spell use in the halls is strictly prohibited, as is a host of very fun things, a list of which can be found posted outside of his office. Lastly now, I must impress upon you the seriousness of this last announcement. Until such a time as it is deemed safe to do so, the border of the grounds of Hogwarts shall be guarded by several dementors from Azkaban prison. Students are not to try to approach them for any reason, and anyone attempting to sneak past them will be discovered. They are not fooled by disguises, or invisibility cloaks, and they do not understand excuses, or pleading. They are merciless in what they do, but in the end they are here to protect this school from those who might do us harm."

Here the headmaster paused to let this last announcement sink in, though Harry didn't think anyone actually needed to be told to stay away from dementors. "Now, this has been much too much of me talking while you are all awaiting the feast. So, tuck in, enjoy the various chocolates, and enjoy the feast."

At the word 'feast' there appeared on every table more food than Harry thought decent, and students all around started piling food on their plates. Harry took a drink of the hot chocolate, and it really did make him feel better.

"All right there, Harry?" Ron asked.

"Yeah," Harry said, realizing he had been looking around for a moment, not touching the food. "Just taking it all in. It's good to be back." He grabbed the spoon for some mashed potatoes.

As far as Hogwarts feasts went, this one started out a bit more subdued than was normal. Yet as students warmed up and reconnected with friends, and drank heartily of the hot chocolate, the atmosphere started to take on the usual atmosphere of a feast.

"So what did McGonagall want?" Ron asked again.

"Well she wanted to make sure Hermione would be ok taking a ton of extra classes," Harry said. "And she'd heard I hit my head on the train so she had me checked out, turns out I'm fine."

"Fine," Hermione hissed. "You were bleeding into your skull."

"What?" Ron asked, sounding alarmed.

"Madame Pomfrey said it had already stopped by the time she checked me out, so see? I'm fine," Harry said in exasperation, though he kept his voice down and gave Hermione a look telling her to do the same.

"Oh, you are such a boy," Hermione said.

"Last time I checked," Harry said with a grin.

"Girls do the same thing," Ron said.

"No we don't," Hermione defended.
"It's the same thing Ginny always says when she thinks mum's babying her. She said she was fine that one time she twisted her ankle and spent half a day limping 'cause she wouldn't admit she'd been climbing trees."

"Well, boy or girl, it's just stupid, and you are staying in the Hospital Wing tonight for observation."

Harry scowled at that. He wasn't about to bug everyone by whining.

"That's rough mate," Ron said.

"Madame Pomfrey's just worrying too much," Harry said. "Like you, and it's no wonder I always say I'm fine."

"You got hit by a car and didn't say anything," Hermione said.

"What?" Ron asked.

"She said they were only minor fractures," Harry said. "They'd have healed before long on their own. The car wasn't even going that fast. It's not like I was bleeding to death or had a bone sticking out of my skin. I was fine."

"You'd say you were fine if you were eviscerated," Hermione said.

Harry opened his mouth to reply but Ron cut him off. "Careful mate, she probably knows a spell that'll do that."

"Oh, do either of you even know what that means?" Hermione asked.

Harry shrugged, and Ron said, "No, I just know you."

The evening wore on, and Harry found himself very glad to have not skipped the meal. He was even glad to have been made to see Madame Pomfrey, so he could enjoy the evening without a headache. Of course the evening had to end eventually. As the rest of the students made their way to their dorms, Ron, Hermione, and Harry waded their way up to the head table to see Hagrid.

"Oh Professor Hagrid, congratulations," Hermione said to the very large man.

"None o' tha' now, you jus' call me Hagrid. It's all down ta you three, isn't it, clearing my name last year. An' Dumbledore o' course, great man Dumbledore."

"Well, you'll be the best Magical Creatures Professor this school's ever seen," Ron said. "You should have had the job ages ago." Hagrid was all but blushing at this point, clearly very happy for the title he had shrugged off earlier.

"Can't wait for our first class, Hagrid," Harry said. "I'm sure we'll have loads of fun." Or at the very least, they'd have a good deal of excitement, Harry could almost imagine Hagrid introducing the whole class to a dragon first thing.

"Oh, it'll be great, just yeh wait, won't spoil the surprise though. Now, you three get along, you'll wan' ta be rested up fer your first day of classes." With that, Hagrid got up from the head table and headed out.

"Well," Harry said. "I'll see you two tomorrow."

"Oh, we'll walk you to the Hospital Wing," Hermione said.
"I'm not going to do a runner," Harry said.

"I know, but you still need to tell us what was with that parchment after the dementor on the train," Hermione said. Harry suddenly felt like doing a runner.

"Fine," he said. "Come on, before Madame Pomfrey starts a search party."

As they walked through the corridor towards the Hospital Wing, Harry looked around nervously to make sure no one would overhear. He wasn't about to tell them where Madame Pomfrey could overhear.

"I found out over the summer that I've got, like some sort of magical variant of hemophilia," he said in a near whisper.

"You can't have secretly had hemophilia," Hermione said matter of factly. "You'd be dead by now without treatment."

"I had treatment," Harry said. "They cast a spell on me when I was a baby. It wears off eventually, though it should have lasted longer. I'll explain more later, but my parents posted a letter to be sent to me when I turned thirteen. It explained everything. There's a spell that tells me if I need to renew the treatment or not, but I couldn't do it over the summer without help, I had to wait till I could do magic on my own. When you noticed the bruise, I figured the spell had worn off, I needed the notes to do the spell right."

"Why didn't you tell anyone?" Hermione all but shrieked. "Do you know how easily you could have died without treatment. What if you hadn't woken up on the train, or if I hadn't seen that bruise, no one would have known to check, you'd have just kept bleeding into your head. You could have died. For crying out loud you got hit by a car this summer."

Harry tried to shush her, very worried about someone overhearing.

"What do you mean, what is it?" Ron asked, now very worried.

"Hemophilia, Ron, it means that Harry's blood doesn't clot right, and it varies from case to case, but even a small injury can be life threatening," Hermione explained. "You need to tell Madame Pomfrey."

"No," Harry said, emphatically. "Then she'd figure it out, and I don't want anyone to know."

"Figure what out?" Hermione asked.

Harry had a big stupid mouth. "It doesn't matter," he said eventually. "It's not life threatening, so just drop it. I have everything under control. I renewed the spell, it'll last a good long while, and I'll check it regularly, so just drop it, it's really really private."

There was silence for a moment as they walked towards the Hospital Wing.

"You alright, mate?" Ron asked.

"Yeah, it's just… Look just, I'm not ready to talk about it, okay. I mean I don't need to do anything about it. Or… I don't know. You'd freak out if I told you. But it's not something you need to worry about; I'm not. So…." Both of his friends were looking at him with worry.

"Just… I'm fine, alright, it's just weird," he told them. They had arrived at the at the Hospital Wing.
"Right, well, you should get back to the tower. I'll see you at breakfast tomorrow," he said.

He tensed a moment as he found himself receiving a hug from Hermione.

"You know you can tell us anything, right Harry," she said.

"Of course," Harry said. "Have a good night."

"Good luck," Ron said, as he and Hermione turned down the corridor.

Harry walked into the Hospital Wing and was soon set upon by Madame Pomfrey.

"Well now, alright, just you get ready for bed dear, and I'll come check up on you before you go to sleep," she said, as she guided him towards a bed, just outside of her office.

Harry found a set of hospital pajamas at the foot of the bed and he went into the restroom to change and wash his face. It was when he was changing that he saw a bruise on his hip, peeking out over the edge of his shorts. Madame Pomfrey must have overlooked it in the face of all the fractures. He frowned, that was where he had bumped into the railing earlier. But that had been after he had done the spell on himself. He shouldn't be bruising so easily. He cast the diagnostic charm, this time from memory. His wand glowed red. He felt somewhat shaken, Hermione's words about the risks of the illness and his own assurances that he had it under control coming to mind. He must have cast it wrong, it hadn't taken, that was all. Just the effects of the dementor making him do it wrong. It just hadn't lasted. He cast the charm on himself again, followed by the diagnostic. Blue. Harry smiled. There now, he thought, everything was fine. He'd check again in the morning, just to be sure.

He was soon sitting on the side of the bed, quite ready to go to sleep after the excitement of the day. It turned out that checking up on him was Madame Pomfrey's way of saying that she'd cast a half dozen monitoring charms on him before he went to sleep. Harry recognized a couple of them from his stay at the end of first year.

"Now I don't want you staying up tonight," the matron told him. "You need plenty of rest, so I want you to go right to sleep. I'll know if you're not." With that she headed into her office and the lights in the room dimmed. Harry wasn't sure what she expected him to do, since he didn't have any of his books or anything to occupy himself with. He was asleep less than a minute later, dreaming dreams he would be happy to forget when he woke up.

Madame Pomfrey insisted on doing another checkup in the morning, and he barely had time to down some breakfast before it was time to go upstairs to the tower and get his school supplies and a robe that he hadn't been wearing while passed out on the floor of the Hogwarts Express. Ron had gotten his time table from Professor McGonagall and the three of them all left the hall to get what they'd need for their first classes. Harry had forgotten all about the things Malfoy had been saying the day before on the train, but after bumping into a Slytherin first year on their way out, Harry was quickly reminded as the boy turned very pale and all but ran away from him. Had Malfoy told all of Slytherin? Did they believe him?

"Don't worry Harry," Hermione said, "it'll blow over soon enough."

"Yeah, just like it did last year, and the year before that," Harry muttered.

"Oh, a person just has to be around you for a moment to know you're not a werewolf," Ron said.

"Well let's just make sure everyone knows it was the full moon last night," Harry said. "Let Malfoy
explain why I didn't change on the train."

"So show Harry your time table," Ron told Hermione.

"Oh, don't worry about that," Hermione said. "So, I can't wait for divination, can you imagine?"

"She's got a bunch of classes at the same time," Ron said. "Should have told McGonagall before
she no-shows to two classes at once."

"Don't worry," Hermione said. "I've got it figured."

Ron gave a bewildered look to Harry who just shrugged.

Once they reached the tower, they all ran up to their dormitories, grabbed their books and headed off in search of the elusive Divination classroom. Hermione's book bag looked a lot heavier than their own.

"To bad we don't know any divination yet, we could find the classroom that way," Ron said as they made their way down a hallway after getting turned around again after getting directions from a portrait.

"I think we could be looking at a map of the school right now and we'd still be lost," Harry said.

"That would be useful though, someone should make one," Ron said.

They made it eventually, but even though Harry was pretty sure that they were late, the Professor just nodded her head to them placidly as they climbed the ladder into the tower classroom. The classroom didn't look like a normal classroom. Instead of desks and chairs, there were small round tables surrounded by poufy cushions. The trio found themselves a table to themselves.

The class started out well; Professor Trelawny made the subject sound fascinating and exciting and mysterious. Hermione kept frowning at what the Professor said, especially after the woman mentioned that the subject wasn't something that could be learned from a book. Everything was going fine until the professor had quite dramatically predicted Harry's near and impending death.

Fortune telling wasn't a sure thing, was it? Maybe knowing the future meant you could change it. He'd have to read his book better. Hermione assured him as they left the class that he probably shouldn't worry about it. It wasn't like he had a history of almost getting killed, or had at least one escaped murderer actively hunting him.

The next class, Care of Magical Creatures started out well also, though Harry had felt odd when he caught a glimpse of the dementor's patrolling the wall off in the distance. Actually the class was pretty awesome. Hagrid had brought amazing creatures called Hippogriffs to the first class which was held out on the grounds of the school. They looked like winged horses with the an eagles head and front legs. Hagrid had asked for a volunteer who wanted to approach the creatures, which were apparently very temperamental. No one had volunteered, and Harry hadn't wanted Hagrid to have a bad first day teaching, so he had wound up approaching the creature. It was as he was doing so that he really noticed how sharp the creatures talons and beak were and he remembered his just recently predicted death. Of course he wasn't about to let Hagrid down.

Hagrid had surprised him by having him ride the beast, which had flown around the paddock before letting him off onto his slightly shaky legs. It wasn't at all like flying a broom; he wasn't in control at all, but it had been exhilarating. Malfoy had just had to ruin things.

Harry had been half tempted to start a fight with the boy when he saw him. In between classes,
Harry had noticed more and more students looking at him like he was a monster, and he had become very well accustomed to the year prior, and at the start of class, the Slytherins had huddled together pointing occasionally at Harry. It was when Harry got off of the animal and was walking back to the rest of the Gryffindors that he heard Malfoy's comment.

"Well of course it was easy for him, he's more beast now than human, it's like watching two animals," Draco's voice carried.

"What's he talking about," Lavender Brown asked, when Harry got up to the rest of them. Unfortunately, she asked loudly enough for Malfoy to hear.

"Oh," the boy said. "He hasn't told you? Of course he hasn't told you. Greyback got him over the summer. He's a werewolf now."

"Don't be stupid," Parvati said. "Harry's not a werewolf."

"You wouldn't know about it, but father heard all about it over the summer," Draco said, really emphasizing his father's inside knowledge. "You all probably heard Potter got attacked by Greyback when he was all alone in the muggle world. What they aren't spreading around is that he went missing after that. What no one is talking about is that Potter got himself captured and infected by Greyback. He didn't escape; Greyback let him go so he could infect everyone in the school. You lot will be first."

"Oh, this is stupid," Hermione said. "It was the full moon last night. It rose while we were all on the train."

"Funny though, isn't it," Draco sneered at her. He turned to take in his crowd. "He's given himself away trying to cover it all up. I saw him on the train, but he wasn't acting right. It was probably one of Dumbledore's cronies under polyjuice, and then of course, surprise surprise, one of the Professor's is missing from the opening feast. And what happened next? Potter didn't spend the night in Gryffindor Tower. They weren't about to have a teacher sleep over with a bunch of third years, so Potter conveniently took ill and had to spend the night in the Hospital Wing, where no one but Dumbledore's people can verify if he was actually there."

"Dumbledore wouldn't let a werewolf into the school. Besides, Harry's obviously not a werewolf," Seamus said.

"Of course he would, the muggle loving old fool would rather let all sorts of filth into the school, half-breeds and mudbloods. He won't stop until the castle's crumbling around him," Draco said angrily.

"What did ya say about the Headmaster?" came a dangerous voice behind Draco that Harry had only heard once before.

Draco turned around to find Hagrid towering over him, but for once since Harry had met him, they blond boy seemed to be at a loss for words.

"Go! Just, go." Hagrid said gruffly.

Draco collected himself and sneered, but turned around and walked off as though he had merely become bored.

"An' tha'll be a detention t'night, after yer last class," Hagrid said to the boys back.

There was an awkward moment when no one said anything.
"Righ' well, les no' stop the lesson," Hagrid said. Hagrid had them break out into groups to approach the hippogriffs.

All of his fellow Gryffindors made small comments of support and belief in Harry, but Harry couldn't help but notice slightly worried or speculative looks here or there.

After class, the trio stayed back a moment to congratulate Hagrid once again on his new position, and the large man assured them that they would be having more than a few adventures in his class that year. They then rushed to get to Transfiguration, not wanting to be late for their first class with their head of house. Half way there, Ron had turned to say something to Hermione, only to find that she wasn't there. The two took a moment to look around, both certain that she hadn't passed them. Surprisingly, she was already in the Transfiguration classroom when they arrived.

"How'd you do that?" Ron asked.

"Do what?" Hermione asked, her cheeks blushing.

"You were right next to me one moment, then you disappeared, then we find you already here when we get here," the freckled boy said.

"Oh, I must have passed you without realizing it," Hermione said.

Ron looked like he didn't want to leave it at that, but at that moment Professor McGonagall walked in and the lesson began.

Transfiguration too had started out well; it wasn't until the end of the lesson when Parvati Patil had held up her Hogsmeade permission slip and asked their Professor when they would be turning them in that things had taken a sharp nosedive. Harry was smiling to himself at this point, for his form had already been turned in, and he was still rather proud of the accomplishment that that had been.

However Professor McGonagall had sighed at this point and her usually stern demeanor had softened for just a moment.

"You may as well pass them forward now if you would like, however," the professor frowned, "I should tell you now that you may not need them. It has not been decided yet, and we are still working with the Department of Magical Law Enforcement, but as of right now it appears that until such a time as those who have escaped from Azkaban are captured, there will be no visits to Hogsmeade."

There were quite a few groans and cries of dismay at these words, but Harry didn't make a sound. He just felt his stomach plummet. He had gone through quite a bit to get his form signed and now his painful victory over Uncle Vernon just seemed like a bad joke the world had played on him.

Next was lunch, and after that was the class that Harry had been dreading. Double Potions, with the Slytherins of course, because that wasn't a recipe for disaster. Harry briefly entertained the idea of meeting his predicted fate from a Slytherin tampered exploding cauldron; but it wasn't really his classmates that had him apprehensive of the class. He rather didn't like the idea of spending two hours with his bio-dad glaring at him and insulting him.

Oddly enough, though, Snape didn't really do either of those things. Oh, he was far from friendly to anyone, and he had taught in the same cold, superior air that he wore like a cloak while using words they barely understood to explain the days lesson, but he barely looked at Harry at all, and Harry could almost think that during the practical part of the lesson the man had been almost more helpful than cutting in his critiques of the students he passed as he stalked through the room. He
even stopped himself halfway through chewing out Neville Longbottom for ruining his potion before he looked at Hermione of all people and ground out “tell him how to fix it,” before turning away. The man didn't even insult Harry once, and Harry found the atmosphere of the room lacked just enough malice to work in and managed a halfway decent potion, which Snape had walked past with indifference.

Draco, of course, was a different matter entirely. He had been whispering to his fellow Slytherins constantly during the class, whenever Snape wasn't looking, shooting Harry smug vindictive glares the entire time but Harry ignored him… for the most part. He mollified himself with the knowledge that Malfoy had a detention on the first day of class.

Harry could hear Hermione quietly helping Neville fix his potion, which he couldn't believe Snape was allowing. Not that he could imagine the man giving her points for it, like any other Professor would.

With his potion done, Harry found himself waiting quietly for other students to finish up. Unlike Malfoy, Harry wasn't about to get away with talking in class. As he sat there, his eyes occasionally following Snape as the man stalked around the classroom, he found himself wondering what the man's story had been. Why had he joined Voldemort? Why had he left? Why did he keep looking out for Harry when he clearly hated him? Like the night before. He hadn't just chased off the dementor; he had told them to eat chocolate and then told Madame Pomfrey to check him over. Perhaps most surprising of all, the man hadn't said a thing about it since. Harry had passed out, and Snape hadn't said a word. He could have spent the entire class humiliating him about it, but he hadn't. Why?

He didn't have too long to ponder these questions; soon the whole class was getting ready to leave, but as Harry shoved his books and supplies into his bag, he found himself mulling the most over the fact that he really did want answers to those questions. Which he shouldn't. He really didn't care a bit about Snape. The man wasn't anything to him, so why should he even think about him outside of not running afoul of the man's temper.

The thing about Mondays, Harry thought as they all walked down the halls to their next class, was that everything was crammed together. It was nice in some ways, since all of the classes except for potions were shorter, but with five different classes in one day, everything just sort of jumbled together. Take Tuesdays for example. Two classes, just two, one before lunch and one after. They were extended periods, but all he had to worry about was two classes for the day. At least the variety of Monday's made the day go by a bit faster. Of course having five classes on the first day of school also meant a fair bit of homework to start everything off with.

After leaving Potions, Harry, Ron, and Hermione walked with the rest of the Gryffindors to the Defense Against the Dark Arts classroom for the last class of the day. Defense had always seemed like it should have been an amazingly exciting class, but if one excluded the fact that both of the previous defense teachers had sent him to the hospital wing and had made attempts to kill or permanently incapacitate Harry, he had to say quite conclusively that it had always been a boring, and at times very unpleasant, class. However, it was a new year and a new teacher, so Harry found himself cautiously optimistic about the new Professor.

Professor Lupin had not at all been what he, or likely the rest of the class, had been expecting. The man looked almost shabby compared to the other professors of the castle. He had threadbare clothes and a look about him that said that he was old before his time. Indeed, he looked like he hadn't slept at all the night before, or maybe like he was recovering from a cold. But the most off-putting part about the professor was that he had numerous faint scars covering his face and hands.
Yet he greeted everyone with a warm smile and a good afternoon and promptly told everyone to take out their wands and leave their bags at their desks and then without so much as handing out a syllabus or giving any sort of introduction to the class, escorted them all out of the classroom and down the hall to the professor's lounge.

Professor Snape, it seemed, was not teaching a class at that moment and had in fact been lounging in said lounge when the class shuffled in. Harry briefly entertained the notion that Professor Lupin was going to teach the class how to defend themselves from Snape. When he saw the class file in behind Professor Lupin, however, Snape got up from his couch and left, giving the defense professor a light sneer, and a snide remark about the competency of Gryffindors.

Only a few minutes into the class, Harry found himself liking the new professor. Oh, time would tell if the man was a dark wizard who for some unfathomable reason wanted to kill him, but for now, Harry decided Defense Against the Dark Arts was probably going to be a fun class that year. Professor Lupin started the class by introducing the class to an actual dark creature, a bogart for this lesson. A creature that could shape shift into whatever the worst fear of its victim was, according to Hermione, who explained it to the class when the Professor had asked for the answer. A creature that was in fact hiding inside a wardrobe in the room. The professor was both engaging and knowledgeable and was soon calling for a volunteer to face the bogart. Though, at this point, he still hadn't explained how one did that.

Harry felt lucky to not find himself in a similar situation to what had happened in creatures class, almost everyone raised their hand to volunteer. Harry, it seemed, was not the only one who was enjoying defense this year. A host of Gryffindor hands shot up and soon Parvati Patil was standing in front of the class.

"Alright now Miss Patil, what form do you think the boggart will take for you?" Professor Lupin asked the girl.

"Um," she suddenly looked self conscious. "A mummy."

Professor Lupin nodded. "Now the trick to getting rid of a boggart is to make it turn into something funny. Turn your own fear into something you would laugh at. There is a spell that will help us do this, but what truly banishes a boggart, what sends it packing is laughter. Now can anyone tell me what advantage we have, with a creature that turns into the greatest fear of the person it faces? Harry," he said without waiting for anyone to raise their hand.

Harry didn't know if the man was calling on him because he was the boy-who-lived, or if he planned to put all students on the spot to answer questions, but found himself searching for an answer anyway.

"Because there's so many of us," he hazarded.

"Yes," Professor Lupin said, "precisely. Large groups confuse it, what scares one person won't scare another, and laughter, I have found is infectious. So Miss Patil, can you think of any way to make a mummy funny, to make us laugh out loud?"

"Well." Parvati thought. "What if it tripped on its own bandages and face planted?"

"That would be amusing," Professor Lupin said. "But surely there is more you can do to your greatest fear."

"Oh," Parvati said. "What if a loose bandage got tugged away, and it spun around like a top, unraveling… and falling to pieces."
"There we go," Professor Lupin said. "Now when those doors open, the boggart will come out and when it sees you, it will take the form of the mummy. It won't hurt you, so all you need to do is to picture the mummy getting unraveled and spinning like a top. The incantation is Riddikulus, and the wand movement is a simple slash, like this. Now everyone else, think about your greatest fear, and be ready to turn it into something we can all laugh at. Are you ready Miss Patil."

She nodded.

"Alright everyone, back up, so that the bogart can focus on one person at a time, and when I call your name, step forward to take your turn."

With that, the rest of the class backed up, and left Parvati to face the bogart. Professor Lupin flicked his wand and the wardrobe that the bogart had been hiding in burst open. A mummy walked out. It had to be two whole meters tall, and it had two yellow glowing eyes. It gave a menacing groan as it lurched toward Parvati, who did indeed look very frightened. But she held her wand up firmly and cried out "Riddikulus."

A loose bandage from around its middle suddenly jerked backwards, and suddenly the mummy was spinning like a top, its limbs splayed out, bits of it flying off, and the classroom erupted into laughter.

"Mr. Weasley approach please," the Professor said.

Ron walked forward, a determined look on his face. There was a pop, as Ron walked forward, and standing in place of the spinning mummy was a giant spider, reminiscent of Aragog, the large arachnid that lived in the forbidden forest. A couple of students screamed when they saw it, but Ron quickly called out the incantation and the spider lost all of its limbs, rolling across the floor.

Professor Lupin called more students up and Harry saw a banshee loose it's voice, and a sunburnt vampire.

"Mr. Longbottom, if you please," the professor called.

Neville walked forward, white as a sheet and with a pop, the sunburnt vampire turned into a person whose face everyone in the class had seen in the newspaper. Belatrix Lestrange let out a cackle and Harry saw Professor Lupin start to walk forward, but Neville gave a very angry "Riddikulus" and Belatrix gave a scream as she seemed to crack up like a porcelain doll which exploded into a thousand pieces. Neville gave a very non jovial 'hah,' and turned on his heels to join the rest of the class.

"Miss Granger, forward please," Professor Lupin said, not seeming to be phased by what he had seen.

As more students went up there was more and more laughter, but Harry couldn't decide what his greatest fear was. He tried to think up a few so that he wouldn't be surprised. When he realized he was the only student left who hadn't yet faced the boggart he took a step forward, getting ready, though not sure what to expect. He made eye contact with the professor to let him know he knew it was his turn. Yet as the class was laughing at a walking severed hand that had found itself trapped in a mouse trap, Professor Lupin said, "Alright, I think we've about finished it off, Miss Patil, if you would do the honors."

Parvati walked forward and the mummy appeared again.

"Riddikulus," she called out jovially. The mummy once more found itself unraveling and spinning,
and the whole class gave a rousing laugh and the whole creature seemed to go up in a puff of smoke and door to the wardrobe slammed shut.

"Excellent," Professor Lupin said. "Excellent everyone. Let's see, that's five points for everyone who faced the bogart, and an additional five for Mrs. Granger and Mr. Potter for answering those questions earlier. Well done everyone. Now, let's get back to the classroom and I'll go over a few things you'll need to know for the term."

The class exited out of the professor's lounge, all talking excitedly about the lesson, a couple people giving Neville an odd look. No one, it seemed, had noticed that Harry hadn't gone forward. No one except Professor Lupin, and Harry found himself pretty miffed. Why had he been excluded? First the man called on him when he hadn't been raising his hand, then he kept him from participating in the practical exercise. Did he think Harry was incapable of handling a bogart. He had a sickening thought. Had Madame Pomfrey warned the faculty to watch out for poor delicate Harry, who had fainted because of the dementor? Did they all know, did they all think him weak? Maybe Professor Lupin had heard about his predicted death and had decided not to take any chances in class. Had the professor only called on him earlier so he could award him points when everyone else had gotten points?

He would have to make sure the man knew he could handle himself just fine. He had faced Voldemort and a Basilisk, and a whole clutch of giant spiders. He wasn't about to sit out on the sidelines of the class just when defense was getting interesting.

That night after dinner, Harry found himself avoiding Hermione. He could tell that she wanted to talk more about what they had discussed the night before. About the hemophilia, and more importantly, why Harry was so desperate that no one else know about it. Harry wound up heading up to the dormitory after he got up to the tower. He had a thought about getting a start on some of the little homework already assigned, or rather he wanted to read about death omens in divination, but was derailed when he opened up his trunk.

There sitting on top of his possessions was the letter from his parents and Harry was suddenly reminded that there had been two things he had been waiting for over the summer: making sure he wasn't about to bleed to death, and revealing the secondary letter that his parents had written. The sheets of parchment held two letters. The letter that he had read; the one that only he could read, and the one that anyone else looking at the parchment would see. The letter that one would expect parents who worried about surviving a war might write to their son. A letter full of stories about their lives, stories that told him who they were. The one Harry hadn't been able to read without a simple spell to switch which letter he could view.

His parents had probably never dreamed that he would be raised in the muggle world. They had probably thought that even if they had died, he would have been raised by people who cared, people Harry could have trusted with the letter. However, he was on his own, and waiting to do either of those spells over the summer had been a little bit of torture.

Harry gathered up the numerous pages of parchment and sat on his bed and drew the curtains.

"Albus," he heard his name called from his fireplace. "This is Amelia Bones, we need to talk."

Albus waved his wand opening the floo connection wide and patiently awaited the woman who soon stepped into his office.

"Good evening, Headmaster, I hope you are well," she said, taking the chair he indicated.
"I am, and I hope that you are as well Madame Bones, however judging by that look I can see that you have some unpleasant news for me."

"Crouch is dead," She said bluntly.

"I see," Dumbledore said. "I had heard he has been working himself very hard since the breakout, but something tells me he did not work himself to death."

"Hardly," Madame bones said. "He was tortured, extensively. The Cruciatus Curse is only one of the spells in our murderer's repertoire. They even killed the poor house elf."

"Do you know who 'they' are?" Albus asked.

"Not officially, no. They took care to disguise magical signatures. But with Belatrix Lestrange and the rest of those monsters on the loose, we have a rather short list of suspects as of right now. Merlin preserve us Albus. It's starting to feel like the war never ended. People disappearing, people found dead in their homes. They left the dark mark over the manor. Twelve years since last I saw it. Fudge is still talking about the tournament for next year as if we aren't fighting a war, as if Hogwarts isn't under guard by dementors."

"Has there been any indication whatsoever of what the others are doing?" Albus asked.

"None," Amelia said. "It's as though they've fallen off of the face of the planet. Beckett has been spotted a couple of times. We have a pretty good idea of where Greyback has set his sights, but the others are in the wind."

Albus was pensive for a moment.

"What word have you had from our neighbors?" he asked.

"The answer is somewhat unanimous from the continent. If they see any of them, they will detain, but they have no intention of actively searching. Not much different from the war. Do you truly think they have gone abroad? They would not want to risk too many border crossings." She gave him a very questioning look, and he knew exactly what she wanted to ask. Though she knew not to ask it as well as he knew not to answer it.

"I do not believe Voldemort is in Britain, and I do not think it will take them long to reason this out either."

"You are sure?" she asked.

He nodded, and she did not probe further. They had discussed the Dark Lord's whereabouts before and there was little use going over it all again.

"We should have sent Aurors to find him twelve years ago, and damn the treaties," Amelia said.

"My dear Amelia, it is best not to get to much in the habit of should haves. When you live to be as old as I am, you find the list grows rather long. Now, perhaps we can discuss the number of dementors you have laying siege to my school."

The moon had been hard on him the night before. Hiding frequently behind clouds, he could not revel in its glory and power, and his need to stay hidden had kept him away from prey. He would have to go hunting soon. Of course if he could grab the boy soon he would have training to do. An easy hunt wouldn't be satisfying but it was always fun to see a new initiate wake up covered in the
blood of their first kill.

His finger found the knot in the tree he was crouched beneath and the swaying branches froze. Cloaked in illusion and wards, he climbed out of the tunnel and looked up at the castle that loomed across the grounds. He wouldn't be going there tonight. He would not attack until he was ready. He loped across the grounds to the forest. It would be his home for some time.

Chapter End Notes

AN: VERY IMPORTANT. Hermione's reaction to Harry's possible concussion was wrong. Common thought is that you should not let someone who has a concussion sleep. This is wrong. If someone has a concussion it is alright to let them sleep, but they should be woken periodically to make sure that they can wake. If they don't or if they are incredibly drowsy when woken, that's when you should really worry. Of course if symptoms seem worse than a headache and whatnot you should call EMS. WebMD has some important information on the matter. It should not go without saying that I am not a doctor or a medical professional or a substitute for competent medical advice. It is a good idea to seek professional medical advice when dealing with a head wound.

As always, thank you for giving me your time by reading this.
Truth

How he wished he could just forget Potter. The boy only needed his protection, he had no need of Severus's concern or his scorn, and Severus knew he himself would be much better off if he could just ignore the boy's presence. The problem was, he couldn't just forget the boy. It wasn't the fact that he saw the boy too regularly in classes, nor even that he was regularly trying to save the fool boy's life. It was that the boy was so much a part of the last two years of Severus's life, and well before, for that matter. Severus could not look at him without seeing his own mistakes; his sins, his losses, his shame, his rage and impotence.

Occlumency allowed him to clear his mind of those feelings; to push them back and analyze them. He was able to see them for what they were, and put them in context. In the end though, he wouldn't stop despising James Potter; he couldn't stop loving Lily; and didn't see how to separate the boy and his duty from the two ghosts of his past. It didn't matter that he understood these emotions and their roots. Nor did it matter that he could push them to the background, because that wasn't the same as getting rid of them.

So much was different now. He could view his past behavior and see it for what it was, and that in itself was painful. He had made a caricature of himself. He had turned his competitiveness to pettiness; his love to jealousy; his wit to a bullying taunt. The magic he had once immersed himself in had become a chore. In the clarity of Occlumency, being able to push away the shame and disgust did not change what he knew about himself, and the temptation to return, to go back to his petty victories and miserable wallowing was strong. He imagined Lily, eleven years old again, sharing a nervous look with him before their sorting; he imagined her seeing him as he had been these past many years. He imagined himself.

Seeing the Potter boy in class and walking the hall with his friends was a constant reminder of all of it. For Potter represented his greatest shames in so many ways. The clarity remained now, wether he occluded or not. The epiphany would not go away, but with Potter in the room, he felt it best to keep himself in check.

There he was, sitting in the back of the class, as per usual. Severus had given the boy a wide berth since the term had started, and he found he was much more tolerable that way. Potter kept his head down, completed his potions and homework, and as long as Draco and his hangers on did not start trouble, the class usually went smoothly. Oddly enough, grades had started going up, and Longbottom had somehow managed to not melt a single cauldron. He would think on the matter later, without Potter in sight.

Draco was another matter. Severus was well aware of the rumors he had started concerning Potter, and while he couldn't be bothered to care about Potter's social standing, he did care about
Slytherin's. The absurd rumors would eventually be disproven; Draco, and thereby Slytherin, would look the fool in the process. The boy simply could not see that. Perhaps he truly believed Potter was a werewolf. It didn't really matter. His house shouldn't look like fools or rumor mongers. That would not lead them anywhere.

That was another thing. It had been a while since he had seen Slytherin House, and his headship, as anything more then the perpetuity of an ancient rivalry. A fight in which he had lost and had been trying to win for a very long while. Soldiers in the crusade to deflate the egos of Gryffindor House and those who had wronged him. When he thought about Slytherin house now, and the state of the students he had loosed on the world he was rather glad that the painting of Salazar Slytherin, and indeed all of the founders, had faded. That he could not hear the voice of scorn from the legend he had revered as a youth was a blessing. The question now lay in fixing what had been broken since the war had ended. Severus did not know how to go about it.

He did know that there needed to be change. He did not love teaching. He did not care for being responsible for his house. Yet he was, and lacking pride for what he did, for his responsibilities was a low he did not wish on himself.

"Time is up," he said. "Bottle your potions and bring them to the front of the class." Then on a whim, he said, "If you failed to produce the potion correctly, give me eighteen inches on the correct brewing method and where you went wrong for partial credit."

There was a pause in the classroom as the students took that in.

"Well don't lollygag," he snarled for good measure. "Get a move on."

The students all rushed to clean up the classroom and get out. Though oddly enough, it was Potter who was the last one out; looking like he wanted to say something before he walked out the door.

"Now, who can tell the class where kappas are most commonly found?" Professor Lupin asked.

Harry's hand was up before Professor Lupin could finish asking the question.

"Someone other than Mr. Potter," Professor Lupin said, with a wry grin.

Hermione got that all the time from other professors. She'd answer too many questions during the class and the professor would insist that someone else answer the question. This was the first time that Harry had ever gotten the treatment and he grinned in spite of himself. Answering questions right wasn't going to show the professor that he could hold his own, but it was a start to at least making sure the man knew he was competent. He wasn't about to be passed over in a practical exercise again, or let the professor think he was weak; and if that meant reading ahead for each class, then so be it.

Next to him Hermione gave him a small smile, after she finished answering the question. He hadn't told her why he was trying so hard in defense; he wasn't even sure if she had noticed the Professor skipping him with the boggart. She was just happy that he was taking the class seriously.

It wasn't that he didn't usually participate in class, but he never liked to draw too much notice from the professors. Old habits died hard, and though he wasn't as bad as he had been in his first year, he still felt uncomfortable showing off or getting too good grades. Not that it was as easy to get good
grades as it had been back in primary school. He wasn't about to try to rival Hermione in all of their classes, he knew that even at his best he was outclassed. In defense though, he was willing to give her a run for her money, or at least try to.

The spell that was most commonly used against a kappa was a little unpleasant, so the professor wasn't about to let the class torture one of the creatures for practice. Instead they practiced on a charmed block of wood that would let them know if they had cast the charm right.

"Mr. Potter," Professor Lupin said as he invited Harry to try the charm first at the front of the class. "I like to reward participation with more participation."

Harry was more than happy to go and perform the charm first. Happy to show the professor that he was capable. Though, really, it didn't exactly mean anything if he wasn't at least facing the creature. This was the third class, and they hadn't actually faced another creature since the boggart. Harry completed the spell, the professor complimented his annunciation, and he sat back down as the rest of the class filed down to perform the spell.

Mr. Lupin was a great teacher. He was shaping up to be Harry's favorite. Indeed it seemed a number of students shared the sentiment. Snape was the only person who seemed to dislike the man.

An hour later, classes were over and the trio headed back to the common room before dinner. Or so Harry thought; he and Ron were soon being dragged into an unused classroom by Hermione.

"Hey," Ron said.

"No more excuses, we need to talk about this," Hermione said.

Harry didn't need to ask about what.

"What do you want to know?" he asked Hermione.

"Well for starts you're going to need to show me these spells instructions so I can learn them. I mean what if there's an emergency, and you can't do it yourself."

"I can't show you the spell instructions," Harry said. "The paper's charmed so only I can read it. I can teach you though, if it really matters."

"Of course it matters," Hermione said.

"I'm surprised you haven't already read a book about it," Ron commented.

"Advanced medical books are in the restricted section," Hermione said, clearly put out to not have access. "All I could find were books that described symptoms, pathology, and transmission."

Harry thought she stressed transmission a bit, but he was probably imagining it.

"So there's two charms, the first one keeps me from bleeding to death, the second one checks to see how well the first one is holding up. Sang Vitalis Charm and the Sang Vitalis Diagnostic."

He quickly went over the two spells with Hermione, and let her cast the diagnostic charm on him.

Was it just his imagination though, or did the blue glow of the charm have a slightly greenish tint to it.

Hermione insisted Ron learn the spells too, and soon Harry was thinking about heading to dinner a
bit early as an excuse to finish everything up. Hermione, of course, wasn't done with her questions, though she didn't really look like she knew how to go on.

"Harry," she started, holding the book she'd been carrying very tightly under her crossed arms. "It's just that I got the impression that you wouldn't have told us about this if it hadn't been for that dementor, and I'm wondering, if something else were wrong, if you would tell us. We're your friends, and friends want to help each other."

"What else could he be hiding?" Ron asked. "Wait you don't actually think he is a werewolf do you?"

"I didn't say that he was hiding anything, and of course I don't think he's a werewolf, don't be stupid," Hermione said. "I just want to make sure." She paused. "Like if you had trouble at home."

"This is my home," Harry said.

"Exactly," Hermione said, as though Harry had said something much more profound or meaningful than he intended. Clearly, even though she wasn't saying right out that she thought he was hiding something, she thought he was hiding something.

"What are you even on about?" Ron asked confused.

"Nothing's going on with the Dursley's, they're their usual awful selves," Harry said guardedly.

"Well that's sort of the point isn't it," Hermione said. "It isn't right, and if they're..." She paused, very uncomfortable. "Why didn't you tell anyone you were hit by a car?" she asked.

Harry was very confused about the change in topic.

"I...it wasn't a big deal," he said. He had been fine, and he didn't understand why Hermione was going on about it.

"Getting hit by a car is a big deal," Hermione said almost indignantly. "Now either you did get hit by a car and fractured a bunch of bones and didn't say anything for some unfathomable reason, or you got hurt some other way that you didn't want to talk about. But Harry, if you were getting hurt at home... in Surrey you need to tell someone."

Harry didn't know what to say for a moment, realizing where Hermione had taken the conversation. He knew he needed a quick denial, else Hermione would know she had hit on something, but the words didn't want to form in his mouth as panic started to set in. It also boggled how Hermione was always right, even when she was wrong.

"Harry can't be getting beat up at home," Ron said. He turned to Harry. " Didn't you say your cousin's been terrified of you since the tail."

"I didn't say he was getting beat up by his cousin," Hermione said.

"I really did get hit by a car," Harry said mulishly, finally able to push the words out. He didn't know how to get Hermione off of the subject. What if he couldn't? What if she decided to tell a teacher?

"So why didn't you tell anyone?" Hermione asked.

"Because," Harry said a little heatedly. "Because with everything else that happened that afternoon, that was the furthest thing from my mind. A werewolf tried to maul me, I saw a woman get
killed... no, exploded, and I'd just flown around London for hours trying to find the Leakey Cauldron, and I was tired, and I wanted to be by myself. And I was only sore, when I could have been exploded, or kidnapped, or bitten, and I wasn't going to whine about it when it was only just sore and nothing was really broken. And that Auror who patched me up kept giving me weird looks and I just wanted him to go away."

The fact that getting hit by his uncle's car had tied into him getting kicked out of the house and left to fend for himself had also put it in the form of things he didn't talk about, and the fact that it had been his uncle's car pretty much put it behind the Dursley's own statute of secrecy that he had been following since long before he had heard of the wizarding one.

"I don't think you should go back next summer," Hermione said.

"I told you it's fine," Harry said.

"It's not fine Harry," Hermione said and Harry was horrified to see that she had tears in her eyes. "Bars on your windows is not fine. Just eating leftovers is not fine. A coat hanger for Christmas is not fine. Living with people who've hated you since you were a baby because you have something special that they don't is not fine."

"It's not that bad," Harry said. "It could have been a lot worse." Harry knew that there were worse things than the Dursleys and kids out there who had a lot less than he did.

"Just because things could be worse, doesn't mean it's alright though," Ron said awkwardly. Harry looked over to Ron in shock. Not Ron too! He had expected him to take his side on this.

"Look, you never wanted to talk about this before," Harry said. "Now all of a sudden you act like I'm living with Death Eaters."

"Well I should have," Hermione said regretfully. "I'm sorry I didn't. It shouldn't have taken you coming to school with broken bones for us to have this conversation. It's been obvious since we became friends that you shouldn't be living there, and... I feel like I've let you down never saying anything before."

"'Mione's right," Ron said. "We should have raised hell when we had to rip those bars off your windows. But it's not like we can really do much of anything about it, unless we kidnap Harry again next summer."

Harry was having a hard time understanding where they were coming from. He had never really complained about the Dursleys, and it had been a long while since he had even mentioned them. He'd certainly never indicated that he needed to be rescued.

"We just need to tell an adult," Hermione said.

Harry thought his heart had stopped in his chest when Hermione said that, and he felt like he had completely lost control of the situation.

"What are they going to do?" Ron asked.

"Well there's an office of child welfare, or something like it, isn't there?" Hermione said.

"What's that?" Ron asked.

"Well like, who placed all of the war orphans with families after the war? I mean I know of at least
a dozen here in the school."

"There's not some agency that takes care of it," Ron said. "They all either went to their closest
blood relative or godparent, but most people had that ironed out ahead of time during the war, any
dispute'd be handled by the courts. I think there's also a little orphanage in London, for kids
without families or godparents, but that's about it."

"Well what happens if someone needs help at home?" Hermione asked.

Ron shrugged. "Aurors I guess, but only if a crime's been committed, and it would have to be pretty
bad for it to be that."

"What do you mean it would have to be pretty bad, hurting kids is a crime," Hermione said.

"Well it probably should be, I mean mum and dad never held with hitting us for stuff, but you don't
think Filch is joking about the whips and chains in his office do you? The only reason they don't
give out lashings for rule breaking anymore is because Dumbledore got the school board to ban it. I
don't know, I think most kids here probably don't have to worry about it, 'cause their parents aren't
gits, but it still isn't illegal."

"Well that's horrible," Hermione said. "Somebody should do something." She looked over at
Harry, who was still at a loss for how to turn his friends from the topic at hand. "We, need to do
something."

"Right, well we could talk to McGonagall, see if you have any other options," Ron said.

"Just stop," Harry said desperately, more to the situation than to his friends. "Just stop ok. I'm not
going back, so you don't have to worry. I'm not going back to the Dursleys next summer so just
stop talking about this, and don't even think about talking to Professor McGonagall. Please, you
can't. Can't we please just forget about this?"

"What do you mean you're not going back?" Hermione asked. "What if they catch all of those
escaped convicts. I don't think they're just going to let you spend an entire summer at the Leaky
Cauldron."

"It doesn't matter, I'm not going back. I'm never going back, no matter what. I can't," Harry said.
"I'll work out where I'll stay, but I'm not going back, and the Dursleys aren't about to call up the
ministry and tell them I never came back."

"But what if someone does say you have to go back?" Hermione asked.

"Well it doesn't matter, because they kicked me out," Harry yelled, and instantly regretted it.

"What?" Ron asked.

There was a moment when no one said anything.

"I got back to the house after getting chased by Greyback and getting hit by a car," he said with a
bit of emphasis. "And when I told them a dark wizard was after me they kicked me out."

"Oh Harry," Hermione said with a pitying look.

"Don't give me that, you should be happy," Harry said defensively. "This is what you wanted isn't
it?"
"Just because I wanted you out of the house, doesn't mean I wanted you to go through that," Hermione said.

"It's not a big deal," Harry said.

"Oh of course not, that's why you lied about it and didn't tell anyone," Hermione said peevishly.

There was another moment of silence.

"You can stay at the Burrow again, next summer. I can work it out with mum," Ron said.

"Mine too," Hermione said. "You shouldn't have to stay at an inn for an entire summer."

"I'm not staying at either of your homes," Harry said. "I shouldn't even stay in Diagon Alley while Greyback is after me."

"So what are you going to do then?" Ron asked.

"I don't know," Harry said. "I'll figure it out."

"Are you sure you don't have any other options?" Hermione asked, with the same emphasis as before. Harry's cheeks flamed. He was fairly sure she suspected, at least in part.

"None that I want to explore," Harry ground out. Ron looked weary of asking what they were talking about.

"Then you should talk to Professor Dumbledore," Hermione said. "He would make sure you went somewhere safe over the summer."

"I can't just tell him the Dursleys abandoned me," Harry said in disbelief.

"Sure you can," Ron said. "Just go in and say 'Professor, the Dursleys were bigger jerks than usual and they kicked me out of the house. Good riddance, I say, but I'll need someplace to stay where werewolves can't get me.' Who knows, he might let you stay here."

That was certainly a better conversation to have with the Headmaster than the one Hermione had wanted him to have a moment ago, but what would the Headmaster think if he knew how much the Dursleys couldn't stand him?

"I'll think about it," Harry said.

Hermione opened her mouth to say something, but Harry cut her off.

"Dinner's starting soon. We should go," he said, and with that he turned and walked out the door.

Ron and Hermione followed after him, and though neither of them spoke, Harry could tell that they both wanted to.

"So Professor Lupin was friends with my dad," Harry said, in part to completely change the conversation. "They shared a dorm here, my godfather too, Sirius Black, and another bloke. They were all close friends, from the sound of it."

"How'd you find that out," Ron asked. "He didn't tell you, did he? You should never trust the Defense Professor, I think."

"Ronald," Hermione scolded. "You shouldn't say that. Professor Lupin seems like a very good
"Well you drive everyone crazy, so you can hardly blame him for that one," Hermione said loftily. "Anyway, how did you find out, Harry?"

"The letter my parents wrote me, it had a lot more than what we talked about. There were a bunch of stories from the both of them."

"That's great," Hermione said. "It must be nice to learn more about your parents."

"Yeah," Ron said. "That must be cool. Uncle Billius used to tell great stories about dad and him when they were our age."

"So is that why you're trying so hard in defense?" Hermione asked.

Harry wasn't sure what to say to that. He didn't want to bring up getting skipped with the boggart.

"Oh, just, I figured I should take defense seriously, what with dark wizards after me," Harry said. "Even if all we're studying is nuisance creatures right now."

"Well you should do some extra curricular reading then," Hermione suggested.

"Are you going to say anything to him?" Ron asked.

Harry shrugged. "I dunno. We'll see. The weird thing is, they wrote about Snape too. They were all in the same year."

"I had suspected as much," Hermione said, "considering how much he speaks about your father."

"Hasn't been doing much of that lately, has he?" Ron asked. "Think Dumbledore had a talk with him about it? He's been weird in class."

"I don't know," Harry said. "The weird thing is, he was friends with my mum for a bit." Well, more than a bit.

"What?" Ron said. "But she was a Gryffindor, and he's a slimy Slytherin."

"Oh Ron," Hermione said. "That doesn't mean… well, that doesn't have to mean that they couldn't be friends."

"They met before Hogwarts actually," Harry said. "He told my mum she was a witch."

"Well that would be adorable if you threw about anyone else into the Snape role," Ron said.

"So what happened?" Hermione asked.

"Ideological differences," Harry said after thinking about it for a bit.

"So he was toady with the You-Know-Who crowd," Ron put in. "Do you think he was a Death Eater," he added in a conspiratorial whisper.
Harry shrugged.

"Oh Ron," Hermione said. "Professor Dumbledore wouldn't have hired him if he had been a Death Eater."

Ron gave her a look.

"He wouldn't hire him to anything other than the defense position if he had been a Death Eater," Hermione conceded. "Oh, that reminds me, we should probably learn more about the Death Eaters that escaped too, we only really know about two of them."

"Greyback wasn't a Death Eater," Harry said, remembering his conversation with Tom during the summer. "He was an enforcer though."

Ron got a pensive look on his face.

"Lestrange was like, one of You-Know-Who's most fanatical followers, one of the most dangerous too, I think. Rookwood was an inside man at the ministry, supposedly he was an unspeakable."

"What's an unspeakable?" Harry asked.

"No one knows what they really do, but they study all the secret advanced magic stuff for the ministry," Ron said.

"What about Dolohov?" Hermione asked.

"He killed my mum's brothers," Ron said after a pause. "They were twins. Mum named Fred and George after them." He shrugged. "He was a fighter I guess. Bill wouldn't say much about him."

He added as an aside. "He had a friend from Gringotts come take a look at the wards around the Burrow, you know, after the breakout. You'd probably be safe over the summer. Especially if we just don't tell anyone."

"We'll see," Harry said noncommittally.

They walked on in silence after that until they got to the great hall, it looked like the food had just gotten on the tables. There weren't many other students in the hall. Snape was though, and Harry found himself glancing at the man.

He thought about the way his mother had written about him in the second letter; not as though he was a former lover, or the father of her child, but rather like he was a friend from her childhood whom she had drifted apart from. Someone she had had adventures with when she had been a girl. Harry still found himself looking for his mum's friend in the unpleasant man, and while it was true that Snape wasn't as horrible as he had been in the past for whatever reason, Harry still couldn't see how the man could have been his mum's boyfriend.

The trio sat down at the far end of Gryffindor table and started serving themselves.

"So," Hermione started. "Have either of you put any thought into your third year projects?"

All of their teachers had been going on a bit about upper year projects.

"Who says we're doing third year projects?" Ron asked. Harry could see that he was getting ready for an argument with Hermione.

"Just because you don't have to do one, doesn't mean you shouldn't do one," said Hermione. "You'll broaden your horizons and maybe get some extra credit if you do a good job."
"Let me guess, you're doing projects for all of your classes. Even though there's no way you're getting to all of them, seeing as they overlap," Ron said accusingly.

Hermione didn't even address her impossible schedule, all she said was, "Not all of my classes, Ron. Just for Arithmancy, Ancient Runes, Transfiguration, and Charms."

"Oh, I see, so just four of the hardest subjects at Hogwarts," Ron said. "Well not all of us are super students who can just tack on a boat load of extra work."

"Well then you should be able to take on at least one project. You're not a bad student, you know. You could stand to do some more studying, but there's no reason you can't handle a project. It could be for something you like. Oh, you could do a charms project."

"Who said I like charms," Ron asked.

"It's your best subject, after astronomy, but that doesn't matter, because you're great at chess. You could charm your own chess board. Oh, you could do it like the one that guarded the philosophers stone. One you could play against. That would be a great project."

"Sure it would be; if I had any idea how to do that," Ron said, as though Hermione was missing the obvious.

"Well that's why you do the project. To learn. I bet you could get it to play a better game than Professor Flitwick," Hermione said.

"Flitwick?" Ron asked. "I thought McGonagall did the chess set."

"Me too, until I thought about it more," Hermione said. "In the key room, I thought the keys were all charmed to fly, meaning they were Professor Flitwick's bit. When I saw the giant chess set, I figured it was Professor McGonagall since those pieces had to have been transfigured. But if you take into account the incredible amount of charm work that went into it, you might start to suppose that the keys weren't charmed, but partially transfigured. Anyway, the point is, you beat the chess set, and you could probably make a more challenging one yourself if you put some effort into figuring it out."

"You're acting like I'm some sort of chess genius," Ron said.

"You sort of are," Harry said.

"What about you Harry," Ron said, putting the attention on his friend. "What's your project going to be."

"I think Quidditch practice is enough of a project for me," Harry said. "But I think charming your own chess set sounds great Ron." He did, but mostly he wanted Hermione's attention back on Ron.

"There's no way I can do that as a third year," Ron said. "Probably not even as a seventh year."

"Well that's why you start now, and by the time you're a seventh year you'll be doing all sorts of things," Hermione said. "You know, even if it is a couple years before the project really gets rolling, you could learn so much. Besides a good project looks good on your resume when you're looking for a job. You don't want to be just another Hogwarts graduate with good grades; there are plenty of those. You want to stand out."

"Hermione," Harry said. "If our next five years here are anything like the last two, I don't think Ron is going to ever be just another Hogwarts student."
Ron blushed, and Harry smiled, remembering their first year when Ron had sacrificed himself to the black queen.

"Yes, well that's certainly true," Hermione conceded. "But it could be fun too. You could at least talk to Professor Flitwick and see how you'd go about it."

"I dunno," Ron said. "What about Harry. I bet he could do a defense project."

Harry's eyes grew wide as the attention was once more on him.

"Quidditch..." he started.

"Would make an excellent project for you," Hermione said, as though Harry had been making a suggestion instead of an excuse. "Unless you have your heart set on defense."

"Huh?" Harry asked.

"Well you could do any number of charms projects to do with charmed equipment. Or you could do a project based on game statistics; maths are still very important."

"So what? Charm my own snitch?" Harry asked.

"Sure, or whatever you want," Hermione said.

"Hey, why does Harry get to do something simple, and I have to charm a chess set to play a better game than Flitwick?" Ron piped in.

"You don't have to," Hermione said. "You can make up any sort of project. That was just something I thought you might do well in and enjoy. Though Harry's right, Quidditch will be taking up a lot of his time this year."

She wasn't kidding. Wood had posted the training schedule and it looked like it had been drawn up by a madman; but then again, it had been drawn up by Oliver Wood. Their first practice was actually after dinner in an hour.

"Alright," Harry said, after they had eaten. "I've got to go grab my quidditch gear. I want to fly a bit before practice." He was usually the first one there, changed and already flying before the older students got there.

"We'll be in the library when you're done," Hermione said.

Ron sighed.

Harry started walking towards Gryffindor Tower. There hadn't been any students in the halls while they had walked to dinner, it had been too early really, but now there was a steady stream of students on the way to the Great Hall that he was passing. He got a lot of dirty and fearful looks. Not from everyone, but enough to sting. He kept his head down.

He wanted to yell at them, 'I'm just a normal wizard,' but he knew that it wouldn't do any good. People would believe what they wanted to believe.

Harry had wanted to be normal since he was very young. Not normal like the Dursleys, certainly. Their quest for normalcy made them some of the most abnormal people Harry had ever known. It wasn't even about fitting in. He just didn't want to have a target on his back. Of course not being normal had condemned him at the Dursleys, but it had also saved him. Yet even as a wizard, he
couldn't be ordinary. He had to be the Boy-Who-Lived.

It occurred to Harry though, that he was confusing abnormal with famous. In the end, he just didn't want to stick out like a sore thumb. He hated being the center of attention. Quidditch was an odd exception, but at least there he felt like he had earned it. Being a star seeker didn't garner the same bizarre attention that being the Boy-Who-Lived did, and it was something that connected him to his father, something he might have been proud of. Though he realized, he didn't want to be normal. Stay under the radar, yes, but maybe not normal. His parents had died for him. He didn't think he could stand feeling one day that they had died for nothing. Not for the first time, he wondered what they would think if they could see him then.

He didn't see it when he first got into the dorm. After stuffing his quidditch gear into his bag, Harry grabbed his broom and closed the lid of his trunk. That's when he saw the banner hanging over his bed. 'Werewolf get out,' it read. Most of Gryffindor seemed to support him; he hadn't realized anyone in the tower gave a lot of credence to Malfoy's bilge. He tore the banner down and shoved it in his trunk. He would deal with it later. He felt very small at the moment.

He looked towards the door and shook his head. He walked to the window and hopped out, mounting his broom smoothly and swiftly midair, he quickly leveled off his descent and flew to the pitch and avoided his school mates.

"Are you sure you should be trying that?" Fred hollered up at Harry. He and George had just arrived at the pitch wearing their Quidditch gear and had just seen one of Harry's newer stunts.

"Don't you have a death omen or something?" George asked.

Harry had had the pitch to himself for about a half an hour when the twins arrived. He leveled off and flew towards the twins.

"Percy told us she always predicts someone's death," he told them. "I think I'm good." Probably.

"Ah well, there's always next year," George said.

"So what have you two been up to?" Harry asked. "Everyone's walking on egg shells waiting to see what you're getting ready for." Actually they were walking on egg shells because half the school, and even a few Gryffindors apparently, thought Harry was a werewolf. Since they had gotten back to Hogwarts, though, the twins had been working on some weird project in the common room, though they wouldn't say a word about it to anyone. Not even their best friend, Lee Jordan seemed to know.

"Oh," Fred said. "Not even you get to know that yet."

"How bout a hint" Harry said.

"It's going to make us rich," George said.

"And you gave us the idea," Fred said.

"Sort of," George said.
"You'll see," said Fred.

"Maybe," added George.

"Well just as long as it isn't going to bring on any death omens," Harry said. "Good luck, when are we going to see a prototype?"

"That depends," George said.

"We have a bit to work out right now, and owl post takes a bit too long," Fred said.

"Yeah, and it'll probably kill you if we really tried it out now," said George.

Well that wasn't ominous.

"Oy," came Oliver Wood's voice. He had just flown onto the pitch. "What's going to be killing my prize seeker?"

"Take your pick," Fred said.

"Probably going to be a bludger in a bit," George said.

"Well, maybe," Oliver said. "We'll be practicing with three, so you two will have to stay on top of things."

Harry grinned. It was good to be playing quidditch again, even if he could see the dementors that were patrolling the castle gates not too far off into the distance from up in the air. He told himself that they were the reason he felt like so much crap just over the opinion of some idiot in the tower.

Soon everyone had arrived, and after warm-ups, all seven of them were zooming around the pitch. Three bludgers, it turned out, were not enough to sate Oliver's drive, and soon Harry and the rest of them were dodging four of the heavy iron strapped balls. It was during a corkscrew maneuver that Harry performed that he saw someone in the shadows of the forest under the still waning moon, someone who looked like they were watching the Quidditch pitch. When he had righted himself and turned back around to see, no one was there. Moments later, Professor Trelawny's prediction almost came true when one of the bludgers came close to taking his head off.

"Watch yourself, Potter," was Oliver's only show of concern. Harry turned his attention back to the game.

"Mr. Malfoy," Severus called at the end of class. "A word if you will." He was nervous, he realized. This conversation would be difficult and it could be the beginning of something big. It could also go very wrong. Pushing away the nerves was the easy part.

"Professor?" the blond scion asked when the rest of the students had filed out.

"Tell me, Mr. Malfoy," Severus said. "Is your family name important to you?"

The boy looked affronted. "Of course it's important. House Malfoy is the most important in the wizarding world after Slytherin. The name Malfoy means..."
"Nothing to you it seems," said Severus, cutting off the boy's scripted lines. "The name Malfoy is supposed to have credibility, the name Slytherin is supposed to be synonymous with cunning. Yet you run around this school as if those words mean nothing."

"I..." the boy indignantly started to protest, but was cut off once more.

"Potter is not a werewolf!" Severus snarled. "The full moon approaches soon enough and anyone who believes that he is one will feel a fool and you will be the king of the fools. Malfoy, head fool, and spreader of lies. You've been clever, I will give you that, but cleverness without foresight is more dangerous than outright idiocy. Malfoys do not rule, but they do guide those that do. Your family has been shaping wizarding Britain for generations. The children you attend school with, Merlin preserve us, are our future Ministers. You sit in the great hall with the future Head of Magical Law Enforcement. Some of those twits will be Aurors, and some will be journalists. What have they seen of you these past years. A boy caught out of bed to tattle on another. A boy who shouts out politically incorrect slurs in a crowded hallway over the scene of an attack, a boy who spreads silly rumors."

"He could be," the boy defended.

"He is not," Severus said. "I know that he is not, because I make it my business to know such things. But let us pretend that there is some uncertainty. Do Slytherins gamble like that or do Gryffindors? Who acts the fool?"

"Gryffindors," Draco said with an averted gaze.

"You must distance yourself from this Mr. Malfoy," he said, now more gently. It was important that Draco felt that Severus was someone who could guide him. "When the school discovers that Potter is indeed not a werewolf, it should not be on the heels of your own accusations."

"So I should be more sneaky about it, so it doesn't trace back to me?" the boy asked.

"Forget Potter, Mr. Malfoy," Severus said. "Your name means a great deal, but he is a celebrity. When others see you fight they do not see Draco Malfoy fighting his nemesis, they see Potter fighting his. You are being defined by Potter's context. He is a shining light and you are nothing but shadow. Separate yourself from him. You are a Malfoy. Be a Malfoy. You are not defined by your family name, you are defining it, and not well."

"So what do I do?" Draco asked, at a loss.

"Focus on your studies. Maintain your power base, but keep your head down for at least a month. Wait till this werewolf foolishness blows over, and be ready. It is about time that the Malfoy scion had some notion of what he wants to define his life."

"I already know that: I want to bring back the old ways. I want to be the one who makes the wizarding world what it should be. Without mudbloods; and half-bloods who know their place."

Severus had to fight his own recoil at that word. Of course he couldn't act as though he had actually been offended by it.

"Mr. Malfoy. You would do well to forget that word," Severus said silkily. "There are more children here born of muggles than there are who truly have pure blood. Far more children with a muggle grandparent or two. Your use of that word puts you at odds with the majority of the wizarding world."

"Not to people who matter," the boy said.
"Mr. Malfoy, a girl who came from nothing is besting you in every class. You who have been given every advantage. Tell me Mr. Malfoy. Tell me what matters."

"The teachers have their favorites," the boy whined.

"You have been my favorite, as I have shown time and again, but she still outperforms you every time. Why is that Draco?" he asked.

"You're starting to sound like a muggle lover," the boy accused.

"Believe me, I bear no fondness for muggles," he said. "But I do respect accomplishment and ability."

"So you would just let Dumbledore's side win?" the boy asked him angrily. "Just lay down and let the lesser forms take over our world and corrupt it?"

"I would have you guide our world in its noble traditions," Severus told him. "I would expect you to keep your heritage. You would alienate more than half our world from those ways rather than guide our people to them. There will always be purebloods Draco, just as there will be always be half bloods and muggleborns. As a pureblood it is your duty to stand up as an ideal of what every wizard and witch should be. You are the elite, but that does not mean that they have no place in our world. You can either hide in the corner embracing the old ways, which never actually existed, with a small group of purebloods while the wizarding world crumbles around you, or you can shape the wizarding world by including everyone."

"My father..." Draco started, but once more Severus cut him off.

"Your father made his own decisions, different from his father's. His father too chose his own path. The duty of the family heir is to ensure the continuation and well being of the line. Thus, he must be prepared to change with the times where he must, and guide them where he can. Your father does not expect you to be a copy of himself, with no self determination or will."

"You would be singing a different tune if the Dark Lord were around," Draco said. "Father says he'll come back. What will we do then? What about you? That mark won't come off."

"I will do what I have to do Draco, as you will do your duty as scion of a noble family and a leader of our world."

There was a long pregnant pause, and Severus was sorely tempted to look into those eyes and see what went on beyond them.

"How do I make myself better than Potter and Granger?" The boy's voice was hesitant, as if asking the question implied something he didn't want to think about.

Severus resisted the urge to sigh, but he could work with the insecurities.

"You could certainly stand to study more, but do not concern yourself with outperforming Granger. You are a leader, not a scholar. Potter and Granger are their own entities and trying to be better than them is like a cauldron trying to be better than a stirring rod. They are both necessary, but they serve different roles. You will be a leader. You will be the best leader. Potter will be a fighter and Granger a scholar, trying to outperform them is trying to be them, and you are something else entirely. We will be working on developing you as a leader, and let them worry about their own lives."

Draco frowned but nodded. Severus calmed slightly. It was progress.
One of Albus's joys and trials was having Severus in his office for tea.

"So Severus, what news do you bring me?" Albus asked his potions master.

"I don't have anything newsworthy to report," Severus said. "I've started preparing the Wolfsbane for the werewolf."

"Yes, Remus will be happy to hear that. He did so very much appreciate the batch you made him last month," he replied, making sure to emphasize Remus's name.

"I appreciated not hearing the tortured screams of our students as they were torn apart by a werewolf," Severus said.

"But come now," Albus said. "Surely something has happened. I am not the only one to note that you have been acting differently since term started."

"Acting differently, am I?" Severus asked mildly.

"Indeed," Albus said. "Some have come close to accusing you of being pleasant."

"Well I will have to do something about that then, won't I?" Severus said with a slight grimace.

"There is nothing wrong with people liking a change in you," Albus said.

"I suppose that all depends on what the change is," Severus said.

"And in your case?" Albus asked, though he of course knew the answer. He had planned for this variant, had made sure Severus would be placed to trigger it, but he could only lay the pieces. How they fell after was up to chance. He was of course happy that the cards had fallen as they had. He had waited too long for this opportunity. Had waited when he had known he could elicit the same response if he had been willing to cause a deviation... But he did not like to dwell on such things. His guilt served no purpose in this case.

"I have started occluding," Severus said.

"Have you indeed?" Albus asked. "And what has an ordered mind brought you, my boy."

"Disappointment," said Severus.

"Disappointment can be used for a lot of good," Albus supplied. "With your optimism."

"And yet, in your case," Albus said, "you have submitted for approval to start a research project, grades in your classes have been rising, and you have been more engaged in faculty meetings. It does seem that this disappointment is doing you well, so long as this disappointment eventually turns into satisfaction and contentment."

"Some mistakes are too great to undo," Severus said. "Just because I can see the weight of my failure doesn't mean I can make it right. My house is a shambles, Headmaster. What can I do about that?"
"Doing nothing," Albus said, "would certainly be the wrong way to go about things. Perhaps we can work something out, you and I."

They talked for a time after that. Albus was pleased. There were plenty of variants where Severus did not start occluding until the start of the second war, the harsh realities of which left little room for positive personal change in one already so mired in such emotional baggage. He had seen some of those variants to the end of the war, and some not, but the change now had more possibilities for success. They also helped him sleep better at night.

It was a few weeks into term, and Harry realized with quite a bit of surprise that Potions was no longer his least favorite class. That was Divination now. The morbid old professor who taught the class continued to predict his death and misfortune, and only seemed to give good grades for predictions of the same from him. Knowing that it was all dramatics did little to put him in a better mood. Hermione's running commentary on the subjects imperfections were entertaining at times, because she had the audacity to say them in class when the professor could not hear. Harry had started to wish that he had taken another elective. He'd always been somewhat good with maths. He should have taken Arithmancy or something.

Potions, on the other hand, was another matter. Snape, though still menacing, was being mostly tolerable. Malfoy had even stopped calling him a werewolf in class, though the rumors certainly hadn't died down.

He realized that he should stop his musings and focus more on the potion he was preparing when he cut his finger with the knife he had been cutting roots up with. He stuck his finger in his mouth quickly and scowled at his knife and the spots of blood on the work table. He got his wand out with his good hand and cleared the roots and the blood away. He didn't know what effect his blood would have on the potion but thought it a horrible idea to find out.

He got up to get a plaster from the supply closet and got back to work, starting over with a new root. The whole while Snape hadn't said a word. The whole class was rather silent till the end. While they were cleaning up, Snape made an announcement.

"I am starting a research project and am currently looking for student volunteers who wish to earn extra credit," he said. "I will primarily be looking for assistance from NEWT level students, however there are some more mundane tasks that will be more appropriate for lower level students. Dismissed."

"Ugh," Ron said as they walked out of the classroom. "That's like volunteering for a detention with Snape. Who'd want to do that?"

Harry gave a pointed look at Hermione.

"As if," Hermione said, aghast.

Harry laughed.
He felt bad for interrupting her work. Since term had gotten well into swing, it seemed that Hermione did nothing but work and study. Which wasn't too unusual, but Harry wasn't used to the somewhat frantic edge she had taken to in all of her work. Still though, the question had been gnawing at him since the first week of term.

"So, what do you know?" he asked her. Ron was playing a game of chess with his sister, so Harry had Hermione to himself in the relative privacy of their corner of the library.

"Quite a lot actually," Hermione said. "Perhaps you could narrow down the topic for me."

"About the thing we talked about at the start of term," he said.

"Oh that," Hermione said. "Well if I had to guess, I would say that Professor Snape is your father."

"What?" he asked. "How could you have possibly come to that conclusion?"

"Well, you made it clear that there was some terrible secret tied in to the hemophilia. Through my research, the biggest thing that popped up was the hereditary nature of the illness. So if there is some big secret, it would seem to be that one or both of your parents wasn't actually your biological parent. You mentioned that in the same letter they told you about the hemophilia that they mentioned both Professor Lupin and Professor Snape, so they're all I really had to go on. Now you seem to like Professor Lupin and you do despise Professor Snape, and when I asked you if you had any other options for your summer situation, you gave a most emphatic no. So, given all of the evidence, most of which you gave me by trying to keep it a secret, by the way, I must say that my best guess is that Professor Snape is your biological father."

Harry noticed that she wasn't asking him if she was right.

"So how do I make sure no one else comes to that conclusion?" Harry asked.

"Well to start with," Hermione said. "You could just say, 'I have hemophilia, I got it from my dad.' You don't actually have to treat it like a big secret."

"But what if someone knows that my dad didn't have it?" Harry asked.

"It's an easily manageable illness. While you definitely should tell the school nurse that you have it," here Hermione gave him a pointed look. "It is certainly possible that a family, particularly a pureblood family, would want to keep it a secret. You can easily say that he had it and kept it a secret."

"It's as easy as that?" Harry asked.

"Yes," Hermione said.

They sat in pensive silence for a moment, and Harry thought Hermione had gone back to her homework when she spoke up again.

"So what are you going to do?" she asked.

"Who said I'm going to do anything?" Harry asked.

"Well you keep on looking at him now and then like you want to say something. Are you going to talk to him about it?" she asked.

"What? No, of course not. I mean how would that go? 'So, you know how you're always going
on about my dad?'' he said with a sneer that wasn't directed at Hermione. "Not that he's not my dad really, James I mean. My dad's James, 'cause that's not what Snape is. You know?"

"Did he know?" Hermione asked.

"Oh, yeah," Harry said. "That's why I look like him. He did this spell that, like, put a bit of himself into me. So he's like, really my dad in more ways than that he raised me for a year. But he knew before they got married."

"Wait, how long…" Hermione started, looking confused.

"Oh, it's complicated…" Harry said before realizing that the truth was probably way better than whatever Hermione might imagine would cause Severus Snape to be his father. So once more looking around for anyone who might overhear, he told her.

"So they weren't just friends in Hogwarts. They dated for a while in their fifth year until they had a big fight and broke up. Then my mom found out she was pregnant, and she found a potion that would let her keep the pregnancy on hold until later. Then she got together with my dad, and told him before they got married. Then they had me during the war 'cause she was worried she might get hurt and never have me."

That last part made him blush. It felt very odd to know how much they had wanted to have him. Though in an odd way, he found he was glad to have told Hermione the story. At least in part.

"And she never told Professor Snape?" Hermione said.

"It's complicated," Harry found himself saying again, though this time he didn't think he could elaborate. He didn't think he could tell her about the Death Eater business without talking about his mother's hopes and suspicions about Snape's true loyalties, and she had wanted those to be a secret.

Hermione waited for him to elaborate, and seeing that he wasn't, asked, "so what do you want to say to him?"

"Who says I want to say anything?" Harry asked.

She gave him a look that clearly said 'I'm not stupid.'

"It's just…" Harry started. "I want to know why. What did she see in him? Why did he break her heart? And what if they had stayed together? Would they have been happy? Would they still be alive maybe? Would I have been happy growing up with him as a… a father? And just thinking that seems disloyal to my real dad, but I want to know and I can't get it out of my head. Even though I don't need a father. I'm doing just fine without one."

"Harry just because you are somewhat self sufficient and have gotten by without a father doesn't mean you couldn't benefit from one," Hermione said.

Harry chewed on that for a bit. "Yeah, but Snape?"

"I don't know," Hermione said. "But you don't have to see him as your dad if you don't want to or don't feel comfortable, you can still get to know him, and maybe find some answers."

Harry didn't want to think about it anymore. "Got to go," he said suddenly. "Quidditch practice," he said. It was still early.

"I'll go with you," Hermione said.
Since he had found that banner over his bed, worse things had been done to show Harry that he wasn't welcome at Hogwarts. In his home. Being tripped up in the halls and having his book bag split open from a spell was the least of it. Ron and Hermione had taken to making sure he didn't walk the halls alone. Even the quidditch team had taken to casually running into him and walking with him wherever he was going. Harry though, occasionally liked some alone time. Besides that, Hermione had far too much work to spend time child minding him.

"You don't have to," Harry said.

"I won't talk about Snape anymore," Hermione placated.

"You also won't get any more work done," Harry pointed out.


"Oh, I'll go with you," Ron said.

Harry heard Ginny make a small disappointed sigh as she looked at their unfinished game. Ron looked at it as well, and, taking out his wand with a look of concentration, he pointed it at the board and said, "Wingardium Leviosa." The pieces all gave a cry of alarm and indignation as the board rose up to float next to Ron. "Come on," he said to his sister.

The three of them left the library with the chess board floating between the two siblings.

"Did you have a fight with Hermione," Ron asked. "Only it's a bit early to be leaving for quidditch." He told one of the pieces to make a move.

"Not really," Harry said. "I just needed to get out of the library."

"I know that feeling," Ron said. "In that case, can we stop off at the owlery, I told 'Mione I'd post a letter to her parents."

Harry thought Ron had had the same idea of saving Hermione time with her very large work load.

"Sure," he said. "Do you want to send it with Hedwig? She'd love to do a delivery."

"That'd be great," Ron said. "It must be nice to have an owl that's reliable."

"Is Errol not doing well?" Harry asked. He remembered the old owl struggling to deliver his birthday gift that summer.

"It's not just that," Ron said. "He disappeared a couple of times over the summer. Mum thought the twins were owl ordering something they didn't want her to know about, but even they seemed worried about him. Of course, now they've been sending off owls like mad since they got here this year. Then Scabbers even disappeared for a bit. I thought he'd finally bit the dust somewhere we wouldn't find him for a bit."

Harry had noticed earlier that Scabbers, Ron's pet rat, had been looking a bit ragged of late. Ron had taken to leaving him asleep on his bed rather than carrying him around in his pocket as he had done previously.

"So why is Hermione writing her parents about your chess game?" Ginny asked after making a move of her own.

"What?" Ron asked.
Earlier, Hermione had gotten Ron to tell her all of the moves from the game they had played against the giant chess set their first year while he had been playing with his sister. Harry was surprised that Ron had remembered them all. Hermione had written it all down without explaining why she had wanted it in the first place.

"I think she put that parchment she'd written it all down on in the envelope," Ginny said.

"She's probably still trying to get me to do that chess project," Ron said. "Though I have no idea what her angle is here."

Harry was suddenly distracted when one of his books was ripped out of his hand.

"Hey," he said, turning around to find his book in the hand of an older Slytherin boy.

"Let's play a game, Potter," the boy said. His friend next to him was snickering.

"Give it here," Harry said angrily. He heard the chess board clatter to the ground as Ron lost concentration.

"Oh, I'll give it back," the boy said. "But let's play our game first. It's called fetch. You know how to play fetch don't you. Of course you do, you mongrel, it's practically an instinct for you isn't it?" He threw the book down the hall. "Go on, fetch it. Bring it here."

Harry glared angrily at him, he wasn't about to go get it with these two staring at him. The other boy was having a hard time controlling his laughter.

"Fetch it, I said," The boy sneered. "Go on, get it boy. Fetch boy, be a good boy, a good doggy."

"Don't call me that," Harry said, furious now. His wand was out now, but neither Slytherin looked concerned about a couple of third years' spell casting.

"Oh I suppose I shouldn't, should I. No one would mistake you for man's best friend, man's worst enemy more like it. Monsters among us."

"You'd know all about man's worst enemy, wouldn't you?" Ron asked. "Seeing as your mum served him, Eckelson."

"Don't you talk about my mum, you blood traitor. It's trash like your disgraceful family that's letting filth infiltrate our society. It's bleeding hearts like you that stopped us from doing the sensible thing and putting rabid beasts like this one down." He had his wand out now. The older boy, Eckelson, grabbed Harry by the hair, yanking his head back with his wand at his neck. Harry froze, and angry yell dying in his throat. Whether the boy would actually do anything to him, or if Harry could manage to disarm him, he would never know, because both of the older boys were suddenly sent flying, flipping over backwards several times, landing hard against the far wall behind them.

Harry was worried for a moment that he had done accidental magic, but a glance to his side showed a very angry Ginny Weasley brandishing a wand at where the two boys had stood. Her anger suddenly turned to worry and the wand was suddenly put away, and with her head downcast, her whole body screamed shame.

"Come on then," Ron said, a guiding hand on his sisters back and a few messy flicks of his wand gathering up the chess pieces. They headed down the hall and Ron stooped down to hand Harry his book.
"Um," Harry said. "Are they going to be alright?" he asked.

"They'll be fine," Ron said. "They're wizards… unfortunately." He turned to his sister. "That was great Gin, where'd you learn that?"

But Ginny didn't say anything. She tore herself away from her brother and ran down a side corridor.

Practice would have been fun, he thought, in spite of the dementors off in the distance. There were times when he could almost feel the pull of the flying spectres, the pitch wasn't too far from the wall they patrolled, but being up in the air flying seemed to mitigate the effects. It would have been fun if he hadn't been spooked beforehand, when he had taken off the plaster that he had put on in potions earlier that day. His finger was still seeping blood though it hadn't been a deep cut at all.

Nervously, he pulled out his wand and cast the diagnostic charm on himself. His wand glowed red, and he almost dropped it. He quickly cast the appropriate spell upon himself and recast the diagnostic charm. Blue; but it should have been blue the first time. It shouldn't have worn off. Had he cast it wrong again? Both times he had tested himself after he had cast the charm, and both times the diagnostic had confirmed that the spell was working just fine. Why was it wearing off so quickly? What was he doing wrong?

He got another plaster from the Quidditch supplies, vowed to check himself more often, and went out to fly, while trying not to think about it.

Besides that, he might have expected to think about the older Slytherin boy for the rest of the evening, but it was Snape he thought about throughout quidditch practice, which didn't go well; Wood wasn't happy. Harry didn't think of the older Slytherin until he saw him on the way back to the castle.

He was scowling at Harry, perched in a corner of the entry hall, and not looking at all happy to see that Harry was walking back with the twins. Harry realized that the other boy had been waiting for him to come back, hoping he would be alone. A while ago he probably would have been. He was usually the last one out of the changing room by five or ten minutes, usually taking his time to maintain his gear after practice. Now, however, one of the older players made sure to walk him back. He'd been convinced that everyone was over reacting, but now his mind wandered to what might have happened if he had been walking alone just then.

Harry couldn't wait until the next full moon. It was coming soon and Harry planned to make sure there were plenty of witnesses present to see him not transform into a werewolf. He said as much to the Weasley twins as they made their way up to the tower.

"We'll have to throw a party then," said George.

"Yeah, rub their noses in it," said Fred.

"I don't think anyone who thinks I'm a werewolf will actually be at the party though," Harry said.

"Well that'll be their comeuppance," George said.

"No party for them," said Fred.
"Might be safer for them if they're not eating sweets at a party you're throwing," Harry said with a grin.

"Maybe we'll put in a little something so everyone'll grow fur and fangs," Fred said with a wicked look.

"Sure, if you want a mass panic," Harry scoffed.

"Oh Harry, we must indoctrinate you in the ways of chaos," George said.

"You have an invisibility cloak for crying out loud," Fred cried in a whisper.

"The mischief you get up to, you could be the best of us if you'd only apply yourself," George said.

"Now you sound like mum," Fred said.

"Flibbertigibbet," Harry said the mouthful to the portrait that guarded Gryffindor tower.

"Wait here," Fred said.

"We've got a sneak preview to show you," George said.

"If it involves me sprouting fur and fangs, I think I'll pass if that's alright," Harry said.

The twins just grinned at him and ran upstairs.

Harry waved to Hermione who was studying intensely in the corner. She didn't notice him. Quidditch had run late, as it usually did, and the common room was mostly empty.

The twins were soon back, and one of them was holding a ball with a thick leather glove on his hand. The other was carrying a mat, which he laid out in the corner, and what looked like a thick sheet of parchment. They beckoned Harry towards them.

"Observe," said Fred as he held the parchment a few feet in the air. He tapped it with his wand and let go. It hung there suspended in the air. George was holding the ball and he tossed it with his gloved hand at the parchment. Where the ball met parchment tiny confetti went out the other end along with the ball leaving a hole roughly the size of the ball in the parchment. The ball continued on, as if it had hit nothing at all and landed on the mat.

"I don't get it," Harry said.

"Look," said Fred. "Look at the hole."

Harry took a closer look. Around the edges, small bits of confettiied parchment still clung, and Harry saw the small pieces reintegrate themselves into the parchment slowly. Harry wasn't sure at this point if the twins creation was the ball or the paper.

"So it's paper that'll fix itself if it gets torn?" he asked. "Hermione might like that I suppose."

"Harry, Harry, Harry," Fred said shaking his head. "You're not seeing the bigger picture."

"Might need to iron out a few things before anyone sees the big picture," George said.

"We need to iron out more than a few things," said Fred.

"So what is the big picture?" Harry asked.
"You'll see," said George.

"Just remember," said Fred. "When we're rich and famous, you can say you were there when it all started."

"When what started?" Harry asked.

"Night Harry," Fred said, as George used his gloved hand to pick up the ball. Fred gathered the rest of their props and followed, leaving a confused Harry and a small littering of confetti behind. He ran upstairs and grabbed his book bag. Ron was getting ready for bed and they exchanged a few words about Quidditch before Harry went down stairs and sat by Hermione. He still had homework to finish and a bit to read for defense. Luckily, he had never needed that much sleep to be alert the next day.

Harry and Hermione worked for a while in silence. Hermione offered to read his essay when he was done, but Harry declined. He was fairly sure he had done decently and Hermione looked like she was about to fall asleep. When Hermione started packing up her homework, the rest of the common room was empty, and Harry figured he had read far enough ahead for defense.

"So I'm thinking about volunteering to be one of Snape's lab assistants," Harry said without preamble.

"No," Hermione said. "You don't want to do that."

"Well I don't want to," Harry said. "But I think I should."

"He'll just say no," she said. "You need to do a potions project. One that will require his supervision."

"Can't he just say no to that?" Harry asked.

"Not if your grades are halfway decent, which they are, and you submit a well thought out project plan," Hermione said. "He would need a good reason to say no then, which he won't have."

"That won't exactly give me alone time with him, I'd be sharing lab time with everybody else," Harry said.

"Maybe an atmosphere where you aren't alone together is the best way to start," Hermione said. "Of course if you are looking to form some sort of bond, you might just tell him everything."

"No," Harry said. "I'm not telling him. Not unless... I'm just not going to tell him yet, or ever probably."

"So what's the point then?" Hermione asked.

Harry thought about it for a bit.

"I don't know," he said finally. "I just want to see where it goes."

Hermione sighed. "Well try to figure it out. In the meantime we'll put together a project for you. Are you going to tell Ron?"

Harry shrugged. "I probably should."

"Well it's late," Hermione said. "We can work on this tomorrow."
Harry bade Hermione goodnight and went up to his dorm. Quickly changing for bed, Harry pulled back the curtains and stopped when he saw a potted plant on his pillow with dark purple flowers. It was Wolfsbane.

Chapter End Notes

Well I hope you all enjoyed reading this as much as I enjoyed writing it. I am very excited for the next chapter. In fact, I almost tacked on a few thousand more words to this chapter to get it all in here.

I hope you all have been reading excellent FF since my last update, and that you will find more between now and my next update.
Wolfsbane

Disclaimer: So even if the rights to the Harry Potter series didn't belong to JK Rowling, I still wouldn't own what I've written below. My employer would. I have a rather horrible contract, I mean for crying out loud, I work in a restaurant, why is that in my contract? :( But that's rather good for anyone who enjoys my stories, because I'm writing here instead of trying to create something new.

A/N: So here is a new chapter written for you all. I hope you enjoy it. My beta had a lot of questions about this chapter, concerning things hinted at, but not said outright or revealed. I write this story in limited omniscient. We have the POV and thoughts of only one character in each scene. So, for instance, if the scene is focusing on Harry and something happens that Harry doesn't understand, I basically want the reader to share in that. I feel that this writing style allows the reader to become more in tune with the character. If all the answers were forthcoming, or if we had everyone's thoughts on the table the story would be less immersive. If something happens that you don't understand, please feel free to ask me questions; I may have just forgotten to include something, but chances are that I've left it out on purpose.

See the end of the chapter for more notes

Wolfsbane

Harry never really thought about how Hedwig knew when someone wanted to write to him; like most things magical, he sort of took it for granted. But somehow, on the few times when he received items at school, it was often his own owl that delivered it; as though she had known that someone had wanted to send him something.

Hedwig, it seemed was also keeping up the correspondence between Hermione and her parents, because a few days after the initial letter had been sent out to her parents, Hedwig flew into the great hall with a return letter for Hermione. Somehow, Hedwig had known that they had a letter for their daughter. After Hermione had read it to herself, she separated one of the pages and handed it to Ron with a smile.

"What's this?" Ron asked.

"My mom had a professor at her old university who was a competitive chess player. So I asked mom if she could show her the moves from the game you played," Hermione told him.

"It was just a regular old game," Ron said. "It wasn't anything special."

"That's not what the letter says," Hermione said. "Go on, read it."

Ron took a moment to read it before he put it down with a pensive look.

"It couldn't have been that good," Ron said.

"When was the last time you lost a game?" Harry asked.
Ron thought. "I lost to Percy last time... when I was seven."

"Exactly," said Hermione. "So enough of this nonsense about not being that good."

"You really think I could do it?" Ron asked. "This project."

"Yes," Hermione said. "But more importantly, I think you should do it. It could be so good for your future."

"Yeah, and think of everything you've said about your brothers," Harry said. "This could be your thing. You could make something super cool before you even leave Hogwarts. And it's based off of something you're really good at. You know. Work off your strengths."

"But that's just it. So what if I'm good at chess. That doesn't mean I'll be good at enchanting things," Ron said, and Harry realized that there was a bit of a defeated quality to his tone.

"But you could be," Harry said. "And besides, Hermione will help, and so will I."

Ron had a pensive moment. "Where do I start?" he asked.

"I'm glad you asked," Hermione said with a smile. Harry had a feeling he knew where this was heading. He had had a similar conversation with Hermione earlier when they were working on his potions project proposal.

Honestly, Harry was glad that Ron was taking on the project, and not just because Harry was doing one himself. Ron had been a bit distracted lately worrying about Scabbers. It seemed the old Weasley family rat was starting to show signs of its older age. The small animal had lost a lot of weight and had started losing small patches of fur. Ron had stopped keeping the rat in his pocket during lessons and instead let it sleep most of the time up in the dorm on a blanket with a small warming charm.

Ron didn't really show it, but he was pretty attached to Scabbers and Harry was pretty sure that he'd be devastated if the rat died. Harry was worried his friend would loose his familiar before the end of the school year though. He could use something to distract himself from it. They could all use some distractions.

In less than a week, the full moon would rise and everyone would see that he wasn't a werewolf. In less than a week, he would be able to walk the halls by himself if he wanted. He wouldn't need an escort just to go down to the dungeon.

"Oy George," Fred said over Harry's head. "I've almost got the idea we're bad company."

"It's not that," Harry said gruffly, though he realized that his attitude during the small trip had hardly been friendly towards those who had volunteered to keep him safe. "Sorry. It's only that I've been getting along by myself since I was six. I mean thanks and all for making sure I don't get hexed walking down the hall, but I shouldn't need minders just to walk the halls to Snape's lab."

"Well, maybe not to Snape's lab," George commented.

"But definitely when you get there," Fred added.
"Wouldn't want you to face him alone," George quipped.

"He's a bit harder to tackle than a basilisk, mind," Fred said with a wink.

"Oh, I dare say he may want you to think that," came a voice from a doorway. They were passing the Defense Against the Dark Arts classroom and Professor Lupin looked like he was on his way out with a stack of parchment that was probably some year's essays. "Although you probably have a better chance of getting detention from a professor than you do coming across a basilisk. I don't think one's been spotted in more than a quarter of a century."

"I thought all you professor's did was gossip about us students," Fred said.

"Didn't anyone tell you about Harry here slaying one last year with the Sword of Gryffindor in the Chamber of Secrets," George said."

"Oh did he now?" Professor Lupin said with a smile. "No, I don't think we've gotten to that part yet. All we've covered so far is who's dating who and the most disruptive pranks some students may have gotten up to. I suppose we'll cover Basilisks at the next staff meeting along with dragons and mountain trolls."

Harry blushed; the professor thought the twins were joking.

"Well it's no wonder they haven't gotten there yet," George said.

"Yeah," Fred said clapping Harry on the shoulder. "With all that to get out of the way, they're saving the best for last. Mind you it may take a couple of staff meetings to get all of the gossip about this one out of the way, and wait until you do hear about the mountain troll."

"And there's more coming every day," George said. "Why did you know that this lad is throwing a party at the end of this week."

"It's going to be the talk of the school," Fred said. "Everyone's invited."

"Even the professors," George added.

"You're throwing the party," Harry said, speaking for the first time. "I'm just the mandatory guest of honor." Harry didn't really want to be the guest of honor for any party, but he supposed if it ended the stupid werewolf nonsense he'd put up with being the center of attention and try to enjoy it.

"So what is the occasion for this party?" Professor Lupin asked.

"Why, it's Harry's 'Not-A-Werewolf' party," Fred said.

"Held for when the full moon rises," George said.

"Trying to do away with those pesky rumors about this one howling at the moon," Fred said.

"Do you think you'll make an appearance, professor?" George asked. "It's going to be in that lecture hall on the second floor that isn't being used this year.

"We're promising tamper free treats," Fred added. Harry thought he might have seen the boy's fingers crossed behind his back, but he couldn't be sure.

"Well," Professor Lupin said. "I wouldn't want the presence of a professor to diminish the festivities. Just do make sure the party doesn't go on too long after the full moon. We wouldn't
want a professor to have to give everyone detention for being out after curfew."

With that, the professor waved them off and they walked their separate ways down the hallway. All too soon they had descended into the darker and colder corridors that were typical of the dungeons of the castle and were standing outside of the potions lab; Harry was suddenly much more nervous.

"You can still turn back mate," George said.

"Yeah, potions experiments are much more fun when you're doing them without adult supervision," Fred added.

"Well, I've come this far," Harry said and walked into the potions lab.

Snape's scowl was on him immediately when he walked in and, if anything, got worse when the twins walked in after him. There were only three other students working in the lab, of which only one even looked up when Harry walked in.

Harry walked up to Snape's desk and placed his project proposal in front of him. Really, it was Hermione's proposal, but she had made Harry learn it backwards to front. Snape had yet to say a word, and neither had Harry, the man just picked up the parchment and started reading. He looked a little sour when he realized what it was that he was reading.

"Why?" The man asked. "Your words, not Granger's."

Harry blushed a bit at that, but he already had a response ready.

"I came to have a bit more of an appreciation for potions over the summer, and I thought I'd like to explore the possibility of potions as a career, sir," he said, not making eye contact with the Professor. He made sure to add the sir since Snape was a stickler for titles and there was no point in antagonizing him.

"And warding potions?" Snape asked.

"I've had an interest in wards since I heard about the ones around my Aunt's house, sir," Harry said.

"Funny, then, that you decided to leave them when you were in danger," Snape sneered.

Harry struggled not to retort with an angry retort, and wound up not saying anything at all.

Snape let out a breath through his nose, and Harry suspected that he had been hoping for an outburst.

"If you have an interest in wards, Arithmancy and Ancient Runes would serve you much better. Potions have a very limited application to such protections," he said finally, almost like he was only begrudgingly giving Harry academic advice but was also inclined to dissuade him from following through on his project.

"Actually, I'm dropping Divination for those classes, sir," Harry said. "And I might not have too much time for the project in the beginning while I'm catching up, but I can still start working on warding potions a lot sooner than I could start working on wards in Arithmancy or Runes."

That had been a hard sell on Hermione's part. Harry was fine dropping Divination, but tacking on two work heavy classes on top was incredibly daunting. Hermione had sworn that she would help Harry catch up, though that just made Harry feel bad for taking up her time. Both Ron and
Hermione were dropping Divination, though Ron would only be adding Arithmancy, and had still looked like someone had canceled Christmas when Harry had left the common room earlier. Ron had been convinced in the end that Divination was a bit of a wooly subject; but Harry thought that perhaps Ron wasn't inclined to take the class without his friends. They still had to talk to Professor McGonagall about it.

Really, the classes would probably benefit Harry greatly, which he supposed would be worth the added effort. When he had chosen divination, it had seemed a bit of a fun, easy class. He felt a bit differently now, and not just because the class seemed a bit useless. He hadn't been able to save Ms. Adler. He had had a wand in his hand and it had been useless. Maybe if he had taken his studies more seriously, she would still be alive, and Greyback would be back behind bars where he belonged.

But if Harry was honest with himself, he had to admit that the thought of Snape thinking that he was taking his studies seriously had something to do with the decision also; a thought he quickly stamped down as ridiculous. He wasn't looking for Snape's approval. He just wanted to know more about the man and answer some of the questions running around in his head. Nothing more.

Snape had previously looked very put off to have Harry in the room, but eventually he sighed to himself and in a flash his face seemed to become impassive.

"You will submit a write up on technique and theory before you attempt any potion, and you will not try any adjustments without running reactivity tests twice. Do you understand?"

"Yes sir," Harry said.

"Then unless you are ready to start working now, remove yourself from my lab," he said.

Harry nodded his head and turned around. He saw the twins talking to one of the other students in the classroom. Harry thought she was in the same year as the twins.

"All done," he said, walking up to the two older student.

"I'll see you in Herbology," the Hufflpuff girl told the twins.

The twins said their goodbyes and the three of them left the classroom.

"So," George said. " Did he try to chop you into potions ingredients?"

"Nope," Harry said. "He probably wanted to though."

"Were there any poisons?" Fred asked. "You made sure not to eat anything?"

"He didn't even offer me a suspicious cup of tea," Harry said.

"Ok, but surely he tried to suck your blood." George supplied.

"He must have restrained himself," Harry said with a bit of a shudder. An image of Greyback's gnashing teeth one of the images in his mind.

"Excuse me?" Remus asked, completely taken aback. A basilisk running through the school, and
Harry had killed it with a sword?

"It was in the papers, though not accurately reported. I'm surprised you didn't hear about it," Professor McGonagall said to Remus.

"Ah, well I've been abroad," Remus said. "It's much easier for me to get a job in Germany. And I've never seen much point in subscribing to the Prophet. Of course, I returned when I heard about the breakout. I'm not sure why really, it isn't likely that I'll be the one to capture him. Sirius had me on that front," he said smiling sadly.

"Well, we were very glad to have you here as a Professor," Professor McGonagall said. "You have probably noticed that the quality of the past few years of defense instruction have been lacking."

"Of course, that wasn't really the reason Albus asked me to teach this year," Remus said offhandedly.

"Well," Professor McGonagall said. "You are something of a subject matter expert. Few people outside of the Department of Magical Law Enforcement know much of anything about Greyback and his methods."

"I knew a lot about him back then," Remus said. "But I can't help but wonder how a decade in Azkaban has affected him and his behavior. Did Harry have much to say after the attack?"

"He spoke to the minister after the first one, though from what I have heard there isn't much of substance in the report. The Headmaster had a man watching over Harry after that and he managed to stop the second attempt on Mr. Potter. Greyback grabbed him and attempted to Portkey away. There's no indication where he got the Portkey, or if he is receiving help from the others."

"The Portkey was likely his own creation. The papers have always painted Greyback as just a savage, but he didn't evade the ministry for over a decade while dragging his pack along without a fair bit of advanced magic. As to the Death Eaters, I think it's fair to say that they want a different outcome than Greyback does."

"Now that Mr. Potter is inside the castle, where do you think he will turn his sights in the meantime?" Professor McGonagall asked.

"Oh, he's almost definitely still focused on Harry," Remus said. "He was always fairly obsessive. Whatever he is doing now, it is likely in furtherance of his goal to take Harry."

"Could he mean to enter the school?" she asked.

"He'll likely try," Remus said. "And that's probably when he'll be caught, if he's bold enough to try to get past the dementors. He would to, if he could find no other way. There's only one concern, and that's the full moon. The dementors have little effect on the wolf. As I understand it that's where this problem began in the first place. If he were on Wolfsbane Potion he could conceivably have the wherewithal to slip in, but that's a big if. Wolfsbane was hard to get and Greyback would have a very difficult time obtaining any while on the run."

"Then we shall be on the look out. Enough of such matters though, tell me about your classes," Professor McGonagall said.

Remus started telling her about an incident during a NEWT level in-class duel.
Harry had had two sessions working in the potions lab with Snape. All told they had gone well, in the sense that Harry and Snape didn't have any sort of argument or disagreement. However, with respect to the ultimate goal of the matter, Harry didn't feel that he was getting anywhere. He hadn't learned anything about Snape, nor gained any insight.

One thing he had been wrong about was thinking that there would always be other students with him in the lab. There were three days the lab was open for student use, and the hours for Monday were overlapped by the sixth year NEWT Astronomy class, of the three students using the lab for their projects besides Harry, all of them were in the class, which had left Harry alone with Snape for two hours. Neither of them had said a word to each other.

"I feel like it's pointless." Harry confided to Hermione. They were sitting in the Library after Ancient Runes and Harry's head was was swimming with everything he was trying to cram into it. "We're never going to have any meaningful conversation just because we're in the same room with each other. We don't ever say anything unless I need to let him know that I'm moving on to the next step."

"Then how about you start with a project related conversation and work from there. I'm sure you have some questions about the reading material. You should be asking him. That's what he's there for," Hermione said.

"He'll just call me a dunderhead if I start asking a bunch of questions," Harry said.

"Who's going to call you a dunderhead?" Ron asked, joining them at the table.

"Snape," Harry said.

"He probably won't," Hermione said. "I mean, he would if you try a potion without understanding it properly because you didn't ask questions when you didn't understand the material though. But not if you're just doing your best."

"Why you chose potions for a project is beyond me," Ron said. "Are you sure you're feeling alright? I'm telling you, I think 'Mione might have confunded the both of us."

"You just be careful that I don't Ronald Weasley," Hermione said indignantly, but she was giving a meaningful look to Harry. He sighed, knowing what Hermione was trying to convey.

"Look Ron," Harry said looking around to see if anyone was in earshot. "Look, don't freak out, ok?"

"Okay?" asked Ron dubiously.

"Well, see the letter I got from my mom and dad..." Harry cleared his throat. "Alright so my mum dated Snape, then she broke up with him, then she found out she was pregnant, so she used a potion to delay it. Then later she started dating my dad, told him everything, got married, then decided to finally give birth to me, and my dad used a charm so I'd look like him instead of Snape... And for reasons I can't get into she never told Snape."

"Wait, so..." Ron looked vaguely like someone who had been hit in the head with a frying pan before he shook himself and said, "So he's your dad? Snape? Bloody hell."

"No," Harry said. "He's not my dad. Well, yeah, in the biological sense. But, um, yeah, you know. It's not like he has any right to the title. Also it's a big secret."
"Well I should hope so," Ron said.

"Ron," Hermione scolded.

Ron gave her a look as if to say, 'you know I'm right.'

"But what could she have wanted to date Snape for?" Ron asked. "I mean it's Snape. Literally the worst person we know. It just doesn't add up."

"That's how I see it. I want to figure it out," Harry said.

"And what, you think doing a potions project's going to give you answers, or something?" Ron asked.

Harry shrugged. "Avoiding him isn't going to get them for me."

"I don't know," Ron said. "I think your mental mate. I mean if it was anyone other than Snape, sure, but you're just setting yourself up for disaster. I mean just 'cause he might be blood doesn't mean he's any good for you. I mean look at the Dursleys. Sometimes your family shouldn't be your family and trying to make it work is just going to make things worse."

"Well he probably would be horrible," Harry said. "But I'm not planning to tell him anything about it, so don't worry. I just want to know a bit more about him, that's all."

"Right," Ron said. "Just keep in mind, he could ground you till you turn seventeen."

"I'm not likely to forget." Harry said.

"Oh," Ron said. "That's where you got your glare from."

"What glare?" Harry asked.

"That glare you have," Ron said. "The one you give Malfoy when he's being a prat. Or rather when he's being Malfoy. Must have gotten that from Snape. Can't believe I haven't seen it before. Oh, see, it's the one you're giving me right now."

Eventually Hermione got them back to studying. Harry's Not-A-Werewolf party was the next day and Hermione said they had to work hard to catch up if they wanted time to play later. It was some time later, when Ron and Harry were walking up to their dormitory for bed that Ron stopped him a moment.

"You're doing alright, aren't you?" he asked. "With everything."

Harry wasn't sure which everything Ron was talking about, but he said, "Yeah, of course," before continuing up the stairs. After Ron had mentioned it though, he had been a little preoccupied wondering what else he may have inherited from Snape.

He didn't tell Ron moments later when he found a piece of parchment on his pillow with the words 'LAST CHANCE' written on it.

"Merlin Harry," Oliver said. "If this is the party the twins throw just 'cause you aren't a werewolf, I
can't wait to see the party we'll have when we win the cup this year.

Oliver had just arrived at the unused lecture hall the twins had commandeered for the party and Harry had to agree with him. The party sure was something. There were snacks and desserts everywhere and everything from pumpkin juice to a very tasty fizzy drink called butterbeer. Harry had heard a few students comment on the twins ability to acquire that last one. Unfortunately, Harry was currently in the middle of a fast that would take him all the way from moonrise to when the moon was technically full, about two hours later. To disprove Malfoy's Polyjuice theory from the month before, Harry wouldn't be eating or drinking anything, lest he arouse suspicions. There were a couple of seventh year Ravenclaw Prefects who had volunteered to be his designated minders, making sure he wasn't sneaking anything from a flask or whatnot.

He could participate in the games, however, and he had been. There had been everything from pin the tail on the werewolf to some odd game that involved bouncing a ball across a table into cups that had butterbeer in them for some reason. Harry couldn't play that one since the game involved drinking from those same cups which seemed a bit gross.

Most everything was wolf themed. There were quaffle sized sphere lights suspended over the party, charmed to look like the full moon. Most of the party games were werewolf themed, and the twins had even started a competition for the best wolf's howl someone could produce. A first year Hufflepuff girl had managed to do the best, and it had almost been chilling. Harry had been cajoled into trying, but his voice had warbled rather horribly.

About five minutes before the moon would rise, Harry found himself watching Neville playing Pin the Tail on the Werewolf. Much like the muggle game of a similar name, he was blindfolded and spun around before being pointed in the general direction of the grotesque wolf pinup. Then, while about a dozen of his classmates yelled directions at him, Neville stumbled forward, tail in hand, towards the wolf.

"Up higher," called out one of the first years watching, trying to be heard over everyone else.

"Left more," called out his friend.

Harry tried not to tally who wasn't at the party. It was sort of meaningless anyway, since it was the middle of the week and many of the upper years just had too much homework to go to a stupid werewolf party. Really though, Harry thought about half of the school had shown up. Even some Slytherins were in attendance, though none he knew at all. Hermione, who should have probably been in the library, was even in attendance, sitting in a corner with a book. Harry reflected that if not for the party, he should have been in the library as well, as he was far from caught up on all of the new material.

Neville was about to pin the tail on the wolf when something wet hit Harry in the back of the neck. His hand went up to grab whatever it was as he spun around to see where it had come from. He didn't see anyone. He looked at his hand to see what had hit him and was confused to see what looked like a cotton ball soaked in oil. He dropped it to the ground and tried to rub what was on his neck off with his hand. Wiping his hand on his robes to get it off, he kept waiting for something to happen. If that had been some sort of prank, it was a pretty bad one. All it had done was leave him feeling a little grimy.

"Are you alright," Bethany, one of the Ravenclaw prefects asked him. She had seen him turn around.

"Yeah," he said. "Just someone being stupid."
"Here," she said, bringing out her wand. She did a minor cleaning spell and his hand and neck no longer felt grimy, though he thought it left them a little tingly. Another swipe of her wand and the cotton ball on the floor was vanished.

"Sure you feel alright? You're not about to sprout feathers or a tail are you?" she asked, glancing over at the twins.

"No, I think this was a dud, whatever it was supposed to do. I'm still half waiting for the twins to try to transfigure me into a poodle or something. Thanks though," he said. He turned his attention back to Neville to see that he had pinned the tail on the poor wolf's nose.

A small firecracker went off near the center of the large wall that looked out on the grounds where the moon could be seen rising over the mountains in the distance.

The twins, who had transfigured themselves wolf's ears and snouts, were gathering everyone's attention.

"Now, as I'm sure you all know, the moon's going to be done rising in a couple of minutes," George said.

"So our guest of honor has a few words for you all," Fred said.

Harry's eyes opened in surprise; he hadn't been expecting that. All eyes were on him.

"Um, well thank you all for coming. And, er, thank you for believing me when I said I wasn't a werewolf. I hope you're all having fun, and that..." He stopped talking when the last couple words came out somewhat slurred. The tingling that he had felt in his hand and neck had intensified, and he now felt it in his mouth and his lips, he felt it in his chest.

"I think..." he said. "Something is..." He tried to say that something was wrong but the words didn't want to come out. Not because his mouth felt like it was filled with cotton, but because air didn't want to come out. His hand flew to his throat as he realized that air didn't want to go in either.

There was an angry buzz in his ears that he distantly recognized as a large number of his classmates yelling. His vision was going dark and he thought he might have fallen over but he didn't feel anything except the burning in his chest and the hammering of his heart that was slowing and stuttering. He saw flashes of light before a sickly orange light replaced everything and he passed out.

"Come in," the Headmaster's serious tone held a sharp contrast to his usual demeanor Severus observed. Of course, with the events of the evening prior, everyone in the castle, all but a few, were on edge and upset. He himself was livid.

He walked into the headmasters office and stood before the man's desk taking a moment to observe his surroundings. The portraits hanging on the walls had given up the pretense of their slumber and were all looking at him expectantly.

"What did you find?" the Headmaster asked, drawing Severus's attention back to the man in front of him.
"Mark Daniels from Gryffindor perpetrated the attack," he said. "And Ritta Ristich from Ravenclaw aided him in planning. They are both currently with their heads of house. As to the imbeciles who..." he was cut off by the headmaster.

"I am much more interested in those who planned a murder," the headmaster said. "We will deal with those who reacted in a panic later."

"He received several life threatening injuries," Severus said. He heard some rumbling from the portraits.

"And that will be addressed," the headmaster said. "Did you find any evidence that might be useful or is all of this fruit of the poisonous tree?" It wouldn't do to explain to the Ministry that evidence had been collected using Legilimency.

"The poison's delivery system was vanished, and Mr. Daniels cast too many spells with his wand after he used it to retrieve the spell used to deploy it, not that a banishing charm would have held much weight in front of the Wizengammot. I did see in his mind however the location where they produced the toxin, greenhouse seven which is currently in disuse and like all unused school space, should be locked. There was enough evidence there to link them to the attack and from what I saw in Miss Ristich, she will likely confess under questioning. With the nature of the toxin we will not have to explain why we searched the greenhouses first. There is no need for Legilimency to come up."

The headmaster nodded. "Thank you Severus. You have done very well. You seem very upset though. You have not taken such personal concern for Harry before."

Severus grimaced. They had tried to kill Lily's son. They had almost succeeded.

"I have invested too much of myself into keeping the fool boy alive to see him reach such an end; and for such nonsense."

"You need not be so defensive. It is alright to be concerned for another's well being," the headmaster said.

"I am not concerned for him, my concern is only that Lily's sacrifice is not in vain."

"And yet," the headmaster said. "What would Lily want in this situation."

"She would not want me to be..." Severus sneered. "Friends with her son. She would probably be appalled that I have contact with him."

"I think you underestimate her. If she could know you now..." The headmaster said. "But that is neither here nor there. Do you think she would want her son to have your scorn?"

Severus chewed on that for a moment.

"He does not have it," he said.

The headmaster just looked at him.

"He does not have my scorn," Severus said. "But neither does he have my concern. He is my duty only."

"You may find it beneficial to actually be on speaking terms with the one you protect," the headmaster said.
"Will that be all, Headmaster?" Severus asked.

The headmaster nodded. "It has been a long evening Severus. Your skills as a potion master have saved young Harry's life, and your investigation safeguards his future; you have done well. Try to get some rest."

"Rest is difficult in this school with that boy roaming these halls," Severus said turning to leave. "Merlin only knows why he decided to do a potions project this year and give us both less rest."

"A potions project, you say?" the unusual tone in the headmasters voice halting him in his steps and prompting him to turn back around.

"Yes," Severus said. "And he's gotten it in his head to focus on warding potions, which are class two. I'll be supervising the boy three times a week outside of class now. Perhaps it will help keep him out of trouble, but I am more convinced that I shall see my potions lab blown up before the year is up."

The headmaster just smiled. "Perhaps Severus," he said. "We shall see, the year is young yet. Have a good night."

"Good night headmaster," Severus said, exiting the headmaster's office.

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Harry woke up feeling oddly horrible and refreshed at the same time. He was sore in a few places and slightly nauseous, but he also felt incredibly rested and in an odd way, clean, like he had been scrubbed from head to toe. A few of his bones had that odd, just healed feeling he was unfortunately accustomed to, and he was very aware that he was in the hospital wing.

He sat up and looked around.

"You're awake," Ron said. He was looking up from a book that he was reading by candlelight, the sun was still an hour or so away from rising, judging by what little light came in through the window, which wasn't enough to read by. Or was it evening light, the sun having been down for some time? He couldn't tell. The thing about waking up in the hospital wing was that you didn't always know exactly when you had been brought in. Ron sort of had the look of someone who had stayed up all night, and Hermione was sleeping in a chair next to him so Harry assumed that it was the morning.

"They let you stay overnight?" Harry asked, trying to be quiet so as not to wake Hermione, though he could see that she was stirring.

"Madame Pomfrey wanted to kick us out, but we insisted someone had to keep an eye on you in case someone tried again."

"Tried what again?" Harry asked. He couldn't exactly remember what had prompted this stay in the hospital wing. The last thing he remembered was going to sleep the night before the party the twins were throwing.

"Tried to kill you, of course," Ron said. Harry saw Hermione stiffen at Ron’s words she looked up, now fully awake, though she didn't say anything. He was disturbed to see that she had been crying, though he was more disturbed by what Ron had said.
"Someone tried to kill me?!” he asked, shocked. "How did they get in?"

"They did kill you, and you probably invited them," Ron said apologetically.

"What?" Harry asked.

"You stopped breathing," Hermione said, speaking for the first time and still fairly distraught.

"What?" Harry asked again.

"Someone poisoned you in the middle of the party," Ron said. "It made you stop breathing, I think your heart also stopped for a little bit. That Ravenclaw prefect who was minding you, Bryan Willoughby, he did this weird muggle thing to buy you time till a professor came. It was Snape, of all people. He did a spell on you so you could breath on your own, and brought you here."

There was a lot more there than Harry wanted to think about. "Why does it feel like Madame Pomfrey had to heal some of my bones too?" He asked.

Ron and Hermione shared a look.

"The poison made you convulse a bit," Hermione said. "The full moon was rising and people thought…"

"Oh for Merlin's sake," Harry said. "I'm being poisoned and I get mobbed?"

"I wouldn't say mobbed," Ron said. "Most people who got stupid just ran away. Only a few people actually attacked you. I think. It was hard to tell, there was a bit of a skirmish. Plenty of people came to your defense."

No one spoke for a bit.

"So who poisoned me?" Harry asked.

Ron shrugged apologetically.

"We don't know yet," Hermione said. "Or at least, they haven't told us yet. You realize it was probably a student right? This wasn't Death Eaters, I don't think this would be their style."

No, Hermione was right. Waking up in the hospital wing, he had sort of assumed it would have something to do with the escaped death eaters, but he thought that an attack from that quarter would be a bit more direct. The warning he had gotten the night prior should have also been a bit of a tip off. Yet even when half of the school had thought he was the heir of Slytherin and attacking students; no one had attacked him, certainly no one had tried to kill him. He found himself wishing that it had in fact been death eaters, or that an investigation would show that it had been them all along. Odd that death eaters were preferable in this instance, but the thought that he was going to school with people who had tried to kill him was so much worse.

There was another moment of silence as Harry dealt with the uncomfortable thoughts.

"Harry," Hermione said, breaking the silence. "With all of your injuries, I thought it prudent to check to make sure…" and here, Hermione checked to make sure Madame Pomfrey wasn't about to descend upon them. "With your Hemophilia, I thought I'd check. The diagnostic charm was green, not blue. I renewed the charm of course, but I didn't think it should have worn away so quickly."

At this Harry was slightly panicked. He hadn't told his friends that the charm seemed to be wearing
off quickly. He hadn't told them about the cut he had received that hadn't stopped bleeding. He hadn't wanted them to worry. He had it under control for the time being, and he was certain that if Hermione thought that something was wrong that she'd go to Madame Pomfrey or Professor McGonagall. He didn't voice any of these concerns to Hermione of course.

"Oh, thanks," he said. "But no worries, green just means it isn't at full strength. I mean it wasn't like yellow or orange or anything like that. The petrol gauge doesn't stay at the top after you've driven around for a bit." But it wasn't supposed to go down so fast either.

Ron looked a bit confused at the reference, but he usually had the sense to know when Harry or Hermione were using muggle terminology.

"Oh, of course," Hermione said. "With everything that was going on... I was just worried. I do wish I could properly read up on it though."

"Right," Harry said. "And sorry, I've put you through a lot of worry."

"Don't be stupid," Ron said. "It wasn't your fault. If anything, It's Malfoy's for starting this whole nonsense. Hey, do you think it was him maybe who poisoned you."

"Who knows," Harry said. "Hopefully we'll find out soon who it was."

"Oh, hey," Ron said. "That's why he's been silent this past week. He didn't want anyone to suspect him after. Do you think he actually believes his own bullshit"

Harry just shrugged. It would be nice, Harry thought, if it was Malfoy. If it was someone who was already an enemy, rather than someone else. He knew he wasn't a normal wizard, but just how many enemies could a thirteen year old boy have? Also, if it was Malfoy, then he'd be expelled for sure, and they wouldn't have to deal with the stuck up aristocrat ever again.

The clack of shoes coming down the aisle could be heard, and Harry looked up to see Madame Pomfrey approaching from her office. He gave her a somewhat apologetic smile.

"Why Mr. Potter, you're awake," the matron said, sounding surprised.

"Well I've been out since the full moon rose last night, so I figured I've been asleep long enough," Harry said.

Madame Pomfrey smiled brightly for a moment before she became serious and started checking Harry over every which way. A lot of diagnostic spells were aimed at his head for some reason, and Harry grimaced a bit for the attention. The thing was though, Harry got the distinct impression that Madame Pomfrey had not expected any sort of speedy recovery on Harry's part.

"It seems a year just can't go by without an overnight stay from you Mr. Potter," Madame Pomfrey said, when she was done with the check up.

"Well I've been out since the full moon rose last night, so I figured I've been asleep long enough," Harry said.

"I'm planning on getting the plague next year if nothing else pops up. Wouldn't want to change our yearly ritual."

"Well see that you stay out for the rest of the year at least. You were very lucky this time Mr. Potter, you're recovering much better than I would have expected, but when you see them you shall have to thank Mr. Willoughby and Professor Snape. They both helped save your life last night."

"Oh, right," Harry said as the matron started walking towards her office. "Hey, can I go to classes
this morning?"

"By all rights, Mr. Potter," Madame Pomfrey said, "you shouldn't have been well enough to leave that bed any time soon, but I can't find anything wrong with you. So yes. I'll do another check up after you have eaten and then you may go." Harry really didn't feel like he could eat breakfast, but he wasn't about to tell Madame Pomfrey that.

Hermione gave Harry a pointed look as the matron made her way back to her office, and pointed at her. Harry looked at her, confused.

"Thank you," she whispered pointedly.

"Oh," Harry said, catching her meaning. "Thanks for taking care of me and everything," he called after Madame Pomfrey

Hermione rolled her eyes.

"What?" he asked.

"Please do come in," Albus said to the knock on his door. Amelia Bones entered, flanked by two aurors.

"Madame Bones," Albus said. "Thank you for seeing to this matter personally. Mr. Flemming, Miss Travers, I should have liked to see two of my former students under better circumstances, but welcome none the less."

Amelia said nothing, a deviation. He was used to minor deviations from her, but after his earlier conversation with Severus, it was very unwelcome. The two accompanying aurors murmured their own greetings.

"The evidence we found was in Greenhouse seven, which has been sealed, and the students in question are with their heads of house, Professors McGonagall and Flitwick," Albus said.

Amelia quickly dismissed the aurors to go about their business and turned to Albus when the two had left.

"Make this private," she said, without preamble.

Albus stared at her for a moment; the decision already made, but years of sticking to a script left him greatly reluctant. His lack of foreknowledge didn't stop him from guessing where this conversation was going. Yet all the same, he drew his wand and made several incantations. The portraits on the wall all flipped around, his windows shuttered, and the sounds from a host of items around his office dampened.

"Is the Potter boy's death part of your plan, Albus? Because I wonder sometimes where this is all going," she said taking a seat across from him.

Albus sat down.

"It is not," he said. "Harry will live, if I have anything to say on the matter, though I've already said too much. We all have a part to play in this Amelia, and it is so much easier to play it if you don't
have foreknowledge. Every action you take has to be natural or everything could fall apart."

"But that's the problem Albus" Amelia said. "The Pillars were never meant for such a long play. You've said it yourself; the smallest deviation could derail everything in the long run. I'm not perfect Albus, and neither are you. It's time to end this. Can you truthfully tell me you can't find He-Who-Must-Not-Be-Named? That you can't find his followers? We could stop him now, today, or at least ensure he never comes back. Tell me what you know, tell me what you've seen and I'll damn the treaties. I'll strike wherever he's hiding and end this now and forever."

"You know the prophesy as well as I," Albus said. "You are the only one besides myself who knows it in whole. Harry is the only one who can destroy Voldemort and that will not be happening anytime soon, we must keep everything on track or we will be maneuvering blind when it becomes most critical that we are able to guide the future."

"No you would be blinded Albus," Amelia said heatedly. "I always have been, in this endeavor. Tell me what you've seen and we can break the prophesy. Remove the burden from that boy's shoulders and deal with Him as he should have been dealt with twelve years ago. Forget the course, it's time we charted our own."

"It is not so simple as that." Albus said.

"So I suppose it is simple to watch others die, knowing that you could have saved them," Amelia said, her words biting. "Or has all the years leading others to battle numbed you to that."

"Do you know why the pillars are never used?" Albus asked, a nonsequiter.

"Of course..." Amelia started to say, but Albus cut her off.

"They drive most who enter them mad. If they ever come out at all, that is," he said.

"And if it wasn't for a Prophecy that foretold the death of the dark lord by an infant, I would have never let you into the Department of Mysteries to use them," Amelia said. "But..."

"Those who come out and are not mad, often cannot keep the different timelines separate, or forget most everything, in spite of the changes that the pillars make to the brain," Albus continued as if she had not said a word.

"Yes," she shouted. "And I get that it is your brilliant mind that kept you sane, and allowed you to remember what you needed, but that doesn't make you perfect, this plan can still fail if you leave too much up to fate."

Albus shook his head. "Most who have studied the pillars, and those who have come out, believe that the knowledge is too much for the brain to handle. Too much too fast, and the brain just breaks. But I have a different insight. That when you see all the different ways your future can play out, all the different ways your decisions can impact the world, all the ways you can do everything right and chance can still ruin everything, when you see how very many ways that the world can fall into chaos and despair and how difficult it is, how treacherous is the path of peace, and prosperity, it is so easy to give up."

I went in expecting to see years of war until Harry or Neville were old enough to fulfill the prophesy. What I wasn't expecting, was to see over a decade of peace in between. And I did see peace, I saw victory over Voldemort and an end to this madness. But there are so many ways for it to go wrong. So many ways Harry didn't survive to come to Hogwarts. So many ways he dies at the hands of death eaters and the dark lord himself and I live long enough to see the world fall to
ruin. I have seen it all up to each and every death for myself that was foreseeable then. I know what must happen to end Voldemort. I know which paths we can follow, and what paths lead to certain ruin. There are certainly variants from our current path that lead to Voldemort's death, and so many that lead to our destruction. But it is the paths I don't see, the paths that I could not see for I never saw them in my future, because I would have never considered them without my foreknowledge, that weigh on me; it is the unknown that keeps me up at night. So yes Amelia, it is simple to watch those I care about die when I could have prevented it. It is so very simple. I am, in the end, following a script. But that doesn't make it easy, and it certainly doesn't mean it does not weigh on me.

I could have saved the Potters. At least for that one night. But after that, what then? Their death happened in every variant. You could say, in hindsight, that the prophesy required it. Yet if I had saved them, we would not have had this peace, Voldemort would still be in power, and countless more would be dead. I knew that the parameters around which he was defeated were so very complex and detailed that they could not simply be reproduced. They had to happen naturally, as everything has been since then. As his final defeat will be. We are aimed at a future where Voldemort is no more; where we have peace and stability. It is the most certainty we can have with any course of action. It has been over thirteen years since you let me into the Department of Mysteries. I ask that you wait four more for the death of Voldemort."

"You mean for the boy to face Him when he is only seventeen?" Amelia asked.

"Much longer than that and the prospects are unthinkable. There are few variants where I live long enough to see what happens in a world where Voldemort wins in the end. What I have seen of those futures is more terrible than you can imagine. I will tell you, that we only ever saw a glimmer of what his world vision is. I will tell you that the variants I have seen where both Harry and Voldemort survive long after Harry turns seventeen are very grim, and our chances of victory very small. All of that is more than you truly need to know. You must always be able to act as if I had never used the pillars, for one can never see those futures."

"And that is all the more reason to act now. Use what knowledge we have now to end it before it can get to that," Amelia implored.

"Let us say that we did," Albus said. "Voldemort has always been deviously cunning and cautious. I could tell you where, in general, he is; I could even tell you who is with him and perhaps we could devise a way to neutralize him and make sure that he is never again a threat. If one thing goes wrong, if he escapes, if he has one failsafe that I don't know about, then we shall have failed and we will forever from that point be sailing blind into the storm. Even with everything I know, there would be no guarantee, and I have seen well how very many ways there are for us to fail when we do not know what is coming. Our greatest chance is to wait and to give Harry and the prophecy the best chances of playing out in our favor."

"Does he even have a choice in the matter," Amelia asked.

"Of course he has a choice," Albus said. "We always have a choice; regardless of my foreknowledge or actions. It is one of the things that changes very little between the variants; that Harry chooses to fight. He chooses to sacrifice. He chooses those he loves over himself. He chooses to end Voldemort once and for all. Harry will not stumble into killing the Dark Lord. He chooses to fight. Yes, I will guide him to that decision and that path, but he still has that choice. As much choice as fate gives any of us."

"I think you would find that that is not very much when it is you who is pulling our strings," Amelia said, rising.
"Amelia..." Albus said.

"I will see this through to the end Albus. And I do not begrudge you what you have had to do to see victory. I should not have suggested that it was easy for you."

She crossed the room, not looking at him.

"Well then" she said. "Tell me what I need to do to correct this small deviation I have caused and lets have some tea while we wait, shall we?"

Hermione had mentioned that Professor Snape and Madame Pomfrey had pumped him full of potions the night before, and he reckoned that that was why he had no appetite while he worked through his breakfast. At first he had been determined to finish it. Madame Pomfrey saw a lack of appetite as a sign that something was wrong, and Harry had been determined to show her that he was fine and that there was no reason for him to stay. Merlin knew that she seemed to think that there should be something wrong with him and she'd look for any reason to keep him longer.

Ron and Hermione had been sent off to get ready for classes while the matron walked about the infirmary, doing what looked like an inventory. The thing was; the longer he sat up in bed trying to force himself to eat, the more he had time to think about everything that had happened. A foreign thought began to form in his mind: he didn't want to leave the infirmary. He had been attacked by students unknown and as he had lain dying, more had taken shots at him; broken his bones and burned his flesh. He didn't want to walk the halls right then and wonder who. He didn't want to see pity in anyone's face, and he couldn't stand to see one more person look at him like he was a monster.

"Come now dear," Madame Pomfrey said. "Don't just push the food around your plate. You're skin and bones already, no point in starving yourself."

Harry had to clear a lump in his throat before he could speak. "Actually," he said, making a split second decision. "I'm not feeling very well. I don't think I'll finish."

"Well, see now," she said. "You students are always trying to rush out of here before you're healed. I'm afraid I'm going to have to keep you here Mr. Potter, at least until after lunch. We'll see if you're feeling better by then."

Harry made a token effort to act disappointed and Madame Pomfrey removed his breakfast and told him to try to get some sleep. The problem was though, he didn't feel tired in the least. Left on his own, he found himself thinking about a number of things he rather wouldn't like to. He thought about the attack, about Greyback, and about a number of things he hadn't bothered himself with until the dementors had intruded upon his psyche and dredged up every sad story from his childhood. It didn't matter that he wasn't that boy anymore, that it was in the past and that he wasn't going back. He still felt like that boy in the cupboard under the stairs, and looking back on that life with the context of the past few years of friendship and comfort only seemed to put that life in a more depressing context.

He didn't have too long to brood though. Professor McGonagall came to see him shortly thereafter. Whereas Harry felt as though he had been asleep for a long long time, Professor McGonagall looked as though she had not slept at all the night prior.
"Good morning Mr. Potter," she said. "I understand you will not be joining us for class this morning."

Harry felt his chest clench up and he had to stubbornly force himself to say anything. "No Professor," he said, not really meeting her gaze. He didn't want his head of house to know that it was because he didn't want to join his peers just then.

"You should know, Mr. Potter, that Mark Daniels and Ritta Ristich were expelled and arrested by aurors this morning for poisoning you. You will not have to worry about them in the future. As well, though last night should have been proof enough that you are not infected, these werewolf rumors are being handled directly by the faculty this morning; and a few students will be serving detentions for attacking you."

"Did they say anything?" Harry asked. "Before they were taken away.

"I do not know if you were made aware of the details Mr. Potter, but you were poisoned with an oil extracted from Wolfsbane, it is very readily absorbed by the skin. It is certainly not a defense, but they did seem to think that it would only kill you if you were in fact a werewolf."

"I didn't think it was that poisonous to non-werewolves. I mean I didn't even eat it," He said, confused. If it was so horrible to people why was it called wolfsbane?

"Werewolves are far more sensitive to the poison, Mr. Potter, than those who are not. A werewolf who ingests or otherwise absorbs only a small amount will die. If you had been a werewolf you would certainly be dead. As for everyone else, Mr. Potter, it is still a poison and a high enough dose will kill you. The oil used against you was extracted from a large amount of wolfsbane. As it was Mr. Potter, it was enough to paralyze your diaphragm and, for a very small moment before Professor Snape arrived, it stopped your heart. I will not say that you were lucky, for indeed that would be ridiculous, but I will say that matters could have gone much worse last night."

Harry processed that for a moment. A part of him wanted to ask why. Why had they poisoned him, why hadn't they waited till the moon had risen. He didn't have to though. It hadn't taken him long with his own thoughts to figure it out. That anyone who thought that he was a werewolf would see the party in an entirely different light than those who did not. In the end, the party had been a large gathering of students in a room as the moon rose. If Harry had indeed been a werewolf he could have infected or killed a lot of people. But that still left one question.

"Do I really come off as so horrible that people just assume that if I became a werewolf I'd decide to try to pass it on to as many people as I could? Haven't I done enough to prove that I wouldn't do that?"

Professor McGonagall sighed. "Mr. Potter, this is less a matter of your character than it is the communal perception of Lycanthropy. Werewolves have always existed at the fringe of our society, and they largely keep to themselves, or perhaps it is more accurate to say that they have been kept at the fringe of society. For this reason, unfortunately, it is easy for werewolves like Fenrir Greyback to appear to represent the group as a whole. It is commonly believed that Lycanthropy destroys the humanity of a person who is infected, though there has never been any evidence that this is the case."

Harry supposed that that was cold comfort. There was a bit of silence before Professor McGonagall excused herself to get to the first class of the day.
Amelia had done well; she always did well. She knew herself well enough that she could act her own part perfectly. When she and her aurors had left with two of his former students in tow, everything had been playing out according to how it should. Yet her words rang in his ears. Everything could fall apart, a small change now could lead to large changes in the future, and would lead to greater uncertainty. Now more than ever, even after he had allayed her doubts and set her back on course, he felt the pieces of the decade old puzzle he had been fitting together start to crumble.

It had nothing to do, really, with Amelia's words, but rather with Severus's moments before. It made no sense, and Albus for the life of him could not identify the source of the deviation, but it was there all the same. Harry had decided to undertake a potions project. This had never happened in any of the futures he had seen.

He had tried to encourage Severus to have a better relationship with Harry for a while. Variants where they got along lead to greater possibilities for success. It was why he had had Severus accompany the train to Hogwarts, and recent events had indeed been leading towards a lessening of hostilities. But in no variant that Albus had seen had Harry decided to take on a potions project. Everything else had been going to form; there hadn't been a serious deviation in over a decade, and that one had been relatively easy to set back on track, but this was not so easy. Indeed, just trying to fix this deviation could lead to even greater deviations. Where was he left then?

Yet that deviation from all those years ago. Perhaps that was the source. It too had involved Severus as well as Harry's mother. Albus had still been adjusting to everything he had seen in the pillars, he had made mistakes in the beginning. One of those mistakes had lead to a large deviation with Lily. Severus had missed a check-in. Not something entirely to worry about. Such was the nature of the rather unpredictable life of a spy. Yet Albus had just recently come out of the Pillars. Not all of the information had been processed. The assault on his mind had been fresh, and he had still not recovered from the ordeal. He could not yet recall every detail, every pathway. He had thought that Severus's absence had been a deviation. He had summoned the man, and that was when the true deviation had occurred. Lily had seen Severus leaving the Headmaster's office when she thought him still a loyal Death Eater. She had asked Albus straight out if Severus was working for him. In no variant had she ever been given sufficient reason to doubt his loyalties to the Dark Lord. Yet anything that she had suspected would have surely died with her.

The letter though. In some of the variants, Harry had eventually made him aware of a letter his mother had sent him, delayed to reach him on his thirteenth birthday. A letter to tell him about the medical condition he had inherited from James Potter. He knew that Lily and James had included stories from their childhood as well.

Perhaps Lily, hoping for the best from Severus, had included stories of her childhood friend. Could that have inclined Harry to decide to spend more time with Severus? It seemed unlikely. Perhaps that was all it was though; something small and trivial disappearing for over a decade to affect change now. Albus knew well just how something small could travel across time. Yet even if that was the source of the deviation, where did that leave everything? He knew well how many ways a path could deviate, but he had the map in his head.

Perhaps he could not fix this deviation, but it wasn't time yet to call everything off. He still knew where everything needed to lead to, which way lay victory. Could he plan his way around this? So much could conceivably change if he made a misstep.

In the end, of course, he had little choice. He couldn't fix the deviation without risking an even
larger one, and he couldn't abandon the plan. He would just have to keep a closer eye on matters and be prepared to make small changes as needed. They were no longer on the right path, but they were right next to it, following it at a distance, and Albus would see that they did not deviate any further from it.

By the time lunchtime had rolled around Harry had gathered himself to face the rest of the school. Madame Pomfrey had made sure he ate every bit of the lunch that had popped up on the table by his bedside and then given him a clean bill of health telling him he could return to classes.

"What did I miss?" he asked Ron, sliding into a seat next to him in History of Magic.

"Madness, I tell you," Ron said. "Professor Lupin's out sick and they had Snape taking over. But get this. He taught us about werewolves. Not just how to survive if you get cornered by one, but all about them when they aren't transformed. I don't know, it was almost like he was sneering at anyone who'd thought you were a werewolf, if you can imagine. You know how Malfoy had been saying that Greyback kept his own saliva from the full moon so that he could infect people any time he wants?"

Harry had lost track of a lot of the various things Malfoy had said.

"Turns out that's impossible," Ron said.

"Well that's something," Harry said.

"Also Dumbledore gave a big talk in the Great Hall during breakfast about rumors and panic and stuff. He said you'd have died if you'd actually been a werewolf, so the rumors should go away now," Ron said.

Harry didn't really know what to think about Snape, or the rest of the school for that matter. He had plenty of time to think of it though as Professor Binns started his lesson.

Ron was right, the rumors had died down. He still got the occasional distrustful glance but for the most part people were ignoring him. Harry wondered if perhaps they were embarrassed to have been proven wrong.

He had found time to track down the Ravenclaw prefect, Bryan Willoughby, who had saved his life. The thank you had been a bit awkward as had been the rejoinder but Harry was dreading a bit the prospect of seeing Snape again. He knew that he owed the man the same.

He had seen Snape in class, and once while working on his potions project since the incident on the full moon, but now it was Monday and after classes he would be returning to the dungeons to work on his project. It being Monday meant that this time he would be working alone, with Snape.

"Where are you going," Hermione asked.

"The dungeons," Harry said. "Lab time's about to start."

"Dressed like that?" Hermione asked.

"No point in getting good robes blown up in a potions accident," Harry said. "Dress code doesn't
"apply after class."

"That doesn't mean you should wear your grungiest clothes," Hermione said.

"They're comfortable," Harry said.

"Come here," Hermione said. She pulled out her wand and before he knew it, his old robes were wrinkle free and had fewer faded splotches.

"Those aren't the robes you fought the basilisk in, are they?" Hermione asked, her nose wrinkled.

"They're still useable," Harry said. "Everything came out pretty well in the wash."

"You should have just thrown them out," Hermione said. "You're not going to impress Professor Snape coming in dressed like that."

"Who said I'm trying to impress him?" Harry asked. "I just want to get to know him a bit more or something."

"Yes," Hermione said. "And I suppose that'll be easy while looking like a vagabond."

Harry shrugged and turned to go.

"You could stand to do something with your hair," Hermione called.

Harry just waved goodbye. Honestly, he thought, it wasn't like he was going on a date with the man. He shuddered at the thought. He pointedly ruffled up his hair.

One of the nice changes since the full moon was that he no longer walked the halls with an escort. Gryffindor's first quidditch match was coming up soon enough and Harry could only imagine Wood's fervor in protecting his star seeker if people were still hexing Harry in the halls.

Too soon, he was in the dungeons and he was somewhat dismayed to see Malfoy walking away from the potions lab. He was ready for some sort of taunt or sneer from the boy but he didn't get anything. Malfoy walked past as if Harry wasn't even there. Which was fine by Harry, though he was sort of reminded of how the Dursleys would do the same when they were so inclined. Not that it was a bad thing, he did better without their attention than with and the same applied to Malfoy.

He walked into the potions lab where he was ignored by Snape as well. Unfortunately, while Harry was just fine with the man not trying to antagonize him, he didn't exactly want to spend the time in complete silence. He was still wary of Hermione's idea to ask the man a bunch of potions questions, but fortunately he had at least a bit of a reason to speak to the man.

"Sir," he said. Hermione had made sure to remind him to always follow decorum while speaking to the man. "I'm ready to start a test brew today. I brought the writeup." He handed a piece of parchment to the professor.

Snape took the parchment with a put upon expression and started perusing the writeup in silence.

"Why do you stir only three and a half times after you add the toad gallbladder?" Snape asked suddenly.

"Because it will explode if you stir it four times and won't work if you only stir it three," Harry said.

"But why, Mr. Potter?" Snape asked.
"Bernoulie's principles governing bile's interaction with manticore saliva?" Harry asked.

Snape looked displeased, but continued to ask questions. Harry figured that Snape was probably hoping that the writeup had been written with a lot of help from Hermione and that Harry wouldn't be able to answer the questions.

"You will call me to inspect your progress before you add the bot-fly larvae," Snape told Harry, handing him the writeup entirely dismissively.

Harry took the parchment and went to one of the lab's stations where he started preparing potions ingredients a little frustrated. Not for the first time he started to doubt that this endeavor was going anywhere. He had no idea how to talk to the man outside of class-related matters, and Snape, as of late, had started looking rather put upon to have to talk to Harry at all. All that was really happening was that they were spending time in a room together, and while the lack of any argument was a bit of a step forward who's origin Harry still couldn't figure out, Harry didn't think he would ever actually answer any of the questions he had concerning the man. He considered, it had been fairly optimistic of him to consider that this project would go anywhere. He'd probably have better luck tracking down people who had known his mum and Snape. There was Aunt Petunia, sure, though Harry wasn't exactly about to drop her a letter. There was also Professor Lupin, he knew, but regardless of who it was, Harry was very reluctant to start asking questions about his mum and some bloke she'd dated when she was in school. That was a pretty good way to start rumors.

He wound up botching the potion by the time he was ready to add the bot-fly larvae. He told himself that it was because he had been distracted and not because it was a rather complex potion that was a bit beyond his skill level. Snape's sneer when he inspected it seemed to say that he had known very well that the potion wasn't within Harry's capabilities.

Yet soon the man's features smoothed over and he very impassively said, "either try again, or leave and revise before another attempt." Harry didn't have to guess which one Snape would prefer.

"I think I'll revise, Professor," Harry said, starting to clean up the station. He got no response from the man as he started to put away his supplies.

"Professor," he said, pausing on his way out of the classroom. "Thank you for saving my life," he said. "Again. And for the times before that, and everything."

"Move along, Mr. Potter," was all Snape said.

"Right," Harry said, before he walked out of the potions lab and headed back above ground.

Severus contemplated Potter as the boy walked out the door. He doubted the boy would thank him for everything if he knew what 'everything' entailed. He pushed those thoughts from the forefront of his mind.

Potter was behaving peculiarly, and as much as Severus wanted to tell himself that it was no concern of his own, he couldn't deny the curiosity he felt every time he interacted with the boy. Just as he couldn't assuage his own guilt when the boy had thanked him, for 'everything.'
I hope that this isn't going too slowly. I feel that as long as these chapters are, that the plot's moving along slowly. I hope you enjoyed this chapter and that you will consider passing on any thoughts or comments.
"I'm ready to add the mercury, sir," Harry said, breaking the silence that had pervaded the potions lab for the past half an hour.

If not for the blank expression that suffused Snape's face at that moment, indeed that very often came over Snape's face lately, Harry would have expected the man to have sighed, or given some indication of what he thought. It was Monday and Harry was once more attempting a brew. He had gotten a fair bit further than he had the last time. The process was a bit more exciting, really, than what they normally brewed in class. For instance, before Harry could conduct the next step, the professor would need to apply a bubblehead charm for him. Mercury was exceptionally toxic. Snape beckoned him over to the work station in the front of the lab where he had been revising notes for whichever project he was working on. The man passively tapped his wand on the top of Harry's brow before doing the same to his own. It was an odd sensation, Harry found. All of the smells that he had grown accustomed to in the potions lab disappeared. The air now smelled of absolutely nothing. What's more, his already poor vision was constantly being ever so slightly distorted as the sphere around his head seemed to be in a constant state of flux. Snape handed him the vial of the liquid metal and Harry started walking excitedly back to his work station. He found he was really looking forward to the next step.

Stepping up to his cauldron, Harry started to uncap the quicksilver before he remembered to remove the flame. The potion had to be as hot as possible without actually boiling. Harry waited until the last bubble burst at the top of the cauldron before he slowly drizzled the mercury into the brew. Then he waited. Waiting was the hardest part to potions brewing, he thought.

He waited in silence. He was getting tired of so much silence. Silence reminded him of being locked up in his cupboard when the Dursleys went out and had no one to watch him. Though, there was a safety in silence too... Suddenly, without warning, the contents of his cauldron started to rotate. He checked his notes to make sure it was spinning the right direction. He smiled; everything was going well, with the potion at least, and this was the first time he had brewed a self stirring potion. The potion started rotating faster and faster, and a silvery glow started to emanate from the developing vortex in the middle. It wasn't long after that that a fog of sorts started to form over the potion, which soon seemed to contract inward before shooting up, spreading out at the ceiling and dissipating as charms that circulated air in the potions lab sucked out the toxic fumes.

Harry rather thought that it all seemed to be a good way to mark the completion of a potion, but unfortunately, this was one of a couple of stopping points in the brew. There was a bit more waiting as Harry marked down notes, while the potion, which was still calming down, settled and cooled. Next he divvied the potion up into six beakers. During his next lab session, he would continue the potion with only one of the beakers. He had six tries from this point to finish the potion unless he wanted to start over from scratch. Harry walked up to the front of the lab to have
the bubblehead charm removed.

"It worked," he said.

He got a raised eyebrow in return. Snape had, of course, seen the spectacular product of his work as well as Harry had. The man dipped the tip of his wand in the bubble surrounding Harry's head and the wibbly-wobbly sphere popped. Snape's was already gone.

"Right," Harry said, "well I have a bit of cleaning up to do." With that, Harry walked back to his work station and started putting everything away, still fairly put out for the lack of progress with the Snape project. He had been about to put his notes away when he made the decision, rather abruptly, not to. He sat back down at the work station and started looking over his notes, or rather, pretending to. Inside he was thinking. He didn't want to waste another Monday with no progress whatsoever; nothing different from the week before. He didn't have much to work off of, though. Nothing except for Hermione's advice from earlier. He still didn't want to talk about potions though. That wasn't at all why he was there. But he didn't want to talk about nothing either. Except he rather didn't know what he did want to talk about, or how to go about it, so he supposed potions would have to do. He searched around for something to talk about.

"Professor," he said to the man across the room. He got half a glance; Snape was still clearly focused on his own work. Harry felt the words momentarily get swallowed in his throat and he rather desperately forced them out. "I was wondering if you had any insight on the Mercury, and why it doesn't react with the dragon's blood?"

There was a pause and for a moment Harry thought that Snape was just going to ignore the question altogether.

"Had you put as much time into this project as you put into quidditch you would know why that is an inane question," Snape finally said, not looking up.

"Well I saw what the text had to say," Harry said defensively, finding it easier now to keep the conversation going. "I was just wondering what your opinion was, sir."

"Given that there is no proper evidence to support either hypothesis, I fail to see why I should have an opinion either way. Hypotheses are not ice cream flavors, one should not simply pick one because it is their favorite." Still the man kept his attention on his work.

His answer left Harry a little stumped, and more than a little rankled. However, still not wanting to leave without making any progress, Harry pressed on and thought of a way to continue the conversation.

"Well isn't there a lot of things that you do based on intuition? On our first day of class, you said that potions was a science, but you also said it was an art. I just thought that maybe your instincts favored one theory over the other. I mean the guy who invented the potion probably had one, otherwise he would have expected the cauldron to explode when he added the Mercury the first time." Harry said a little stiltedly.

Again a pause, but this time Snape looked up. "I could not say what lead Kempt to conclude that the Mercury would be safe; he did not leave any clues in his writings. For myself, I don't believe that either theory actually explain the phenomenon. My opinion is that neither one is accurate."

"Why not?" Harry asked. "Professor."

"I had thought that instinct was enough of a reason to have an opinion," Professor Snape said.
Harry shrugged.

"It is a great mystery," the man said. "Perhaps the only reason such a complex yet only moderately affective potion has the attention that it does in academia. Many potions masters have attempted to find the answer. The truth is that there has never been any evidence one way or another. Those hypotheses in your book were posited by those who understood only enough of the problem to hazard a guess. Those who had long studied the phenomenon knew enough to understand that they had no idea."

With that said, Snape clearly turned his attention back to his work.

"Oh, that makes sense then," was the only thing Harry could think to say. After all, he was himself rather bad at making small talk.

Harry didn't know if he should quit while he was ahead or push on. He didn't want to irritate the man. Or at least, he knew that it would be counterproductive. He supposed he should let the man work in peace, as he clearly wanted to. Still though, he wanted to see if the past few minutes had just been a fluke.

He packed the last of his notes and got up to leave.

"Oh, so for the reading for next class," he said, as if it had just occurred to him. "I didn't understand why the thujone reacts with the slate powder when slate's an inert ingredient. I mean it's just used as a stabilizer."

Again an awkward pause.

"The thujone does not react with the slate powder," Professor Snape said. "The slate powder incidentally carries the rapunzel leaf flakes that have been floating on top of the potion to the bottom, where the thujone has been resting, as it is added. The thujone reacts with the rapunzel and the slate stabilizes the finished potion."

Again he turned to his work.

"Right," Harry said. "Thanks, Professor, I'll see you in class then."

He walked out.

So it seemed that they could have civil conversations. Of sorts. Harry just wondered if they could talk about anything besides potions, or really, what that would be at all. He doubted he could get the man to talk about his mother, and he wasn't sure if he wanted him to either. But somewhere in the man lay the answer to the mystery of why his mum had liked him. Also too, Harry had started to wonder if there was anything other than the hemophilia that he had gotten from Snape. Besides the scowl that Ron now swore was a mirror replica of Snape's own, Harry couldn't really see anything much of the man in himself and he wondered what Snape had been like when he was thirteen. Like Snape's own new attitude around Harry, it was all a mystery.

Severus stopped occluding the moment Potter left the potions lab. With the boy around, Occlumancy was the only way to focus on his work, instead of grudges against people long since dead. Occlumency was a wonderful study aide, and if any of the half-witted students he taught
could master it, he was certain that grades would start to improve. However, it was not at all good for creative thinking, and Severus's current project required plenty of it.

His life would be so much easier without Potter in it. For it didn't matter how many times he saved the boy's neck, he would always remind him of the one who hadn't been saved. Yet, more and more he saw that Lily lived on in her son; not in many ways, but in those that counted most. The more time he spent occluding around Potter, the more he saw that the boy lacked what Severus had loathed in James Potter. This wasn't exactly comforting, of course. Life would be so much easier if the boy was every bit the arrogant bully his father had been; he could feel justified in his treatment of him. Yet more and more, thoughts of how Lily would look upon him if she could see him haunted him. She haunted him. She had been for so long.

He cast that thought aside. Lily wasn't some revenant. He longed, though, to just be able to remember her without feeling such loathing for himself. Albus's words rang in his head. What would Lily want? What would she think?

None of these thoughts were relevant though. He briefly cleared his mind once more before he turned to his work, letting his mind immerse itself in solving the problem before him.

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Harry checked his watch and frowned. He wouldn't be getting much sleep that night. He had had far too much homework piled on him that day, and with quidditch practice the next night, he'd need to get most of it done sooner rather than later. Making his way through the dungeons and up into the warmer and brighter halls of the castle, Harry frowned as he considered his project. No number of stiffly formal conversations were going to get him what he wanted out of the endeavor. Though considering that he didn't think he could put into words exactly what he was looking to gain from it or any sort of landmark where he could say that he had accomplished what he had wanted to accomplish, this was par for the course.

As he rushed to the common room so that he could finish his homework in a decent amount of time, Harry thought that things would be a lot easier if he gave up on the Snape project and quit the wards project to boot. Though, the more he learned about it, the more he did seem to have a genuine interest in wards, and even better, his potions grades were much improved. But was that worth it? Because right then, it was all he was getting. Harry shook his head to himself, he couldn't quit just yet.

When he got to the common room he quickly dropped his bag next to Ron and sat down opposite Hermione, ready to get to his homework. He had hardly had a chance to pull out his Arithmancy text though, when he found himself being pulled away by one of the twins.

"Sorry," George said. "Emergency quidditch meeting."

Harry sighed as he was dragged out of the common room. Wood had been getting more and more fervent with quidditch. His manic desire to win the cup that year was an obsession that often struck without warning. His exuberance had also gotten them booted from the common room enough times that they had started holding such impromptu meetings in a close-by storeroom by the portrait of the fat lady. However, they didn't stop there as George led him down the hall.

"Aren't we..." Harry began.
"Might have lied about the quidditch meeting," George said.

Harry was starting to get nervous now; with the twins, one could never be sure where something was going.

"Um, I actually have a fair bit of homework I still need to do," Harry said.

"You won't care about that in a moment," was George's cryptic response.

This did nothing to reassure Harry. "I'm pretty sure I'll care tomorrow when I haven't slept and still have work to do."

"Alright, keep your pants on there, this won't actually take long," George said.

Harry still wasn't reassured. They had gotten into an unused part of the castle and soon they were entering an unused classroom. Fred was already there. He had a familiar looking iron ball that was sitting on a leather pad and he was wearing a glove on his hand. Comprehension dawned somewhat.

"Wait," Harry said. "Are we making confetti again?"

"Hopefully not," Fred said.

"Though if this works we'll make all the confetti you want," George said.

"So what are we doing then?" he asked.

"You'll see," Fred said. He held up a sheet of paper that became suspended in the air with the tap of his wand. As before, a mat was spread out on the ground.

"Should we make a speech first?" Fred asked. "To mark the occasion."

"No speech," Harry said. "Let's see it then."

Fred raised his eyebrows at his twin.

"Simply has too much homework to be spending time with his chums," George commented.

"Ach," Fred cried, now acting mortally wounded. "To be valued less than homework, say it isn't so, Harry."

"Well you're certainly more fun than homework," Harry ceded. "But… Actually I'll leave those sentiments to Hermione. Alright let's have a speech…a short speech."

"Speech!" Fred exclaimed.

George held up an imaginary glass. "Ahem," he said. "To the best thing to happen to pranking since the you-know-what."

Harry didn't know what, but Fred, it seemed, did, as he was nodding his head.

"To profit," Fred said.

"To, um…" Harry said grasping for something to add. "Invention…I think."

"Alright," George said. "That was a little longwinded Harry. We're on a time crunch here. Let's get
the train rolling."

Without further chatter, Fred picked up the steel ball with his gloved hand and tossed it at the paper. Instead of the shower of confetti that Harry had seen last time though, the ball seemed to pass right through, landing on the mat that had been lain out for it. The paper looked like it hadn't been touched. Harry's eyes shot up as he realized what had just happened.

"Lets try something thicker," George said.

"A desk," Fred said, picking up the ball with his gloved hand.

George grinned and picked up the mat, laying it out underneath one of the desks in the room. Fred held the ball out over the desk and dropped it. It sailed right through and landed on the mat. They were both jumping up and down in excitement. George started rubbing his hand over the desk where the ball had passed through.

"So um, that's really cool and all, but what's it going to do exactly?" Harry asked.

"Harry, Harry, Harry, you need to think about the big picture here," Fred said.

"Um, a cannon ball that goes through walls instead of smashing them?" Harry hazarded.

"A picture that's outside of the box," George said.

"Um, wait, it went through it right?" Harry asked. "This is about what I said back in August, about passing through solid stuff. You figured out how to charm people to do that?"

"Well not quite, but we're getting there," Fred said.

"I don't think we'll ever be at the point of being able to just charm someone like that," George added. "But we're looking at a charmed object that'll bring someone along with it."

"We've been meaning to ask actually. How did it go with you? We never got the details." Fred said.

"Did you go through something?" George asked.

"Or did something go through you?" Fred asked.

"Oh," Harry thought. "Both actually."

"Really?" Fred asked.

"So you really were non-corporeal." George said.

"Oh, what if you could make yourself incorporeal so spells would go through you?" Harry asked.

"We'd have to come up with something completely different," Fred said. "This doesn't work at all like that."

"So what did you pass through and whatnot?" George asked.

"Oh, um," he said sort of embarrassed. "My cousin's hand went through my head and I went through... a wall," he lied at the end, if only because saying his bed would sound more messed up than it had been. A brief look passed between the twins. "So how does it work?" Harry asked, his homework forgotten.
"Oh, well nothing like what you just described," George said.

"We're not going through stuff so much as disassembling everything in our path and telling it to put itself back together after we get through." Fred said proudly.

"And doing it fast enough that you can't really tell," George added.

"That sounds really complicated," Harry said.

"Oh it is," Fred said. "Very precise charm work, took us forever to do that there," he said, gesturing towards the ball.

"Actually got the idea from that wall in Diagon Alley, how it disassembles itself to make a doorway," Georg said.

"But it didn't take us too long to get the concept down," Fred added.

"Had a lot of help from Madame Tooling, though," George said. "When we've got a working prototype, she's going to have exclusive retail rights."

"And we're going to be rich," Fred said.

"And you'll be running through walls as much as you like," George said.

"I will?" Harry asked.

"Sure thing," said Fred.

"You were our inspiration," George said. "You'll get to play with it when we've got all the kinks out."

"Mind you, you'd better put it to good use," Fred said. "I mean with an invisibility cloak and the ability to walk through walls, we'll be expecting quite a bit from the likes of you."

Harry hadn't actually pulled a prank in his life, discounting accidental magic and blowing up that cauldron. That had been a heist. Still, his mind was brimming with the possibilities.

"Well I can't wait," Harry said.

"Oh right, almost forgot," Fred said.

"What?" Harry asked.

Fred didn't reply, he did though pull out his wand and, with a flourish and a few odd words, confetti started raining down.

"So what do you suppose'll happen this Halloween?" Ron asked.

It seemed a bit early, but the castle was already being done up a bit here and there for the holiday.

"What do you mean?" Hermione asked.
Ron looked at her like she was daft. "First year we had to clobber a troll, second year the chamber got opened and Filch almost killed Harry. Something'll happen this year for sure."

"Well both of those times there were crazy people running about causing trouble," Hermione said. "We shouldn't have to worry this year."

"There's crazy people running around this year," Ron said. "Crazy people who want to kill Harry."

"Yes Ron," Hermione said. "Crazy people outside of Hogwarts. They can't cause us any trouble in here."

"Oh just go right ahead and jinx the whole thing why don't you," Ron said. "Now Harry's probably going to get bitten by Greyback on Halloween."

"I don't know," Harry said. "That whole social pariah thing in September really sold me on the idea, you know?"

"If he doesn't just eat you in one bite," Ron said, gesturing towards Harry and his small stature.

"Hey, I'm due for a growth spurt any day now," Harry said. About a week prior, Madame Pomfrey had given the third year boys a talk about growth spurts... among other things. Really, growth spurts had been the least surprising and certainly the least disturbing thing she had talked about. He'd rather remain in ignorance than forever have to remember the old matron giving him The Talk with all of his male classmates. He'd been trying not to think about most of it, though growth spurts had at least held promise that he might not always have to worry about being mistaken for a second year, or worse, a first year. Ron, who had already been a couple inches taller than Harry had recently shot up, and Harry was less than patiently awaiting his own turn, and not for the first time, Harry wondered how much his earlier childhood had affected his stature.

"Sure Harry, you just keep telling yourself that," Ron said.

"Besides," Hermione said. "Harry's been studying really hard for defense. Fenrir Greyback might just be in for a surprise if he ever catches up to him."

"Thanks," Harry said, not so convinced. "Of course if he tried to go at me while you two were there, you'd probably have him wrapped up in a spell no one's ever heard of before and Ron'd stab him with his own pocketknife."

"Too right," Ron said. "Just don't stick your wand up his nose; you wouldn't want werewolf bogies on it. Of course since we now know that Hermione's jinxed things so Greyback'll attack on Halloween, we can be prepared for him."

"Oh, I did no such thing," Hermione said. "How about you tell me how you prepared for the Transfiguration test we have in five minutes."

"Does playing chess with Harry count?" Ron asked. "It's like mental stretching.

"Oh Ronald," Hermione sighed.

Actually, Ron had been taking his studies a bit more seriously this year. Though he complained about it, his own project with the chess set did seem to interest him and he had been getting guidance from Professor Flitwick on how to proceed. He had been enchanting small objects to move on their own and cataloging chess moves; baby steps towards his final goal.

For himself, Harry was doing alright, considering how much more work he had been talked into. It
had been a while since he had felt that something bad was going to happen if he was seen to be doing well in school, and now it was actually starting to feel good to do well. Even though there was only so much studying he could tolerate before he wanted to hop on his broom and fly out a window. His potions project was going well, though it had taken him four tries to get to the next resting point. He had successfully held a handful of conversations with Professor Snape, though they were all potions related. It seemed to work.

It was Hermione, of course, who Harry couldn't figure out. How she managed to get to all of her classes, work on multiple projects, help Harry and Ron with their projects and help them study, Harry didn't know. He didn't think two people working together could manage it. Though he had long since stopped questioning how Hermione did it all; she just did.

They arrived in Transfiguration, and Harry was glad for the review that Professor McGonagall gave before the test, which she did not always provide. During the test though, Harry found his mind wandering. It wasn't that the subject of turning ferrous metals into non-ferrous metals wasn't engaging, though it wasn't. It was more the thoughts that kept running through his head that wouldn't leave him alone. Thoughts of Greyback.

It was odd, perhaps, that he should focus so much on the man. Hermione was right: he couldn't get into the castle, and he hadn't even been seen since the last time he had tried to kidnap Harry. Beckett, on the other hand, had been prolific. With heightened security, he had stopped going for large targets, but that didn't stop him from burning down buildings left and right, and killing dozens of people, mostly muggles. Though muggles didn't make the front page.

Yet even with what he had seen in the morning paper that day, it was Greyback who Harry thought of while he should have been focusing on his test. He thought of a spell that hadn't worked, and an emaciated man who had just escaped from prison who had been able to throw him around like a rag doll. He hated feeling so helpless. He hated even more the knowledge that he wouldn't be much better off if Greyback did attack that Halloween. Heck, he'd be better off with the sword of Gryffindor than with his wand. Suddenly, learning about Grindylows and Kappas in Defense Against the Dark Arts didn't seem like the best use of his time.

It rained a lot in Scotland, a fair bit more than it did in Surrey actually, and Harry had always considered Surrey to be fairly rainy when he was younger. But come October, it seemed the skies just opened up on them at Hogwarts. Unfortunately, this was also when Oliver was the most eager to practice. Oh, not just because the first quidditch match was less than a month away but because he loved to practice in bad weather. Really, Harry thought, Oliver Wood wanted them to be the team that practiced no matter what. He wanted them to hold the upper ground come rain or shine; to be the only team that could fly their best in the middle of a hurricane.

Harry though, who loved quidditch, who really loved flying, loved feeling like he was especially good at something, and loved the feeling that nothing, not even a bludger, could catch him, even if that wasn't exactly true; Harry hated flying in the rain. It wasn't that he'd get cold and wet, well not entirely; it was that he couldn't feel quite so free when his robes clung to him and dragged him down; how he could barely see through his glasses.

As he walked out of the boys changing room he was a bit put out to see that it was raining just as much as it had been when he had started cleaning his gear after practice. He paused at the doorway
to consider if he could transfigure himself an umbrella or if that would even do any good with how much wind there was. The wind was the worst part. He figured he would just trudge up to the castle as is, he was halfway decent with a drying charm. He cast a wary glance at the dementors gliding along the wall not too far off, whose chill and melancholy he could now separate from the effects of being cold and wet as he trudged up to the castle alone after practice. Or not quite alone. He heard some Latin, the roots of which he couldn't follow, and as he stepped out from the covering and into the rain he found that it didn't touch him. He turned around to find Angelina Johnson behind him, casting a charm on herself. She had just come out of the girls changing room.

"Thanks," he said. "Are Kattie and Alicia coming?"

"No, Alicia's pulled something in her lower back and Kattie's helping her stretch it out. Actually from the sound of it Kattie was getting ready to take her through a Yoga routine; she just started over the summer and she's been trying to get us to take it up since September."

They had started walking up to the castle. It was very weird to walk through a storm and not get wet.

"This charm seems handy," Harry said, indicating the spell that was keeping him dry. "I should learn it."

"It's actually pretty tricky," Angelina said. "When we covered it in Charms last month, half the class hadn't mastered it before the end of the period."

"Figures," Harry said, a bit disappointed but also a bit determined.

"Did the twins and Olie leave already?" Angelina asked.

"Yeah," Harry said. "I take a bit longer to get out of there I guess."

"Well if you didn't insist on cleaning your gear after each practice, you could probably finish up with them. Once a week is just fine." Angelina said.

Harry shrugged. "You need to take care of things if you want them to last. It's nice to have nice things."

"Well still, how often do you walk back to the castle alone?" Angelina asked.

"Most of the time, I guess," he said. "You're a bit late getting out, aren't you."

Angelina laughed. "I had a hard time getting out of that nice hot shower. Took forever to get the chill out of me. You really shouldn't walk back alone though. It's not really safe."

"Between the wards and those ruddy dementors, I think I'm good," Harry said. "Any of that lot would have to be pretty stupid to try to get at me here."

"Well they aren't the only ones to worry about," Angelina said.

"That's gotten a lot better," Harry said. "Most people don't think I'm a werewolf anymore." Though a few people did seem to still be unconvinced. None had threatened him or done anything since the last full moon though; it was just a few dirty looks, and Harry had gotten used to those long before he had come to Hogwarts. Who knew, maybe some of them actually still thought he was the Heir of Slytherin.

"Well I'm sure we'd enjoy your company none the less," Angelina said.
"I'll see what I can do," was Harry's non-committal reply. He supposed he could rush a bit. He'd never been one to take long showers; Uncle Vernon had always made sure that he didn't waste water.

There was a silence between them for a bit; and in the silence, Harry felt that something was off. They were getting farther and farther from the dementors that patrolled the wall, but Harry had a growing feeling of foreboding. There was almost an itch between his shoulder blades and he could just about feel someone's eyes boring into the back of his head. He kept walking, though it felt like someone was behind him; that he was being watched.

He was being stupid, he knew. Thoughts of Greyback from earlier had him on edge. The dementors had him on edge. The not so subtle reminder of his poisoning had him on edge. Walking back to the castle on a dark stormy night had him on edge. Hermione was right; Harry had said it earlier: Greyback wasn't going to get into Hogwarts. He couldn't sneak in on the back of someone's head, or get smuggled in inside of a diary. Still though, he found himself patting his wand in his pocket as he looked over his shoulder. There wasn't much to see in the heavily overcast night.

"I hope there's a downpour for our first quidditch match," Angelina said as they neared the castle.

"Why would you say that?!" Harry asked aghast.

"Olie's right," Angelina said. "Slytherin hasn't been practicing half as much in bad weather. Between that and Olie's analysis of the Slytherin team, we'll win for sure."

"Well I say we can beat them on a sunny day with one hand tied behind our backs," Harry said.

"That's the spirit," Angelina said.

"Oomf," Harry had the wind knocked out of him as his foot slipped out from underneath him on the wet flagstone of the steps up to the castle.

"Are you alright," Angelina asked, as she helped him back up.

"Yeah, um," Harry checked himself over. "I don't suppose you know any healing charms." He held up his left hand, which he had caught himself with. It had a shallow gash where it had hit the edge of the stone step.

"I probably should," Angelina said, "considering how many quidditch injuries I've seen. But I'm afraid that this is the best I can do for you." She held out a handkerchief for him.

"I'll ruin it," Harry said.

"I can transfigure myself a new one," Angelina said, as though Harry were being silly.

Harry shrugged and took the kerchief, tying it around his hand. "Thanks," he said. He'd ask Percy to take care of the wound in the common room. Percy was good at that sort of thing.

They got back to the common room without any further incident. Harry dashed up the stairs to the third year dormitory to put his broom away and get his homework out. When he saw that he was alone though, he pulled out his wand a little warily. He sat down at the edge of his bed and cast the diagnostic spell on himself. His wand glowed red, and Harry's stomach dropped as he looked at his left hand and the kerchief run through with his blood.

He recast the medical charm on himself; the charm he wasn't supposed to have had to recast for a long time. Because his wand hadn't been supposed to glow red, nor orange nor yellow nor green. It
was supposed to be blue. Because the medical charm that made sure his blood clotted properly wasn't supposed to run out like that, not so quickly. Not when he was flying, and especially not when he was playing quidditch. This was the seventh time he had had to recast the charm on himself since he had come back to school, not even counting the time Hermione had done so.

He had been checking himself regularly and there didn't seem to be a rhyme or reason for it. Some nights when he checked, nothing had changed, and then others it seemed that most of the spell had drained out of him somehow. Though this was the first time it had gotten all the way to red before he had had a chance to reapply the medical charm. Why was this happening? Didn't he have enough to worry about?

He didn't know what to do. He was about ready to panic. He knew he should go to Madame Pomfrey, except he couldn't tell Madame Pomfrey. Because maybe he could convince her that his dad had had Hemophilia, but she had been the school nurse back when his parents had been students. She probably knew that Snape had hemophilia, and for all he knew, she knew that Snape and his mum had been friends. What if she put it all together? Would she tell Snape?

He couldn't tell Madame Pomfrey. He couldn't ask Hermione to look into it because she would definitely go to Madame Pomfrey. The only thing he could think to do was to just recast the charm every day. Was that bad? Like taking too much of a potion? He didn't know, but bleeding to death was definitely bad, so Harry supposed that he would have to take his chances.

He looked at his hand. It had bled a fair bit for such a shallow gash, but it was stopping now. He gathered up his books with his right hand and went down to the common room to find Percy.

After a few distracted hours of homework and an abysmal game of chess with Ron, Harry found himself getting into bed not at all ready for sleep. Between thoughts of Greyback, fire, blood and everything else dredged up when he got too close to the dementors during practice, he spent what felt like half the night with troubled thoughts running through his mind. At around one o' clock in the morning, Harry found himself digging through his trunk for the letter. He needed a distraction. It was another hour before he finally fell asleep, with different thoughts running through his head.

Harry knocked on the professor's door.

"Do come in," he heard Professor Lupin say from the other side. Harry opened the door and walked in, being sure to leave the door open. One couldn't be too careful with the defense professor.

"Mr. Potter," Professor Lupin said genially. "What can I do for you."

"Um… sorry to bother you professor, but I was looking for some advice on defense," Harry said. "Given that these are my office hours, and that I have invited all of my students to bring any concerns to me during them, I can't see why I should be bothered," Professor Lupin said.

"Oh, right, well, the thing is, I've been thinking that what with all that's happened lately that I should probably work more on defense. Like, the real defense stuff, for defending yourself from dark wizards and such," Harry said. "And I know that you don't really think I can handle myself, but I've gotten through a few tight scrapes before and I know I can learn more and do better. I just want a better chance if I ever see Greyback again."
By the time Harry had finished talking, Professor Lupin was looking at him like Harry had sprouted wings or something, and Harry realized that it was a lost cause. The professor would probably always see him as the boy who fainted when he got too close to a dementor; who let old ladies die at the hands of monsters. It didn't matter how well he did in class; who cared how many facts he had memorized about vampires? Some marks didn't come off.

"Right," he said red cheeked. "I should go." He didn't want to ask Hermione for help when she was already doing so much and he supposed this was a research project he would have to handle on his own.

"Uh, before I help you with that," the professor said. "Perhaps you can tell me when I gave you the impression that I didn't think you could handle yourself."

Harry found himself a bit agitated. "Well you know, with the boggart. No one else noticed, but I certainly didn't miss being deliberately skipped for facing the thing."

The professor's mouth opened and closed a couple of times.

"I had thought it was obvious," he said.

"Well yeah, it was," Harry said. "To me anyway."

"No, Harry, I didn't think that you couldn't handle the boggart," the professor said. "I was worried about He-Who-Must-Not-Be-Named popping up in the classroom."

Now it was Harry's turn to be slightly speechless. "I… really?"

"Yes really," Professor Lupin said. "Had you had something else in mind?"

"Um, I'd thought maybe Greyback… or a dementor," Harry said reluctantly. "Or who knows what. I don't think Voldemort even crossed my mind at the time."

"Well then perhaps it is still best that you did not go," Professor Lupin said. "A boggart could mimic the effects of a dementor if it took it's shape, to an extent. Greyback too, I am glad did not pop up during my class. I wasn't especially happy to have Belatrix Lestrange crash the occasion either."

"Oh," Harry said somewhat surprised. "So you didn't…I mean with the dementor on the train I wouldn't blame you if you thought…"

"Mr. Potter, I certainly wouldn't judge a person based on how they were affected by a dementor," Professor Lupin said. "And if half the stories about you are true then I have little doubt that you would easily handle some more advanced training in defense."

"Really?" Harry asked.

"Of course," Professor Lupin said. "I think it would be best if you joined the fourth year defense study group. They mostly go over what they're learning in class but it's also turned into a bit of an informal dueling club. They meet in the defense class room at eight for forty-five minutes on Thursdays. I am usually there, and students are welcome to practice any defense lesson that's taught in class. In the meantime I suggest you start reading the first three chapters of 'Practical Defense for Beginners.'"

"That sounds great," Harry said. "Uh, thanks professor."
"You're welcome Mr. Potter, now I do believe it is time for dinner," Professor Lupin said.

"Right, um, bye," Harry said as he left the professor's office. That had gone better than he had hoped. Though he was embarrassed about how things had started out.

He wasn't going to delude himself into thinking that he'd be dueling Greyback anytime soon, but at least he was doing something. He was also glad to have cleared things up with Professor Lupin. He wasn't about to start trusting the Defense Professor, but he rather thought he was going to enjoy lessons more without feeling like he had something to prove to this man who had known his parents. Though how it was all going to fit into his schedule was a bit beyond him.

"So tell me Severus," the headmaster said after sipping on his tea. "How is Mr. Potter's project coming along?"

Begrudgingly, Severus stated, "I dare say it is going better than either of us had thought it would," Severus said. "He does seem to be putting in a good deal of effort, at least."

"And how do you find yourself tolerating these sessions?" the headmaster asked.

Severus had to ponder that for a moment.

"It is not as trying as I had perhaps thought it would be," Severus said. "Though I would be much overcome with joy if he decided to cease the project henceforth."

"I have been curious to know what drew him to start a potions project," the headmaster said.

"He said it was more of an interest in wards," Severus said. "And that potions would be a better place to start until he became more proficient in runes and arithmancy." Though Severus had heard the lie in his words.

"Is he now," the headmaster said. "Well I am glad to see that the two of you can put your differences behind you. I think you'll find, Severus, that you will be much happier when you put old grudges to rest."

"Oh yes, I am brimming with joy, Headmaster," Severus said sardonically. He poured himself some more tea. "I do wish that I knew what has possessed the boy. He's definitely making an effort to... get along, he's being utterly transparent about it. He's been trying to make idle chit chat for the past couple of weeks. About potions. Last time, I swear he had a list of topics he kept sneaking looks at."

"Is it so onerous to hold a conversation with Harry?" the Headmaster asked. "Or to pass on your knowledge of potions? Perhaps next time you should bring your own list."

"Headmaster, I have to occlude just to be in the same room with him without immediately seeing his father," Severus said.

"When was the last time he was in your presence while you weren't occluding," the headmaster asked.

A pause.
"To one extent or another I have been occluding around him since the train ride," Severus said.

"Ah," was the headmasters only reply.

"It would be foolish to stop," Severus said.

"I dare say I believe you will surprise yourself," the headmaster said.

"I've spent years hating him," Severus said.

"You've spent years hating his father," the headmaster said. "Not Harry. You've admitted as much to me. You've spent the past two years taking that out on Harry."

Severus grimaced.

"Perhaps it is for the best that you learn to see him for who he is; separate from his father," the headmaster said.

"To what end?" Severus asked.

"Closure," the headmaster said.

"I do not need closure," Severus said.

"You've spent the past twelve years hating a dead man," Albus said. "Has that hatred made you happy?"

Severus didn't respond. He didn't need to.

"I have been happy, Severus," the headmaster said. "Very happy to see the changes in you these past weeks."

Severus shook his head.

"I do not deserve that happiness," Severus said. "How can you care so much for it?"

"Because someone must," was the headmasters reply.

"That is meaningless drivel," Severus said.

"Severus," the headmaster said. "Lily died protecting her son. I am certain that were she here now that she would thank you for protecting him when she could not."

"She could protect him herself where it not for me," Severus said.

"If Voldemort had never heard the prophesy, Lily and James would have never gone into hiding," the headmaster said. "There is no way of knowing how long they would have survived as high as they were on his list. You made a mistake Severus, you had no way of knowing. You've said it yourself, you didn't believe in prophesy."

"But he did," Severus said. "I didn't think, or if I did, I thought I could outsmart him."

He got up to leave.

"I put myself in that situation," he told the headmaster. "I thought I was clever, I thought I could make those decisions on my own, and she died for it."
"Severus, my boy," the Headmaster said. He had put down his tea, and he was looking at Severus with an almost pained expression. "I want you take some time tonight. Think of Lily, who she was in life. Would she want you to punish yourself like this? You did everything you could to keep them safe."

Severus opened his mouth to respond, but the headmaster held up his hand to forestall him.

"Think on it," the headmaster said.

Severus hung his head. "Goodnight headmaster," he said as he left.

Albus watched Severus leave with a pensive look on his face. It had been an odd conversation for him. Part scripted and part not. It had been over a decade since he had had a conversation with anyone but Amelia without knowing which ways the conversation would lead ahead of time, but things were off track, and he needed to know by exactly how much.

He was no closer to truly knowing what had inspired Harry to take on the potions project, though he was fairly certain it had more to do with Severus than potions in general. Not knowing was particularly distressing, for without knowing what had caused the change, how could he predict what else it might change?

Other areas were going well. He had been aiming towards a variant where Severus and Harry got along and could work together towards a common goal. It was one of the best variants in terms of positive outcomes with fewer possible pitfalls. In most variants, Severus was essential to victory. He had seen many different outcomes where Harry and Severus were concerned. In most, they hated each other to their dying days. In some variants, Severus had become a mentor to Harry, particularly in those possible worlds where Harry had been sorted into Slytherin. He had even seen an odd variant where Severus had adopted Harry. Albus would have been tempted to aim towards it, were the odds of a good outcome not worse than a coin toss.

It seemed clear that Harry and Severus were heading towards a path where they got along, or at least tolerated each other, and Albus had tried to strengthen that during his conversation as he tried to get more clues out of Severus which would indicate where things had gone wrong. Yet more and more, he was concerned that his task would be less like the following of a script and more like trying to guide a river. He still knew what must happen to defeat Voldemort. He knew what gave better odds, and he was very good at cheating the odds. Yet without his roadmap he felt lost.

In the end, though, he still knew what he had to do. He would give Harry the best chance to defeat Voldemort. If he had to change tactics then he would change tactics, but there was no reason to abandon the path. No reason to chart a new course. He could still make everything work. It would just take more planning and maneuvering.

"Stupefy!"

A red light flashed, and a student fell to the ground. Harry stopped in the doorway of the defense
classroom and watched as a boy he recognized from the Gryffindor common room went to check on his classmate, whom he had just attacked. The boy muttered a spell, pointing his wand at the fallen student, who had collapsed on a pile of cushions. She seemed to awaken very suddenly, and was helped up by the Gryffindor boy.

"Right," said the girl that Harry could now see was a Ravenclaw, though he didn't recognize her at all. "That was three times in a row you did it right, now it's my turn."

"You mastered it last week," the boy said.

"You can't just learn a spell and then never use it again," the girl said. "You need to practice."

"Oh, all right," the boy said as he took his place among the pile of cushions.

"Stupefy," the girl cast. Red spell light hit the boy and he collapsed to the floor on top of the cushions. The girl quickly woke him up. Harry wondered why they insisted on standing while someone knocked them out, the boy looked like he had landed on his shoulder funny. Shaking his head, Harry decided he had stood in the doorway long enough.

"Hi," he said, walking into the classroom.

"Hello," said the girl. "Professor Lupin said you would be joining us."

"Is this it then?" Harry asked. He wasn't exactly on time, and he had thought that 'study group' implied more than two students taking turns cursing each other in an empty classroom.

"Oh there's about twenty of us," said the boy. "Most everyone's also in the charms study group which usually runs late. We never start on time. I'm Benjamin, by the way."

"Anna," said the girl.

"I'm Harry," Harry said needlessly.

"So what brings you to our study group?" Anna asked.

"Just wanted to become better at defense," Harry said. "That spell you just did seems useful. Does it just knock someone out?"

"Pretty much," said Benjamin. "Leaves them more or less unharmed." He started rubbing his shoulder.

"Actually," Anna said. "Getting hit again when you've already been stunned is kind of bad for you. But if you're looking to stop someone without really hurting them it's about the best spell for it. Aurors use it a lot."

"Cool," Harry said as the door to the classroom opened and a small gaggle of fourth years walked in.

Introductions were made and they moved towards the back of the classroom where desks were moved around to accommodate the group. He wound up sitting next to Anna, who was sitting very closely to Benjamin. There were a lot of questions aimed at Harry about why he was joining their group, but a student who's name Harry had forgotten quickly got everyone focussed on studying.

Professor Lupin arrived a little late. He helped the students here and there, but the session was largely student run. They reviewed a number of spells that Harry had only read about, and he was
glad for the different explanations and demonstrations. After about half an hour of this, they stopped reviewing and most everyone got up.

"This is when we practice everything," Anna said to him. "The study session's pretty much over, this is just informal practical work."

Harry saw two students in one corner of the now much larger front of the classroom throwing jinxes at one another while another area had several students practicing deflecting hexes. Benjamin, he saw, was no longer sitting very closely to Anna, but was in front on a now padded area and seemed to be fighting another boy with no magic at all.

"What are they doing?" Harry asked.

Anna looked over at the two boys.

"Oh, they both took karate before they got their letters and they like to play at it sometimes," she said with a shrug. She seemed amused by it.

Harry thought it looked funny, since they were both obviously trying not to actually hit the other.

"Did you want to work on anything?" Anna asked.

"I figure if there were only one thing I learn here, it should be the stunning charm," Harry said.

"Well hopefully you'll learn a lot more than that," Anna said. They went up to the front of the classroom and Anna helped Harry with the charm for a while. It didn't take Harry long to learn the wand movements or the annunciation of the incantation. Harry noticed Professor Lupin moving among the students for a while, giving pointers, but he left after a five or ten minutes.

"Do you want me to stun you before you try?" Anna asked. "So you know what it's like?"

Harry didn't want to be stunned at all, but he supposed he should.

He went and sat down on the pile of cushions and from the look on Anna's face, Harry could tell that he was the first person she had ever seen to think that it would be best to not be standing before passing out.

"Stupefy," Anna incanted.

Harry's vision was filled with the red glow of the charm as it raced towards him and he found himself shutting his eyes before he opened them with a jolt. He was lying on the floor, and Anna was standing over him with her wand pointed at him.

"Weird, isn't it?" she asked.

"I was out?" he asked.

"Like a candle," she said.

"Weird," he said, standing up.

He switched places with Anna, who took care to sit down among the cushions. He didn't make much progress before the study session wound down. His incantation was perfect, he thought, he was doing everything right, except, it wasn't working.

"How are you doing?" Benjamin asked, coming up. He, Harry had noticed prior, had moved on
from muggle fighting to magical dueling. Now though, he, and most everyone else looked ready to go.

"I'm not even dazed," Anna said.

"Sorry I took all your time," Harry said sheepishly.

Anna waved his comment aside. "I've been reviewing in my head."

"Try on me," Benjamin said, quickly switching places with Anna. He too seemed to quickly grasp the benefit of sitting on the floor. Harry wasn't sure why he thought that switching people would be a benefit, unless Anna was especially resistant to the stunning spell and hadn't mentioned. No reason not to try though.

"Stupefy," he said. A red flash erupted from his wand, and Benjamin passed out. Still though, Harry wasn't sure.

"Did that really work?" he asked. "Or are you just trying to make me think it worked to boost my confidence?"

Benjamin didn't say anything. Anna poked him in the ribs.

"He's out," she said.

"Right," Harry said, a bit perplexed. "Wait, what's the spell to wake him up."

"Enervate," Anna said, with her wand pointed at Benjamin. "Get on up Benjie." She turned to Harry. "I'll make sure you know that one next week."

"Why'd that work?" Harry asked.

"Intent matters," Benjamin said.

"What?" Harry asked.

"He means that you should leave chivalry behind in the muggle world," Anna said with an amused look.

"What?" Harry repeated.

"It didn't work right because you didn't want to stupefy a girl," Benjamin said.

"See you next week Harry," Anna said.

"Bye," Harry said, his face flushed red.

Benjamin gave him a wave, and it seemed that he had different thoughts on chivalry from Anna because he left to walk her back to Ravenclaw tower while Harry walked back to Gryffindor alone.

The weekend had been filled with much more quidditch than Harry had really had time for. Of course, then Monday saw him receiving homework from five different subjects. Still, as he walked
He stopped outside the door to the potions lab and checked to make sure he had his list; the few things he had decided to talk to Professor Snape about that evening. Two of them had nothing to do with potions, which he was a little nervous about. He walked into the potions lab, and noticed right away that there was something different. Snape was looking at him oddly; like he was waiting for something.

"Good evening professor," Harry said, unsure of what he was supposed to say.

There was a pause.

"Good evening," Professor Snape said, before turning to whatever work he had before him.

Well that had been odd. Harry set up his work station as he mulled over the bizarre normalcy of the exchange that had just occurred. It wasn't until he had set up his work station that he had really realized what had seemed off when he had walked into the classroom: Professor Snape hadn't worn that blank look he had adopted since the start of term. He had almost looked apprehensive for a moment. Though that was a word that Harry couldn't really attribute to Professor Snape.

Harry had been nervous to start bringing up his talking points, or rather, more nervous than he normally was, but he did. They had a short discussion about the use of chocolate in potions, and stardust too; both, it seemed, could be used to make the most marvelous of potions, and the most terrible of poisons. They talked about dragon's blood and fairy fangs for a bit. However, he was especially nervous to bring up the next topic, as he removed the flame from his simmering potion, for the next topic had little to do with potions, though it tied in. Harry was worried that whatever bewitchment that had the two of them tolerating each other would break the moment he deviated from Professor Snape's area of interest.

"Do you like to cook at all?" Harry asked. "Only, it seems like potions without magic." Or frog guts.

He supposed it didn't really count if he tied it back into potions. He about held his breath waiting for a response.

Professor Snape answered him with only a moment's pause.

"I suppose it never seemed a practical skill to acquire," Professor Snape said. "I've always kept things simple when I've fared for myself."

Harry refrained from sighing. It wasn't a total bust; the spell hadn't broken; the man hadn't started sneering at him again for suggesting that he might do something as mundane as cooking. He had sort of been hoping that Snape was a secret master chef or something though. Maybe he was, but he was keeping it a secret. He probably wouldn't want to ruin his reputation.

"Do you?" Professor Snape asked, surprising Harry.

"I used to," Harry said, though he hadn't expected the question to be turned around on him. "It was fun for a while. I was doing something useful and it felt like I was being grown up. But I guess it sort of became repetitive after a while. I never got to try fun things. Potions though, there's always
something new." He'd sort of thought he'd get to eat more when Aunt Petunia had had him start cooking breakfast for the household. He had quickly been disabused of that notion.

"Variety is the spice of life," Professor Snape said dryly.

"Well variety isn't going to help with this potion," Harry said as he added exactly 129 poppy seeds to the brew. "It's very particular."

"The Widow's Shield is a very difficult and timely potion to brew. Curious that you chose it over other, easier potions," Professor Snape said, and here there was calculation in his eyes as he looked over at Harry.

"I like a challenge," Harry said evasively.

"Hmmm," was Professor Snape's only response as he turned back to his own work.

They worked in silence for a while longer. Harry was almost giddy, though he made sure to pay close attention to what he was doing. That hadn't just been civil discourse, that had been a normal conversation. Harry waited a bit, but he was very excited to use the last topic on his list, wizard chess. It turned out to be the longest conversation he thought he had ever had with Professor Snape; Harry even tied in Ron's project. Though the conversation eventually ended with another long bout of silence, it was not the awkward sort, and the conversation had worked out. Harry was starting to see that, when he wasn't trying to intimidate everyone around him into silence, Professor Snape actually was pleasant to talk to. He felt like he was starting to see some sort of sign of the person who his mother had cared for.

Fifteen steps later, and Harry had come to a stopping point. With luck, he would be able to finish the potion during the next session. Then he could start experimenting with it.

Harry was packing up when Professor Snape surprised him by starting a conversation himself.

"It is less than two weeks until the first quidditch match," Professor Snape observed.

"Gryffindor versus Slytherin," Harry said with a nod. "Same line-up as last year, too. Though, hopefully there won't be any house-elf-controlled bludgers trying to knock me off my broom this time."

"House elf?" Professor Snape asked incredulously.

"Yeah," Harry said nonchalantly. "A crazy house elf named Dobby spent a good bit of time last year trying to convince me to leave Hogwarts for my own safety."

"With a bludger?" Severus said, his tone still laced with incredulity.

"Crazy," Harry said. "He was the Malfoy's, he knew about the basilisk and was convinced he had to keep me away from it. Got me into trouble over the summer with my relatives and he blocked up Kings Cross at the start of term."

"If the house elf was crazy," Professor Snape said wryly, "what were you when you decided that the best solution to missing the train at Kings Cross was to fly to Hogwarts in an enchanted muggle automobile?"

Harry hadn't meant to drag the conversation into reminding Professor Snape of one of his stupider decisions.
"Twelve," Harry said. "And grateful in the end that I had chosen Gryffindor, since Professor McGonagall was less inclined to expel us."

"You chose Gryffindor Mr. Potter?" Professor Snape said. "I was not aware that we gave students that choice."

"Well the hat sort of indicated I could fit into any house," Harry said.

"And you chose Gryffindor," Professor Snape mused.

"Well, I didn't so much choose Gryffindor as I said…" Harry paused when he realized what he was about to say. "That is, I, um…" He had really stepped in it; and now everything was ruined.

Snape had one eyebrow raised inquisitively and knowingly though, and Harry was relieved to see that there was no sneer on his face.

"Yes Mr. Potter," Professor Snape said. "Do tell."

Words tumbled out of Harry's mouth as he tried to explain in such a way as to not offend the head of Slytherin House.

"Well I had met Ron on the train and we sort of became friends right away and he said that his whole family was in Gryffindor and that's where he wanted to go too, see?" Harry said quickly.

"And then I met Malfoy, and he told me to ditch Ron and be his friend instead and he'd said Slytherin was the only place for him, and that all really put me off. And I'd heard my parents had been in Gryffindor and well, some other stuff about Slytherin, and I guess I didn't want to take any chances."

"So you told it anywhere but Slytherin," Professor Snape finished the story.

Harry shrugged, trying to gauge however much he had put off Professor Snape.

"Imagine if you had been in Slytherin," Professor Snape said, though Harry had the idea that he was speaking more to himself.

"It got pretty pushy afterwards," said Harry, a bit more boldly, realizing that the man hadn't taken offense. "Told me Slytherin would help me on the way to greatness, and that just sounded weird so I was just like, 'not Slytherin, not Slytherin.'"

"You never asked to be placed in Gryffindor?" Professor Snape asked.

Harry shrugged. "I guess I'd never felt all that brave before. I suppose I'd wanted to feel brave, but I didn't feel like I really belonged. I was worried at first that I wouldn't live up to the standards, but, well, that sort of took care of itself I guess."

"Yes," Professor Snape said. "Chasing after a mountain troll."

This time there was a bit of a sneer, though it did not seem cruel.

"Would you have let me onto the quidditch team in first year if I had been in Slytherin?" he asked.

"Most assuredly not," Professor Snape said. "Second years shouldn't even be playing in matches."

"Would you have expelled me last year if I had been in Slytherin?" Harry asked.

Snape opened his mouth, most likely to say that he most assuredly would have, but he closed it
before saying, "Why Mr. Potter, if you had been in Slytherin, I can assure you, you would have never thought it a good idea to fly to Hogwarts."

"I suppose it's a moot point, but you can think on it when Gryffindor beats Slytherin," he said cheekily, while still trying to gauge if he was taking things too far.

"I would not count your chickens before they've hatched, Mr. Potter," Professor Snape said with a half smile. The conversation was over.

Harry finished cleaning up and packed up his supplies.

"Good night Professor," he said on his way out.

"Good night Mr. Potter," Professor Snape said. "Do try not to slay any monsters on your way to the your dorm."

"Well I'll try professor, but I can't make any promises," was Harry's reply before he closed the door behind him.

That, Harry thought, had to have been the weirdest evening of his entire life. And considering his three previous birthdays, that was saying something. The weirdest thing was, though, that it had felt normal. It had been a normal conversation. With Professor Snape. Had that been a joke between them at the end? It couldn't have been, because that wouldn't make any sense. Perhaps he was currently dreaming.

'It's working,' Harry thought to himself. They were getting along very well, or so it seemed. With that thought though, Harry stopped.

Since when had getting along with Snape been the goal? Since when had having a nice conversation with him become what he wanted. He'd just wanted to know more about the man who had sired him, whom his mother had loved. None of that translated into wanting to let bygones be bygones and become friends with the man. He started walking again.

Harry did manage to not slay any monsters before he got to his dorm, though he did get a couple of dirty looks from Slytherins walking the dungeons. He spent the time walking from two polar opposite points in the castle thinking mostly about Professor Snape. He thought about the man who he had known during his first two years at the school and about the stranger who had taken his place this one. He thought about the gross amount of time the man had spent watching over him. Though more and more, he thought about his mother, and one particular thing she had said concerning Professor Snape in the letter, something she had wanted. There was a conversation he was starting to feel like he should be having with the man that he couldn't possibly broach without reveling things he was still adamant he would never tell the man.

"You alright mate?" Ron asked while the three of them were studying in the library. "You've been distracted."

"Oh I'm fine," Harry said. "It's just…" he looked around. "I realized last night that I have no idea what I want with this whole thing with Professor Snape."

"Well you said as much from the beginning," Hermione said, her head tilted towards Harry but her
eyes still scanning the pages of her book.

"No," Harry said. "I mean, I know I never really knew what I was looking to get out of it, besides just figuring out what my mom had seen in him, or what parts of him are in me. I didn't know what I was looking for exactly or why I needed it in the first place, but last night it was…different.

"I enjoyed last night," he said, almost like it was a dirty secret that he was confessing. "I mean, I enjoyed talking to him, and I enjoyed working on my potion with him, and when I left it was like I was looking forward to the next time, and I was happy. I was happy that everything was going well with him and that's when I realized… It's like somewhere along the way something hijacked the mission and decided that I was trying to make friends with Professor Snape. It's like something's shifted and now I don't know what I want anymore at all. I mean, it's ridiculous."

Harry noticed that he now had his friends full attention.

"So you're saying you like him and you're not sure if you want to get close to him or not?" Hermione asked.

"No," Harry said. "I don't like him. I mean how could I? I hate him."

Even to his own ears he heard a great deal of uncertainty.

"I'm not sure how you could like talking to him so much if you hate him," Ron said.

"I just don't get it," Harry said. "I'm supposed to hate him right?"

He looked to Ron for confirmation.

"I mean he broke my mum's heart and spent two years trying to make me miserable here at Hogwarts," he said.

"It's complicated with family," was Ron's shrugging reply.

"But he's not family," Harry said. "He's… I don't know what he is, but he's not family."

"But he's been nice to you?" Hermione asked.

"I don't know about nice," Harry hedged.

"He hasn't been mean and you've been having pleasant conversations that you enjoy and look forward to," Hermione said. "At least for Professor Snape, he's being nice. I think you need to reconsider telling him."

"Reconsider…” Harry said stunned. "Hermione just because he's been 'nice' to me doesn't mean I want him to be my dad, and it certainly doesn't mean I would trust him not to abuse the position somehow. I can't tell him."

"Harry, they're no closer to catching any of those maniacs and you really need somewhere safe to stay over the summer," Hermione said. "My house isn't warded. There's a good chance you won't be allowed to stay at Ron's if they're still on the loose. You need somewhere to stay and you need a better plan than 'I'll figure it out'."

"What if he's horrible?" Harry asked. "What if he's worse than the Dursleys?"

"Well he hasn't been horrible while you've worked on your potions project," Hermione said. "And you said yourself that he didn't want you doing it in the first place so he had every reason to try to
get you to quit, but he didn't. He's also saved your life which already puts him ahead of the Dursleys in terms of taking care of you. You need to think about this Harry, and the sooner the better. You don't want to wait till the end of term. Think of it like a test run. You can have him know now while you're in school and living in the dorm, and if he's horrible, well you can run away come summer and I'll help you to boot. But Harry, for whatever reason, he seems to be getting along with you right now, so I don't think he's going to stop just because he finds out he's your father. It could make everything better."

"I just can't," Harry said. "Not unless…"

"Unless what?" Ron asked.

"Nothing," Harry said. "I mean maybe if… It's nothing. Have you found an explanation for Kent's theory in there," he asked Ron, changing the subject and clearly ending the conversation.

"Just think about it Harry," Hermione said.

Harry started turning the pages of the book in front of him.

He watched them flying about. Like birds they were. He watched one bird in particular; flying the fastest, making the tightest turns. He watched until they all landed. He watched as they disappeared into a building only to leave in smaller groups. He watched the boy as he walked back up to the castle. He could take him now. None of those students could match him. He could take the boy, but getting him past the wards was another matter. The tunnel was on the other side of the grounds. Portkeys were useless unless they were made by the headmaster. He couldn't fly for the life of him, and carrying the boy past the wards would be too risky for how long it would take.

Fenrir Greyback growled as the boy returned to the shelter of the castle. He could be patient. He had a plan. The rat just had to do his part first.

Chapter End Notes

Hey, thank you for reading. I hope you enjoyed the chapter. If you're looking for something new in-between updates, I'd like to recommend Against the Moon by Stoplight Delight. It's a MWPP that focuses on Remus and starts in his first year. It's very good. However, it is a WIP. Also, fair warning, triggers for miscarriage, gore and death. There's also In the Silence by Esse on ff.net, a RotG fan fiction. It's incredibly well written in a unique fanciful style and I loved every minute of it, however it is abandoned. Like the author fell off the face of the internet abandoned. It is however good enough that I don't regret reading it even though I don't expect to ever finish it.
IMPORTANT A/N: Or semi important anyway. I was horrible in the beginning and I never gave a name to the charms that Harry uses to manage his hemophilia. I’ve been referring to them as the diagnostic charm and like 'the charm that prevented him from bleeding to death,' pretty much. So from now on, we shall have the Sang Vitalis Charm and the Sang Vitalis Diagnostic.

Sorry this took so long. I wrote a oneshot BH6 Avengers crossover in between chapters. I really liked how it turned out, but I’m not going to make a habit of writing things in between chapters. I like to finish projects before I start new ones.

See the end of the chapter for more notes.

Harry added the dragon's fang to the cauldron cautiously. He had to be careful to make sure the tip of the fang was the last part to go under the surface of the potion or else he would have to start over. He only had one beaker of the starter left after this and he didn’t want to start from scratch.

He gazed at the potion somewhat warily counting down the seconds. Nothing happened. He let out a breath of relief. Nothing happening actually meant it had worked. The potion was done. It had certainly taken long enough.

"I'm done professor," Harry said.

Professor Snape looked up from the essays he was grading.

"How do you spell the contraction of 'they are,' Mr. Potter?" Professor Snape responded.

"Um, it's the one with the apostrophe," Harry said.

"Indeed it is," Professor Snape said. "Try to remember that when you are writing your essays."

"Are you actually grading my essay right now professor, or have you been saving that for a while now?" Harry joked a little boldly.

The professor held up the paper in front of him.

"Oh," Harry said.

"Bring up the potion," Professor Snape said. "Let's see how you have done."

Harry ladled out the potion and brought it up to the professor's desk. The man retrieved what basically looked like a paint brush made with silky fine silver bristles, which he dipped into the beaker and carefully wiped the excess off on the rim. He transferred the brush to his other hand and pulled out his wand and cast a spell on the brush. Another spell cleared off his desk and he then used the brush to paint on a symbol, about the size of a dinner plate, in the center. Harry recognized the symbol from runes class and his research into protective wards.

"Mr. Potter," Professor Snape said. "Would you like to try to set my desk on fire?"
Harry grinned, pulling out his own wand.

"Incendio," he cast. A tongue of flame leapt from his wand towards the table where it died without touching the wood. Harry smiled at the failed spell.

Professor Snape cleared his throat. "Incendio!" he all but roared. The result was the same, if with a much larger flame.

Harry just gave him a look.

"When doing an experiment, it is always good to be thorough," Professor Snape said.

"Hm, well it looks like it works," Harry said. "I guess I'll be working with Professor Flitwick from now on."

"Indeed," Professor Snape said. "And have you selected the protective charms you will be testing?"

"I have," Harry said. "I finished the writeup too, sir."

"Good," Professor Snape said. "And remember, you still have one beaker of the starter potion to finish if you want to expand the project later."

"I will, sir," Harry said. "Though those last stages were pretty difficult. I'll probably procrastinate on that. I tend to do that a lot."

Harry looked up to the professor's face.

"You and the rest of the students in this castle, Mr. Potter," Professor Snape said.

"You know, you could probably help me with the next part of the project, if you were interested. You were really good teaching that confusion charm when you covered for Professor Lupin last week."

"I could very easily teach you the charms you will be working with," Professor Snape said. "However, the point of this project is not to learn charms, it is to experiment with protective charms not normally paired with the Widow's Shield potion. Professor Flitwick is far better equipped to work with you in that regard."

"Oh," Harry said. "Right, yeah. Well… It's been fun professor, I guess I'll just clean up."

"Do be certain to give me the final writeup for review," Professor Snape said. "I will be interested to see how it goes."

"Right," Harry said. "I will. How's your project going, sir?" He started putting his ingredients away. Before putting his notebook away, he turned the pages back and crossed an item off of a list.

"It is going well," Professor Snape said. "Or as well as it can go during the school year. I won't see much progress until the summer I expect."

"What do you mean?" Harry asked. "You won't have all the free labor over the summer."

"No, I won't have a thousand distractions over the summer," Professor Snape said.

"Well I guess you'll have your Monday evenings free from now on," Harry said.

"My productivity shall surely rise," Professor Snape said.
"Quidditch is in a few days," Harry said leadingly.

"Indeed," said Professor Snape.

"So?" asked Harry. "Are you coming to the match?"

"Are you asking the Head of Slytherin house if he is coming to the Slytherin/Gryffindor match?" Professor Snape asked.

Harry shrugged.

"I am indeed looking forward to a Slytherin victory," Professor Snape said.

"I wouldn't put any money on it, Professor," Harry said. "Gryffindor's got it in the bag. We've been practicing so much more."

"Practice will only help you so much against Slytherin cunning," Professor Snape said.

"Oh is that what we're calling it now?" Harry asked.

Professor Snape merely raised an eyebrow.

"Well you've got the better brooms," Harry said. "I'll give you that."

Harry could have sworn Professor Snape had grimaced before saying, "May the best team win."

"I'm sure they will," Harry said. "I'll see you in class professor."

"Do be careful out there Mr. Potter," Professor Snape said. "It would be a shame if Gryffindor had to forfeit the match because its Seeker was in the Hospital Wing once more."

"I'll schedule all of my near death experiences for after the match," Harry said on his way out.

Had Professor Snape been making a joke about Harry's frequent, sometimes match ending, trips to the hospital wing, or had he been threatening the competition? Harry couldn't tell. That was the thing with Professor Snape's humor, you weren't always sure if he was joking or not, or aware that a joke had even been made until later.

Harry found that he was a little put out to be finished with the project, or rather, the part of the project where he was working with Professor Snape. What would he have thought of that a year ago? It was pretty surreal to think of how different things were.

It would be difficult to find the right moment to talk to the man. He had hoped an opportunity to have a serious talk would come to him over the past week, and now he was done with the project and all of the good opportunities were wasted. The moment had just never felt right.

Harry stopped walking towards the common room. It probably wasn't ever going to feel right; it was just an awkward conversation to have. He really just needed to get it over with so he could stop worrying about it. Harry did an about face and started walking back to the potions lab going over how to start this conversation in his head. He knocked on the door before he let himself in.

"Did you forget something Mr. Potter?" Professor Snape asked.

"No, I…" Harry said. "I've been meaning to talk to you about something. It's a little awkward but I figured it wasn't going to get less awkward so I thought I'd just do it now."
Professor Snape eyed him appraisingly. "Go on then," he said.

"Right," Harry said. "Well you see the thing is, um… There's something I think you should know, and I feel like I should tell you, but if I tell you you're going to have, like, this one really big question, and I have to tell you before hand that I'm not going to answer it."

"Are you asking if I still would want to know this bit of information if it will only raise questions I won't have answered?" Professor Snape asked.

"Well yeah" Harry said. "That and I was hoping you'd promise not to press the issue if I tell you."

Professor Snape's eyes pierced into Harry's for a moment before the man said, "Very well."

"Right, so…” Harry found all of his pre-rehearsed lines leaving his head. "You see I got a letter this summer. It had been written when I was a baby and left with a service that would send it when I turned thirteen. It was from my mother, she'd written it just in case, you know? She talked about… well a lot of things really, but she talked about how she found out she was a witch and about a friend she had had growing up."

Harry heard a small sharp intake of breath from the professor and realizing that he had been looking more at the ground than at the professor, Harry looked up to see a very controlled look on the man's face.

There was a moment's pause.

"Um…yeah, so, she mentioned you, and that you'd been really close friends and that you'd had a… falling out. She said that you'd apologized the next day but that it had been the end of your… um… friendship. So the thing is, in the letter she said that she forgave you like, right then and there, when you apologized but, and this is the thing you can't ask about, she said she couldn't tell you, then or ever. But after reading the letter I think… I know she would have wanted you to know if she knew you today. She spoke, um… fondly of you. I could tell that she still missed you when she wrote it, and that she was worried about you because of the war, but she was very hopeful that you were… alright. And I think she'd be happy to know that you were."

Harry was looking at the ground again. He looked up at the professor who hadn't made a sound. The man had that blank look on his face, the one he had worn earlier in the school year, the one that had disappeared when he'd really started getting on with the man.

"I see," Professor Snape said. "If that is all Mr. Potter, then it would be best for you to be along. Curfew is soon upon us and I'm sure you have homework that needs your attention."

"Professor?" Harry asked.

"Good evening, Mr. Potter," Professor Snape said.

"Good evening, Professor," Harry said, turning around and walking out the door.

Well that had been odd. Though the man had hardly looked very happy with what Harry had told him, Harry found himself wondering just how much Professor Snape might still think of Harry's mother. It had been over fifteen years since they had been friends, but the man had clearly been affected by what Harry had told him.

"Did it work out?" Hermione asked as he walked into the common room. "Or are you going to have to use the last batch of starter?"
"Hey mate," Ron said.

"Hey," Harry said. "It worked."

"You almost sound disappointed," Ron said before lowering his voice. "You should just tell him about the you-know-what. It's obvious that you're getting on well enough. If you like him enough that you're disappointed not to be stuck in the dungeons more than necessary, then I think you can survive the summer with him."

"I haven't finished yet," Harry mumbled. "And I haven't even decided whether to tell him or not."

"What haven't you finished?" Hermione asked as Ron spoke over her.

"What's there to decide?" Ron asked. "It's been another couple of weeks and guess what, they haven't found any of those Death Eaters. Now I hope you can stay over at the Burrow. That would be awesome. But you need a guaranteed safe place to stay. The guy who keep's trying to save your life seems like a great candidate to make sure you don't get mauled by a mad werewolf over the summer."

"I just need to be sure," Harry said.

"Which brings me back to my question," Hermione said.

"It's nothing," Harry said.

"It's not nothing," Hermione said. "How are you making sure?"

"I just..." Harry said. "Look, I think it would be fair to say that I'm never really acting quite myself when I'm around Professor Snape, right? So what if over the summer he really gets to know me and he really really doesn't like me?"

"What are you even talking about?" Ron asked exasperatedly.

"I'm just making sure that the professor gets to know me, you know," Harry said. "So that way if he doesn't like me I can know now and then I won't say anything."

"Don't be daft," Ron said. "The problem before was that he hated you when he didn't know you. The more he's gotten to know you, the better you get on."

"I just need to be sure," Harry said.

"When did this become the get-Snape-to-love-me mission?" Ron asked, still keeping his voice low while they were in the common room. "I thought this was the make-sure-I-don't-die-this-Summer mission. It's great if he really starts to care about you, and you can have whatever paternal relationship thing that works, but I thought the focus was making sure you had a safe place to stay where you don't have bars on your window and no one's knocking you around. We can worry about the rest after we've taken care of that part. The offer's still on the table you know. If he's horrible we'll just kidnap you and you won't have to deal with it. Promise."

"Yeah, well what if I don't want to go through that again?" Harry asked.

"Go through what?" Hermione asked.

"Look," Harry said. "If he doesn't like Harry Potter his student that's fine. But if he doesn't like Harry Potter his son... I've been through the whole, my-family-hates-me thing enough. I can deal
with him not liking me after he gets to know me, but if he knows I'm his son and I move in with him and then he realizes it was a mistake, and he winds up hating me… No. No way, if he can't like me when he gets to know me as his student then I won't give him the chance to hate me as his son."

"But he does seem to like you Harry," Hermione said. "What do you think he's going to find out about you that's going to make him hate you?"

Harry shrugged.

"I just have to make sure," Harry said.

"Is this why you insist on wearing your worst robes to the potions lab?" Hermione asked. "Are you trying to put yourself in the worst light?"

"What?" Harry asked. "No. Do you know how many times my cauldron's blown during this project? That's purely practical." Though it was somewhat true, if he was being honest with himself.

"You wear good robes to potions class," Hermione said.

"I wear my worst good robes to potions class," Harry said. "I can't get away wearing last year's worst robes to classes, McGonagall would kill me. It's nice to have nice clothes you know. You may not have to worry about your cauldron exploding, but us lesser mortals need to make sure we have something decent to wear for the whole school year. You care way too much about what I wear."

"Ughh," Ron said. "Enough about robes. Harry, just try to finish up and make your decision. In all honesty the suspense is killing me."

"What?" Harry asked.

"I've been waiting to see the look on Snape's face when he finds out he's a dad for weeks now. Honestly, he's going to go from the scowling bat of the dungeons to gobsmacked like that," said Ron with a snap of his fingers.

"Woah," Harry said. "If I decide to tell him, I'm not going to do it while you're there with a bag of popcorn."

"What do you mean I can't be there?" Ron asked scandalized. "I was going to get a camera from Creevey."

"…Prat," Harry said when he realized that Ron was having him on.

"Tosser," Ron said.

"Honestly," Hermione said. "Can we take this seriously."

"Yes," Ron said. "In all seriousness, can you just imagine the look on his face?"

Seriously, Harry could; he could imagine a million different ways for that conversation to play out. Though most of them didn't end well.

"Really Ronald," Hermione said, sounding a bit like Mrs. Weasley.

"Enough being serious," Ron said. "We just had a big serious conversation. Harry's going to do
whatever he needs to do, and we're probably not going to talk him out of it, so why don't we finish this homework. A couple friends of mine decided to talk me into taking Arithmancy and I was too nice to tell them to go dunk their heads in the lake."

"Did you already start the essay?" Harry asked.

"Not without you mate," Ron said. "We suffer together."

"You are especially pensive tonight Severus," the headmaster said.

He should have canceled tea, or rather, he should have kept occluding; completely immersed himself.

"I have much on my mind," Severus said.

"Coming from you, that is saying something," the headmaster said. "Perhaps it would help to talk about it."

"It does not bear discussing," Severus said.

"Perhaps," the headmaster said. "Tell me then, how is your project progressing."

"Well enough," Severus said. "I've established that there is a reaction with the taproot, but so far tests have been inconclusive. I am starting to think there might be a lunar affect."

"The moon has been governing much in our lives lately," the headmaster said.

"Too much," Severus said.

"And how fares Harry's potions project?" The headmaster asked.

"He has finished brewing," Severus said. "He is moving on now to work with Filius, and none too soon."

"I had rather gotten the feeling that you had come to tolerate Mr. Potter's presence well," the Headmaster said.

"I tolerate it just fine," Severus said.

There was a pause in the room as the two men sipped their tea.

"She wrote him a letter," Severus said. "Lily."

"Did she indeed?" the headmaster asked.

"She wrote about me," Severus said. "She had arranged for it to be delivered on his thirteenth birthday."

"She wrote about you?" the headmaster asked.

"Among other things presumably," Severus said. "Mr. Potter decided that there was something she would have wanted me to know."

"Indeed," the headmaster said. "And what he had to say has upset you."

"I think he thought it would be a comfort," Severus said. "He said she had forgiven me, that the
words that ended our friendship, she forgave me for then and there."

"And this was not a comfort?" the headmaster asked.

"It begs the question," Severus said.

"Why she did not tell you this herself then and there?" the headmaster asked.

Severus nodded.

"He prefaced the conversation by explaining that there would be such an obvious question and that he would not answer it," Severus said. "A misguided attempt to pass along this message while sparing my feelings."

"You presume to know why?" the headmaster asked.

"Of course I know why," Severus said. "She didn't trust me. She may have forgiven me, but she saw the path I was going down better than I. I was going where she could not follow. She made the right choice where I am concerned."

"I think she saw the path better than you may think," the headmaster said. "Lest, why did she included you in this letter. Why do you think Mr. Potter decided to pass on this message?"

Severus was silent.

"Perhaps he has seen the path you walk and decided that you deserved to hear this message of forgiveness," the headmaster said.

"Unfortunately, she is not here to forgive me my gravest mistakes," Severus said.

"And you do not think that she would?" the Headmaster asked.

Severus was silent once more. He sipped his tea to avoid eye contact with the old man.

"Do you think that this has anything to do with why Mr. Potter decided to do this potions project?" the headmaster asked. "Perhaps he has been trying to find a connection to his mother through you."

"If he is looking for connection he would have better luck with the sentimental werewolf down the hall," Severus said. "I must presume that the letter mentions the man."

"Yet he has gone to you," the headmaster said.

"The boy is purely bizarre," Severus said. "It isn't just that he's decided to… befriend me."

"Indeed?" the headmaster asked, his silver bushy eyebrows rising.

"He's been inserting these odd confessionals into conversations over the past two weeks," Severus said.

The boy was rather clumsy about it too. He tried to make it seem a natural part of the conversation, but he always would glance at Severus as though he was gauging his reaction.

"Confessionals you say?" the headmaster asked.

"Little things," Severus said. "Personality flaws, bad habits. He just brings something up and then waits to see what I think."
"And what do you think?" the headmaster asked.

"I think he's testing me somehow," Severus said. "Though for what, I can not fathom."

It was odd that a boy of thirteen should have such a list in his head.

"Time will tell," the headmaster said and now it was his turn to have a pensive look about him, though it was gone quickly. "Rookwood has been spotted in Bosnia."

Severus was brought out of his musings with that news.

"They are searching for the Dark Lord," Severus said.

"It is the most likely explanation," the headmaster said.

Severus grimaced. "What can they do if they do find him?" he asked.

"With the right resources they could return him to his full power," the headmaster said. "There is more than one ritual that I know Riddle is aware of that could reconstitute a body for him."

"What will we do?" Severus asked.

"We will give Harry the best chances of surviving and fulfilling his role in the prophesy," the headmaster answered.

Wormtail scurried across the dark castle grounds towards the forbidden forest. An owl hooted in the cold night air and Wormtail froze, his ears listening for the sound of wings in flight. There was nothing and he continued on, trying to go as fast as his small legs would let him. The trees were getting closer. He would be safe in the cover of their shadows.

Wormtail transformed into Peter when he was safely within the forest. He pulled out his wand and looked about nervously. The shadows of the trees flickered as a patchy cloud moved across the waning gibbous moon, their shifting movement sending a shiver down Peter's spine.

"What happened?!" Greyback growled angrily behind him.

Peter yelped and spun around, finding the feral wizard had been right behind him. He took an involuntary step back, and then another voluntary one.

"He didn't go for the bait," Wormtail said.

"I told you to forget the bait," Greyback said. "I told you you weren't going to be able to lure him out of the castle, your job was to take him while he slept and bring him to me. Why would you think you could lure the boy out of the castle on the night of the full moon?"

"I didn't try to lure him out of the castle, I tried to lure him out of the common room," Peter said. "I need to maintain my cover. I can't just drag the boy's body out of that bloody portrait and expect no one to see me."

"You have a wand you fool," Greyback snarled. "If someone sees you, you kill them. Are you afraid to face children?"

"I can't draw attention to the tower," Peter said. "That would draw attention to me."

"You should fear less the old fool who runs this school," Greyback growled, stalking closer to
Perter. "And fear more the man who would gladly kill you tonight, you useless rat."

"N-No," Peter said. "Wait, y-you need me. I'm your man inside."

"And what use are you to me on the inside if you won't do as I say?" Greyback asked.

"Polyjuice Potion!" Peter exclaimed desperately. "I can get you Polyjuice Potion."

"So you're a potions master now are you?" Greyback sneered.

"I don't have to be," Peter said. "Snape's notorious for stockpiling potions like that. He'll have some in his private stores. You could take the place of one of his friends and lure him out onto the grounds right before the moon rises. If you took the place of one of the Weasley twins, you could even get him through the tunnel. Potter would think little of them telling him they wanted to show him a secret tunnel. A very light confundus would easily go undetected and make him forget that it was the full moon and ignore any behavioral oddities."

"You think you can steal it, then?" Greyback said.

He had too.

"I can," Peter said. "F-few know the secrets of the castle as I do."

"One month," Greyback said. "I expect to have Potter one month from now. Do you understand."

"I do," Peter was quick to say. "I do."

"Scabbers!" Ron cried out joyously, waking up Harry and from the sounds of it, the rest of the dormitory.

"You find him?" Harry asked drowsily looking at the clock. Fifteen minutes to go until wakeup, he could have slept another fifteen minutes.

"Yeah," Ron said happily. "He's just curled up at the foot of my bed."

"No noise till the alarm goes off," Seamus said testily.

"Sorry," Ron said, dismissively.

Harry knew he wouldn't get back to sleep now, but he did try. They had stayed up a bit late the night before, finishing homework, only to go up to the dorm that night to find Scabbers was missing. They had spent a good bit of time searching for the rat before turning in. Ron had been nearly inconsolable, convinced that the rodent had crawled away somewhere to die. Harry was glad that the tragedy had been averted, but judging by how poorly Scabbers had looked lately, he rather thought it was just a matter of time. Rats weren't meant to live that long. The specter of death seemed to hover over the dilapidated rat, and Ron had been worried since the start of term. Perhaps it would have been better if Scabbers had never come back.

Harry drifted in between wakefulness and sleep for fifteen minutes until the alarm went off. The third year Gryffindor boys took a bit longer getting ready for the day that morning. Rather, the Gryffindor boys besides Ron. His chipper spirits seeming to have made him a morning person all of a sudden. Harry and Ron found Hermione reading one of her large tomes in the common room.

"What took you so long?" Hermione asked.
"It took a bit to get going this morning," Harry said.

Hermione quizzed them on Arithmancy on their way down to breakfast, which cured Ron of his chipper spirit. There was supposed to be a test that day.

"Hey Harry," Angelina said from a few seats down as they sat down at the Gryffindor table. "Check out the weather forecast for Saturday."

Harry found a copy of the Daily Prophet being passed from student to student down from Angelina until it reached him. He took a moment to find the weather seer's predictions.

"A heavy rain storm," he said with a sigh. Angelina was going to get her wish. Slytherin wouldn't be happy, the weather would favor Gryffindor. Though Harry couldn't really find much cheer in that, he hated flying in the rain.

"Looks like we'll be creaming Slytherin on Saturday," he said more loudly and with more bravado than he felt as he passed the paper back down towards Angelina.

"That's what I like to hear in the morning," Woods voice called out a few more spaces down. "Keep up that spirit Harry."

Hermione continued quizzing them on Arithmancy as they walked to Defense, the first class of the day. It was a double lesson that day, though Harry didn't mind. Double Defense was way better than double Potions, no matter how well he was getting on with Professor Snape. They were working on counters to minor jinxes at the moment, the ones you couldn't just finite, and there were a lot of them. Harry's drive to do well in defense hadn't gone down, though it was a lot nicer now that he didn't think he had something to prove to the professor, but he still thought he had something to prove to himself. It had been months, and he could still clearly remember the feeling of casting a spell that had utterly failed when he had needed it the most.

After defense was double Transfiguration. He didn't think he would ever need to turn a teacup into a nematode, but he still managed a decent nematode by the end of the two hours. Unfortunately, Hermione felt that lunch would make an excellent study session, and Harry barely managed to scarf down any food before he was dragged to the Arithmancy classroom where he and Ron were drilled on the subject before the bell rang and students started trickling in. The test went well though. Harry was actually pretty pleased about it. For the first time he felt like he was actually catching up in Arithmancy. He was still struggling with Ancient Runes, but he did feel like he was getting there.

The last class of the day was Charms. Once more, Harry wasn't sure why he needed to know how to make feathers dance, but it was sort of fun, and he found himself catching on to the spell pretty quickly. He stayed after to talk to Professor Flitwick about his project. They arranged to meet Wednesday after classes to start working on the project. Harry found Ron and Hermione waiting for him outside of the classroom and they made their way to the library before dinner. It wasn't long though before Harry felt the affects of his rushed lunch and the trio found themselves heading downstairs.

Harry hadn't made it two steps into the Great Hall however when he was dragged away by an upset Oliver Wood.

"Emergency Quidditch meeting," Oliver said.

"But dinner," Harry said, looking at the laden tables.
"The twins are getting some food right now," Oliver said. "Come on, the girls are waiting for us."

"Ollie, we don't need an emergency Quidditch meeting," Harry said, trying to keep up with the much taller boys long stride. "We're ready, we're going to kick butt on Saturday."

"We're not ready," Oliver said. "It's all gone to hell and we're going to have to scramble if we're going to be ready."

"What's wrong," Harry asked as they walked into an unused office where Angelina, Alicia, and Katie were transfiguring some furniture that would be appropriate for a quidditch meeting. "Is someone not going to be able to play on Saturday? Are we subbing in someone new?"

"Everyone's fine Harry," Katie said. "Oliver's just overreacting a bit."

"When isn't he," Fred said, walking into the room with a tray of sandwiches. George was right behind with pumpkin juice and crisps.

"I'm not overreacting," Oliver said. "We need to take this seriously."

"What happened?" Harry asked.

"Slytherin backed out of the game," Fred said. "We're playing Hufflepuff."

"Slytherin forfeit?" Harry asked skeptically.

"They didn't have to," Oliver said darkly.

"Let's start from the beginning," Alicia said.

"Flint got the rest of the captains together during lunch today," Oliver said. "Told us Pucey's come down with Dragon Pox and won't be able to play on Saturday. He said, 'it would be a shame if we had to forfeit for something out of our control,'" Oliver said, doing a trollish impression of Marcus Flint. "He wanted Ravenclaw or Hufflepuff to take their place, so it would be 'fair'."

"No," Harry said incredulously.

"Yes," George said. "That new puff captain said Hufflepuff would take Slytherin's place."

"I can't believe Pucey came down with the pox right before the game though," Alicia said.

"I can't believe it either," Oliver said. "There haven't been any Hogsmeade weekends, and the castle's all but completely isolated. Where'd he catch it from."

"Oh they're probably faking it," Fred said.

"There's a few potions you can use to fake the symptoms," George said. "If no one had taken the match for them, Pucey could have just had a speedy recovery in time for the match."

"Alright," Harry said. "That sucks, but it's not the end of the world."

"Yes it is," Oliver said. "We've been training to play Slytherin; the 'puffs have completely different tactics. And we had the advantage. Slytherin hasn't been practicing much in the rain, we have, and so has Hufflepuff. What's worse, Diggory's been getting his team ready to play Ravenclaw and Ravenclaw's a lot closer to our style than Hufflepuff is to Slytherin."

"Oliver," Kattie said. "I can assure you, Hufflepuff hasn't been practicing near as much in the rain
as we have."

"Yeah, don't worry Ollie, no one does crazy like Gryffindor does crazy," George said. "Just get out
the play book and let's start going over our Hufflepuff strategy."

"And someone pass Harry one of those sandwiches," Angelina said. "He's been eying them since
you brought them in."

It was a long time before they left for the common room that night.

Harry had been nervous on the way to Potions the next day. Things had been a bit weird with the
professor when he had last seen him. He needn't have worried though, Professor Snape was his
usual self. Or rather, usual for this year. It wasn't until after class when they had a study period that
Harry started worrying about Professor Snape again. Hermione brought it about.

"I found a potion that might be useful," Hermione said.

"Werewolf repellant?" Ron asked.

"A lineage potion actually," Hermione said, giving Harry a significant look. "It's used to identify
someone's parents. Since you can't show Professor Snape the letter, I thought you could use the
potion when you tell him."

"If I tell him," Harry reminded her.

"If you tell him," Hermione agreed. "It could be useful. It is a little difficult, but you could make it
easily enough."

"What about that adoption ritual though?" Ron asked. "Harry's dad did that thing to make him like
the third parent. Would that mess with the lineage potion."

Hermione thought for a moment.

"I guess we'll just have to see," she said. "I know you're busy this week Harry, but we could brew it
next week as a test."

"Yeah," Harry said. "I guess we could."

"Are you ready to work on your project with Professor Flitwick after class today?" Hermione
asked.

"I am," Harry said. "And then I've got quidditch after dinner. I'm not going to have much time to do
homework tonight."

"Well everything due tomorrow is already done," Hermione said. "But let's try to finish that essay
for Transfiguration before the end of the study period."

"Fifteen bloody inches," Ron mumbled.

Oliver had decided to practice with four bludgers the night before and Harry was still sore from a
couple of hits. He probably should have seen Madame Pomfrey, but Harry had been more
concerned with getting back to the dormitory so he could check the status of the charm that was
keeping him from bleeding to death on the inside after bludger hits like that. It did turn out to be
holding, but Harry had had to renew it once more, as it hadn't been holding very strong.
Now though, he was working with the fourth year defense study group practicing a binding jinx, and subsequently having one practiced upon him, and he found his sore spots really tender. "You alright there Harry?" Anna asked.

"A little sore from quidditch yesterday," Harry said. "But I'm alright."

"Well I think we've got this jinx down pretty well, do you want to move on to something else?" Anna asked.

"Sure," Harry said. "What did you want to practice?"

"How about the banishing charm?" Anna asked.

"We learned that last year in charms," Harry said.

"I've been to dueling tournaments, and I've seen duelists banish objects into the path of spells," Anna said. "It's tricky though, you have to have a lot of control, and be very fast, but if you get good at it, you can save yourself a lot of energy."

"Oh, alright," Harry said. "That sounds tricky. Have you tried it before?"

"Not with someone shooting spells at me," Anna said.

"Right," Harry said. "Let's give it a shot then."

Anna summoned some pillows and left them strewn about the floor around her.

"What should I use?" Harry asked.

"Stinging hex," Anna said. "Gives me an incentive to try really hard, but we don't have to pause between hits."

"How fast do you want me to go?" Harry asked.

"How bout you start slow and we'll work from there," Anna said.

Alright," Harry said. "Ready?"

"Ready," Anna said.

Harry cast the stinging hex.

"Ow," Anna quietly said a moment before a pillow sailed through where the hex might have traveled.

"Um," Harry said.

"Keep going," Anna said.

There were quite a few more 'ow's over the next few minutes, and, just in Harry's head, one anthropomorphized 'ow' as one pillow blocked the hex.

"My, my, and last week you couldn't even stun her," Benjamin said coming up to the two of them. He was a bit flushed, having spent the practice time dueling his friend with both magic and muggle fighting.
"We've created a monster," Anna said. "He's been doing terrible things to me; but now the tables have turned and it's his turn to practice the banishing charm."

"Um," Harry said. "I'll try, but I'm pretty sure I don't have that much control over the charm yet."

"You'll have plenty of incentive," Anna said wickedly.

Harry practiced banishing a couple of pillows towards where he imagined an incoming hex would be. His confidence did not improve.

"Okay," Harry said. "Let's try it."

"Actually," Anna said, seeming to take pity. "How about you practice banishing a bit before next week. It's getting a bit late."

"Probably for the best," Harry said.

"Have you gotten enough of your fisticuffs, Benjie?" Anna asked.

"Well, I've gotten enough for now," Benjamin said. "Although I was hoping to get a chance to punch a Death Eater. Oh well, perhaps next week."

"I think you'd be better off cursing one," Anna said.

"Oh, but what if I've lost my wand?" Benjamin asked.

"Probably best not to antagonize them then," Anna said.

"Well let's say Harry here is actually a Death Eater in disguise and he has me at wandpoint," Benjamin says, nodding at Harry. It takes Harry a moment to realize that he is expected to point his wand at Benjamin. "See now, my wand's in my pocket, and by the time I've drawn it and thought of something to do with it, Harry's already cursed me. Harry, however is so confident in the relative power balance, wherein he comes out on top because he is the only one holding a wand, that he has forgotten that we are too close to one another and spells actually take time to cast. So suppose Harry starts to cast a spell…"

Benjamin looked expectantly at Harry who realized that he was actually expected to attack him.

"Tarantall..." Harry got out before Benjamin was very much in his personal space and his wand arm was quickly locked up in an awkward position with only the older boys hand twisting his wrist.

"Of course all I really need to do is disrupt the wand motion briefly and get a strike in to the windpipe or the nose. It's hard to pronounce spells properly with a broken nose," Benjamin said, releasing Harry who shook out his wrist. "If you know what you're doing, the safest place to be when you're faced with an armed wizard, while you are not, is right in front of him. Now if Harry here were on the other side of the room, I'd be a bit screwed, but Harry would take a bit longer to aim and I might have time to duck for cover and pull my own wand."

"Are you coming Anna?" a Ravenclaw girl called out. "I don't want to fall asleep trying to finish our project tonight."

"Coming," Anna called out. "I'll see you two. Night."

"Night," both boys said.
Benjamin looked a bit put out with Anna's sudden departure.

"Too bad I couldn't do that with a real Death Eater," Harry said.

"Why not?" Benjamin asked, turning his attention back to Harry.

"Well, you know," Harry said. "Cause I'm like this," he said gesturing to himself. "And they're like this," he said holding his hand high above his head. No better able to protect himself when he was thirteen than before Hogwarts.

"Doesn't matter," Benjamin said. "Disrupt, disarm, disable, that's what you need to do, and you don't need to be stronger than them. Say I'm Snape, and I've finally decided to do you in."

Harry grimaced for the choice of the scenario.

"I've drawn my wand on you," Benjamin said. "You come in, disrupt the spellcasting, take my wand and drop me."

"Oh right," Harry said. "That's all. Wish I'd thought of that before."

"Well it's like before," Benjamin said. "I didn't actually use much strength to get you into that wristlock. Most moves like that involve redirecting your opponents movements, using their momentum against them. Once you're in a wristlock, you're basically at my mercy. Let me see your hand."

Harry very reluctantly held out his arm.

"So, see, I take you back to where I just had you while you were the Death Eater, and now with just a small twist, your fingers involuntarily uncurl and you drop your wand."

Harry's wand clattered to the floor.

"I twist a little bit more," Benjamin said.

Harry suddenly found himself standing on his tiptoes as his body reacted and tried to get his immobilized arm back into a position where it didn't feel like it was about to be ripped off, which was odd, since it didn't actually hurt per se.

Benjamin let go.

"From that position it's pretty easy to get someone face down on the ground," Benjamin said. "Even if they've got six stone on you."

"So you think I could do that with a Death Eater?" Harry asked skeptically.

"Well sure," Benjamin said. "With a lot of practice."

"What if they've grabbed you?" Harry asked. "Or they're like, on top of you, say."

"Well grappling's a bit different," Benjamin said. "But there's some things you can use depending on the situation. Size does matter a bit, but if you know what you're doing and they don't you've got a decent chance. A lot of wizards sort of think that hand to hand combat is pretty muggle, so they dismiss it. Don't do with your hands what you can do with your wand, you know."

"That's pretty cool," Harry said as by unspoken agreement they both headed out of the classroom and back to Gryffindor tower. "I wish I'd known some of that over the summer."
"I could teach you some," Benjamin said.

"Oh, you don't have to do that," Harry said.

"It's no problem," Benjamin said. "I don't get to practice enough anymore anyhow."

"Really?" Harry asked.


"That'd be great," Harry said. "Thanks."

"It's cool," Benjamin said. "So are we ready to beat Hufflepuff on Saturday?"

"Yes," Harry said. "Though don't expect it to be a quick game. It's going to be storming and the snitch's going to be pretty hard to find."

"I really wish you were playing Slytherin," Benjamin said. "That was going to be a good game."

Yeah, a great game in a storm.

"Hufflepuff's got a pretty good team this year," Harry said. "Not as good as we are mind, but it's not going to be too one sided."

"I can't believe that snake caught the pox," Benjamin said.

"Yeah, well, we'll just be doubly prepared to play them when we do," Harry said.

"Oy, Harry," the voice of one of the twins called out from behind them. Harry turned around.

"Emergency quidditch meeting," George said.

"Again!" Harry said. "We just had an emergency quidditch meeting over dinner. And let me tell you, Flemming's halfway decent attempt at a Prisoner's Feint during the Puff's practice isn't an emergency."

"No time to explain," Fred said, before veritably dragging Harry off.

"But homework," Harry's protest fell on deaf ears. He gave a forlorn wave to Benjamin.

The three of them were soon in an unused lecture hall. They were the only ones there.

"Ok, so, quidditch meeting, or secret meeting?" Harry asked.

The twins both grinned at him.

"We have a prototype," George said.

"Want to try it out? Fred asked.

"Am I your guinea pig?" Harry asked suspiciously.

"Oh we've worked the kinks out," George said.

"Painfully," Fred said.

"But we've got it down pat now," George said.
"Alright," Harry said. "I'm game."

Fred held up a pair of cloth gloves that Harry put on. He looked at the twins expectantly.

"Well," Harry said. "Let's see it then."

"That's it," Fred said, gesturing to the gloves which Harry had assumed had been for protection, as the twins had always worn gloves when he had seen them working on the project. Harry looked at his hands. They didn't look like anything special.

"Or rather," George said. "That's all you really need, but there's going to be more. We'll explain."

"Right," Harry said. "Cool, ok so how does it work?"

"It's very simple," George said. "Approach the wall or whatever obstacle is in front of you, stick out your hand and just walk through."

"But you've actually got to think about going through the wall," Fred said. "You need both elements of intent, the action and the target."

"That's a bit of a safety really," George said. "You really don't want to accidentally go through anyone."

"Yeah," Harry said. "That would be weird."

"Actually it could kill them," Fred said, looking about as serious as Harry had ever seen him outside of the end of his second year.

"What?" Harry asked, looking down at the gloves again with apprehension and moving his hands away from his body, being careful not to touch himself with them.

"Remember when we said that we're basically disassembling everything in our path and telling it to reassemble itself once we're through?" George asked.

Harry nodded.

"Well we don't exactly have the spell work precise enough so everything gets put back together exactly perfectly," Fred said.

"Which is fine for walls and stuff," George said.

"But if it's a living thing that has, you know, cells, and capillaries and nerves and whatnot," Fred said.

"Not getting put back just right tends to make it all not work at all," George said.

"But no worries," Fred said. "You could punch Malfoy in the face while wearing that glove and as long as you aren't thinking, 'I want this glove to go through his head,' you're good."

"Though best not to chance it," George said. "Just make sure you're not wearing the gloves when you punch Malfoy."

Harry wondered what they would say if it were Malfoy senior, who had given Ginny the diary.

"So it's safe?" Harry asked.
"Yes," Fred said at the same time that George said, "Mostly."

The two brothers gave each other an odd look.

"Right," Harry said. "So I can just go through that wall right there."

"Go ahead," George said. "We've already tested it."

"Some walls have wards up," Fred said. "Like just about everything in the dungeons. So don't try to go too quickly through walls you haven't been through before."

"Yeah," George said. "No swan dives through new walls."

Harry wondered just which walls the twins had tried to get through in the dungeons.

"Go on then," Fred said, pointing to the wall.

"Don't lock your elbow," George advised. "If you don't go through, for some reason, you want to be able to brace yourself."

"And remember," Fred said. "You're basically going through a hole in the wall. So everything going in has to follow something else. If you've only got one glove on and you put one hand through, you can't just put you other hand on the wall a couple feet away and expect it to go through. We'll have something for the tips of your shoes in a bit, so be carefull how you walk. It's best for your body to follow through. Don't bang your knee or anything."

That was a lot to think about, actually.

Harry walked to the wall with his hands outstretched. He focused on walking through the wall, though it was more like leaning forward until he thought he was through past his waist and stepping forward. It didn't feel like walking through the barrier at Kings Cross, which felt like walking through nothing at all. The barrier, Hermione had explained with no prompting at all, wasn't actually a wall, but rather an illusion over a ward. Using the twin's invention, though, It felt like walking through a wall of water, only it didn't feel wet.

He found himself in another classroom. He turned around and walked back through the wall. The twins were grinning at him. He grinned back.

As it turned out though, there was about a five minute safety lecture next that Harry felt was a bit out of character for the twins, but he supposed they probably hadn't ever invented something that could easily kill someone. Though Harry hadn't needed to be told not to dive through the floor.

"We think we can manage something that will let whatever part of you you want start the hole. Like a bracelet you wear and then you can stick you head through a wall if you like, but that's a way's away," George said. "In the mean time we're making a bunch of patches you can put on your shoes or the hood of a cloak or your shoulders. Just so you have options."

"So," Fred asked. "Got any plans?"

Harry sometimes thought the twins mistook his penchant for rule breaking and adventure for a fondness for mischief.

"Well next time someone tries to kidnap me I'm going to dive through a wall and hope they try to do the same," Harry said, at a loss for thinking up something that would impress the twins.
"Well fair warning," George said. "If you're tempted to stroll into the Slytherin common room, that wall's warded."

"Oh getting in there was easy enough," Harry boasted.

"You infiltrated Slytherin," Fred asked.

"Ron never mentioned?" Harry asked.

"No," George said. "Do tell."

"Oh it's not that interesting really," Harry said. "See you tomorrow."

Harry dove through the nearest wall and made his escape with a grin while the twins called out demanding explanations.

The promised storm had come, and quidditch was not canceled for mere weather. The sun was still up, and would be for another couple of hours, but the thick roiling clouds looked black under the lights over the pitch casting the rest of the grounds in darkness. The team's warmups had left them felling pretty chilled as they listened to Oliver's pep talk in the co-ed section of the locker rooms. Oliver of course didn't look put out by the weather at all. He looked a bit nervous, but he would be happy playing alongside a tornado.

"... and don't forget," Oliver was nearly shouting. "They wanted to take Slytherin's place, so we're going to give them everything we were saving for Slytherin. Now let's go out there and win this thing."

"Don't worry Ollie, we've got this game in the bag," Angelina said confidently.

They all got off the benches and walked to the entrance, brooms in hand. They could hear the wind blowing outside as they listened for Lee Jordan to announce them.

"Now Harry," Fred said. "We'll be rather put out if you let someone try to kill you this year."

"Yeah," Harry said. "I'm sure Greyback's just been waiting till now to attack. Right when I'm surrounded by hundreds of people."

"A precedence has been set," George said.

"Every year during the first game someone tries to off you," Fred said.

Harry resisted the urge to roll his eyes. He was determined that he would have a normal quidditch match, and furthermore he was determined that he wouldn't be visiting the hospital wing again this year. He was relatively confident that no one should be trying to kill him within the next few hours at least. Still though, he had recast the Sang Vitalis Charm on himself right before he had headed down to the pitch, just in case.

"Actually last year was a house elf trying to get me so injured I'd be sent home so I would be safe from the basilisk," Harry said. "So you see, he wasn't trying to kill me, he was trying to save me. Though I can see how you could think otherwise."

"Wait," Fred said.

"What?" George said.
"And first on the pitch is GRYFFINDOR," Lee Jordan's magically amplified voice called out.

Harry smirked at the twins. Lee's timing had been perfect, and Harry only wished he had timed it himself, for rarely was it the twins who were flabbergasted. His expression sobered though as he turned to the pitch. Huffing at the rain, he hopped onto his broom, flying out into the storm. The Gryffindor team started circling the pitch in formation as Lee Jordan called out their names and positions, giving short blurb biographies of the players. Before long, the Hufflepuff team was called out and the two teams were hovering opposite each other as Oliver and Diggory shook hands. The quaffle was tossed, the bludgers and snitch released, and the players took off.

The game moved slowly, and it didn't take Harry long to feel dragged down by his drenched robes, frozen limbs, and the ever so slight tug of the dementors patrolling the walls in the distance. Harry rather wished he could catch the snitch quickly and get back to the castle, though he might as well wish that they were allowed to charm their robes for warmth, it was unlikely he would be spotting the snitch in this weather; the lights that illuminated the pitch were refracting through raindrops causing little bits of sparkle that were vaguely reminiscent of the flash of the snitch and Harry usually relied on that flash of light to spot the little golden ball that was usually too far away for him to focus on properly. Whenever the snitch was spotted, it would be by luck. Being able to play quidditch was one of the things that Harry loved most about the wizarding world, but there were a fair few things he would change about how it was played, if he could.

The quaffle was a bit harder to throw and catch while chilled to the bone and possession of the ball changed frequently, though after the first hour Gryffindor was up by fifty points. Of course, it was still anyone's game. Harry made sure to keep Diggory in the corner of his eye while he flew. Harry's glasses were more than a bit of a hindrance in rain and if either of them was more likely to spot the snitch first it was the Diggory, he was almost tempted to just take them off. Realistically, Harry was probably going to have to rely on his skill and his faster broom if he was going to win.

Flying by the teacher's stand, Harry noticed Professor Snape observing the game. The professors of course had charms to keep the weather at bay. For whatever reason, Harry felt a renewed vigor to find the snitch.

It was another hour before Oliver called a time out. It had been some time since the players and the crowd's enthusiasm had waned. The players took shelter under the awning over the door to the locker room and Angelina cast drying charms on everyone while Oliver started giving out pointers. Harry thought he had mostly wanted a break rather than actually having anything to say to them. Gryffindor was up by seventy points and the only person who had much say on how the game went at this point was Harry, and Oliver could hardly give Harry pointers on how to see better. Though that didn't stop him from telling Harry that he needed to catch the snitch sooner rather than later. Not even Oliver, it seemed, could keep up his enthusiasm for the game in such horrible weather. Harry nodded and assured everyone he would be catching the snitch soon.

It was a half an hour later that he saw it out of the corner of his eye, zooming right past him in the exact opposite direction. Harry flipped around, his momentum carrying him backwards before he accelerated hard. It took him a moment to catch sight of the snitch again and as he did he also noticed Diggory at his ten o'clock making a sharp turn, coming around to intercept. Harry could vaguely hear the roar of the crowd in the background, new life coming into the stadium as the end of the game was in sight.

The snitch rapidly changed course as both boys approached from opposite directions, briefly shooting up before plummeting towards the ground. Harry almost thought he had lost sight of it before he saw it dropping; Diggory never stopped tracking it though and his own dive started a moment before Harry's. Their dives towards the ground were soon followed by two cracks of
beaters bats and first Diggory and then Harry were dodging bludgers. The snitch was dropping straight to the ground and Harry didn't think he would catch it before it would have to level out and he wished he could see it better to gauge which direction it would soon be breaking in.

Harry's lead on Diggory was lost when another bludger cut him off, Harry had just barely seen the ball out of the corner of his eye in time to avoid it completely. He got back on track just in time to see the ball dart out towards the base of the Gryffindor stands. Harry's turn was faster than Diggory's and they were soon neck and neck. The crowd was now roaring with excitement as the two boys skimmed a few feet above the grass of the pitch soon rocketing up and up as the snitch made a wide arc that skimmed along the base of the stands as it rocketed into the sky. Diggory wasn't far behind when another bludger caused him to swerve and the Gryffindor students were lucky that bludgers couldn't fly into the stands because otherwise it would have gone right into the crowd. He was right next to Diggory now and they were so close to the snitch.

The odd thing was though, that Harry didn't feel like he was about the catch the snitch, he didn't feel the thrill of the chase or even relief that the game was about the be over. All Harry could feel was the cold. It was so cold, as it had always been cold; he couldn't remember ever not being cold. The sun had gone down and he had failed. A woman was screaming. He was so cold, and he knew that she was warmth, but she was so far away and he couldn't help her and he would never be warm ever. He would always be cold, he would always be alone, and she was screaming until she wasn't and the cold was pierced by a malevolent high pitched laugh.

There was a brief moment of warmth before everything lurched.

He was such a freak; he had never truly understood the word until then. He shivered in the hallway, afraid to make a noise, afraid for anyone to see him ever again. It was so cold. He was such a horrible boy, he knew, and there wasn't anything Harry could think to do to change that. He didn't know how he had done it, but he had, he hadn't even taken his one opportunity to stop it. He knew now why Aunt Petunia krinkled her nose when she looked at him, why Father Christmas left him only coal, why the other children at school knew to stay away from him. They didn't need Dudley's threats, they could all see in an instant what Harry had not known until then. It would happen again. Something would. He knew now what 'unnatural' meant. He had caused this and he would cause something unnatural again. He could still see the dark look from Uncle Vernon, contempt and anger clear on his face. It would happen again unless Harry stopped it. Maybe…

Shift.

Harry briefly had the feeling of his stomach being in his throat before all he could see was a bright light as the cold was leached out of his bones and he knew that he was safe.

Shift.

It was so cold. He had never been so cold. It had always been cold. It would always be cold. His bed clothes were completely soaked. The rain mixed with the tears streaming down his face as he looked up at the handle to the backyard door, he was crying, but he knew not to make a sound. His shoulder still ached from being dragged outside. He wanted so badly to be let back in, but he knew he was dirty. He knew he would mess the floor. He shouldn't have had that water before bed.

Everything lurched and Harry felt pain all over and he briefly saw bright lights all around him as rain fell all over him. People were screaming.

Shift.

The wand was useless in his hand. He had failed and he struggled for his own life, pinned and
helpless, before Ms. Adler's was violently and viscerally taken from her by that same wand. He had failed and she had died. If only she had known he was such a freak. Perhaps she would have stayed inside. Even the heat of the chase couldn't take away from the cold chill he felt. If he hadn't failed…

Shift.

He was warm. He was safe. People were screaming, everything hurt, but he knew that he would be alright. Harry blacked out.

Harry woke up in the hospital wing. He could see outside the windows that the storm seemed to have passed and he idly wondered how long he had been out this time. As he was used to, he felt oddly very rested, like he had had a great nights sleep. Put together with the aches and pains though and it made for an odd dichotomy.

"Harry!" Hermione exclaimed. Harry quickly spotted his friends sitting next to his bed.

"What happened?" Harry asked.

"Dementors swarmed the pitch mate," Ron said, handing Harry a bar of chocolate that had been sitting on the nightstand. "You um… you passed out and fell off your broom."

"What?!" Harry asked, his cheeks flaming. The whole school had seen that; he had passed out in the middle of a quidditch match! "What happened to the game though? Was it postponed, or did they sub someone in for me? How long has it been? I can go back out there, I feel alright." The team was going to hate him, he had been so close to the damned snitch.

"Do you?" Hermione asked, looking at Harry seriously.

"What?" Harry asked.

"Do you feel alright?" Hermione asked.

"Yeah, sure," Harry lied, trying to get up in bed. He'd worked through worse at the Dursley's and he needed to get back to the pitch. Hermione, however, was pushing him back towards the bed.

"The match's over mate," Ron said. "It's well past midnight."

"No," Harry said. "It can't have been that long, I didn't pass out for that long last time."

"Harry you almost died," Hermione said, very upset. "Forget about the stupid game, you fell. I think someone must have summoned you because you fell towards the bleachers instead of the ground, but you still hit very hard, and with all your injuries I thought to check, and if I hadn't…"

Hermione broke off, very upset, Harry was worried to see tears in her eyes.

"Hermione did that test, the one for the blood charm," Ron said.

"Did anyone see you do the charm?" Harry asked worried.

"I doubt anyone noticed," Ron said. "I thought she was just being paranoid but it was red. You said it was supposed to last a couple years at least."

"What?" Harry asked shocked. "No, I reapplied it right before the game." The charm had never worn off so quickly before.
“You reapplied it?” Hermione asked. “You knew it wasn't lasting as long as it should?”

Harry's cheeks flamed red.

“I, I had it under control,” Harry said.

“Control?” Ron asked, gobsmacked. “You would have died if Hermione hadn't done anything. No one would have known you were bleeding to death on the inside.”

“It's never worn off so fast before,” Harry said.

“So it has worn off before,” Hermione said.

“It hasn't gotten that far in a while,” Harry said. “I've gotten good about checking myself regularly.”

“And you didn't say anything?” Hermione asked incredulously.

“I had it handled,” Harry said.

“You clearly didn't,” Hermione said.

Harry huffed and looked away.

“Why isn't it lasting though?” Ron asked.

“I don't know,” Harry said, miserably. “One day it's doing fine and then the next it's just drained.”

“Why didn't you tell us Harry?” Hermione asked. “We need to know these things in case something happens.”

Harry shrugged. “I knew if I told you you'd go tell…” Harry was suddenly panicked. “Hermione did you tell Madame Pomfrey?”

“No,” Hermione said, and now she looked worried but resolute. “But I'm going to.”

“Hermione, no!” Harry said desperately. “You can't.”

“I can and I will,” Hermione said. “Either you go and talk to the man who's been living with this condition his whole life and ask him what's going wrong, or I talk to Madame Pomfrey. That's it.”

“Yeah mate,” Ron said. “Friends don't let friends bleed to death.”

Harry shot Ron a panicked look, he was very surprised to find that Ron was on Hermione's side in this discussion.

“What if she figures it out?” Harry asked.

“She's not going to figure it out,” Hermione said. “We talked about this, remember, and what would be so terrible if she did. She's a medical professional, she's hardly going to be going to tabloids with it.”

“She'll tell Snape,” Harry said.

“You're supposed to be telling Snape,” Hermione said in exasperation.

“I haven't…” Harry started.
"Oh you've decided," Hermione said rolling her eyes. "You've just been putting it off."

"I have to be sure," Harry said.

"You're never going to be sure," Hermione said. "You just have to do it. Now if you don't want me to talk to Madame Pomfrey, you'll have an excellent reason to do it tomorrow, and I'm going to cast the Sang Vitalis Diagnostic on you every hour until you do."

"She's been doing it all night," Ron said.

"I'll talk to him," Harry said, surprised himself that the words had come out of his mouth. But the man would probably have answers, and Harry couldn't afford to let his hemophilia be an issue any longer.

"Good," Ron said. "He came to check up on you, you know."

"Who?" Harry asked incredulously. "Professor Snape?"

"Yeah," Ron said. "Gave us a funny look, like he hadn't wanted to be seen, but then he went and talked to Madame Pomfrey. Asked her if she needed anything brewed, like she wouldn't have told him already if she were running low on something."

"You think he was here because of me?" Harry asked.

"You're not the only one who got a bit attached," Ron said with a shrug.

Harry had a hard time accepting that Professor Snape might actually like him enough to be worried about him.

"Are you really feeling alright though?" Ron asked. "That looked like a really horrible landing. You had a couple bones poking out before Madame Pomfrey got to you."

Harry grimaced at the thought of that and was very glad that he hadn't actually seen that himself.

"I'm just a bit sore," Harry said. "What happened to the game though?"

Ron looked down and Harry knew he didn't have any good news.

"We lost mate," Ron said. "Diggory caught the snitch right after you started to slow down. He tried to forfeit the win and ask for a rematch when he realized you'd fallen and whatnot, but I think even Wood agreed that it was a fair win. Quidditch doesn't stop for dementors unless someone calls for a time out. You should have seen Dumbledore though, he was something else. I've never seen him so mad. Sort of makes you realize why You-Know-Who was afraid of him. He cast this really bright charm that drove off all of the dementors."

Harry couldn't believe that he had lost. He had never lost before, and to lose like this; to be the only one who was so affected by dementors and to fail when everyone had been counting on him; he was mortified.

"Why'd they have to swarm the pitch then of all times though?" Harry asked angrily. "Weren't they restricted from the grounds?"

"I suppose all those people in one place were a bit more than they could resist," Hermione said.

"Especially when everyone got all excited you'd seen the snitch," Ron said. "Like leaving the oven door ajar when there's a roast in it."
Harry winced slightly at the mental image of himself sitting in an oven while a dementor waited outside to eat him.

"Oh," Harry said. "How's my broom? I didn't fall on it did I?"

"It started drifting in the wind," Ron said. "The twins went with a few of the Hufflepuff players to go find it before it could get across the English Channel. It should be in the dorms."

Harry hoped that that was the case.

"How mad was the team?" Harry asked, worried.

"No one was mad Harry," Hermione said. "Everyone was really worried about you."

"I really let them down," Harry said morosely, no one else was passing out around dementors.

"It's hardly your fault," Ron said.

"Yeah," Harry said, if only so he wouldn't have to hear the platitudes.

"Look," Hermione said. "You should really get some more sleep. After everything you've been through, magical healing can take a lot out of you."

Harry didn't feel tired though, but he didn't feel like arguing with Hermione then and he had a lot to think about.

"Night," Harry said. "And thanks… for you know, um, saving my life."

He'd said that way to many times in the past year.

"You're welcome," Hermione said. "Sleep well."

Harry didn't sleep for a long while and when he did, he dreamed of blood.

Severus really wished he didn't have to grade essays. It wasn't really the atrocious errors the children made that made the process taxing, but rather reading about the same topic dozens of times over. A knock came at his door, breaking the tedium.

"Come in," he said.

The door cracked open slowly and a messy mop of jet black hair poked in. Severus was rather surprised to see it as the boy that had been preoccupying his mind that morning edged through the doorway. The boy had escaped the hospital wing in record time.

"Is it alright if I talk to you for a bit professor," Harry Potter asked.

"Of course," Severus said. "Is this about your project?"

"Oh," Harry said. "That's going alright, sir. I got Impervious to work with the potion. Most everything else though either just doesn't work or doesn't last, or only has a minimal effect. Professor Flitwick said most everything that works would have already been figured out and in the book, but it's fun to work out how to merge each charm with the potion and then test it, even if it doesn't work. Um, but that's not what I came down for."

The boy paused, his eyes darted about for a moment like he was looking for words.
"Was there something I could help you with?" Severus asked, having no idea where this was going.

"Yes," Harry Potter said. "You see Professor, well, that letter I told you about was really sent to let me know about a medical thing. It turns out my dad had had Hemophilia and I got it too and there's this spell that I need to renew, but…"

"You fool," Severus snapped, standing up.

The boy gapped up at him.

"I…" But the boy didn't seem to have anything else to say.

"It's taken you this long to say something?" Severus asked. "How many times have you had to recast the spell this year?"

"A few," Potter said.

"A few," Severus snarled. "You could have died. You should have died, how on earth did you survive last night?"

"Hermione thought to check," Potter said. "Do you know why it's wearing off? It isn't supposed to, not like that, but you make it sound like…"

"Different magics wear at the spell differently," Severus said, pinching the bridge of his nose and trying to rein in his temper. He occluded briefly to clear his head. "Dementors tear right through it."

"Oh," Potter said. "That explains a lot actually. Ok, well I was hoping there would be a potion or something that might help."

Severus sighed.

"Wait here," he said.

Countless people working to make sure the boy lived long enough to graduate from school and he takes to dancing around his own grave. Severus walked into his store room and grabbed a phial. He returned to the very sheepish looking boy.

"Drink this," he commanded a bit brusquely.

The boy stared at the phial for a moment before casting his eyes down for a moment and downing the potion.

"Before the Sang Vitalis Charm was invented, there was the Sang Olaes Potion," Severus said, having now calmed down significantly. "Today is Sunday, you will return every Sunday for another dose. Do you understand?"

"Yes sir," Potter said, looking very grateful. "Is there anything I need to worry about besides having to retake the potion?"

"You will find yourself craving green leafy vegetables," Severus said. "Do not take anything with Taproot or Doxy wings in it. Besides that there are no other side effects. The potion works as well as the charm but is not affected by dementors. You need no longer worry about applying the Sang Vitalis Charm. Once the school is no longer surrounded by dementors you will resume with the
charm, but you will always carry a phial of the potion on you, just in case. Now would you care to explain why it has taken you this long to say anything?"

"I thought I had it under control, Sir," Harry Potter said. "I was checking myself regularly, and I figured with practice I'd get better at casting the charm and it wouldn't wear off. The letter made it sound a bit like a family secret so I figured I'd keep it to myself. I guess I never really think things through."

Severus had never told Madame Pomfrey himself, but his own family was well versed in the illness and its treatments and their drawbacks.

"Then it would be best if you did not feel the need to handle everything yourself," Severus said. "There are many people who are here to help you. You should utilize them. Particularly if you do not think things through."

"Oh, right," Harry Potter said. "So, um, on the train you did that spell to get rid of the dementor. What's it called?"

"It's called a patronus," Severus said. "But it is a seventh year spell Mr. Potter. The staff will make sure that we do not have a repeat performance of last night. Stay away from the ground's perimeter and you should have no reason to come across a dementor again."

"Oh," Harry said. "Alright… So, you know, I'm only working with Professor Flitwick one day a week, and I figured, with that extra bit of free time, if you still need lab assistants for your project, I can work Saturday evenings into my schedule."

Severus was caught off guard by the offer that seemed to come out of nowhere. Again the boy was going out of his way to work around Severus. He was aware of the classes the boy was taking, he would hardly say that the boy had much by way of free time. Why volunteer? The boy was an enigma. Then again, he had not been overwhelmed by the response to his posting for lab assistants.

"You will mostly be preparing ingredients," Severus told the boy.

"I'm sure I'll learn a lot by observing," Harry Potter said. "Thanks for the potion, professor. I really appreciate it."

"Do try to stay out of trouble Mr. Potter," Severus said.

"I'll try professor," Harry Potter said on his way out. "I've never been very good at that though, come to think of it."

"And yet, I would still be rather put out if you were not around to get into trouble, so at least try to stay out of the Hospital Wing," Severus said.

The boy paused on his way to the door. "I will," the boy said. "Have a good day professor."

Severus had a feeling that that last exchange had been highly significant to the boy, but he still could not fathom how. He certainly hadn't been lying. His stomach had been in his throat when the boy had fallen. It had felt so foreign to him, because he knew then that it hadn't been about Lily, and it hadn't been about the prophecy. It had been worry for the boy and Severus couldn't quite identify when that transition had been made. That Harry had come all the closer to death the night before was not a welcome revelation. How odd that they would share this illness. That he had shared it with Potter. He briefly entertained the notion that all of the pureblood families had been passing it down for generations while keeping it a secret from one another.
Harry took a deep breath after he walked out of Professor Snape's office. That had gone a lot better than he had thought it would. Harry replayed the interaction in his head over and over again as he made his way up to Gryffindor.

"How'd it go?" Ron asked.

"He gave me a potion," Harry said. "I take it every Sunday. I don't need to worry about the charm anymore."

"...Cool," Ron said. "But how'd he take the whole thing."

"Well he was angry at first, cause I could have died, but he calmed down pretty quickly," Harry said. The way Harry saw it, he was glad that he knew that the man wouldn't just revert to his old self just because he was angry at him.

"Harry," Hermione said in exasperation. "What did he say when he found out you were his son?"

"I didn't tell him," Harry said. "He didn't even seem to suspect."

"Bloody hell," Ron said. "What are you waiting for. This was the perfect time to bring it up."

"But it wasn't," Harry said. "What if he thought I was making it up. See now, I think Hermione was on to something with that lineage potion. I want to learn how to brew that first."

"And then you'll tell him," Hermione said. It wasn't a question.

There was a pause where Harry thought about it.

"Yes," Harry said. "And then I'll tell him."

"It's not an easy potion," Hermione said. "Though I have a feeling you were banking on this taking a while."

Harry shrugged.

"Let's get to work then," Hermione said.

They worked until lunch. The potion wasn't exactly as difficult as Polyjuice Potion, or the Widow's Shield Potion, but it still wasn't the sort of thing they'd brew in class during Double Potions.

He had forgotten his arrangement with Benjamin until the older boy tapped him on the shoulder as Harry was finishing his lunch at the Gryffindor Table; Professor Snape had been right, Harry was craving green leafy vegetables, but he certainly didn't enjoy them.

"You still on for after lunch?" Benjamin asked. "Or are you still all banged up from yesterday."

"Oh, no, I'm alright," Harry said. "Madame Pomfrey you know; she patched me up good as new. You still want to?"

"Of course," Benjamin said. "It'll be fun."

"Alright," Harry said. "I'm ready to leave now." He turned to Ron and Hermione. "I'll see you in an hour or so. I'm doing some defense work with Benjamin. Oh, right. This is Benjamin, Benjamin this is Ron and Hermione."

The three exchanged greetings and Harry and Benjamin found an unused classroom and cleared out
a space to work in. Benjamin cast a few cushioning charm on the ground.

They started by stretching and then Benjamin showed Harry some different wrist locks that Harry found easy enough to do if he was being attacked in slow motion.

"You were interested in grappling though, right?" Benjamin asked.

"Yeah," Harry said. "Like if someone's grabbed you."

"Alright," Benjamin said. "There's a few different scenarios I can show you. Let's say you've grabbed my arm."

By this point, Harry knew that in such a hypothetical, he was actually expected to act it out. He grabbed Benjamin's arm.

"Right, so the weak point of a grip is the thumb," Benjamin said. "Most people try to break away from someone like this… but they're working against the fingers. So if you twist like this… you can break their grip. Of course if you're this close to them you'll either want to be ready to run or strike, so know what you're going to do before you break the hold. Alright now you try."

Benjamin's grip was very firm but not terribly tight around Harry's rather lean arm. It rather seemed improbable that any trick would break him free, but he tried anyway and was surprised when he did in fact break loose. Still though, Benjamin was a far cry away from an adult's stature.

"Right," Benjamin said. "So let's say someone's grabbed you from behind, so both your arms are pinned to your sides. Instead of pushing your arms away from your body to break their grasp, you want to pull your arms in and then up like this." Benjamin showed him the motion.

"This might actually be a bit much for someone who can't be more than 145 centimeters," Benjamin said to Harry, who didn't need to be reminded that he was one of the shortest students in third year. "So you might want to pull your legs up at the same time so they're also holding up your dead weight. Here," Benjamin said, indicating for Harry to turn around.

Harry soon found his arms trapped to his sides as Benjamin's arms wrapped around him from behind. Harry had the very uncomfortable feeling of being trapped. He was certain he wouldn't be breaking free of this one.

He brought his arms inward and upward like Benjamin had shown him anyway, but the older boys arms barely budged. Harry tried again, his sense of unease growing. Finally he tried lifting his legs at the same time. Benjamin grunted as he found himself holding all of Harry's weight as Harry tried the move once more, sliding out from the boy's arms, entirely unprepared to land on the ground.

"Good job," Benjamin said. "Alright, we've been at this for a while. Suppose we just do one more."

"Sounds good," said Harry, who was feeling a bit exhausted by the lessons.

"So this'll be fun," Benjamin said. "All of those wrist locks I showed you, once you've got them in a lock, there's a few different ways to force them face down on the ground from that point, even if you're smaller. I'll show you how next time, but you need to do it right, because if you leave them an opening there's a way for them to flip the tables. So let's say that you've just forced me to the ground and you're pinning me with your knee on my back."

Benjamin hopped down to the ground, but Harry hesitated.

"You want me to put my knee into your back?" Harry asked.
"You can't weigh more than 35 kilos,” Benjamin said. "I think I'd be fine if you jumped on me."

Harry frowned but got down and pinned Benjamin, putting his hand on the boy's shoulders to hold him down. He had certainly been in that position a good number of times thanks to Dudley and his gang. Dudley had definitely weighed more than 35 kilograms back then though.

"Alright, so there's a few options here, but if I were you I'd stick to this move here. I'll do it slow."

Benjamin twisted and squirmed and slow as he was moving it did seem that suddenly the boy wasn't underneath him on his stomach, but rather next to him on his side.

"So from here now your center of balance is off and it would be easy for me to push you over and make a run for it, or I could grab you like this… and flip us… and now I have you pined. Now this hold here is much more static you see…"

Benjamin was still talking, but Harry wasn't listening. He was trapped. He couldn't move. He had to break free but he couldn't move. He needed to get away, but he was trapped. He had let this happen. Everything was his fault. He was trapped. He couldn't breath. He was going to die.

Harry struggled. He wanted to scream but he knew that he couldn't. He had to get away. If only he could get away. He thrashed about.

"Harry," he heard some time later. "Harry are you alright?"

He was taking huge gasping breaths. His back was to the wall in the back corner of the room, his legs were curled up and his arms were protecting his face. He had to catch his breath. He was nauseous and covered in sweat.


It took Harry a long moment to focus on where he was, what they had been doing. It took him a long moment to realize what had happened, but when he did…

"I'm sorry," Harry said quickly. "I'm sorry, I don't know..."

"It's alright," Benjamin said.

There was a long awkward silence while Harry caught his breath.

"That happened over the summer," Benjamin said. "Didn't it."

Harry didn't say anything, he just tried to catch his breath.

"You said on Thursday this stuff would have come in handy over the summer. Did Greyback have you pinned like that?” Benjamin asked.

Harry just nodded, because he didn't think he could look at Benjamin just then, much less talk to him. There was a longer moment of silence before Harry got up on unsteady legs and ran from the room.
AN: Harry had a panic attack in this chapter. Benjamin, while trying to help, tells him he just needs to calm down. As I understand it, this is supremely unhelpful in helping people who are experiencing a panic attack, but Benjamin does not know this. As I have previously said. The characters don’t always know what do do in certain situations, and they sometimes do the wrong thing. As usual, I am not a medical or psychological expert. WebMD has a helpful article under, “Helping Someone During a Panic Attack,” if you are at all interested.
Hello and welcome back to Blood. I hope that you have all been finding excellent stories to read since my last update. Thank you to everyone who reviewed my last chapter. Happy Fathers Day!

"Are you sure nothing happened?" Hermione asked tentatively.

"For the last time, Hermione, nothing happened," Harry said trying to keep how much he was at the end of this tether out of his voice.

"There he is," said Ron with a conspiratorial whisper.

"Just leave it," Harry said.

"Do we need to have a talk with him?" Ron asked darkly.

"No!" Harry said, frustrated. "He didn't do anything. Can we just eat our breakfast?"

"Right," Ron said. "You just showed up from your lesson with him looking like you'd been surrounded by dementors for no reason. I guess you skipped dinner for no reason too."

"Harry," Hermione tried again. "If something happened you need to tell someone. It's not just going to go away. We didn't do enough when people were giving you trouble in the halls back in September and look what happened."

"He didn't do anything," Harry said miserably. He had been miserable since the afternoon prior. He just wanted to forget about it. He just wanted to stop feeling like something horrible was still coming to get him; like he couldn't breathe. He wanted to pretend that it had never happened. He used to be good at that back at the Dursleys. He knew it was too much to think that Hermione would just drop it though.

"He didn't do anything," Harry said again. "I did, okay? Can we not talk about this at breakfast?"

"Don't go blaming yourself if someone's mistreating you," Hermione said.

"I'm getting a head start," Harry said. "It always takes forever to get to Runes. I'll see you in class."

The 'I'm going alone,' was left unsaid. He could hear Ron and Hermione talking anxiously behind him as he walked away with his head ducked down.

"Harry," he heard as he neared the end of the table, and his heart skipped a beat.

"O-oh," Harry said, looking up to see that Benjamin was standing in front of him. "Hey Benjamin. Look, I'm really…"

"No, I'm sorry," Benjamin said awkwardly. "I wasn't paying attention; I didn't realize something
was wrong. I probably should have canceled after the dementor thing. They can mess with you for a bit after they're gone I guess."

"Yeah," Harry said, almost relieved. "The dementors. I should have thought of that too, you know. I guess… Yeah, after the quidditch match, I just wanted to pretend like… But yeah, probably should have done a rain check."

"Right," Benjamin said. "So I'll see you Thursday then. Have fun in class."

"Yeah, you too," Harry said, relieved to have the conversation be over. Relieved that there was an excuse.

Harry started his ascent of the castle.

Had it really been the dementors, though? They made him pass out and they left him with dredged up memories he'd rather leave buried, but he didn't think they left him feeling like everyone else did. Everyone else seemed to feel the effects long after the dementor had gone, like the dementor was still not too far off, but not Harry. He hadn't felt it after the dementor left on the train, not like Ron and Hermione obviously had. He wanted it to be the reason though. He wanted to believe that absent the dementors it would never have happened, and that absent dementors it would never happen again. How could he ever face a threat like Greyback again if he couldn't even train without freaking out.

He was the first student to arrive in the Runes classroom. Professor Babbling didn't notice as she was writing pictograms up on the chalk board. Harry took a seat in the back corner and shut his eyes for the first time since he had woken up the day before.

He didn't know if it was the warmth of the classroom, or the steady scritch scratch of the chalk on the chalk board, or if it was simply that he hadn't slept the night before, but Harry found himself finally relaxing. He felt the tension ebbing away and he had just about drifted off in his seat when the door to the classroom banged open and students started walking in. Hermione was seated next to him quickly, shooting him a worried glance, but she didn't say anything as the other students filled in around them.

When Harry was able to keep his eyes open during the class, he thought to himself that this was perhaps the first time that Hermione had failed to pay attention in class. She kept looking over at him and chewed at her bottom lip. Harry felt bad for worrying her.

When class ended, Harry stayed in his seat while the other students filed out, partly because he felt entirely too unmotivated to get up and partly because he wanted to talk to Hermione alone. When the classroom was empty besides themselves and Professor Babbling, Harry pushed himself up and made his way to the door.

"Look," Harry said tiredly when they were in the hallway. "I'll tell you what happened when we catch up with Ron. It really isn't what you think."

"Really?" Hermione asked.

"Well, yeah," Harry said.

"Are you alright?" Hermione asked.

"Yeah, I guess," Harry said with a shrug.
They caught up with Ron who had just had a free period. Harry had no free periods while Hermione... Harry wasn't sure how Hermione was managing her class schedule or where she found the time, but she was taking one more class than Harry was, and keeping Harry and Ron on top of their studies as well.

"How're you doing?" Ron asked.

"Alright," Harry said nervously. "Look, so, yesterday, I guess I wasn't as over the dementor as I thought and, well, when we were doing defense stuff I sort of felt like I was... like it was back when Greyback had me pinned and I sort of, like, freaked out. Like I really really freaked out."

"Oh, Harry," Hermione said. "Why didn't you just say so?"

Harry shrugged. "I guess I felt bad for not being able to handle it."

"Don't worry about it mate," Ron said, clapping him on the back. "You've handled plenty worse. Don't feel bad if a dementor's got you off your game."

"So it wasn't anything he did?" Hermione asked.

"No," Harry said. "He was great. It wasn't his fault."

"Well alright then," Hermione said, though she still looked worried. "Well you must not have eaten enough chocolate, I think. Here."

Hermione handed him a bar of chocolate. Like many students, she had taken to keeping a bit of chocolate in her schoolbag.

"Honestly," Hermione said. "If my parents knew how much chocolate I've been eating this year..."

"Really Hermione," Ron said. "Mass murderers and dementors, and it's the chocolate your parents'll be upset about."

"Well there's no need for them to find out about any of that," Hermione said. "But if I come home for the holidays and they don't think I've been taking care of my teeth they'll be upset to say the least. I should probably get a dental check-up from Madam Pomfrey before I go home for Christmas."

"So you're alright now though, right?" Ron asked Harry.

Harry really wasn't.

"Yeah," Harry said. "Just, really tired, I didn't sleep well last night." Or at all really.

This would be the defining theme of the day, which turned into a series of small disasters as he drowsily made his way through classes. Mondays were so exhausting with so many classes crammed in together. The last class of the day was of course double potions and Harry managed to fumble his potion rather spectacularly, receiving extra homework from Professor Snape. It didn't help that it was extra awkward to be in the room with the man now that he had sort of officially decided to probably tell the man that Harry was his son.


"Fizzing Whizbees," he tried. Still nothing. He was probably wasting his time. There were better ways to spend a Tuesday evening than trying to guess the headmaster's password. Namely,
catching up on Monday's homework.

"Acid Pops; Mars Bars; Berti Bots Every Flavor Beans; Lemon Drops… Um: Cauldron Cakes, Goobers, Laughing Taffy, Everlasting Gobstoppers…"

There was the rumble of moving stone and the gargoyle in front of him started corkscrewing upwards to reveal a spiral staircase.

Was there a delay there, Harry wondered, or was the password to the headmaster's office really Everlasting Gobstoppers?

Harry hopped onto the rotating stairs to the headmaster's tower office and waited anxiously for the stair to get to the top. Reaching the end of his journey, Harry raised his hand to knock on the door before him but it opened of it's own accord as the Headmaster Dumbledore said, "Come in Harry."

"Good evening, Professor," Harry said as he stepped into the office, lingering by the door.

"Good evening to you, do have a seat," the headmaster said gesturing to one of the high backed winged chairs that sat opposite himself.

Harry hesitantly took the seat, feeling rather dwarfed by it. He didn't really know how to start this conversation, so what came out was, "I'm sorry to bother you after dinner like this professor."

"Nonsense," the headmaster said. "There is no bother. Tea?"

Harry realized that there was a tea service upon the headmaster's desk that he was certain had not been there a moment ago.

"Oh, you don't need to bother," Harry said.

"Why Mr. Potter," the headmaster said. "If pouring tea was a bother, I don't expect it would be as popular as it is."

"Right," Harry said awkwardly. "Alright then."

The headmaster poured Harry's tea as Harry watched before pouring his own while Harry glanced around the office at the myriad of unique devices, sleeping portraits of headmasters and headmistresses of old, and bookshelves that reached the ceiling that were likely filled with books that one could not check out of the Hogwarts library. Harry was disappointed to see that Fawkes was not on his perch.

"Lemon drop?" the headmaster inquired, breaking Harry from his perusal with a tin of yellow confections held out in front of him.

"Oh, no, thank you," Harry said as he picked up the teacup in front of him.

The headmaster plucked one of the hard candies from the tin and placed it in his mouth before taking a sip of his tea.

"How have you been enjoying your classes, Harry?" the headmaster asked, starting the conversation. "I understand Professor McGonagall had to rearrange your timetable." Somehow, he didn't sound at all like he was speaking around the sour candy in his mouth.

"Oh, yes," Harry said. "They're going well. I had to catch up a bit, but I've had a lot of help, Professor."
"And you are doing a project as well," Professor Dumbledore said. "You are doing yourself and your House proud."

"Thanks professor," Harry said, though he didn't know how well he had been personifying Gryffindor House lately. "Um, I came here to ask you a question."

"Indeed," the headmaster said. "I should take it that this is a very serious question, Mr. Potter?"

"Oh, I wouldn't bother you if it wasn't," Harry said.

"Nonsense, my boy, you may certainly bring less serious questions to me whenever you like," the headmaster replied kindly. "I was merely wondering if I should impart upon you the same warning that I gave you at the end of your first year."

"That the truth is a great and terrible thing, or that you may not answer but you also won't lie," Harry asked.

"I suppose both may apply to this conversation," the Headmaster said knowingly, and Harry could almost think in that moment that the headmaster did in fact know what Harry was going to ask and why, but that, of course, would be preposterous.

"Well, the thing is professor, I wanted to talk about Professor Snape. You see…" Harry sank one of his canines into his bottom lip for a moment before he pushed on. "You've always trusted him to protect me. I mean this summer you had him guarding me every day for weeks. It's just that… well you see I know, or I have a good reason to believe that he worked for Voldemort back when and I want to be able to trust him, and I think I do, and he's saved my life a bunch, but how can I, if I know… I just need to be sure I'm not crazy to trust him."

The headmaster was silent for a moment, and Harry very strongly suspected that he had crossed a boundary; though the headmaster did not look upset.

"I do not know that I can answer this question to your satisfaction Mr. Potter," the headmaster said at last. "I am sure that you can infer that I do in fact trust Professor Snape myself, and most importantly, that I have entrusted your safety to him. I'm afraid the most I can say is that I do trust Professor Snape. I trust him implicitly, and I do believe that if you knew him as I know him, that you would trust him the same."

Though truly he had gained no new information, the headmaster's words did prove to be reassuring to Harry. He frowned at his tea as he processed everything.

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"I am curious to know what led you to have such certainty of which side Professor Snape was on during the war," the headmaster said.

"I got a letter, sir," Harry said. "Over the Summer. My parents had set it to be delivered when I turned thirteen. It mentioned the war, and a few people who were involved."

"Indeed," the headmaster said. "Yet in spite of these words from your parents, you found yourself able to trust Professor Snape to such an extent."

Harry shrugged.

"Mr. Potter," the headmaster said and paused until Harry looked up to the headmaster's piercing gaze. "Were there any other important matters in this letter that we should perhaps discuss?"

"Oh nothing like that Professor," Harry said in a rush. "It mostly wasn't about the war. It was
about… family stuff. They talked a lot about their time at school and about being married and having me." Harry turned his gaze to his lap before returning it to his tea.

"Well then," the headmaster said as an air of great seriousness lifted from the room. "If that is settled, then perhaps while I have you here you would like to tell me about this project of yours. I have been hearing good things from your professors."

The avuncular manner that Albus had taken on slipped as Harry left his office and he started crunching on what remained of the lemon drop in his mouth.

Severus was Harry's father.

A great deal had been made clear, but the path ahead was all the more muddled. He had to ask himself; if he had known this was coming, would he have prevented it? Would he have intercepted that letter and removed the relevant text? The answer did not take long to come to him. Of course he would have. He would always have chosen to prevent the blindness that now mired the future. What was one more sin to tally? He had done so much worse to safeguard peace. Yet he did not have that option now.

Outside of Hogwarts, everything moved as it was supposed to. Every event happened as Albus knew it would, every interaction with the Minister was scripted, every letter he received. Inside the castle however, events spiraled more and more into realms he could not predict and he was working harder and harder to keep things on the right path in spite of events he couldn't affect. Before long, the chaos within the castle would spill out. How long did he have before he could no longer predict the future?

Yet this was good. At least now he knew what had caused the change in Harry. More information could only make it easier to predict and affect change and stability. It was fortunate that the next step was one he found pleasant. He had been guiding Harry and Severus towards an amicable working relationship. It would be best if Albus could make sure the next part of Harry's plan went well.

"Hey Potter," Harry heard from one of the classrooms he was passing in the hall. He looked up and blushed to see Cedric Diggory flagging him down from the middle of what looked like some manner of school club gathering. The older boy got up and headed for the door and Harry waited.

Harry hoped that this would somehow be about something other than the quidditch match. He had heard far too much from his team mates and other Gryffindors about how they didn't blame him for the loss and he rather didn't want to hear the Hufflepuff version of platitudes.

"Hey, um, Diggory," Harry said, not sure how to handle the conversation.

"I just wanted…" Diggory started. "Sorry, about the match. If I'd realized…"

"Yeah," Harry said. "They said you'd tried to void the win. It's quidditch though, you know how it is."

"Dementors aren't exactly covered in the rule book," Cedric said. "It wasn't exactly fair."

"Yeah, well, it wouldn't exactly have been fair if I had won just 'cause I had the faster broom," Harry said with a shrug.

"Thinking about downgrading?" Diggory asked.
"Oh no thank you," Harry said. "But you know; just think of it from my point of view. I shouldn't have won my first match, or at least not like that. The snitch basically flew into my mouth. If I get to call that a win then you can call Sunday a win."

"I seem to recall the fact that you probably wouldn't have won at all if you hadn't kept on your bucking broom. That was some serious riding, and speaking as a bloke I'm not sure how you managed," Diggory said.

"It was rather uncomfortable," Harry admitted. Brooms were poorly designed for male flyers, no matter the cushioning charm.

"Well you're a good flyer," Diggory said. "I wish I could see who would win in a fair match."

"We'll see next year I suppose," Harry said.

"Why not sooner?" Diggory asked

"They're really not going to void the match," Harry said.

"So?" Diggory asked. "Let's have a seekers match. Don't you get bored just playing against the snitch in practice? Just three thrilling chases a year? If we're lucky."

"It still wouldn't be fair though," Harry said. "Your Comet's a great broom, but it can't beat my Nimbus."

"Didn't stop you beating Malfoy last year," Cedric said. "Besides, if you want things fair then we can have two matches and trade brooms in between."

"Are you sure you don't just want some good practice before your match against Ravenclaw?"

Harry asked.

"Don't you?" Diggory asked.

Harry smiled. "I suppose."

"Great, we'll work it out later," Diggory said, holding out his hand. "I got to get back."

Harry shook Cedric's hand and the older boy returned to the classroom.

After a little trial and error, Harry found that it was easier to dive through walls with his hands at a point over his head. It was best however to make sure each particular wall was passable though. He had the bruises to show that that had been a hard learned lesson. Until he had a better idea of which walls were safe and which weren't, he found himself being very cautious before passing through a wall. Most walls weren't warded though and getting through the castle had become a lot more interesting, though not necessarily faster. The castle defied the laws of physics in many ways and walking through certain walls did not always lead where one would logically expect. He had once gone through a wall on the second floor only to find himself walking into the dungeon on the other side. Though he was building a mental map of shortcuts.

He turned a few heads as he appeared in the main second floor hallway, but since he was coming from one wall and then walking through the next, no one had time to stop him to ask about the trick. Harry wondered if the twins wanted him drumming up excitement for the product. He dove through another wall and had to take a moment to judge where he was in the castle. Was he in a tower?
In this fashion, Harry arrived to the Thursday defense study group quite a bit earlier than he normally did. Anna and Benjamin probably weren't even in the classroom yet and they were usually the first to arrive. The thought of waiting with them, just them, for the rest of the students made Harry uneasy. Benjamin had acted like nothing was wrong, but he was a nice bloke like that. Harry wondered if he had told Anna. He considered taking a walk, and learning more about the castle, but that wouldn't be very Gryffindor, would it. Harry walked into the classroom only to find that it wasn't empty.

"Ah, good evening," Professor Lupin said. "You're a bit early aren't you, Mr. Potter?"

Harry stood still in the doorway, he also hadn't planned to wait for the start of the study group alone with the professor.

"Oh, good evening professor." Harry said. He noticed the stack of parchment in front of Professor Lupin. "I didn't realize you'd be here, I won't interrupt your grading."

"Ah, well, consider me interrupted," Professor Lupin said with a kind smile. "The study group will start soon enough anyways. Come in, Mr. Potter, I've wanted to ask you how you are doing with the advanced course work."

"Oh it's going well enough, professor," Harry said as he stepped into the classroom and stood by one of the desks. "The spells aren't too difficult. I'm just trying to become a bit faster. I spend too much time focusing on the incantations and movements."

"Have you tried using your toothbrush?" Professor Lupin asked.

Harry's hand went to his mouth. He wasn't even standing that close to the man.

Professor Lupin laughed.

"Not that," he said. "For practice, as a stand in for your wand. You can practice over and over again without exerting yourself, anything vaguely wandlike will do. I used my toothbrush when I was your age."

"Oh, no I haven't tried that," Harry said. "There are only so many stunners I can cast before I have to stop."

"It is good to get to that point of course," Professor Lupin said. "Magic isn't exactly like a muscle, per se, but working out your magic does help train you to channel more magic down the line. Now, I've been wondering if you'll want to take the fourth year exam come June."

"What for?" Harry asked.

"To skip it of course," Professor Lupin said.

"I can do that?" Harry asked surprised.

"Well it would be up to whoever is teaching defense next year," Professor Lupin said. "But you have effectively been learning both years curriculums thus far. I would see no need for you to repeat the fourth year curriculum next year as long as you show competence."

"You aren't even planning on being here next year?" Harry asked, disappointed in spite of himself. He had heard enough to know that the loss of the past two defense teachers hadn't been a fluke.

"I think it's best not to tempt fate," Professor Lupin said.
"It's a shame," Harry said. "We didn't learn half as much with our previous defense professors. It would have been nice to have you back next year."

"Perhaps you'll luck out," Professor Lupin said. "I bandied a few names with the headmaster. There's some good candidates out there, if he can get them to take the job."

"Hm," Harry said. "Well I guess we'll have to wait and see."

"And the exam?" Professor Lupin asked.

"Oh, I suppose I should take it," Harry said reluctantly. He wasn't fond of the idea of having a class without Ron or Hermione. Would he even be with the Gryffindor fifth years, or would he be put in with whatever fifth year class overlapped one of his free periods.

"Well if you want to focus on being able to defend yourself, it really is the best course to take," Professor Lupin said.

"That's the plan," said Harry. "Next time someone tries to get me, I'll have a surprise for them."

"I must warn you," Professor Lupin said. "Fenrir Greyback has rarely been known to be taken by surprise, or to be much phased by it when he is."

"Do you know a lot about him, then?" Harry asked.

"Oh, I've made something of a study of him," Professor Lupin said.

"Then do you know what his thing with Sirius Black was? Or why he killed him?" Harry winced a moment later at the pained look on the professor's face. He hadn't even thought to be delicate. The letter had told him enough to know that Professor Lupin had probably been close friends with Sirius Black.

Professor Lupin opened his mouth to answer but Anna and Benjamin walked in at that moment. Whatever he had been about to say turned into, "We can discuss that another time." He turned his attention to the new arrivals and soon was talking to Anna about a fourth year class project.

Benjamin walked up to Harry with a smile and Harry did his best not to look like he was still embarrassed about the previous Sunday.

"Good week so far?" Benjamin asked by way of small talk.

"Yeah," Harry said. "You?"

"I managed to blow up the potions classroom," Benjamin said. "I'm counting that as a detractor, though some have tried to convince me it's an accomplishment."

"That would be the twins I'm guessing," Harry said with a smile. "I heard about that. How long did it take to clean up?"

"Only my entire evening without magic," Benjamin said with a wan smile.

Harry grimaced sympathetically. Not for the first time he wondered: if he did tell Professor Snape, would everyone else find out? It wouldn't exactly do to say, 'Hey you're my dad, can we treat this like it's a deep dark dirty secret?' But the peculiar circumstances of his birth were a private matter and everyone finding out would raise a ton of questions. He really didn't like the idea of people thinking his mum had cheated and it was either that or explain every last detail… he might as well
That he didn't want students giving him grief whenever they got a nasty detention from Professor Snape was also perhaps a factor. If Saturday did somehow go well, there'd be a host of new things to worry about.

"So do you want to practice some wrist locks," Benjamin asked, with none of the trepidation that Harry suddenly felt at the idea of practicing physical self defense.

"S-sure," Harry said almost immediately, because there was no way he was going to let being afraid of what had happened on Sunday stop him from making sure that no one could grab him like that ever again. That he would never be helpless again. That he would never have to wonder if he could have done something to stop it. That he would never have to look back and think, 'if only.' If he could only keep it together in the here and now.

"Just wrist locks?" he found himself asking and cursed his fear.

"I don't think we'll have time for much more before everyone else gets here," Benjamin said. "We can do a lot more if you want to meet again this Sunday."

"Oh, yeah," Harry said, keeping the nervousness locked down. "Same time?"

"Sure," Benjamin said. "Now, let's say I reach out to grab your collar…"

Harry felt approaching dread the entire time they practiced, until the other students arrived. He didn't know if it was the same dread he had felt that Sunday or if it was worries about what had happened happening again. He kept it at bay though; maybe it had just been the dementor.

"You wished to speak with me Headmaster?" Severus asked.

"I did Severus," the headmaster replied. "Please have a seat."

Severus enjoyed his weekly tea with the headmaster, but he did rather wish that the man would just get to the point when he summoned him out of the blue. Still though, he waited until the tea was poured and he could refuse the usual offer of a lemon drop.

"Harry came to see me the other day," the headmaster said when they had both taken a sip of their tea. "I do believe that all of your questions shall be answered by the end of this week."

"Oh the mystery may be solved headmaster, but I do not think I shall ever understand the boy," Severus said. "He told you what he has been up to?"

"Not quite," the headmaster said.

"And you disapprove when I have had the need to use Legilimency on students," Severus said.

"Where Harry is concerned, not knowing what is going on in his head makes it very difficult to make sure that it stays on his shoulders," the headmaster said. "Besides, when a student comes in and tells you that he knows for a fact that one of his teachers was a death eater and wishes to be assured that he can trust him, one must take every precaution."

"He told you that?" Severus said aghast.

"Not in so many words, no," the headmaster said. "You will understand his position soon enough. It will seem very reasonable when you do."
"The gall," Severus said.

"Yes, it does remind me of someone," the headmaster said with a smile.

"His father," Severus said, and if anything the headmaster's smile widened.

"As I said, it will seem very reasonable," the headmaster assured him.

"But how would he even know?" Severus asked. "The letter?"

The headmaster nodded.

"But then why would he…" Severus pondered before breaking off in complete confusion.

"He did say that he does trust you," the headmaster said. "He wished to have my assurance that he was not unreasonable to have such faith. All shall become clear when he tells you."

"You could tell me now," Severus said.

"Ah, but that would spoil the surprise," the headmaster said.

"I do not like surprises, headmaster" Severus said testily.

"Ah, but it is simply not my place to tell," the headmaster sighed forlorn, as if he truly did wish to tell Severus but was bound by propriety to keep silent. The twitch of his lip gave him away.

"Of course, it is one thing to read a student's mind, but spoiling his surprise is beyond the pale," Severus said being as droll as possible.

"I'm glad you see this as I do," the headmaster said.

Severus sighed. He wanted to storm out to show his displeasure but… it really was good tea and it would be rude to leave before it was finished.

"There is one thing Severus," the Headmaster said.

Severus looked up, for though there was still mirth in the headmaster's eyes, there was definitely a more serious note to his voice.

"What Harry has to tell you will seem impossible at first," the headmaster said. "You may be inclined to believe that he is lying or misinformed. He is not, I have already taken it upon myself to verify the matter. I believe it is important for the both of you that you know that now."

Severus was certain now that whatever the matter was, that it was very serious and that whatever it was, it would probably cause him several headaches. He sipped on his tea pensively. By the end of the week, the headmaster had said. That left Friday and Saturday. Though since he would be seeing the boy for his first time as a lab assistant on Saturday, Severus supposed that it would be Saturday. That left him until then to figure out whatever mess he was about to find himself in. He rather did not like surprises.

'Muggle Military Explosive's Storehouse Immolated, Beckett Dead By His Own Flames,' the front page of the daily prophet proclaimed Friday morning.

The students in the Great Hall were carrying on as though a holiday had just been declared, but absent from the article, and seemingly absent most everyone's minds was the fact that there were
probably a great many people dead in that fire besides Beckett. Those people would of course be muggles and hardly worth mentioning in a wizarding newspaper. Even when a muggle woman died saving the blasted boy-who-lived. As usual, the muggles were being dismissed, but Harry wondered if the writer or the editor at the Daily Prophet understood muggle explosives. He was pretty sure Beckett didn’t, because if he had, he would have known that setting fire to what was likely a place to store missiles or bombs with fiendfyre was not a good idea. Explosions move much faster than fiendfyre, and Beckett had likely been unable to apparate away before everything in the area had been leveled. Yes, a good many muggle soldiers had probably died in that.

Harry handed the paper back to Hermione who started re-reading the article.

"Well at least it's one less thing to worry about," Ron said, with much less levity than the students around the hall had. Harry didn't know if Ron had read the same deaths between the lines of the article, or if he was simply picking up on Harry's mood.

"Yeah," Harry said. "There's that. It's fitting I guess."

Harry had just turned back to his breakfast when a small origami swan flew up and landed in front of him. He looked around to see who had sent it, but no one was looking at him.

"There's writing," Ron said.

Harry looked back and saw that indeed there was writing curling around one of the wings. He set about unfolding the parchment and read the short note.

_See me in my office before the start of classes today._

- McGonagall

Harry looked up to the head table to find that Professor's McGonagall, Snape, and Dumbledore were absent. There wasn't much point in keeping them waiting. Grabbing a scone, he got up.

"I've got to go see Professor McGonagall," Harry said.

"Don't be late for class," Hermione said. "If you're telling him tomorrow, you don't want it to be right after you get in trouble for being late for potions."

"I'm sure McGonagall'll give me a note if I need one," Harry said as he left. Besides, he had a feeling that Professor Snape would be there as well.

Professor McGonagall's office was relatively close to the Great Hall and Harry, only halfway done with his scone, wound up putting what was left of his pastry in his pocket for lack of a better place for it. The door was ajar and Harry knocked as he stuck his head in.

"Professor?" he asked. He could see the three missing professors standing in front of Professor McGonagall's desk with a woman he did not recognize; it looked like they had been arguing.

"Come in, Mr. Potter," Professor McGonagall said. "I take it you saw the news."

"I did, professor," Harry said, standing just inside the doorway. "Though I'm not sure why you would want to see me about it."

"As tragic as recent events have been, Harry, we have been presented with an opportunity and time may be of the essence," the Headmaster said. "This is Madame Bones, the head of Magical Law Enforcement, she is here because we hope to soon capture Fenrir Greyback."
"And you want my help?" Harry asked, not at all sure where this was going, but he was very excited at the prospect of Greyback going back to prison.

"Very indirectly," Professor Snape said. "But yes."

"We will be announcing over lunch that since there is no longer a threat from Beckett, we will be allowing a Hogsmeade visit for all students who have their permission slips signed," Professor McGonagall said.

"We will be letting the villagers know to expect students this Sunday," Professor Snape said. "If Greyback gets word, he will hopefully realize that this is his best opportunity to grab you."

Harry swallowed and looked at Professor Snape with almost a feeling of betrayal.

"You want to use me as bait?" he asked before taking a deep breath. "I can do that, I think. I still have that anti-portkey necklace, and I still wear it everyday." Harry tugged on the chain around his neck. He could do it, he thought. If it meant justice for Ms. Adler.

"Phaw!" Professor McGonagall exclaimed. "We will be doing no such thing Mr. Potter. You will be safely inside the castle. You will of course have a doppelgänger who will keep to himself and favor the outskirts of the town."

"Oh," Harry said uneasily. "Polyjuice then?"

"Indeed," Professor Snape said.

"Who'll impersonate me, Professor?" Harry asked.

Professor Snape merely raised a single eyebrow.

"You?" Harry asked.

"Who better, Mr. Potter?" Professor Snape asked. "I spent a great deal of my summer around you, and for precisely the reason that I could handle matters should Greyback attack."

"What if he hurts you though?" Harry asked, and now both of Professor Snape's eyebrows rose.

"That is my concern, Mr. Potter, and not yours," Professor Snape said sternly.

"But if he's trying to get me…" Harry said.

"Then that will be his mistake," Professor Snape said darkly.

"What if he hurts the other students?" Harry asked, liking the idea less and less as he had time to think about it.

"There will be a staged spat between yourself and Mr. Weasley as you arrive in the village, after which you will skulk around the edges of the town," Professor Snape said. "It may be too transparent, but we are not willing to shoulder more risk."

Harry really didn't like this plan. Greyback was vengeful and cruel and fully capable of quickly murdering people.

"Shouldn't an Auror be doing this, though?" Harry asked. "I mean it's not that you aren't capable sir, but…"
"There will be Aurors, Mr. Potter," Madame Bones said, speaking up for the first time. "Your professor will not be handling this matter on his own. If all goes to plan, he won't even need to raise his wand. It has been agreed that due to his experience with yourself, that he will be able to passably imitate your mannerisms. With luck we'll have drawn Greyback out before he can even get close."

Though she spoke in favor of the plan, Harry got the impression she didn't like it, or perhaps she didn't like Snape's role in it.

"Do you need me to do anything?" Harry asked. "I mean besides giving you some hair."

"Merely go about today and tomorrow as though you are excited to go to Hogsmeade," the headmaster said. "Should anyone express surprise that you are allowed to go, you may tell them that you have your anti-portkey necklace and that you have agreed to stay where it is busy."

"Do you think he can get information from inside the school, sir?" Harry asked, thinking of certain students.

"No," the headmaster reassured. "But it is best to be cautious none the less. Sunday morning, you will get into the carriage to town with your friends. You will have a portkey beacon that will be delivered to you by owl post that morning. The beacon will allow Professor Snape to portkey directly into your carriage. You will then portkey out and arrive safely in my office."

Harry nodded as he processed the plan.

"Unless there is anything else," Professor McGonagall said. "Some of us have classes to be attending to."

"That should be all," the headmaster said. "Do you have any questions, Harry?"

"Yeah," Harry said. "What should I tell my friends?"

"Nothing for now Mr. Potter," the headmaster said. "They will be told when they leave for the village during the carriage ride. Now, I do believe that if you leave now, you and Professor Snape can arrive to your first class without being too late."

Harry soon found himself walking the mostly empty halls with Professor Snape.

For the first time in a while, Harry found himself in an awkward silence around the man, and wished he could escape using his gloves. He could probably get to the potions classroom before the bell if he did.

"I care little if you believe me capable Mr. Potter," Professor Snape said. "But whatever doubts you do have, you must bury them. You wear your heart on your sleeve and it is best that none of your worry is apparent."

"I don't doubt you professor," Harry said. "You've saved me too many times for that. I'm just worried; I've seen what he does to people."

"A number of people will have failed at their jobs if he gets that close to me," Professor Snape said.

"Yeah, well he got pretty close to me in Diagon Alley sir," Harry said. "And enough people have died in my place if you ask me so I don't need that on my head again."

"Death is not a line you are waiting in, Mr. Potter," Professor Snape said tersely. "You do not have
a ticket with a time and date that someone can take for you. That they died while you were in danger does not mean that you were supposed to have died then."

"Yeah, well they still died trying to save me!" Harry said. "Maybe I wasn't supposed to die, but they shouldn't have died so that I wouldn't."

"Life doesn't work on 'should,' Mr. Potter," Professor Snape said, and now he sounded tired.

"Yeah, well it should," Harry said petulantly, not caring for the first time in a long time how he came off to the man. Professor Snape ignored the comment.

"So you would prefer it be an Auror he got close to?" Professor Snape asked.

"It's not like that," Harry said. "It's just… um, well it's different."

"Different how?" Professor Snape said.

"Well I like you," Harry said before blushing and looking down. "I mean, maybe that's selfish, but I guess I'll worry more about you than someone I… don't know."

Professor Snape didn't speak for a moment and Harry snuck a glance up at him. The man did not speak for a moment.

"I was not aware that I had given you reason to like me," Professor Snape said.

Harry shrugged.

"You don't need to give me reasons," Harry said.

"And yet you have them," Professor Snape said.

Harry shrugged again, he supposed that the professor was about as willing to directly ask his questions as Harry was to answer them.

"Your mother was my best friend when I was your age," Professor Snape said, perhaps too casually. Harry looked up at him in surprise. "Though I suppose you already had an inkling of that from the letter you mentioned. I have been surprised of late to realize that you share some of her better qualities."

Harry found his breath catching and suddenly found his shoes very interesting. For a brief moment, he could hope that everything would go well on Saturday.

"Though I must say she had considerably more common sense when she was your age," Professor Snape continued. The moment was broken.

"Hey," Harry said.

"Did you not just say that you would act as bait for Fenrir Greyback?" Professor Snape asked.

"You actually are acting as bait for him Professor," Harry said indignantly.

"I am a fully trained wizard who is more than capable, and an adult," Professor Snape said. "You clearly did not want to do it, but you said that you would. Why?"

"He needs to be stopped," Harry said. "He's hurt too many people."
"But why you?" Professor Snape asked.

"Because he's coming after me," Harry said insistently.

"That is a very good reason to stay far away from him," Professor Snape said.

"Well what does that make me if he hurts someone else trying to get to me?" Harry asked heatedly.

"It doesn't make you anything," Professor Snape said. "It makes him what he is, a monster. You are not responsible for stopping him."

"Yes I am," Harry said. "It's my fault."

"What drivel is this?" Professor Snape asked.

"Nothing," Harry said, not looking at the man.

"The first two years of you schooling may have given you the impression that you are the hero of some story, but I can assure you that when it comes to Greyback, your only responsibility is to stay safe from him, and follow the plan that we have laid out," Professor Snape said.

"But I…"

Professor Snape cut him off.

"But nothing," he said. "Now with luck he will be dealt with this Sunday, but even if he is not, I need to know that you will not try to run after him."

"Why does everyone think I have a death wish?" Harry asked.

"I could go on ad nauseam," Professor Snape said.

"I'm not just going to go looking for him, Professor" Harry said. "I know how that'd go."

"See that you keep it in mind," Professor Snape said as they arrived at the potions classroom.

Harry had no trouble doing just that. He had a hard time concentrating in potions again that day.

Everyone was in high spirits after the announcement over lunch, and Harry was doing his best to play his part. It was hard though, as worried as he was. Charms and Defense Against the Dark Arts went well and when the bell rang Harry was ready to go to the library to get a head start on some homework to keep up the facade of a student who fully expected to spend his Sunday in Hogsmeade when he was interrupted.

"A word, Mr. Potter," Professor Lupin said. "Or two, if you will."

Harry told his friends he'd catch up with them in the library as he made his way to the front of the classroom. He eyed the door as the classroom emptied quickly and they were soon alone.

"I thought, Mr. Potter," Professor Lupin said with a sad smile. "That you might like to finish our conversation from yesterday evening."

"Oh," Harry said as he remembered the pained look in the professors eyes the night prior. "I shouldn't have asked like that. I understand if you don't want to talk about Mr. Black."
Professor Lupin looked at him with surprise.

"I know you were friends," Harry said. "You were both mentioned in a letter I have that my parents wrote."

"I hadn't known if I should bring it up," Professor Lupin said. "If it was still my place to be a family friend."

Harry shrugged. He didn't know Professor Lupin outside of the classroom. He figured he probably felt as conflicted as the professor was on the topic. He was a stranger, but, he had also been a friend to his dad. A very close friend, he could tell from the letter, but what was that now?

"I didn't know either," Harry said. "It was rude of me to ask."

"No," Professor Lupin assured. "You should know. Sirius was your family, your godfather. Did you know?"

Harry nodded.

"You have a right to know what happened," Professor Lupin said very seriously. "I could tell you now if you'd like."

"Alright then," Harry said with a feeling that he was getting a lot more than he had initially asked for.

"Here," Professor Lupin said, pulling out his wand. "Let's have a seat."

Two of the desks from the front of the classroom floated up and transformed into much more comfortable chairs. Harry sat down across from his professor.

"I suppose I should start out by telling you that Sirius was about as excited when you were born as your father was," Professor Lupin started out. "He doted on you constantly; we all did I suppose, but he took being your godfather very seriously. We'd all had turns baby sitting you, but Sirius liked to call it Godfather Time. He was your favorite and everyone knew it."

Harry stared at his knees for a moment as he processed the information and Professor Lupin gathered his thoughts. He didn't know that he wanted more of a reason to feel bad that the man was gone, but at the same time, it was nice to think of a time when he had been wanted.

"We were over all the time," Professor Lupin said. "Even with the war, we always made time for each other. We all fought, in our own way, but even when it was all crumbling down around us I suppose I still thought we'd all come out on the other end, even with your father and Sirius both being Aurors."

"The letter mentioned a Mr. Pettigrew," Harry said. "Is he still alive?"

"No Harry," Professor Lupin said heavily. "I hadn't planned on bringing this up, but you should know." Harry had the very large impression that he should just stop asking questions. He had once been very good at that.

"He betrayed your parents, Harry," Professor Lupin said sadly. "He betrayed us all. The night your parents died… He told Voldemort where to find them… Where to find you. He died soon after; a Death Eater cornered him after it all, and blew the whole street apart to kill him. We never really knew why, as the Hit Wizards killed the man trying to bring him in. I've always supposed he blamed Peter for what happened to their master."
Harry felt a hollow ache in his chest. They had been betrayed. How could someone do that, how could a...

"He was their friend," Harry said flatly.

"I thought so, yes," Professor Lupin said.

Harry took a while to process it all.

"Sirius though," Professor Lupin said. "He was true to the end."

"What do you mean?" Harry asked.

"Afterwards," Professor Lupin paused. "It was still dangerous. Death Eaters were still on the loose, were still targeting you. You were sent to your Aunt and Uncle's where the Headmaster was able to erect powerful blood wards to keep you safe. Sirius worked day and night to bring in the Death Eaters. He wanted to make the world safe, so he could take you home. He wanted to raise you, but there was still so much danger out there. I doubt you've ever known but they caught a few Death Eaters as they attempted to bypass your wards only two days after. You'll probably be interested to know that Sirius was the one who captured Beckett and Rookwood. The last person he stopped was Greyback."

"But I'd heard Greyback killed him," Harry said.

"He did," Professor Lupin said. "Sirius had always had a bit of a vendetta against Greyback, and even before the war, Sirius wanted to be the one to stop him. In the end though, all he found was Greyback's camp. The aurors swarmed in, arrests were made, children rescued, but there was no Greyback. Greyback found Sirius, later that day. They fought… Sirius was able to subdue him, but he had already taken severe injuries. By the time the aurors arrived…"

Harry had a hard time imagining what his life would have been like. What if his parents hadn't been betrayed? What if Sirius Black had lived? He had long ago convinced himself that such a life wasn't for him, but that didn't stop him from wondering. He'd been wondering about a lot of things lately.

"What happened to the children?" Harry asked. "Had they all been turned?"

"All but one of them had," Professor Lupin said sadly. "Some had spent a long time in captivity, some less so. Some acclimated back into society better than others. The youngest one graduated from Hogwarts last year I believe."

"Wait," Harry said, surprised. "One of my classmates last year was a werewolf?"

"Oh yes," Professor Lupin said. "With most you really can't tell. Unless you're paying close attention to the full moon. The headmaster wouldn't stop a child from getting their education."

"So they were safe then?" Harry asked.

"Safer I dare say than any student might have been in my day," Professor Lupin said. "There is a recently invented potion that allows a person to keep their mind when they have transformed, making them little more dangerous than an animimagus."

"So no one knew?" Harry asked.

"Only the ones who needed to know," Professor Lupin said. "There was no need to start a moral
panic among the parents or the school board."

Harry could have imagined Mr. Malfoy's reaction.

"What would my parents have done if Greyback had gotten me?" Harry asked.

"They would have razed heaven and earth to get you back," Professor Lupin said rather simply.

"Yeah, but what if I had been bitten?" Harry asked. "There are people who hate werewolves just for being werewolves."

"Your parents weren't those sorts of people," Professor Lupin said smiling sadly. "I can assure you of that."

"The hat wanted to put me in Slytherin," Harry said.

"Did it really?" Professor Lupin asked, not seeming to mind the change in subject.

Harry nodded. "I asked it not to. I've wondered what my parents would have thought if I had been." He gave his professor a searching look.

"Ah," Professor Lupin said. "Well I suppose every parent wants their child to be in their old house, but I know they would have loved you all the same. Sirius had a hard time of things for being sorted into Gryffindor; his whole family was Slytherin, but your parents wouldn't have thought less of you. It may seem at times like the war was between Slytherins and everyone else, but I can assure you all houses were represented on both sides."

"I'd gotten the impression that my dad had a bit of a vendetta against Slytherins," Harry said.

Professor Lupin laughed. "I suppose he did. I suppose we all did way back when. But Harry, we largely grew out of that. Your father worked with many Slytherins as an Auror. I certainly can't say that the old rivalry ever truly died out, but I do know he came to respect a few of them. People change a good deal after school you know. I think if you had been sorted into Slytherin, your father would have been boasting to anyone who would listen that you were destined to be the Head of the DMLE or some such."

"What about Sirius Black?" Harry asked.

"Oh he would have teased you about it every chance he got," Professor Lupin said with a smile. "But he teased just about everyone he liked regardless. I don't think Sirius would have ever parroted his parents and treated your sorting like a betrayal. I don't think I can stress enough that Sirius adored you. I think people who didn't know him assumed he was a father; he would tell anyone who would listen about all of your milestones."

"So if I were to have written home to say I was dating a Slytherin or something?" Harry asked.

"Oh is that where this line of questioning has been heading?" Professor Lupin asked with a grin.

"Oh, no, I'm not dating anyone," Harry said pulling a face.

"Hm, well," Professor Lupin thought. "I think the best I can tell you is that your parents would have wanted you to be happy; regardless of who you were dating."

Harry thought about that for a moment.

"Any more insight I can give you?" Professor Lupin asked.
Harry wanted to ask more, but questions were telling, and he had already told enough.

"No, Professor," Harry said. "But thanks for talking to me about this stuff."

"It's no problem Harry," Professor Lupin said. "I remember them fondly, and I enjoyed sharing them with you." Professor Lupin stood up, and Harry followed suit.

"Oh, there was one thing, professor," Harry said. "I was wondering about that spell for dementors. I found it in the library, but I haven't had any luck with it."

"Ah, well it is a seventh year spell, Harry," Professor Lupin said. "You can certainly master it, but it will take a considerable amount of work, and power."

"It's just, I can't afford to be weak like that," Harry said. "I mean, what if they attack the next quidditch match?"

"Well we can certainly work on it, Harry," Professor Lupin said. "Though it may have to wait while I work around some logistical issues. It may not be until next term, but we will work on it if you want to put the effort in."

"I do, professor," Harry said. "Thank you."

"Very well," Professor Lupin said. "I'm sure you'll probably have plenty of homework to get out of the way before your Hogsmeade weekend."

"Oh, I do," Harry said, feigning enthusiasm.

"Well then, Harry, enjoy your weekend," Professor Lupin said.

"You too professor," Harry said, making his way out of the classroom.

What would my parents have thought about what I'm going to do tomorrow, Harry wondered as he headed towards the library chewing on his bottom lip.

"Have you thought about what you're going to say?" Hermione asked.

"Yeah," Harry said as he stirred the potion. Only about a million times, in a million ways.

"Well I think it's going to go alright," Ron said confidently, looking up from a chess piece he was fiddling with.

That made one of them, Harry thought. Harry shrugged.

"Are you going to ask him if you can kip over for the summer?" Ron asked.

"I think he should take it one step at a time," Hermione said.

"What do I do if he gets upset?" Harry asked.

"Tell him it's his loss and get out of there," Ron said flippantly. "If he's a jerk after he finds out he's you father he'll be a jerk forever. We'll work on plan-B"

"Yeah, but he'd still know, and it would be weird," Harry said.

"Can't get worse than it was before this year," Ron said.
"But it's alright now," Harry said. "This could make it worse. Maybe I should wait till it's closer to the end of the year."

"No," Hermione said. "Harry, remember, this is the testing period. You can interact with him in the safety of the school and if it's working out here it'll probably work out for the summer. You don't want to wait till the end of the year and go into everything blind do you?"

Harry sighed.

"What if he just doesn't want to be a father?" Harry asked. "Like he's alright being friendly with a student, but like... you know, he doesn't want to take one home with him. I'd be ruining his child free summer."

"How'd his child free summer go last time?" Ron asked. "He had to stalk the alley for weeks on end. This way he can stay in whichever dungeon he haunts when school's out."

"He did that for Dumbledore," Harry said. "This time he'd be doing it for me, and he wasn't exactly happy about it the last time."

"Look," Hermione said. "We all want this to go really well and for you to be happy, but the primary focus is you not being homeless and in danger this summer."

"Professor Snape isn't my only option though," Harry said.

"No," Hermione said. "But he's your best option. He can keep you safer than anyone else. Greyback got to you when you were surrounded by aurors. Professor Dumbledore asked the professor to watch you for a reason."

"There are more things to worry about than safety," Harry said in exasperation.

"Well you'll have plenty of time to worry about them while you're safe and sound," Hermione said.

"Do you really think he's going to become terrible again when he finds out he's your dad?" Ron asked.

Harry shrugged.

"Maybe not terrible," he said. "But.. I don't know."

Disappointed, disgusted, annoyed, horrified, weary, resigned; he could be any of those things besides terrible. He could think the whole thing was a laugh, a cosmic joke, and tell him to get lost. He didn't need to be terrible, he didn't need to say awful things or assign detentions and take points; Harry would know when he wasn't wanted.

Professor Snape might take him in as a duty; he might even try to be nice about it, but Harry didn't want to be an obligation or a burden. He really wished he could go back to the beginning when he had been pretending to himself that all he cared about was a safe place to stay.

"Time to add the star seeds," Hermione said.

Harry lightly spread the seeds over the potion and watched it glow.

"Alright," Ron said. "Let's pour a bit of it off and see if this thing'll say you have two dads."

A few minutes later they had their answer.
"That's enough, Mr. Malfoy," Severus said. "Update me on your efforts."

"I've got Jugson going against McDanniels," Mr. Malfoy said proudly. "They'll both be too busy to interfere for a while."

"Did either of them see your hand in the matter?" Severus asked.

"I think McDanniels suspects something, but he's more angry with Jugson," Mr. Malfoy said.

"So you were transparent," Severus said.

"I was not," Draco Malfoy protested. "McDanniels probably just figured I was the only one with the motivation to say anything to Jugson."

"Oh, I'm sorry Mr. Malfoy," Severus said. "It was the plan that was transparent, not yourself."

"I..."

"Just because a plan will work does not mean you should execute it," Severus said. "Do not become so enamored with your good ideas that you can not see their flaws. How are you going to correct this?"

"I could give him someone else to focus on," Draco Malfoy said.

"He is already focused on someone else," Severus said. "Do not make things overly complicated, or you will become his primary focus again."

"So what do I do?"

"At times, Mr. Malfoy, the best plan is to do nothing and wait, observe, and prepare," Severus said.

Draco Malfoy just looked frustrated at that answer.

"How is your Ravenclaw foray?" Severus asked.

"I helped Sue Li in Charms Class," Draco Malfoy said.

"Is that the most you can say for your efforts?" Severus asked.

"They all act like I'm up to something," Mr. Malfoy complained.

"You are up to something," Severus couldn't help but to point out.

"They think I'm up to something bad," Draco Malfoy said, a petulant whine creeping in.

"Perhaps this should cement in you the importance of reputation," Severus said. "Keep working, be subtle, it will take time."

Draco sighed.

"Now, Mr. Malfoy," Severus said. "For our next exercise you will convince me I should give you my last biscuit."

"Is there actually a biscuit?" Draco Malfoy asked, eyeing the professor's desk.

"No," Severus said. "This is merely an exercise."
"It's just I think these exercises would work better if I was arguing something that mattered," Draco Malfoy said. "Like I should be convincing you to vote for something you don't actually want, and if there isn't even really a biscuit I'm not sure what the point is."

"The point is that you should be able to argue anything," Severus said. "I'm sure you would delight to pretend at some political machination, but there are plenty of doldrum things that a good Slytherin must be able to debate."

"Well sure, but just for the sake of it being realistic, professor," Draco Malfoy said. "I mean there should actually be a biscuit."

Severus sighed and retrieved a tin of shortbread biscuits from his desk. He removed one biscuit and placed it on the desk.

"Well, professor," Draco Malfoy said. "It's just that it is supposed to be your last biscuit."

Severus gave a bark of a laugh that startled the boy.

"You'll have to do better than that if you want to walk out of my office with this tin Mr. Malfoy," Severus said.

There was a knock on the door and both biscuit and tin disappeared before Severus gave a curt, "come in."

Of course, of all people, it was Harry Potter who stuck his head through the door.

"It's not too early is it Professor," Harry Potter asked.

"It is early," Severus said. "But do come in. I'll have to familiarize you with my lab procedure before the rest of my assistants show up." He turned to Mr. Malfoy. "We will continue on Tuesday."

Draco Malfoy nodded and turned, pointedly not looking at Harry Potter as he walked out of the classroom.

"Have you been doing your part?" Severus asked Harry Potter when the door was once again closed.

"I have professor," Harry Potter said. "As far as everyone else is concerned, I'm very excited to be going to Hogsmeade."

The boy made some sort of face, and Severus supposed he could imagine what the boy thought of everything.

"With any luck you will be going the next time," Severus said.

Harry shrugged.

"Perhaps I should take you the next time I run to Waldorf's for ingredients," Severus surprised himself by saying. "In disguise of course."

"Really?" Mr. Potter said with a very sincere wonder. It was ridiculous how much stock the students put into the little village.

"We shall see, Mr. Potter," Severus said. "But I do believe we were to be discussing lab procedures."
Harry had to remind himself several times that not remembering the proper lab procedure because he had not been paying attention would be a bad way to prelude what was to come later, but it was what was to come later that had him scatterbrained at the moment. He had hoped to have some time to just talk with the professor after they had talked about how the lab was run, but Harry wasn't the only student who arrived early. Faisal Khan and Arianna Leurman, the professor's only other lab assistants soon arrived and Harry quickly found himself preparing ingredients en-mass. His hand was cramping before long and, all in all, it was a rather smelly ordeal. Arianna was brewing potion bases while Faisal took copious notes and transcribed for the professor. It wasn't all monotony though, Professor Snape had a dozen cauldrons going and periodically he would call them over to demonstrate a technique or explain a reaction. It was very much a different environment than the classroom was.

It was odd though, but the monotony was nice in a way. It gave him time to think over what he wanted to say as soon as the others left, though those thoughts were interspersed with mostly dire thoughts of what would happen next. Three long hours later it was time to clean up the lab and Harry learned a couple of charms that students in detention were not allowed to use. Arianna left pretty quickly after that but Faisal stayed behind to go over the days results, which largely went over Harry's head.

"Later, professor," Faisal said after he had finally put his notes away.

"Indeed," Professor Snape said as he turned to Harry. "Was there something you wanted Mr. Potter?"

Harry nodded and waited for Faisal to walk out. When the door closed behind him, Harry opened up his book bag and pulled out a beaker of potion.

"I wanted to ask you to identify this potion, professor," Harry said.

"Where did you get this?" Professor Snape asked, and suddenly his wand was in his hand. "Did someone give it to you?"

"No," Harry said. "I brewed it. Or, I mean, I helped brew it."

"You brewed a potion without even knowing what it was?" Professor Snape asked, clearly outraged. "Have you any idea how dangerous that is? That could be poison, it could have turned into a toxic cloud!"

Harry had to swallow down the silence that came with a feeling of panic. "No, sir" Harry said, backpedaling internally from the professor's harsh tone. "No, I know what it is, it isn't dangerous, it's..." Why did conversations never go how he had planned them in his head. "I need to explain something to you, and the potion is part of it, but you need to know what it is first and you might not take my word for it."

Professor Snape gave him a piercing look and Harry found himself studying his shoes while he calmed himself down.

"I see," Professor Snape said after he himself had taken a deep breath, and Harry looked up to briefly see a blank expression on the professor's face before a calmer one took over. "We have certainly discussed this in class before, positively identifying a potion is not a quick task."

"It's important, sir," Harry all but mumbled, still kicking himself internally for how badly he had started the conversation.
"Then we should get to work I suppose, this shall be a learning experience for you," Professor Snape said. "Of course you realize, this would go much faster if I knew what I was identifying ahead of time."

"It's best if you don't, sir," Harry said.

"Is it indeed?" Professor Snape asked.

Harry shrugged.

"Then I hope you didn't have many plans this afternoon," Professor Snape said.

"I already told Oliver that I wouldn't be able to make practice," Harry said and Professor Snape's eyebrows rose.

"I don't suppose this is some manner of truth potion?" Professor Snape asked. "If that is what you need for your explanation then I have plenty on hand that I trust implicitly."

Harry thought for a moment and immediately rejected the idea of ever voluntarily ingesting a truth potion.

"Even if you believe I think I'm telling the truth, you probably won't actually believe what I'm saying," Harry said, it certainly wasn't going to make Professor Snape like what Harry had to say any more than he would.

"That is a bit ominous, don't you think, Mr. Potter?" Professor Snape said.

Harry just shrugged once more. It was too late to back out then, he knew, but he was having a hard time thinking this could possibly go well.

"Very well, go fetch a number three cauldron and a standard brewing kit," Professor Snape said before turning to the ingredient stores.

Professor Snape explained the process while they worked, but there were many periods of waiting and this time it was Professor Snape who was filling the silence with conversation. Before long, Harry found he had stopped worrying at his bottom lip and he became much more engaged with the professor. After a while they started discussing what Harry had been learning in Defense Against the Dark Arts which carried them up until the process was finished. Harry reminded himself several times over while they worked that Professor Snape had seemed to be tolerating him a lot better recently.

"Now Mr. Potter," Professor Snape said. "We have a list of ingredients that we know are in the potion, and we've identified as many properties as we can. I can already place this potion in the appropriate family and class, but unless you'd like to spend some time going through potions encyclopedias, perhaps we can cut to the chase."

Harry nodded and pulled a large potions book out of his bag and placed it on the counter before flipping it to a bookmarked page.

"It's the Filius Herritatum Potion," Harry said, and while up until this point the tedium of the potions work had calmed his nerves and kept his mind off of the countless scenarios, he couldn't keep a slight tremble out of his voice now that the time had come to start explaining. Once more, Harry couldn't even imagine this going well, but Professor Snape was giving him a very expectant look, and Harry knew he couldn't back down then.
Severus gave Harry a very piercing look as he tried to fit the puzzle together. The potion didn't fit with any of the theories he had had. Who was the potion to be used on?

"The letter I got over the summer," Harry began to explain as he pulled out a piece of parchment and a small granite mortar. The boy was clearly nervous, and was steadfastly not making eye contact. "It talked a lot about my mum and you. How you'd been together, like dated, you know. Right after you broke up she found out she was pregnant. She wanted to forgive you, but she was scared of you resenting a half-blood baby 'cause… well… you know."

Severus stopped breathing as the totality of what the boy was saying crashed down upon him. It was the truth, the headmaster had told him it would be the truth.

"She had the child?" Severus asked, his voice ragged. "She had the child in secret?"

Harry nodded, and the boy started pouring the potion into the mortar.

Severus eyed the door, half expecting a student to walk in to have their blood tested. They would be a seventh year of course, though Severus had a hard time imagining Lily putting her child up for adoption.

"There was a potion," Harry said. "To delay the pregnancy, and there was this adoption spell, so um…"

Harry pulled out his potions knife and made a small cut in the back of his hand, letting three drops of blood drip into the mortar. The potion turned a jet black. Severus drew in a sharp breath as realization struck.

The boy was looking exclusively at the potion as he picked up the mortar and poured a small portion of the potion onto the parchment. The potion roiled and rippled and was inexorably drawn into the parchment. Severus watched as the name 'Harry Potter' wrote itself out at the top of the page and then the names 'Lily Evans,' 'Severus Snape,' and 'James Potter' appeared underneath connected by lines.

There was silence in the room as more names appeared below, going back generations, but Severus did not have eyes for the parchment. He looked at Harry, who's eyes were rooted to the tabletop. He looked at his son, and could not help but think of their first interaction. It was not difficult to recall every cruel word he had ever spoken to him; easy enough to remember the pleasure he had derived from being mean to the boy. It was so easy to recall a shattered home and an infants cry on a moonless halloween night. He closed his eyes as shame consumed him.

How could he be a father, he thought bitterly. How could he be a father to this boy.

"Merlin no," he said. "I…"

What words could he say that would make this alright? How could he ever make this alright.

Severus heard the clatter of a chair and the rustling of a book bag.

"Oh, right then," Harry choked out. "Just forget it sir. I…"

Severus looked up to see Harry walking towards the door.

"Wait," Severus said. "I didn't mean…"

But Harry didn't wait. He tore open the door and ran. Severus was quick to follow. The chase
ended abruptly after a flight of stairs when Harry ran right through a wall whose trick Severus could not divine.

Hitting it did not help at all.

Chapter End Notes

Now you didn’t expect me to make things easy did you.

I had not set out to post this chapter on Fathers Day, it happened by pure happenstance and I’m rather pleased by how it turned out.

If you enjoyed this chapter or have any comments I would greatly appreciate a review. I read every one.
Welcome back. I hope all of you have been having a good summer and that you’ve been staying out of the heat. I had fun writing this and I hope you will have fun reading it.

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"You have the potion?" he asked Pettigrew. It was more of a statement than a question. There should be no question. He had given the rat more than enough time. He had waited long enough.

"I… I have something better," Pettigrew said. "The boy is going to be outside the castle wards tomorrow. They're letting the students go to Hogsmeade since Beckett is dead."

"Dead." Fenrir said. That was news to him. That would mean more Aurors looking for him. Of course no one would guess that he was living in the forests around Hogwarts. That he had bypassed their own wards.

"They're letting Potter go as well?" Fenrir asked. "Or did you just assume." Would Dumbledore let the boy out of his grasp and into Fenrir's paws?

"He's told his friends they were letting him go," Pettigrew hastily assured. "He's expected to stay in the town proper, but he'll be there. He'll be surrounded by Aurors, but with even a small distraction you could grab him and portkey away."

"Be here tomorrow night," Fenrir said gruffly.

"W-what?" Pettigrew asked.

"If that boy is not in Hogsmeade," Fenrir said darkly, "I will need to give you further instructions. But Pettigrew, you should best hope the boy is there tomorrow."

"He will be," Pettigrew said.

Fenrir left.

Peter scurried back to the castle, keeping to the taller grassy areas where he could hopefully avoid being spotted by an owl. The grounds were not a nice place to be when you were a rat; unless you had fearsome creatures of your own with you.

Yet tomorrow. Tomorrow, if everything went right, then he would be done with Greyback, done with shadowy meetings in the forest, and back to living his dull life in the castle. How had he ever gotten tired his peaceful life as the boy's pet? If he had only stayed hidden… This was a nightmare.

Tomorrow though, it would all be over tomorrow. Greyback would try to grab Potter. Potter's anti-portkey necklace would prevent his escape, and Greyback would be caught by the Aurors and
kissed, or killed on sight. It would be best if he were killed. But either way, Peter wouldn't have to worry about Greyback anymore.

"Hogsmeade'll cheer you up mate," Ron said as they ate breakfast. "We'll focus on staying out of the dormitory today, and not skipping meals."

Couldn't a guy shut himself up for one day without people acting like he was sliding off the deep end?

"You really shouldn't be going to Hogsmeade," Hermione said, and Harry had long since lost count of how many times she had said it since the visit had been announced.

"Can we maybe focus on positive things just this once?" Ron asked, annoyed. "After yesterday, Harry deserves a day in Hogsmeade. It'll be a Snape free day."

"Well someone has to think about these thing," Hermione said scathingly. "Since none of the professors are." She shot a hostile glance at the head table.

"If Professor Dumbledore thinks it's safe then we shouldn't have to worry," Ron said.

"Professor Dumbledore thinks a lot of things are safe," Hermione said.

Harry largely spent the conversation moving food around his plate.

"Oh look Harry," Ron said. "Hedwig's got something for you."

Harry looked up and was glad to see his snowy owl flying towards him. She dropped a small parcel in front of him and perched on his shoulder.

"Did you order something?" Ron asked.

"Yeah," Harry said and placed the parcel in his book bag and stroked Hedwig's feathers. "I'll explain when we're alone."

Harry went back to staring at his plate after Hedwig took off for the owlery.

"Harry," Hermione said. "If you give it some time…"

"Life isn't some fairy tale Hermione," Harry said bitterly. "You don't always get a happy ending. I wasn't meant to have parents and that's that. I told you before I could do just fine on my own."

"Well you're welcome at my place Harry," Ron said. "We should talk to my parents about it soon, we can get Bill over to visit and look at the wards. You'll be safe as gold at Gringotts this summer."

Harry gave Ron a smile and Hermione sighed sadly before shooting another glare at the head table.

They walked out together with the other students later, on their way to Hogsmeade. Harry rather wished he could just take a day to walk around the village and explore with his friends. They got into a carriage and once it started moving Ron turned to Harry.

"So what's with this secret package you got?" Ron asked.

There was a pop and suddenly Professor Snape was stooping in the carriage.

"It's a portkey beacon," Harry said as Ron yelped.
"What are you doing here," Ron said indignantly, shooting the professor a glare as the man sat on
the opposite bench.

"I'm not going to Hogsmeade Ron," Harry said. "Professor Snape's going to impersonate me and try
to draw out Greyback."

"Snape is!?" Ron asked incredulously.

"Mr. Weasley," Professor Snape said imperiously. "Do stop shouting."

"Is that safe?" Hermione asked. "What about the students?"

"Measures have been taken to ensure everyone's safety," Professor Snape said. "We do not have
much time. I need a hair Mr. Potter."

Harry didn't say anything, he just reached up and yanked out a few strands that he quickly passed
over to the man. Professor Snape reached into his cloak and pulled out a vial of familiar potion.
Harry noticed then that Professor Snape was dressed in student robes, with a Gryffindor tie. The
man put the hairs into the vial before downing the potion. Harry watched with morbid fascination
as Professor Snape became his double. A few waves of his wand resized his clothing.

"Here is your portkey; you'll need to give me your anti-portkey charm." Professor Snape said,
holding out a ruffled quill. "We're going to hit the Hogwarts gates in a moment and I don't want you
outside the wards so activate that now, I'll explain the plan to your friends, and Mr. Potter…"
Professor Snape eyed Ron and Hermione. "I would very much like to discuss what we went over
yesterday when I return. The activation code is 'taurus', go now."

Harry blanched at the prospect of a future discussion but nodded, making the exchange. He wanted
to be away from the professor quickly, and he had no desire to get anywhere near the castle gates
and the dementors that guarded them. He said the word, and disappeared.

Severus watched Harry disappear and settled back into the carriage seat secure in the knowledge
that the boy was safe. There had been much he had wanted to say but there hadn't been the time. He
eyed Weasley and Granger now that they were alone. Weasley had a clearly hostile look on his
face and Granger looked like she had misgivings to say the least.

"There is a carefully laid plan afoot, and loath as I am to involve students, the two of you are
tangentially involved," Severus said. "You need to listen carefully and do exactly as I say."

"Greyback's never going to fall for this," Weasley said. "You may look like Harry, but you'll never
fool anyone."

"He does have a point Professor," Granger said. "Everything from your posture to the way you
speak is different. If Greyback spent any time watching Harry over the summer, he'll spot the
difference."

Severus held up a hand to silence their objections and he sank into his own mind, pulling up the
mask he had prepared. His shoulders hunched in, he sank down into his seat and he started
fidgeting slightly as he looked nervously between Ron and Hermione.

"Look Ron," he said tentatively. "I know things have been crazy lately, and this is like, really bad
timing for everything, but you need to trust that I know what I'm doing here. The important thing
here is catching Greyback. I can't let him get away again. He's hurt too many people and if I can do
something about it then I will, but I'm going to need your help," He turned to Hermione. "Both of
Severus let the mask slip and he sat up straight in his seat as Weasley gave him a wide eyed look and the gears behind Granger's eyes started turning.

"Is that a spell professor?" Granger asked. "Or are you really…"

"The mental arts allow me to simulate another person within my own mind," Severus said. "Or rather they allow me to simulate another person as I perceive them. Had a Legilimens looked into my mind a moment ago they would have believed that I was Harry Potter because in the forefront of my mind, I believed I was Harry Potter. Now enough of this, are you prepared to listen?"

The Weasley boy shrugged and Granger nodded.

"Your part of the plan is simple," Severus said. "You, Miss Granger, will show excitement as soon as we arrive and you will walk off towards Scriver's Emporium as though you expect the two of us to follow you. Scriver's is the closest store on your right when you get out of the carriage. Do you understand?"

"Yes," Granger said. "But why…"

Severus cut her off.

"Mister Weasley, you and I will have a verbal spat at the end of which I will walk off angrily towards the northern edge of the town but will curve towards the eastern edge. You will head towards Miss Granger. Do you understand."

Weasley nodded.

"Miss Granger, you will notice my absence and insist on looking for me. You will go in the direction Mr. Weasley saw me initially go in. You will search as though you assume that I have stayed in the center of town around the popular shops. You will not go into the outskirts of the town. You will not go towards the eastern edge. You will not reveal to anyone this ruse. Do I make myself clear?" he asked the both of them.

"Yes professor," Granger said while Weasley just nodded again.

"What are we fighting about?" Ron asked.

"Mr. Potter has made no secret that something has been bothering him," Severus said, and Weasley sent him a withering glare. "As I exit the carriage a few moments after Miss Granger's exits I will say loudly that it is none of your business. The presumption here being that you had been prying into what has been upsetting Mr. Potter. You will yell back that I should just tell you what's wrong and that it probably isn't even a big deal. I will insult you, you will insult me, I will leave."

"Are there any questions?" asked Severus.

"Yeah, I've got a question," Weasley said. "What have you got against Harry?"

"Ron!" Granger scolded. "That's not going to help."

Severus internally groaned. He had wondered if Harry had told everything to his friends. For good measure he started mildly occluding, if only since losing his temper would make it more difficult later to organize his thoughts.
"Help?" Weasley asked. "What's there to help? He's made up his mind. Harry's the one who needs our help right now. Help getting over this mess." The boy shot Severus a glare when he said the word 'mess.' "And you know what, we helped cause this. Harry was right to give it time, he'd have realized it was a no-go eventually. We shouldn't have pushed him into this."

"Enough," Severus said. "The matter is not as it appears. There was a misunderstanding last night that I will address. I do not require your input on the matter."

"A misunderstanding? Was it two years of misunderstandings?" Weasley asked. "A bloody misunderstanding! A kid tells you you're his father and what? You accidentally told him to get lost?"

"I did not get a chance to tell him anything," Severus said, exasperated. "And that is all you need to know about the matter. I have no intention of repudiating him."

"Are you sure?" Granger asked timidly. "You can't go back and forth. If you change your mind later it will really hurt him."

"Don't give him ideas, Hermione," Weasley said.

"I'm not giving him ideas," Granger said, turning back to Severus. "Harry's not stupid. Maybe you didn't say anything horrible to him, but if he could tell that you weren't exactly thrilled about being his father…"

"I am not adverse to being his father, I am sure," Severus said. "And I certainly have no intention of hurting him."

"Then you need to make sure he knows that," Weasley said. "Or else he's always going to be waiting to see what's on the other side of the tarot card."

Severus sighed. A glance out the window showed that they were passing through the outskirts of the town.

"Are the both of you clear on the plan?" Severus asked.

"Yes Professor," Granger said as Weasley nodded.

Severus immersed himself in his mind and emerged as Harry Potter.

"Lemon drop Harry?" the Headmaster offered as Harry picked up his teacup.

"No thank you, sir," Harry said. He of course couldn't be seen roaming the castle when he was very publicly supposed to be in Hogsmeade so he was taking up residence in the Headmaster's office where he had been offered leave to peruse the various bookshelves for entertainment. This would probably have been an exceptionally interesting offer any other time, but Harry would much rather just hole up in his dorm room at the moment. It wasn't as though Seamus, Dean, or Neville would be anywhere other than Hogsmeade at the moment or reporting to Greyback besides.

"I have been curious to know if our conversation from last week led anywhere," the headmaster said after Harry had had some time to with his tea. This certainly wasn't a topic Harry wanted to discuss.

"I suppose it has professor," Harry said ponderously. "I've needed to tell you something for a while and I guess this is probably the best time. I…" Harry remembered Ron's words from earlier in the
term. "The Dursleys and I've never gotten on and they where a bit worse than usual this summer. When they found out I had a dark wizard after me they… well they kicked me out of the house. I didn't run away. I'm going to need someplace safe to stay this summer if they don't catch Greyback today. Or, you know, just a place to stay if they do."

Harry looked up at the headmaster and saw a shrewd but compassionate look on the man's face, before that was smoothed over leaving nothing but concern.

"I am sorry that that happened, Harry. Did you have any ideas on where you might stay?" the headmaster asked.

"Well I was thinking I could just stay at the school over the summer," Harry said, looking mostly at his tea. "I'd be plenty safe here. Though if they do catch Greyback, I was hoping I could stay with Ron's family again. He has offered, though I would need to ask his parents. Hermione's offered her place too. I guess I could also stay at the Leakey Cauldron again if their folks won't go for it."

"I see," the headmaster said and Harry looked up to gauge what the man thought of those options but found that he could not tell. "I must say, within the wards upon Privet Drive, you are far safer from Fenrir Greyback there than you are even here at Hogwarts. It may be that an attempt to convince your relatives to take you back would be the best course."

Harry took a fortifying breath and shook his head no even as he dropped his gaze to make a study of his own lap.

"I can't go back, Sir," Harry said. "They don't want me, they never have. I… I can't go back. I just can't."

"I will have to consider this matter carefully Harry," the headmaster said. "But I will endeavor to find for you the best solution."

Harry wondered how the headmaster would define the 'best' solution.

As Harry perused the bookshelves, Albus ordered his thoughts. Yet another conversation that did not go as he had thought it should.

In none of his foreseen futures had this been an issue. Harry had never confided his homelessness. In all scenarios down this path, Fenrir Greyback was either dead, captured, or had absconded with Harry. In the variants of the first two cases, Harry had been able to convince his relatives to take him back on his own.

Yet the headmaster had been prepared to deal with a Harry Potter who had asked to live with Severus, now that he knew of Harry's heritage. He had even started working out a fashion to rework the blood wards to retie them to Severus through his blood resonance with Harry, and Harry's with Lily. Not as effective, but still very potent potentially.

It wasn't ideal, it was in fact a massive divergence, but he had to adjust as he was able, lest he completely lose control. He could still guide events to stay along similar pathways and minimize contamination while keeping Harry within the blood wards. He had thought he understood where Harry's and Severus's relationship had been headed, but Harry had not mentioned the man, and considering his rather morose demeanor, Albus thought that something had gone wrong with the boy's plan to tell Severus the day prior.

Though it saddened him, this was for the best. With a little work he could more easily keep things...
on track. He would convince Harry to go back to the Dursleys. Harry would discontinue his potions activities and Albus would see affairs within the school running as smoothly as they were running without. Everything and everyone moving precisely and predictably towards Voldemort's demise.

He walked the outskirts of the town, the very picture of an angry morose teenage boy. Severus kept watch over the simulation running in his mind; the angry miserable boy who just wanted to be alone. That was what controlled his body then, not Severus. Severus could only watch now.

He took comfort from his inability to spot the Aurors who he knew surrounded him. At least they could hide worth a damn. He had heard rumor that Alastor Moody had come out of retirement to help with the hunt and he wondered if the mad Auror was out there as well. The part of him that was Severus kept alert for all movement while the other part was barely aware of what was two feet in front of him. He idly noticed the cat that was Minerva walking along the top of a fence in front of him. He didn't know why she had insisted on taking part. It wasn't as though her Gryffindors didn't give her enough trouble.

Keeping alert was, however, actually difficult at the moment, though his life could depend on it. The fact of the matter was that splitting his mind thusly was incredibly taxing, and factoring in the revelation of the prior afternoon, Severus found he had a hard time keeping his head in the moment. It didn't help that all the boy was thinking about was the afternoon prior himself.

If he hadn't seen numerous examples of parents who should not have kids, he might have fooled himself into thinking that there was no possible way someone such as himself could possibly have a son.

Yet it did seem that the fact of the matter was that he was a father. Harry was his son, his and Lily's... and James Potter's... Where it that that was the only wrinkle he thought he could see the way forward, but it was not so simple. The first two years of Harry's life at Hogwarts was not even the worst of it. Harry didn't even know the worst of it. Should he tell him? Could he?

He could not fathom what Lily had been thinking when she had written that letter. He couldn't imagine she had wanted him to be any sort of father to Harry, but Severus knew that he was the one who had destroyed her family. Whatever Albus's platitudes, Lily was not there to forgive him, and he could not do so for either of them.

Lily was gone though, James Potter was gone, Severus remained, but what was there to do with Harry? Why was he seeking out a relationship with Severus? He did not remember Petunia fondly but she and her husband had been the boy's family since he was fifteen months old. They were his parents. What could have possessed the boy to feel the need to connect with Severus, of all people, when he had a family already?

Severus was brought out of his musings when he saw a man approaching. It didn't look like Greyback, but Greyback hadn't looked like Greyback the last time he had attacked Harry. The man spotted him and paused, giving him a feral grin that revealed sharpened teeth. In a heartbeat the man was sprinting towards him. Severus dropped the simulation and took control of his body, quickly drawing his wand. It was pointless however, a good dozen spells struck the man who fell to the ground stunned, petrified, bound, and for some reason glowing. A good many Aurors dropped illusions and came out of hiding, several rushing past Severus to approach their prisoner.

It was almost anticlimactic. Severus put his wand away as an Auror trio portkeyed away with Greyback. The rest of the Auror's appeared to be in good cheer. Two of the five escapees were now taken care of, and within a few days of one another too.
"Severus!" Minerva's warning cry rang out.

Suddenly he was grabbed from behind. Severus struggled, but Harry's diminutive body was powerless against the arms that encased him. A large dirty hand covered his mouth.

"Nice try Potter," a gruff voice said in his ear. "But then, your not Potter are you? Tell him he's mine, tell him I'm still coming for him. If you can."

A sharp pain erupted just below his bottom rib and he felt his diaphragm spasm and freeze as it was pierced. The hands disappeared and he barely registered the sharp crack behind him as he fell to the ground. He could barely breath as he tried to staunch the flow of blood gushing from his chest with one hand and draw his wand with the other. He could barely speak as he attempted to close the wound, the spell would not form. New hands came; removing his own. A new wand hovered over him as a new voice started incanting. Severus did his best to stay alert, but eventually resigned himself to waking up in the infirmary.

'Runs of Peace' was actually a very interesting book, Harry reflected as he sat in the plush armchair that sat by the headmaster's fireplace. Most of it went over his head, but it still managed to be very engaging. The headmaster had been going through a mountain of paperwork and correspondence for the past hour while Harry had been thumbing through several interesting books.

Hermione would probably be jealous when she found out about how Harry had spent his morning. Though that squared, since Harry was jealous that she was able to go to Hogsmeade. Of course if this whole thing worked out, Greyback could be caught at any moment and then perhaps he could go spend the afternoon in the magical village. He was due for something good, wasn't he? Hadn't the universe taken enough?

Harry shook off that thought. He was forgetting it. He was forgetting all of it. He hadn't lost anything, because he hadn't anything to lose. Professor Snape wasn't really his father, he had never truly been free from the Dursleys, and fairy tales were just tall tales. He hadn't lost a father, he hadn't lost his freedom, he had just been telling himself stories, fantasies really, and now he had been brought back to reality. He was lucky to have cut it off when he had, really. Professor Snape had done him a favor and ripped the bandaid off in one go.

"Headmaster! Severus has been injured, I've brought him to the infirmary," Professor McGonagall's voice said urgently.

Harry's head whipped up from the headmaster's book to catch a silvery ethereal cat disappear from the headmaster's desk.

"P..Professor Snape?" Harry said, shocked. He felt his stomach coil up as his breath caught in his throat. The next moment he was out of the chair and racing down the spiral staircase. He heard the headmaster call after him, but he didn't stop. He ran through the corridor and dove through walls, taking every shortcut he knew to get to the infirmary.

He arrived out of breath and skidded to a halt in the entrance. He saw Madame Pomfrey incanting over Harry's own doppelgänger, which was prone and very still while Professor McGonagall was retrieving potions from shelves. He knew better than to interrupt the matron but he still asked, "Is he going to be alright?"

Madame Pomfrey didn't stop what she was doing, or even look up, but Professor McGonagall gave him a very curt, "He will be fine, Mr. Potter, leave us be to treat him," before continuing with what she was doing.
Suddenly Professor Snape's body arched up and he gave several short gasping breaths, as though he could not draw air in properly. Harry took in the blood that was smeared on the white linen around the man's chest. Madame Pomfrey forced a potion down Professor Snape's throat after he had taken a few more breaths, after which his breathing became deeper, though still ragged.

Professor McGonagall noticed that Harry was still there. "This isn't quidditch Mr. Potter," she said tersely. "We do not need an audience."

"But will he be alright?" Harry asked, very worried and still out of breath.

"Yes," Professor McGonagall said. "Now off with you."

Harry cast a wary glance at Professor Snape, who looked far from being alright, but nodded his head and left the infirmary. He didn't go far, turning the corner, he slumped down and focused on catching his own breath. Drawing his knees up to his body, he leaned his head against them and closed his eyes. The blood was everywhere. He couldn't stop himself from seeing it. He felt as though he were covered in it. He couldn't stop hearing how Professor Snape had gasped for breath.

Worry brewed inside of him even as shame and anger tried to stamp it out. He shouldn't be worried, he told himself. He shouldn't feel like this. The blood wasn't on his own hands. Not this time. He reminded himself that Professor Snape wasn't his father; he wasn't anything to him. There was no reason to be worried about him, no reason to care. There never had been. But he was worried; he was worried for the same reason he had felt hurt and rejected the night before. He did care. A part of him still wanted that fantasy. A part of him still wanted that happily ever after.

Maybe it wasn't even so hard to see why. There had always been that secret squashed hope, when he was living with the Dursleys. Some long lost relative would come and take custody of him, and love him. His parents weren't really dead, they were just in comas, and they woke up. He was adopted like Little Orphan Annie. Heck, he'd even daydreamed about that older kid who had once told Dudley's gang to leave Harry alone inviting him to come stay at his place. So when an actual biological father had come into the picture, even if it was Snape, why wouldn't he hope?

The worst part; the worst part was that he had started to really like spending time with the professor. He had liked thinking of himself living with the man even when he had thought that it could never happen. He'd started to really like Professor Snape and that hadn't just stopped the night prior. There was a reason he felt sick at the thought of Professor Snape bleeding out in the Hospital Wing, struggling to breathe. Harry drew in his own ragged breath and held it before letting it out as calmly as he could.

"Are you alright?" a young voice asked.

Harry looked up to see that a first or second year Hufflepuff had stopped in front of him. Harry took a moment to be annoyed with himself for being so oblivious as to not hear someone coming down the hall.

"Yeah," Harry said, embarrassed. "I'm alright, I guess. Just, thought I'd sit down here for a moment."

"Wanna sugar quill?" the Hufflepuff asked.

"A sugar quill?" Harry asked.

"Make you feel better," the Hufflepuff said.

"I'm alright," Harry said. "Really. What are you doing up here. Do you need the infirmary?"
"My feet got hexed," the Hufflepuff said, nodding down to bare feet, poking out from under robes that were a little bit too long. Harry noticed that the feet appeared to be about twice as big as normal feet. It explained how he hadn't heard the click clack of shoes down the corridor.

"Did you try finite?" Harry asked.

The Hufflepuff nodded.

"Well the infirmary's not really open for business right now, how about a professor," Harry said. "Professor Lupin's office is near here. Can you walk alright?"

He got another nod. "I've never been to Professor Lupin's office though."

"I know the way," Harry said and took a deep breath before he got up.

"Were you waiting for the infirmary though," the Hufflepuff asked.


"Is Professor Lupin going to ask questions?" the Hufflepuff asked. "Devon says Madame Pomfrey doesn't ask too many questions."

"I don't know, but he seems alright," said Harry, though he wasn't sure how he felt about endorsing a professor to a student, especially a defense professor.

"You know this isn't how it was supposed to work," the Hufflepuff said. "I was supposed to be nice to you."

"You were nice to me," Harry said. "And who's keeping track. Hufflepuff doesn't really have a good deed quota do they? I thought that that was a joke."

"It's not really a quota," the Hufflepuff said, as though this was something Hufflepuff's often had to address. "But that's besides the point. You helped me on the train so I wanted to help you, I just didn't have any chocolate. Was it the sugar quill? You would have liked a chocolate frog I bet. I finished all my chocolate weeks ago. I asked my brother to bring me some from town but it's fifty fifty if he will now."

Harry's eyebrows shot up realizing who he was talking to.

"I'm sorry, I didn't recognize you. Your hair was a lot shorter on the train," Harry said. "Justin, right?"

"Justin's my brother. I'm Sam. Sam Eldrich. My dad makes me keep my hair short, but I like it like this," the Hufflepuff said. "Justin keeps saying he's going to write dad though."

"Is this the same Justin who told you you were going to be tested on spells at the sorting?" Harry asked.

A nod.

"I don't suppose Justin hexed your feet?" Harry asked.

A shrug.

Silence.
"He caught me being... goofy, and he said that I wasn't acting like a 'proper wizard,' and that's why I was in Hufflepuff and not a good house. He's always trying to act all grown up and like a 'proper wizard', but he's just mean."

"What house is he in?" Harry asked frowning.

"Ravenclaw," Sam said.

"Well Ravenclaw doesn't even have the smartest student in the school, so I don't know what their claim to fame is," Harry said. "Hufflepuff's a proper house."

Harry thought that might have been the nicest thing he'd ever had occasion to say about Hufflepuff House.

"It is," Sam nodded sagely.

"So did Justin hex you for being goofy?" Harry asked, wondering why an upperclassman would take offense to a first year acting childishly.

"No, he'd been saying he was going to write dad about me to get me in trouble, so I told him I was going to tell everyone he'd had lightning bold underwear till he was ready to come to Hogwarts," Sam said. "Then he hexed me, but it's alright, because I kicked him with my giant feet. I was hoping it would wear off but it's been a while."

"Lightning bolt underwear?" Harry asked.

"Yeah, you know," Sam said, gesturing towards Harry's forehead.

"Wait," Harry said, scandalized. "They've got my scar on underwear."

"Well yeah," Sam said. "It's like that super fellow. A muggle boy told me about him when I saw his at the community pool. With the big red ess. You grew up with muggles didn't you?"

"Superman," Harry said nodding.

"Yeah, him," Sam said. "They've got his ess on underwear."

Harry had thought having books about himself was weird enough. His scar wasn't a symbol, it was just... his scar.

"Do you think he's a wizard?" Sam asked, not noticing Harry's discomfort. "Or do you suppose he really is from another planet. I bet he just says he's from another planet to get around the Statute of Secrecy, that boy said he could fly, but I bet he has an invisible broomstick."

"Who? Superman?" Harry asked, bewildered. "He's just a story. He's not real." Harry could forget sometimes just how much the wizarding world could be ignorant of the muggle world.

"Really?" Sam asked. "Oh, I guess that makes sense. Devon kept laughing when I was telling Nichole about him."

They arrived at Professor Lupin's office. Sam looked hesitant.

"He doesn't bite," Harry said. "At least I don't think he does. If he asks questions you can just say you made a mistake practicing charms. I'll go in with you."

Sam knocked on the door, and the two of them entered the office.
"Harry," Professor Lupin said, clearly surprised. "And company, what can I do for you."

"I messed up my charms, Professor," Sam piped up, sticking out one large foot. "My feet are ginormous."

"So you'll need shoes twice as big," Professor Lupin said with a straight face. "It's a simple engorgement charm; did you bring them with you?"

"No, no, no," Sam said urgently. "I need my feet shrunk. You can fix them can't you."

"Oh, you want your feet smaller," Professor Lupin said. "Yes I suppose I can do that as well. Not as easy as making shoes fit, but I think I can manage. Kip on over here and have a seat." Professor Lupin patted the top of his desk.

Sam walked over and hopped up onto the desk.

Professor Lupin prodded Sam's feet with his wand a couple of times.

"A charms mishap you said?" Professor Lupin asked.

"Mmmhmm," Sam replied.

"Well lets see," Professor Lupin said. He tapped Sam on the top of his head with his wand and said, "Finitae Pedésaltus."

Sam's feet promptly shrunk to what Harry assumed was their original size. Sam gave a small sigh of relief.

"That's odd," Professor Lupin said. "It seems that all you needed was the counter for the foot engorgement hex. What charm did you say you were practicing when you did this?"

"Ummm… I can't remember," Sam said, doing a good show of putting some thought into the matter.

"Oh well," Professor Lupin said. "Do be more careful in the future then. Enjoy your Sunday."

"Thanks Professor," Sam said, heading for the door.

"That'll be five points to you Mr. Potter for helping out," Professor Lupin said. "And just a moment of your time if you don't mind.

Sam turned around at the door and waved to Harry goodbye. Harry waved back and got a loud "thanks," as Sam left.

Harry wished that Sam had stayed. He had learned early on with the Dursleys that it was dangerous to be alone with people. The Dursleys had always been more vicious without an audience, even if that audience was one another. It was as though they didn't want each other to see them at their most horrible. He had always been hurt worst when he was alone with Uncle Vernon. It was a lesson he had learned time and again. He was nervous to be alone with people, adults especially.

Harry thought that Professor Dumbledore was the only adult he was actually comfortable being alone with. There was something about him that was very disarming. Harry had thought that he could feel that way with Professor Snape, maybe. Professor Lupin though, he was really nice, and he had been friends with his father, but Harry couldn't help but be wary of the relative stranger.

Harry turned towards Professor Lupin who smiled and said, "I think we can start lesson's on the
Patronus Charm soon. I do think I've found a proper study aide."

"Oh, that's good professor," Harry said, both relieved and anxious at the same time. "When can we start?"

"Well I suppose that will be mostly up to you," Professor Lupin said. "I understand your schedule can be a bit hectic these days."

That gave Harry pause since he did in fact have very little time in his schedule if he wanted to get his homework done. Although, what was he going to do about being Snape's potions assistant? Would the man be angry if he gave that up? Or, more likely, the man would probably be happy to spend less awkward time around him. Or was he even really going to be alright. There had been so much blood.

"I'll have to work that out professor," Harry said, stressed now to be thinking about the professor once more. "I'll get back to you."

"Take your time," Professor Lupin said. "I seem to have more essays to grade right now than I remember assigning."

"Well you could always stop assigning essays for a while, professor," Harry said, forcing a bit of a smile. "If they've gotten to be too much."

"Ah, but then I wouldn't get to see every which way a student can fit a quidditch analogy into an essay about vampires," Professor Lupin said.

"Oh, I could always fit a few more in if you'd like professor," Harry said.

"With you, Mr. Potter, I don't think one could fit any more into an essay," Professor Lupin said. "No I don't think it would be possible. Now, I must say, I was under the impression that you would be in the Headmaster’s office this morning, or is that harebrained scheme of theirs already over?"

"Professor Snape's in the Hospital Wing," Harry said, looking down and trying not to sound upset. "I don't know what happened."

"I see," Professor Lupin said, looking worried. "Will he be alright?"

Harry shrugged. "Professor McGonagall said he would be, but I don't know. It looked bad."

"Was there any other news?" Professor Lupin asked.

Harry shook his head. "I don't know if they caught Greyback or anything. I hope they did. I really really do. I hope they put a stop to him."

In spite of everything, this was the first time Harry could recall feeling anger towards Greyback. He had felt fear, terror really, at times. He had felt sorrow and horror when he had thought of what Greyback had done to Ms. Adler. But for some reason he had never really been angry. Greyback was a monster, what use was it being angry with a monster. They couldn't be anything but monsters. But he was angry now. He really, really hoped that the aurors had put a stop to Greyback.

"Well, I suppose we shall have to hope for the best then," Professor Lupin said.

Harry nodded.
"I didn't realize you knew about the Greyback thing," Harry said. "I thought it was supposed to be hushed up."

"It is," Professor Lupin said. "The headmaster consulted me for the plan though. He wanted to know what Greyback was likely to think."

"Because you're an expert on Greyback?" Harry said.

Professor Lupin nodded.

"Because he killed Mr. Black?" Harry asked delicately.

Professor Lupin shook his head. "I had made a study of him during the war," he said. "He was very active back then, since before the war really."

"Why?" Harry asked.

"Well he's not an average werewolf now, is he?" Professor Lupin said. "Contrary to popular belief and in accordance with all records, most people with lycanthropy attempt to lead quiet lives, and try very hard to never bite anyone. Fenrir wanted to start a movement, he wanted the world over to be either werewolves or prey. He was convinced that they would thank him for it too. He was able to gather a few followers, people who had grown embittered being marginalized in society and he started a colony."

"They were always on the move," he went on. "They would kidnap children, magical and muggle alike. He thought he could raise them to be like him, more animal at heart than man. He had always been somewhat feral, since before he was bitten. He is the only werewolf I know of who sought out lycanthropy."

"He got bitten on purpose?" Harry asked, aghast.

Professor Lupin nodded. "He kidnapped a young woman who had lycanthropy, put her in a cage, and on the night of the full moon stuck his arm through the bars to receive the bite."

Professor Lupin paused to let that sink in.

"Many people have used him to highlight their fears of all werewolves, but he is very much the same man he was before he was bitten," Professor Lupin said. "He was expelled from this school for mauling one of his classmates. He did it for sport I think. He has always relished in the animal side that I think we all have, that we abandoned millennia ago. He is highly intelligent, but at his heart, he embraced the mythos surrounding pack animals from a very early age and he wants the rest of the world to either be a part of his pack, or prey for it."

"What did you tell Professor Dumbledore when he asked you about the plan?" Harry asked.

"I asked him, if he were an outside observer, would he expect Dumbledore to allow you out of the castle just because Beckett was dead," Professor Lupin said. "I told him that Greyback may seem to be detached from reality, but he is very in tune with what goes on around him. I didn't think he would fall for this one."

"So why did they go through with it?" Harry asked bitterly.

"I suppose they thought even a small chance was worth the risk," Professor Lupin said. "Though I do believe they miscalculated that risk, in hindsight. I must say, a great many would say any risk was worth the chance to catch Greyback once more."
"Catch him," Harry said, upset. "What's the point? So he can escape again? So he can kill again?"

"Would you kill him yourself?" Professor Lupin asked gravely.

"What?" Harry asked.

"If not captured, then killed," Professor Lupin said. "Are you volunteering?"

"That's… That's not what I meant," Harry said.

Professor Lupin looked at him. "Okay," he said.

"That's not…" Harry was frustrated. "I'm just… He kills for fun. When he killed Ms. Adler… He said, 'let's have some fun,' and he smiled like he… like he got off on what he was going to do to her… What he did do to her. There was blood everywhere, and I keep seeing it. I don't have to get close to a dementor to see it. I can't 'un-see' it. He did that to her for fun and I'm drowning in it. Now he's hurt Professor Snape, he was covered in blood, and he's like the only…"

Harry had to take a couple of deep breaths before he could go on.

"Should I feel bad?" he asked. "For thinking Greyback shouldn't exist?"

"Of course not," Professor Lupin said. "I myself have often wished that he had never existed. I've thought that he is too dangerous to exist. Yet it is a great burden to kill another. Remember that the next time you think an Auror should just kill someone rather than capture them. Remember that and ask yourself if you would place that burden on them."

Harry made a study of his shoes.

"Who's Ms. Adler, Harry?" Professor Lupin asked.

"What?" Harry asked, looking up.

"You said Greyback killed her," Remus said. "I hadn't heard about that. I was wondering who she was."

"I don't even know her first name," Harry said sadly. "She just lived in my neighborhood, you know? When Greyback found me, back in Little Whinging, he chased me for a bit before he caught me. He caught me in her back yard. She came out and told him to get off me and she whacked him with a fire poker. Then he… then he attacked her. He attacked her with his teeth and with his nails, but she kept fighting. I tried to stop him, but I couldn't, and when he turned his attention back to me she got back up and started throwing stuff at him. She wouldn't stop. Then he used this spell and she… I told her to stay inside. I told her to stay inside and call the police. I didn't think the police could stop him, but I didn't think she could either. Why didn't she stay inside? Why did she… Why did I have to run through her yard? I was supposed to be a wizard, but she saved me and I couldn't do anything for her. Nothing. All I could do was run away."

"That was very brave of her," Professor Lupin said.

"She should have stayed inside," Harry said, swiping at his eyes with the sleeves of his robes. He hung his head. "I told her to stay inside."

"Perhaps I'm being selfish," Professor Lupin said, putting a hand on Harry's shoulder. "But I'm glad that she didn't."
"I, I should go…Professor," Harry said, ducking away from the man and trying to hide his face, suddenly very self aware. "They'll be wondering where I got off to. I…I just sort of ran off on the Headmaster. I'll just…"

Harry walked towards the door.

"Harry wait," Professor Lupin said. "I could floo the headmaster in just a moment."

"I just need to go," Harry mumbled, almost running out the door.

Once he was well out of the man's office, he really did start running. He ran and he ran, not caring where he was going. He ran until he tripped on the corner of the flagstone and fell to his hands and knees somewhere in the castle. He lay there a while, catching his breath, feeling the pain in his hands.

Eventually he rolled onto his side and sat up, bringing his knees to his chest with his back to the corridor wall. Harry looked at the small smear of blood and grit on his palms. He remembered the blood in the infirmary, he remembered blood that spattered a back yard. Ms. Adler, then professor Snape; before them his own parents, his godfather. People kept getting hurt on account of him, people had died. Harry remembered what Professor Snape had said on Friday, but even still; it may not have been his turn to go before the specter of death, but he would be damned if anyone else ever faced it again for him.

The blood on his hands had stopped flowing, it was just a scrape, the potion that Professor Snape had given him was doing it's job. Harry wondered if he would be able to get his week's dose that evening of if he would have to perform the Sang Vitalis charm on himself and avoid Dementors until Professor Snape got better. Harry looked at the blood on his hand and wished for a moment that the charm had worn off long before Harry had ever gotten that letter. He pushed that thought away with a sick feeling. He performed the charm on himself then. There would be no point in bothering Professor Snape today, even if he was out of the Hospital Wing before curfew that evening. Even if he was still alive.

He stopped in a bathroom before he went back to the headmaster's office. He washed the dirt and the blood from his hands and the tears from his face. He wished he could wash everything down the drain, before he thought that he should stop wishing for stupid things. Some wishes were dangerous. Some things couldn't wash clean.

The headmaster wasn't angry with Harry for running off, and Harry found himself with more tea before long, though he couldn't taste it. The words of the headmaster washed over him. He didn't take in much more than that Professor Snape was going to be okay but Greyback had gotten away.

The headmaster released him before long and Harry found himself detouring past the infirmary on his way to Gryffindor Tower. He didn't much notice the first and second years who eyed the lone third year curiously. He took a seat by one of the fireplaces and stared at the fire for a time. Lunch came and passed and Harry eventually decided to do something productive and started reading ahead for defense.

"Did you really not go to Hogsmeade Harry?" a twin surprised him by asking some time later. Harry looked up to see the twins looking at him.

"They're saying someone polyjuiced you to trick Greyback," one of them said.

"Oh, yeah," Harry said awkwardly, doing his best to identify the twins. "They did."
"You couldn't have gone under your cloak?" George asked.

"Or polyjuiced yourself?" Fred asked.

"Wasn't worth the risk," Harry said, thinking of Professor Snape.

"Wasn't worth the risk?" George asked.

"It has never been more blatantly obvious that our young friend here has had no proper education," Fred said.

"None at all," George agreed.

"A terrible shame," Fred said.

"What are they teaching kids these days?" George asked.

"Nothing important I'm sure," Fred said.

"Hogsmeade is fantastic," George told Harry.

"Bloody brilliant," Fred supplied.

"Why, for someone who's never been, you must have no clue what you're missing," George said.

"Something must be done," Fred said.

"Something must, yes," George said.

"He shall be educated in the ways," Fred said, eying Harry appraisingly, and the hairs on the back of Harry's neck stood on end.

"But that is for another time," George said ominously.

"Um.." Harry said, not sure what they were talking about.

"To business," Fred said.

"To the matter at hand," George said.

"The matter at hand?" Harry asked.

"Your hand actually," Fred said.

"What?" Harry asked.

Fred pulled out a pair of gloves from his bag.

"Oh," Harry said, recognizing the material the twins had been working with for their project.

"We're swapping out the prototype," George said.

"This one's much safer," Fred said.

"Safer?" Harry asked, thinking of just how much he had been using the gloves.

"You know how we told you you could punch Malfoy while wearing these gloves as long as you
 weren't thinking about going through his head cause his head wouldn't get put together quite right?" George asked.

"Will these put his head back right?" Harry asked.

"I don't think we'll ever get these things that accurate," Fred said.

"These just won't go through people period," George said.

"It's not like we think you're out to kill Malfoy or anything," Fred said.

"But even a small bit of intent can activate the gloves," George said. "A passing thought really."

"So like you're punching Malfoy and you just have a fleeting thought about it," Fred said.

"And next thing you know you've got to send, like, flowers to his parents or something," George said.

"Super awkward," Fred said.

"These are better," George said, holding up the gloves.

"So we're swapping gloves," Harry asked, pulling out his own.

"Everything," Fred said, pulling out a bundle from his bag.

"Just toss the old stuff in the fire," George said.

Harry pulled out his gloves and started peeling off the patches of black cloth that had been stuck to the toes of his shoes, and the hood and shoulders of his robes.

They watched the cloth burn after Harry had made a bundle and thrown it into the fire.

"So how has it been working out for you?" Fred asked.

"They make for a quick escape," Harry said.

"That's what we like to hear," George said.

"We've gotten out from under Filch's nose so many times with these now," Fred said.

"It's unsporting," George said, though he did not seem to care about that.

"Well enjoy," Fred said. "Have you already had dinner?"

Harry nodded, a lie.

"Well we're off then," George said.

"We just came up to get a little something for Flint," Fred said with a smile.

"Seems he thought it would be funny to trip up Angelina in the mud," George said.

"He'll be having an interesting time at dinner tonight," Fred said.

"Wait," Harry said. "Have you seen Ron and Hermione?" It was getting pretty late.
"Not a bit of them," Fred said.

"I'd say they were off for some alone time," George said.

"But I'm not sure they'd know what to do with it," Fred said.

The twins made their exit.

They had probably stopped at dinner themselves. Harry wouldn't expect them to come to get him before they ate.

Harry looked at the pile of cloth the twins had left him. The patches went back on his shoes, and robes. The gloves were clipped to the lips of his pockets so he would only need to shove his hands into them to put them on. When he was done, he pulled a lone glove out from under his thigh where he had shoved it earlier. The twins hadn't noticed, and Harry didn't know what he was going to do with it.

No one had seen Ron or Hermione; not for hours. Harry was really starting to get worried. Dinner was over and everyone was back except for his two friends. Harry left the tower. McGonagall might know, or at the very least, she should know that they were missing.

Harry tried not to imagine horrible things as he walked, but suddenly the idea of Greyback deciding to kidnap his best friends to get to him seemed like something he should have thought of before they had gone off to Hogsmeade. Harry was halfway convinced that he was going to get an owl with instructions to present himself before Greyback for his friends' freedom by the time he got to McGonagall's office.

It was as he got to McGonagall’s office though that Ron and Hermione walked out of said office. Though they looked tired, they did not look as though they had been kidnapped in any fashion.

"Ron," Harry exclaimed. "Hermione, where were you? You didn't get detention did you?"

"Detention?" Hermione said, scandalized. "Why would the first thing you thought of be detention?"

"Well my first thought was that you had been kidnapped," Harry said. "But where have you been? It's been ages."

"The aurors wanted to debrief us," Ron said. "They wanted written statements."

"But why?" Harry asked. "You weren't there were you? You weren't supposed to be anywhere near Professor Snape when everything happened. What did happen?"

"Well we didn't see any of that," Ron said. "And we weren't anywhere near it. But someone got it in their head that since we had been involved in the beginning we had to be on the official record. So we're there at the ministry, waiting to give our statements, but everyone's running around doing other stuff ‘cause I guess everything got bollocksed, so it took forever."

"They didn't even feed us properly," Hermione said. "All they had were pastries. But the ministry was so interesting, Harry. It was amazing to be in another magical building besides Hogwarts."

"But what really did happen?" Harry asked.

"Dunno," Ron said. "All we've heard is that Snape got hurt but he's okay and Greyback got away."
"That's all I've heard too," Harry said.

"You really thought we'd been kidnapped?" Ron asked as the three of them started walking back to the tower.

Harry shrugged.

"You'll be happy to know we had a perfectly boring, Greyback free day," Hermione said.

"Yeah, we had to pretend to be looking for you to keep up appearances," Ron said.

"I guess you didn't get to enjoy Hogsmeade either," Harry said.

Ron shrugged.

"Well we did stop for lunch at a rather nice place called the Three Broomsticks," Hermione said.

"Yeah," Ron said. "You know that Butterbeer the twins got for that stupid party? Well they serve it warm and it's bloody brilliant. You've definitely got to try it when this bloody business is all over."

"It was rather good," Hermione said.

"Mr. Potter," the unmistakable voice of Professor Snape said from the corridor they were crossing. "Just the student I was looking for."

Harry turned to face the professor, both eager to see that he was all right, and dreading to have any sort of interaction with the man. The man was pale. Or rather he was paler than usual, and he definitely looked like he should be in bed. He did not, however, look like he was on deaths door, so Harry supposed that he was much improved.

"You're alright," Harry blurted out, completely lacking anything else to say.

"So it would seem," Professor Snape said. "I need a moment of your time, there is a matter we must attend to."

"You don't need to say anything, professor," Harry said. "I understand. You can just forget it, really."

"No, I'm afraid I can not forget that there is a potion you must take every Sunday," Professor Snape said. "Now as trying as this day has been, I do still have a great deal to attend to, perhaps we can take care of just this one matter now."

"Right," Harry said. "Is it..."

"In my office," Professor Snape said.

"Right," Harry said.

"We'll see you in the common room," Hermione said, with a slight smile. Harry felt slightly abandoned.

Harry started walking with the professor towards the dungeons.

It seemed that the professor was just going to ignore everything; act like Harry had never said anything. Probably the best outcome really. The man wasn't being horrible. He could have said all
sorts of things. He could have acted like the Dursleys did, like Harry was a stray wet dog that had wandered in. Ignoring the matter was really the best outcome Harry could have asked for. He pretended it didn't hurt.

Oddly enough, this was the most comfortable Harry had ever felt being alone with the man. Perhaps it was because the man knew. He knew and it changed nothing. Harry didn't have to worry about what he did or what he said. There were no wrong impressions. The cards were on the table. Nothing had changed, nothing would change. Harry had nothing to prove, and nobody to prove anything to. Nothing was going to happen. Pretending that that didn't hurt though was about as effective as pretending everything else didn't hurt.

"I did do the spell, professor," Harry said. "If you're really busy I can always pick the potion up tomorrow after class."

"Yes," Professor Snape said darkly. "Because the spell has been so effective in the past. How many times have you almost died this year? I do not believe you planned out all of your encounters with dementors, did you?"

Harry shrugged.

"You could have at least gone to Madame Pomfrey," Professor Snape continued.

"She would have had kittens," Harry said. "I'd have probably had to stay the night in the Hospital Wing."

"She would have taken care of you," Professor Snape said.

"How did you escape?" Harry asked. "There's no way she released you."

"I do not need to be released," Professor Snape said.

"Should you be in the hospital wing right now?" Harry asked.

"I had more important matters to attend to," Professor Snape said, looking at Harry.

"Are you alright?" Harry asked.

"I will be," Professor Snape said. "It looked worse than it was. I understand you visited."

"I wouldn't call it a visit," Harry said.

"No," Professor Snape said. "I don't suppose it was."

"What happened?" Harry asked.

"From what I observed, Greyback had a man disguised and under the Imperius Curse and forced him to attack me," Professor Snape said. "Believing him to be Greyback in disguise the Aurors all attacked and came out of hiding, leaving me with no one to watch my back."

"So he realized you were an imposter when he saw all the Aurors?" Harry asked.

"He did," Professor Snape said. "He stabbed me with a knife from behind and apparated away."

"And you're going to be alright?" Harry asked.

"I will be stalking these halls in the dead of night looking for wayward Gryffindors in no time at
Harry smiled at that before chewing on his lip, thinking back on what the professor had said about the attack.

"Magic can do that though?" Harry asked. "Control someone?"

"The Imperius Curse is one of three curses whose use are considered to be unforgivable," Professor Snape. "It removes one's free will and forces compliance."

"Forever?" Harry asked, horrified.

"As long as the curse is maintained," Professor Snape said. "Or until it is broken."

"But surely there are some things you can't be forced to do," Harry said.

"Some people are able to resist the curse," Professor Snape said. "But it is not a matter of being repulsed by what has been commanded of them. If the curse controls you then it does not matter what you have been told to do. You will attempt to comply without a thought otherwise."

Harry shuddered, feeling sick.

"Will that man be okay?" Harry asked.

"He will be," Professor Snape said. "Greyback will have no need of him, and no reason to maintain the curse now."

They arrived at the professor's office.

"Have a seat," Professor Snape said, opening his storeroom.

"Oh," Harry said. "Actually, it's getting late. I shouldn't stay."

"We have much to discuss," Professor Snape said, returning with a vial that he handed to Harry. Harry downed the potion after a moments pause as his stomach churned with nerves.

"There's really nothing, Sir," Harry said, slightly panicked. "I understand, I really do. You didn't sign up for anything and you don't owe me anything and you don't need to worry about me or anything. I'm fine really."

"You do not understand," Professor Snape said. "You left before you could understand. 'Merlin no,' was not an indictment against you. It was the realization that I had… It was an indictment of how I had treated you for two years, for the eleven years of not knowing you. I did not handle well the realization that I had so horribly transgressed against my own blood."

Harry swallowed a lump in his throat as he tried to understand what the professor had said. Part of him tried to hope and he tried vainly to squash it down. He was so weak.

"But what does that mean for… us?" Harry asked.

"I had given you every reason to never tell me," Professor Snape said. "Why did you seek me out this year?"

"I just wanted to get to know you better," Harry shrugged, feeling exceptionally vulnerable. "And then I liked you; I don't know… Then I thought, maybe there could be… more. Like, family stuff, maybe. I thought maybe you'd want to… like… take me in or something. Not that I'd expect you
to, or you should feel obligated or anything. You don't owe me anything."

Professor Snape studied him for a while.

"You should really sit down, Harry," Professor Snape said steadily.

Harry paused a moment, not sure where he stood. He eyed the appropriate chair warily before taking it. Professor Snape started to roll up his left sleeve.

"If that is what you would like then I find I must be straight forward with you," Professor Snape said. "Do you know what this is?" he asked brandishing his left forearm.

Harry saw a faint but ugly tattoo of a snake poking out of the eye socket of a skull.

"It has to do with Voldemort?" Harry asked.

Professor Snape winced but nodded.

"This is his mark," Professor Snape said. "The mark he gave his followers."

"But you were really working for Professor Dumbledore," Harry said. "Like a spy."

"I became a spy, yes." Professor Snape said. "But I joined the Dark Lord first. I followed the Dark Lord first. I was faithful to him."

"So you joined him to…" Harry let the question hang.

"To feel powerful," Professor Snape said softly. "To feel safe," he said with a derisive laugh. "To feel like I had a future. To be a part of something greater than myself. I don't really know anymore. It doesn't matter in the end, does it?. I joined him and I served."

Harry swallowed hard and looked at the desk that was between them.

"How did that work out for you?" Harry asked.

"The Dark Lord's promises are but lies," Professor Snape said, and Harry nodded. "But realizing that was not enough. Realizing he was evil was not enough. When I took his mark I bound myself to him. There was no leaving his service. Nowhere to hide where he could not find me. I had resigned myself to dying in his service long before I entered the headmaster's."

"Do you believe the pureblood stuff?" Harry asked.

"No," Professor Snape said. "I never believed that. I believed in heritage, but not blood. Yet when I was younger… Everything was about sides. Before the Dark Lord made his first appearance, had truly started, before I had left Hogwarts, the Dark Lord's envoys painted a glorious picture of a new era for the wizarding world. We were stagnant, they said. We were falling. There were those who would destroy us and it was up to us to stop them. They wanted me to help them bring about their glorious future. They promised me a place in that world."

"What made you change sides?" Harry asked.

"Your mother," Professor Snape said.

"You still loved her?" Harry asked.

"I never stopped," Professor Snape said.
"But you fought against her in the war," Harry said.

"I had thought I could protect her," Professor Snape said. "She was a ward breaker, she wasn't supposed to fight. I had thought I could protect her once the Dark Lord won, if I was one of his favored. This was before he had made clear his plans to kill all muggleborns. Blood purity was certainly a part of his manifesto, that purebloods should only marry purebloods, but that was not the stated goal of his world vision. He always spoke of the old ways. His recruiters promised a revival of the old magics. Of the days when great feats of magic were performed. Who's relics we now covet and do not understand. The days before the ministry banned the Dark Arts and tightly controlled ritual casting. Before tomes of power were hidden away by the old families and restrictions were made on what could be taught or practiced centuries gone."

"You sound like you still believe in all that," Harry accused.

"I do," Professor Snape said. "There is a wonder I can not describe in the bare scraps of magic that I was able to obtain while in his service. But it wasn't worth it. None of it was worth serving him. None of it would have been worth the blood that he spilled in rivers across our world. Besides, I believed in boundless discovery. The Dark Lord's power was for the chosen few."

"You didn't care about the blood stuff though?" Harry asked. "You didn't care what he said about my mum?"

"I am a halfblood myself," Professor Snape said before he paused. "I ignored it at first. I had heard such talk for a long time in Slytherin house, I was good at ignoring it. I knew that the old families who still coveted the old ways walked hand in hand with the blood purists. It was all bilge, but I was used to hearing it, I was used to ignoring it. As I made in roads to the powerful houses that held the knowledge I craved, I got used to ignoring a lot. They had been saying those things for generations, and they would be saying them for generations to come. It was part of the package, and I didn't take it seriously. It was their vision, not mine. All I had to do was prove that I was worthy of the knowledge that they had. That I deserved that power. That I was one of them."

"So you changed sides when you realized Voldemort would kill my mother?" Harry asked.

"I changed sides when your mother blasted down the door of the manor house I was delivering a potion to," Professor Snape said. "There was a battle, the Dark Lord himself was there. I saw her get taken down by a serious curse. Potter got her out of there, but that was the day I knew I could not go on as I was. I would later learn that that was the third time your mother had come face to face with the Dark Lord. I had been convinced before then that the Dark Lord would win. It seemed that the writing was on the wall. But I knew then and there that I would do anything to see your mother safe. I knew she never would be while the Dark Lord was alive."

"So you became a spy?" Harry asked.

Professor Snape nodded.

"I think I can..." Harry began.

"I haven't finished," Professor Snape said.

"Sir?" Harry asked.

"This has just been to explain how it began," Professor Snape said tiredly. "That was not my confession."

"O-ok," Harry said, waiting for the professor to continue warily.
"I still needed to act the loyal Death Eater," Professor Snape said. "The Dark Lord has a way of knowing when you lie, a way of seeing into one's mind. There are ways to protect the mind, but the best way to be certain is to lie as little as possible, to hide lies within truths. I was one of many Death Eaters tasked to spy for the Dark Lord and I happened to be tasked to spy on the Headmaster one day as he was meeting a purported seer in Hogsmeade. The woman was ridiculous, she was obviously a charlatan. I was soon convinced that she was wasting the Headmaster's time. I thought I would have nothing to report, but I was wrong."

"As the headmaster got up to leave, the woman went into a trance and began prophesying," Professor Snape said. "I was discovered listening outside the door before I could hear the entire thing and was soon summoned to the Dark Lords side. He wanted to know what I had learned."

"I had had no time to discuss the matter with the headmaster, but I thought then that there was no need," the Professor said. "The woman was a fraud, the words she had uttered were useless. I did not want to lie to the Dark Lord and so I came up with a way to trick the Dark Lord. To bring about his destruction with truths. I thought to make the Dark Lord believe that the prophesy was real, to sell it to him as valid, for indeed, it involved him. The prophesy gave a set of qualifiers to identify someone who was a threat to the Dark Lord. They were so ridiculous that I thought surely no one could truly match the description. I had thought that the Headmaster could manufacture someone, someone who would appear to fit this description and a trap could be set. A trap that would see an end to the Dark Lord. I convinced the Dark Lord that it was real. That there was this threat to him, and I did not stop to think of what would could come of it."

"Was it a real prophesy?" Harry asked, already knowing the answer.

"Yes," Professor Snape said.

"Did Voldemort kill them?" Harry asked. "Would they have killed Voldemort if you hadn't said anything, is that what the rest of the prophesy was about?" Harry wondered if Voldemort would have been dead before he could have gotten to Harry's parents if things had been different.

"The Dark Lord did not kill him," Professor Snape said. "The Dark Lord killed his parents before having his own curse rebound against him."

Harry looked up at the professor speechless. He shook his head.

"Me?" Harry asked. "The prophecy was about me? All he wanted was me? He killed them because he wanted me?"

Professor Snape only nodded.

"No," Harry said. "That shouldn't… No... You... That doesn't make any sense! You were trying to protect her. You loved her. You..." Harry stopped talking, realizing that none of that was contradicted by what he had just been told. The universe was not fair. The universe didn't work on 'should's.

"It's not fair," Harry said angrily. "It's not right. Why didn't you save her?! Why didn't you save my parents?! Weren't you spying for their side?"

"I warned the headmaster," Professor Snape said. "I begged him to get her into hiding. I told him there was a spy close to them, I just didn't know who he was. I thought she would be safe under the strongest of wards."

"But they weren't," Harry said angrily. "They were betrayed."
"Yes," Professor Snape said. "They were."

Harry closed his eyes, too many could-have-beens flashing in his mind.

"Was that everything?" Harry asked.

"Everything?" Professor Snape asked.

"Everything you had to tell me?" Harry asked.

"Yes," Professor Snape said. "Yes, that's everything."

Harry nodded.

"I need to go now professor," Harry said. "It's almost curfew."

He didn't run this time. Professor Snape didn't try to stop him.

Deep in the woods, Peter waited. 'It should have worked,' he thought. Yet he was not free. He was waiting for Greyback.

Chapter End Notes

A/N: I must credit the idea of HP underwear being a thing in the wizarding world to althor42’s Horcrux Within. A lot of my concept for Fenrir Greyback comes from Fernwithy’s Teddy Lupin stories. I drew a bit on Less Wrong’s Methods of Rationality for my concept of Occlumency.

Thank you for reading this. Many thanks to my beta, althor42, whose HP fanfiction I’m sure you would all enjoy on ff. Recently I have been enjoying the Avengers FF series Tales of the Bots by scifigrl47 on AO3.

Please leave me a review, I always love to hear what you think.
“So how long are you going to ignore him?” Ron asked as they walked down the corridor, heading towards the Headmaster’s office.

“I’m not ignoring him,” Harry hedged.

“So what are you doing?” Hermione asked.

“I’m thinking,” Harry said.

“About what though?” Ron asked. “A week ago you wanted this to work out. He told us he wanted it to work out. Then he gets stabbed and you start acting all weird.”

“It got complicated,” Harry said.

“Complicated how?” Ron asked.

“It’s nothing,” Harry said.

What was there to say to the man who convinced Voldemort to kill your whole family? Harry knew that that wasn’t fair. But none of it was fair. It wasn’t fair that he had grown up without his parents, it wasn’t fair that he had a dad he didn’t know. But life wasn’t fair, he had known that since before he could count. Was it fair to blame Snape for trying to end the war, for trying to save his mother? Was it fair to forgive him for all he had done in service to Voldemort. What did Harry know of war besides what it had wrought for him. Life wasn’t fair, so maybe the only thing Harry should be thinking about was what he wanted for himself.

“Yeah well nothing had you pretty upset about something after you spoke to him,” Ron said. “And that doesn’t even cover that weirdness that came next.”

“What’s weirdness?” Hermione asked.

“It’s nothing,” Harry said.

“Oh it’s always nothing,” Hermione said. “Your arm could get lopped off and you’d say it was nothing. Was it nothing Ron?”

“It was like after the dementors,” Ron said. “You know, when he first woke up and he was all calm when he shouldn’t have been. He came back from seeing Snape and he was all upset about ‘nothing,’ and then all of a sudden it was like a switch flipped and he was all calm about it. Stopped pacing about the dorm room and just decided to go to bed. He did the same thing a couple of times last year when everyone was on him about the Heir of Slytherin thing.”
“You never said anything,” Hermione accused Ron.

“Ron doesn’t need to report to you every time I decide to go to sleep,” Harry said.

“But what happened?” Hermione asked. “And what did happen with the dementor?”

“It’s…” Harry started, but Hermione cut him off.

“If you say it’s nothing I’m going to scream,” Hermione said.

“Not in the halls,” Harry said. “That would be breaking the rules.”

“Come on Harry,” Hermione said.

Harry paused for a moment.

“I don’t really know what it is,” he said after a bit. “It’s just, one moment I’m upset or something and then I’m not, it’s like… I don’t know what it’s like. But it’s always been like that. Since as long as I can remember. It doesn’t always happen, but it’s happened all the time. Especially in the evening when I’m already tired I guess. I don’t know, it just happens. It always has. I guess it just sort of washes over me. It’s like… it’s like… being… comforted. It doesn’t solve everything, but I feel better. Or maybe I just stop feeling like the world’s coming to an end.”

But it was more than that. He couldn’t put it into words. He couldn’t tell them that it felt like sipping cocoa in front of the fire sandwiched between Ron and Hermione the previous Christmas Eve or like the end of second year when Hermione had been un-petrified and Hagrid had come back. He couldn’t tell them it felt like something he was missing. That it felt like someone had told him that everything would be alright and that he knew that it would be. He had never had that. He never would.

Ron and Hermione paused in their tracks to look at him questioningly.

“It’s weird with the dementors though,” Harry said. “It’s like going back and forth. Like I see, you know, dementor stuff in my head and then there’s peace and then it shifts back to the dementor. It’s like something’s fighting it.”

Hermione looked concerned.

“It’s not a bad thing,” Harry said.

“It’s just I haven’t heard of anything like this before,” Hermione said. “Maybe you should tell Madame Pomfrey about it.”

“Like that’ll ever happen,” Ron ribbed Harry. They started walking again. “You haven’t read all of the books in the library Hermione, maybe this is just something rare, like parseltongue.”

“I had read about parseltongue before I even got here,” Hermione said. “And some strange magical happenings that affects the mind isn’t something that should be overlooked.”

“Who said it’s magical,” Harry asked.

“Yeah,” Ron said. “Harry’s probably just a nutter.”

“Hey,” Harry said. “You’re a nutter.”

“Yeah,” Ron said. “But I have to deal with the twins so I have an excuse.”
“Fair enough,” Harry said.

“It’s magical,” Hermione said forcefully. “Because it fought the effects of a dementor.”

“So does chocolate,” Harry said.

“Are we sure chocolate isn’t magic?” Ron asked.

“Good point,” Harry said. “Hermione might be right. This might just be magic.”

“Hermione is right,” Hermione said.

“Now see what we’ve done,” Ron said. “Now Hermione’s gone nutter and she’s forgotten that she’s Hermione and she’s talking about herself.”

“It’s really nothing to worry about Hermione,” Harry said. “I can remember it happening as far back as when I was like five.”

“And you’ve never noticed any other symptoms?” Hermione asked.

“Nope,” Harry said. “I usually don’t even realize it’s happened until later in retrospect.”

“Well it’s not normal,” Hermione said, though it sounded like she was willing to drop it.

“Never been normal I guess,” Harry said looking down.

“I don’t mean that as a bad thing against you,” Hermione said.

“Yeah mate,” Ron said. “If you’d been normal You-Know-Who would’ve probably killed you in first year. No point in normal I say.”

“I think we’ve gotten off topic,” Hermione said.

“What’s the topic?” Ron asked.

“The topic is that it’s been a week and Harry hasn’t said so much as one word to Professor Snape.”

“I have too,” Harry said. “I was telling him when various ingredients were ready yesterday in the lab.”

“Fine,” Hermione said. “You’ve just been ignoring the fact that you and he both know that he’s…” Hermione looked around before whispering. “That he’s your dad.”

“Yeah, well, it got complicated.”

“Do you still want things to work out with him?” Ron asked.

“It’s complicated,” was all Harry could think to say as they reached the stone gargoyle that guarded the headmaster’s office. That about summed up how he felt anyways. “I’ll see you two later.” Harry said.

“Think about it,” Hermione said as the two turned around.

Harry wanted to say that all he did was think about it, but instead he said “Acid Pops.” He could hear Hermione now talking to Ron about looking up mind magics.

Harry rode the spiral staircase and was greeted with, “Come in Harry,” as he reached the top of the
stairs. The headmaster sounded old and Harry did not think he was going to get to hear about any
grand plans for a Dursley free summer vacation. Harry opened the door and walked inside, his
stomach in knots and his eyes not rising above the headmaster’s desk and the tea service that sat on
top.

“Have a seat Harry,” the headmaster said. Harry felt like he was to be executed. He sat down.

“I’m to go back to the Dursleys, sir,” Harry said, not even bothering to make it a question. He
couldn’t settle on anger or despair.

“It is where you are safest, Harry,” the headmaster said.

“They won’t take me back,” Harry said. “They don’t want me.”

“I have already taken care of the matter,” the headmaster said.

And Harry had to wonder then just how that conversation had gone.

“Did you even look into other options, Professor?” Harry dared.

“Extensively,” the headmaster said sadly. “I had thought there might be a way, but it seems that
that avenue is closed to you.”

“Would the wards matter if I wasn’t the boy-who-lived?” Harry asked.

“The wards would not matter if there had not been twelve attempts to bypass them in the first
month you lived with the Dursleys; twelve attempts that we know of. They have withstood a good
many attempts since then, including two made a week after you returned from your first year, and
of course they protected you this past summer.”

No one had bothered to tell Harry any of this before, of course. “I’m safe here at Hogwarts,”
he said.

“And yet Quirinus Quirrel would have killed you in your first year if the protection you received
from your mother had not been reinforced by the time you spent under those wards,” the
headmaster said patiently. “And that is perhaps the most important reason you must return. That
protection must be renewed every summer if you are to survive Voldemort’s next attempt on your
life. He will not stop Harry. He will always come back for you, and I am very determined that you
shall have every protection.”

Harry’s chest tightened at the thought of Voldemort coming after him again.

“It stopped him from touching me,” Harry said. “But it doesn’t stop anyone else. And why does he
want to kill me so bad? That stupid prophesy already happened didn’t it? Doesn’t he have anything
better to do?”

If the headmaster was surprised that Harry knew about the prophesy, he didn’t show it.

“Even without the prophesy Harry,” the headmaster said gently. “Voldemort has relied long on fear
to control others. That you lived when he had decided that you should die is not something that he
will ever let pass.”

“What if I don’t care?” Harry asked. “What if I’m willing to take my chances? What if I’d rather
live on the streets?”
“Then I would need to assign several people to follow you around those streets,” the headmaster said. “You must be protected.”

Harry’s stomach dropped at the thought of it, a street covered in blood and shaded by the skeletal wings of the specter of death as he was whisked away from carnage and bloodshed as others died in his place.

“No,” Harry said. “No. No more. What does it matter? Just ‘cause I’m the blasted boy-who-lived? What’s the point of risking one person to protect another?”

“One month Harry,” the headmaster said.

“What?” Harry asked.

“One month,” the headmaster repeated. “That should be enough to renew the protections. One month in that house, and then there will be alternate arrangements for the rest of your summer.”

Harry felt as though he were crumpling as he realized that he was going to give in. That he would go back. He sat there in silence.

“Can I go now headmaster?” Harry asked.

“Yes Harry, you may,” the headmaster said.

Harry left the headmasters office and wandered the halls aimlessly. He flashed a smile and an ‘mhmhm,’ to a passing Hufflepuff who asked if he was alright, and he ignored the Slytherin who howled like a wolf as he passed by. He wound up in the unlit Arithmancy classroom where he sat up against the wall in the back staring absently at the equations on the blackboard.

Unbidden, memories of the Dursleys arose in his mind, reframed for the coming summer. From there his thoughts turned to more dangerous territory, to the could have beens. He imagined going home for the summer to live with his mom and dad. He imagined hugs and backyard quidditch and meals that came with seconds and left him feeling full. He imagined introducing his friends to them and showing Ron and Hermione his room. A room that wasn’t a place for cast off things.

As he wiped silent tears from his eyes his thoughts turned to the letter his parents had written him. The love that had been there. He would do anything to feel like that in real life. And what if he could? Summer with his mom and dad turned to summer with Professor Snape.

These daydreams tended to involve more potions than the others but that was alright, because here, Professor Snape wanted to spend time with him. They’d prepare very precisely made dinners together, and Professor Snape would help him with his summer homework instead of forcing him to hide it. He would tolerate Harry’s friends being over, even if they were all Gryffindors, and the professor and Harry would play chess in the evenings, or maybe just sit in the same room together reading books in comfortable silence. It was a just a fantasy though.

From there he started contemplating a childhood with the man. Would Professor Snape have slapped him for coming to him in the middle of the night during a thunderstorm? Would he have still carried Harry around long after he had learned to walk? Would Harry have feared the man growing up, or would he have felt safest when he was with him? He imagined toy broomsticks and Christmas mornings and the feeling of safety. He imagined being loved.

It was getting late, and Harry needed to go get his potion. He thought about using the gloves in his pockets but decided to walk the long way, thinking about the man he was about to see as he walked the halls.
Harry passed Draco Malfoy on his way down and was relieved when the other boy ignored him as had been usual lately. Harry briefly wondered if the boy actually felt bad for starting a rumor that had gotten Harry poisoned. Harry was still eager to get payback on the quidditch pitch for that.

Harry knocked on Professor Snape’s office door and received a curt ‘come in.’

“I’m here for my potion, sir,” Harry said.

“Yes, of course,” Professor Snape said, his expression and his voice neutral. “Just one moment.”

The professor went to his store room and Harry took a seat at the man’s desk. Professor Snape paused when he re-entered the room, clearly not expecting Harry to stick around.

“Why did you tell me all that stuff?” Harry asked.

“You deserved to know the truth,” Professor Snape said, placing the glass vial on the table in front of Harry, who shook his head as he picked up the purple sludge.

“You wouldn’t have told me if I hadn’t told you you were my father,” Harry said.

“No,” Professor Snape agreed. “I would not have.”

Harry downed the contents of the vial before he asked his next question.

“Did you tell me so I’d leave you alone?” Harry asked.

“No,” Professor Snape said. “I told you because I couldn’t let you get attached to me without knowing the truth.”

“Do you want me to leave you alone?” Harry asked.

“What I want doesn’t matter,” Professor Snape said.

“Yes it does,” Harry said. “What do you want, Professor?”

“I want to do right by you,” Professor Snape said.

“I don’t want to be your obligation,” Harry said.

“That’s not what I meant,” Professor Snape said looking frustrated and unsure of himself. He sighed. “I want to get to know you. If that is what you want.”

“Why did you stop hating me?” Harry pressed on.

“I never hated you,” Professor Snape said. “I hated your… I hated James.”

“It sure felt like you hated me,” Harry said. “Why did you hate him so much? Because he married my mum? Or was it because he was a bully in school?”

“I hated him because he had failed the same way I had failed,” Professor Snape said bitterly. “And it was so much easier to hate him.”

“What?” Harry asked.

“He too had thought to fool the dark lord,” Professor Snape said. “Your family was to be protected by the Fidelius Charm. A protection so powerful that the only way to find you was if the trusted
Secret Keeper revealed the location. Your godfather was to be that Secret Keeper, and loath as I am to admit it, he would have died before he betrayed you. He was also the obvious choice. Your father decided that another friend was to be the Secret Keeper, he thought that he could fool the Dark Lord, but he told his spy exactly where to find them.”

“He was trying to protect us,” Harry said.

“Yes,” Professor Snape said. “He was.”

“Why did you stop hating me?” Harry asked.

“I didn’t…” Professor Snape started but Harry cut him off tenuously.

“Please don’t,” Harry said, and he had to hide the desperation from his voice, because at that moment no question could have mattered more to him. “Why did you stop?”

Professor Snape took a deep breath and finally took a seat behind his desk.

“There is a magic of the mind called occlumency,” Professor Snape said. “I used it during the war to protect my true allegiances from the dark lord. Occlumency gives one a level of control over one’s own mind. I could control, to an extent, what was in the forefront of my own mind and therefore the dark lord could not see what I did not want him to see. Occlumency also gives me a sort of clarity. Put simply, it is difficult to lie to oneself when one is occluding properly.

“On the train at the start of term,” Professor Snape continued. “When the dementor boarded I found myself unable to cast the patronus at first. I started occluding for the first time since the war ended. I found clarity. After that, I saw myself for who I had become. I saw you for who you are. I saw that you were far from the caricature of James Potter that I had in my head. I saw that I didn’t know you at all. I saw a lot, and none of it made me proud. I have been attempting to change myself since then.”

“Do you still hate him?” Harry asked.

“I do,” Professor Snape said.

“Does that mean you…” Harry couldn’t complete the question, he couldn't ask the man if he hated himself for what had happened Halloween night. “I think my mum would have forgiven you.”

“Yet she is not here to do so,” Professor Snape said.

“But I am,” Harry said. “You were trying to stop the war. You tried to protect my mum. I can’t hate you for that. Even if it went wrong. You didn’t kill them, you didn’t betray them. They’re not here to forgive you, but I am.”

Professor Snape didn’t say anything and there was a silence for a while. Harry found himself staring at the desk while he waited for some sort of reaction from the professor.

“Is that what you want?” Professor Snape asked.

Harry nodded.

“I truly was blind,” Professor Snape said.

“Sir?” Harry asked, looking up at the man.

“I looked at you and saw your father,” Professor Snape said. “I should have seen how much of you
comes from your mother,” Professor Snape said.

Harry blushed at the compliment, a warm feeling in his chest even as he thought to himself that he hoped that the professor didn't look at him too closely.

“Dinner is almost upon us,” Professor Snape said. “Perhaps you would care to join me in my quarters. I would like to get to know you better.”

“Okay,” Harry said, full of trepidation and hope. "Is that what you want?"

"It is,” Professor Snape said. "Is that what you want?"

Harry nodded and they turned towards the door.

"Will your friends be concerned if you do not show up for dinner?" Professor Snape asked.

“Oh,” Harry said. “They’ll probably think I’m skipping meals again.”

“What?” Professor Snape asked.

“Huh,” was Harry’s reply.

“Skipping meals,” Professor Snape prompted.

“Oh, you know,” Harry said. “Studying. Where does the time go?”

“I’m afraid I do know,” Professor Snape said. “Let’s avoid that in the future.”

“Sure,” Harry said. “So…dinner.”

“Yes,” Professor Snape said. “Right this way.”

Dinner with Professor Snape had been odd. Nice, but odd. With everything between them, the comfort that had developed while they had been working on Harry’s project seemed to be gone. Or not so much gone as it was out of reach for the time. Still, there was plenty to talk about and the food was good. Being in a professor's quarters was surreal though.

Afterwards, as Harry made his way to the library, he wound up crossing paths with Oliver Wood.

“Hey Olie,” Harry said as the older boy switched routes and matched pace with Harry.

“Harry, um, good,” Oliver said awkwardly. “I’ve been meaning to talk to you all week.”

“There’ve been like five practices this week,” Harry said. “Also, we sort of live together.”

“Right,” Oliver said. “It’s just, I keep putting it off.”

“Is this about the match?” Harry asked. “I’m really sorry, really I am. I know how much this means to you.”

“Oh,” Oliver said. “You don’t need to apologize or anything. It wasn’t your fault. But, you know, if this next match goes right it could keep us in the running. I just... with the dementors and
everything, I need to be sure. We can’t afford to lose another match.”

Harry swallowed. “Are you cutting me from the team?” he asked tremulously.

“No,” Oliver said quickly. Quick but unsure. “You’re the best damn seeker I’ve ever seen and you’re a part of the team no matter what. But I need to know if I should be looking for a reserve seeker.”

“I’m taking care of it,” Harry said. “I’ve arranged lessons with Professor Lupin. I’m going to learn this Patronus Charm thing.”

“Really,” Oliver said, a relived smile coming up on his face. “That’s great, oh that is good. Okay, and that’ll fix it, right?”

“Yeah, I’ll let you know how the lessons go,” Harry said, sounding a lot more sure than he was. “But, you know, feel free to look for a reserve, as long as, you know, they’re a reserve. Um…”

“Hey,” Oliver said. “There’s no replacing you. Sorry if that was weird.”

Harry shrugged. “There’s a lot at stake.”

Oliver grinned. “Put any thought to doing quidditch camp this year? France is great over the summer.”

“I don’t think it’s happening,” Harry said. He’d be stuck at the Dursley’s while Angelina and Katie flew over a white sand beach.

“Oh well,” Oliver said. “Anyway, you’re heading to the Library?”

“No rest for the wicked,” Harry said.

“I hear you,” Oliver said. “See you, then.” He turned back to head towards Gryffindor Tower.

“See you,” Harry said.

“Where’ve you been? You missed dinner,” Ron accused as Harry joined Ron and Hermione in the Library. Hermione had reached a bit of a block in her Arithmancy project and Harry and Ron were helping with the research. The table was littered with crumpled up bits of parchment and tomes that definitely wouldn’t fit in any of their book bags. There were also a couple of books on magics that affect the mind that have been left to the side for now.

“You need to eat this,” Hermione said, handing Harry a plate of chicken and rice with vegetables. A true testament of her concern, if she was bringing food into the library.

“I take it Dumbledore said you have to go back to the Dursleys,” Ron said.

“Yeah,” Harry said. “He did, but I didn’t skip dinner.”

“Oh come on Harry, you need to eat something,” Hermione said, gesturing with the plate.

“I had dinner with Professor Snape,” Harry said.
“Really?” Ron asked.

“Really,” Harry said.

“So things are good?” Ron asked.

Harry shrugged.

“Still complicated?” Hermione asked.

“Yeah,” Harry said.


Harry shrugged. “The headmaster’s pretty insistent that I be protected by the blood wards. Something about recharging the protections my mum left on me. It’s only for a month though so…”

There wasn’t much ‘only,’ about a month with the Dursleys, but Harry wasn't going to make a big deal of it to his friends. They worried enough as it was, and the last thing Harry wanted was for them to go to McGonagall or the headmaster with their concerns.

“Well, you still shouldn’t have to go back,” Ron said. Hermione nodded in agreement.

“Did he even ask what goes on there that you don’t want to return?” Hermione asked.

Harry shook his head and mumbled, “There’s nothing going on.”

“But what about Snape?” Ron asked.

“We’ll see,” Harry said. “I don’t know. I don’t know where this is going with Professor Snape and… I’m not going to get my hopes up, so I’m just going to see where this goes. Also, well, people do keep trying to kill me, so…”

“Well, we could always kidnap you again, if you need it,” Ron said.

“Thanks,” Harry said. That really did mean a lot, even if he’d never allow it. If people were trying to get to him, then he had no business being around Ron or Hermione outside of the strongest protections on the planet. Even if the Dursley’s were being worse than normal, Harry wasn’t going to involve his friends, his mind was made up on that. Harry had to wonder again how Dumbledore had convinced them to take him back and how upset they would be after how things had been left the last time.

“Come on,” Harry said. “Let’s get to work. Hermione’s Arithmancy project isn’t going to research itself and there are way too many books in here.”

“Harry, there is no such thing as too many books,” Hermione said.

“But there is, Hermione,” Harry said. “There is such a thing as too many books.”

“Tell that to Lockhart’s publisher,” Ron said.

Hermione flicked a ball of parchment at Ron while Harry scowled at the memory of the man.
Harry knew of the prophesy. He would be going back to the Dursley’s and that was one massive divergence avoided, but Harry knew of the prophesy, and Albus had damaged their relationship by having to insist the boy go back to his distasteful relatives.

Albus brainstormed and plotted and did his best to determine how best to keep things afloat. How to make sure Harry stayed on the right path, never mind that it seemed that they were no longer on the map. Yet Albus was confident that he could keep things moving along. Voldemort would die, and Harry would live, and if Albus was very lucky, he himself would still be around when all was said and done.

He became aware as Severus was deposited at his doorstep.

“Come in Severus,” he called out.

“You wanted to see me Headmaster?” Severus said as he walked into the office.

“I did,” Albus said. Severus accepted a cup of tea and declined a lemon drop as the two exchanged pleasantries, as much as Severus tolerated pleasantries.

“I was surprised to find that Harry was aware that there was a prophesy,” Albus said when they were settled.

There was a pause.

“It came up,” Severus said.

“Did it indeed?” was Albus’s response.

“He is my son,” Severus said. “Though I do believe you already knew that. My surprise from a week ago, was it not? It is good you warned me. Though Harry did a good job of explaining the situation.”

“Were you so caught up in the circumstances of his birth that you felt the need to tell him of the prophesy?” Albus asked with only a hint of reproach. Severus did not know the second half of the prophesy, and would not understand why Albus would have reason to hide it. As far as Severus was concerned, the second half of the prophesy had come to pass that Halloween night. That too, it seemed, was Harry’s thought on the matter.

“It was necessary that he understand my hand in that night,” Severus said.

Albus did not need to ask how that had gone. It completely explained why Harry had not requested to live with Severus when he had asked to be removed from the Dursley’s custody. Yet while it was sad, it was for the best.

“Your hand was an innocent one,” Albus said kindly.

Severus only sighed and sipped on his tea.

“Please do tell me if there are any other developments where Harry is concerned,” Albus said.

“You would be the first to know,” Severus said.

Albus changed the subject after that, and Severus left after a time to patrol the halls. Yes, there was a divergence, but matters were being corrected, largely on their own. Yes, everything was
The week progressed with a buzz of excitement as the second quidditch match of the season approached. The upcoming match was important to determining if Gryffindor still had a chance for the quidditch cup. Basically since Gryffindor had lost to Hufflepuff in the first game, Hufflepuff would have to lose to Ravenclaw in the second, and then Ravenclaw would have to lose to Gryffindor. With luck Ravenclaw and Slytherin would end their match fairly close in terms of points and then of course Slytherin would have to lose to Gryffindor. In the end, if every team lost at least one game, it would all come down to the point spread. Oliver did try to find a reserve seeker that week, but no one was really up to scratch.

Harry was still working with Professor Flitwick on his wards project. Messing around with this sort of magic wasn’t the sort of thing he could do unsupervised. Most things didn’t work with the project, but a few things had worked out so far and Harry was happy with the results. Between that and quidditch practice Harry wound up pulling a couple of late nights to get his homework done. Harry was doing alright in Arithmancy, though Ancient Runes was a headache and a half, but Harry was scraping by. Speaking of headaches though, Harry still had no idea how Hermione was managing all of her classes and projects and he tried not to think about it too much. He also squeezed in a couple of meals with Professor Snape during the week.

Harry was still managing to keep up with the defense study group though the hand to hand self-defense that Benjamin was teaching him still left Harry anxious with memories of his first lesson, but it was definitely something he needed to learn. That Thursday, before the study group, Harry arranged to meet with Professor Lupin on Sunday evening to work on the Patronus Charm, and very counterintuitively, Harry had also agreed to go flying with Cedric Diggory Sunday afternoon. He had wanted to say no, thinking about all the time the quidditch match would take and all the homework he would have to fit in between everything, but Cedric was a nice bloke and Harry had a hard time saying no. Who knew, it might be fun.

Finally, Saturday arrived, and with it the quidditch match. Gryffindor was cheering on Ravenclaw while many in the Slytherin section were actually sporting Hufflepuff pendants. There was a blond blur waving one and Harry couldn’t imagine that it could actually be Malfoy, even if he was the right size.

The game started out in Hufflepuff’s favor and they took a quick and decisive lead much to Harry’s dismay. However, the sky was overcast and there was no sun to shine on the snitch. As the game dragged on Ravenclaw started reclaiming the difference. Two of Hufflepuff’s chasers and one of their beaters were second years, and they didn’t seem to have the stamina of the older Ravenclaw players, something Harry hadn’t been able to notice during the previous game.

Between the two of them, Cedric Diggory seemed to be the more skilled flyer, while Cho Chang was the more tactical player. She managed to twice trick Cedric with a feint and both times it seemed timed and placed to draw Cedric towards the Ravenclaw beaters. Cedric came close to being knocked off his broom both times, but he very skillfully evaded the bludgers. Harry kept a close eye on his watch as the game wore on. It wasn’t that the game wasn’t exciting or engaging, but he had rather a lot of homework to be working on and far too many commitments for the weekend. The game ended without much lead-up. Ravenclaw had managed to surpass Hufflepuff by twenty points when Cho Chang caught the elusive snitch. There was no neck to neck chase. Harry rather thought that she had spotted the snitch and just casually gotten close before a
short burst of speed had the snitch in her hand.

Cedric and Cho Chang shook hands before Cedric went to commend the Ravenclaw team captain. Harry looked at his watch before looking over at Professor Snape. He thought he just had time to go rib him about Slytherins wearing Hufflepuff colors before he absolutely had to get back to his homework. His stomach rumbled. Actually, lunch should probably come first.

He excused himself from his friends and had made his way towards the teacher’s section when he spotted Professor Snape exiting towards the grounds. He had about caught up when he noticed that Professor Snape was walking with Professor Lupin, and it did not look like they were having a friendly chat. Harry drew back a bit as he heard Professor Lupin say, “I had nothing to do with it Severus.”

“You may have the headmaster fooled, but not me,” Professor Snape said darkly. “Who better would it have been to keep Greyback ahead of Black’s investigation. Who else had such a connection to the man. And who else could have warned the beast of our trap.”

“I want Greyback caught as much as you do,” Professor Lupin said coldly.

“Don’t think I have forgotten the past,” Professor Snape said. “And don’t think I’m blind now. Just give me a reason, and I’ll see to it that you two share the same fate.”

With that Professor Snape lengthened his stride and left Professor Lupin behind him, with Harry still behind Professor Lupin.

That had been entirely too reminiscent of Professor Snape’s interactions with Quirrel. Why did Professor Snape think Professor Lupin was working with Greyback? Had his dad just been really bad at picking friends? Harry had a sinking feeling when he thought about the patronus lesson he had the next day.

Professor Lupin hated Greyback. That had been clear when they were talking about him. Could Harry have been so easily taken in, or was Professor Snape just suspicious of the defense professor who had once been his enemy at school. There wasn’t even any real evidence that Greyback had actually been tipped off about the duplicity of the week prior. It seemed that everything was just determined to become more and more of a headache.

He went to the Great Hall and had a very quick lunch before he went to the library to work on homework with Ron and Hermione. Harry was entirely too distracted by what he had just overheard and was very unsatisfied with his progress when the time came to go to the dungeons to work as Professor Snape’s lab assistant. The way he saw it though, Professor Snape had a good track record of sniffing out untrustworthy professors, and it did seem that the defense professor was always up to something.

Harry worked diligently and cleaned up quickly in the end, though he still had to wait for Faisal to finish going over notes with Professor Snape long after Arianna had left. Harry wondered if he should bring up Professor Lupin. He didn’t want to tell him that he had been eavesdropping.

“That was some game, huh professor,” Harry said with Faisal on the way out.

“It was,” Professor Snape said. “Gryffindor, it seems, still has a chance at the cup.”

“More than a chance, I’d say,” Harry said with a bit of bravado. “I was interested to see the Hufflepuff pendants in the Slytherin section. We didn’t even see that when Hufflepuff played Gryffindor.”
“As it turns out there have been a few tentative ties developing between our houses,” Professor Snape said. “The headmaster has been going on about inter-house unity. It is time for some to stop living in the past.”

“I might have thought there would sooner be ties between Slytherin and Ravenclaw,” Harry said. “Slytherin’s always seemed to tolerate Ravenclaw best in the past.”

“Oh there are ties there as well,” Professor Snape said. “But today Hufflepuff and Slytherin had reason to cheer towards a common outcome. Alas though, it was not to be.”

“You’re all plotting against Gryffindor, aren’t you,” Harry accused.

“We just might be,” Professor Snape said. “I can’t think of any ties between our houses.”

Harry grinned shyly.

“Speaking of which,” Professor Snape said. “I was wondering if you should like to take dinner with me this evening.”

Harry frowned.

“I’d really like to, professor,” Harry said nervously. “But I’m lousy with homework, and I’ve got a special class tomorrow and I told Cedric I’d go flying with him and Ron and I’ve been helping with Hermione’s research and I’ve got to do a bit of a writeup before my next experiment with Professor Flitwick sooo… Monday?”

“Yes, I should like to see you Monday evening. It will be the full moon,” Professor Snape said. “You do have a rather large workload don’t you. How is your project coming?”

“Oh it’s going well,” Harry said. “I, um, sort of started it so I could spend time with you, you know.”

“You don’t say,” Professor Snape said dryly, and Harry realized that he had probably never had the professor fooled.

“Yeah,” Harry said. “But it’s actually a really cool project, so there’s that… Anyway, I’ve got to go. They haven’t figured out a way for homework to do itself yet, unfortunately. They haven’t right?”

“No I do not believe that they have,” Professor Snape said.

“Oh well,” Harry said. “See you, professor.”

“Enjoy your evening Harry,” Professor Snape said. “If you can.”

Harry and Hermione didn’t stop working for some time, and Ron, with his smaller work load stayed up with them for a while playing gobstones with his sister. They didn’t get up to their dorms at anything approaching a decent hour that night. When they did manage though Ron had a nasty surprise.
“Scabbers!” he said in alarm.

“What’s wrong?” Harry asked as the other boys in the dorm stuck their heads out from their curtains.

“It looks like he went twelve rounds with a cat,” Ron said in concern. “What happened to you, little guy?”

“Is he alright?” Harry asked. Scabbers had been looking poorly for a while and Harry would have been surprised if the rat could look at a cat without falling over dead.

“I don’t know,” Ron said. “His fur’s matted with blood. It’s mostly dry though, who knows when this even happened. I don’t think I’ve seen him since yesterday. He’s always sleeping you know.”

“Percy knows some healing stuff doesn’t he?” Harry asked. “He can take a look before you can see Hagrid tomorrow.”

“Good idea,” Ron said, heading for the door. “Percy’s going to kill me. He’ll check you over buddy. What happened, huh? I don’t want to have to leave your cage locked up.”

Ron made his way upstairs to the seventh year boys’ dormitory.

Harry had gotten ready for bed and closed his eyes before Ron got back with Scabbers.

The chess piece Ron was working on crumbled to dust. Ron sighed and blew the dust off of the table and onto the common room floor. Oddly enough, Ron’s project was probably the hardest one that any of them were working on. The past couple of days he had been getting more and more frustrated at the block he seemed to have hit. Ron kicked his feet up on the table, clearly done with his project for the day.

“So how’s scabbers?” Harry asked.

“Percy said it was all mostly superficial,” Ron said. “He’ll be alright. I just wish I knew how it happened.”

“Well I’m sure he’ll be back to his good old self in no time,” Harry said.

“So how’re you doing?” Ron asked Harry.

“Well I’m done with my homework, and I think I know how I’m going to do my writeup but I still need to finish ‘The Numbers of Life,'” Harry said as he rolled up his transfiguration essay.

“I meant with Snape,” Ron said.

“Oh,” Harry said. “I’m going to have dinner with him on Monday.”

“So it’s alright?” Hermione asked.

“Yeah,” Harry said. “I guess.”

“Is it still complicated?” Hermione asked.
“Yeah,” Harry said. “But it’s a complicated I can work with. Everything’s been complicated lately.”

“Anything you want to talk about?” Hermione asked.

“Ummm,” Harry said. “I found out why Voldemort wanted to kill me.”

“Wait,” Ron said. “You mean before the whole boy-who-lived thing?”

“When I met him in first year he sort of told me that my mom wouldn’t have died if she hadn’t been protecting me,” Harry said.

“So why’d he have it in for you when you were a baby,” Ron asked.

“There was a stupid self-fulfilling prophesy,” Harry said. “Said I’d be a danger to him. He only heard the first half though. I guess the rest of it would have told him it was a bad idea to try to kill me.”

“Are you okay?” Hermione asked.

Harry shrugged. “Yeah. It’s just. It was some stupid self fulfilling prophesy crap, and then one of my parents friends told Voldemort where to find them and he’s dead too but… It’s just a mind warp, you know. I feel like all year I’ve been swamped with all these what-if thoughts. Like what if they’d lived, or what if Professor Snape had raised me, or you know, what if I was just a normal kid.”

“Well that’s alright, but what’s your what-if that could actually happen in the future? Something you could work towards?” Hermione asked.

“Um…what if...I had less homework?” Harry said.

“I meant big picture,” Hermione said.

“Umm…” Harry said drawing out his words. “What if... Professor Snape was to… you know, really become my father. Like really be my father and what if I really didn't have to go back to the Dursleys and what if Greyback got struck by lightning tonight and what if I never ever see a dementor again, and if I could just for a moment this year feel like I’m on top of all of my schoolwork that would be perfect.”

“I’ll start looking at weather spells,” Ron said.

“Well don’t summon any thunder storms now,” Harry said. “I have to go flying with Diggory soon.”

“Oh, you poor thing,” Hermione said. “You have to go play on your racing broom.”

“Is little Harry nervous to go on his first play date?” Ron asked.

“What can I say? It really is my first play date. I’m just so full of nerves, should I bring flowers?” Harry asked sardonically. “Also there’s the work I’ve got to do, but mostly… no, no it’s the work. Yeah, it’s the work.”

“Yeah well next time don’t let Hermione talk us out of taking a cushy class like divination,” Ron said.

“Hey,” Harry said. “I rely on you to stand up to Hermione.”
“You’ll both thank me when you graduate,” Hermione said.

“Who says I’m graduating,” Ron said. “I figure I can get by with just my OWLs.”

“What?!” Hermione shrieked. “Ron no…”

Ron started laughing.

“What’s this?” a twin asked, coming up to the trio.

“Is Ronnie playing a joke?” maybe Fred asked.

“Ron’s planning on quitting school after his OWLs,” Hermione said, panicked.

“High five,” the twin that Harry was pretty sure was George said.

Ron gave George a high five.

“No,” Hermione said. “Not high five. Ron you can’t quit school.”

“Hermione, I was joking,” Ron said.

“Oh,” Fred said, disappointed.

“But good joke,” George said, ruffling Ron’s hair. “Knew you had to have a sense of humor somewhere.”

“Wait,” Fred said. “Let’s check. Okay Ron, now, looking back, teddybear spider. Funny in retrospect or terrifying childhood memory?”

Ron made a rude hand gesture with a scowl.

“Ronald!” they heard Percy call out all the way from the other side of the common room.

“So no,” George said. “No sense of humor.”

“What a shame,” Fred said, turning his attention to Harry. “It was a fluke.”

Ron rolled his eyes, he looked upset.

“Ron makes jokes all the time,” Harry said.

“Knock knock jokes don’t count,” Fred said.

“So how’ve the new gloves been working out?” George asked turning away from his younger brother.

“Uummm…” Harry said. “I thought that was a secret.”

“Yeah,” Fred said. “From prefects and teachers. Though I can see why you’d want to keep it a secret from these two.”

“What gloves,” Hermione said, and she was already disapproving.

“Oh it’s nothing bad,” Harry said, pulling out his gloves. “It’s actually really cool. I have these gloves and patches on my robes and shoes, they really just blend in, and I can use them to walk through walls.”
“Most walls,” George said.

“I’ve been their guinea pig,” Harry said.

“Woah,” Fred said defensively to a murderous looking Hermione. “We were guinea pigs, you’re human trials.”

“Monkey trials?” George asked Fred.

“Monkey trials,” Fred agreed. “We’re not quite at human trials yet.”


“Oh but that’s a proprietary secret,” Fred said.

“Couldn’t possibly say,” George said.

“Why didn’t you ask me to try them out?” Ron asked.

“Well you didn’t give us the idea, now did you?” George said.

“I’d sort of did a bit of accidental magic over the summer,” Harry said. “I sort of became non-corporeal for a bit. No big deal, but I just mentioned it in passing and then the twins went and made these. I mean that’s the only reason I’m involved.”

“Can I try them?” Hermione asked, and there was real interest in her eyes. Harry could almost imagine what was going on in her head as she tried to divine their secrets.

“Sure,” George said.

“What about me?” Ron asked.

“Oooh, sorry Ronnie,” Fred said. “Knowing you, you’d probably end up falling through to the center of the earth.”

“What?” Hermione asked.

“Mum would kill us,” George said. “Probably wouldn’t get anything for Christmas.”

“And you know how seriously we take Christmas,” Fred said.

"Wouldn't ever hear the end of it either," George said.

"What did you boys do to the rug?" Fred said in a horrible imitation of their mother. "This is just as bad as what you did to your poor brother, what's-his-name."

"Never live it down," George said.

Ron stood up. “You know what?” he said looking like he was about to go off on them, before he deflated and looked away. “Whatever, just bugger off.”

Ron walked off towards the dorm.

“No sense of humor,” Fred said, even as George was calling out, “We were only kidding.”

“I gotta…” Harry got up and followed after Ron.
Ron was on his bed when Harry got up to the dormitory and he was distinctly not looking at Harry.

“I’m sorry Ron,” Harry said. “I wasn’t… I didn’t want to keep it from you, I just thought… it was their secret, you know?”

“I wasn’t upset about that,” Ron said. “They’ve always just… I feel like I’m the butt of all their jokes, and they’re just so good at everything so it’s no wonder they never wanted me to be involved in anything but… if they aren't ignoring me it's only because they're taking the mickey, you know… I don’t know.”

“You’re good at things,” Harry said.

Ron just sighed.

“Are you alright?” Harry asked.

“That’s supposed to be my question for you,” Ron said.

“I don’t have a monopoly on feeling like shite,” Harry said.

“I’m alright,” Ron said. “I just… I’ve been feeling bad about Ginny.”

"Okay?" Harry said, very unsure of where that had come from.

"She spent the whole of last year being terrorized by that diary and I ignored her the whole time. Part of it, I guess, is that I know I sort of ignored Ginny the same the twins ignored me a lot of the time, mostly last year, especially last year. It makes me feel like crap when they're like that, so how'd it feel for her?"

“You’ve been spending a lot more time with her this year,” Harry said.

“Doesn’t change what happened,” Ron said. “Only Lockheart can forget that that ever happened.”

Harry scowled and had to push that away.

“None of that was your fault,” Harry said.

“Yeah, well, it would have been nice if I’d just paid her a bit of attention,” Ron said. “We used to be really close, you know. That just makes it worse, doesn't it. I’d sort of gotten this talking to from Bill when I was little about what it meant to be a big brother and I used to take that really seriously and then… I don’t know. For a while it was mostly a responsibility thing, then when it was just the two of us left at home we got real close. Then I went to Hogwarts for my first year and we drifted apart again, then second year I completely ignored her and she couldn't trust me to tell me something was wrong. I went from being her best friend to treating her like an annoyance and she almost died for it.”

"Yeah, well you were still the bloke who went down into the chamber of secrets to get his sister back,” Harry told Ron.

“I think you’ve gotten me mixed up with you,” Ron said.

“Nah mate, I don’t have a sister,” Harry said. “You didn’t have to fight a giant snake for it to be totally awesome that you actually went down there knowing it was there.”

“Mum said she was proud of me for that,” Ron said. “She also told me I’d be degnoming the backyard all summer but that only lasted a couple of days.”
“Yeah, see,” Harry said. “You’re an awesome big brother, I seem to recall you were helping her with some homework last week.”

“Does that make Hermione, like, our big sister, since she’s always helping us with ours?” Ron asked.

“Well she’s older than the both of us,” Harry said.

“I think we left Hermione alone with the twins,” Ron said.

“The twins’ll survive,” Harry said. “Maybe.”

Ron laughed.

“I’m serious,” Harry said. “She wants to know everything and those gloves are like a big mystery. You know how determined she can be.”

“Come on,” Ron said. “We’ve got too much to do.”

“Speak for yourself,” Harry said, grabbing his broom from his trunk. “I’ve got a playdate.”

Ron snickered.

“When was the last time we went flying together?” Harry asked.

“Ugh,” Ron said. “I think it was last year.”

“We should do something about that,” Harry said.

“Yeah,” Ron said. "I should take Ginny too sometime."

The two walked downstairs to the common room. The twins weren’t in sight and Harry told Ron and Hermione he’d see them after his lesson with Professor Lupin. As he was walking away, he heard Ron ask, “Hermione, are you like our big sister?” To which the only reply Harry heard was “What?!?”

Hermione was ten and a half months older than Harry actually, so he supposed she was actually old enough to be an older sister; if they were actually siblings of course. Harry had dreamed of siblings often enough, as well as parents.

“How was flying with Mr. Diggory?” Professor Snape asked as Harry entered the man’s office somewhat sweaty and sporting a grin.

“It was fun actually,” Harry said. “Cedric has this cool modified snitch, so, like, it has a narrower flight area and it’s a bit bigger but it’s faster. So it’s less about finding the snitch and more about chasing it.”

“Who won?” Professor Snape asked.
“Oh we were just playing for fun,” Harry said.

“Harry, two seekers went flying with a snitch, I find it hard to believe that there was no competition,” Professor Snape said.

“I totally won,” Harry said, and he really did feel good about that. “Most of the time.”

“Poor Mr. Diggory,” Professor Snape said. “How many times did he lose the snitch this weekend?”

“He’s actually really good,” Harry said. “Except he takes too much at face value. But he’s got some good skills there. You’re just upset he lost the match and Gryffindor’s still in the running for the cup.”

“I suppose from now on I shall be rooting for you to catch the snitch and for Slytherin to win the cup,” Professor Snape said.

Harry grinned.

“Do you still have that special lesson you mentioned or did you already have that?” Professor Snape asked.

“I’m actually going there right now after I grab a bite to eat,” Harry said.

“Ah,” Professor Snape said, pulling out his wand.

With a swish and a jab Harry was struck with a spell that left his skin tingling and it took him a moment to realize that it was some sort of cleaning spell. He scowled at the professor.

“A student shouldn’t show up to a class in such a state,” Professor Snape said.

“I didn’t really have time for a shower,” Harry said. “Actually I really should grab my potion and go.”

Professor Snape nodded and turned towards his stores. “Who are you having a lesson with?” he asked over his shoulder.

“Usually I have a self defense thing going with Benjamin Turner,” Harry said. “But I had to beg off so I could do a Patronus Charm lesson with Professor Lupin.” He hadn’t known if he would mention Professor Lupin to Professor Snape until the words were coming out of his mouth.

Professor Snape returned in silence, handing the vial to Harry.

“Do not let your guard down around that man,” Professor Snape said bluntly. “Not for a moment. Do not let propriety stop you from leaving if you feel that something is wrong.”

“I do know not to trust the defense professor, sir,” Harry said. “I’ll make sure to leave the door open if it will make you feel better.”

“This is serious Mr. Potter,” Professor Snape said.

“I know,” Harry said, brought up by the use of his surname. “I really do. I’ll be careful. I’ve been alone with him before.”

“Constantly on alert,” Professor Snape said firmly.

“I will be,” Harry said. “I’ve got to go, do you want to walk to the Great Hall with me?”
“I have a potion simmering next door,” Professor Snape said. “Be safe, and try to have more than just a bite to eat Harry.”

“I will,” Harry said, walking out the door.

He managed a few bites.

‘Really nice friend of my dad’s who hates Greyback,’ Harry reminded himself as he psyched himself up to go be alone with the defense professor. Harry had to take care of the dementor problem before the next quidditch match or Oliver was probably going to sub in another player. He needed to not have every horrible part of his childhood stirred up every time he got close to those things and he really needed to not pass out ever again. He needed to not feel nauseous at the thought of going into the classroom. Throwing up on Professor Lupin’s shoes would probably be bad. Harry walked through the classroom door with a smile on his face. He left the door wide open.

“Harry,” Professor Lupin greeted.

“Hey professor,” Harry said. “Good weekend?”

“Well, that match was exciting,” Professor Lupin said. “How has yours been.”

“Oh, you know, saw the match, went flying,” Harry said. “I’m sorry to have you working before your weekend’s even over.”

“Nonsense,” Professor Lupin said. “I seem to recall assigning you homework for the weekend so I suppose this is fair. Did you do the reading?”

“Yes,” Harry said. “Though nothing happened when I tried the spell again.”

“The spell’s actually hard to learn without a dementor present,” Professor Lupin said. “Of course it’s hard to actually cast in the presence of one as well but we’ll see how you do. Now, do remember that this is not a third year spell. So don’t get discouraged if you don’t get it right on the first go.”

“We’re not actually practicing with dementors though, are we?” Harry asked.

“No,” Professor Lupin said. “No, we’ll be using a boggart, though that will actually depend on if your suspicions are correct and it is indeed a dementor that you fear the most and not Greyback.”

Harry eyed a wardrobe that was in the corner of the room. It rattled a bit when Harry eyed it. So much for not passing out ever again or having memories dredged up.

“I think I’m more angry with Greyback now than I am scared,” Harry said. Though that certainly didn’t mean that he wasn’t scared. “Dementors are what I can’t fight no matter what right now. I might have a chance with Greyback… you know, just a small one.”

“Have you found yourself a happy memory?” Professor Lupin asked.
“Yes,” Harry replied. His first quidditch victory. The book had said that any happy memory could technically do, but that there were some characteristics that worked better than others. Euphoria was good, but Harry couldn’t really think of anything that matched the sort of happy memory that the book had said was the very best sort. The patronus charm was a protection, a shield. It made you safe, and that feeling, that memory where you felt safe and protected and secure and happy; Harry couldn’t think of anything like that. Harry felt safest at Hogwarts, but there was nothing that stuck out as especially joyous and secure. The truth was that he did feel safest at Hogwarts, but Hogwarts wasn’t really all that safe. He supposed he’d never felt especially safe. He had more than enough to fear, even in his home.

“Good,” Professor Lupin said. “Let’s see you try it now, just to make sure you have the form and incantation down.”


“Very good,” Professor Lupin said. “Perfect form. Ready to see what’s inside this wardrobe?”

Harry imagined that the door would open and Greyback would step out, only it really would be Greyback. That would be a good trap, wouldn’t it? Harry would be trying to banish a boggart while Greyback and Professor Lupin made their attack. Harry shook off that thought.

“Yes,” Harry said, definitely not ready.

“Alright,” Professor Lupin said. “Focus on that memory.”

Professor Lupin stood to the side of the door and used his wand to open the door. A dementor popped out. It stood well over six feet tall and Harry had time to get out the word ‘Expecto,’ before he heard what must have been a death rattle and suddenly he heard a woman screaming. She was pleading. Everything was so cold. There was cruel laughter and Harry wanted to cover his ears, he had to help, but there was no way he could. How could he help anyone, he only ever got people killed. The woman was dead, it was all his fault. She died and all Harry could do was hug himself as he couldn’t even fight the cold that seeped into his bones.

There was a green flash and then Harry felt warm. There was peace. Everything was alright. Everyone was going to be alright. Harry tried to hold on to that feeling, tried to wrap himself in it.

Shift

Aunt Petunia was going to be so mad, Harry knew, as he tried to get himself turned the right way around. The cold rain soaked him and made it even harder to see through his glasses. What if a stranger found him first? A car sped by on the rain slicked street and Harry got grimy from the wash of the tires. He was going to be lost forever he knew…

Shift

He was warm and dry and he knew that he was where he was supposed to be, he knew there would always be someone who would come looking for him. He…

Harry opened his eyes and stared at the ceiling.

“That didn’t go very well,” Harry said.

“I didn’t imagine your first try would,” Professor Lupin said.

Harry sat up and was helped to stand by Professor Lupin who handed Harry a block of chocolate.
Harry eyed it warily before looking at the professor.

“Ummm…” Harry said, fear rising up.

“Go ahead,” Professor Lupin said. “It really does help.”

“Right,” Harry said. “Umm.. so dementors make me really paranoid actually.” He placed the chocolate on the desk next to him. He blushed furiously. How awful it was to insult a man who was helping him.

“Do they really?” Professor Lupin asked, picking up the chocolate.

“Yeah,” Harry said. “You know, too many people’ve tried to kill me. Last time it was poison.”

“Well I can promise you I am actually terrible at potions,” Professor Lupin said. “So you needn’t worry about poisons from me. You may want to bring some of your own chocolate next time though.”

The professor took a bite of the chocolate.

“Oh,” Harry said. He went to his bag and grabbed a chocolate frog.

“I am sorry,” Harry said.

“Think nothing of it,” Professor Lupin said kindly.

“I’ve been wondering,” Harry said.

“If I’m going to poison you?” Professor Lupin asked.

Yes, Harry thought, even as he blushed deeper.

“About dementors,” Harry said. “Does more exposure make you, like, less susceptible to them?”

“Ah,” Professor Lupin said. “I understand that the guards who work at Azkaban do become a bit inured to them. The long term inmates of course go insane, though, for the most part.”

“Oh,” Harry said.

“I think over time you could become resistant to them,” Professor Lupin said. “But we might not want you to get that much exposure. Though I do expect you will become better able to stand your ground during these lessons.”

“I couldn’t even cast the spell,” Harry said.

“It takes practice,” Professor Lupin said. “Speaking of which, do tell me when you’re ready.”

“I suppose I’m ready now,” Harry said. "Oh wait... Cushions."

Harry took a moment to get some of the cushions used by the defense class so he wouldn't fall on the hard floor anymore.

They made several more attempts before Harry ran out of chocolate frogs and became very well acquainted with the classroom ceiling. The dementor’s effects didn’t last on him after it was put away, but it didn’t stop the memories from mucking around.
“So if dementors drive people crazy,” Harry said, and had to suppress a shudder at the thought of being exposed to one long enough for that to happen. “How come everyone who escaped’s been so good at not doing crazy stuff to get caught?… Besides Beckett anyway.”

“We don’t really know,” Professor Lupin said. “I perhaps should not have said crazy. Some truly do resemble how popular culture portrays insanity. Most however just stop living. They stop being aware of what’s around them and become locked inside of themselves. Even after they are released, it is often a while before they are anything resembling functional again, if they ever are. What has been reported is that a couple of years ago, a certain number of death eaters in Azkaban started to come out of their shells, so to speak. Certainly not to an extent where they were considered a threat, but it was never explained.”

There was a knock on the frame of the open doorway and Harry’s jaw dropped open as Professor Snape stepped in, a steaming goblet in his hand.

“I don’t keep your potion in the stores,” Professor Snape told Professor Lupin darkly, acting for all the world as if Harry were not there. “If you feel you need it before I bring it to you, you may always ask. Tampering with my wards can be very… dangerous.”

“I’m afraid you have me confused with one of your students, Severus, I hope your wards are not terribly lethal for the students who go looking for a wit sharpening solution or whatnot.” Professor Lupin said, and though he spoke in his usual pleasant tones Harry could tell that he didn’t appreciate what Professor Snape was implying. “I have full faith that you will make sure I have what I need.”

Professor Snape’s eyes narrowed as he handed Professor Lupin the potion.

“Do let me know if you need anymore,” Professor Snape said. “It would be such a pity if you did not have enough.”

“Of course,” Professor Lupin said. “I must thank you for brewing this for me.”

Professor Snape sneered. He actually sneered, and Harry hadn’t seen that in a while. Harry stared wide eyed at the two professors wondering if someone was about to be killed. Professor Snape finally looked at Harry and gave him a significant look before walking out. Harry let out a breath he hadn’t known he had been holding. His anxiety spiked when he saw Professor Lupin pick up the potion.

Harry didn’t really have to wonder what sort of potions Professor Snape had brewed for Voldemort. The man wouldn’t really poison Professor Lupin right in front of Harry though, would he? Maybe Professor Snape was a really over-protective parent. Harry had a strong urge to knock the goblet out of the professor’s hands.

“Professor Snape think’s you’re working with Greyback,” Harry told Professor Lupin abruptly. Reminded, really. Professor Lupin knew full well that Professor Snape suspected him. Why was he taking potions from him? The thing was smoking. That wasn’t steam. That was smoke!

“I didn’t know you knew about that,” Professor Lupin said.

Harry’s eyes bugged out as the man drank the potion. Professor Lupin grimaced as he drank the whole thing down, but he drank it. He set the goblet down and turned towards Harry, he smiled at the look on Harry’s face.

“You really do get paranoid around dementors don’t you?” Professor Lupin asked.
“Are you alright?” Harry asked, looking for some sign that Professor Lupin was about to keel over dead.

“Most definitely,” Professor Lupin said. “Professor Snape has been kind enough to provide me with a potion that truly does help me with a personal matter. I am intimately familiar with it, and I am somewhat confident I would recognize if it had been tampered with.”

“Right,” Harry said, feeling relieved. “I think we should call it a night professor.”

“That would probably be best,” Professor Lupin said. “Wednesday after your quidditch practice?”

“Yes,” Harry agreed, though he didn’t know if he could handle another evening like the one he had just had.

“Do practice the incantation and the wand movement,” Professor Lupin said. “Focusing is difficult around a dementor, you want to have it down to muscle memory.”

“I will professor,” Harry said.

“Have a good night Harry,” Professor Lupin said.

“You too professor,” Harry said. He left the room in a hurry. He tried not to think of what the dementors had stirred up. He tried not to think of his suspicions and his fears. It wasn’t much use what he tried to think of.

Harry couldn’t help thinking about what professor Snape had been talking about. He had accused Professor Lupin of trying to break into his stores, likely because someone had. He also couldn’t help but think of Professor Lupin’s own assertion that he was no good at potions himself and the chocolate he had wanted Harry to eat.

He shook that thought off. It had been a lie, but maybe dementors really did make him paranoid. The man had eaten the chocolate himself. Although he could have previously imbibed the antidote to whatever he had laced it with. Not that he had likely laced it with anything. Harry was making something out of nothing, he was sure. He was mostly sure.

The truth was that Harry had always been wary of Professor Lupin, and not just because he was the defense professor. Something about him seemed too good to be true; the old friend of his dad's who only ever gave him encouragement, who treated Harry as though he were old enough to have such serious conversations. Harry had been wary from the beginning even as he had craved the contact, even as he sought it out in Professor Snape.

Harry didn't know if he trusted Professor Lupin, he didn't know if he wanted to. There was too much possibility that he would be proven wrong. Yet he needed to learn the Patronus Charm, and Professor Lupin hadn't done anything to deserve being treated with suspicion.

Harry would have to rely on hope. Hope just didn't have a very good track record.

With the full moon rising in another hour, Severus was happy to have Harry safe with himself just then. While there was no evidence that Greyback could possibly enter the grounds, there was
nothing stoping certain others from trying to get Harry outside of the very many protections that surrounded him.

“So then I was wondering about what you said about the train ride at the beginning of the year,” Harry said, continuing in his description of the patronus lesson he had had the previous night. “You mentioned you couldn’t use the patronus charm until you’d started using that mental magic stuff and I was wondering if I should learn that.”

“Occlumency is not so easily learned,” Severus said. “Particularly not at thirteen.”

“But do you think I could learn?” Harry asked. “I mean, I’ve been doing well with the fourth year defense course work. I think I could handle it.”

“I am sure that you could,” Severus said. “Though you do have a phenomenally full schedule already.”

“I’ve got two months to learn the Patronus Charm,” Harry said. “So I’ve got a bit less than that to learn Occlumency. How long did it take you to learn?”

“A week,” Severus said. “But you would not want to learn the way I learned.”

“How was that?” Harry asked.

“It was a bit like learning to swim by being thrown off of the deep end and having no shore in sight,” Severus said. “It was a singular task that I could not quit until I got it right. Failure meant death. Now perhaps you can tell me why you believe you shall need to know the patronus charm in two months.”

“Well that’s when Gryffindor’s next match is,” Harry said. “Can’t lose another match because I fell off my broom, now can I?”

“The matter has already been taken care of,” Severus told Harry. “I presume you noticed the lack of dementors at Saturday’s match.”

“Well yeah,” Harry said. “But you can’t just assume it’ll never happen again. Gryffindor can’t afford another loss. We’ve got to get Oliver the cup; it’s his last year.”

“We took precautions during the previous match,” Severus said. “We will be taking precautions during all future matches for as long as the dementors are here. If you fall off your broom in January it will not be because of dementors.”

Harry was silent for a moment. “I still want to learn,” he said.

“You would be well off staying away from that man,” Severus said. Harry shrugged.

“Like, I know that you have some suspicions,” Harry said. “And I’m not, like, ready to trust him or anything, but... I do think he’s on the level, and I still really need to learn that spell. You’ll be happy to know that he offered me some chocolate and I didn’t eat any. I told him the dementor made me paranoid.”

“He exposed you to a dementor?!?” Severus asked, outraged.

“No,” Harry said quickly. “It was a boggart. My boggart’s a dementor. Which, by the way, is reason enough to want to learn the Patronus Charm, I think. And you’ll be happy to know he never leaves me exposed for long. Like, once I’m down he’s already getting rid of it.”
“Well what’s the point of you not eating the chocolate when he can do whatever he wants when you’re passed out?” Severus asked.

“Well I’d like to point out that I did pass out,” Harry said, and the boy was blushing furiously now. “And case in point, nothing happened.” As far as Harry knew anyway.

“Do not trust him,” Severus said. It galled him so much that Harry was so exposed to the man. Every year the headmaster insisted on hiring people who were a danger to Harry.

“I should go,” Harry said. “I’ve still got to finish some homework. Thanks for dinner, will you think about Occlumency?”

“We will work it in your schedule,” Severus said. “Somehow. Come, I will walk you to the tower.”

“What do you think’s going to happen on the way to the tower?” Harry asked.

“I’m sure I’d like not to find out,” Severus said. “Not on the night of the full moon.”

They walked out into the hall together and headed towards the stairs.

“Did you really think I was going to poison Lupin?” Severus asked.

Harry’s jaw dropped open and he flushed. “What made you think that?” Harry asked.

“The way you looked at that goblet like I was about to throw a poisonous snake at his face rather gave it away,” Severus said.

“Did you mean to do that?” Harry asked. “Cause you rather seemed to be giving off the vibe of a man set on killing someone. And then there’s that whole smoking goblet thing and just hours before you’d practically told me he was going to deliver me to Greyback. Did you have to deliver it when I was there?”

“It is optimal for the potion to be taken at certain times,” Severus said. “And I certainly wasn’t going to be cordial when he can’t keep his paws out of my stores.”

“Why are you so sure it was him?” Harry asked. “It could have been anyone.”

“The attempt was made through a secret passage that was open while we were students here,” Severus said. “I sealed it long ago, but the only person who would attempt such a thing would be one who had been here when it was open. There were a couple of other attempts earlier this month through other avenues.”

Harry was silent for a while.

 Was anything taken?” Harry asked.

“My wards were not breached,” Severus said smugly.

“So what’s with the potion anyway?” Harry asked.

“Apparently it is none of your concern,” Severus said.

Harry gave him a questioning look but Severus did not elaborate.

“Please have faith that I would not kill one of your professors right in front of you,” Severus said. “Or at least, not without good reason.”
“That makes me feel so much better,” Harry said.

Before long they arrived at Gryffindor Tower and they parted before they reached the portrait of the Fat Lady.

“Can I trust that you will not leave the tower before the setting of the moon?” Severus asked.

“I’m not suicidal,” Harry said.

“I’ve wondered in the past,” Severus said.

Harry swallowed and nodded. “I’ll stay in the tower.”

“Excellent,” Severus said. “Have a good night.”

“You too, Professor,” Harry said.

Harry, Ron and Hermione worked for a while after Harry had gotten back to the tower. Harry was finally caught up on homework and Hermione was plowing on with her projects and Ron was doing some odd experiment where a chess piece would move right or left depending on where Ron placed another piece before it. It was the first time Harry had felt caught up in a while and he had the whole rest of the week ahead of him.

Harry and Ron wound up going up to the dormitory at a decent hour that night and when they did, Ron found a surprise waiting for him.

“Butterbeer!” he exclaimed.

Harry perked up at the excitement in his voice.

“What’s this,” Seamus asked. The other boys were already getting ready for bed and they all looked Ron’s way as the boy held up six bottles of butterbeer that seemed to have been left on his bed.

Harry’s excitement died down as suspicion rose up.

“Who left you butterbeer?” Harry asked.

Ron looked at a scrap of parchment left with the bottles.

“Ugh,” Ron said. “The twins left it. Probably got a hex on them.”

“What’s it say?” Dean asked.

“Says they’re sorry for being jerks,” Ron said.

“I’ll try a bottle,” Dean said.

“You’re crazy,” Seamus told him.

“I didn’t hear about the stuff till after I came back from Hogsmeade,” Dean said. “I want to try. There’s a bunch of prefects downstairs, I don’t mind if my eyebrows grow past my hips if the stuff
“still tastes good.”

“Your funeral,” Ron said, handing the boy a bottle.

They all waited with bated breaths as Dean opened one up and took a drink.

“This stuff’s great,” Dean said.

“Ron, your brother’s are saints,” Seamus said when nothing seemed to happen to Dean.

“I guess stranger things have happened,” Ron said. “All right, butterbeer all around, though I’m keeping the extra bottle.”

Harry was skeptical as everyone started drinking, but he hadn’t had a chance to try any at the party the twins had thrown and he was really curious. It had a creamy vanilla taste and there were spices that reminded Harry of the holidays and he felt warm inside as the beverage settled in his stomach. Harry was glad that the twins were trying to be nice to Ron.

Suddenly everything felt good. He’d been working so hard and now he was ready to get a good night’s sleep. He couldn’t wait to get into bed and close his eyes. Dean apparently couldn’t wait to get to bed either, he was lying down on the ground, Harry noticed idly. Soon, Seamus and Neville joined him and Harry thought it was funny. Everyone just lay down on the floor and fell asleep. Ron managed to slump over on his bed. Harry smiled. Ron would be much more comfortable there. Harry’s own bed was just too far away. The floor looked really nice actually. Harry lay down and closed his eyes.

Chapter End Notes

A/N: I was really excited to write this chapter, got it done in record time. I’ve already started writing the next one too. althor42 has just posted an update to Horcrux within on ff.net. Story recommendations - Lighting Candles by PitViperOfDoom on AO3... death is not the end for Tadashi... BH6/RoTG crossover.
Deceptions

Chapter Notes

Tried to get this back to you in a decent amount of time since last one ended on a cliff hanger of sorts. One of these days I should actually end a chapter where someone’s literally hanging off of a cliff.

Disclaimer: If I owned Harry Potter, I would be traveling the world right now. Sadly I am not. All characters belong to JK Rowling, except for Sam.

See the end of the chapter for more notes

Deceptions

Harry was swaying. It felt nice. He was swaying and it was fun, but he couldn’t sleep and sleep was the best. Back and forth, back and forth he swayed.

Harry opened his eyes. It was difficult. He was moving somewhere but he didn’t know where. Did it matter? It took him a while to realize that he was pretty uncomfortable. He thought that perhaps he had always been uncomfortable but that he hadn’t noticed. It did seem that he was in an uncomfortable position. Perhaps he had always been uncomfortable, but that was alright. It didn’t really matter. He would be able to sleep better if he wasn’t upside down though. He watched his arms sway back and forth with the rest of him as the corridors passed him by. Everything had an odd glimmer to it.

Gradually though, Harry started to wonder why. Why wasn’t he in bed? That would be such a good place for him. Why was he swaying? He rather thought that he was being carried. It was an odd feeling. He couldn’t remember ever being carried. Where was he going? He wanted to sleep, but he couldn’t, and something wasn’t right. Harry recognized the glimmer that overcast everything, it was what the world looked like from inside his invisibility cloak. Why was he wearing his cloak? Why was he still in his robes? How could he sleep in his robes and his shoes?

Harry thought about falling asleep on the floor; he remembered the butterbeer. He passed a window and saw the full moon halfway risen past the mountains in the distance. Clarity crashed into him like a bludger. He was being kidnapped. Adrenaline overrode the desire to sleep as panic set in. He was being kidnapped, thrown over Greyback’s shoulder like a sack of potatoes and soon he would be with a werewolf under the light of a full moon.

Harry opened his mouth to yell but no sound wanted to come out. Harry bucked and twisted and suddenly he was falling. He landed roughly on the floor. He tried to get up but he was bundled up in his dad's cloak.

“No,” Harry heard a panicked voice above him say. “Damn.”

Harry looked up and saw a wand being drawn with a shaky hand. Everything Harry had learned from Benjamin seemed beyond him in that moment. There was just one thing that came to mind. Harry managed to stand a bit, stumbling forward and pulling the cloak away from himself. Harry thought about falling through the floor, and the patches on the toes of his shoes opened up the floor underneath him.
Harry fell gracelessly, his arms coming up just barely in time to protect his head, though his nose still broke. He heard something snap and something pop as he landed on a granite staircase. The pain was both excruciating and far away. He thought he might have fallen more than one floor. Looking up he saw that he was in the high vaulted entryway of the castle. One arm didn’t want to move, and the other wasn’t working right but he managed to get up, wincing as certain ribs seemed to pierce him where they had landed on the corner of a step. Harry heard the clamoring of feet and looked to the stairs from the floor above. He tried to run, but that was beyond him at the moment, he barely managed to get down the rest of the stairs without collapsing. He was right over the dungeons.

Harry went through the floor again and managed to land on his feet this time, but he still crumpled to the floor, his right knee giving out. He managed to get up again and lurched forward using his only functional arm for support on the wall. His wand arm hung limp against his side and he left his wand in his pocket where it had remained during the altercation. Harry paused and threw the invisibility cloak over his head, just in case, before he started moving again. With one arm useless, and the other keeping him upright, Harry let the blood flow freely from his nose. He kept moving even as panic receded and pain flared all over. As the rush of adrenaline wore off, the desire to sleep returned, and even through the sharp stabs of pain that came with movement, Harry had to focus to keep himself alert.

Harry reached his father’s quarters and started pounding on the door, each beat causing jolt’s of pain in his forearm. It felt like forever before the door was opened. There was a wand in his face and Harry fell backwards onto his bottom with a yelp, jolts of pain shooting up the arm that reached back to catch himself and his torso on his right side felt like he was being stabbed. He awkwardly pulled the invisibility cloak off from over his head.

Professor Snape looked horrified. “Are you alright? Of course you’re not, get in.”

Harry struggled to get up and soon found himself being floated through the air and was promptly deposited on Professor Snape’s couch. Harry scrambled down to sit on the floor, he was a right mess. Harry started pinching his nose to stop the blood that was still flowing from his nose. It was no wonder it hadn’t stopped with his heart still racing as it was, pounding in his ears.

“Greyback?” Professor Snape asked.

“No,” Harry said in a nasally voice. “I don’t know who. I woke up being carried through the halls.”

“Expecto Patronum,” Professor Snape said to Harry’s utter confusion. Nothing happened. Professor Snape took a deep breath and his concerned face blanked before he tried again.

“Expecto Patronum,” Professor Snape said confidently. A silvery doe burst forth and lit up the room. “There was an attempt to abduct Harry, he is safe with me.”

The patronus seemed to shift and then it wasn’t there. Professor Snape started casting and Harry saw the front door disappear to be replaced with nothing but stone wall. The same thing happened to the fireplace. When the professor was done another silvery patronus appeared in the professor’s living room, this time it was a phoenix.

“The castle and the grounds are being swept, stay where you are for now,” the headmaster’s voice said, coming from the patronus, to Harry’s surprise.

Professor Snape turned towards Harry. “Where are you hurt?” he asked.

Everywhere, Harry thought. He had a nasty headache, his chest hurt all over and on his lower left
side particularly, and in spite of the fact that his heart was still beating furiously and everything was flaring with jolt’s of pain when he moved, he still felt incredibly sleepy.

“Left arm’s dislocated,” Harry said drowsily. “Right one’s broken ’n so’s my nose I think. Also something’s wrong with my left knee.” He thought some ribs were definitely cracked, but that could wait for everything else. Experience had taught him that those would heal on their own, but he would rather avoid that this go around.

Professor Snape tapped Harry’s right arm and it was promptly splinted against his chest. His left leg was soon similarly immobilized. The professor tapped his wand on Harry’s nose a couple of times, but the blood still flowed freely. Harry wasn’t sure at this point if he felt drowsy because he’d been drugged or because of the blood loss. The headache was getting worse. The professor left for a moment and came back with a bottle of dittany and some swabs. The swabs were dipped in the dittany and then shoved unceremoniously up Harry’s nose. The bleeding stopped. The professor eyed Harry’s shoulder.

“I c’n pop it back into place,” Harry said. “I’ve done’t before.”

“Let’s leave that for Madame Pomfrey,” Professor Snape said. Harry’s arm was soon bound to his side, and now both of his arms were for the most part immobilized.

“That feels better,” Harry said, though now he was noticing just how nauseous he was feeling.

“Why are you so drowsy?” Professor Snape asked. “You shouldn’t even be able to think of sleep at a time like this.”

“Oh yeah,” Harry said. “I was drugged.”

“You were drugged and you didn’t say anything?” Professor Snape’s voice thundered in his throbbing head.

“Everything hurt real bad and it was wearing off already,” Harry said petulantly. His arms wanted to curl over his stomach which was really roiling but they were stuck in place where they were.

“That’s why I woke up during my kidnapping.”

“How was it administered?” Professor Snape asked.

“Butterbeer,” Harry said, sleepily, though now he realized he was breathing heavily again, the nausea was intensifying. Now that everything was wrapped up and he was safe, he really thought he should be able to calm his heart rate but it only seemed to be beating faster, his brain throbbed with each beat, right behind his forehead. “It was really good too. Now I really don’t feel good though.”

“What’s wrong exactly,” Professor Snape demanded.

Harry thought. “Everything,” was all he could manage before he started vomiting. He had enough time to be horrified that there was blood in it and that it was now all over the professor’s floor before he passed out.

Harry woke up in the hospital wing. It took him a moment to take stock and remember the night
before. He was sore all over, but he felt loads better than he had earlier. He hoped that this would be the last time he would be waking up in the infirmary, but he had trouble taking that thought seriously.

“Ah,” Madame Pomfrey said from across the room as Harry started to move around. She sounded cross. “So you’re awake are you?”

“Yeah,” Harry said, somewhat confused. She normally wasn’t happy when student’s got hurt but she normally wasn’t angry with them for it.

“Hemophilia?” Madame Pomfrey said, stalking towards Harry whose eyes widened. “You decided not to tell me you have hemophilia? While the school’s surrounded by dementors and you’re being stalked by a mad man, you thought to keep that to yourself?”

“I had a potion,” Harry said defensively, wondering how on earth she had found out. He’d just been kidnapped and bloodied all over, didn’t he get a break? “I had it under control.”

“You very nearly died last night,” Madame Pomfrey said.

“But I had the potion,” Harry said again. Had he really almost died again the night before? Getting kidnapped was bad enough.

“And did Professor Snape give you any instructions when you got that potion?” Madame Pomfrey asked, still pressing the issue.

“Um,” Harry said, trying to think back. He really didn’t want to deal with this right then. “Don’t take anything with taproot or doxy wings while I’m on it.”

“Exactly,” Madame Pomfrey said.

“It’s not like I tried to get poisoned,” Harry pointed out. He’d just wanted to have some butterbeer, and then some creep had hauled his butt out of his dorm room so he could be a werewolf’s midnight snack.

“That is entirely besides the point,” Madame Pomfrey said.

Harry still wasn’t sure what the point was as she started poking and prodding him with her wand. He suffered it in silence until she was done.

“Are the guys in my dorm okay?” Harry asked. “They were drugged too.”

“They were fine,” Madame Pomfrey said. “They slept it off; they don't have hemophilia.”

That was good. It hadn’t even occurred to Harry to feel worried for them last night, and he felt rotten for it. Anything at all could have happened when that man had gone into their dorm to take him. At least it hadn’t been Greyback.

“What did you even do?” Madame Pomfrey asked. “None of your injuries made sense.”

“I sort of went the quick way down a couple of flights of stairs,” Harry said, not thinking that she would appreciate the part where his brilliant escape plan had been to fall through the floor over who knew what.

“Well you were very lucky,” Madame Pomfrey said. “One of these days that fool neck of yours is going to snap if you're not careful.”
“I didn’t have time to be careful,” Harry said. “I was too busy making sure I didn’t get eaten by a werewolf.”

“Were you too busy to tell me you have hemophilia?” Madame Pomfrey asked. “Apparently you’ve known since the summer, never mind the ridiculous amount of time you’ve spent in here this year. I don’t know what your mother was thinking, but your father should have known to take the illness more seriously.”

Harry had to wonder then just how much Professor Snape had told her. He decided that it would be safest to just say, “I thought I had it under control.”

“Well when it comes to healing, perhaps you can defer to my judgement on the matter,” Madame Pomfrey said.

Harry was pretty sure that literally nothing would have changed the night before if Madame Pomfrey had been in the know, but since the matron controlled when he would see anything but the four walls of the hospital wing again, Harry said. “Sure.”

“Are you hungry?” Madame Pomfrey asked.

Harry wasn’t sure if this was a test question or not, but the answer was yes either way. He was still tired and sore all over, but was acutely aware that he was starving, even though food didn’t really appeal to him at the moment. Harry supposed that he had to replace whatever he had lost the night before, whether he wanted to eat or not.

Madame Pomfrey brought him a tray of lunch and Harry thought that she agreed with his assessment because there was a lot of protein on the tray. She admonished him to drink the potion that came with it before he ate anything and then left to her office to do whatever it was she did when no one needed her attention. She hadn’t told him when he would be getting out of the infirmary, and that wasn’t a good sign.

Left alone, Harry’s thoughts gravitated to the events of the night before. The befuddled feeling of having been drugged, the panic, the fall. He remembered a sense of surety, that getting to Professor Snape had meant safety. He thought about showing up on the man’s doorstep. He’d been a terrible mess the night before. Professor Snape was always taking care of him, always cleaning up Harry’s messes. Harry was dismayed that he was once again burdening the man with his problems. The man hadn’t signed up for this. What was he going to do when he realized that Harry was just one big complicated mess?

Harry chewed on those thoughts for a while as he ate. He chased them away after a time. He would just have to try harder to be the sort of person Professor Snape would want in his life. It would be easier though if he had an inkling of what that was.

Harry checked his watch. Classes should have just been let out for lunch. He didn’t have long to wait before Ron and Hermione came in.

“Hey,” Harry said around a piece of roast beef.

“Merlin,” Ron said. “They should just give you your own bed in here.”

“Yeah,” Harry said awkwardly. “I guess I could at least leave a few books down here. It can get rather boring.”

“Well I brought you some homework,” Hermione said. “And some class notes. Are you alright?”
“Yeah,” Harry said. “You know Madame Pomfrey. I’m good as new. Who knows when I’ll get out of here though.”

“Would you tell us if you weren’t alright though?” Hermione asked.

“Oh come off it,” Ron said. “You know the old matron would be hovering if he weren’t.”

“So what happened with you?” Harry asked.

“McGonagall woke the tower all up at like, two o’clock last night,” Ron said. “Except the rest of the guys and me couldn’t keep our eyes open. They checked us over and let us go back to bed after we told them about the butterbeer. Slept through the alarm this morning too. The twins are never going to let me live this down.”

“Yeah, well we all screwed up together on this one,” Harry said.

“Yeah but you’re the only one who’s stuck in here,” Ron said. “So what happened to you?”

“Woke up being carried over someone’s shoulder,” Harry said. “I got him to drop me and then I used the twins’ invention to go through the floor a couple of times. That’s why I’m here for the most part; rough landing. Also, because whatever was in that potion interfered with the potion Professor Snape gave me for my blood.”

“That’s rough mate,” Ron said.

“Yeah,” Harry said. “I’m glad you’re okay though. You shouldn’t have gotten drugged ‘cause of me.”

“Don’t worry about it,” Ron said. “So, was it Greyback?”

Harry shook his head. “I don’t know who it was, but they definitely didn’t act like Greyback.”

“How did they even get into the tower?” Hermione asked.

“That’s a good question,” Ron said. “Maybe they disillusioned themselves and listened by the portrait for the password.”

“I think you dozed off when Professor McGonagall was talking to the Fat Lady,” Hermione said. “She said no one had entered since curfew, and she only saw one person leave before Professor McGonagall came to wake everyone up. She said she thought it could have been an older student, but they had been wearing the cowl up on their cloak.”

“That’s right,” Harry said. “I woke up wrapped up in my invisibility cloak. Whoever it was didn’t want to be seen carrying me through the hall.”

“You don’t think it was an older student do you?” Ron asked. “Like what if Greyback’s got someone on the inside?”

“Why would an upper year Gryffindor work for Greyback?” Hermione asked.

“Who knows,” Ron said. “Maybe it’s a Slytherin, it’s not like it’s impossible to get into another house’s dorms. Oh, what about that curse, the Imperius Curse. Maybe he bewitched someone.”

“Yeah,” Harry said. “But I don’t think it was a student.”
“Are you sure?” Ron asked. “Did you get a good look at them?”

Harry shook his head. “Not really, I just got the impression of an older man. His voice was weird. He looked beat up too, like bruises and scratches.”

A throat was cleared from the entrance of the infirmary. The three of them turned their heads and Harry saw that it was Professor Snape looking at the three of them from the doorway.

“We should really get some lunch,” Hermione said, nudging Ron.

“Oh, yeah,” Ron said. “Get out of here soon, mate.”

“I’m glad you’re alright,” Hermione said.

“Thanks,” Harry said.

Both Ron and Hermione made a quick exit, leaving Harry alone with Professor Snape.

“Hey,” Harry said. “Um, sorry about last night. I’d sort of wound up in the dungeons and then I didn’t know where else to go and… sorry about the mess, I can clean it up, really, as soon as Madame Pomfrey lets me out of here. I can… I can clean that up… um… sorry.”

“What?” Professor Snape asked, the word drawn out.

“Um,” Harry said. “The mess, I sort of recall throwing up and bleeding all over your sitting room last night. I’m really sorry.”

“I really don’t understand you sometimes,” Professor Snape said.

“Sorry?” Harry said.

“All the time really,” Professor Snape said with a sigh. “You do realize that I am a fully qualified and capable wizard. My sitting room is not currently in need of cleaning.”

“Right,” Harry said. “So thanks then, for saving my life again.”

“I nearly killed you last night,” Professor Snape said. “I was more worried about your physical injuries than your other symptoms, and it took far too long to get you to the infirmary after I had sealed my quarters. The headmaster had to summon his phoenix to get you here, and I didn’t realize that you had been given something that negated the Sang Olaes potion until you had lost a good deal of blood.”

“None of that was your fault,” Harry said.

Professor Snape shook his head.

“What happened last night?” Professor Snape asked.

“Um,” Harry said. “Got drugged, passed out, woke up being carried through the castle, fell a couple of landings to get away, took a short cut to the dungeons and passed out again in your sitting room.”

“You deliberately fell a couple of landings?” Professor Snape asked.

“Well I thought it would only be one,” Harry said. “I didn’t really know where I was in the castle at the time; I was pretty out of it. I just figured that it would be the best way to put a lot of distance
between us.”

“Let’s not do that again,” Professor Snape said.

“Sure,” Harry said. “So what made me so sick like that? Was it just a bad interaction with the potions?”

“That did not help,” Professor Snape said. “But you broke a rib that punctured your stomach and you had sub-cranial bleed as well as a myriad of other issues, but those two were competing to see which one would kill you first.”

“Oh,” Harry said. “So do you know what I was poisoned with?”

“A rather simple sleeping solution and a Befuddlement Brew,” Professor Snape said. “The sleeping solution was not strong enough to keep you asleep while being kidnapped so the Befuddlement Brew was used to cause you to disregard things that would have otherwise woken you up. The bot fly larvae in the Sang Olaes potion reacted with the taproot in the Befuddlement Brew eventually negating both potions.”

“Would those potions be easy to make?” Harry asked. Thinking of someone who was self professed to be lousy with potions.

“Relatively speaking, yes,” Professor Snape said. “In fact all of the ingredients could have been found in the Forbidden Forest. There are numerous potions that would have worked far better, but perhaps the person responsible had limited means.”

“We were wondering if it was someone from the castle,” Harry said.

“Did you recognize them at all?” Professor Snape asked.

“No,” Harry said, shaking his head. “I really didn’t get a good look, but no, I’m pretty sure I would have recognized certain people, also I didn’t recognize the voice at all.”

“Appearances and voices can be changed with magic,” Professor Snape said.

Harry shrugged. “I thought of that too,” he said. “But the thing that let me know that it wasn’t Greyback was the weird mannerisms. Fumbling with their wand, stunted speech. I don’t know. It was an adult, I’m pretty sure, but it didn’t seem like any adult in the castle. They had all sorts of little injuries I think. Like bruises. It’s all fuzzy in my mind.”

Though Harry had to wonder just who would have known about his invisibility cloak. That was a short list of people. Did Professor Lupin know about the cloak that Harry had inherited from his dad?

“It should have been impossible for anyone, who did not belong, to enter the castle with malice in their mind,” Professor Snape said. “Even if they somehow accessed the grounds.”

Harry shrugged.

“How are you?” Professor Snape asked.

“I’m alright,” Harry said. “Really, I’ll probably get out of here soon if I can get back on Madame Pomfrey’s good side. Um… What did you tell her last night, by the way?” He tried to be nonchalant about the question, but his downcast eyes probably gave him away.
“After I realized why you were bleeding so much internally, I told her that you had hemophilia and that you had been poisoned with a potion that had negated the Sang Olaes potion you were on,” Professor Snape said. “I mentioned the letter you had received and allowed her to draw her own conclusions from that. What they are, I could not say. However, I did think that while we are getting to know one another that there was no need to involve others.”

“Right,” Harry said. “So…”

“Professor Snape,” Madame Pomfrey said from the doorway to her office. “Here to check on my stores again?”

“Just ensuring our patient had no other adverse reactions to the potions he imbibed last night,” Professor Snape said.

“My patient is doing well,” Madame Pomfrey said. “And you should remember in the future that while you are our potions master, I am the healer. The next time a student has a serious medical condition I do not care if you have just the potion to fix it, I need to be aware of it.”

“Of course. I will make sure of it,” Professor Snape said. “Well, Mr. Potter seems to be in order.”

Without any further preamble, Professor Snape left the hospital wing.

“Were you finished with that dear?” Madame Pomfrey asked. “You haven’t finished half of it.”

“No, I’m still hungry,” Harry said. She wouldn’t think him well if he didn’t have an appetite. Harry ate mechanically while he pondered everything that had happened over the last few days. He had been telling the truth when he had said that the man who had tried to kidnap him had borne no resemblance to anyone Harry had ever encountered in the castle, but the matter at hand was that Professor Lupin was still the prime suspect. Perhaps because he was the only suspect. Yet Harry had never felt so conflicted about mistrusting someone before.

There was a part of Harry that seemed to be telling him that he could trust Professor Lupin. A part of himself that was normally silent. The rest of him was screaming at him to stay away from him, and Harry had usually done alright by that instinct. He had ignored it to his own peril before. Yet mistrusting Professor Lupin seemed like the thing that he was supposed to do but not the right thing to do. Mistrusting his own instincts left him feeling incredibly anxious.

Harry occupied himself for a while with school work, his thought regularly returning to Professor Lupin and to Greyback and to the people in his past who he had been right not to trust, and those he shouldn’t have. Harry was brought out of his reverie by the ringing of the bell. Looking at the clock, Harry saw that the last class of the day would be starting soon. He turned back to his course work.

Harry looked up briefly when the door opened a moment later, but it was only a younger student coming in. He turned back to his work.

“Chocolate frog?” Harry heard from his side.

“What, oh, um, Sam,” Harry said, looking over. “Um, hello.”

“Hi,” Sam said, holding out the afore mentioned chocolate frog.

“Thanks,” Harry said, taking it, but leaving it on the nightstand. “You haven’t been hexed again have you?”
“Uh uh,” Sam said. “I’m visiting. Cause you’re sick.”

“Oh,” Harry said, not sure what to do with that. “I’m already better, just resting. I see your brother came through on those chocolate frogs.”

“Yeah,” Sam said. “He can be nice sometimes. But anyway, I just wanted to tell you that it’s okay if you’re a werewolf now. Hufflepuff won’t be mean to you for it.”

“What?” Harry asked.

“Some people were saying that Greyback got you last night and that’s why you’re in the hospital wing.” Sam explained. “One of the prefects said that that’s not a reason to be mean to someone though.”

The five minute bell rang.

“Oh,” Sam exclaimed. “I’ve got to go. Hope you’re better soon.”

“Still not a werewolf,” Harry called after Sam.

“That’s okay too,” Sam called back on the way out the door.

Harry suddenly wasn’t eager to get out of the infirmary. Not if the school was once more going to be convinced that Harry was a werewolf. He wondered why Ron and Hermione hadn’t said anything when they had visited.

“What’s all this noise,” Madame Pomfrey asked from her office.

“The school may think I’m a werewolf again,” Harry said, trying to keep the dread out of his voice.

“It’s always something,” Madame Pomfrey sighed and returned to her office. She came back out a moment later and placed an item on Harry’s nightstand, next to the chocolate frog that Harry wasn’t eating.

“What’s that?” Harry asked.

“A bezoar,” Madame Pomfrey said. “Should you ever find yourself poisoned again.”

She left him to his homework. He didn’t get much done.

Harry recognized the Auror who came to interview him later in the afternoon. She had been one of the Auror’s who had talked to him after Greyback had tried to grab him in the alley. He couldn’t remember her name and she didn’t reintroduce herself. He didn’t have anything to add to what he had already told Professor Snape. Once more he left out mention of the gloves.

Madame Pomfrey released him right before dinner with instructions to take it easy.

“Would you tell me if he had been bitten though?” Draco asked Severus.

“Did you happen to notice the time when the school went on lock down last night Mr. Malfoy?” Severus asked.
“No,” Draco said.

“Well you can certainly ask around,” Severus said. “If you don’t trust me to tell you the truth. You can also figure out precisely when the moon finished rising over the mountains in the East last night. If you would like to take my word for it however I can certainly tell you that Mr. Potter escaped his would be kidnapper a full fifteen minutes before any werewolf would have turned.”

“Oh,” Draco said.

“Try not to sound too disappointed about that,” Severus said, keeping any true reproach out of his voice. “At least in public.”

“Well it would make things easier,” Draco said.

“It would make precisely nothing easier,” Severus said. “I assure you. His loss is not your gain. You are separate people who have separate roles in life. Potter turning into a werewolf would not make your success any easier. You certainly do not need those old rumors starting up again, lest people remember who started them the first run around.”

“I should probably point out the timing stuff to people spreading those rumors,” Draco said.

“That would certainly be beneficial to your efforts,” Severus said. “A leader is someone that people can rely on to clear up doubt.”

“Don’t think I don’t know that wasn’t what you were angling for though,” Draco said.

“I was wondering when you would pick up on that,” Severus said.


“A great show of support for another house,” Severus said. “It was very much noticed by Hufflepuff, I can assure you, you did a good job.”

“It wasn’t my idea though, was it?” Draco asked. “You were feeding it to me.”

“It was certainly your idea,” Severus said. “I merely laid out the conditions for you to have the idea. The same with a number of other matters. It was you who planned out and executed those ideas. Your leadership convinced your housemates to show support for another house during a quidditch game.”

“Well you were rather transparent this time,” Draco said.

“Having taught you to plant ideas in the minds of others, I did wish to see how transparent I could be before you caught me out,” Severus said. “You may certainly trust people should you like, but you should always ask yourself where your ideas have come from. Not that you should reject an idea just because it was planted by someone else. Not as long as you understand what their angle is.”

“So what’s yours?” Draco asked.

“Seeing a day when the name Slytherin is not synonymous with the word ‘evil,’” Severus said. “Seeing someone competent leading our people. An end to the idiocy that is our ministry.”

“But why do you care?” Draco asked. “There’s nothing in it for you.”

“Slytherin is the house of the ambitious,” Severus said. “How many of your classmates would you
say have ambitions?"

“Well all of them, don’t they?” Draco said.

“Let us say that there is a difference between being ambitious and having an ambition,” Severus said. “How many of your classmates aspire to do nothing more than fill the shoes of their parents, and how many dream of accomplishments that their parents never dreamed of. All of your classmates may aspire to be powerful wealthy wizards, but I know of few of them who have any sort of goals. I dreamed once of being a powerful wizard who helped to save the wizarding world. I have recently decided that I should like to fulfill that one way or another.”

“But you’re still not really getting anything out of it,” Draco said.

“I do not need money or power to get something out of accomplishment,” Severus said. “Having both already, that is a lesson you would do well to learn.”

“If you say so, professor,” Draco said.

“I do,” Severus said. “Enough of this. Dinner awaits you in the great hall.”

Draco pulled out his watch.

“It’s almost half way through you mean,” Draco said, heading for the door. “See you in class on Thursday Professor.”

“Good night,” Professor Snape said.

Severus looked at his own watch. He wished he had an excuse to drop by the hospital wing. He eyed the books on his desk that he had covered up when Draco had entered. He was getting out of his depth with the boy. There were complex human skills that were essential to the boy's development that Severus had never properly developed himself. The private library left for the Head of Slytherin house had perhaps some of the most developed materials on such subjects that one could find in the wizarding world, but the muggle world had done far more extensive research on the matter and Severus had found himself supplementing the shelves with their tomes. What would Salazar think of that?

Moments after Draco left, there was a brisk knock on his office door before the door was thrust open and in stormed McGonagall.

“Severus Snape, I demand to know what you have been doing with my student,” McGonagall said coldly, without greeting or preamble.

“Mr. Malfoy is my student,” Severus said. “Though if you want him for Gryffindor you might wish to take the matter up with his father.”

“Not Mr. Malfoy,” McGonagall said tersely. “Though perhaps I should ask after him as well. It is Mr. Potter you must answer for. What have you been doing with him?”

“Nothing that requires your concern, I can assure you,” Severus said.

“How did Mr. Potter know where your personal quarters were last night?” McGonagall asked. “Both yourself and Mr. Potter have been missing meals in the Great Hall at the same time, while the house elves tell me they have been sending dinners for two to your quarters. Do not think that I have not noticed how much time you have him spending with you outside of class.”
That brought Severus up short. This was not a conversation he had planned on having.

“The headmaster can assure you that nothing untoward is going on,” Severus said.

“Suffice it to say that I do not trust the Headmaster’s judgement where Mr. Potter is concerned,” McGonagall said. “I certainly have had my doubts where you were concerned. Though I had almost come to forget them.”

“This really is none of your concern,” Severus said coldly.

“I am his head of house, and you report to me. This is precisely my concern and I am not leaving here until I have an explanation,” McGonagall said.

“You’ve known me the vast majority of my own life,” Severus said. “Is this truly the first conclusion you have jumped to?”

“It is not for me to ask myself if you have the proclivity for such a thing,” McGonagall said. “It is for me to protect my student. You have always been cruel to him, perhaps I should wonder where such cruelty would lead you.”

The accusation brought him up short. He could not deny his cruelty.

“I have come to realize that he is not James Potter,” Severus said. “I have no ill will towards Harry.”

“Do you realize that he is not a substitution for Lily either,” McGonagall asked and Severus’s lip curled.

“How dare you?” Severus asked.

“I dare because I must,” McGonagall said. “Why have you been taking dinners with Mr. Potter in your quarters?”

“Because he is my son,” Severus said. “He is my son and I would like to get to know him better. Dinner is about the only time we have to hold a conversation.”

“I beg your pardon?” McGonagall said in disbelief before she shook her head. “No actually, I beg nothing of you. Explain yourself at once.”

“James Potter used an adoption charm, that’s why Harry looks like him,” Severus said tersely. “I’ve confirmed it all with a heredity potion.”

“Lily would never,” McGonagall said. “How dare you even suggest…”

“We were fifteen,” Severus said. “And I didn’t know. She kept it a secret. Amniostasis Temporalus; a potion that will put a pregnancy on hold indefinitely. Lily left a letter for Harry’s thirteenth birthday explaining everything.”

“Ridiculous,” McGonagall proclaimed.

“Why professor, have you ever known me to lie ridiculously?” Severus asked.

“It will not be difficult for me to determine if you are telling to truth,” McGonagall said.

“Indeed it will not be,” Severus said.
“The headmaster knows?” McGonagall asked.

“He does,” Severus said.

“Mr. Potter told you voluntarily?” McGonagall asked.

“Without any of the headmaster’s meddling,” Severus said. “Or as far as I know, anyway.”

“Who else knows about this?” McGonagall asked.

“The headmaster, Granger, Weasley and now you,” Severus said. “Suffice it to say that Harry is not entirely sure how to handle having the bat of the dungeons for a father. Neither of us have felt the need to tell the world while matters are being worked out.”

“And what are your intentions towards Mr. Potter?” McGonagall asked.

“That is up to him,” Severus said. “I should like to do well by him.”

“If you hurt him Severus Snape, I swear, the headmaster will not be able to protect you,” McGonagall said.

“Why professor, does this mean you believe me?” Severus said.

“Do not think I won’t be verifying this ridiculous tale,” McGonagall said. “One way or another, we will be having a long conversation after I do.”

She left with as little formality as she entered.

“I have something,” Peter said the moment he knew he wasn’t alone in the clearing. There was a chance he could get out of this meeting unscathed.

“Is it my potion?” Greyback asked.

“I’m working on that,” Peter said. “And I’m close too, I swear, but this is useful too. If you can ward it against those who might look for it.”

“Another distraction,” Greyback said. “Another delay. I’ve had enough delays. You will get me what you promised me or you won’t see another full moon.”

“O-of course,” Peter said. “And I will get it for you. I will, I p-promise you. But this is useful. For when you have the polyjuice potion. It’s… it’s a map.”

“I don’t need a map,” Greyback said. “I just need Potter on the grounds and a disguise to lure him away.”

“This isn’t just any map,” Peter said. “It shows people. In the castle. On the grounds. Everyone. It shows where everyone is. Everyone in Hogwarts.”

“The forest?” Greyback asked.

“No,” Peter said. “Not the forest, it doesn’t reach that far. And not the bed chambers either, those
are protected from scrying or I would have been discovered years ago. But the grounds. Yes, you
could see where Potter is and if anyone is around or if anyone is coming. You can see everything.
Everyone.”

“Give it to me,” Greyback said.

Peter handed it over.

“If you can’t ward it, then it is worse than useless to you,” Peter said. “The ones I took it from
would be able to scry for it; they have a connection to it now.”

“I can ward it,” Greyback said. “It would have been easier if you had just killed them though.”

“It is one of them who you will be impersonating,” Peter said. “When I get you the potion.”

Greyback shook his head dismissively. “Start talking.”

“I’ve, um, I’ve told you everything I can think of,” Peter said hurriedly. “Everything important.
He’s just a boy. There isn’t much to him.”

“You haven’t told me everything,” Greyback said. “You’ve only scratched the surface. The first
rule of the hunt is to know your prey. So tell me more about Potter.”

“Yes, well, um…” Peter started. It was going to be a long night; and a painful one if he couldn’t
think of anything to say.

The suspicious looks were back. The whispers. No one had messed with him yet, but Harry was
keeping a wary eye out. He touched the bezoar in his pocket.

Sam had been right though. Hufflepuff did seem to be standing behind him. Firmly in the ‘let’s not
treat Harry bad because he’s a werewolf’ camp. They were being nice and supportive, but a lot of
them seemed convinced that Harry had been bitten. Some of them were nice from afar.

Gryffindor was mostly behind him as well. For the most part.

So many people might not have been convinced if Harry hadn’t spent the night in the infirmary.
Everyone was sure he had been recovering from a werewolf bite.

“This’ll die down in no time,” Ron said. “Faster than the first time, you’ll see.”

“It only died down the first time because I almost died,” Harry said.

“This is stupid,” Hermione said. “Didn’t anyone do the math?”

“Some people did,” Harry said.

“There’s a rumor going around that a werewolf can change when the moon’s still behind
mountains,” Ron said.

“That’s directly contradicted by Elyas Aybara’s treatise on werewolves,” Hermione said. “All this
werewolf hype and you’d think someone would have checked out a book or two from the library.”
“What’s a book next to a rumor?” Harry asked.

“They’ll figure it out eventually,” Hermione said.

“Just have to hope I don’t get poisoned first,” Harry said.

“Yes, well, we’ll just have to be extra careful,” Hermione said.

“So where did McGonagall get that heredity potion?” Harry asked changing the subject. Harry had told them about the early morning meeting he had had with their Head of House right before he had been released from the hospital wing.

“That’s right,” Hermione said. “It took us a long time to brew that. If she only just found out, how did she get it so quickly.”

“She probably visited the apothecary last night,” Ron said. “In Hogsmeade. They’d have all sorts of ready made potions.”

“How often do people need heredity tests that they keep the stuff in stock?” Harry asked. “The book said it didn’t keep very long.”

“Oh, purebloods probably use it tons before marriages,” Ron said. “You know, some purebloods. Gotta make sure all the other person’s ancestors are accounted for before you mix.”

“Did your parents?” Hermione asked.

“My parents eloped,” Ron said. “Right after Hogwarts. Great Aunt Mildred tells the story all the time. She thinks it was the most romantic thing since Tristan and Isolde. Great Granddad Prewett thought it was ’cause dad was hiding some muggle heritage though. Gave dad trouble for the longest time for marrying mum. Glad I never had to go to those family reunions. The ones we have now are nightmare enough.”

“So are you okay with Professor McGonagall knowing,” Hermione asked.

Harry shrugged. “She didn’t act weird about it,” he said, though for some reason Harry had felt almost as though he had betrayed the head of Gryffindor. “She just said she would make appropriate changes to my school records and that I could talk to her if I needed to.”

“You know what that means, don’t you?” Ron asked.

“What’s that?” Harry asked.

“Means she’s listing him as your parent on your record,” Ron said. “Now she tells him whenever you get in trouble.”

“You don’t think she would, do you?” Harry asked, worried. “I mean they don’t tell your parents everything, do they?”

“Mum get’s letters about us all the time,” Ron said. “Mostly about the twins, mind, but you better believe she heard about the troll in first year. The letter she sent after that was weird, I couldn’t tell if she was angry with me or proud.”

“My parents never get anything,” Hermione said.

“What about when you were petrified?” Harry asked.
“They don’t even know about that,” Hermione said. “And make sure you remember that if you ever meet them again please.”

“Why do they tell my parent’s everything and not yours?” Ron asked.

“Well I think I know why,” Hermione said.

“My mum bribed McGonagall with biscuits to keep her in the loop?” Ron suggested.

“My parents are muggles,” Hermione said.

“Do you think that’s it?” Harry asked.

“Do they write to the Dursleys?” Hermione asked.

Harry shook his head. “I’m going to keep that in the ‘that’s a good thing’ category,” he said.

“But it’s not good,” Hermione said. Harry gave her a skeptical look.

“Do you wish they’d told your parents about the Chamber of Secrets, or Quirrel and you-know-who, and dementors and escaped convicts?” Ron asked. “I’m going to get a letter from mum worrying about me getting drugged, but she’d never once in a million years think about pulling me out of school. What’d your parents do if they found out about half of that? That’s why you didn’t tell them, isn’t it?”

“Well I’m glad they don’t know, but it’s terrible that they aren’t considered worth keeping in the loop by the wizarding world,” Hermione said. “Over the summer, who do your grades get delivered to, you or your parents? Who got the Hogsmeade permission slip?”

“Mum and dad did,” Ron said.

“All that stuff got sent to me,” Hermione said. “Honestly, I don’t know what would happen if they did try to pull me from Hogwarts.”

Harry didn’t know what to think about that. Some guardians couldn’t be trusted to have their kid’s best interest in mind. The Dursley’s wouldn’t have let Harry come to Hogwarts if they’d had their way. They wouldn’t have let him go to school period if it hadn’t been state mandated. Harry’s whole childhood could have been chores and the cupboard if someone hadn’t said that the Dursleys weren’t the sole deciders of Harry’s fate. Harry was managing his own education just fine… with Hermione’s help. Some of the only grace Harry had ever known before Hogwarts had come because the Dursleys were worried about the watchful eyes of others. Though, Harry had never been able to trust in those eyes either.

“Is Professor Lupin okay?” Harry asked as they entered the Great Hall. The defense professor looked ill sitting up at the head table.

“He missed his first class yesterday,” Hermione said. “I heard Professor Snape covered for him again.”

Harry wondered if something had kept the man up late the night prior. He had another lesson with the man that night.
Herbology that day with the Hufflepuffs was frustrating to say the least. Hannah Abbott had nearly shrieked in fright when Harry had asked her to pass the pruning shears and then had proceeded to pass them to him with effusive friendliness.

Luckily a lot of the hostility from the first go around was still lacking and Harry managed to get through the day without being harassed, or tripped up in the halls. Disturbingly though, two students that Harry didn’t even know got into a fist fight over the topic of Harry’s supposed lycanthropy. Tomorrow, of course, was another day, but hopefully Harry wouldn’t come across anyone who was violently opposed to him still being in the school. Tonight was his second lesson with Professor Lupin.

Harry still didn’t know where he stood with the man. On the one hand, he was the best teacher Harry had ever had, and on the other, Harry was fifty-fifty on whether the man wanted to kidnap him for Greyback. Harry brought a bunch of chocolate to the classroom.

“Harry,” Professor Lupin greeted. “How are you holding up?”

“Oh Madame Pomfrey healed everything just fine,” Harry said, entering the classroom and once more leaving the door wide open. He looked at the professor, searching for any of the mannerisms or marks he had seen on the man who had abducted him.

“I meant rather the atmosphere in the school,” Professor Lupin said.

“I’ve dealt with it before,” Harry said. “It’s better this time at least.”

There were no similarities between Professor Lupin and the man from the full moon as far as Harry could tell. Though Professor Lupin looked a little exhausted and haggard, he was nothing like the mysterious man who had chased after him in the halls two nights prior.

“Well there is that,” Professor Lupin said. “Have you had opportunity to practice the Patronus Charm?”

Harry nodded. “I’m ready whenever you are, professor.”

“Right to it then,” Professor Lupin said. He approached the wardrobe in the corner where the boggart awaited. Harry looked at the clock.

The temperature of the room plummeted Harry felt all of the warmth leave his body as a dementor glided towards him.

“Expecto Patronum,” Harry called out. He thought there might have been something that happened but he was shaking so much he lost whatever was there. He was so cold. Warmth was only a memory, a memory to remind him of what he would never have again. He hugged himself as a woman’s scream filled his head. He had to get to her, but he was powerless, he was trapped. He heard a man’s voice and he was afraid. If only she could come to him, Harry just needed her to be there with him, he knew, and everything would be alright, but she wasn’t coming. She never would. There was cruel laughter, a laugh that ached in his bones and then a flash of warmth covered him and Harry knew that everything was alright.

Shift

Harry had been blown back by a massive force before the world had fallen around him and as the rocks and the dust settled Harry’s mind reeled in horror. His arms were still covering his head and Harry just wanted to settle down on the icy cold ground and never let go. Harry had just narrowly avoided being obliviated and in that moment he could almost wish that it had been successful.
Everything was wrong. Everything was in ruin. It was all Harry’s fault, he had known not to trust, he had known not to let his guard down, he had known that there was something wrong with Lockheart but that hadn’t stopped him and now he fully knew the measure of his folly. He was such a freak, and he had failed, and there was nothing he could do about it. Ginny was going to die because of him. He couldn’t get it out of his head and he longed for oblivion.

Harry looked around in the settling dust with his wand that was somehow still lit. There was no sign of anyone. Everything was rock. Everything was lost. He had put his trust in Lockheart and now Ron was crushed to death deep under the bedrock of the castle, Ginny was going to be killed by a Basilisk, and Harry was going to die cold and alone. He was stranded in the icy cavern with nothing but the memories of his failures. Freezing to death was the only thing he had to look forward to.

The memory shifted and Harry gasped as a reassuring knowledge blanketed him in relief. Ron had been alright, Harry knew, and Ginny had come out unharmed. Harry wasn’t alone, he knew it deep down, if only for a moment.

Harry woke up to Professor Lupin tapping his shoulder. Harry just stared up at him for a moment before he got up and wordlessly sat down next to his book bag to pull out a chocolate bar. He took a moment to look at the clock before he started gnawing on some of Honeyduke’s finest. He tried to shake off the second memory, he was well practiced at doing that. He knew what that memory had been. He remembered it clearly, he remembered everything very clearly, though the dementor’s effects had tweaked it some in the replay, the memory twisted and distorted further as he lived it again. It was the first memory though that had him pondering.

The woman was first, she was always first, and she wasn’t like the other memories. Her screams weren’t clear; the memory indistinct. All of the other memories he relived were strong memories for the most part, and he actually knew what they were about after the dementor was gone. He had no context for the woman. He had no memories like it. He pondered the origins of the memory as he chewed on some chocolate and tried to hold onto the feeling of peace that still lingered after his fight with the dementor. He thought he already knew the origin of the memory. He thought he had always known, since his first encounter with the dementors. But Harry had always been good at not thinking about certain things. Now as he prepared himself to face the dementor once more, Harry decided he needed to know. He wasn’t going to focus on the spell this time, he was going to focus on the memory. He wanted to remember it as fully as he could. It was the only memory he had.

Harry kept an eye on Professor Lupin as he recovered, he glanced at the clock. Harry was pretty sure that if the man was plotting against him, that hauling him off through the castle in the middle of the evening wasn’t part of the plan. Lest he would have done so during the lesson on Sunday during one of the many times Harry had been unconscious. But Harry was going to keep an eye on him regardless.

Harry stood up ready to face the dementor once more. He was already shivering in anticipation of the cold.

“Your wandwork was very good,” Professor Lupin said. “Though try to be clearer on the ess in the ex.”

Harry nodded, knowing that he would be focusing on something else this time.

Professor Lupin opened the doors of the wardrobe once more and Harry performed the incantation by rote, but he wasn’t focusing on any happy memories, he focused on what the dementor showed him.
“Not Harry, not Harry, please, I’ll do anything,” the woman pleaded.

“Stand aside, stand aside girl,” a high pitched and cruelly amused voice said.

“Not Harry, please no, take me, kill me instead,” the woman said.

“So be it,” Harry heard.

There were more words, more yelling, but Harry didn’t take any of it in before there was a flash of green light and the cold passed as Harry felt the warmth and peace penetrating the effects of the dementor.

Shift.

Harry was in the forest at night. He was so cold and he and Ron were going to die in the clutches of the giant spiders that Harry had led them to. Ron was going to be killed by his greatest fear and it was all Harry’s fault. They were going to die, cold and alone. Everything lurched and suddenly Harry knew that Ron was safe, that they had made it to their warm beds unharmed.

Shift.

His feet lifted off the ground and his body was slammed against the wall. An arm across his chest pinned him in place and he couldn’t breathe in all the way. He didn’t need the threats, he didn’t need the blow to his cheek. It had been drilled into him long ago. He knew what would happen if he ever told on the Dursleys. No one would care, no one would help, they would know what he was, a freak, there would be only pain. This was a new threat though, a new promise and Harry knew it to be the truth. He cemented the threat into his head as he told his uncle that of course he wouldn’t tell, he would never tell. Who would believe what he had seen, who would listen to what he had heard, who would care what had happened. His uncle’s menacing face lurched out of view then and the pressure on his chest let off and he knew that someone cared. Someone had always cared. He felt safe and as he opened his eyes to the ceiling of Professor Lupin’s office, one word passed his lips that his mind latched onto.

“Mum,” Harry said sadly, longingly. In that moment Harry knew that the woman he heard was his mother. Every time he had heard that voice, he had wanted to protect her he had wanted to save her. But he couldn’t, because she had died saving him. He was remembering his mother plead for his life. He remembered the sound of her voice, and the green flash and the feeling of safety. The feeling of safety and comfort that had always accompanied the memory like it was a part of it, the last part of the memory that he could remember. All of the other memories were different, the feeling came afterwards, it was tacked on to the end and Harry knew what that feeling was. He knew what was protecting him from the dementors, he knew what had comforted him when he had been alone in his cupboard and when he had felt like he couldn’t stand the world any longer. It was his mum, it was her protection on him that he felt.

“Harry,” Professor Lupin prompted. “Are you alright?”

Harry looked up at the professor who was standing worriedly over him. He looked at the clock.

“Yeah,” Harry said. “I’m just… I think that’s it for today.”

“This is a very difficult charm Harry,” Professor Lupin said. “And we are making sure you don’t have to face the dementors again. Perhaps…”
“I can do it,” Harry said quickly and then blushed. “I’m sorry. But I need to do this. I’m alright, I just… I just remembered something.”

“Well sit down and eat some chocolate before you go,” Professor Lupin said gently.

Harry took a seat and gnawed on some Honeydukes absentmindedly.

“She loved you very much,” Professor Lupin said, and Harry knew that the man had heard what he had said upon waking up.

“I know,” Harry said, smiling sadly. He didn’t have to rely on the words of others, he could feel it. He had felt it his whole life, as long as he could remember. A part of his mother had stayed with him, protecting him always. Loving him always. Harry enjoyed thinking then that she would still feel the same way if she were alive then. That she would have loved him no matter what. He thought that maybe she would have. She was the best person Harry had never known. He wished that that feeling was something he could hold onto.

“Your father did too,” Professor Lupin went on. “They’d both be very proud of you today.”

A lot of people may have loved him as a baby, but Harry only had a remnant of that today. He would have to hold on to it however he could. Maybe a month at the Dursleys was worth it.

“Thanks for the lesson professor,” Harry said getting up. “I’ll see you tomorrow in class.”

“Get some rest, Harry,” Professor Lupin said as Harry made his way to the door.

“Night,” Harry said.

“You look flushed,” Severus told Harry as the boy entered his quarters. “I am sure Madam Pomfrey instructed you to take things easy for a couple of days.”

“Oh I’m fine,” Harry said, taking a long look around the room and taking particular interest in the area where he had lain three nights prior. “It was just quidditch practice. It went fine.”

“I do believe that you and our school nurse have different opinions on the definition of taking things easy,” Severus said.

“I really do feel alright,” Harry said.

“Well let’s eat then,” Severus said. “I understand you are supposed to eat plenty of protein after so much blood loss.”

“Sounds good to me,” Harry said. “Though you don’t need to go through any bother or anything.”

“Ordering pot roast from the kitchens is not a bother,” Severus said, turning towards the fireplace to place the order. Moments later the hot food appeared on his dining table.

“How did your quidditch practice go?” Severus asked as they sat down.

“Oh, well enough,” Harry said. “Fred and George were upset about something but they wouldn’t say what though. Oliver was upset that they didn’t have their heads in it... Wait, are you trying to
“get me to spill team secrets?”

“If I wanted to know Gryffindor’s secrets I would send Mr. Flint to goad Mr. Wood into bragging about his team. It has always worked in the past.”

Harry gapped at him.

“I trust you have been told not to show off the food in your mouth Mr. Potter,” Severus said. The boy shut his mouth.

“That’s not fair,” Harry said.

“I was not aware that I was the head of Hufflepuff house,” Severus said. “Or that my son was one of their students.”

Harry smiled at that as he looked intently at his plate. They ate in silence for a while, Severus, dearly wishing that he knew what was going on behind those green eyes.

“You have your defense study group tonight, is that right?” Severus asked.

“Yeah,” Harry said. “We’re practicing shields and this simple ward that’ll tell you if someone crosses it.”

“You have been doing well with your school work,” Severus commented.

“I’m doing alright I guess,” Harry shrugged. “Professor Lupin wants me to take both years’ final exams later.”

“And you don’t?” Severus asked.

“It would be weird not to have class with my friends,” Harry said.

“I would not be surprised if Ms. Granger could already pass the fourth year exam,” Severus said.

“Well probably,” Harry said. “Though I don’t think she would take it if she didn’t think she’d get a perfect score, and then Ron’d be alone next year in defense.”

“I wonder how much socializing you must do during classes besides my own that this is such a concern,” Severus said.

“Oh,” Harry said. “Um well it’s just nice to be around people you trust. I probably wouldn’t even be with the Gryffindor fifth year class, it’d be whichever class worked with my schedule.”

“You’ve certainly put a lot of work into defense this year,” Severus said. “You should not waste that.”

Harry shrugged.

“Do you know why Malfoy is telling people I’m not a werewolf?” Harry asked Severus, changing the subject. “Is this some weird Slytherin reverse psychology thing?”

“Is he saying that?” Severus asked.

“Yeah,” Harry said. “He’s been telling people that the castle went on lockdown before the moon rose so I couldn’t have been bitten.”
“Why do you think he is doing so?” Severus asked.

“Slytherin shenanigans,” Harry said.

Severus raised an eyebrow.

“I thought you might have had something to do with it,” Harry said.

“Mr. Malfoy decided on this course of action himself,” Severus said. “This was not done by my instruction. You may have noticed that it has been some time since you have had an altercation with him.”

“He doesn’t actually feel bad about me getting poisoned because of those rumors, does he?” Harry asked.

“I do not think that he does, no,” Severus said. “Do you feel that you are in danger from these rumors?”

Harry shrugged. “No one’s hexed me in the halls this time. The Hufflepuff’s are scared but ‘supportive,’” Harry said. “I think most of them think I’m a werewolf. I think the majority of the Ravenclaws don’t think I’m a werewolf. A handful of them give me dirty looks. A lot of Slytherins are just ignoring me, a bunch of them are being jerks, although that may have nothing to do with the rumors. Gryffindors mostly believe me, I think. There haven’t been any threats yet.”

“There were threats last time?” Severus asked.

“Yeah, on my bed, a sprig of wolfsbane and then a note telling me to get out of dodge,” Harry said.

“And what did Professor McGonagall say when you told her of these threats?” Severus said dangerously.

“Umm,” Harry said, dithering. “I may not have mentioned them to anyone.”

“You have the absolute worst survival instinct of anyone I have ever met,” Severus said.

“I’m sorry,” Harry said.

Professor Snape sighed and pinched the bridge of his nose. Lily, he was sure, would be yelling right now.

“We’ll work on that,” Severus said.

“Sure,” Harry said, placating as always.

“How was your lesson with Lupin last night?” Severus asked, changing the subject.

“Oh,” Harry said. “It went alright.” He was being evasive, Severus could tell.

“Harry if there is something you suspect you must tell me,” Severus said.

“No,” Harry said. “It’s not that. I just, didn’t do very well. It ended pretty quickly.”

“It is not a third year spell,” Severus reminded him.

“It’s not that,” Harry said. “I- I realized… there’s this memory that always gets dragged up that I didn’t really remember. I figured out what it was, um… it was my mum, on that night.”
Unbidden, Severus’s own memories of that night came forward and he inhaled sharply. It was a moment before he could respond. “You shouldn’t have to hear that,” he said.

Harry shrugged. “I realized something though,” Harry said. “The protection she gave me, I can feel it. It’s like I remember what it felt like when… when it was placed on me, and I recognize it from, like, there’ve been times when I felt that, like, bad things happen and then I feel better for no reason and I feel like this, thing, it feels nice. I don’t know.”

“You think you can actually feel the protection she left on you?”

Harry shrugged. “I think so.”

“There is not much we know of the magic that has protected you,” Severus said, taking comfort that something of Lily lived on. “I am glad you can draw solace from it.”

Harry shrugged, looking at his dinner. “I was thinking maybe I can use it for the patronus charm.”

“The memory of that night?” Severus asked.

“No, the feeling, it’s…” Harry looked back down with a blush. “It’s nice is all.”

There was a silence for a while as they ate.

“That might be where occlumency would be beneficial,” Severus said. “Separating the memory of that feeling from what preceded it would help you to cast the patronus.”

“You really will teach me?” Harry asked.

“I do recall saying that I would,” Severus said, noting Harry’s surprise. “I have put some thought into how to teach you. As I said, you would not benefit from the conditions I learned under. I will give you a book on the subject which you will read and then we will begin practicing.”

“I was thinking about that spell you told me about,” Harry said. “The one that controls people.”

“Occlumency is not a protection against the Imperious Curse, however, a disciplined mind would be beneficial to resisting the charm.”

Harry looked disappointed at that. “What does practicing entail?” he asked.

“Occlumency is primarily the protection of your mind,” Severus said. “To develop your skills you will block my attempts to invade your mind.”

The boys eyes widened. “You’re going to read my mind?” he asked.

“What is on the surface,” Severus said. “I will not be looking for anything. I will not be rooting around your mind; this is only the most basics of intrusion and defense.”

“Yeah, but what if something comes up cause I’m trying not to think about it, like, you know, something private?” Harry mumbled, staring intently at his plate and sounding miserable.

“Well, not trying to not think about something is the best way to not think about it,” Severus said. “It is a bit like a game. There will be something that your are trying to hide from me while trying to convince me of something different. For instance, I will ask you what the first class of your day was. You will hide that from me, while trying to convince me that it was another class entirely. If I cannot sense the deception in your mind you win, if I can divine what class it was, you lose.”
“Don’t you know the class schedules already?” Harry asked.

“The secret can be anything,” Professor Snape said. “But regardless. The point is, at this level, you will be preoccupied with the game, I will not be looking deeply, I should not see anything you do not want me to see. However, I should remind you that I too was once a thirteen year old boy. I dare say I would not be shocked by anything, private.”

“Oh no,” Harry said. “I was not talking about that, like at all. Just, you know, like just… never mind. Forget I said anything. Nothing private at all.”

“It is perfectly normal for a young man to…” Severus said, realizing he wasn’t sure how to have this conversation. “Well, you had that talk from Madame Pomfrey earlier in the year, probably the same I had when I was your age.”

“Really not necessary,” Harry said.

“Although I do not recall that talk being as all encompassing as it should have been, there are some materials she doesn’t cover till you are older,” Severus said.

“There’s more?” Harry said, sounding horrified.

“Yes, there is some important information that they don’t think you need until you are older, but, case in point, you were conceived when I was fifteen,” Severus said. “Perhaps we should have a discussion.”

“Oh Merlin,” Harry said, getting up. “Um, I should go, um, it’s late, got to get to my defense study group.”

“We will be having that conversation at some point,” Severus said getting up as well.

“Please don’t,” Harry said.

“I can make it quick and painless,” Severus said.

“I promise you, it’s not necessary,” Harry said.

“I might have said the same thing when I was thirteen,” Severus said.

“I’m out of here,” Harry said.

“In the meantime,” Severus said. “There is a book you should read.”

“No books,” Harry said heading for the door.

“About occlumency,” Severus said.

“Oh,” Harry said, pausing in his tracks. “Okay.”

Severus retrieved the book from his study.

“Let me know when you have finished reading this, and let me know if you have any questions,” Severus said. “About anything.”

“No questions,” Harry said taking the book. “Um, thanks, a lot, for um, everything. Yeah. Just, no talks. Please.” He turned towards the door.
“It really is important information,” Severus said.

Harry groaned as he walked out the door. Severus tried to imagine how he would have felt at thirteen.

“Minerva,” Albus greeted pleasantly, even as he dreaded another divergence within the castle. Outside Hogwarts, everything moved along as it should, yet inside he had yet to see matters corrected. “To what do I owe the pleasure of your company this evening.”

“Severus indicated that you were already aware of this matter, but I wanted to discuss with you what your intentions are for Harry this summer?” Minerva said.

“There is a plan in place for Harry’s summer arrangements,” Albus said. “I would be happy provide you with the details, but first I must ask to what matter I should already be aware.”

“Did Severus not tell you that he is Harry’s biological father?” Minerva asked. “I have verified it myself. I was not ready to believe it otherwise.”

“He did,” Albus said. “But I was not aware of any reason to make changes to Harry’s summer arrangements. I was under the impression that they were not tolerating one another well.”

“Well they were tolerant enough to dine with each other several times this previous week,” Minerva said. “And Severus has spoken of ‘doing well by’ Mr. Potter, whatever he takes that to mean. So I must ask if there is any possibility that Harry will be living with Severus this Summer and how you intend to make sure that that doesn’t end horribly.”

Just when he had thought he had a handle on matters, he was proven most grievously wrong.

“Until such a time as Severus asserts his parental rights, Harry will be returning to the Dursleys for a month after which he will have alternative arrangements dependent on various safety issues,” Albus told Minerva.

“And if Severus does assert his rights?” Minerva asked. “By Merlin, Albus, if Mr. Potter’s tuition wasn’t already paid in full for the next four and a half years we would be getting ready to send Severus the bill for next term at this point. What are you going to do if Severus decides he wants to take Harry home at the end of the school year?”

Albus had already made plans for that, drawn up schematics and formulas for the wards, he was prepared for that occurrence, but he had thought that he would not need it. He had hoped that such a divergence could be avoided. He had thought that that line of possibility had been cut short.

“Then we will provide him all the support he needs to make sure that Harry is well cared for,” Albus said.

Internally, he tried to think of another option. The truth was that matters were spiraling out of his control, but he could still make things work. He could focus on forcing the bigger events. Yet how much was reliant on the smaller events. Harry’s defeat of Greyback was an important step towards the future defeat of Voldemort, yet one misstep could completely change the outcome. Albus knew what had to happen for Voldemort’s defeat, and if he did say so himself, he was just clever enough to make it work.
Chapter End Notes

Albus’s walking a fine line isn’t he. We’ll see how that works out for him. Please let me know what you thought of this chapter. Until next time, I hope you find many good fics.
Welcome back, I hope everyone’s been having a great holiday season.

Disclaimer: The rights to the Harry Potter universe were not in my stocking this Christmas, though I did ask Santa for them. Unfortunately I do not own Harry Potter and am not making any money off of this story.

"Hufflepuffs are so stupid," Draco said.

Severus laughed.

"They are," Draco insisted. "They're so obsessed with being nice to Potter they won't even listen to reason because then their niceness wouldn't mean anything. I swear, I think they, more than anything else, have convinced the school that Potter's a werewolf. 'Be nice to Potter the werewolf.' Yeah, they're being nice, and they're so obsessed with it they can't stop and think."

"Perhaps you can think of something that will convince them," Severus said.

Draco shrugged. "I thought of a couple of things, but explaining to people how they're stupid is one thing, there's only so much I want to be seen being nice to Potter in public. Or out of public for that matter."

"Focus on the Ravenclaws," Severus said. "And people have been noticing your efforts. They may not know what to make of them, but you will have time to shape those perceptions."

"Did you know there's a rumor going around that you're the one who tried to kidnap Potter," Draco said.

"Clearly I have done a poor job of instilling fear in the school populace," Severus said. "Everyone should know full well that if I had intended to kidnap Mr. Potter, then I would have succeeded."

"So do you have any suspicions?" Draco asked.

"Never trust the defense professor," Severus said.

"Everyone knows that," Draco said.

"Are there rumors about him?" Severus asked.

"There aren't actually," Draco said. "He's everybody's favorite, though how anyone can respect a man who dresses so shabbily, I don't know."

Lupin always did have a way of disarming people, Severus thought.

"I have an assignment for you." he told Draco.

"Another one?" Draco asked.
"Convincing the school that Potter is not a werewolf was your idea, I do believe," Severus said. "This should prove a challenge at least."

"You want me to convince the house elves to go on strike?" Draco asked.

"I said it was a challenge, not that it was outside the realm of possibility," Severus said. "Clarice Loxley, a fifth year Slytherin, is planning something. I want you to get her to confide in you what that is."

"Do you know what it is?" Draco asked.

"Of course," Severus said. "Ground rules are: no bribes, no blackmail, and no snooping through her dormitory."

"Well if you're going to take all of the fun things off the table what's the point?" Draco asked with a smile.

"I have taken the easiest means off of the table, they are also the riskiest," Severus said. "You will not always be a school boy. Be careful of what level of exposure you take on when you play the game. Did you finish your reading?"

"Yes," Draco said. "I get it already, being a dark lord is stupid. I do not need to read any more biographies."

"Oh there are more," Severus said. "But we can stop focusing on dark lords. Did you pick up any underlying themes?"

"Everyone dies," Draco said. "Both sides, neutral parties, allies, enemies, but just, everyone dies, and usually the dark lord too."

"What did you think about that?" Severus asked.

Draco looked thoughtful. "There aren't enough of us. Purebloods I mean, or just wizards in general I suppose. We can't just kill each other off."

"Should we avoid war at all costs then?" Severus asked.

Draco was silent for a moment. "It has to matter," he said.

Severus nodded. He would let the boy ponder on what mattered.

"Can I presume you have read the biographies on Salazar Slytherin?"

"Father used to think they made good bedtime stories," Draco said with a hint of a smile.

"Good, what do you think Salazar would have thought of those dark lords you read about?"

"He would have probably thought that they were stupid," Draco said. "I think he said something once about the cunning being blinded by their own ambitions."

"I want you to read up on the rest of the founders," Severus said.

"Even Gryffindor?" Draco asked.

"Especially Gryffindor," Severus said. "If you wish to understand how the world works you need to understand the people in it. Understand it beyond the jokes that get passed in the halls about the
other houses."

"I should get to lunch before I get any more assignments," Draco said.

"That might be wise," Severus said.

Draco left and Severus had little time to himself before McGonagall arrived at his office door. She had the grace to knock and wait this time.

"What are you doing with Mr. Malfoy?" McGonagall asked. There was suspicion but no accusation in her voice.

"Well I'm not molesting him if that is what you were wondering," Severus said.

McGonagall gave him a tight lipped glare.

"I was just tasking him to read the biographies of Godric Gryffindor," Severus said, and he enjoyed the dismissive look on her face that said she did not believe him. "Why professor, I thought we agree that I did not lie ridiculously."

"Well I did confirm your ridiculous tale," McGonagall said.

"I know," Severus said. "Harry told me as much a couple of nights ago over dinner."

"I must ask again what your intentions are with Mr. Potter," McGonagall said.

Severus opened his mouth to reply but McGonagall cut him off.

"Let us pretend that I have no idea what your concept of 'doing right' by a child is," she said. That brought Severus up short, in part because doing right by Harry was about as far as Severus had been able to figure matters at that point.

"It is complicated," Severus said.

"Of course it is complicated," McGonagall said. "It is one of the most complicated things there is. Even if we weren't discussing a boy who is famous and likely the target of several dark wizards, whom you used to work with no less. Parenthood is certainly not for everybody. This is a complicated matter, and if you are going to proceed in any fashion you need to figure these matters out before you trample all over a child's life."

"What do you want from me?" Severus asked.

"Are you going to acknowledge Mr. Potter as your son?" McGonagall asked.

"That is up to him," Severus said. McGonagall shook her head.

"Mr. Potter is hardly the sort to ask for what he wants. Children need stability, Severus," McGonagall said. "Mr. Potter is certainly old enough to communicate to you what he is looking for, but he needs to know where he stands with you; if, that is, you actually have something to offer him."

"Miss Granger had much the same thing to say," Severus said.

"Well she is rather smart," Minerva said. "You have spoken about what Mr. Potter wants. That is all well and good, but you had best make sure of what you want."
"I want to be a father to him," Severus said.

"I see," Minerva said. "Do you expect you'll still say that in a year or so?"

"This isn't just a product of me finding out he is my son, I do actually care for the child," Severus said. "He was rather clever about it. He got me to like him as a student before he told me. I do not anticipate that wearing off."

"See that it doesn't," Minerva said. "Because if you hurt him…"

"I do believe there will be a line, Minerva," Severus said. "Dire consequences, yes, I am sure. I have already hurt him. I know that very well. Do not think that I am not paying for that."

"No, Severus," Minerva said. "He is the one who pays for it. That is what you must not forget. What do you really know about Mr. Potter's relations outside of this school?" McGonagall asked. "I will be collecting names for students staying over winter holidays. As usual, I expect Mr. Potter will be signing his name. Do you know why that is?"

Severus was about to respond but he realized he did not know the answer. A few months ago he would have said that the boy was too spoiled to spend time with his family when he had a magic castle and a quidditch pitch to himself, but now he could say that he honestly did not know. Harry had never once brought up any of his relatives.

"What do you know?" Severus asked.

"I know that Mr. Potter has only ever received two letters from them in his time here," McGonagall said. "I know that they went to great lengths in an attempt to keep him from attending Hogwarts. I know he spent a full month with the Weasleys before his second year. Besides that I could not say, except that twelve years ago I had great misgivings about leaving Harry with them."

"Do you suspect anything?" Severus asked.

"Anything more than that they do not get along?" McGonagall asked. "No, but I do not expect that I would if there was."

"So you want me to take custody of him," Severus said. He had not thought that that was what she was aiming towards.

"I want what is best for Mr. Potter," McGonagall said tersely. "I am not going to make the assumption in this case that you can fulfill that role. You may be different this term, there has been a change in you, but change is fickle Severus Snape, and true change in a man is rare. Why should I think that this change in you is anything more but a passing fancy? It has been a few months, I have known you as a teacher here for twelve years."

"I have changed," Severus said. "It is not a passing fancy, but I do not need to prove that to you. I am proving that to Harry."

"See that you do," Minerva said. "He has enough stress in his life without having to wonder if his father is going to be his father."

Quidditch practice was going better than it had the last time. The twins were on their game, the weather had cleared, and Harry had plenty of tension to let off on the quidditch pitch. Harry had been taking flack from some of the students over the whole werewolf thing and he was feeling fed up with it all. He had tried some of those mind clearing exercises from the book his father had
given him the night prior but he had been too preoccupied at the time to really get anywhere.

Flying was a good way to let go though, and Harry wondered if he could just fantasize about flying when he needed to clear his mind. He had caught the snitch a few times already and was just focusing on dodging bludgers and breaking up chaser formations. Seekers didn't have much to do besides look for the snitch really, and sometimes they were treated as a free agent on the field. The only ball they could touch was the snitch, but they could get close enough to the bludgers to draw them away, and they could force other players to change course all they wanted.

Wood had booked the pitch for most of the morning and by the time they were done, Harry's mind was a thousand miles away from werewolves and his classmates. Harry set about taking care of his gear, in no particular hurry even though lunch was about to start. He always took care of his gear first. His broom and his quidditch things were about the nicest things he had. He had only just begun when Fred and George sat on either side of him. They didn't look like they were getting ready to go, so Harry supposed it was on them to make sure he got back to the castle in one piece. While Harry appreciated the sentiment, he did not need watchers.

"Had a thought," George said. "About your werewolf problem."

"Wanted to run a couple ideas by you," Fred said.

"It's not another not-a-werewolf party is it?" Harry asked. "Because the last one didn't go so well."

"Well hey now," George said. "That was a good party."

"It's not our fault it got crashed by one of the many people who's failed to kill you," Fred said.

"People were having a right lot of fun, they were," George said.

Harry rolled his eyes. "So ideas?"

"Okay," Fred said. "So don't just say no because it sound stupid."

"Because it does sound stupid," George said.

"I'm tempted to say 'no' now," Harry said.

"See, now that doesn't sound like the boy who followed a bunch of spiders into the forbidden forest," George said.

"Well I learned from my mistakes," Harry said. "When someone tells you to do something and it sounds stupid, like say, 'follow the spiders,' it's probably because it's stupid.

"Well this one's actually a good idea," Fred said.

"It's just that it's also crazy," George said.

"Well I'm listening," Harry said.

"You can eat some wolfsbane in front of everyone," Fred said.

Harry gaped at him. "No," he said after a moment.

"Now Harry, that just isn't an adventurous attitude," George said.

"Yeah," Fred said. "You could have been like, 'what?' or 'that's crazy,' but you just went straight to
'no.'

"We're going to pretend you said 'what?' incredulously," George said.

Harry sighed. "What?" he asked as drawn out and incredulous as he could manage.

"Why Harry I'm glad you asked," Fred said.

"You see, wolfsbane is totally poisonous," George said.

"But if you just nibble on a teensy tiny little bit, you'll pretty much be fine," Fred said with air quotes around the word 'fine.' "For the most part. A werewolf wouldn't be, it's way more toxic to them. See, instant proof."

"Noooo," Harry said, putting every bit of conviction he had behind the word, worried that the twins would try to talk him into it. He knew they probably could.

"Fair enough," George said. "But mind you that was the smart option."

"Oh there's an even crazier idea?" Harry asked.

"Well you can always just bite a Slytherin," Fred said.

"Why would I bite a Slytherin?" Harry asked.

"Well it doesn't have to be a Slytherin," George said.

"But they'd probably have it coming," Fred said.

"As strange as it may seem," Harry said. "I am still confused."

"A werewolf's bite is only contagious under the full moon," George said.

"But in human form their bite's still a curse," Fred said. "It leaves a scar that can't be healed. I mean, not that much of a curse, but hey, if you bite someone and it doesn't leave a scar after Madame Pomfrey heals it you're in the clear."

"You'll probably have detention," George said. "But what's a detention or two. This way you don't have to eat poison. Though come to think of it, if you're adverse to poison you might not want to put your mouth on a Slytherin."

"Oddly enough, I don't want to do either actually," Harry said.

"Come now Harry," Fred said. "It's one or the other."

"It really isn't," Harry said.

"It could be fun," George said.

"So you were asking about how the gloves were working out the other day," Harry said, changing the subject. "Saved my life that night."

"Really?" Fred asked, taking the bait. "Did you use them to get away?"

"I did," Harry nodded. "Went through the floor. Unfortunately it was right over the the entrance hall so…"
"The entry hall's like three bloody stories high," George said.

"Well I didn't know where I was at the time," Harry said.

"I mean good on you for getting away, but wow, I feel all responsible for telling you ahead of time not to go through floors."

"How does it feel," George asked his twin.

"Horrible," Fred said. "I wouldn't suggest responsibility to anyone."

"Good thing I've never tried it," George said. He turned back to Harry. "So, mouth full of woldsbane or mouth full of Slytherin."

Harry was saved from having to answer by Oliver coming back into the change room, a towel around his waist and another one drying out his hair.

"What are you doing with my seeker?" he asked.

"Nothing," George said.

"Positively nothin," Fred said.

"Admonishing him to stay safe," George added.

"You know this one," Fred said. "Constantly getting into mischief."

"Well he does need an admonishment or two," Wood agreed. "Though I doubt you two are the ones to give it. I have to say, it's nice to be able to shower in peace after practice without you two chattering on."

"Us chattering on?" George asked.

"It's only to drown you out," Fred said.

"Always with the post practice commentary from you," George said.

"We should just get you a chalk board with a water repellent charm in the shower room so you can do things properly in there," Fred added.

Oliver waved them off and started changing while Harry turned his focus back onto his gear now that the conversation wasn't focused on him.

"Oh, so Harry," Oliver said. "How're those lessons coming along."

"Oh," Harry said looking up with a bit of a blush. "Not so good, I guess. Professor Lupin says I've got the charm down pat but it just isn't working right now for me. I'm working on it though."

"But you think you'll have it by our next match, right?" Oliver said, sounding worried.

"Oh we're not playing anyone for like two months Olie," George said.

"Besides," Fred said. "We'll make sure to catch him next time."

"I don't want there to be a next time," Oliver said.

Harry had to reassure himself that he wasn't going to get replaced before he could look Oliver in
the eye to reassure him.

"I'll get it," Harry said. "I'm working really hard, really, I am. And the professors say they're making sure the dementors stay away. There weren't any dementors at the last match. There won't be any at the Slytherin-Ravenclaw match either, you'll see."

"I just want to be sure," Oliver said.

"If the dementors storm the pitch just call a time out," Fred said.

"I can only call a time out if we have possession of the quaffle and there's no active snitch pursuit," Oliver said.

"So make a deal with Ravenclaw," George said. "Roger's a decent bloke, he'd probably call a time out for dementors."

"What if they're chasing the snitch?" Oliver asked.

"Oh, come on," George said. "What're the odds of that happening again?"

"You're giving the poor kid a complex," Fred said, gesturing towards Harry.

Harry shook his head to indicate that he was fine.

"I just want to be prepared," Oliver said.

"We are," George said. "Speaking of though, Fred and I are trying to get those new bats that Woodrow's put out for Christmas."

Oliver took the cue to exit the circular conversation and the four boys started talking equipment. Oliver finished dressing and left. With the older boy gone and his gear taken care of, Harry got down to his small clothes and headed for the showers with his arms wrapped around his chest, wondering, as he often did, why no one ever charmed the air in the locker room to be any warmer than the late fall air outside. He stopped at the first spigot thinking about the twins.

It had been nice feeling like they were defending him from Oliver, not that Harry really needed defending or that Oliver was someone he would need defending from, but the quidditch team had always treated Harry a bit like a little brother, which did feel odd. Harry thought about Ron's recent blowout with his brothers and thought that perhaps the twins treated Harry better than they did Ron. Which wasn't to say that they didn't tease him, because they certainly did that, but still, Harry thought it a bit unfair that he got more attention from the twins than Ron did, even off the quidditch pitch. He wondered if the twins would have ever had anything to do with him if he hadn't been a star quidditch seeker. He wondered what it would have been like to really have siblings.

Speaking of the devils, Fred and George walked in. Fred made a crude comment, intimating that he was interrupting something, causing Harry to blush. Oliver was right, the twins had no concept of having a relaxing shower after a hard practice and they chattered on and joked incessantly. Not that one could really have a relaxing shower with an audience, anyways, Harry supposed.

"Oh, hey, I've got it," George said. "You can just go starkers for everyone."

"Yeah," Fred said. "That's right. No bite scar, no werewolf."

Harry just sighed and started showering faster, glad that his back was to the twins and they couldn't see him blush.
"Oh but someone'll say he's polyjuiced," George said.

"That's right," Fred said, teasingly. "You'll have to be starkers for an hour, probably in the great hall, that should work."

"What do you think Harry," George asked.

"I think McGonagall would have something to say about it," Harry said.

"I suppose we are talking to a bloke who used to shower in his underwear," Fred smirked.

"Little shy there Harry?" George asked

"I was eleven," Harry defended himself with a mumble, feeling very self conscious.

Harry finished quickly and went to get dressed, hoping that the twins wouldn't be too far behind. Everyone expected Harry to walk back to the castle with a minder, lest he be kidnapped again, and Harry needed to get back to the castle for his lab work, not to mention lunch before that.

Cleaning up the lab took a bit longer than it normally did. Professor Snape's cauldron had erupted all over the place halfway through the period and the grayish green gunk seemed to want to bind to everything it touched. They actually wound up finishing early, since the professor had decided not to restart the brew until he had done an analysis of what had gone wrong, but Harry was more than ready to get out of the lab by the time they were done. With no test results to go over, Faisal was out of there before Harry was and Harry wasn't sure he wanted to be alone with the man. Not if he wanted to give Harry, 'the Talk.'

Harry grabbed his bag and headed for the door.

"See you, professor," he said, making it clear he was leaving.

"Did you make any headway with the book I gave you?" Professor Snape asked.

"Oh, yeah," Harry said. "I'm more than half-way done I think. I tried a couple of the exercises. I'll let you know when I'm finished."

He turned back to the door.

"How did it go?" Professor Snape asked.

"Hmm?" Harry asked.

"The exercises," Professor Snape said.

"Oh," Harry said. "Not too well I suppose. I wasn't really, um, I was sort of, um, upset about this… werewolf rumor thing that's going around."

"Has it gotten worse?" Professor Snape asked.

Harry shrugged. "It's mostly just irritating. The twins want me to eat wolfsbane in front of everyone so it'll stop."

"Remind me to poison them later," Professor Snape said.

"They were joking," Harry said. "I think. It's hard to tell sometimes."
The same could be said about Professor Snape of course. Harry wasn't sure if the man was serious about poisoning the twins, not with the way he had said it.

"The exercises, of course, are things you will need to be able to do while under stress if you are to truly master occlumency," Professor Snape said. "Though of course they would be much easier to learn first if you practice them with a cool head before you try to do it otherwise. Find some time to relax before you try again."

"Don't know about relaxing," Harry said, opening the door. "I've got plenty of homework, and classwork to make up to boot."

"If you need help with anything," Professor Snape said with some sort of significance. "I am here for you."

"Oh," Harry said. "Thanks. See you professor."

"Have a good afternoon Harry," Professor Snape said.

Harry left feeling somewhat relieved and somewhat stupid at the same time. He couldn't just avoid the man because he was afraid of some awkward father/son 'talk.' But that was definitely a topic Harry had no desire to go over with the man, or anyone really. Harry was enjoying the time he spent with the man and running away from him over something stupid like this seemed incredibly juvenile. Still though, Harry wasn't about to get anyone pregnant any time soon, why should he be miserable for his parent's mistakes?

"Well if it isn't the headmaster's pet dog," a sneering voice said, bringing Harry up short.

It was the older boy who had told him to play fetch with his books, who Ginny had blasted across the hall. The two of them where alone, and the much bigger student had a look on his face that Harry had often seen on his cousin's. Much like when he had had to deal with his cousin, Harry weighed his options. He could run back to his father's office, and hope that the boy's much longer legs wouldn't give him an advantage, or that he would be able to shield his back; he could try to fight, but he doubted his abilities against what looked like a sixth year. He could go through the walls, but the twins had warned him that a lot of the dungeons were warded and impassable.

"Werewolf's got your tongue Potter?" the boy said, stepping closer to Harry. "What are you even doing here? Is Professor Snape using werewolf's blood for some dark arts ritual he's trying out. I've got some spells I'd like to try out on a werewolf."

"Oh come off it Eckelson," Malfoy of all people said coming round the corner ahead with his entourage of Crabbe and Goyle.

"You standing up for werewolf rights?" Eckelson asked.

"Do you believe the silly rumors of Hufflepuffs?" Malfoy asked.

"It's not just the Hufflepuff's, everyone knows what he is," Eckelson said gesturing towards Harry. "And everyone knows you're playing the game so you can just stop with whatever stupid plot you've got going."

How Draco seemed to look down upon a boy who was a foot taller than he was, Harry did not know.

"It's not a plot," Malfoy said. "Just a fact. It's all facts. You don't have to be a Ravenclaw to understand the truth. Potter isn't a werewolf." He turned to Harry. "Don't you have better things to
"Well they are such lovely dungeons," Harry said. "I love what you've done with the place, really. I mean they're just so... grey, but I do have too much homework to be enjoying them now I suppose. I'll just be off."

Malfoy rolled his eyes and Eckelson glared at him with a sneering disdain as Harry edged around him and walked down the hallway. He should probably start walking the dungeons under his invisibility cloak if he was going to be alone, he figured. Spending the night in the hospital wing after being kidnapped on the night of the full moon had sparked the rumors again, but everyone finding out that he had been drugged beside seemed to stretch their ability to believe that he had escaped on his own and the whole, "Greyback infected him and released him to infect the whole school," rumor was going around again. The longer the rumor had to fester it seemed, the more and more he got dirty looks, whispers, and brush ups in the halls.

Harry managed to get to the tower with no further incidents though. He sat down next to Ron on one of the couches and pulled his homework out. No sooner had he sat down though than an older boy stood up abruptly from the adjacent seat and walked off. Harry told himself it was just a coincidence.

Hermione helped keep them focused and they worked until dinner before returning to finish up what they had left for the day. Harry was confident by the end of the night he would be able finish what was left and still have time to relax the next day. The two boys wished Hermione a good night as they packed up their things. As was often the case, they were the last ones still studying.

"Hey Ron," Harry said, hesitantly. "Did your Dad ever give you, um, you know... 'the talk'?'"

Ron's eyes lit up and he laughed. "Oh Merlin," he said. "Snape gave you the talk, didn't he?"

"What? No," Harry said almost frantically, looking around the common room he already knew was empty. "Just um..."

"Ooh," Ron said with an air of understanding. "Got questions? Don't worry, I know loads."

"No," Harry said quickly. "No questions. I was just wondering. It was a stupid question."

Ron shrugged. "I've gotten like five different talks all together."

"Five?" Harry asked incredulously.

"Well yeah," Ron said. "My dad gave me this boyhood to manhood talk right before my first year, then he gave me, you know, 'the talk' talk, this past summer. He said the school doesn't teach us enough, you know? 'Cept he used all these weird muggle analogies about plugs and sockets that had me fairly confused. Well Fred and George figured I'd gotten 'the talk' 'cause I guess all my brother's got it right before their third years so they decided to give me their own version, which I'm pretty sure was all wrong and intended to humiliate me some day. So then I just straight out asked Bill while we were in Egypt and he told me, well, just a bunch of stuff really. Then of course we all got to sit through Madam Pomfrey's 'it's perfectly natural' lecture, which I can actually say does leave a lot out. So yeah, any questions, I'm your guy."

"Was it horrible?" Harry asked.

Ron shrugged. "Dads' were awkward a bit, the twins were horrible, Bill's was sort of cool, and I'd rather forget Madam Pomfrey's."
Harry thought on that. "So my dad's sort of told me he was going to give me the talk," he said.

"Oh that's going to be so awkward," Ron said, grinning at the thought of Harry's future mortification. "I bet he uses a bunch of potions analogies. Everyone uses analogies, even Bill did. Nobody just want's to say it."

"Say what?" Harry asked. Ron blushed. He didn't want to say it either it seemed.

"You'll see," Ron said, as though he didn't want to spoil a surprise.

"Oh I thought you had all the answers," Harry teased.

"Well now that I know you're getting them all from Snape I don't want to ruin the fun," Ron said.

"I don't want any surprises," Harry said.

"It's not the worst thing in the world," Ron said. "It's just a thing you have to go through and then it's done. When's the big day?"

"I don't know," Harry said. "It's just like a big hangman looming over my shoulder. I've sort of been avoiding him."

Ron rolled his eyes. "How long do you think that's going to work? Just get it over with."

Harry mulled that over.

"Is it working out?" Ron asked. "You know, just, in general."

Harry though. "Yeah," he said. "I think it is, and I want it to keep working out. It's nice, having a… you know?"

"Yeah," Ron said. "It is. Who'd of thought you'd ever say that about Snape though?"

"I'd have thought you'd been hexed something awful if you'd told me earlier," Harry said.

Ron grinned. "It still seems a bit unbelievable. Even now."

"That he's my dad or that I'm glad that he is?" Harry asked.

"Both I guess," Ron said.

It still seemed unbelievable to Harry that everything was working out. It shouldn't be possible, he knew that it really wasn't. Believing in magic had been easier. He still felt like he was waiting to see the whole picture.

"I'm knackered," Harry said.

"Last one's to bed again," Ron said, turning towards the dorms. "You'd think we were Ravenclaws."

"Ravenclaws don't go looking through tunnels for giant snakes," Harry said as they reached the stairs.

"Or giant spiders," Ron said.

"Or Professors we think are trying to bring back Voldemort," Harry said.
"That just makes us sound mental," Ron said.

"Sanity's over rated," Harry said. The two boys got up to the dormitory and quietly got ready for bed in the dark. Harry wondered if he was delusional to hope that things could work out with the Professor. He tried some of the mind clearing exercises from the book with mixed results. Even when he wasn't really thinking of anything, he still felt anxious about something. He wasn't sure when clearing his mind became sleep, but somewhere along the way the long day caught up with him and he drifted off.

"You wished to see me headmaster?" Severus asked.

"I did, Severus, I did," the headmaster said. "I have been very heartened to hear that matters are proceeding well with you and Mr. Potter, though I do have some concerns."

"I'm not going to hurt the boy," Severus said for what felt like the hundredth time.

"Of course not," the headmaster said. "But the war is not over, and though we have tasted peace, we all still have our roles to play."

Harry had decided sometime overnight to bite the bullet and let whatever talk was coming happen. He put on his invisibility cloak and headed into the dungeons after breakfast to visit with Professor Snape. There was no talk though, no mention of it even. Was it just a thing that was off in the vague future, or had the whole thing been in jest? Harry wasn't sure. He still didn't get his father's humor a lot of the time. He definitely didn't want to have that conversation any time ever, but if it was coming then he'd like to at least know about it in advance. He felt like that was something he should be prepared for ahead of time.

The visit was normal though. They talked about Harry's projects, he got more warnings to be wary of the defense professor, and they played chess for a while. It was nice. It would have been stupid to forego this so that he could avoid an awkward conversation. Though it would be stupid to think that all of this couldn't go wrong. It was nice to think that it wouldn't; it almost felt like it shouldn't, but Harry couldn't let himself truly believe that he was in the clear. When would Professor Snape realize that Harry wasn't who he thought he was? He had tried to tell him in part, had tried to hint, but he could have never truly exposed himself to the man. Professor Snape had seen some of what Harry should by all rights be hiding, and the man hadn't turned away. What they had now was nice. Harry liked to think that it would last. Harry had lunch with the Professor before leaving with an admonishment to stay safe.

Harry made his way invisibly up to the library and finished his homework with Ron and Hermione. Ron had been wheedling Hermione about her impossible course schedule when Harry had arrived and when the two boys had finished their assignments they helped Hermione by pulling books and looking up this and that. When they weren't doing that, they worked on their projects. Harry was about ready to start on some more advanced protection charms with Professor Flitwick and Ron was working on animating a couple of chess pieces.

After dinner, Harry split off from his friends to go meet with Benjamin for their self defense practice. Though they were both in Gryffindor, it was the first time Harry would be talking to the older boy since the attempted kidnapping and Harry was a bit nervous for the encounter.

"Hey," Benjamin said. "How've you been? I'd heard you were hurt pretty bad."

"Oh, you know Madame Pomfrey," Harry said. "I was healed up long before she let me out of
there. What did you hear?"

"Just that you were drugged and still managed to get away," Benjamin said. "Plus all the werewolf stuff, been hearing a lot about that too."

"I'm not though," Harry said. "They're just rumors."

"I figured," Benjamin said. "So how did you get away."

Harry blushed. "Jumped a couple banisters," he said. "Took a short cut to the dungeons. This potion I was on at the time sort of counteracted the potion he'd drugged me with so I didn't stay passed out. I was still pretty hopeless though, with the whole defense thing. I didn't even think to draw my wand until I'd gotten away and by that point I'd messed my arm up too bad to do anything with it." He didn't like telling the boy that all the work they had done together had been useless, that he had been useless. Though Benjamin didn't look put out.

"A lot of what you learn in self defense classes and the like can slip your mind pretty quickly when you actually need it," Benjamin said. "That's why you need to practice it a lot, so it's like second nature even when you can't think straight."

"I guess I haven't practiced enough," Harry said.

"Oh it takes time," Benjamin said. "Why do you think I'm always looking for someone to practice with? Come on, nothing new today, we'll just practice basic moves, over and over again. Next time, it'll just come naturally."

'Next time,' Harry thought. They warmed up and practiced manually disarming each other first, a short wooden dowel standing in for wands that they didn't want to accidentally snap.

"Good work out," Benjamin said an hour and a half later when they were both tired out.

"Yeah," Harry said, heading for the door. "I feel better about some of those moves now."

"Good, we'll make a master of you yet," Benjamin said before he stopped Harry at the door. "Oh, by the way, I've been meaning to ask you about our resident potions master."

"Oh?" Harry asked, wondering where this was going.

"Well it's just he's been a lot... now I don't want to say 'nicer,' but he's definitely been different this year," Benjamin said. "Figured since you've been working on his potions project you might have some insight. What are the chances he's going to stay Snape 2.0?"

A question Harry had pondered before.

"Chances are good," Harry said. "I think. I mean who knows, really. He's really different in the potions lab. He's always having us gather round for demonstrations, and he talks about what he's doing a lot different than how he does in the classroom. But, um, I think he has been getting, like, progressively nicer as the school year's gone along. There've been a couple of times when I've messed up and he's been cool about it."

"Hmm," Benjamin said. "Anna is thinking she wants to pursue a career in potions maybe but she isn't sure about putting up with Snape for an additional two years, you know, if he were to go back to how he was. Next year is OWLs for us and she's already trying to plan out her study schedule."

Harry shrugged. "Might be a safe bet," he said. It was a bet he himself was making.
"I wonder how many people've made career decisions based on how much they like their teachers," Harry said.

"I wonder how many Potions Masters we're missing in this country," Benjamin said.

Harry shrugged, almost feeling guilty on his father's behalf.

"Are you heading back to the tower?" Harry asked.

"I'm, um, meeting Anna actually," Benjamin said with a bashful grin.

"Oh," Harry said. "Okay, I'll see you then."

Harry left the classroom and started heading for the tower. It was a little close to curfew and there weren't that many students out. Harry wondered if Benjamin's plans for the evening included getting back to the tower on time. He spent the walk wrapped up in his own musings about his father. He had just passed the library, though, when he saw the flash of a spell from behind him which bathed the hall in front of him in orange, his own shadow stark against the granite floor before the spell impacted his shoulder. He dodged to his side, drawing his wand.

"Protego," Harry cried, searching the corridor behind him for whoever had attacked him. There was no one there. There wasn't a sound. His heart still beating heavily in his chest, Harry took stock of himself. His right shoulder throbbed a low burn.

Still keeping a wary eye out, Harry chanced a look at his shoulder. His robes were unmarred, so it was likely an enchantment.

"Finite Incantatum," Harry said, pointing his wand at his shoulder. It still burned. Harry put one of his gloves on and went through the wall next to him. He came out in an empty room that looked too big to be an office and too small to be a classroom. It suited his needs though. Harry peeled back his collar gingerly and looked at his shoulder. It didn't look like a serious burn, it was just really red. The spell probably emulated a thermal burn or a sunburn. That narrowed things down a bit. Harry tried to think of what the counter would be.

"Calor Finite," Harry tried.

"Solis Finite," Harry tried again. He tried a few variations on the latin with no luck. Either he was barking up the wrong tree or the spell wasn't persistent and he was looking at damage done. Either way he would need to see someone about it. Harry crossed Madame Pomfrey off, she would probably try to keep him overnight. He thought about Professor Snape but immediately dashed him off the list, he was trying not to be needy. Professor Lupin was… well he probably wasn't out to get him, but Harry didn't feel like taking any chances at the moment. Professor McGonagall would make a big fuss, Harry was sure, and besides, Percy could probably handle a minor burn just fine.

Harry walked out of the door to find himself in an unfamiliar corridor. He considered going through the wall again, but he didn't want to wind up where he had been attacked. He picked a direction and started walking. The hall quickly ended at a doorway and Harry found himself in the Great Hall. How going through a wall on the third floor had taken him to the first, Harry didn't know. The castle had always defied logic.

Harry kept his glove on and his wand drawn as he made his way back up towards Gryffindor Tower. He was going up the stairs to the third floor when he had the great misfortune to cross paths with the same Slytherin boy he had encountered the day before. Eckelson, Malfoy had called him.
"It's the savage mutt, is it?" Eckelson asked loudly of no one; they were the only ones around. The older boy blocked Harry's path. Harry's eyes darted around. He was in the middle of an open stairway, the only thing he could go through was the stairs themselves and he did not want a repeat performance of previous Monday. He considered turning tail and running but he really didn't want to show his back to the boy.

Harry's grip firmed on his wand. "Get out of my way Eckelson. We've both got places to be."

"Oh your place is nowhere in this school, you half-breed piece of shite," Eckelson sneered. "Of course it never was, you son of a mudblood." Eckelson took a step down towards Harry.

"That muggle blood sure threw your dark lord for a loop didn't it," Harry said angrily. "And my muggleborn mom sure as hell made better use of her Hogwarts education than you ever will." Eckelson took another step forwards, drew his wand and sent a blasting hex at Harry in one fluid motion. Harry was barely able to shield it in time. His shield barely held.

"Expeliarmus," Harry cried out, but Eckelson lazily countered it. Harry took a step back before remembering what Benjamin had taught him.

"Someone aught to teach you a lesson," Eckelson said, and there was utter contempt in his voice and loathing in his eyes. "That's not how a dark creature speaks to a wizard. That's not how a half-blood speaks to a pureblood."

"Stupefy," Harry cried, only to have the red bolt deflected to the side.

"Insepia," Eckelson said, and Harry started to swat himself frantically all over as he felt spiders moving along every inch of him, crawling underneath his clothes, over his face, through his hair. He started twitching all over, his body moving jerkily. It took him a moment to realize that there was nothing there, but he could feel them, he felt it in his bones that they were there even as his brain told him that it was fake. He forced himself to stop moving, though the feeling persisted, but even knowing that there was nothing there, he felt his body continually try to jerk around; his arms wanted to flail, every muscle screamed at him to crush the spiders but he forced himself to stand still. He was twitching and trembling so violently, it hurt. Eckelson was laughing.

"That was amusing Potter," Eckelson said with a sneer. "Perhaps if you entertain me I shall forget how you have slighted me. We never finished our game. Would you like to play fetch?"

"I'm nobody's plaything!" Harry said angrily, his skin still crawling as he tried to bring his breathing under control. He was trembling all over from the feeling, he wanted to scream.

"Then you're nothing but filth," Eckelson said. "And you don't belong here. Expelliarmus!"

Harry dodged to the side, and tried to cast his own disarming charm, but Eckelson had followed his first one with a rapid second and Harry's wand was ripped from his hand and it soared past Eckelson's head and onto the landing above.

Harry didn't hesitate, he closed the distance between the two of them on shaky legs and jabbed at Eckelson's solar plexus. Eckelson's arms moved to cover his middle and Harry reached for the older boy's wand arm. He had the wrist locked up just like he had practiced a hundred times with Benjamin. Eckelson dropped his wand and Harry reached down to pick it up only to be kicked in the face as his fingers wrapped around the older boy's wand. He fell backwards and down the stairs.

A lot of things hurt, but still, the thing that was driving him crazy was the feeling of thousands of
arachnids crawling around on his skin.

"Finite Incantatum," Harry tried on himself. The feeling did not go away. Eckelson was almost upon him.

"Stupefy," Harry said, brandishing the wand against it's owner who was stalking down the stairs after him. Harry didn't know if he was shaking too much or if he was just a poor match for the wand but nothing happened whatsoever. Harry threw the wand over the banister to the next floor below and took up a defensive stance as he trembled all over.

Eckelson threw a punch at Harry's face that he dodged. A few more maneuvers and he had his back up against the wall. Unfortunately it was an external wall and going through it wasn't the best option at the moment. Eckelson grabbed Harry by the collar and wrenched him forwards and to the ground. Harry bucked as Eckelson straddled him but after that it was all he could do to try to protect his face as Eckelson started punching him repeatedly. He stopped punching him only to yell at him.

"You don't touch a wizard's fucking wand!" Eckelson shouted, his face a blur, Harry had lost his glasses somewhere along the way. Eckelson grabbed Harry's collar with both hands. "Half breeds can never touch a wizard's wand. You shouldn't have your own fucking wand. You don't have the right. You don't deserve magic."

Harry reached over Eckelson's right arm to grab his left hand which he wrenched into an arm lock that had Eckelson rolling sideways to relieve the tension. Harry tried to maintain the lock, to maintain control, but his violently shaking hands couldn't keep the hold and Eckelson tore himself free and got up quickly, lunging forwards to knee Harry in the stomach. Harry spasmed and curled up into a ball. Harry didn't know how long Eckelson kept kicking him, but eventually there was a flash of light and it stopped.

Harry stayed curled up in a ball, twitching madly, until someone stooped in front of him, he couldn't see who.

"Make it stop," Harry pleaded. "There's a spell, make it stop."

"What is it doing?" Professor Lupin's voice asked.

"Spiders," Harry said. "Crawling all over me, everywhere, make it stop, please."

The professor countered the hex and Harry was able to stop trembling after a while. Now though, he was left with all of his injuries.

"Let's get you to Madame Pomfrey," Professor Lupin said.

His last essay graded, Severus started to organize his desk; a task he fell into when he wanted to think and needed something to do with his hands. Severus had hoped that another meeting with his son would make things clearer to him. He had been pondering Minerva's words for some time, the headmaster's as well, and he had three things to consider; what did Harry want, what did Harry need, and what did Severus himself want?

Severus cared for Harry. That at least was clear. He still loved Lily, but he knew now that he wanted to do what was right for Harry, for Harry's sake and for his own. But what was right in this instance? Did Harry need a father or did he need a spy, a body guard? Could Severus function in all of those roles? Severus knew what Albus wanted, but Albus's focus was on the Dark Lord. Severus's had to be on Harry.
Severus had just been about to leave his office when there was a knock on the door. He opened the
door to find Lupin standing there looking very grave.

"Lupin," Severus said, his lip curled. "My office hours are over, you will have to see me tomorrow
between the hours of three to five."

"I have one of your students with me in need of disciplinary action," Lupin said, and Severus could
detect an undercurrent of anger.

"I know you yourself lack discipline, but surely you know how to administer a detention," Severus
said, he stuck his head out the door and spotted Eric Eckelson standing a couple of meters down
the hall. "I must ask, do you even take points during your classes?"

"This goes beyond points and detention," Lupin said. "I found him savagely beating an
underclassman in the hall. He also used a compulsion spell on him. All he could say for himself
was that the poor boy was asking for it."

Severus's eyes narrowed. "Injuries?"

"Everywhere as far as I could see," Lupin said. "A broken nose, two black eyes, likely broken ribs.
He was kicking the student repeatedly with him curled up on the ground, I couldn't begin to
imagine what internal damage was done."

"It's nothing he didn't have coming," Eckelson said hotly from the hall. "It's not like Madame
Pomfrey isn't just going to fix it like…"

"If you have learned anything in my house, Mr. Eckelson," Severus bit out. "You should at the very
least know to hold your tongue right now. Now get in my office and stand before my desk until I
have time for you." He waited for Eckelson to get in the office before he turned back to Lupin.
"And what did the other student have to say about the matter."

Lupin hesitated, but then with a sigh he explained. "It appears that the incident was sparked by
these," he grimaced. "Werewolf rumors," he said.

"Harry," Severus said. "Potter," He corrected himself quickly. "The student he attacked was Mr.
Potter?"

Lupin gave him a curious look and Severus started occluding. "Yes, but the identity of the student
doesn't have a bearing in the matter."

"Is that why you didn't mention his name before?" Severus asked. "Hoping I would assign
punishment before I found out it was Mr. Potter in question. You should leave the cunning to the
cunning, Lupin. You're rather clumsy at it. Now if you'll excuse me, I have a student to deal with."

Lupin sighed. "If there is a dispute over who did what, the incident happened in front of the portrait
of the Dancing Friars, I've already heard the tale. I can assure you though that the one who is solely
responsible for this incident is standing behind you right now." He pulled out a wand and handed it
to Severus gesturing towards Eckelson. "Goodnight Severus."

Severus bade him adieu with a sneer and closed the door. He turned on Eckelson.

"Sit," he commanded.

"Professor," Eckelson started.
"I do believe I told you to hold your tongue, now sit down," Severus said.

Eckelson sat in the wooden chair before Severus's desk and an incantation stuck the boy to the chair.

"I shall return after I have determined what damage you have done," Severus said. "Do try not to do anything else imbecilic before I return."

He strode to the fireplace and flooed to the infirmary.

He arrived to the hospital wing and his stomach clenched when he saw Harry. He was sitting on the side of the bed closest to the matron's office, and he had a far off look in his eyes and he did not look like he had noticed Severus's arrival, nor that he was very much aware of Madame Pomfrey's ministrations as she worked around the boy. Harry was shivering slightly, all over, and what he could see of the boy was covered in bruises and blood. Madame Pomfrey noticed his arrival.

"Unless this is an emergency, professor, you will have to wait, I am quite busy at the moment," Madame Pomfrey said. She tapped her wand on Harry's brow and a small gash sealed itself.

"Of course," Severus said. "I merely wanted to check on your patient, since I am tasked with disciplining his attacker. How are you faring Mr. Potter?"

Harry looked up at him as though he had just realized that Severus was there.

"I-I'm sorry? he asked.

"How are you feeling?" Severus asked.

"Oh," Harry said and then paused. He seemed to come back to himself, though he was still shivering. "I'm alright really. There's really no need to worry. I'm fine. You don't need to do anything for me. Madame Pomfrey's taken care of everything. It wasn't that bad at all."

Madame Pomfrey tutted. "Really Mr. Potter, of all the patients I have ever had. You'd probably say the same if your leg had been torn off by a troll." She turned to Severus. "A fractured orbital socket, broken nose, three cracked ribs, bruised kidneys, sprained elbow. We just took care of all that." She turned back to Harry and started spelling away bruises and cuts. "And you fought the Millé Des Aracnis Hex, didn't you. You've torn muscles and stressed tendons all over. Speaking of, Severus, could you get me a muscle relaxant and a deep tissue poultice?"

"Of course," Severus said, turning towards the hospital wing's supply cabinet. Distantly, he was aware that he was furious, but under the control of occlumency he was able to maintain a professional air.

"The Millé Des Aracnis Hex, you said?" Severus queried. That would be the compulsion spell Lupin had mentioned.

"Yes," Madame Pomfrey said. "Probably a good ten minutes, judging by the damage done. A good night's rest however should see him fully recovered though." She handed Harry the muscle relaxant which he looked at very warily. He gave Madame Pomfrey the same look before he steeled himself and drank it with a sick look on his face. The shivering stopped though and Harry looked visibly calmer after he took the potion.

"Alright Mr. Potter we'll apply the poultice and then a sleeping potion will make sure you get all the rest you need tonight," Madame Pomfrey said.
Harry looked visibly uncomfortable and Severus figured the boy didn't want to undress in front of him and decided to give the boy some privacy.

"Well," Severus said. "I have matters to take care of, get well soon Mr. Potter."

For a moment, Severus imagined that the boy looked like he was going to ask him to stay, but the moment passed and Harry mumbled out a 'goodnight professor.'

"Goodnight Harry," Severus said.

Harry just nodded, a worried look on his face. Severus wondered if Harry was anxious about taking the sleeping potion. Worried about another kidnaping or another attack. It wasn't right that he should have so much good reason to worry.

Severus left the infirmary and walked to the headmasters office. Eckelson could wait exactly where he was.

"Butterscotch Salamanders," Severus told the guardian Gargoyle.

He rode the spiral staircase to the top and knocked on the Headmaster's door.

"Come in Severus," the Headmaster said.

Severus walked in. "Eric Eckelson just attacked Harry. He used a compulsion spell and physically assaulted him causing extensive injuries. I am going to suspend him, and I need you to override me and expel him."

Severus had never seen such a look of surprise on the Headmaster's face, though it was soon replaced with a look of great concentration and concern. After a moment he asked, "will Harry be alright?"

"He will recover fully," Severus said. "But that does not belie the savage nature of the attack, nor the seriousness."

"I will not be expelling Mr. Eckelson," Albus said with a sigh.

"He attacked my son," Severus hissed.

"It pains me that Harry has once more been assaulted in this castle, but in this matter, disciplining Mr. Eckelson is your purview. For me to expel a student contrary to the decision of his head of house will raise many questions. This is a matter that would usually be handled with a suspension and a good many detentions. Unless I am mistaken, Mr. Eckelson has never been cited for violence before, and Harry has taken no long term harm. It is best if we do not draw attention to ourselves by taking matters out of hand."

"Harry should be able to feel safe in this school," Severus said.

"Mr. Eckelson will be suspended," the headmaster said. "And when he returns, he will have more than enough detentions to keep himself occupied. He will not have time to bother anyone."

"And what if I did decide to expel Mr. Eckelson?" Severus asked.

"That would be within your purview as his head of house," Albus said. "However, it would also draw a lot of attention to your relationship with Harry. You have a cover to maintain. A cover that may someday be imperative to keeping Harry safe. We can impress on Mr. Eckelson that he is to
stay away from Harry. We must also impress on those who are watching that whatever your relationship with Mr. Potter, it is not one that would drive you to take brash actions. Suspension is what would be expected. Suspension is what we must do."

"And if there was no threat?" Severus asked. "If I had no position to maintain, if the Dark Lord were truly gone?"

"There are very few people who I have met, Severus, who I have believed to be beyond hope," the Headmaster said. "I have been rewarded for having faith in people in the past and I am reluctant to dispose of people. I will address the school once more tomorrow on these werewolf rumors. We will make sure that Harry is safe once more in these halls."

"I will handle the matter," Severus said. "Tomorrow at breakfast. There's been enough of this nonsense. If you will excuse me headmaster, I have matters to attend to."

"Of course," the headmaster said. "I will see you in the morning Severus."

Severus nodded his head towards the headmaster and departed. He did not go back to his office yet though. He went to the Slytherin common room. "Nightfall," Severus said to gain entry. "Mr. McDaniels," Severus said when he walked in. "Go pack up Eckelson's trunk. His clothes and his school supplies only."

McDaniels hesitated but gave a "yes, Professor," and left to the dormitory that they shared. "Is Eric alright?" Flanagan asked.

"Mr. Eckelson is being suspended for attacking another student," Severus said. "He has shown himself to be a poor representative of our house and he is being removed from this school for the rest of term in the hopes that he will realize that savage violence is not cunning and that he should aspire to be more than a bully. I trust that no one here will ever need those lessons."

There were denials around the room. Severus spotted Draco and summoned him with a look. Draco approached him and Severus cast a privacy charm. "Was it Potter?" Draco asked.

"What do you know?" Severus's eyes narrowed. "Just that Eckelson cornered him yesterday," Draco said. "I intervened."

"We spoke of ending these werewolf rumors once and for all," Severus said. "I also said that there was only so much I was willing to be nice to Potter," Draco said. "Leadership isn't always fun," Severus said. "Eckelson has done damage to our house, we should not leave it to others to clean up his mess."

Draco sighed. "Silver test at breakfast?" he asked.

"Indeed," Severus said. "Spend this evening maneuvering. Your housemates do not need to like Mr. Potter to realize that what Mr. Eckelson did should not represent our house."

McDaniels returned with Eckelson's trunk. "I think that's everything Professor," McDaniels said.
"It doesn't really matter, I suppose," Severus said. "Thank you for being expedient."

Severus nodded to Draco and left. He would be much happier when Eckelson was out of the castle. He would be much happier if he could sit with his son and tell him that everything was being taken care of.

Eric Eckelson was not supposed to have been suspended. Harry was not supposed to be in the Hospital Wing. While Harry would be out of the infirmary in the morning, Eckelson would remain out of the school, and his schedule drastically altered when he returned. Who knew what small change in the timing of the nights events had caused the two boys to cross paths, what truly mattered though was how the fallout would affect the future paths to be taken. Severus and Lily had crossed paths briefly over a decade ago, a chance encounter caused by a small deviation, and its effects had lead to a great change in the present.

Albus sat at his desk and pondered the future. His foreknowledge didn't give him a surety, but he could see the paths. He knew what conditions must be met to defeat Voldemort, that hadn't changed, but there were so many things that could go wrong now that the way was muddled. It was like trying to guide a piece of string though the eye of a needle with one's eyes closed. Eckelson certainly wasn't any part of his future plans, but he was still one of so many cogs moving things along.

Harry woke up feeling rested, with none of the injuries he had had the night before. Several of his muscles felt a little tight though and he gingerly started stretching. The poultice that had been applied the night before had dried out and was crumbling all over. Harry doubted that he could have slept without the sleep potion. He hadn't thought he would be able to sleep at all the night before, even with the potion, he had been so strung up. Yet as he had lain awake after Madame Pomfrey had left he had felt it, his mothers protection. It had comforted him as his eyes which hadn't wanted to close moments before drifted shut. He started stretching the stiffness out of his muscles and was in a bit of an awkward position when he found out that he had company.

"You'll want to take it easy today," Professor Snape said from a chair next to his bedside. "Your newly healed muscles are going to be tense and more easily stressed."

"Professor," Harry said, quickly straightening himself out. "Um, good morning."

"Good morning Harry," Severus said.

"Um, Madame Pomfrey will probably be in to check on me soon…" Harry liked that the professor was there, but neither one of them had yet made a move to inform the matron of their relationship and she would probably find it odd for Professor Snape to be sitting by his bedside.

"Madame Pomfrey came to see me last night," Professor Snape said. "While updating your student file, she noticed a certain change in regards to your parentage. We can discuss that in a moment though, how are you feeling?"

"Nothing hurts," Harry said.

"Good," Professor Snape said with a nod. He seemed to reflect for a moment. "What happened last night should never have transpired."

"I'm sorry," Harry said quickly. "Really, I just, I couldn't figure a good way to escape, I said things I shouldn't have."
"The failing was not yours," Professor Snape said. "I've already heard the story from the portrait of the dancing friars."

"It's going to be all over school," Harry said with a sigh. "The portraits are all gossips."

"The portraits alerted Professor Lupin," Professor Snape said. "I must say you handled yourself as well as can be expected."

"I was useless," Harry said, looking down at his lap. He started absentmindedly picking at the crusted poultice.

"You faced an opponent with a great deal more experience and strength," Professor Snape said sternly. "Facing down mountain trolls doesn't mean you can face a competent wizard. As idiotic as Mr. Eckelson is, he is skilled with a wand, and he has many years more training than you do." He paused. "I very much want to expel him."

"Oh, no," Harry said. "That seems a bit extreme." He couldn't imagine life without Hogwarts.

"I said I want to," Professor Snape said. "He has been suspended, and he will be spending most of his free time in detention when he returns." He made very deliberate eye contact with Harry. "He attacked my son though, and I very much wanted to make sure that you never saw him again."

Harry felt ridiculously good hearing Professor Snape refer to him as his son. It made everything seem much more permanent.

"I'm going to let you go get cleaned up in a moment," Professor Snape said. "But I wanted to discuss an important matter with you."

"Okay," Harry said.

"You know what your mother suspected of me towards the end of the first war," Professor Snape said. Harry noticed for the first time that there was absolutely no sound that he could hear besides the two of them.

"The spying," Harry said.

Professor Snape nodded. "The Dark Lord is not gone, and far too many Death Eaters went free or are otherwise at large. It should also be no surprise to you that many of them bear you ill will. My position could still be useful in keeping you safe."

"You want to keep things a secret," Harry said.

"The headmaster and I have agreed that that would be best," Professor Snape said. "Eckelson would have been expelled otherwise. I still maintain contact with several former Death Eaters, and should the Dark Lord ever return, it will be imperative that we have information about his plans. If anyone were to question the relationship between us now, I can always say that I am building your trust in anticipation of using it one day to serve the Dark Lord. That would be a much harder sell if everyone knew that I am your father."

"No one else knows," Harry said. "No one you don't already know about."

"Are you alright with that?" Professor Snape asked.

Harry shrugged. Did that matter? "Whatever you think is best," Harry said.
"Right," Professor Snape said. "Well, you should go clean up. I expect Madam Pomfrey will let you out soon."

"I'll see you Professor," Harry said.

"Very soon, I should expect," Professor Snape said.

Harry went into the small bathroom that was attached to the infirmary and got into the shower. The dried poultice turned into a tacky paste under the spray and it took him a while to scrub it off. It gave him plenty of time to think about the conversation he had just had with Professor Snape. In part he was still mortified for the man to see him in the hospital wing again, for him to know how much trouble he was always. He was still shaken by the night before. He had felt so helpless. He had been completely at Eckelson's mercy, and the older boy had shown none. He had felt so out of control, so ineffective. Another part of him was still wrapped up in having Professor Snape waiting for him next to his hospital bed. He had called Harry his son, again. Harry let himself indulge in a fantasy where Professor Snape took him in, where he truly became Harry's father. Harry got out of the shower and returned to the Hospital Wing proper where Madame Pomfrey was waiting for him with Ron and Hermione.

"Well Mr. Potter," Madame Pomfrey said. Let's see if you have healed up enough to go back to classes."

"Okay," Harry said. He was eager as always to get out of the hospital wing, but he wasn't sure how eager he was to return to classes.

Madame Pomfrey ran several diagnostics before she allowed Harry to leave. Harry joined his friends and they left for the great hall. "You alright mate?" Ron asked.

"She wouldn't have let me out if I weren't." Harry said.

"I mean besides all that," Ron asked.

Harry shrugged. "I guess I wish I had another weekend right now just to not have to deal with the rest of the school for a bit. What are the rumors going around?"

"I just heard that you got beat up and were in the hospital wing," Ron said. "Of course I already knew from when I went to tell Professor McGonagall you never came back from your class with Benjamin."

"You told on me?" Harry asked, aghast.

"I didn't tell on you," Ron said indignantly. "I told Professor McGonagall that my best friend, who's almost been murdered and kidnapped this year, on separate occasions mind, oh and who's got a life threatening medical condition that, what did it do, oh yeah, it's almost killed you a bunch this year, yeah, I told McGonagall that that friend was missing. Because these days my first thought is that you're going to be dead somewhere, not that you're breaking school rules and I should keep my mouth shut."

"You don't have to worry…” Harry started.

"I do have to, because if I didn't, I'd be a shite friend," Ron said. "None of it was your fault though so don't sweat it."

"How often do you think Harry's off dead somewhere?" Hermione asked.
Ron shrugged looking uncomfortable. "Don't make a thing out of it, Hermione," he said.

Harry felt guilty for worrying Ron. His whole life was a mess and it affected everyone around him. He always took a toll on others.

They got to the Great Hall and the topic of their conversation turned to more carefree matters. Harry played with the food on his plate for a while. They had arrived to breakfast halfway through the dining period but Harry couldn't summon up much urgency to eat.

The amplified noise of a spoon rapping against a goblet garnered the attention of the hall and the conversations died down. Professor Snape was standing at the head table and giving a level glare to the assembled students.

"Your scheduled lessons will be starting a bit late this morning," Professor Snape's voice bit out. "Do not worry, we will make up the time at the end of the school day. It seems though that we need a lesson right now about werewolves."

There was a murmuring among the students and a lot of people looked at Harry. Professor Snape proceeded to give a lecture that included many things about the moon cycle, the mountains in the East, the werewolf transformation, and the timing of the events that had occurred during the last full moon. The entire time, he oozed contempt. He didn't mention the attack on Harry, or the rumors, but everyone knew what he was talking about.

"Mr. Malfoy, Mr. Potter, if you could come up to the head table please."

Malfoy stood up, clearly not surprised to have been called. He strode confidently to stand before the head table in front of the four house tables. Harry though was a bit bewildered. He could sort of imagine why the professor wanted to include him, but he had no idea what Malfoy's part in this was. He got up too though, and went up to stand a couple paces away from Malfoy.

"Mr. Malfoy, would you be so good as to explain to your classmates how silver affects werewolves?"

"Certainly Professor," Malfoy said, and he had a practiced ease for making his voice carry without shouting or straining his voice. "Though I should hope that even the youngest among us knows that silver burns werewolves. Whether they are transformed or not."

"Do you happen to have a silver sickle on you, Mr. Malfoy?" Professor Snape asked.

"I believe I do, Professor," Malfoy said. He reached into his pocket and pulled out a silver coin.

"Catch," Malfoy said to Harry, tossing the coin. Harry's fingers closed around it before he even thought about it.

"Do hold it up for everyone to see, Mr. Potter," Professor Snape said.

Harry held the silver sickle up between his thumb and forefinger, there was murmuring again among the students. Harry felt immensely self-conscious and tossed the coin back to Malfoy. He made a study of the flagstones.

"You may both return to your seats," Professor Snape told them. Harry made a quick getaway.

"Since there are also concerns about Polyjuice Potion, Mr. Potter's classmates may certainly observe him today to watch out for hidden flasks of potions being drunk every hour. If any of you still doubt Mr. Potter's word that he is not a werewolf, you can put your money where your mouth
is," he held up a silver sickle. "Or you can keep it shut." He sat down.

Harry went and sat down between Ron and Hermione. The eyes of everyone, it seemed, were on him.

Harry turned to Fred and George, a few seats down the table. "Silver," he said. "You guys thought of wolfsbane, biting, and going starkers before you thought of silver."

"Well that wasn't exactly entertaining now was it?" Fred asked. Harry rolled his eyes. Everyone was still staring at him.

That was how it went for the rest of the day. For the most part. People either stared at him in the halls, or they studiously avoided looking at him. He amassed a few sickles during the day though, and he made sure not to go off alone or do anything that might make it look like he was sneaking a potion. He figured that everyone should be satisfied by the end of classes though. He went to see Professor Snape for dinner, he showed up under his invisibility cloak.

"Thanks," Harry said when he was inside Professor Snape's quarters. "Um, I think that thing worked this morning."

"I cannot abide such stupidity," Professor Snape said.

Harry smiled. "You put up with me, and I seem to recall crashing a car into a tree not too long ago," he said.

"There are exceptions to every rule," Professor Snape said. "Though I have noticed this year a sharp increase in the quality of your work."

"It's been worth the effort," Harry said.

"Where are you on your project?" Professor Snape asked.

"I've almost finished with all the charms I was planning to test," Harry said. "The write up is going to take a while though. I'm supposed to put in all these sources and stuff."

"Research isn't all glitz and glamor," Professor Snape said. "What would you like for dinner?"

"Um," Harry blanked. "Spaghetti and meatballs."

Professor Snape went over to a piece of parchment on his desk and wrote out their meal order. Having dinner with a professor had it's perks. Not that Harry had particularly craved spaghetti and meatballs, it was just the first thing that had come to mind.

Not a minute later, a big bowl of steaming pasta appeared on the dining table, along with pumpkin juice, rolls, and steamed vegetables. As he had taken to doing, Harry eyed the food as it was delivered magically, wondering what it would take for someone to slip something in undetected.

"I understand Professor McGonagall was asking for the names of those staying for the holidays," Professor Snape said. "I was wondering what your plans might be."

"Oh I'm staying here," Harry said. "I mean in the castle, not… I wasn't inviting myself or…"

"I was hoping you would join me," Professor Snape said. "Some time Christmas day. Throughout the holiday as well. There would be plenty of time to see each other, if you would be amenable."

"Really?" Harry asked.
Professor Snape nodded.

"That would be great," Harry said. "Thank you." A pause. "Any Slytherin Christmas traditions I should know about?"

"You mean after we drink snake venom and dance naked under the moonlight?" Professor Snape asked.

Harry snorted into his pumpkin juice and had to reach for his napkin.

"Well obviously," Harry said. "Everyone knows about that."

"Besides making sure no one in my house is spending the holiday holed up alone in their dorm," Professor Snape said. "I typically make my appearance at the holiday feast and then get dragged to the staff party."

"There's a staff party?" Harry asked. He had a hard time imagining any of his professor's partying.

"I have seen things that would shock you and your classmates," Professor Snape said. "And beyond that I'm afraid I am honor bound to say no more. What did you do last year for the holiday?"

"Oh, well…” Harry said. "I can't get in trouble for something that happened last year, right?"

"Is the Granger cat mystery about to be solved?" Professor Snape asked.

"Maybe," Harry said leadingly.

"Of course," Professor Snape said. "There are no statutes of limitations upon school infractions, however, if we were speaking purely hypothetically…"

"Then hypothetically I might have thought that Malfoy was the Heir of Slytherin and I might have also taken polyjuice potion Christmas day to impersonate one of his henchmen so I could trick him into admitting it."

"Where on earth did you get polyjuice potion?" Professor Snape asked.

"Well, hypothetically speaking," Harry said, "I am honor bound to say no more."

"Touché," Professor Snape said. A pause. "Miss Granger used a cat hair by mistake didn't she?"

"Hypothetically speaking?" Harry asked.

Harry was getting pretty excited for the holidays. Besides welcoming the time off from classes, the prospect of spending time with Professor Snape, like a real family, was simultaneously thrilling and daunting. On his way back to the tower though he ran into someone else who was thinking about the winter holidays.

"Hey," Sam Eldrich called out as they crossed paths. "Hi, Harry."

"Hey Sam," Harry greeted the younger Hufflepuff, who's hair was now past their shoulders.

"Can I ask you something?" asked Sam, who seeming a bit timid; which didn't really go with Sam's usual bubbly personality.

"Uh, yeah," Harry said, slowing down a bit so Sam could walk besides him. "What's up"
"Um, is it nice staying for the holidays?" Sam asked.

"In the castle?" Harry asked. "Yeah, it's nice. Are you and your brother staying over?"

Sam frowned. "No, I was just wondering 'cause I heard you stay over," Sam said. "Do you need permission from your family?"

"Oh, um, well my family's muggle so I don't think they get a say," Harry said. "I don't know how it would work with you."

"Oh," Sam said, looking thoughtful.

Harry worried at his lip for a moment. "Do you want to stay in the castle for the holidays?" he asked.

Sam nodded.

"Are any of your friends staying over?"

"I don't think so," Sam said

Harry thought for a moment before saying, "I stay in the castle because I don't want to go home."

"Really?" Sam asked.

"I don't tell a lot of people that," Harry said, with a bit of significance. "Do you not want to go home?"

Sam hesitated. "No, I don't."

"Alright," Harry said, feeling a bit of dread, because he really didn't know what he could really do. "Um, is something bad going to happen at home?"

Sam shrugged and looked down. "I just don't want to have to change everything."

"What's everything?" Harry asked.

"Everything," Sam said. "Like my hair. I like the way I look now. Dad's going to make me change everything." Sam tugged a lock of hair in a grip that seemed determined to hang on. Harry noticed that Sam's fingernails were painted a subtle shade of pink.

Harry stared for a moment and had to stop the first words that felt like coming out of his mouth, since asking someone if they were a boy or a girl seemed rude. Sam had had a buzz cut on the train when they had first met, and throughout the school year Sam's hair had gotten longer and longer, at a rate Harry suspected was not normal. Besides the boys uniform, looking at Sam now, Harry would think that they were a girl, and while he had known a couple of girls to wear slacks to Care of Magical Creatures he'd never known one to wear the boys uniform all the time.

"Your dad wants you to look like a boy?" Harry asked slowly.

"And act like a boy," Sam said. "And play with boy toys and stuff."

"But you're a girl," Harry said, trying very hard not to make that a question.

Sam frowned. "My friends in Hufflepuff said it was alright if I wanted to be one."
"Um," Harry said, really not sure what to say to that. A few choice words he had heard from the Dursleys and on the playground popped into his mind, but he couldn't imagine any of that applying to Sam. "So you wish you were a girl?" Harry asked.

"Nooo," Sam said slowly and hesitantly. "I feel like- I feel like I am a girl, or I was supposed to be. Only something got mixed up. Um... Justin told me not to tell that to anyone though, but I told my housemates."

"When, um- when did you start feeling like a girl?" Harry asked.

"Since forever," Sam said. "Or, well, maybe it just more felt like being a boy wasn't right, but now I know I feel like I was supposed to be a girl. I feel like someone transfigured me into a boy when I was born and everyone's been wrong this whole time."

Could that have happened? Would someone do that? But why else would Sam feel for so long that they were supposed to be different? Harry briefly wondered how he would feel if someone transfigured him into a girl. Would he suddenly feel different about himself? Harry didn't know, but Sam was clearly upset and Harry felt that he was definitely out of his depths.

"What did your housemates say when you talked to them about it?" Harry asked.

Sam shrugged. "They said it was okay to feel like that, 'cause there's a million ways to be and everyone's different and that's okay."

Harry thought that was a nice sentiment but... "Okay, but have you talked to anyone who could, um, help?" Harry asked.

Sam shook her head.

"Right," Harry said, thinking.

"Should I talk to a professor?" Sam asked.

"Um.." Harry didn't know how he thought about bringing this to an adult. He could just imagine how the Dursleys would have reacted if Harry had ever gone up to them and told them he felt like he was supposed to be a girl. His first thought would be to go see Hermione, but as awesome as she was, Harry knew well enough that human transfiguration was a bit beyond her. Of course, there was Professor McGonagall, but Harry could imagine her thinking he was acting the fool if he went up to her and told her one of his schoolmates was really a girl. Harry supposed they'd need someone who would listen first.

"Do you think you could talk to your head of house about it?" Harry asked. She had always seemed nice enough to Harry, and besides, her house was the house that was supposed to take in everyone.

"What if she tells my dad?" Sam asked.

Harry shrugged. "You don't have to tell anyone if you don't want to," he said. "But I'm not really sure what else to do."

Sam frowned. "Will you come with me?" she asked.

Absent anything useful, Harry figured he could at least do that. "Yeah," Harry said. "You want to go now?"

Sam nodded. Harry had never had occasion to visit his Herbology professor outside of class, but
Sam knew the way. They walked in silence for a bit and Harry was unused to the usually talkative Hufflepuff being quiet.

"So, um, Sam, do you fight with your brother about this stuff?" Harry asked.

"He doesn't like me being girly where others can see." Sam said. "Also, can you call me Sammy? It sounds better than Sam," Sammy said. "And it's a lot better than Samuel."

"Sammy," Harry said. "Okay, so, are you going to stay over Christmas?"

Sammy sighed. "I don't want to be alone for Christmas, and I'd miss Justin, and everyone would want to know why."

Harry nodded. He understood wanting to keep things private.

Professor Sprouts office was downstairs and must have been somewhere near wherever the Hufflepuff dorms were. Harry thought he might be more nervous than Sammy who just went up and knocked on the door before sticking her head in.

"Can I talk to you now Professor Sprout?" Sammy asked.

"Of course you can dear, come in," Professor Sprout said. "Oh, and Mr. Potter as well, come in, come in."

Harry knew that they were below the ground floor but Professor Sprout's office was lined with great windows that showed the grounds of the school and let light in for a variety of potted plants that littered the room.

"Now what can I do for you two?" Professor Sprout asked once they had taken seats opposite her.

Sammy hesitated and looked at Harry. Harry was more than ready to abort and make something up to excuse their interruption without bringing Sammy's situation into it but Sammy just came out with it. "I think I'm really a girl, Professor," she said rather abruptly and perhaps a few decibels louder than was necessary.

Professor Sprout went a bit wide eyed at the proclamation and Harry quickly stepped in.

"Sammy said that, um, she- that she's always felt like she was really a girl and that it was like someone had transfigured her to be a boy when she was little, and I thought maybe someone should check."

"Oh, of course," Professor Sprout said. She didn't look upset and Harry took that as a good sign. "Yes, I'd wondered about your hair, I should have asked. No, Mr. Potter, I doubt Miss Eldrich has been transfigured. Being transgender is much more likely. Though I am a bit out of my depth here; let's get Madame Pomfrey, why don't we."

Professor Sprout moved to her fireplace and started a floo call. Things were happening rather rapidly and Harry felt a bit nervous now that someone else was coming. He looked over to Sammy who was biting her lip nervously.

"She'll be over in just a moment," Professor Sprout said, coming back from the fireplace.

"What's transgender mean?" Sammy asked. It was exactly the question Harry had wanted to ask. He had heard Uncle Vernon and Aunt Petunia use words like transvestite or transexual when they would bemoan various peoples they thought were ruining Britain, always saying them like they
were bad words, but he'd never heard transgender before.

"Oh, well, I suppose transgender means that someone is born with a gender that doesn't match their body," Professor Sprout said. "We occasionally have transgender students so don't worry about a thing dear."

Madame Pomfrey chose that moment to floo into the office.

"Good evening," she greeted. "Now what's brought me out of the hospital wing?"

"Well it would appear that Sam Eldrich is transgender," Professor Sprout explained. "She feels that she is really a girl."

"Is that so?" Madame Pomfrey asked.

Sammy nodded. "Being a boy's felt wrong for so long," she said. "I think I was supposed to be born a girl."

"Alright then," Madame Pomfrey said. "And what has brought Mr. Potter along?"

"Harry was the one who said I should talk to Professor Sprout about it," Sammy said.

"Well, I'm glad you did, you shouldn't have to feel that you must hide a part of who you are," Madame Pomfrey said. "Now, Miss Eldrich, the school is very happy to make accommodations to help you with your class mates and to refer to you with the name and pronouns of your choice if that is what you want. The bigger question now is whether or not you would like to make further living adjustments."

"What sort of adjustments," Sammy asked.

"Well," Madam Pomfrey said. "If you would like, you could sleep in the girls dorm, and use the girls' facilities, and, if you wish, we can use magic so that your body reflects your gender identity."

"You can really make me a girl?" Sammy asked excitedly.

"Well, some would say that if you feel that you are a girl, then you are a girl regardless of what your body looks like, but yes, we can change your body."

"That's great," Sammy said. "I want to do all of that. I've wanted to do all of that since forever."

"Very well," Madam Pomfrey said. "Now, for us to make those adjustments, the ministry requires that we perform a test, but that should only take a moment."

"What sort of test?" Harry asked, frowning. How was Sammy supposed to prove how she felt inside?

"Hmm?" Madam Pomfrey looked over at Harry as though she had forgotten that he was there and Harry was starting to feel rather unnecessary. The two adults were making everything seem rather less of a big deal than he had thought they would. "Well it's a bit similar to the charm that keeps boys out of the girls dormitory, Mr. Potter," Madam Pomfrey said. "Suffice it to say, we can tell with magic what someone's gender identity is. Of course, it isn't as simple as saying if someone is a boy or a girl. Gender isn't really two set states of being, rather it's more like a spectrum, but for our purposes here we'll just say that there is a charm that will tell us Miss Eldrich's gender."

Harry wasn't sure how some charm would tell them anything that Sammy hadn't told them already.
Sammy looked happy, though, so Harry figured everything was going alright.

"When can we do it?" Sammy asked.

"We can perform the test right now if you would like," Madam Pomfrey said. "It is also alright if you would like to wait."

"Now's fine," Sammy said.

"Very well," Madame Pomfrey said. She pulled out her wand and a quick incantation later she was nodding her head and putting her wand away. "Now that that is out of the way," she said. "Professor Sprout will be able to handle matters with your dormitory and your classmates. I will talk to your other Professors to make sure that they call you Miss instead of Mister, and I can also handle transfiguring your body, but of course, I would understand if you would prefer Professor McGonagall to handle the matter."

"Professor McGonagall please," Sammy said.

"Very well," Madame Pomfrey said. "Let's see if she's available now." She went over to the fireplace to call in Harry's head of house.

Sammy flashed Harry a brilliant smile.

"Did you want us to write to your father to explain what's going on?" Professor Sprout asked.

"Oh," Sammy said, suddenly frowning. "No, that's okay, I'll write him." She hesitated then. "So, you don't need his permission?"

"Not at all," Madam Pomfrey said, returning from the fireplace. "It is your body, of course, so it is your decision. I have the right to make medical decisions for you while you are at school and if you wish your body to match your gender then I find it medically necessary to do so. Do you come from a muggle family Miss Eldrich?"

Sammy shook her head.

"I can provide you with your documented test results if you would like," Madame Pomfrey said. "He should understand, but if he has any questions you can tell him to owl me."

"Yes please," Sammy said. "And my brother too, I'll talk to him about it myself."

"As you like, dear," Professor Sprout said.

Professor McGonagall entered through the floo at that moment and Harry spared a moment to wish that he could floo throughout the castle whenever he wanted to.

"What do we have here?" she asked, taking in the crowded office.

"We were hoping to use your transfiguration expertise, Miss Eldrich is transgender," Madam Pomfrey said. Harry thought Sammy beamed a bit brighter every time one of the adults called her Miss.

"And you?" Professor McGonagall asked, looking at Harry.

"Oh," Harry said. "Um, moral support, I guess?" Not that Sammy looked like she needed it anymore. She just looked excited.
"Well Mr. Potter, this would be the part where you should step outside," Professor McGonagall said.

"Oh," Harry said. "Right. I'll just, um, be outside then."

Harry glanced to Sammy who gave him a wide toothy smile. He went and waited outside the door. A couple of Hufflepuffs passed by and looked at him askance before moving on. As he stood there, he ruminated. Sammy was clearly excited about everything, but he hadn't missed that Sammy hadn't wanted the school to talk to her dad or her brother. He'd already spent some time thinking about the Dursleys. He didn't need to wonder how they would react if he ever came home with a completely different body. Would a wizard handle things differently? Magic said it was so, so it must be? Would the knowledge that his son was really his daughter fix whatever was going on behind the scenes?

A short while later, a fair bit shorter than Harry thought could account for such a great change, the door opened and Harry went back in. Sammy looked elated. It appeared that Professor McGonagall had taken care of her outfit as well because Sammy was admiring her new school uniform, looking at herself in a mirror that had been placed on Professor Sprout's desk.

When Harry walked in, Sammy turned around and lunged at Harry, hugging him and saying, "thank you, thank you."

"Oh, um, your welcome," Harry said. "So you're happy with everything?"

"Yes," Sammy said. "I'm so happy about everything. This is great."

Harry smiled.

"Well that should be ten points for Gryffindor for helping a younger student," Professor Sprout said. "Now Mr Potter, if you will excuse us, we're going to have some girl talk and then we'll re-introduce Miss Eldrich to her housemates."

"Oh, okay," Harry said. "Good luck Sammy."

"Curfew will be soon upon us, Mr. Potter," Professor McGonagall said. "Perhaps it would be best if you flooed with me to my office and made your way from there. It would not do to lose the points you just earned."

"Thanks professor," Harry said. He wasn't going to tell her that he was pretty sure he could make it there in time using the twin's invention.

They flooed into her office and Harry brushed himself off and headed for the door.

"Thanks for letting me use the floo, professor," Harry said.

"Looking out for the younger students is something we look for when we choose prefects, Mr. Potter. Keep up the good work."

"Haven't I been in too much trouble to be a prefect?"

"Mr. Potter, I nominated your father for Head Boy," Professor McGonagall said. "Nothing is impossible. Though you could certainly do with a bit less trouble. There is a fair bit of time until your fifth year."

"We'll see professor," Harry said.
"Have a good night Mr. Potter," Professor McGonagall said.

"Good night professor," Harry said.

Harry left her office and made it to the dorm with minutes to spare. All in all, it had been a good day. Professor Snape had cleared things up with the werewolf nonsense, they'd had a nice dinner together and made plans for Christmas, and Harry was glad he had been able to help Sammy. He just hoped things went well when she went home. He remembered what Ron had said about the leeway parents in the wizarding world had, but there was nothing Harry could do about that.

"I'm close," Peter said.

"You're always close," Greyback snarled.

"Just one more ward to piece through, I promise, I'm almost there," Peter assured.

"You had better be," Greyback spat. "I've been keeping watch over you on that map of mine. Start talking."

Peter was scraping the barrel. He started out telling Greyback about the recent attack before moving on to Harry's favorite foods. The thing was, he was no closer to breaking through the wards than he ever had been. But he was so close to being rid of Greyback.

Chapter End Notes

I've been comfortable writing about a gay character (I'd warn for spoilers but that's tagged for this story) but I didn't want to misrepresent a transgender character so I avoided really fleshing out Sammy's story the first time I wrote this. I sort of realized that it was more like I was erasing Sammy's story, so I put a call out on Tumblr asking for some help writing that scene and I was really grateful for all the support I got there.

Thanks for stopping by, I hope you all enjoyed this installment. When I outlined this chapter, I thought it was going to be a short one, but it sort of got away from me. Until next time, you may want to check out Nightfall by Le'letha, a HTTYD fanfic where Hiccup was taken along with Valka when he was a baby, growing up side by side with a night fury, crashing back into Berk many years later. Great read, very unique writing styles.
Prior to Professor Snape's intervention, Harry had been looking forward to the winter holidays just for the fact that he wouldn't have to worry about the general population of the castle turning on him. Now, just about everything had returned to normal, though he was still looking forward to the holidays. Students stared at him a lot more than they normally did, Harry felt, but almost no one was treating him like he was a werewolf. As Harry worked through the Occlumency book Professor Snape had lent him, he found himself having better success with the exercises as his life became less hectic.

The portraits, it turned out, where as gossipy as Harry had feared. A blow by blow recounting of Harry's altercation with Eckelson, with varying embellishments, was all over the school. Though Benjamin had actually been proud of how well Harry had done in the fight, (they both had very different ideas on this matter) the older boy had felt bad for not walking Harry back to the tower that night. Harry was sick of everyone thinking he needed a minder. A minder might have been useful though when he was rather abruptly grabbed as he was making his way back to the dormitory from Professor Snape's quarters. Someone dragged him into the transfiguration classroom as he was passing by and Harry found himself hit by an expelliarmus before he had fully pulled his wand from his pocket. He was shoved up against the wall and had one hand pressing against his chest with the other pointing a wand at him.

"What the hell are you doing with my brother," his assailant demanded.

"What?" Harry asked, trying to think of how best to get out of the older boys grasp.

"Sam," the older boy said. "My brother Sam. You convinced him he was a girl, what the hell is wrong with you?!"

"Justin?" Harry asked. "Crap, look, Sammy really is a girl. I didn't convince her of anything. You can ask Madam Pomfrey; she did a test."

"Shut up," Justin said. "Sam is a boy. He's always been a boy. Little kids play dress up sometimes, it doesn't mean anything. He's just confused, and people like you telling him he can be something he's not is messing with his head. Sam can't be a girl. Now I've got less than two weeks to convince him to give up on this nonsense and you're going to stay away from him or I'll make what Eckleson did to you look like rough housing. Got it?"
Harry went for the wrist pinning him while he twisted his entire body out from between Justin's hand and the wall. Justin stumbled forward and Harry kept control of his wrist, using his momentum to drive him to his knees. From there he shoved the older boy to the floor and shoved his arm up into the small of his back. He pinned it there with his knee while he grabbed the other wrist and grabbed the wand out of it.

"Get off me," Justin said angrily. "Get the fuck off me."

"Sammy's a girl," Harry said. "Sammy's a girl and that's that. There's never been anything you could have done to change that. If you want to look out for her then you can help make sure no one gives her crap about it. The last thing she needs is for people to see that her own brother doesn't like who she is."

"Fuck you, I love Sam," Justin said, struggling to get out from under Harry. "You don't get it. You don't get it at all. He can't be a girl, he can't, I'm trying to protect him."

"Her," Harry said.

Justin didn't say anything, he just struggled.

"Protect her from who?" Harry asked.

Justin hesitated. "Creeps like you," he said in the end.

"BS," Harry said.

"You don't get it," Justin said.

"No I get it," Harry shouted, angry himself now. "I get it really well. I didn't know I was a wizard when I was little, but my family knew. My Aunt and Uncle knew, and they hated it. They hated magic and that caused all sorts of trouble for me. They tried to make me muggle, they wanted me to be something I wasn't. I get what it's like to have your family hate who you are. Sammy's been a girl her whole life and her family's been making her into something she isn't. I get what Sammy's going through with you."

"I don't hate Sammy," Justin said. "Sammy's my little-"

"Your little what?" Harry asked only to be met with silence. "Your little sister. You knew, didn't you?"

"Of course I knew," Justin yelled. "He's... She's been... She's not very good at hiding it. Of course I knew, and I had to be the bad guy. I had to make her be a boy. I had to make sure she would be who she was supposed to be."

"She's supposed to be herself," Harry said, getting up off of Justin's back. He held on to the boy's wand and went over to pick up his own.

"She can't be," Justin said miserably. "I can't hide this. I can't gloss over this. I can't protect her from this."

"Madame Pomfrey did a test," Harry said. "This shouldn't be an issue."

"You don't get it," Justin said.

Harry supposed he didn't. "What's going to happen when you go home?" he asked as Justin picked
himself up from off the ground.

"Nothing," Justin said.

Harry nodded. There wasn't any point of talking about something you couldn't change.

"Do you have somewhere you can take Sammy if you need to?" Harry asked. Not every teenager could pay for a room at the Leaky Cauldron over break.

"I don't know," Justin said. He looked very grim.

"Well, think of something," Harry said. "If you want to protect Sammy, then protect her. From everyone."

Justin nodded.

"You should talk to her," Harry said. "If you can accept her as a girl, you should talk to her. She can probably explain everything better than I can. It's great that her housemates accept her but I'm pretty sure your opinion matters a lot more. It really sucks when your family doesn't accept you for who you are."

"I was trying to protect her," Justin said.

"Then support her," Harry said.

"How'd you even get involved?" Justin asked.

Harry shrugged. "She'd heard I usually stay over the holidays so she asked me what it was like staying over at the castle for Christmas and the rest just sort of came out. I took her to Professor Sprout and that was that."

"Dad would never let us stay over the break," Justin said.

Harry nodded. The feeling that there was nothing he could do hurt. "If you need to get her out of there, get her out of there. If you need a get away… I don't know, owl me," he said. "Just, um, she should have your support. Anyway," he turned toward the door. "You should go talk to her." He left Justin's wand by the door.

Harry worried about Sammy as the two final weeks of term wound down, but there wasn't anything he could do about her home life. In the school though, most of the students didn't even seem to treat Sammy being transgender like it was an issue. Magic said she was a girl and that was that. The first years in particular seemed to take it as a matter of course. This might have had something to do with a coordinated information campaign originating from Hufflepuff House. It wasn't the school that Harry was worried about though. Sammy had to go home for the holidays and Harry was pretty sure hiding her down in the Chamber of Secrets for the two weeks of break would probably do more harm than good. Absent anything constructive to do, Harry focused on his work.

As the last two weeks of term wound down, Harry found himself becoming more and more comfortable with his workload. He managed to go the whole time without having a kip over in the infirmary, so that helped keep him on track with his school work. He did wind up seeing Madame Pomfrey briefly for a dislocated shoulder after a collision during quidditch practice though. No one had thought it was a good idea for Harry to pop it back in himself when Harry had proposed it, though he totally could have.
Both Ron and Hermione signed up to stay over the winter Holidays and Harry felt guilty. Hermione insisted that she had too much classwork to go home, but Harry had his doubts. Ron's excuse, that he couldn't stand to spend two weeks in close quarters with Percy, didn't fly at all, and Harry couldn't help but think of how Ron had admitted that these days, when he didn't know where Harry was, he was worried that something had happened to him. The sooner Greyback was dealt with, the sooner everyone could go back to living their normal lives. Ron and Hermione shouldn't be giving up their time with their families to worry over him.

It was Ron that Harry was worried about, however. Or rather, he was worried about Scabbers. Ron had always complained about his pet rat, but he was becoming evidently more and more worried as the poor animal's health declined. Since the incident the month prior when Scabbers had shown up looking like he had been a cat's plaything, the rat had lost a great deal of weight and was losing fur. Ron had taken him to see Hagrid, who hadn't been able to do much more than give diet suggestions and forewarn Ron that common rats didn't live for very long. Ron rarely took the rat out of the dormitory these days, the animal nestled between the sheets of Ron's bed most of the time. Harry thought it would be a very poor Christmas indeed if Ron's pet died over the holidays.

After Professor Snape's talk about the need to keep matters a secret, Harry had had a talk with Ron and Hermione. He couldn't tell them that Professor Snape was a spy for Dumbledore, but he did tell them that they were keeping family matters private for the time being. As for Harry himself, he didn't much like the prospect. If Voldemort ever did come back, he didn't want Professor Snape spying. He knew enough how dangerous that probably was. Harry had taken to being extra careful when he went to see Professor Snape outside of lab hours, making sure to wear his invisibility cloak and grateful for the Silencing Insoles he had gotten in Diagon Alley.

Harry rather wished that he knew what Professor Snape thought about keeping things a secret. Harry didn't need the world to know, but he couldn't help but think of the boy in the cupboard, who mustn't make a noise, who had to pretend not to exist. Locked out of sight so that the Dursleys could pretend he wasn't there, kept silent so they wouldn't have to deal with the shame of a guest knowing he was in the house. He was uncomfortably aware of all the times he had had his own thoughts of the shame he would feel if others would find out that Professor Snape was his father.

Harry was looking forward to being able to see Professor Snape over the holidays, though. Besides Harry, Ron, and Hermione, only three other students had signed up to stay at the school and Harry figured he wouldn't have much difficulty slipping off without anyone noticing he was nowhere to be found. Though there was plenty to be nervous about the upcoming break.

Professor Snape had only ever dealt with Harry in small doses. Though everything was going well between the two of them, Harry was worried that the man would grow tired of him during longer visits. The holidays would be the best time for Harry to assess if there was any viability for a summer arrangement. Though if Professor Snape wasn't going to acknowledge Harry as his son in the predictable future then Harry didn't know if contemplating a summer with the man was any more wishful thinking than any of the rest of it. Harry also had no idea what he should be getting the man for Christmas or if he should be expecting to receive anything himself.

Harry had gathered a few owl order forms to start on his Christmas shopping when he received an offer a couple of days before the end of term that would make shopping a lot more fun.

"There is to be a surprise Hogsmeade visit this Saturday," Professor Snape said over a plate of pork chops and mashed potatoes. "They will be announcing tomorrow at breakfast."

Harry frowned and put down his utensils. "You're not going to try to lure Greyback out again, are you?"
"No," Professor Snape said. "That would be most unwise."

"Will it be safe for the other students though?" Harry asked.

"Though Greyback seems to be the only one of the escapees still in Britain, and he seems to be fixated solely on you, there will be a visible increase in the Auror presence during the visit, and students will be prevented from leaving the center of town," Professor Snape said. "You will of course not be going.

"That's alright," said Harry, who hadn't figured on going anyways.

"I have thought though that for your… surprisingly good conduct this term, I should reward you," Professor Snape said.

"Surprisingly good?" Harry asked.

"Besides your improved schoolwork, you have managed to not receive a single detention this term," Professor Snape said.

"It was hard not getting detention last year," Harry groused. "Lockheart was always looking for an excuse to have me answer his fan mail and give me celebrity advice. I think he wanted us to be some sort of weird celebrity duo. And it was hard taking his class seriously besides."

"Yes, well I do recall mentioning the possibility of escorting you to Hogsmeade when I had the time to do so," Professor Snape said.

Harry's eyes shot up to Professor Snape. "Really," he asked.

"In disguise of course," Professor Snape said. "I understand you are familiar with Polyjuice Potion."

"Hypothetically speaking?" Harry asked with a grin.

"Of course," Professor Snape said. "I thought the twentieth would be a good day to go."

"Well that would be great, Professor," Harry said, already looking forward to the trip.

"I have been curious to know how your lessons with Lupin have progressed," Professor Snape said.

"He hasn't tried anything," Harry said.

"Well I would have hoped you would have said something if he had," Professor Snape said. "I was more referring to the lessons themselves."

"Oh," Harry said. "I last longer before I nock out. I've also gotten some silvery mist now and then."

"That is an improvement then," Professor Snape said. "How have you been handling the after effects of the dementor?"

"Oh, it's alright," Harry said, looking at his plate. It wasn't alright, but he wasn't going to say that. Everyone kept telling him that the Patronus Charm was too advanced for him, that he should just trust that the adults would protect him, but he couldn't do that. He couldn't be helpless like that again. He could put up with the dark memories and the feelings they dredged up; he could deal with the dreams that plagued him at night, but it wasn't alright. It wasn't alright because each time a memory was played back it became more firmly cemented in the forefront of his mind. Details he couldn't have remembered before were being filled in, or made up as horribly as his twisted psyche
could imagine. He remembered more and more of the night his parents had been murdered. There were plenty of other memories to play back, but that one was always there; it was always first.

He now knew the sound of his dad's voice, he knew his father had tried to fight Voldemort, to give his mum and him time. He had fought and died, wand in hand, knowing he hadn't had a chance. It seemed pointless in the after haze of the dementor. It seemed pointless. His father had been a great wizard, Harry had been told, but he had never stood a chance against Voldemort. The act had seemed pointless, but Harry had changed his mind over time. He knew that he would do the same. He hoped he could do the same. It had seemed pointless, but then Harry had understood. It didn't matter if it had been hopeless, he had had to do whatever he could, even if it was impossible, it wasn't pointless, it still mattered in the end.

He knew also, now, that there had been something his mother had been trying to find, something that was missing. A portkey he supposed. He knew that his mother had understood the totality of their betrayal before she had died, before she had died for him, and what a mess he had made of that sacrifice. Everyone always told him what great people his parents had been, as if he should be happy that the world had lost something far greater than he could ever be. He thought of Ginny, alive today, so he could shake that thought off; he tried.

He wasn't going to tell Professor Snape about any of that though, or Professor Lupin.

"And the book on occlumency?" Professor Snape asked.

"I've read it," Harry said. "And I've been doing the exercises too."

"Good," Professor Snape said. "Keep practicing, we can start lessons soon."

Harry smiled at that. He was sure occlumency was the key to mastering the patronus. The prospect that there were random mind readers out there was also motivation to learn. His dad being a mind reader…

"I have a favor to ask," Professor Snape said.

"Oh," Harry said, caught off guard by that. "All right," he said, feeling a bit nervous.

"There will only be one Slytherin student staying for the holidays," Professor Snape said. "A first year, Mr. Latimer, I would rather he was not completely alone for the entirety of the two weeks of winter break."

"You want me to make friends with him?" Harry asked.

"Merely to invite him from time to time to join you and your friends in your activities," Professor Snape said. "If that is no more than studying in the library together, then so be it, but I'd rather he was not isolated for the holidays."

"I can do that," Harry thought. Ron was alright with Harry having a Slytherin for a father, he probably wouldn't mind having a Slytherin first year hanger on for a bit during the holidays.

It was Friday night, Harry's last class of term would be midnight astronomy the following night when Jupiter and Mars would be aligned, so Harry didn't fret about homework and stayed later than he normally did. He wound up helping Professor Snape brew for the hospital wing. It didn't seem like it should be a nice way to spend a Friday evening, but it was.

"Do you want me to pick you up anything?" Ron asked as they made their way to the carriages
across the lawn.

"I don't really need anything right now," Harry said. "Nothing that can't wait for later anyways."

"What was the name of that tonic Hagrid mentioned?" Ron asked.

"Goldstein's Pet Vitalizers," Hermione said.

"Same Goldstein do you think?" Ron asked.

Harry shrugged.

Ron snagged a carriage and hopped aboard before turning to help Hermione up.

"Are you going to be alright with us going without you again?" Hermione asked.

"I'll manage somehow," Harry said. "Besides, I'm not spending the day alone, I'm going to go see my dad, probably brew something."

"Have fun mate," Ron said, not sounding like he thought brewing in the dungeons would be any fun at all.

Hermione turned to look at something to Harry's side.

"Harry! Look out!" Hermione screamed.

Harry drew his wand in a flash. A body collided with him before he could turn around, though. He lurched sideways and crashed to the ground, a heavy body on top of him. Harry just had time to see a mouth full of file sharpened teeth before he was locked in a desperate attempt to keep them away from his face. Greyback had a manic glint in his eyes and snarled like a wild animal; Harry could smell the putrid stink of rotted meat on his breath. Harry jabbed his fingers into the soft tissue between Greyback's collarbones causing the man to rear back.


Greyback slugged him in the face and plucked his wand from his hands.

"You have to mean it, boy," Greyback said. "You have to mean it. But you want this, don't you. You want what I have to offer. We'll howl at the moon together. You'll see it's a gift."

'No,' Harry wanted to scream out. He tried to say it with every fiber of his will but no words came out.

"Get off him," Ron cried out.

"Stay back," Harry said desperately. "He's dangerous."

"I said get off him," Ron said. "Now."

It was Greyback's turn to be tackled from the side. Ron was all fists and knees, and Greyback was all savage ferocity. It was only a moment before Greyback was on top. It took no time at all for there to be blood everywhere.

"Ron," Harry cried out, rushing over. He tried to shove Greyback off of Ron, but Greyback grabbed him by the collar and stood up, lifting Harry off the ground.
"Let's have some fun," Greyback said, taking a couple of steps back, drawing his wand, Harry tried to reach for it, but couldn't.

Greyback brought his wand down in a sharp movement, roaring words Harry knew he had heard before. Ron's face had only a moment to show shock before the spell ripped into his chest.

Harry gasped a shuddering breath as he bolted upright in bed before he slapped a hand over his mouth to hold back a scream. The next thing he knew, he was curled up on his side, trying not to throw up. He told himself over and over that it was just a dream. He told himself that Ron was in the bed across from his own. Everyone was fine.

"No," a strangled cry broke the silence of the boys dormitory. Ron. Fear and horror and rage rose up in Harry and he grabbed his wand off of his bedside table, scrambling to disentangle himself from his bedsheets. He tumbled out from behind the curtains of his four post bead ready for action, expecting to see... something. But there was nothing, and in the pounding of the blood in his ears and the raggedness of his breath, he almost didn't hear the mournful moan, "Harry no," from behind Ron's curtains. Harry took a moment to process everything, his wand still at the ready, his breathing still coming back under his control. He could hear Ron twisting about in his sheets.

Harry padded over to Ron's bed and pulled back the curtain. Ron was clearly in the throws of a nightmare.

"Ron," Harry hissed, trying to shake him awake. Ron was already moving about so much himself though that it seemed a wonder that he didn't wake up from it.

"No," Ron said, his voice miserable.

"Ron," Harry hissed again. He pinched Ron's arm. Ron gasped and stopped moving.

"Harry," Ron said after a moment, clearly shocked. "You're alright." It was an exclamation. It was almost a question. He was half asleep, but he was also loud.

"Yeah, of course," Harry whispered. "Everyone's asleep Ron."

"What's going on," Ron asked in a voice approaching a whisper.

"Nothing," Harry said. "You had a bad dream."

Ron rubbed the palm of his hand into his eye.

"Did I wake you?" Ron asked.

"No," Harry said. "I was just on my way to the loo, so, um, yeah... I'll just."

Harry walked into the loo. He stopped in front of the sink and splashed cold water on his face with one hand, his wand still fisted in the other. He braced his hands on the edges of the sink and leaned forward, his head limp as he closed his eyes and let the water drip from his face. He took a moment to collect himself before he grabbed a towel and dried his face. He went back out into the dormitory.

Harry had hoped that Ron would already be back asleep, but a rustle and a faint snuffle told him otherwise.

Harry grabbed a couple of chocolate frogs from his trunk and went back to Ron's bed. He hesitated a moment before pulling the curtains back and crawling in.
"Lumos Saltatio," Harry cast, and small motes of light came out of Harry's wand and drifted over their heads. Harry leaned himself against one of the posts opposite Ron.

"Here," Harry said, holding out a frog to Ron. Ron took the frog without a word and opened the box, catching the frog with practiced careless ease. They ate the chocolate in silence.

"Dumbledore," Ron said, looking at the card inside. "They way overprinted for Dumbledore."

"Shh," Harry said. "I think he can hear you. It's probably like portraits. All those pictures carry messages for him I bet. That's why it always seems like he knows everything."

"Well you just let him know that you're onto him," Ron said.

"I guess if I disappear in the next couple of days you'll know what happened to me," Harry said. Ron looked down at his lap in silence.

"So how often do you worry about me being dead in a ditch?" Harry asked.

"Did I say something?" Ron asked, red faced.

"Not much," Harry said. "I heard you say 'Harry no.' I figured you were either dreaming of something horrible happening to me or I was trying to convince you to follow the spiders into the forbidden forest again."

"Ugh, I don't need more dream fodder, Potter," Ron said.

There was silence.

"It's not like it's a reoccurring dream or something," Ron said.

"But you do worry," Harry said.

Ron shrugged. "You've had a lot of, like, really close calls," he said. "You know? Like all the time, and you make it through, but I've been wondering how long that sort of luck can hold out."

"What about all the bad luck that gets me into that stuff," Harry said. "That's got to run out too. We'll just have to see which one runs out first."

Ron just shrugged.

"I had a dream too," Harry said. "That's why I was awake. It was like when Greyback first attacked me, but… it was you he killed this time."

"Greybacks not coming for me," Ron said.

"Yeah, but if he came for me and you interfered..." Harry said

"You're damned right I'd interfere," Ron said.

Harry looked up at him with haunted eyes and shook his head. "I couldn't stand it if something happened to you," he said.

Ron shrugged. "You don't have a monopoly on that," he said.

They sat in silence for a while until the lights started winking out.
"I think I'll try going back to sleep," Ron said.

"Yeah," Harry said. "Me too. Night." He slipped out and padded over to his own bed. He didn't get much sleep that night, and he wondered if Ron did either.

The announcement was made the next morning at breakfast and was met with excitement from most of the student body. Harry didn't wind up walking Ron and Hermione to the carriages. He knew that the dream he had had last night had only been a dream, but he wanted to avoid doing anything that would remind him of it. He was stopped by the twins before he could get to the tower.

"Hey Harry," George called. Harry turned around.

"We've got something to show you," Fred said.

"Another invention?" Harry asked.

"Not an invention," George said.

"Though it sure comes in handy," Fred said.

"Come on," George said. They started heading towards the middle of the third floor corridor.

"I'd have thought you would have wanted to head strait to Hogsmeade," Harry said.

"Oh, this'll only take a moment," Fred said.

"It just wouldn't be right for us to leave you here on your lonesome while everyone else goes to have fun," George said.

"So how many secret passages would you say you know about?" Fred asked.

"Oh, about a dozen," Harry said.

"What would you say was the coolest one you know about?" George asked.

"Well besides the entrance to the chamber of secrets?" Harry asked.

"What would you say was the most useful one you know about?" Fred asked.

"Oh, I suppose that would be the one that cuts from that alcove on the second floor to that wall hanging next to the ancient runes classroom," Harry said.

"Well prepare to be amazed, Harry old boy, because you are about to be amazed," George said, stopping in front of a statue of a one eyed humped back witch.

"This?" Harry asked. "It's a bit out of the way to be a shortcut."

"It's less of a shortcut," Fred said.

"And more of an access point," George said.

"Access to what?" Harry asked.

"Hogsmeade," Fred said.
"It goes the whole way?" Harry asked.

"From here it goes all the way to the basement of the candy shop, Honeydukes" George said. "No dementors."

Harry paused for a moment. "Is it secure?" Harry asked.

"It's password protected and as far as we can tell it's got the same protections as the portrait holes," Fred said. "Plus, the tunnel's covered by the castle's wards."

"And as far as we can tell we're the only ones who use it," George said.

"It's a muggle trick," Fred said.

"A good wizard will look for magical tripwires," George said.

"But no one notices the strand of hair we spellotape to the base of the statue at one end and the floor at the other," Fred said.

"Here look," George said, indicating behind the statue.

Harry craned his neck behind the statue and saw at it's base a red hair that connected the statue and the flagstone beneath.

"If someone opens the passageway the hair breaks," Fred said.

"And it's never been broken when we've come to use the passageway," George said. "That's how we know we're the only ones who use it.

"Just make sure you put a new one down when you're done using it," Fred said.

"You've got your invisibility cloak, right?" George asked.

Harry nodded, staring at the statue.

"Right well, to activate it you just tap your wand and say 'Discendium.'" Fred said.

"Have fun walking," George said.

"We're taking the carriages of course," Fred said.

"I know you'll be invisible," George said. "But are we going to see you there?"

Harry hesitated. "Tell you what, if you can find me while I'm there, I'll buy you both butterbeers."

"Sounds good," Fred said.

"Have fun," George said.

The two twins walked off towards the entry hall and the carriages outside. Harry looked at the statue.

"Discendium," Harry said, tapping the statue with his wand. He looked down into the pitch black tunnel below.

Harry put the statue back to rights and removed the now broken strand of hair. Plucking a hair from his own head, Harry spellotaped it in the same position the twins had had it. Harry pulled out his
invisibility cloak and made his way down into the dungeons.

Term ended the following day and almost all of the students left for the holidays. With only six students in the castle, everything seemed rather special with the whole castle done up for Christmas, just for them. There were a dozen Christmas trees in the Great Hall, and garlands of holy and fairy lights down every corridor. The whole castle seemed warmer.

Hermione had drawn up a time table and planned to finish holiday homework quickly and work ahead in her classes. Harry, who had spent most of term feeling like he was behind in his classes could see the benefit of working ahead over the holidays, though he didn't plan on spending the holiday in the library.

Harry did wind up inviting the Slytherin boy, Danny Latimer, to join them. Ron had acted scandalized when Harry had told him that the Slytherin boy would be joining them, but besides some inter-house ribbing, he had been plenty friendly to the lone Slytherin. The four of them spent most of the day everyone left working on homework; Harry would be spending the following day in Hogsmeade with Professor Snape.

Danny had been a bit odd at first. He came off like a caricature of Slytherin cunning and aristocratic propriety; he had worn aloofness like a cloak. He mellowed out pretty quickly though and Harry wondered how much of that facade was an attempt to fit in with his housemates. When studying had turned into playing cards after dinner, the younger boy had seemed much more like any of the Gryffindor first years and Harry wondered if he himself had changed how he acted when he had gotten to school. He had certainly changed from the boy in the cupboard, but how much of who he was today had been influenced by what he had been through, and how much was just trying to be some one different? Being a Gryffindor seemed so different from who he had been, but sometimes he didn't feel as though he had changed at all from the boy in the cupboard.

Polyjuicing into a complete stranger was weird. He'd had a similar experience the year before while infiltrating the Slytherin common room, but today he didn't have an overarching mission to distract him. His body was smaller this time. He was used to being small, but now everything seemed to tower over him. Today he was impersonating a young boy, probably around the age of ten. Professor Snape had told him it was from a random muggle he had passed on the street.

Looking at Professor Snape, who looked like a middle aged man who was much stockier than Professor Snape was, was weird too. He had a bit of fun pretending to be younger than he was. The real odd thing, though, was that the whole day while they roamed the magical village, Harry could publicly treat Professor Snape like his father, and Professor Snape could publicly treat Harry like his son. It felt awkward and stilted at first, it felt like pretending, but towards the end of the day it felt normal. What didn't feel normal was having to retake the Polyjuice Potion throughout the day. Harry wound up drinking the sludge six times and he never got used to the taste. The village was definitely worth it though. It had a certain Victorian Era charm, mixed with holiday decorations and snow that seemed to be strategically (probably magically) distributed to be beautiful.

Harry had had little trouble shopping for his friends. Though purchasing something for the professor, who had kept a close eye on him the whole day, had proved a challenge. They went through most of the shops; Harry was surprised that the Professor had let him go into the joke shop. By the end of the outing, Harry had bags full of candy, school supplies, presents, and refills for his quidditch gear maintenance supplies. They also stopped at a pub called the Three Broomsticks for lunch. Harry had frowned at the stein of butterbeer that had been placed in front of him, the memory of having been drugged still fresh on his mind, but he wound up drinking, and greatly enjoying, the beverage.
The outing had gone perfectly. It was on the walk back that matters seemed to spiral out of Harry's control. He felt like he should have known things couldn't go so well for him without something coming along to muck things up. They had just passed the gates to the castle grounds, the professor's silvery doe patronus walking next to them to keep the dementor guards at bay, when Professor Snape had turned to Harry and ruined everything.

"I had thought that with your evening free, that now would be a good time to have that talk we discussed earlier," Professor Snape said.

Harry looked at Professor Snape in horror. "You mean the talk I assured you I had no need of?" he asked.

"Yes," Professor Snape said, amused. "That talk."

"Now?" Harry asked.

"Now seemed as good a time as any," Professor Snape said.

"But, like, right now?" Harry asked.

"Well, more like when we return to my quarters," Professor Snape said.

"It's just I feel like a bloke should be prepared for that sort of thing," Harry said. "You know, like, mentally fortified."

"I think you attribute more weight to this conversation than is warranted," Professor Snape said. "If the prospect is so unpleasant for you, would it not be best to get it over with than spend the intermediate time worrying about it."

"Nope," Harry said. "Worrying's better."

"I suppose you could use the time to think of any questions you might have," Professor Snape said.

"No questions," Harry said, covering his face with his hands.

"As you say," Professor Snape said. "We are agreed then, you have a reprieve. Tomorrow afternoon at three."

Harry groaned. By asking for it to be put off, he had tacitly agreed to participate in the conversation when it came.

Professor Snape had timed their return very well and the Polyjuice Potion wore off just before they arrived at the castle; a wave of Professor Snape's wand resizing Harry's clothes as he grew taller.

"Thanks," Harry said, when he was resized. "I had a lot of fun today."

"I enjoyed our outing as well," Professor Snape said.

"I'm going to go do homework, Hermione's trying to get us done with all our homework as soon as possible, so I guess I'll see you tomorrow," Harry said.

"Tomorrow indeed," Professor Snape said. It felt ominous.

Not as ominous, though, as the look on Professor McGonagall's face when she came upon him as he made his way back to the dormitory.
"A moment of your time, Mr. Potter," Professor McGonagall said, turning around with the full expectation that Harry would follow. Worrying about getting the talk from Professor Snape suddenly didn't seem like the worst thing that could happen over break.

Harry followed behind, going over in his head what he could have possibly done to get in trouble. Professor McGonagall led him to an empty hallway and turned around to face him. With the castle practically empty, they wouldn't be disturbed.

Professor McGonagall looked hesitant, which didn't suit her. "Did Miss Eldrich give any indication that she expected difficulties at home?" Professor McGonagall asked.

Though Harry had been expecting something to happen, he felt more than a bit of dread at Professor McGonagall's question. "Is she all right?" he asked.

"She will be," Professor McGonagall said.

"Is she still at home?" Harry asked.

"She will be staying with a friend for the remainder of winter break," Professor McGonagall said. "Did we miss something, Mr. Potter?"

Harry shrugged. "She was nervous about how her dad would take it," he said. "I asked but neither of them would say anything. Besides, I didn't think that was illegal in the wizarding world."

"There are limits," Professor McGonagall said.

"Oh," Harry said, feeling a cold pit of anger form in his stomach and a lump in his throat. "What about Justin?"

"He was the one who removed Miss Eldrich from the house," Professor McGonagall said. "He was uninjured." She sighed. She looked less severe now, she just looked tired. Very well Mr. Potter, I think that is all. The matter is being handled."

"Should I have done something?" Harry asked.

Professor McGonagall frowned. "In these instances, there is little we could have done," she said, and here she looked rather pointedly at Harry. "Though if Miss Eldrich had been muggleborn or otherwise raised by muggles, we would have had more options since muggle law is a good deal less permissive on how parents handle their children."

"Oh," Harry said. "Alright then."

"Your classmates are safe now Mr. Potter," Professor McGonagall said. "Enjoy the rest of your holiday."

"Yeah," Harry said. "Um, you too professor."

Harry went on his way to the tower to meet up with his friends. He was conflicted on how he should feel. He was glad that Sammy was now away from her dad; he was glad that Justin had protected her; but she shouldn't have had to go through, whatever had happened, in order to now be safe. Harry hoped she never had to go back.

"So as you can see there are a number of methods for preventing unwanted pregnancies," Professor Snape said. "But not all of them prevent sexually transmitted illnesses."
Harry bit his bottom lip and resisted the urge to groan as he had been doing a fair bit over the past hour. This basic message had been drilled into him several times already. They had covered a number of topics, all of them embarrassing. Harry hadn't needed to be told to be wary of drinks people gave him at parties, nor had he needed to be told that no meant no. A lot of it was stuff that he might not have thought of before but made intuitive sense to him. There were other parts that he was skeptical of though, and others he just didn't want to think about. The part Professor Snape kept coming back to, though, was protection.

"Do you have any questions?" Professor Snape asked.

"No questions," Harry assured. He avoided looking at his father who sat across from him at the dinner table. "I am very certain I won't sack you with any unwanted grandchildren any time soon."

Professor Snape hesitated. "Perhaps I have been indelicate," he said.

They were way past indelicate, Harry thought.

"Yeah, well, you know, message loud and clear, don't get anyone pregnant, stay safe, and it's all 'perfectly normal,'" Harry said. Harry hoped there weren't any other bits of wisdom Professor Snape wanted to impart.

"It is only… When I speak of unwanted pregnancies I do not mean to imply that you are unwanted. You may have been unplanned, but it is rather obvious to me that your mother wanted to have you. You would not be here if she hadn't. And while I can definitely say that my teenaged self had no desire for a son, I have found myself very glad that I have you for one."

"You hardly know me yet," Harry mumbled, unwilling to look Professor Snape in the eyes.

"I know enough," Professor Snape said. "And I'd like to get to know you more."

Harry both loved and hated that idea. He felt like an imposter. He thought about it for a bit.

"Green," Harry said.

"What?" Professor Snape asked.

"My favorite color," Harry said. "People usually ask don't they? When they're getting to know each other."

"It wouldn't be Slytherin green, would it?" Professor Snape asked.

"Not exactly that shade, Professor," Harry said.

"You might laugh if I tell you mine," Professor Snape said.

"I might," Harry agreed.

"Black," Professor Snape said.

Harry grinned.

"I have the potion," Peter said as he met Greyback for what he hoped would be the last time. It was four days until the full moon in the very early hours of Christmas day. It had been a long time since he had last gotten a Christmas present that wasn't a rat treat and he thought being done with Greyback once and for all was a good Christmas present for himself. He rather thought that killing
Greyback was a nice present for Remus too. Not that Remus would ever thank him for it.

Greyback got a predatory glint in his eye after Peter's declaration, but all he said was, "Took you long enough. The hair?"

Peter took out the bottled potion and a phial with a black hair in it. When he had initially hatched this plan, he had intended for Greyback to impersonate one of the twins. He had heard Ron's plans to stay over break and had assumed the twins would as well.

"I made a mistake," Peter said, nervous. "But it's resolved already. Ron Wesley is staying over the break, but his brothers are not. You can't impersonate one of the twins. But you can impersonate one of the professors. The magical creatures professor invites Potter over from time to time. I can forge a note. Potter would follow Hagrid anywhere, he trusts him."

With the potion in hand, Greyback would be checking the map the day of the full moon, he would notice if the boy he was supposed to impersonate wasn't anywhere in the castle.

Greyback dismissed the change in plans. All he cared about was that he would have Harry soon.

Peter handed the potion and the hair to Greyback. Getting into Snape's private stores had proved impossible. All he needed was a sludge with the appropriate ingredients to fool Greyback though, as well as an extra ingredient which would suit his needs just fine.

"The moon rises over those mountains at six thirty on the night of the twenty ninth," Greyback said. "I'll need time to get him away from the grounds before then. Get him out of the castle at two that afternoon."

"That won't be a problem," Peter said.

"This only lasts an hour?" Greyback asked.

Peter nodded.

"Then we have a narrow window to pull this off," Greyback said. "And I am not wasting this moon." He held the potions flask up to the light of the waxing moon. Suddenly his eyes narrowed and he inhaled deeply through his nose.

Peter stillled.

With a look of fury Greyback cast the flask to the ground.

"Did you think I wouldn't smell the wolfsbane?!" Greyback snarled.

Peter paled, but didn't waste any time. He transformed and tried to scamper into the underbrush. He didn't get far. His feet left the ground and he flew through the air landing in Greyback's outstretched hand. He had been summoned. Greyback started squeezing the life out of him and Peter transformed back, gasping for breath as he grabbed for his wand. Greyback wrenched it from his fingers and snapped it in half. Tossing the two pieces aside, Greyback lunged at Peter and dragged him to the ground, ravaging him with his teeth. Peter struggled but it was no contest. The last thing Peter saw was the gibbous moon overhead through the film of blood in his eyes. The last thing he felt was Greyback ripping a chunk of flesh out of his throat.

He hadn't had much time after the haze of his bloodlust had faded to the background. He would have liked to properly dispose of the body, but the wards would have alerted Dumbledore that
someone had died within the castle grounds. He got off of the body, blood dripping from his face and hands. He drew his wand.

"Corpus Incendiata!" he incanted. The body went up in flames that crackled and popped. Greyback took a moment to watch before he disappeared into the woods. He heard a woosh of flames as the Headmaster appeared into the clearing with his phoenix.

Being summoned to the headmaster's office bright and early on Christmas morning did not seem like a good sign to Remus. He rather doubted that he was being summoned to exchange Christmas gifts.

"Butter Toffee," Remus said to the stone gargoyle that guarded the headmaster's office. He mounted the spiraling staircase and made his way to the top. Inside, he found Severus and Professor McGonagall sitting in chairs facing the Headmaster's desk with one chair left over for himself. The headmaster was not in the room.

"Has something happened?" Remus asked, taking his seat.

"I have not spoken with the headmaster yet," Professor McGonagall said.

"Perhaps if something has happened it is you we should be questioning," Severus said, giving Remus a dark look.

"You can ask away," Remus said. "But I don't expect I'll be able to tell you anything you don't already know."

"And I suppose I wouldn't find my missing potions ingredients among your personal affects," Severus said.

"Seeing as you won't have access to my personal affects, I expect that that is a rather moot point," Remus said. "However, if you would like help from a qualified Defense Professor in protecting your stores from your students I would be happy to assist you."

"Enough of that," Professor McGonagall said. "The both of you. Pour yourselves some tea if you must keep your mouths occupied."

Remus was tempted to say that Severus had started it, but the Headmaster chose that moment to walk in. The Headmaster's expression was unreadable, and Remus could not tell if he bore good news or ill.

"Very early this morning the wards alerted me to a death upon the school grounds," Professor Dumbledore said, and Remus's heart thudded in his chest.

"Upon my arrival," the Headmaster continued. "I discovered a burning body in a clearing a short ways into the Forbidden Forest. My initial examination has led me to conclude that two people met in that clearing and one of them was Fenrir Greyback, based on the nature of the wounds inflicted on upon the deceased who I have determined to be none other than Peter Pettigrew."

"You've been harboring him this whole time," Severus spat furiously, standing from his chair to face Remus and drawing his wand.

"Put your wand away Severus," Professor McGonagall said.

"Remus is not suspected in this," the Headmaster said. "Though I do believe he can help shed
"They were thick as thieves up until the end," Severus said. "And now the same time he comes back here, Pettigrew pops up as well, meeting with the other werewolf. I told you from the start that he could not be trusted."

"Peter betrayed us all," Remus said, and Merlin, it still made him feel raw to say that. "If I'd even suspected he had still been alive I would have hunted him down."

"I do believe that Peter Pettigrew has been in this castle much longer than Professor Lupin has, and I believe that I know how," the Headmaster said. "I had my suspicions many years ago, but I find I must ask you to confirm them Remus. I think you may know how he could have stayed hidden within these walls all these years."

Remus felt the blood drain from his face.

"Headmaster," was all Remus could say.

"It is all right," the Headmaster said. "We only need the truth in this matter."

"I…” Remus started. "I heard of his death at the same time I heard of his betrayal. If I suspected that he was still alive…” Remus wasn't sure what he would have done. "Peter was an unregistered animagus; his form was a rat."

Professor McGonagall gasped.

"There are only six students in the castle right now," the headmaster said. "I suspect one of them may be missing a pet rat."

"Mr. Weasley has a pet rat," Professor McGonagall said. "It used to belong to Percy Weasley. It has been in this school for seven years now. I could not speak for the students outside of Gryffindor."

"I don't believe Latimer has familiar," Severus said. "But I will check."

"I did check with Filius before I arrived," the Headmaster said. "Neither Ms. Jones nor Mr. Miller have pet rat's as far as he is aware."

"Do you believe that Pettigrew could have helped Greyback onto the school grounds?" Professor McGonagall asked.

"He could have told him about the Shrieking Shack," Remus said. "And the Whomping Willow, but it just doesn't make any sense for Peter to have been working with Greyback."

"You would have far more insight into that than any of us," Professor McGonagall said.

"That's just it," Remus said. "Greyback wouldn't hesitate to use Peter if he knew he was here, and Peter would probably cooperate up to the point where he could find an escape if Greyback had any leverage on him, but there should have been no way for Greyback to know if Peter was hiding out at Hogwarts. How would their paths have even crossed? I very much doubt that Peter would have sought Greyback out."

"Perhaps they had an intermediary," Severus said.

"If I were working with Greyback, Severus," Remus said. "I assure you I would have had no need to work with Peter to accomplish Greyback's goals."
"Oh but you always loved to keep your paws clean," Severus said. Remus bristled.

"That's enough Severus," Professor McGonagall said.

The Headmaster ignored the back and forth. "Can you make a guess as to what Greyback's next move will be?"

"What exactly did you find in that clearing?" Remus countered.

"Peter Pettigrew's body had been savaged with teeth, a rather large bite had been taken of his jugular vein," the Headmaster said and Remus shuddered. "I also found this flask of potion. The potion appears to be a rather poor facsimile of Polyjuice Potion with more than enough wolfsbane to kill a werewolf. I will ask you, Severus, to do a full analysis though."

"Peter tried to kill him?" Remus asked.

"It would appear so," the Headmaster said.

Remus thought for a moment. "If Peter had tried to trick him with a laced potion then Greyback would have definitely killed him. With no more inside help… Are we certain Greyback can not get into this school. There are ways in that Peter would have known about."

"The wards for the school are much more comprehensive than those over the grounds and much stronger as well," Professor McGonagall said. "They're tied deep into the bedrock as well."

"Too deep into the bedrock," the Headmaster said. "Lest the basilisk would have had to pass through them to get into the school last year. The tunnels that Fenrir Greyback would use to gain entry to the castle still pass through the castle wards. In his wolf form, he could pass through if he were taking the Wolfsbane Potion, however, with nothing but the wolf's mind, he would be kept out by the same charms that keep stray animals from entering the castle."

"Greyback would never use Wolfsbane," Remus said. "He has a trick to get the wolf to target who he wants but he would never do anything to tame it. He holds his wolf up almost like a deity."

"So we are reasonably sure he could not get into the castle," Professor McGonagall said. "Yet more importantly, Greyback knows he has no access to the castle. So what will his next move be?"

"He is very single minded and obsessive, but I think he's smart enough to move on at this point," Remus said. "Though after so many years in Azkaban, he may have left reason behind. My best guess is that he will leave and attempt to start laying the groundwork for a new pack. He won't give up on Harry, but he may put it off and attempt to get resources outside of the school that will help him get Harry later. Of course, he may just be reckless enough now to try to grab Harry off the grounds but I do not think that even now he would do that unless he was certain he could get away."

"Then now is the time to use the dementors," Severus said. "We can restrict students to the castle while they do a sweep. Either the dementors finish off Greyback or he is driven off of the school grounds."

"He may retreat deep into the forest," Remus warned.

"The centaurs have been warned to be on the lookout for him and they will not tolerate him in their forest," The headmaster said. "Fenrir Greyback may be at home in the forest, but the centaurs are superior hunters. He would have an even harder time of evading them in four days when the moon is full."
"What did you mean by laying the groundwork for a new pack?" Professor McGonagall asked.

Remus shrugged. "Recruiting followers, identifying targets, scouting out places to camp out," he said. "He doesn't like to do things rashly, he observes, he plans, he stalks."

"And by targets you mean?"

"Children," Remus said. "They're easier to indoctrinate. He'll recruit adult werewolves who are at the end of their prospects, but he won't waste his time targeting an adult for the curse."

"Thank you Remus," the Headmaster said. "We will keep the grounds clear today. I will ask Madame Bones to handle the dementors."

"We'll want to avoid the outer edges of the castle," Professor McGonagall said. "The towers are heavily exposed as well. We certainly don't want the students to be exposed any more than they have to be. On Christmas no less."

"The dungeons might be the best place for the students then," Remus said. "What do you say Severus, a school Christmas party in the Slytherin common room?"

Severus had a very put upon look on his face.

"I do believe, Professor Lupin, that we are trying to preserve holiday cheer," Professor McGonagall said. "Not smother it."

"Nonsense," the Headmaster said. "We can certainly make more than the best of the situation, the Slytherin common room will be a wonderful place to have a Christmas party. I do think it would be best to keep the students there together. I would not want them to get too close to the dementors while they are hunting."

"Just how long do you intend for the dementors to be on the prowl?" Severus asked.

"A twenty-four hour sweep would be best," the Headmaster said. "Especially since the school is largely empty and we have no need of the grounds today."

Severus looked particularly put out about this and Remus didn't imagine that Severus was happy about his sanctum being invaded by Gryffindors.

"And what will we tell the students?" Professor McGonagall asked.

"Only that Fenrir Greyback was spotted upon the grounds and that they are safe in the castle while the dementors perform their search," the Headmaster said.

"What about Harry?" Remus asked. "He should know that the man who probably kidnapped him is dead."

Severus shot him a deadly look.

"Not on Christmas day," Professor McGonagall said.

"I've spoken to him before about Peter," Remus said. "I can tell him about what happened this morning."

"You told him about Pettigrew?" Professor McGonagall asked.

"I hadn't planned on telling him. He asked," Remus said. "He has a letter that mentioned the lot of
"After Christmas," the Headmaster agreed. Remus wondered why Severus shot the Headmaster an angry look at that.

"Well," Remus said. "Unless there's anything else, here's to Christmas in the dungeons."

Harry half opened his eyes as a hand gently shook his shoulder. He could tell by the little light coming in through his curtains that the sun wasn't up yet.

"Come on Ron, gimme more time," Harry said, sleepily. "We'll do presents in a bit."

"I'm afraid this can not wait, Mr. Potter," came Professor McGonagall's voice from over his shoulder.

Harry turned over quickly in bed to see Professor McGonagall standing over him.

"I shall wake Mr. Weasley and then explain the morning's events to you," Professor McGonagall said. She turned and walked to the bed opposite Harry's. Harry checked his watch. It was barely past six. Ron's head poked out from behind his curtains.

"Fenrir Greyback was spotted on the grounds very early this morning," Professor McGonagall said. "You are, of course, safe in the castle, however the dementors will be scouring the ground looking for him over the next twenty-four hours. In order to avoid prolonged exposure to the dementors, we will be keeping all students together in the heart of the castle. Presents will be brought to you there. You will meet me in the common room in ten minutes so I can escort you to where you will be spending Christmas day."

That was a lot to take in when he was half awake.

"Are they going to catch Greyback?" Harry asked.

"We can only wait and see, Mr. Potter," Professor McGonagall said. "I will see you in the common room. Ten minutes."

She left the two bleary eyed boys and walked down the stairs.

"Happy Christmas," Ron said.

"Happy Christmas," Harry said. "Oh!"

"What?" Ron asked.

"If they're keeping all the students together," Harry said. "I won't be able to see Professor Snape. We were going to see each other."

"That's rough, mate," Ron said. "Maybe they'll still do the big Christmas dinner, even if we aren't in the Great Hall. You'll see him then."

"Yeah, but..." Harry sighed. He needed to get ready to go.

They opened the packages from Mrs. Weasley, they wanted to wear their new sweaters down to wherever they were going. They were about to leave when Ron realized that he couldn't find Scabbers. The two of them were searching the room when Professor McGonagall came back looking for them.
"The time to leave has very much passed," Professor McGonagall said tersely.

"I can't find Scabbers," Ron said. "My pet rat. He's missing. I can't leave him with the dementors."

Professor McGonagall sighed. "I suppose that that answers that question," she said.

"Professor?" Harry asked.

"Was your pet missing a toe on it's left front paw?" Professor McGonagall asked.

Ron nodded, looking very much like he knew where Professor McGonagall was going.

"One of the house elves found a deceased rat not too far from the tower earlier this morning," Professor McGonagall said. "Since magic keeps wild rats out of the castle, we knew it must have belonged to one of the students."

"Scabbers died," Ron said in a very small voice.

"Yes," Professor McGonagall said. "I believe so."

"Oh," Ron said. "I guess… I guess it's been a long time coming. I just thought… That tonic had been helping you know, he'd looked better."

"Yeah," Harry said. "He was probably happier these past few days. You've been taking good care of him. It was just…” He didn't think that he could say that it was 'just his time.' There wasn't any such thing. "That's rough." He felt rather useless then.

"Why'd he wander off alone like that?" Ron asked no one in particular. "He should have been with me."

Professor McGonagall sighed. "Come along," she said. "We can handle this matter tomorrow."

They went down to the common room where Hermione was waiting for them. While Harry and Ron had thrown a change of clothes and some necessities into their book bags, Hermione looked like she was bringing all of her course books and some extras besides.

"So where's the heart of the castle, Professor?" Harry asked after they were underway and Ron had told Hermione about Scabbers.

"The center of the dungeons," Professor McGonagall said. "You will be staying in the Slytherin Common Room for the day."

"Great," Ron said, sounding depressed.

"You will be a guest in another house," Professor McGonagall said. "And while matters are rather upsetting right now, I do expect all of you to accept this hospitality."

"Happy Christmas," Hermione said as they set off for the dungeons.

"Happy Christmas," Harry and Ron said.

They made their way down from the tower and even though Harry had been to the Slytherin Common Room once before, he was glad to have Professor McGonagall to guide him since he was sure he would have gotten lost. The way down was mostly silent. Harry found himself largely preoccupied by thoughts of Greyback and dementors. Maybe today would be the last day he had to worry about Greyback. Maybe his luck was turning.
"Broadchurch," Professor McGonagall said at the entrance to the Slytherin dungeons. "This password will of course not be valid tomorrow. You are free to spend your day how you wish so long as you remain here. The dormitories are off limits for you, but you will have pleasant accommodations tonight. There's a table set up for breakfast, and the Christmas feast will be in seven hours. Now, Mr. Latimer is a first year and the only Slytherin in the castle and I do believe he's been spending the holiday break so far by himself down here so perhaps you can include him in your festivities."

"Oh we've had him with us a bunch this week," Ron said. "We'll get on fine professor." In spite of his words, he clearly sounded like he was ready to be done with the conversation. Harry thought Ron probably wanted to be alone, but he very much doubted any of them would have any time to themselves that day.

"Very well," Professor McGonagall said. "I shall return later. Do let Professor Snape know if you need anything. And Happy Christmas to all of you."

"Happy Christmas," they replied with varying levels of enthusiasm.

The three of them walked past the threshold and entered the Slytherin common room. The whole room was decorated in garlands of holly, floating candles, and Christmas colored streamers.

"Intruders," Danny accused, coming up to them with his arms crossed over his chest. "Come to pilfer the dungeons, have you?"

"Well that's the plan," Harry said. "And we're not being stopped by a first year."

"Oh yeah? Well I've got a dozen dungbombs that say different," Danny said.

"You wouldn't." Harry said. "We're all stuck here. It's mutually assured destruction."

"I guess we'll just have to see," Danny said.

"Well I suppose we've been foiled," Harry said.

"That's a relief," Hermione said to Harry before turning to Danny. "We were going to open presents down here, did you want to open yours with us?"

"Oh," Danny said, blushing, his eyes downcast. "I already opened mine, in my dorm, so, you guys go ahead. I was going to... take a shower, so I'll see you in a bit."

Danny beat a hasty retreat and Harry wondered if the boy, who had nowhere to go on Christmas, had had anything to open at all. Harry knew better than to ask though. He spotted a pile of presents sitting on one of the tables and moved over to sit next to them on a couch that was nice and close to the nearest fireplace. He had a nice view of the large window that looked into the depths of the great lake. The two Ravenclaws who were staying in the castle soon joined them, having been dropped off by Professor Flitwick, and they started opening presents.

Hermione had gotten the both of them homework planners that were filled out for the rest of the year. She must have asked all of the professors for insight because it seemed she already knew what assignments were coming up. It wasn't the most exciting gift but Harry could definitely see the value of it. Harry had gotten Hermione a practical gift in turn; a liner for her book bag that would make it weigh less. Ron had gotten her a box of chocolate roses. The floral aroma mixed with the chocolate was actually really nice, Harry thought. Hermione seemed to like them, but she was a bit quiet after she opened them.
Ron had gotten Harry a number of chocolate frogs, hopefully enough to last for the rest of his Patronus lessons with Professor Lupin.

"You should really start a proper collection," Ron said as Harry pulled out one of the more common chocolate frog cards.

Harry had given Ron a quaffle and a hoop that would float around their dormitory he could toss it through. Ron smiled and thanked Harry for the gift, but Harry could tell his mind was elsewhere.

Harry opened gifts from Hagrid and the twins while Ron opened presents from his whole family. There were no coat hangers or old socks from the Dursleys this year, there was nothing at all, and Harry was just fine with that.

The two Ravenclaws didn't appear to be close with one another and they mostly opened their presents in silence. Hermione struck up a small conversation. They were both, it seemed, staying over the holidays to study.

Harry noticed that there was nothing from Professor Snape, but Harry had been waiting to give his gift in person and maybe if Professor Snape had gotten him anything he was waiting too. They'd probably have to wait until the next day to properly do anything family like. It wasn't the biggest disappointment, but Harry had been looking forward to their Christmas plans.

A table had been set up with breakfast. Nothing too heavy; Harry supposed they were supposed to be saving room for the Christmas feast. Danny joined them while they ate and Harry thought his Christmas cheer looked a little forced.

The impromptu Christmas party was a little droll, with Ron in mourning, the two Ravenclaws reading in the corner, and Danny clearly missing out on an important part of Christmas. Normally it would be Ron getting some activity started, but Harry felt that it was probably going to be up to him if he didn't want the day to devolve into another homework party.

"So we can't do a snowball fight," Harry said. "But what about we play magic tag." He had seen some Hufflepuff's playing the game at the end of the previous school year.

"How does that work?" Hermione asked. Everyone looked to Harry.

"Well we use the glow charm," Harry said. "The person who's it tries to hit someone with the charm. If they get hit, then they're it and the person who hit them calls out the next color. No repeats. We play till everyone's glowing."

The Ravenclaws had put down their books skeptically but Ron looked glad for a distraction.

"Everyone know the spell?" Harry asked, though Danny was the only one he was worried about. "It's Lumiosa and then the color." He got a bunch of nods.

"Good then," Harry said. "The first color is red, rubrum, and Danny's it."

Danny didn't miss a beat. "Lumiosa Rubrum," Danny said, pointing his wand at Harry from two feet away. Harry spun narrowly out of the way and the game was on. Hermione was very accurate with her casting. She never missed, but she also couldn't dodge to save her life. Ron had a very good sense of what was going on around him, but he was hit and miss when he was it. Effie Jones, who was a seventh year in Ravenclaw was the last one to be hit. Her housemate, Thomas Miller, who looked far taller and lankier than he was used to being, was hit the most. Harry was only hit once; he was very light on his feet. He had always had to be. He was glad too when he hit Hermione with his first shot. He actually was capable of hitting his mark, though it wasn't as
though it mattered when the only thing at stake was a game.

They were a rainbow of colors and very out of breath when they settled down for a card house building tournament with exploding snap cards. Later, after the glow charms had worn off, they played a magical version of the game Risk which Danny said was very popular in the Slytherin common room. The board was very large and all of the pieces moved and battled on their own in response to their dice rolls. They all had charmed parchment so they could send messages to each other; forming secret alliances and goading other players to attack each other.

Hermione was very good at it and scarily ruthless. Harry and Ron kept an alliance going until Harry was wiped off the board. Harry felt that Ron had largely been carrying him through the game. Danny took Harry's last territory before Ron took him out in vengeance. Effie was next to be taken out and Ron and Tom formed an alliance that lasted until Hermione seemed to be on the ropes. Tom betrayed Ron while he was engaged with Hermione and the two fought ruthlessly until their armies were decimated. Hermione then revealed her forces kept in reserve and swept the board. Harry was rather certain that she had planned the entire thing.

The game had gotten a few spectators along the way as professors had started trickling in as the Christmas feast approached. Professor Snape had watched with a quiet intensity while Professor Flitwick had been full of excitement and bubbly bravos and congratulations. By the time the game had ended the teachers outnumbered the students and Professor Dumbledore arrived as the game was put away. At his bidding to take seats, Harry turned around to find a heavily laden table that he was certain had not been there before the Headmaster had spoken.

Harry, by seeming random happenstance, was seated next to Professor Snape and while they chatted during the meal, it definitely lacked the familiarity that had developed between them over the past weeks. It was alright for them to appear to be on friendly terms in public, it wasn't alright for them to show filial attachment.

The feast was excellent, as it was always, and the dungeons proved to be a perfectly fitting setting, done up as they were. The feast devolved into a student teacher Christmas party that lasted into the evening. Harry watched a rather good game of chess between Ron and Professor Flitwick while he played gobstones with Professor Sprout, Danny, and Thomas. Hermione had to be reminded a couple of times not to ask the Professors about classwork during the party. She spent a lot of time asking them about their careers. He spent time with his father, a card game here, a chess game there, but the whole event was entirely lacking in the anticipated family Christmas feeling that Harry had hoped for. Harry knew that it was a far better Christmas than he could have hoped for before he had come to Hogwarts, and he felt a bit ungrateful for being disappointed. He wondered how Sammy and her brother were doing. They were away from home and away from school for the holidays. They were dealing with a lot more than anything Harry was going through. He couldn't do anything about that though and he focused on trying to enjoy the holiday.

Carols were sung, Christmas crackers were popped, and Ravenclaws were kept from their books. For all that it was lacking, it seemed the picture perfect Christmas such as he might have seen in one of the movies that was on the telly around the holidays. Harry's mind couldn't help but be drawn to his book bag where a gift-wrapped present sat and the man across the room he wanted to give it to.

The teachers departed one after another after a while and the evening was a rather quiet affair after the eventful day. That night, before they called it quits, Harry gave Danny some chocolate frogs, hastily done up in discarded wrapping paper. He was surprised by a fierce hug before the younger boy ran out to his dormitory. Hermione gave him a sad smile.
Couches were transfigured into beds and they turned in for the night, all of them a little exhausted. A year ago it would have been the perfect Christmas. A year ago he hadn't had a father he couldn't acknowledge.

The tunnel was protected. Not enough to keep him from feeling the dementors effects as they glided by, but enough to keep him hidden from them. Now and then, one would get too close and he would cling to the wolf inside. Everything had been bollocksed. He had been here for almost four months. He had spent three moons unable to hunt. His chances of getting the boy, of getting cleanly away, had dwindled.

Harry Potter belonged to him. He was Greyback's prey, the boy would be part of Greyback's pack, he would give the boy his mark, and Black would spin in his grave as Potter howled at the moon. There could be no better feather in his cap than to have the Boy-Who-Lived in his pack. The boy was his, and he would make him his. The first step to building his pack. His pack that would make the world tremble. His pack that would hunt. His pack that would grow. His pack that would stand at the top. His wolf at the apex. The wolf brought strength. The wolf gave clarity, focus, purpose. The wolf was everything and Greyback was his vessel. The world would be their hunting grounds.

Potter was in the castle though. Potter was in the castle and Greyback was on the outside where the dementors prowled, and the Aurors plotted, and the Headmaster schemed, and here Greyback sat, waiting for a moon without blood; a moon without the hunt. He would need resources. He had a purpose, a glorious purpose. He could not be caught. He could not waste away. He would come for Potter again and Potter would be his, but until he was ready he needed to go. He needed to prepare. The boy would be his, but not today.

Greyback glanced at the map in his hands and the names that had stopped moving now that night had come. He would return, but until then he had work to do. He turned around and loped through the tunnel. He could feel dementors up ahead. The moment he was past the wards upon the grounds, he portkeyed away.

Harry and Professor Snape met the next day after the Dementors had been cleared from the castle grounds. Harry was pleased to see that Professor Snape had gotten him a Christmas present, new leather gauntlets for quidditch and an admonishment to stay away from bludgers so he wouldn't need them. Harry gave Professor Snape his gift, a framed picture of his mother and him when he was a baby from his album with some black licorice as well. Harry couldn't stand the stuff, but Professor Snape seemed to like it. They spent the day together, and it was nice, but Harry felt it lacked whatever it was he had been hoping Christmas would be. Their get together took a serious note towards the end though.

"There's something I need to tell you," Professor Snape said, after they had had dinner.

"I already figured you would have said something if Greyback had been captured," Harry had said. Besides Professor McGonagall's explanation for their Christmas accommodations the day prior, no one had mentioned Greyback since. He wasn't exactly a topic for the holidays.

"He was not captured," Professor Snape nodded. "But this has to do with how he was spotted in the first place. Lupin says he told you about Peter Pettigrew and the role he played in your mother's death."

Harry nodded, having no idea where the conversation was going.

"It would appear," Professor Snape said, "that he faked his death twelve years ago. His body was
found upon the grounds early yesterday morning. The nature of his death suggests that he was killed by Greyback. It looks like he had been working with Greyback but had attempted to betray him. We think it most likely that he was the one who attempted to kidnap you last month. Especially based on your limited description of the man.”

"I don't understand," Harry said. "If Greyback can't get into the castle, how did he? And how did he betray Greyback? And how could he be alive this whole time? He was… He was the one who betrayed my parents. Where's he been hiding?"

"According to Lupin, he was a rat animagus," Professor Snape said. "And it was most likely that he was brought in by a student."

"Scabbers!" Harry said, horrified. "He got rid of scabbers and replaced him to get into the castle."

"It is more likely that he has always been the Weasley's pet rat," Professor Snape said. "The Headmaster visited the Weasleys this morning. They've had that rat since not long after Pettigrew faked his death."

Harry felt sick to his stomach. The very thought that he had effectively been living with the man who had betrayed his parents was entirely too distressing.

"You must still be careful," Professor Snape said. "Do not trust Lupin. We do not know what Greyback will do now, but even without the aid of Pettigrew we can not trust that he does not still have influence in the castle."

"You said Pettigrew was the one who kidnapped me," Harry said.

"There are too many connections between Lupin, Greyback, and Pettigrew," Professor Snape said. "Do not assume that he is what he appears to be."

Harry nodded.

"Does Ron know?" Harry asked. "He was going to see Professor McGonagall today about Scabbers's remains."

"He has been informed," Professor Snape said.

"I should go," Harry said. "He'll be pretty upset."

"I imagine you are as well," Professor Snape said.

Harry shrugged.

"I'll be alright," Harry said.

"Will you be ready for your first Occlumency lesson tomorrow?" Professor Snape asked.

Harry hesitated. He had high hopes that Occlumency was the key to mastering the Patronus Charm. He was also terrified of the prospect of Professor Snape reading his mind, or anyone else for that matter. He would probably feel differently tomorrow, but at that moment, he rather didn't feel like he was capable of clearing his mind or doing any of the exercises.

"Maybe later this week," Harry said. "I just, um, need some time."

"Friday?" Professor Snape asked. "After lunch."
"Yeah," Harry said. "I'll see you… Um, Happy Christmas."

"Happy Christmas Harry," Professor Snape said. "Although, you should know that Lupin is planning to tell you about Pettigrew. It would be best if you did not tell him that I had already told you."

"Right," Harry said. "Bye."

"Have a good night," Professor Snape said.

"Good night," Harry said. He left and headed to the tower. He shouldn't have been surprised the way the universe had been treating him that day that he should pass Professor Lupin on his way.

"Harry," Professor Lupin said. "How are you, I hope your holiday went well, in spite of the situation."

"It was great," Harry said. "Thanks."

"There's something I wanted to talk to you about," Professor Lupin said.

"Pettigrew," Harry said. "Yeah I know, I overheard… I wasn't eavesdropping, but I… Yeah, I overheard."

"That's not how I would have liked for you to find out," Professor Lupin said. "If you have any questions…"

"I don't," Harry said quickly. "I'm sorry, I've got to go. I'll see you Thursday for our lesson. I mean; I know I've taken up a lot of your holiday."

"Nonsense," Professor Lupin said. "You haven't taken up my holiday, though now that you mention it, I don't think I'll be available Thursday, but your schedule is probably clear for the week, perhaps another day."

"Yeah," Harry said. "Wednesday?" He'd like to keep his time with dementors further away from his Occlumency lesson.

"That won't work either," Professor Lupin said. "How about Friday?"

"In the evening?" Harry asked. Maybe he would have better luck with the spell if he had just been practicing Occlumency.

"That works for me," Professor Lupin said. "I'll let you go, you seem to be a bit in a hurry."

"Thanks, yeah," Harry said. "Happy Christmas, Professor."

"Happy Christmas, Harry," Professor Lupin said.

Harry went up to the tower where he was greeted by a rather upset Ron and a worried Hermione.

The next few days went rather uneventfully. They studied for the most part. Danny joined them off and on. The thing that was bothering Harry was that there seemed to be something off between him and Ron. He certainly didn't blame Ron for Scabbers being a secret evil wizard who had betrayed his parents and kidnapped him. He could also understand why Ron was upset about Scabbers, but it felt like it was a barrier between the two of them and Harry didn't understand why. It made him feel sick, thinking about the loss of camaraderie between the two of them. It felt wrong to be with
Ron and feel like that.

Wednesday came, and with it the full moon. They had a small gathering in the tower, inviting Danny, Tom, and Effie, just so Harry would have an alibi for the day. The next day he spent a lot of time practicing the Occlumency exercises from the book Professor Snape lent him. He wondered where Professor Lupin had gone, since he hadn't noticed him the evening prior at dinner or that morning at breakfast. The small part of him that was suspicious of everyone, and Defense Professors in particular, whispered that he was off meeting Greyback. Professor Lupin reappeared that night at dinner looking slightly ill.

Friday came and with it his first Occlumency lesson. He had lunch with Professor Snape and then they went to the parlor where two chairs were set up opposite one another.

"This exercise is rather simple," Professor Snape said when they had settled. "Think of what you had for breakfast this morning. Now, I'm going to ask you what you had for breakfast and you are going to tell me a lie while at the same time, preventing me from seeing the truth in your mind. From your reading, what methods can you use to accomplish this that will also help you with the Patronus Charm?"

"Umm.. The two most basic methods are Direct Deception where I focus in my mind on the false answer to fool you and Shielded Exclusion, where I'm thinking of something completely different to prevent you from seeing anything to do with my breakfast," Harry said.

"That is correct," Professor Snape said. "Both of those methods will help you with the Patronus Charm. When you use Direct Deception, you don't just think of the answer you want me to see, it must appear in your brain like a true memory, you must experience the deception in your head as if it were something that had truly happened. Shielded Exclusion is very good for focusing yourself on certain matters, so for example, the ability to focus on your happy memory while feeling the effects of a dementor. In protecting your mind, Shielded Exclusion prevents me from having anything to grasp onto that might lead me to seeing what you had for your breakfast. Your book of course has a good many other techniques, but these two in particular will help you with the Patronus."

"I've been practicing them," Harry said.

"Good," Professor Snape said. "Do you have any questions before we start?"

"No," Harry said, though he didn't really feel ready to start.

"Remember," Professor Snape said. "If there is anything you wish me not to see, trying not to think about it is the best way to accidentally think about it. Focus on the exercise, do not worry about anything else. Do not focus on not letting me see what you had for breakfast, focus on selling me on the deception you are telling me. We will start with Direct Deception first. This exercise requires eye contact. I will not be using my wand since I will be using the most passive of Legilimency to begin with. Ready?"

Harry nodded, beginning the exercise.

"What did you have for breakfast?" Professor Snape asked.

"Waffles with syrup and strawberries," Harry said.

"Good," Professor Snape said. "I did not see the truth, but what I did see did not feel like a memory, it felt like your imagination. Again."
Harry nodded.

"What did you have for breakfast?"

"Waffles with syrup and strawberries," Harry said again.

They repeated the exercise several times until Harry got comfortable with it, though when Harry started to get the hang of it, Professor Snape started mixing things up.

"What did you receive from Miss Granger for Christmas?" Professor Snape asked.

"Wait, what?" Harry asked.

"You are currently singularly focused on this breakfast deception," Professor Snape said. "Now we throw in distractions. Simple, innocuous questions that have nothing to do with the deception. Once I have you distracted, I bring you back to what I want to know. It forces you to think quickly and adapt."

"Oh," Harry said. "But it's just questions like that, right?"

"I will not try to catch you out for rule breaking," Professor Snape said.

Harry frowned but nodded.

"What did you receive from Miss Granger for Christmas?" Professor Snape asked.

"A homework planner," Harry said.

"Yes," Professor Snape said. "She came to me to ask about future assignments. How has your studying been going?"

"Good," Harry said. "We're already studying ahead for next term."

"I'm glad to hear it," Professor Snape said. "What was the last essay you worked on?"

"Charms," Harry said. "Reductive Animation."

"And what is thirty nine divided by three?" Professor Snape asked.

"Thirteen," Harry said with a moments thought.

"What did you have for breakfast this morning?" Professor Snape asked.

"Um... Waffles with syrup and strawberries," Harry said. He didn't need Professor Snape to tell him he hadn't done it right.

"Let's try that again," Professor Snape said.

They worked at it for a while before switching to Shielded Exclusion. Harry didn't like any of it. Who knew where an innocuous thought could lead. He did rather well, though, at keeping focused in the moment. Practicing the exercises as much as he had had helped. After a while he thought he could actually feel Professor Snape in his head. The book had said that with practice, he would become sensitive to the presence of others, depending on how delicate they were and how sensitive he was. It was good to know the feeling of someone being in his head, but he didn't like it one bit.

Though he had been sitting the whole time, Harry felt rather exhausted when they were done. It
was dinner time already, they had practiced for hours. They ate and Harry left for his lesson with Professor Lupin.

Professor Lupin looked a bit better than he had the day before, and he greeted Harry with a smile and his usual pleasant manner. Harry used the techniques he had just been practicing as he focused on the charm and the feeling of his protection, the feeling of his mothers love that was always there with him, that came to him when he needed it. He used the techniques to focus on the feeling, to experience it while keeping other thoughts away. He wasn't quite there, but he was definitely improving. He was definitely doing better. There was more white mist and he lasted longer before he passed out.

Harry was munching on chocolate towards the end of the lesson while Professor Lupin graded some papers. He was trying to distract himself from everything going through his head when he had a thought about the professor being gone earlier. He thought about how the professor had known ahead of time he would be gone. He thought about all the other times he had been gone. He went over all the conversations he had had with Professor Lupin about werewolves. He pondered for a moment before bringing it up.

"Weren't you worried, coming to Hogwarts, when everyone would be focusing on werewolves and the moon?" Harry asked quietly, keeping an eye on the door.

Professor Lupin froze, not looking up from his grading. "People's prejudices against werewolves protect me actually. They see what they expect to see," He said. He looked over at Harry. "I don't act the way they would expect a werewolf to act so they don't notice what's rather obvious. It took over a year for your father to figure it out."

"Wait," Harry said. "How long have you been…"

"I was eight when I was bitten," Remus said.

"Greyback?" Harry asked.

Professor Lupin nodded. "He tried to take me for his pack, but I was rescued by my father that night."

"That potion Professor Snape makes for you?" Harry asked.

"Wolfsbane Potion," Professor Lupin said. "It keeps my mind from being taken over by the wolf during the transformation."

Harry frowned. "Is that why he doesn't trust you? Professor Snape? Because you're a werewolf?"

"We have a rather long and trying history between us," was all Professor Lupin said. "You should know your father and Sirius… and Peter, became Animagi because they found out about me. There was no Wolfsbane Potion back then. The transformation is extremely trying when the wolf cannot hunt, it will attack itself."

Harry noticed the many scars that marred the professors face and hands in horror.

"Animals are safe though, werewolves only hunt humans," Professor Lupin said. "Transformed, your father and Sirius could keep me company and distract me. It was a godsend."

"What were they?" Harry asked.

"Sirius was a very large black dog, though he acted like a puppy," Professor Lupin said with a sad
smile. "Your father was a stag."

Harry smiled. "Did my mom know?" he asked.

"Oh she certainly noticed your father disappearing once a month," Professor Lupin said. "Nothing much got past her. She figured everything out in our seventh year."

Harry smiled at that. He bit his lip.

"Greyback likes being a werewolf," Harry said.

"He does," Professor Lupin said, nodding in agreement. "Most, however, would give anything for a cure. If I'd ever spoken to him I'm sure he would have told me that he had done me a favor, but I'll never not regret that night."

He looked at Harry sadly. "It was the summer, and we normally kept the windows open. I hadn't understood that night why I had to keep it closed. I got too warm and... I opened the window."

"That's why you became an expert on Greyback?" Harry asked.

Professor Lupin nodded.

"Was that why Mr. Black went after him?" Harry asked.

Professor Lupin sighed. "He had made it his personal mission to 'avenge' me. Losing him... Losing him like that was the hardest. He'd been... We had been very close."

Harry could imagine what it would be like to lose Ron like that. He could imagine how he would feel.

"Do you hate him?" Harry asked. "Greyback?"

"More than anyone," Professor Lupin said. "More than Voldemort, more than those who think I should be killed for being what I am, more than those who..." He sighed. "It doesn't help us to dwell on hate though Harry. There are many people who have wronged you in life. It is alright to be angry, it is alright to hate them, but in the end you have to be able to live your life as if they didn't exist. After the war, I tried very hard to do just that."

"How'd that work out?" Harry asked.

"Better some days than others," Professor Lupin said. "Do you want some tea? This feels like a tea conversation."

Harry froze. He knew better. He definitely knew better. But though he knew better, the voice that told him not to trust Professor Lupin was quiet. He knew better but... more than ever now, he felt that he could trust the man.

"Alright," Harry said.

He still watched the man make it. He still felt nervous drinking it. He knew that it would be alright though.

"Can you tell me more about my father?" Harry asked. "Did he ever do anything being an animagus besides keeping you company?"

"Oh the stories I could tell," Professor Lupin said. "You'd best get settled then, this might take a
So I recently watched the BBC’s Broadchurch on Netflix and couldn't help but bring in a couple of characters just for a side bit. I hope you all enjoyed this latest installment and that you will tune in next time. Please let me know if you have any thoughts on the chapter or the story. Until next time, I hope you all find wonderful stories to read.
Harry had found himself worrying on and off about Sammy throughout the winter break and he felt that seeing her again when all of the students returned from holiday put him a bit at ease. He knew full well though how people could put on a good face and marshal through rough times. They wound up crossing paths a couple of weeks into the new term and Sammy told him all about how wonderful her housemates were and how well she was getting on with her brother now. She didn't mention the winter holidays and Harry didn't ask.

He didn't get much time to dwell on it. He didn't regularly see Sammy and besides a brief and awkward interaction with Justin a few days later, Harry didn't much have time to think of the Eldrichs. The new term started at a fast pace and there was no sign it would be slowing down any time soon. The only reprieve Harry really had was visiting with Professor Snape and Quidditch and two weeks into term a very important game arrived.

"I suppose congratulations are in order Professor," Harry said when he walked into Professor Snape's quarters. "That was a solid victory for Slytherin."

He could have just walked there with the Professor, but Professor Snape was keeping Harry a secret, so walking back to the castle together would have looked weird.

"Oh, I hardly had any hand in that," Professor Snape said. "You may certainly congratulate the team if you have the chance; I'm sure they would appreciate that. Of course this game just improves the odds that it will be Slytherin/Gryffindor vying for the Cup at the end of term, doesn't it?"

"I think it's the first time Oliver's ever cheered a Slytherin victory," Harry said with a grin. "The point spread is really good now. We've still got to beat Ravenclaw though, of course. I'm surprised Ollie didn't call an emergency meeting after the game to go over all the moves they played against you."

"Then I am glad you did not have to cancel our meeting," Professor Snape said. "Have you been practicing?"

"I have been," Harry said. "I'm getting a lot more comfortable with the exercises."

"Good," Professor Snape said. "I'd like for you to master Occlumency eventually. Not merely practice some exercises for your Patronus Charm. There are a great many benefits to learning the art."

Harry smiled. They had gone a long way from Professor Snape trying to dissuade him, to getting
actual encouragement to master the difficult magic.

"It would be nice if I didn't have to worry about random mind readers," Harry said.

"We aren't all too common," Professor Snape said.

"Still," Harry said. They went to go sit down in the drawing room, taking their usual seats opposite each other.

"Greyback was spotted again," Professor Snape said. "Kent, this time."

Harry frowned. "I keep hoping that the next time someone spots him something will actually happen," Harry said. "How can he be so active and slip away every time?"

"He has a lot of practice," Professor Snape said. "I told you that hoping it would be a comfort. You must still be vigilant, but knowing that he seems to have his sights elsewhere gives us a bit of breathing room."

"I'm just worried about what he's going to do next," Harry said. "If he's not after me then he's after someone else."

"And if he is, it would not be your fault that you are not his target," Professor Snape said.

Harry shrugged. "Yeah, I know that," he said. "It's just… At least with me, we knew he was coming after me. Who knows who he'll go after next. They won't be protected like I was."

Professor Snape sighed. "This conversation isn't very conducive to your learning Occlumency," he said.

"Probably not," Harry said. "Thanks again for taking the time to teach me this, by the way."

"You are a good student," Professor Snape said. "I am glad to be teaching you."

Harry smiled at that. It was nice to hear, as odd as it was to hear those words coming out of Professor Snape's mouth.

They ran through the two exercises as they had the previous two practice sessions; Harry did well. It wasn't just that Professor Snape told him he was doing it right, it felt right, in his mind. The process felt smoother, the false stories seemed to slip in just right. He knew that there was a subtle magic involved. Visualization was a key in performing magic, and that road, it seemed, could go both ways. It wasn't that muggles couldn't train their minds in a similar way, but magic facilitated the process for wizards and went beyond what the mind could do alone.

Every time they ran through the exercises now, Harry got a new question. He had to create a new falsehood every time. He had always been good at lying, as long as he was prepared. It had been essential to survival before Hogwarts. He didn't do too well when he was caught off guard though. It was good, Harry thought, to change scenarios like they were. He was still wary of revealing something to Professor Snape unintentionally, but so far he had been good at keeping focused on the exercises, and Professor Snape kept the topic of the exercises mundane.

"The next question I will ask is," Professor Snape said. "Did you eat any chocolate yesterday?"

"That's no good," Harry said. "I'm pretty sure you can guess the answer."

"Perhaps I can," Professor Snape said. "Very well, in that case… Describe your favorite outfit to
wear in the muggle world."

Harry forced a smile. The professor had never seen him in his cousin's oversized hand-me-downs. He imagined the sort of clothes he had wanted when he had been about to turn eleven. Before he had bought school robes and button up shirts without stains and slacks that didn't, strictly speaking, still need a belt by the end of the school year. Before he had leather shoes that weren't extra wide and worn.

"Ready?" Professor Snape asked.

"Mmhmm," Harry said. He focused on the fantasy, rather than focusing on not thinking about the horrid clothes he had worn for ten years and a few weeks during his summers.

"So what did you think about the Slytherin Chasers this match?" Professor Snape asked.

Harry smiled. "Looking for pointers, Professor?" he asked cheekily.

"Mr. Flint is being scouted," Professor Snape said. "As is your own Mr. Wood I do believe. There was a league representative at the game today. I was merely wondering how you think they played."

"Oh Flint would do well on the Wasps," Harry said. "They've really got that whole fierce power play bravado thing going on in their matches. Of course the Gryffindor Chasers are a lot more efficient on the field. Do you think there'll be a scout at one of the Gryffindor games?" Harry asked.

"There likely will be," Professor Snape said. "How do you feel about that?"

"Oh, well we'd better do right by Ollie I figure," Harry said.

"How have your new gauntlets worked for you?" Professor Snape asked.

"I've been staying away from the bludgers during practice," Harry said. "But they fit really well thanks."

"You're welcome," Professor Snape said. "So what do you like to wear in the muggle world?"

"Oh just my jean shorts and a t-shirt during the summer," Harry said. He visualized the outfit that he had never worn. He imagined how it felt, and how it must be to not be embarrassed of what you were wearing as you walked down the street.

"That was good," Professor Snape said. "Indistinguishable from the truth, but it was incongruous. You were very casual when we were discussing quidditch and your new equipment, I could feel your focus when we came to the question about your clothing. If I were looking for deception, that would be a give away. That intensity will be good while practicing the patronus though, but as a defense from a Legilimens, you must be subtle."

"Right," Harry said. "Don't oversell it."

"You are doing well," Professor Snape said. "I think we should practice with active Legilimency."

"How would that be different?" Harry asked, frowning.

"My presence in your mind would be much less subtle, the spell makes it harder to direct your own thoughts. I will still not be actively rooting through your mind, trying to direct you in any particular
direction, but you will find it harder to properly focus. It is good practice for the patronus, since the dementor has a similar effect. Of course, this will not cause the dementor's other effects, but it will increase the difficulty."

"Right," Harry said. He could do that. He needed to do that. He needed to master the Patronus Charm. He needed to be able to protect himself.

"Now if a legilimens were to be employing this spell against you in the real world, they would not hold back. They would actively be following memories and thought associations to find what they were looking for. Since I will not be doing that, I will still be questioning you as we have been doing," Professor Snape said. "Your next question will be… What is the name of your first childhood friend?"

That wasn't really a question he wanted to test his skills at a new level of Legilimency on. He didn't have a friend he could switch in for a hypothetical first friend. It was like the clothes, he would have to invent a person who had never been Harry's friend, much less his first friend. His first friend was Ron, but there was no way he could let Professor Snape know that.

Harry imagined being small. He imagined playing in the park, another boy running through the jungle gym with him. He imagined carefree laughter. Trevor was as good a name as any, for an imaginary friend.

"I'm ready," Harry said.

Professor Snape drew his wand. "Legilimens," he said.

The feeling of a presence in his mind was much stronger than it had ever been. It made his skin crawl, he could feel the hairs on the back of his neck standing on end. He focused on structuring his thoughts.

"I don't think you've ever mentioned what your favorite team is," Professor Snape said conversationally; as though he wasn't dragging his feet, walking though his son's mind.

"Don't really have one," Harry said, and it was so hard to keep his mind on the topic at hand. Every thought seemed to want to lead somewhere else. "There's some players I like, on different teams. Tacheus Worth's really good, they call him the 'Iron Wall.'"

"What position does he play?" Professor Snape asked.

"Keeper," Harry said. "He's got the highest block rate in the league right now."

"He's not the one who keeps showing up on Witch Weekly's front cover, is he?" Professor Snape asked.

"Probably," Harry said, focusing very hard. He felt that if he lost his concentration, his mind could go anywhere. "Didn't think you read anything besides potions periodicals though."

"I have confiscated many copies during class," Professor Snape said, his eyebrows raised.

"My aunt used to get the same sort of magazines," Harry said, wishing instantly that he could take the words back. He very much would not have brought up his aunt at all if he had been thinking properly.

"Yes," Professor Snape said. "She was much the same when I was younger. How is Petunia? You must have heard from her over the holidays."
Harry tried not to think of how he had been happy not to have heard from the Dursleys at all, and of course trying not to think about it brought it right to the forefront of his mind.

"She's well," Harry said, hoping he hadn't been caught, hoping that Professor Snape wasn't paying attention to Harry's mind until he asked the final question, that the fleeting thought had come and gone before the professor could properly understand it. "Christmas is always her favorite time of the year."

Unbidden, thoughts of Christmas with the Dursleys came to mind. He turned his mind back to quidditch and the game he had just seen.

"What was the name of your first childhood friend?" Professor Snape asked.

Before he could even try to bring up the fantasy of a boy named Trevor, a memory came to mind of sitting at the edge of the playground, watching everyone else play. He focused on the lie.

"Trevor," Harry said. "His name was Trevor. He moved away a while back." The presence retreated from his mind.

There was a moment's pause where neither of them spoke.

"This approach requires a lot more focus," Professor Snape said. "You did well in the beginning, but it's difficult to maintain that much concentration."

"Right," Harry said. "Yeah, I should probably practice some more before our next go."

"Did you want to stay for lunch?" Professor Snape asked. He looked perturbed, Harry thought.

"I told Ron and Hermione I'd see them for lunch actually," Harry lied.

There was another moment of silence.

"You know Harry," Professor Snape said. "I think that's the first time you've ever mentioned your family."

Harry's mouth stopped working, and he found himself avoiding making eye contact while he tried to force something out. "Oh," he said after what was probably much to long of a moment. He focused on keeping the panic internal. "Was it? Surely I've mentioned them before."

"Of course," Professor Snape said. "How is everything with your family. Sooner or later I feel it would be appropriate to meet them."

"Oh," Harry said. "Yeah, umm… I don't know. They don't really like magic, you see. Not sure they'd want another wizard popping in."

Professor Snape frowned. "Petunia never grew out of that?" he asked.

"Apparently not," Harry said. "But you know, family's family. I can't complain."

"You can't complain about a family that is prejudiced against something that's inherent to your very nature?" Professor Snape asked.

"Oh, well they took me in, didn't they? But lot's of kids don't see eye to eye with their families, so umm…" Harry said. "Yeah, I should go meet with Ron and Hermione for lunch."

Professor Snape looked like he wanted to say something but he didn't. There was a pause.
"Very well then Harry," Professor Snape said at last, and Harry couldn't tell at all what the man was thinking. "I'll see you in the lab this afternoon."

"Right," Harry said. "I should go, I'll see you, Professor."

"Indeed," Professor Snape said.

Harry left for the library where Ron would probably be cajoling Hermione to go eat soon. He frowned thinking about Ron. Things were still weird, but he couldn't think about that then. All he could think about was what had just happened. He didn't make it to the library before he had to duck behind a wall hanging that covered a secret passage. In the relative privacy he kicked the wall a couple of times before slumping down in the dark passage.

Legilimency practice had been a disaster. He had worried it would be a disaster the whole time going into it, but it still felt like a shock. He had been so careful to avoid anything that would show Professor Snape Harry at his worst, and then he had had to go and bring up the Dursleys. The question was, how much had Professor Snape seen? How well could he interpret the brief flashes of memories? What could he have seen other than that Harry didn't get along with the Dursleys or that once upon a time he had been lonely watching the other kids play. There were certainly things that he could infer, but how much would he read into it?

There was too much in his head that Harry didn't want Professor Snape to see. In the grand order of things, the two memories that he might have seen were insignificant, this hadn't been disastrous, but what about next time? What if Professor Snape wanted to know more? Wouldn't that be normal, for a dad to want to know about the people raising his son?

"What do I want, and what do I need?" Harry asked himself out loud.

He wanted Professor Snape to be his dad. He wanted what Ron and Hermione had with their parents to some extent or another. He wanted proud smiles. He wanted weekend excursions and the security of home. He wanted a summer where he wasn't hiding in his own house or listening for the movements of everyone around him.

He needed to be able to protect himself. He needed to master the patronus. Harry could never again be at the very lacking mercy of a dementor. He needed to be able to protect his mind. Even when he had had nothing he had had his mind, his thoughts. They were his and his alone. His memories, whether they were good or bad were not for anyone else. His ability to lie when he needed to had always been essential to his survival. What could he do when his worst memories and his biggest secrets could be accessed by anyone with a wand.

What if what he needed put what he wanted in jeopardy? What if getting what he needed left the very mind he was trying to protect bare to man he wanted to care about him?

"What do I want and what do I need?" he whispered into the darkness.

He needed to practice. He needed to practice so that he could master the art. He needed to practice so he could face Professor Snape and not worry about what he might see. Occlumency would protect him. He would master the Patronus Charm. He would practice, and Occlumency would help him be the boy Professor Snape thought he was.

He started one of the breathing exercises from the book. He started organizing his mind as best he could. He needed to practice. He had plenty of time until lab time. Later, he could tell Ron and Hermione he had had lunch with Professor Snape.
He should really get going. He had already had too much and he really couldn't afford another one. Though his money was almost gone anyway.

"Thought I recognized you," the stranger said as Steven drained the last of his beer. Steven looked to the side and saw a man who looked worse off than he himself was.

"Pretty sure I'm no one you know," Steven said.

"Sure you are," the stranger said. "You worked for Ogdens. Heard all about the scandal."

Alarmed, Steven stood up quickly and took a couple of stumbling steps away from the stranger. He put his hand over the pocket that his wand was in, but he didn't draw it. He was in a muggle bar for a reason, no one was supposed to recognize him. Though even if there weren't muggles around, he didn't think he could aparate away after all he had drunk.

"I don't want any trouble," Steven said. "If you don't want me drinking at your bar... I'll just go."

The stranger rolled his eyes. "Now did they fire you because they found out you were a werewolf, or did they fire you because they knew that you wouldn't fight for what was yours. Never back down from what you've got. The world the way it is, we can never give an inch."

The stranger casually held up his left arm and pulled back his long sleeve revealing a savage looking bite mark on his forearm. Steven's hand absentmindedly drifted to the back of his thigh where he himself had been bitten.

"Come on, sit," the stranger said in a friendly but commanding manner. "I want to buy you a drink."

Steven sat down and the stranger sat down next to him, motioning to the bar keeper. Steven had always avoided other werewolves, and it seemed unreal to just be sitting down next to one in a bar. Now that he really looked at the man, Steven could see the glamour. He wasn't talented enough to see through it, but he knew it was there. He'd change his face too if he could work the charm past hiding his scars without making himself look like a Picasso.

"Boy I'd be furious if I'd had something taken from me like that," the stranger said.

"I am furious," Steven said.

"You could have fooled me," the stranger said. "Just drowning yourself in drink with money that's about to run out, ready to run from the first person to know what you are."

"I suppose you've always been able to make it work out," Steven said. "Never lost a job have you, being what you are?"

"Never had a job to lose," the stranger said. "But I've lost a lot, and you'd better believe I've never let a slight pass. How many years did you work for them? How much did you sweat for that company before they threw you away?"

"Eight god damn years," Steven said.

"Eight years," the stranger crowed. "Eight wasted years. How many of those years did a wolf walk among the sheep?"

"Just two," Steven said. "But I made it work. I kept it a secret, I kept my performance up, I did my god damn job. They promoted me. They promoted a god damn werewolf! Then that fuck Davies
got damned nosey. He was jealous. He was jealous of my promotion. He snooped into what I had hidden so well."

"You shouldn't have had to keep it a secret," the stranger said. "You should be proud of what you are. You're a survivor. You're stronger than they are. You're sharper than they are. That isn't disgust they feel when they look at you... It's fear. They know that you're better than them, and they know that they're afraid to stand where you stand. We're of the highest order in this world, but they try to keep us on the bottom."

"You make it sound like it's better to be one of us," Steven said.

"It is," the stranger said. "But you're trying to live like one of them. You're not one of them. You're something better. We're more than half way to the next moon. Can't you feel it? It's high above you now. Don't you feel more alive? Don't you feel the pull?"

"Yeah," Steven said. "Less than half a month till I have to lock myself in a cage. Half a month till I add new scars, and break more bones." He didn't know how he would manage the hospital bills this coming moon.

"You've never done it, have you?" the stranger asked. "Transformed without a cage? You don't know what it's like, you don't know what it is to let the wolf run free."

"I can't exactly afford the wolfsbane potion right now," Steven said. Even before he had been fired, that had been a rare luxury.

The stranger's face twisted. "Who said anything about that shite," he said. "I said let the wolf run free. There's nothing else like it."

Steven began to feel nervous. "I couldn't do that," he said. "I could hurt someone."

"There are ways," the stranger said. "There are ways to be safe. Easy ways. The Ministry would rather lock you up in a cage, where you can't see the moon, where the wolf can't be free, and of course you wind up hurt. You can't cage the wolf. Your wolf was meant to be free. I have my ways, and I have never made a mistake during the moon. Over thirty years my wolf has run free. You can't imagine the sensation, you can't imagine how different it is. You would look forward to the moon every month. You would miss it when it was gone."

"It wouldn't be safe," Steven said. He didn't want to hurt anyone. "Not really."

"Safe for who?" the stranger asked. "That cage isn't safe for you. It isn't even really safer for them. All it is is their little ego stroke. They know that you're better than them. They know you're on a higher level, but they put you in a cage so they can feel better about themselves. They put you in a cage, and made you believe you belonged there, when there are ways, oh yes, there are ways for you to run free, and for them to be safe and sound in their homes, but they don't want that. They spread lies about us. In the natural order you would have advantage over them, so they want to make things harder for you. Keep you out of work, keep you from seeking out others like you, keep you from succeeding in their society."

"Look I've heard people talk about werewolf colonies before," Steven said. "If that's where you're going. You know the ministry would never let one form."

"Colony," the stranger scoffed. "You're still thinking like you're one of them. You're not one of them. You aren't meant to live like one of them. You're something more. We're something better. What is a colony but a pathetic miniaturization of their society. Forget their society, forget their
way of living. They'll never let you in. There's something better for you; for us. You're meant for
greater things than their world can offer. Transform with me. In two weeks, transform with me."

"I don't know," Steven said. He had been dreading the next moon. He had been dreading the next
two weeks. Money was running out and transforming on an empty stomach was misery. It was
only going to get worse.

"Forget what you know," the stranger said. "All you know is what their ministry has fed you. What
do you feel? You have instincts in there, they've tried to suppress them, but you have instincts.
Embrace them. Feel it. You aren't meant to be in a cage. Transform with me."

It was a command, and Steven almost balked at that, but he wanted to. He really wanted to now.
He was sick of cages. He was sick of waiting to see just how badly he could hurt himself.

"Okay," he said. "Okay, yeah. I will."

At least this month, with all the crap that had been heaped on him, he needed one thing to look
forward to.

"Just this once, yeah," Steven said. "I'll try it. It's safe, you said."

The stranger smiled and clapped him on the shoulder.

"Safe as houses," he said.

"Ron's mad at you," Hermione said, as they walked out towards the greenhouses.

Harry frowned down at the snow beneath his feet. "I know," he said. "I just wish I knew how to fix
it."

"Do you really think you can fix this?" Hermione asked.

"I have to, don't I," Harry said, frustrated. "I'll figure it out." He had to fix things with Ron. He
could lose everything else, but he had to fix things with Ron.

"It doesn't really seem like you're trying," Hermione said, and a chill went up Harry's spine and it
seemed that suddenly his cloak wasn't enough for the winter chill.

"I am," Harry said. "I really am, I just don't know what to do."

"Have you tried apologizing?" Hermione asked.

"I don't know how," Harry said. "How do you apologize for that? I don't understand…"

"What's there to understand?" Hermione asked. "You bring chaos to everything. You ruin
everything just by being around. Everything's worse now. Do you think Pettigrew would have
infiltrated Ron's family if he hadn't wanted to be able to spy on you? To take you? To kill you? I
know I have had to help you figure a lot of things out Harry but that shouldn't be one of them. I
don't know why I bother anymore. I don't know why I ever did."

"I'm sorry Hermione," Harry said. "Please, I'll fix this."

"How can a mistake like you fix anything?" Aunt Petunia asked, a metal ruler in one hand and
Harry's stretched out forearm in the other. "Mistakes just make mistakes, haven't I always told you
that. You should be thanking me for this. No one else would bother. Did you think I couldn't tell?
It should be obvious by now that everyone can tell. Eventually."

"No!" Harry said. "I've helped people. I've done good things too. I'm not all bad."

"Then why did you let him kill me?" Ms. Addler asked him, and she was terrible to look at. The primal part of his brain screamed at him to look away; to run away, but he couldn't move a muscle as she stared at him with wide dead accusing eyes flecked with blood.

"You had a wand in your hand and you couldn't do anything with it," Ms. Addler said.

"Useless boy," Aunt Petunia muttered.

"You wanted him to kill me," Ms. Addler said. "You wanted it to happen. You're just like him. You're a killer."

"No," Harry said, finding his voice. "No, it wasn't my wand. Other people's wands don't work right. I tried. I really tried."

"So are you a killer or are you a failure?" the Auror asked, pad and quill in hand, taking down notes as suspicious eyes bore into Harry's skull. "Are you sure you did the spell right? I've used a dozen different wands in my lifetime. Just because it isn't a perfect match doesn't mean you can't use it. So did you mess up the spell the one time someone was actually counting on you, or did you just let her die? I've had a lot of reports. People tell me there's just something not right about you. I've heard some things that are really quite disturbing. I'm really starting to wonder why you led him right into that muggle's backyard."

"I didn't mean to!" Harry said desperately.

"Don't worry about it, Harry. I can make it all go away," Professor Lockheart said, twirling his wand between his fingers, a predatory smile on his face. "I can make you forget; as if it never happened. We wouldn't want this failure to ruin your fame. What would people think? They wouldn't understand. Celebrity's a fickle thing Harry. They'll always believe the worst about you. You're lucky no one seems to have caught on to who you really are. I can take it away, I can take it all away; your memories. Wouldn't you rather forget? I can take it all away, Harry my boy. Not that there's much to take."


"You can't make it not have happened," Harry said angrily. "She'll still be dead whether I remember or not. How can I stop it from happening again if I don't know what's wrong with me? I need to know if I've messed up."

"All you do is mess up," Aunt Petunia said. "You ruined my perfect family."

"I didn't mean to," Harry said. "I didn't choose to live with you."

"I've heard enough excuses from you," Uncle Vernon roared, pinning him against the wall, his feet dangling. "I've had enough. I don't know how I put up with you for so long. Lord knows I tried to make you right. I tried to make you normal, tried to put some use to you, but there's nothing but freak in you, and even that's not useful. I should have thrown you in the trash the day you arrived on our doorstep."

"I had Colonel Fubster drown a litter of freaks just last week," Aunt Marge said. "You wouldn't want them contaminating the rest."

"I'm not a freak," Harry said. "I'm a wizard. That's what it was. That's why you could never love me. You just didn't like magic."

"But we all know that's not what it really was, Mr. Potter," Professor Snape said. "Don't we."

"Dad," Harry said. It was almost pleading, but Harry had learned long ago what pleading got him.

"Silence, you fool," Professor Snape said. "Did you think you could trick me? Did you think I wouldn't see through that thin little mask you wear? I don't have to read your mind to know that you're disgusting."

"I can explain," Harry said.

"Explain it to your parents," Ron said, the larger boy pinning him down on the ground. "Explain how they died for a disgusting freak like you. Explain how you've made a mockery of their sacrifice. You didn't even try. Admit it. Admit it! You just let him. We all know why."

He wrapped his hands around Harry's throat. "It's 'cause you're a freak. You can tell yourself it'll never happen again, but it will. It's going to happen again and again and again unless you do something about it. I think there's one foolproof way to be sure that it'll never happen again; you just won't go through with it. You can't do the world a favor? I guess I'm going to have to help you out, one last time."

The hands around his neck tightened and Harry couldn't breathe as he struggled and flailed, even as despair was eating him alive.

'NO,' Harry thought. 'No, this isn't right. Ron wouldn't."

It was like a spell. One moment his vision was going black, the next he was opening his eyes to the darkened canopy of his bed, gulping for breath. He grabbed his hair, curled up on top of his bed as he tried desperately to clear his mind of everything he had just seen. It was a pointless exercise while every part of him was screaming with adrenaline and misery.

"Harry?" Ron's voice said from beyond his bed curtains. Harry gasped, his heart in his throat.

"You okay?" Ron asked, sounding nervous.

"Yeah," Harry said around the massive lump. "Just a dream."

"Can you do that spell?" Ron asked.

It took Harry a moment to realize what spell Ron was talking about. He wiped at his face a bit more in the dark and pulled his wand from his nightstand and sat up in bed.

"Lumos Saltatio," Harry said, casting his gaze upwards as the small canopy filled with small dancing lights. He looked down to see Ron handing him a couple squares of chocolate, leaning against the far bedpost.
"Hermione'd lecture us if she knew we were eating chocolate in the middle of the night," Ron said. "Again."

"Yeah," Harry said.

They sat in silence for a while, the silence just as awkward as things had been the past three weeks.

"Delimitas," Ron cast at Harry's curtains, a new skill he'd picked up from his project, followed by "Silencio." Harry looked at Ron, worried.

"I think we need to talk," Ron said.

"I'm sorry," Harry said, and he tried to pour every ounce of himself into those words.

"What?" Ron asked. "You're sorry? That's what I was supposed to say. What would you even be sorry for?"

"For everything," Harry said.

"Yeah, well I think you're going to have to be a bit more specific than that," Ron said.

"I'm sorry for all the bad stuff I've caused in your life," Harry said.

"I'm still really confused," Ron said, looking at Harry with a bewildered expression on his face.

"I talked you into going after the stone and you got hurt real bad," Harry said. "I-I almost got you expelled. Convinced you to go get eaten by a bunch of giant spiders, and a mountain troll. Your sister got kidnapped because of me. You got drugged because of me. Oh, and also a fucking creep of a wizard decided to get close to me by infiltrating your family as your pet rat." Harry was shaking with his confession and he couldn't look at Ron.

"Like, literally none of that was your fault," Ron said. "Okay, the spiders I'm blaming on you. But everything else? You saved Ginny's life. That was all Malfoy's fault anyways. He was going after my dad, not you."

"Riddle was after me," Harry said. "And don't you think you would have figured things out about Ginny if I hadn't been taking the spotlight with the whole stupid Heir of Slytherin thing?"

"None of that was your fault though," Ron said. "I was responsible for Ginny, not you."

"All of it was my fault," Harry said. "If I wasn't here none of this would have ever happened."

"Ginny would have still needed saving, and I don't know which of the crazy people who run this place I would have trusted to go save her. I'm glad I had you."

Harry shook his head.

"Look, as far as I'm concerned, I won the best friend lottery," Ron said. "Winning that chess game was one of the best moments of my life, thank you very much. I might add that my other best friend would have been eaten by a mountain troll if you hadn't convinced me to go with you to save her. That was pretty awesome too. The best things I've ever done are because of you."

"Everything you do revolves around taking care of me," Harry said. "My life's always a mess and I'm always dragging you along."

"Your life's a mess because there's a bunch of asshats who keep trying to kill you," Ron said.
"That's not your fault."

"It might not be my fault," Harry said, though he knew it was. "But it's still because of me and you shouldn't have to put up with it."

"I'll put up with what I want, thanks," Ron said. "Even if I have to get chased by giant fucking spiders every now and then. Now can we talk about how you're not upset with me about Scabbers."

"That wasn't your fault!" Harry exclaimed. "How were you supposed to know your rat was really an evil animagus?"

"Gee, I don't know," Ron said. "But I bet there were a bunch of signs over the years that I missed."

"Yeah well I missed them too," Harry insisted. "And my parents must have missed a bunch of signs, because he tricked them also."

"How are you not freaking out about the fact that I've been feeding the guy who betrayed them rat treats for years," Ron said.

"I've tasted those, remember?" Harry said, recalling a stupid night of truth or dare in the dorm. He'd lied about a lot. "I'm pretty sure you weren't doing him any favors."

"You're really not mad about the whole thing?" Ron asked.

"It wasn't your fault," Harry said.

"I could have prevented that whole kidnapping," Ron said. "Then that prick wouldn't have thought you were a werewolf and attacked you later. You've been in the infirmary twice because of me this year."

"That was Pettigrew and Eckelson," Harry said. "Who would even think that the pet rat that's been in their family since they were a toddler was really a grown man. It wasn't your fault. None of that was your fault."

They sat in silence for a moment under the fairy lights. Ron looked a bit stubborn.

"I guess we should both keep that in mind then," Ron said.

Harry stared at his lap before he shook his head, his mistakes weren't forgivable. He was at fault. Ron didn't understand that somehow. He didn't know.

"I killed that woman," Harry choked out miserably. "Ms. Adler." The words just came out, and he couldn't take them back. He couldn't look Ron in the eyes under the dancing lights.

"What are you talking about?" Ron asked. "The lady Greyback killed? Why would you even say that."

"I didn't have my wand," Harry said. "I was so stupid. I didn't even have my wand, but I got my hands on his, while he was attacking her. I had his wand and I tried to petrify him but nothing happened. Then he attacked me again and I just dropped it. I could have at least broken it, but I just… She was bloody all over. He's got his teeth sharpened to points and he bit her all over, but she kept trying to save me. He got off of me so he could deal with her and he had his wand because I bloody well dropped it and it happened so fast."

"Yeah," Ron said. "Greyback killed her, not you."
"I let him," Harry said. "I had his wand, it should have been over."

"You don't know if you're even a passable match for his wand," Ron said. "And magic's hard enough to do in class, you think you can just do a perfect spell in the middle of a fight after all that with someone else's wand. Have you ever even done that? All that crazy stuff we've done, how often did it involve slinging spells in the middle of it all? It wasn't your fault."

"I had his wand," Harry said.

"Yeah, well you may have done some awesome stuff but you're still just thirteen. You can't expect to do every single thing right. You can't take responsibility for what a psycho killer does," Ron said passionately.

"I had his wand," Harry said again, his voice choking and he hid his face from Ron.

The bed shifted as Ron moved to sit next to Harry and throw an arm over his shoulder. Harry wanted to shrug it off almost as much as he wanted to grab his friend and bury his face in his shoulder. He wanted to ask Ron how he could touch someone as messed up as he was; a wizard who let defenseless muggle women die, a freak who ruined everything, a disgusting boy hidden out of sight. He felt like he was choking on all the things he couldn't say.

He almost gasped in relief when he felt it; his mother's love. Her protection over him. It didn't always come. Not for every misery, nor for every tear, but it came that night as he was hugged by his friend and he felt assured that there was something about him that Ron must like. Some redeeming quality. Something that his mother could have loved and others could see too, despite everything else. Now he did turn and return the hug that Ron was giving him, even as he still cried, even if at any other time he would have been horrified at the situation he found himself in.

"You did your best," Ron said. "I know you did, but you were facing a wizard that spent decades evading top Aurors. You've been training and next time, your best is going to be way better. It wasn't your fault, and you'll be ready next time."

"She saved me," Harry said, his voice muffled by Ron's shoulder.

"She's a saint," Ron said. "And I bet she wouldn't want you upset like this."

"She would've been a Gryffindor," Harry said.

"Heart of a lion," Ron said.

"I can't stop seeing it," Harry said.

"How long have you been feeling like this?" Ron asked, after Harry had calmed down a bit.

"A bit, I guess," Harry shrugged, pulling away to lean back against the headboard, Ron's arm still around his shoulder. "It's been worse lately. I just keep thinking I could have saved her."

"Do you think it might have anything to do with all the quality time you've been spending with a dementor lately?" Ron asked, referring to the boggart in Professor Lupin's office.

Harry shrugged, thinking about all the times he had relived that moment the past few weeks. All of the things he had re-experienced since school had started.

"I need to learn that spell," Harry said.
"You know most people go their whole lives never coming across a dementor," Ron said. "You could probably avoid them the rest of the school year. The only thing you need that spell for is to protect you from dementors but learning that stupid spell is exposing you to them more than you'd ever be exposed otherwise."

"I can't be vulnerable like that," Harry said. "I pass out, I'm defenseless. I have to do this."

"Yeah, well how about you take a break for a while," Ron said. "You've seemed down for a bit, and I've mostly been thinking it's all the stupid stuff that's happened, but I really doubt your lessons are helping anything."

Harry was silent for a bit.

"Just take a couple of weeks off," Ron said. "See how you feel."

"I could try that," Harry said, though the concession made him feel as uneasy as he felt relieved to not have dementors to look forward to any time soon. "Sorry about the…" He waved vaguely at the damp spot on Ron's shoulder.

"Hey, what are friends for?" Ron asked.

Harry shook his head. "You really mean it about the best friend lottery?" Harry asked.

"Of course," Ron said. "I'm, like, a better person because of you."

"I think you're thinking about Hermione," Harry said.

"Nope," Ron said. "The hair's all wrong. I wouldn't know Hermione if it weren't for you. Wouldn't have a sister if it wasn't for you. Wouldn't have ever done anything heroic or noble. I'd have some friends who were okay and I'd be taking divination and I'd be missing a whole lot from my life."

"I'll always be happy I met you on the train," Harry said, feeling a great conviction in the words, needing desperately for Ron to know.

"Same here," Ron said. "Can we stop being weird? Not talking to each other, I mean. It's been like we've been strangers since Christmas. It's worrying Hermione."

"That would be good," Harry said, feeling relieved. "I'd like that. Hermione's got enough on her plate."

"I still want to know what her secret is," Ron said.

Harry smiled closing his eyes as his head slumped over onto Ron's shoulder. "She can split herself into multiple Hermiones, attend each class, then merge back at the end," he said.

"That's probably it," Ron said. "Wish I could do that."

"The big question is why she isn't telling us about it," Harry said.

"Oh that's easy," Ron said. "She knows we'd want to use it for rule breaking."

Harry smiled at that and leaned his head back against his pillow.

"I should let you get back to sleep," Ron said. "You look like you're going to nod off mid sentence."

"I'm pretty sure I'm the one keeping you up," Harry said.
"Turnabout's fair play," Ron said.

"Night Ron," Harry said. "Thanks."

"Night Harry," Ron said. "Next time, let's not go three weeks without talking about this stuff, yeah?"

"Sounds good," Harry said.

Ron crawled out leaving Harry in the dwindling lights. They hadn't even talked about the big stuff. But Ron didn't see, or maybe he never would see. Maybe it was just the fact that he could ignore the fact that Harry was a freak. It didn't really matter though. Ron was the best friend he could have, and Harry wouldn't give that up.

Harry set about clearing his mind; both for the practice and so that he could sleep.

Harry did his best to act normal the next day. He talked easily with Ron, he smiled a lot for Hermione. Ron was right, she had been worried about him and Harry shouldn't be worrying her. He did feel a lot better after having worked things out with Ron, but he still couldn't put the thought out of his mind. He had had the wand in his hand, and he hadn't been able to save her.

Harry had long felt certain that he would face Greyback again. He thought of the glove in his back pocket. The one he never used anymore, the one the twins thought had burned with the rest of their prototype. He thought of Professor Lupin's words about killing. He thought about a wand he had to get his hands on so that he could know. Greyback was going to come after him again, and Harry was either going to get his answers or he wasn't, he was going to stop Greyback or he wasn't, but he wasn't ever going to let Greyback have him. He thought about the glove in his back pocket.

Harry had never talked about his relatives around Severus. That in itself should have been a red flag. Combined with what Minerva had said and the flashes he had seen in Harry's mind the day before, Severus was starting to have a very bad idea of Harry's home life. A home life that Harry was hiding.

"Mr. Weasley," Severus said. "Stay after the bell, we must discuss your most recent essay."

"Umm," Ronald said. "I've got to get to Defense, Professor. It's on the other end of the castle."

"I will write you a note," Severus said.

Harry and Ronald exchanged glances before Harry looked up and made a questioning eye contact with Severus which he ignored.

"Alright then," Ronald said, looking hesitant as he and his fellow classmates finished packing their books and notes away.

"You may go, Mr. Potter," Severus said when it looked like Harry would stay behind as well.

Harry frowned and looked to Ronald for confirmation who only shrugged. Harry left with Hermione Granger and Severus was alone with the boy.

"I have a question for you Mr. Weasley," Severus said. "What do you think about Harry returning to his relatives this coming summer."
Ronald's eyes widened and he looked at the door.

"I'm not sure what you mean, Professor," Ronald said.

"I will be forthright with you then, I do not believe you would have pressed Harry into pursuing a relationship with me, as you said you did, if you had not seen me as a better alternative to his current relations," Severus said. "And I would like to know why the wicked bat of the dungeons was a better guardian in your mind than the people who have raised him since he was an infant."

Ronald looked torn.

"I can't betray anything he's told me," Ronald said. "Not that he tells me much."

"But what he has told you is reason enough for concern?" Severus asked. "Or have you observed matters on your own that led you to these conclusions."

Ronald grabbed the lapel of his robes with his wand hand and worried at it with a conflicted look.

"Are you going to be his dad?" Ronald asked.

"I am his father," Severus said.

"That's not what I asked," Ronald said. "I know you're keeping things to yourselves and you're being discreet but are you ever going to acknowledge him? Or are you going to keep him your dirty little secret?"

"That's not what this is about," Severus said.

"Harry doesn't always show when things bother him," Ronald said. "So when something does show, you know it's bad. He doesn't always ask for what he wants either, so when he does, you know it means something to him. He didn't tell you you were his dad on a whim and he sure as hell got upset when he thought you were brushing him off. So let's just forget about secrets, do you want to be his dad? Do you want him to be your son?"

"I do," Severus said. "But the matter is more complicated than that. There are matters beyond either of our control that require discretion for now."

"Well he can discreetly live with you, can't he?" Ronald asked.

"He can," Severus said. "I would like that. Is there a good reason to remove him from the family he has known the past twelve years?"

"You should ask him," Ronald said. "Me personally, I'd like him to come live with me for the summer, but I know he won't go for that if he even suspects it'd put me in danger from Greyback. I'm still trying to convince him we could make it safe, but he's stubborn. You should know that too. He's stubborn, and sometimes he thinks he needs to keep things to himself so it's almost impossible to find out what's wrong. So he's stubborn and he won't stay with me so I'm asking you to take him in. You can infer from that what you want, Professor, but I can't tell you about the Dursley's."

"I see," Severus said.

"Did you by chance have anything for my essay?" Ronald asked.

"Yes," Severus said. "You completely left out three steps in the process. I'm sure you can find them
and return the essay tomorrow for half credit." He held out the essay and a hall pass for the boy's next class.

Ronald grimaced and grabbed the paper.

"I want visitation over the summer," Ronald said on his way out. "Professor," he added belatedly.

Severus contemplated his home being invaded by Weasley and Granger over the summer before returning to the matter at hand. His conversation with Ronald had been telling, but completely non-substantive. The question was, what was Harry hiding and how could he find out.

He acknowledged that the matter would be moot if he just asked Harry to live with him during the summer, assuming he would agree. But it wasn't just a matter of removing Harry from a negative environment. If there was something untoward… He could still feel the burning rage he had felt after Harry had been attacked, and now the thought of him in the care of the ominous unknown left his hackles up. He wanted to know how his son had been raised, and he needed to know what part of his upbringing Harry felt he needed to keep a secret. What ugly truth had people thinking Severus was a better alternative to the status quo?

He didn't need to imagine very hard to think of what Harry might be hiding. He himself had kept many secrets as a child. Yet if he and Harry had shared similar upbringings, then it was clear that Harry had handled matters far better than he had, though that did not necessarily mean that he was handling matters well at all. Severus couldn't help him if he didn't know what was wrong.

Steven had never really been camping. Not outside of a cabin anyway. The heightened senses that had driven him crazy in the wizarding world these past two years now seemed to make everything seem more real in a natural setting. He felt as though he was really alive for the first time in a long while standing in the deep wood. It was also nastily cold. He recast the heating charm on his boots.

"What's in the cooler?" he asked his companion, though he could already smell what it was.

"Blood," his companion said. "Human blood. Enough to keep us busy tonight."

"Where'd you get all that?" Steven asked, sure he didn't really want to know.

"Muggle medical waste," his companion said. "Buck up, it's been sterilized, you won't catch nothing. Now stop smelling the morning air and let's get a move on, and carry this. We've got a bit of work to do if you want your safe cage-free moon." He handed the cooler to Steven.

"I do want it," Steven said, just the thought of it had been keeping him going the past two weeks. Steven had been a bit surprised when his companion had shown up that morning with a slightly different face. Still a glamor, but it was always difficult to do one exactly the same as before. He had thought that away from everyone else that his companion would drop the disguises but he was keeping it up apparently. He was pretty sure the name wasn't Jason either. Maybe that was normal for other werewolves, always keeping hidden. He had always tried to avoid other werewolves before so by and large, he felt he was rather an interloper in werewolf culture, if such a thing could be said to exist.

"But how does this work," Steven asked. "Are we putting the blood in a tree to keep the wolves occupied?"

"Nah, your wolf can climb a tree easy enough," his companion said. "The wolf wants to hunt, that's what we're giving you. First things first, we've got a lot of ground to ward if we want to keep out
errant muggles. We don't have to worry about wizards, 'cause they all know not to go wandering through the woods the night of a full moon."

"How far are we going to ward?" Steven asked. "A wolf can probably get really far."

"Sure it can," his companion said. "But we're keeping things local, the hunt will be contained to about ten hectares. We keep the wards weak since they don't need to last past morning so don't worry about getting it all done."

"How do you keep the hunt contained?" Steven asked. "The wards that can keep a werewolf out need to be tied into structures."

"You need to think like a hunter," his companion said. "That's what you are now. We don't need to contain the wolves, because we're going to contain our prey. First things first, we put up wards. Next we clean out any lingering scents, then we put a tether on our prey to keep it in the warded area and we're set. Our prey will have a head start and we'll be chasing it all night long. By the time we're done, even if we do catch it, the area will be so crisscrossed with the scent of human blood we'll be running back and forth all night, never even tempted to leave. The wolf will follow the scent of human blood before anything else."

"What do you mean, prey?" Steven asked.

"You'll see," his companion said. "You need something fast though, something that's used to avoiding predators. There's a natural order in this world Steven, and you're at the top of it right now, over all the animals, and all the muggles, and all the wizards. We're at the top of the food chain, right this minute. Tonight though? Tonight we'll be usurped by our wolves. Tonight we will hunt as the most cunning and powerful predator. Tonight our wolves will run free, and you will know what it is like to wake up after a free moon."

Steven hadn't been feeling like he was at the top of anything lately, but here in the forest, away from the wizarding world, out where every sense sang with the thrill of the wild, Steven could almost feel it. He felt like he was young and about to lose his virginity all over again, the anticipation and the unknown and the thrill.

They spent a lot of time warding. It was a rather large area, and Steven could just imagine running through it in the moonlight. His companion handled cleansing the scents from the area with a complicated spell that Steven supposed he would have to learn at some point. Then came the time to prepare their prey.

It was beautiful and majestic in it's own way. It was a stag with a rather impressive set of antlers and Steven hadn't really known that deer grew that big.

"We're hunting this guy tonight?" Steven asked.

"Wishing it could be your old boss?" his companion asked with dark humor.

Steven laughed even as he shut down the guilty joy he got at the thought. "That would be cathartic I suppose," he said.

His companion laughed. "Not much of a chase though. Humans don't run very fast. They can be dangerous prey in their own right, but they don't make for a good chase. This one here though, this is a hunt."

"He seems a bit docile," Steven noted.
"That'll wear off by nightfall," his companion said. "Get that cooler open."

Steven opened the cooler and was a bit squicked by the sight of the blood. He handed the cooler to his companion who pulled out a bag for himself before handing another to Steven. A quick charm had both bags snipped open and Steven almost panicked when a bit of the blood sloshed onto his hand.

"Get it on the stag," his companion gruffed, pouring his bag along the haunches and rubbing it into the legs. Blood dripped red into the snow. "You're a predator, you revel in blood. Blood is strength. You are strong and tonight you will hunt this blood as you were meant to do. Now get started."

Steven nodded and started pouring the blood on the animal which barely registered that he was there. His hands were covered by the time he was done.

"Do one of your warming charms," his companion said. "We don't want it freezing."

Steven wiped his hands in the snow before pulling his wand out with numb fingers to perform the charm.

"What's next?" he asked.

"What's next is I treat you to a bonfire and a meal before we transform," his companion said. "You'll be burning a lot of calories tonight, and I've got some fireside stories to tell."

Steven wasn't sure what the point of stories was if he wouldn't remember them the next morning. Still though it sounded nice. Steven was pretty sure he was burning a lot of calories right then just keeping warm, the feast would be nice. He didn't fancy waking up the next morning naked and in the snow.

Harry looked out the tower window at the moon that was just starting to peek over the mountains. He looked back to his Potions homework while he thought about Greyback, who was out there somewhere. He wondered if the past month had been a ruse. If he had just been traveling around so Harry would let his guard down. Perhaps he was lying in wait just that moment. He looked at Ron and Hermione, sitting across from him, and briefly fantasized about what he would do if Greyback attacked in that moment.

He'd been supposed to have a Patronus Charm lesson earlier in the afternoon, but he had taken it off as he had the previous week. Everyone had told him it was a good idea, and Harry definitely felt better than he had been. His nightmares were fewer, particularly the previous Saturday after he had had another Occlumency lesson. He thought there might be a connection.

That Saturday afternoon during their practice, Professor Snape had decided to pull back a bit. He used Active Legilimency again, but there were no questions and there were no deceptions. All Harry had to do was keep his mind clear while under the effects of the spell. It wasn't easy, but it also didn't feel like he was moments away from thinking the wrong thing. Professor Snape definitely wasn't rooting through Harry's mind. Harry had started clearing his mind before bed in the nights since and he thought it improved his sleep a bit. Not that he was very good at keeping his mind clear in the first place, but he had been practicing. He practiced every free moment he had.

Taking a couple Patronus Charm lessons off had helped him out, and he could see that clearer now that he had spent two weeks not getting any closer to the dementors than the quidditch pitch. Though he was spending a lot of time on quidditch. With their next game coming up the following
Saturday, Ollie had ramped practices up considerably. The exertion was good for him.

"Your essay looks good Harry," Hermione said. "But you should add a paragraph about the effects of gold dust in rune mediums."

"I'll put it in tomorrow after Potions," Harry said. "I've got to finish this tonight."

"You should have done Potions first then," Hermione said.

"Then I'd have been tempted to go to bed after I finished instead of working on my Runes homework. This way I've got incentive," Harry said.

"Have you thought about asking him?" Ron asked, out of the blue. It had been a while since they had discussed Harry living with Professor Snape for the summer, but Harry knew what he was talking about.

"I've thought about it a lot actually," Harry said.

"You mean you've worried about it a lot," Ron said.

"It's a big step," Hermione said. "It's very normal to be worried about it. Though sometimes when you put something off too long it just gets harder. How is everything?"

Harry shrugged. "I keep waiting for the other shoe to drop I guess," he said.

"You're actually fairly likable, Harry," Hermione said. "Don't forget you won him over before you told him about the you-know-what. I don't think any shoes are going to be dropping."

'Tell that to the Dursleys,' Harry thought, though what he said was, "Yeah, you're probably right. But just because he likes me alright doesn't mean he's going to want me around all the time."

"Harry nobody wants their family around all the time," Ron said. "But if he's willing, and you're willing, then I figure you should go for it. Unless all this dark wizard stuff goes away and you can stay at my place. That would be way cooler. Let's keep in mind, though, that our goal here is, 'not the Dursleys.'"

"Just think about it Harry," Hermione said. "It should be sooner rather than later."

"I will," Harry said. "Though I'm not going to impress him much if I don't finish this homework now."

"Go on then," Ron said. "Just keep it in mind, yeah?"

As though it was ever far from mind at all.

Steven came to, freezing, lying naked in the snow. He got up in a flash, dancing from foot to foot.

"Umm, umm," he tried to think. "Island Alchemist," he hollered as loud as he could, activating the summoning patch he'd gotten earlier in the week for his knapsack, which was hopefully not too far away. He hopped up and down and hugged himself, shivering uncontrollably for what seemed like an eternity before his bag zoomed up to him and he ripped it open to get at the heavy clothes inside.

It wasn't until he was warm and had caught his breath that he realized that he was standing under his own power, without any injuries, and only the lingering aches of the transformation to remind
him of the night before. He hadn't bitten himself, or slammed himself into any cage doors, or scratched at his own face. He didn't have any vague memories of the impotent rage of a caged beast gnawing at it's own paws.

He remembered the hunt though. Nothing of substance, but he remembered the thrill of the chase and the scent of blood in the air. He could still feel the exhilaration of running free, a pack mate running next to him. Though, come to think of it, where was his companion?

Steven pulled his wand out of his bag and did a quick point me to find the man. Not a short hike later, he came upon his companion roasting something that smelled delicious over the fire. A slightly different face this morning than the last time he saw him. Steven wondered what he'd looked like the night before.

"Didn't get a kill last night," his companion said. "Always a pity, but no reason not to fill our bellies. Sit."

Steven joined him by the fire wondering what exactly had happened the day before. In the end though, it didn't matter. He felt alive.

"We can do this next month, right?" Steven asked.

His companion smiled a toothy grin at him.

Harry stayed very busy between the Slytherin/Ravenclaw match and the upcoming Gryffindor/Ravenclaw match. Oliver had been training them every moment they could get, and Harry even once heard one of the twins commenting on the need to catch up on homework. Harry was almost surprised Professor McGonagall hadn't done anything about it, though he supposed that she wanted to win as much as everyone else did. The quidditch cup had stayed with Slytherin for too long.

Harry felt that he was getting a bit of better sleep at night since he had become a bit better at Occlumency; which was good since he was staying up late at night to get his homework done. He felt a bit like he was able to put away some of the things that had him on edge before he went to bed each night. Though he was still having issues on nights when he had Patronus Charm lessons. At least he was doing better at the charm. He didn't have anything corporeal or anything that was identifiable as an animal, but he was getting a lot better at staying conscious for a while and he definitely felt that he could feel some level of protection from the Patronus mist. Still, Ron was probably right about the regular contact not being good for him, but Harry felt as though he could see light at the other end of the tunnel and it would all be worth it when he managed to do the spell properly.

There were several Greyback sightings, and who knew if any of them were even legitimate, but still no one had seen any of the other escapees or had any idea of what they might be doing. Most people were discounting the tale of a person who had claimed to have seen Belatrix Lestrange moonlighting as a stand up comedien in a Brisbon pub, which had popped up in one of the tabloids. Harry could almost pretend that they had all decided to settle down in the country somewhere and forget about dark lords and governmental overthrows, but if there was one theme in Harry's life it was that the mundane was not an option.

When the February match finally came up, Harry was both excited for the match and eager for the tempo of his life to slow down just a bit afterwards. Oliver had snuck him out a couple of times to watch the Ravenclaw practices. It wasn't against the rules to observe the other teams practice, but it was more fun to sneak.
The twins were laughing and joking as usual as they got ready to go out onto the pitch. Harry was fairly nervous though. Everyone had assured him that there wouldn't be any reason for Dementors to storm the pitch, but Harry still had a niggling fear that they would strike at the worst moment. His patronus still wasn't up to scratch. Harry went to peek out the door to the locker room at the waiting crowd. The stands were packed and Harry was glad to see Professor Snape in the teacher's section. It felt very filial, the thought that maybe he had come just to see Harry play.

"Get back over here, Harry," Oliver said. "I've only got a couple minutes to give my pep talk."

"You've got ten," George said.

"And that doesn't bode well for us," Fred said.

Oliver, usually boisterous, had a bout of nerves, but he got through several pointers on their opposing team before saying, "We've got to win, don't we, so go out there and give it your all."

"Just for you Ollie," Angelina said.

"Don't worry about us," Harry said, thinking about what Professor Snape had said about the scout. "Just focus on being the best keeper."

They flew out onto the pitch as Lee Jordan announced them from the stands. Lining up opposite their counterparts, they waited for the captains to shake hands and the quaffle to be tossed. Harry avoided the urge to look around for the snitch. It was considered gauche for the Seekers to start looking before the match started.

Opposite Harry, the Ravenclaw Seeker, Cho Chang gave him a friendly smile that seemed out of place in the highly charged and competitive atmosphere. Harry smiled awkwardly and waved, unsure if that was what he was supposed to do in that situation.

"Oh, come on Harry," Fred said to his left, sounding exasperated.

Harry turned to look at him questioningly just as the quaffle was tossed and everyone was in action. He heard the bludgers being enthusiastically released from their brass strapped cages and the game was quickly in motion. Harry was hunting for the snitch in earnest. A quick catch would ensure a solid victory, and they needed a solid victory. Winning was important, but so too was the point spread.

Gryffindor kept a narrow lead in the beginning but started to pull further and further ahead as the game wore on. Harry thought that in part, it was really a matter of endurance, and Gryffindor had just trained harder. Today they'd be showing off not only their skill but their dedication to the game. As much as Harry had wanted a quick catch, he was glad they got to show off.

Harry kept himself busy looking for the snitch and interfering with the Ravenclaw chasers. He even drew the bludgers away a couple of times and had occasion to need his gauntlets on one of them. The odd thing was that he seemed to run into Cho Chang a lot more than he was used to crossing paths with the opposing teams seeker. She'd smile at him every time they passed. Gryffindor was sixty points in the lead when Harry spotted the snitch. He noticed Cho Chang. She was a bit closer to the snitch and just a bit off to the right of his vector towards it, but Harry was sure he was fast enough. He started moving towards it, hoping he could get closer before it or Cho Chang noticed.

Cho Chang spotted him and likely narrowed in on his focus. She spotted the snitch and perhaps by chance, the snitch seemed to become aware of their attention right then because it darted away.
Harry darted forward. Cho Chang did too, but not towards the snitch. The older girl interposed herself right in his path, obliterating his sight and forcing him to do a barrel roll underneath her. By the time he had gotten himself back on course, the snitch had disappeared.

"Next time, knock her off her broom, Harry," he heard Oliver call out.

Harry looked back at Cho, who was grinning at him. She had known she couldn't beat him to the snitch, positioned as they were, so she had blocked him rather than trying to beat him to the catch.

The game kept going around them, and Harry was soon off looking for the snitch again. The scores kept rising, and Gryffindor kept pulling further and further ahead. If the game wore on too much longer, it might not matter who caught the snitch. The issue was though, that Cho had started cutting ahead of Harry in each of his search patterns planning to either block him, or use the difference in distance to her advantage. If Harry were facing an opponent with a faster broom he would look for the snitch on his own, so that there would be less of a chance of a chase. Though Harry's two year old Nimbus wasn't that much faster than Cho's new Comet. Harry could either pick up the pace of his search pattern or convince Cho that marking him was a mistake, and speeding up would make it easier for him to miss the Snitch. Cho was splitting her attention between looking for the snitch herself and keeping an eye on Harry.

Without missing a beat, Harry broke off and launched himself at the ground. He didn't need to look back to know that Cho was right behind him diving towards the ground. Harry broke the dive a bit sooner than he would have if he were just doing stunts on his own. Cho dove past Harry and struggled a bit to right herself before she got too close to the ground. Harry looked down at her as she looked up. She wasn't smiling anymore. Harry waved again. A moment later he was dodging a bludger. It was as he was righting himself that he saw the snitch, flying directly in the wake of the bludger. He took off after both balls and nearly had his head taken off when one of the Ravenclaw Beaters hit the bludger he was chasing right back at him from only a few meters away. It was his gauntleted forearm that took the brunt of the impact, instead of his head, though he was sent spinning. Of course he lost sight of the snitch, he looked around frantically for a moment with his arm clutched to his chest.

The same bludger was sent back to the offending beater with extreme prejudice by Fred a moment later. The Ravenclaw ducked it rather than trying to hit it anywhere. Harry meanwhile figured that he had lost the snitch and resumed his search with one arm clutched to his chest. It didn't feel broken, but it felt a bit like hitting his funny bone, only painful, and that feeling wasn't going away.

Harry resumed his search. He felt a bit awkward flying with only one arm, but he kept his spirits up. It was an important match. He kept harrying the Ravenclaw chasers and drawing away bludgers. After a while though, he began to wonder how long it was going to be before the snitch was spotted again. Gryffindor kept pulling up further and further, but Harry was starting to get hungry, which meant it was well past lunch already. They'd been flying for a rather long while.

Harry started to think there might be something wrong with his arm. The pins and needles were gone, but he felt a lump in the middle of his forearm that seemed to be pulsing madly. Had he broken it? It didn't feel like any of the times he'd had broken a bone. He was tempted to ask for a timeout so Madame Pomfrey could check. He paused a moment so he could actually look at it. He pulled his arm away from his chest so he could pull up his sleeve and the golden snitch fell into his lap. Harry stared at it for a moment in shock. It looked like it had gotten caught up with the bludger, one wing was completely smashed and the other wasn't looking too good either. He barely heard the bludger that had decided to unseat the player that had stopped in the middle of the pitch. He barely got out of the way either. He grabbed the snitch out of his lap and held it up in the air, sheepishly. They'd won an hour and a half ago by Harry's estimate.
Severus had never been to Privet Drive before, though he knew it's location for emergency purposes. There was no emergency, but Severus thought that a visit was long past overdue. He strode up the walkway of Privet Drive eyeing the ordinary houses with their ordinary lawns. Each lot only a slight variant on the one next to it. He sneered at the reminder that a much younger version of himself had been very envious of people who lived in such houses.

Number four looked much like all of the houses around it. Nothing to say that a wizard lived there over the summer, much less the boy-who-lived. Though he supposed that was much the point.

Severus began occluding before he knocked on the door; he wasn't expecting anything good and it would be best if he kept himself in check. It was a bit later in the day than he had thought to come. His usual lab time had had to be rescheduled after the quidditch game the day prior had run over. Though it didn't matter, as he had not announced his visit ahead of time. A woman who was unmistakably Petunia Evans opened the door.

"Petunia," he greeted politely. Civility for now, at least.

"You," Petunia said accusingly, recognizing him instantly.

"Me," Severus agreed.

"We already agreed to take him back," Petunia said. "What does your sort want now."

Severus didn't let the surprise show. What did she mean 'take him back.'

"Why Petunia I'm only here to catch up with an old friend," Severus said.

"You have never been a friend of mine," Petunia said, and it was as though they were both twelve again. Petunia had nothing but spite and malice in her gaze as she looked at him.

"True," Severus said. "I am tasked with Mr. Potter's safety. I have come here to check on his protections."

"Well those things are in place aren't they?" Petunia asked. "No one's ever had to come in before."

"After what happened this previous summer, we felt it best to check," Severus said. "No reason to take chances."

"All your world has ever done is put my family in danger," Petunia said.

"Then let me in to check a few things," Severus said. "For your family's safety."

Petunia sniffed, looked around for anyone out on the street or looking through windows, and then stood back to let him in.

"Are your husband and son at home?" Severus asked.

"Dudley is away at school, and Vernon's with a client at golf," Petunia said. "It's for the best, I wouldn't want either one of them meeting you."

"Afraid I'll tell embarrassing tales?" Severus asked.

"What do you need to do?" Petunia asked, clearly not trying to mask impatience. "I don't wan't any of that hocus pocus in my house, and the sooner you leave the better."
"I will merely be assessing the protections," Severus said. "We wish to make sure everyone feels secure. It would not do to have a repeat of last summer."

"Secure?" Petunia asked. "Oh yes I've always felt secure having one of your lot in my house, around my son. You people come by, pat us on the head and tell us not to worry our silly little heads and think that everything's all right. That whole world of yours, and everyone in it is just as arrogant and condescending as you ever were."

"Everyone you say," Severus said. "So how has it been, raising Lily's son?"

He pulled out his wand and started muttering basic detection charms. Petunia's face grew pinched when she saw the wand but it became more so as she spoke.

"We never asked for him," she said accusingly. "Our family was perfect before he came along. Why do you even care? She's gone, she left you long before she got herself blown up, so why do you even care if the same doesn't happen to him?"

"I don't care," Severus said. "I am merely doing my job. One mustn't live in the past Petunia."

Petunia turned her nose up at him.

"Ruined a perfect family did he?" Severus asked.

"We are not ruined," Petunia said. "He tried, oh how he tried, but I wouldn't let him succeed, not like Lily."

"Does your husband share your view?" Severus asked, continuing with his pointless charms.

"Of course he does," Petunia said. "He's a sensible man. He doesn't put up with your nonsense."

"Knowing the boy's father, it must have been hard keeping a child like that in check," Severus said.

"We managed well enough," Petunia said. "Is this going to take much longer? You've done a dozen of those… things already."

"Almost done Petunia," Severus said. "I need to see his room."

Petunia looked nervous. "His room? Whatever for?"

"Well I could explain to you the magical theory behind protection wards, but you did seem to want me vacated with all due haste. It would be much faster if you just showed me and I could take my leave."

"Well you should take your leave now," Petunia said. "Your-wards are fine. I won't have you doing your mumbo jumbo next to my Dudley's room."

"This is quite necessary, Petunia," Severus said. "And it will only take one moment. Though if you will not show me. Tempus Locatum Harry James Potter." His wand, placed over his palm, pointed towards the stairs. The spell wasn't meant to find bedrooms exactly, but it did show where one spent the most time, and in a house, that was typically the bedroom. He turned and started walking up, only to have his wand start pointing down. 'The basement?' he wondered. He walked back down the stairs and paid more careful attention to it's movement.

"I really must insist…" Petunia said as Severus' wand pointed to a short doorway on the side of the staircase. It had a lock on the outside, but it wasn't at that moment locked. He opened the door, not
sure what he would find.

There were a few file boxes and some cleaning supplies, but underneath it all was clearly a child's cot. A few charms had the boxes out into the hall and Severus crouched down to look inside. The space was small, and besides a few crayon drawings on the slats of the stairs above, there was little to say that his son had spent more time in this cupboard than in any other room in this house. There were bloodstains on the cot.

"That's not his bedroom," Petunia said, and all of her previous gall and spite were gone.

"Not anymore I suspect," Severus said. "Are you going to show me, or must I go looking?"

"We never wanted him," Petunia said, and it wasn't accusative this time.

Severus gestured her on with his arm. She walked past him and went up the stairs. Severus followed. They stopped outside of a room with several locks on the outside of the door, which had a cat flap at the bottom. Like the cupboard under the stairs, this door was not currently locked. He didn't really know what he was expecting, but the completely spartan room fit with everything else. The room was empty besides a dresser, a bed, a chair, and a mirror. Severus gestured for Petunia to precede him before he walked in himself. There was blood in here too, all of it had been cleaned, but some traces never came out if you didn't clean it properly. A spot on the floorboard here, a smear on the bed frame there, and a dozen places besides.

"Tell me Petunia," Severus said, dropping all pretext of detached curiosity. "How did you discipline Harry when he was young?"

He gave that question a moment to set in.

"Legilimens," he hissed.

Legilimency wasn't like viewing a memory in a pensieve. The pensieve's magic could turn even the most fragmented of memories into an immersive experience. Memories were by their very nature, though, fragmentary and heavily influenced by the one remembering them. Petunia's first memory was just a shard.

"Worthless boy," Petunia spat a moment before her hand cracked against his cheek. The boy looked up at her with those pathetic sad eyes, his hand coming up to his cheek and his lips formed a silent 'oh.'

Severus snagged onto that link, those eyes, and followed it, taking him to more memories. He felt the contempt and the malicious spite in one memory and followed it to the next. He saw slaps and hair pulls and twisted ears on the way to the cupboard under the stairs.

"No food for a week," Petunia hissed through the grate on the door. "And just wait till your uncle gets home."

Severus followed the thought about the husband and found himself in a memory of Petunia in her son's room, reading him a story. Vernon was a bit louder than usual this time, the boy at least could be quiet, but he had crossed a line with that report card. Lily had always stolen their parents affection and she could just see the boy trying to do the same to her Dudders and she would not have it. He had probably cheated anyways. She would have to tell his teacher.

The memory changed.

"He's a chronic liar, I'm afraid," Petunia told Ms. Druthers. "I love him to bits, and we've been
working with him, but something's just not right there, not after that car crash. He'll always push boundaries if he thinks he can get away with it."

"Car crash you say?" Ms. Druthers asked.

"Yes, you've probably noticed the scar on his forehead, brain trauma. It was his father," Petunia said. "Drunk driving I'm afraid. That was the way for the both of them. Of course we begged Lily to stop drinking while she was pregnant."

Ms. Druthers gasped.

There was more. There was so much more. There was a little boy, clothes soaked from the rain, being shoved into a cupboard while his family watched the telly as if he was not there. There was rotten food for dinner and good food thrown out in front of a hungry child who had just burned himself on the stove. There was a cupboard door being slammed shut over and over like the beating of a drum.

There were a litany of words like 'worthless'; clumsy fool, idiot boy, ungrateful monster. The word that kept coming up though was 'freak.'

"Of course she didn't," Petunia said. "How could anyone love a freak like you?"

"Freaks don't deserve bedtime stories," Petunia said.

"Santa doesn't bring presents to freaks," Petunia said. "And don't ask questions."

'Don't ask questions,' came up a lot too, as did, 'You should be grateful.'

"You should be grateful I bother," Petunia said, ruler in hand. "Someone has to make sure you don't grow up to be just as worthless as your parents were.

"You should be grateful I didn't drop you off at an orphanage," Petunia said. "Do you know what happens to worthless freaks like you there? You'd realize your Uncle's been going easy on you. And don't even get me started on the food we've wasted on you."

"You should be grateful to get anything," Petunia said. "With how you've ruined everything I shouldn't give you a single bite. But you do just ruin everything, don't you, so I don't expect much, do I? You should be grateful for that also."

Severus pulled out from her mind and regained awareness of the room. Petunia had fallen to her knees clutching her head.

"What did you do to me?!" she shrieked.

"Nothing an Asprin won't fix," Severus snarled, keeping his mind as clear as he could under the circumstances. "You should be grateful. Your death would complicate matters for your nephew."

Severus stopped in an old wood before he returned to the castle. He leveled destruction at everything he could see.

"Tell me you didn't know," Severus said without preamble as he entered the headmaster's office. It had been a long time since he had been this angry with the Headmaster.

"You must forgive me, Severus, for not knowing whatever it is I should not know," the
Headmaster said, leveling Severus a questioning and admonishing look.

"Tell me that you didn't know that my son was starved, beaten, and locked up in a cupboard until he came to Hogwarts," Severus said.

He should get used to seeing the headmaster surprised. It seemed to happen more often of late.

"What has happened Severus?" the Headmaster asked.

"I visited Petunia," Severus said. "I found reason enough to find out if my son was safe in his home."

"I see," the Headmaster said.

"Did you know?" Severus asked.

"I did not," the Headmaster said. "Though I will admit that I should have. I did know that they did not get along, I knew that there was bad blood. I told myself that keeping Harry alive was more important, though if I had known…"

"He will live with me," Severus said. "From now on, he doesn't go back there. He never goes back there. I will tear that house down if I have to to make sure he doesn't."

"Harry will not go back, but your cover Severus…" the Headmaster began.

"It can be a secret," Severus said. "There is no reason for anyone else to know."

"I had considered the possibility before," the Headmaster said. "When I first learned that you were Harry's father. I have been attempting to find a manner to extend his mother's protection through you."

"Through me?" Severus asked.

"Blood magic works through resonance," the Headmaster said. "Petunia Dursley's blood resonated with her sister's providing the avenue by which I extended the blood protection. From Lily, to Petunia, to Harry. It becomes a bit more contrived when we try to channel that protection through you. In this instance the connection from Lily would go through Harry, to his blood connection to you, then back from you to Harry. I believe it can be done, but it will take time to work matters out."

"If you can carry the resonance from Lily to Harry then why am I needed at all?" Severus asked.

"It is a protection," the Headmaster said. "It requires a protector."

"Petunia did not protect him," Severus said.

"She accepted the task, she brought him into her home; that was enough for the ritual," the headmaster said. "Whatever else happened in that house did not change that."

"Why did you think that that was the only way to protect him?" Severus asked. "He could have been safe elsewhere."

"Those wards have kept him safe from several attempts on his life," the Headmaster said.

"There were many children in danger during the war, you never went so far for them," Severus said. "Harry is the boy-who-lived, but that wouldn't matter for your plans. For any other child at
risk you would have found a better alternative than the Dursleys, why were the blood wards so important. If you knew they did not love him, why did the wards matter? He could have been hidden properly elsewhere, where wards would not have mattered. There's something more."

The headmaster gave him a long assessing look before sighing.

"I have always led you to believe that the prophesy played itself out that night, Severus" the headmaster said. "But the truth of the matter is that the prophesy is yet to be complete. I believe that that protection is essential, both to protecting Harry and to defeating Voldemort for good."

Severus' blood ran cold."Tell me the Prophesy," he demanded. That damned prophesy had already killed Lily and damned him. What more would it take.

"It is important that I don't," the Headmaster said. "Prophesies are meant to be heard by those who hear them. This prophesy is not done and the outcome is not set. Interference could affect who comes out the other end. I do trust you Severus, but the remainder of the prophesy must remain hidden at all cost."

"You intend for Harry to face the Dark Lord?" Severus asked, aghast.

"I intend for Harry to survive his encounters with Voldemort," the Headmaster said. "As Tom will surely seek out Harry again and again until one of them is dead. The prophesy doesn't matter in that regard. Our goal is the same regardless. Voldemort will seek Harry out, regardless."

"Harry needs to be prepared," Severus said. "He doesn't even know."

"There is time Severus," the Headmaster said. "Harry is thirteen, he is not a soldier."

"He's a target," Severus said. "And he is my son. If this is all being dictated by a prophesy then I already know I can't protect him ultimately. Not if fate guarantees they clash. I need to prepare him."

"I have been carefully planning for the past many years for Harry's survival, Severus," the Headmaster said.

"I assume the plan never included me being his father," Severus said.

"No it did not," the Headmaster said. "I have been happy for you, for the both of you, even as I have struggled to make adjustments."

"I don't need adjustments," Severus said. "I need for you to treat me like I am his father. He is my son and I need to be able to protect him. I need to prepare him."

The headmaster sighed. "This is all very new for you, Severus. For the both of you. I am heartened to see you taking to fatherhood so well. Though you hold no legal guardianship over Harry as of now, I will start treating you as though you do.

"Keep in mind, though," the headmaster said. "That Harry is a very independent boy. From what you have told me just now it is very unlikely that he has ever had an appropriate father figure. It is likely that he has often suffered under authority and he is used to managing on his own, likely prides himself for that. If you wish to be Harry's guardian, it may be best to ease him into the matter.

"Are you trying to tell me not to come on too strong?" Severus asked sardonically.
"In a manner of speaking," the Headmaster said. "Is there anything I should be aware of in regards to your visit to the Dursleys?"

Severus gave the Headmaster a grim smile. "Nothing more than some unpleasant charms upon their home to make their lives interesting. Harry does not need me in Azkaban for crimes against muggles."

"Very well," the Headmaster said. "You will need to give me some time. I must determine how to involve you in my plans for Harry's survival in the fight against Voldemort."

Steven woke up half frozen on the early February morning in the woods. The weather was the worst part of transforming in the great outdoors. Or rather the one and only downside really. Everything else? He felt so alive. So free. He felt elated. He felt… full. He looked down upon himself and saw that he was covered in blood. He looked around panicked until he saw the deer. They had caught it sometime under the light of the full moon.

Steven felt… accomplished. More so than he had the week prior when he had gone hunting with his pack mate. That had been fun. Stalking his prey, bringing it down with a spell; but this. He had brought this animal down under his own power. He had chased it though the woods and he had brought it down. His pack mate was right. He was a predator, and last night had been his first kill, his first real kill. Struggling, he tried to recall any flashes of memory of the night prior. The thrill of the chase, the hunt, the scent of blood in the air, the feeling of flesh in his mouth. It had been a long time since he had felt that he had any power.

"You look like an idiot," his pack mate said, stalking into the clearing with a smug smirk. "I hope I didn't look like that my first time."

Steven just grinned at him.

Something had changed, Harry thought, between him and Professor Snape. It was a good change, Harry thought. It might just be his imagination. The headmaster had called him to his office earlier in the month to tell Harry that he had found a work around for the blood wards. Harry would never have to go back again. Though the headmaster hadn't said where Harry would be staying over the summer, it left Harry wondering.

Harry had been putting a lot of thought into asking Professor Snape to take him in. Perhaps that was why he was imagining Professor Snape being more… fatherly, might not be the best word, but he felt that there was something more. Casual encouragements, pats on the shoulder, checking his homework; it wasn't anything really, but Harry had the feeling that something had changed and he took it as encouragement that things were working out. Which wasn't to say that he didn't still worry that it would all fall apart. The thought that things were becoming more just seemed to fuel those fears. That and the dementors. He couldn't forget the dementors. It didn't help that he was on his way to another lesson with Professor Lupin.

Harry thought that this might just be it though. He was feeling it. He had been since his last Occlumency lesson with Professor Snape. He had been getting better. They had taken things slow since they had started using Active Legilimency during the lessons, but Harry was really starting to feel like he was there, that he was getting to the point where he would be able to maintain focus in the face of a dementor. It helped that he was also lasting a lot longer under the sway of the dementor before he passed out. Perhaps given long enough he wouldn't pass out at all, but Harry would rather not get that much exposure.
"Ah, Harry," Professor Lupin greeted when Harry entered. "I haven't spoken to you since the game. How is Gryffindor feeling about their chances?"

"Pretty good," Harry said. "It would have been better if Hufflepuff had beaten Slytherin, but the point spread's still promising for us. I just need to catch the snitch at the right moment."

"Just under a month then until the big game," Professor Lupin said. "I'm supposed to be unbiased, but I don't mind telling you that I'll be rooting for a certain someone."

Harry grinned.

"How do you feel about today's lesson," Professor Lupin asked. "It's been a while since you've taken a session off."

"I feel good," Harry said. "Hermione has me working on self care. I'm supposed to do something fun or relaxing every day. I helped the twins with a certain activity earlier today."

If half of what his father had written him was true, or just a fraction of what Professor Lupin had told him, then the man wouldn't mind a bit of pranking in good fun. Charming the flagstones leading up to the teacher's lounge to each chime a different tone when stepped on was the sort of prank not even Hermione could frown at too much. Though hopefully Professors Snape and McGonagall would never find out about his involvement.

"Well I'm glad you're in good spirits," Professor Lupin said grinning at him mischievously. "Why don't you get yourself ready and we can begin."

Harry nodded and set about clearing his mind. At this point, clearing his mind was easy enough for a short period of time, as long as there wasn't anything heavily weighing on his mind or otherwise distracting him. He started focusing on his memory, the feeling of the protection, the love, while he separated everything else out; everything else that was associated with the night his parents died, keeping only that feeling of love and protection.

Even though it was just a memory, he let himself fall into it, that feeling; the proof that his mother had loved him. He buried himself in that memory before nodding to Professor Lupin that he was ready.

The dementor popped out of the wardrobe and the temperature in the room dropped considerably. Harry focused on his memory.

"Expecto Patronum," Harry cast, and there was an awful lot of white mist, he could feel the effects of the dementor diminish and he focused on his memory. "Expecto Patronum. Expecto Patronum."

"Not, Harry!" his mother pleaded. Halloween always came first during these sessions. He heard his mother die before he felt her protection.

That was the only memory he relived that time. He came to with that memory still very present in his mind. He didn't even wait for chocolate or rest. He focused on that feeling, still fresh, still there. He focused on his mother's love which had followed him his whole life, comforting him when he had needed it, always there. It wasn't just a moment, it was a lifetime of protection, of salvation. When he had had nothing, he had had his mother's love. He focused, not just on the feeling, but the concept of having never been completely alone.

"I'm ready to go again," Harry said, still slumped against Professor Lupin's desk.

"It's fairly soon," Professor Lupin said. "You should have some chocolate."
"I'm ready," Harry said, eyes closed, focusing on the memory.

Professor Lupin sighed. "Alright but then that's it for tonight."

Harry nodded. He thought it would be the last time also.

The wardrobe popped open but Harry didn't open his eyes to look at the dementor. There was something it could never take away from him.

"Expecto Patronum," Harry cast. He didn't need to see to know it had worked. He could feel it down to his bones. He felt his mother's power singing in his bones.

"Harry you need to open your eyes," Professor Lupin said.

Harry opened his eyes, and looked up at a silvery doe peering down at him. Harry gasped, his hand reaching out tentatively, afraid to touch, afraid to break the spell. His hand rested on the side of the doe's head and the next thing Harry knew he was reaching forward to hug her. He stayed like that for a while before his arms passed through nothingness and Harry slumped forward feeling completely drained.

"Are you alright?" Professor Lupin asked.

Harry nodded, unable to speak, but not feeling as if his silence was terrible.

"Your mother had the same patronus," Professor Lupin said. "She said it was to match your father's animagus form."

"Do you think she'd like that I had the same one?" Harry asked.

"Of course," Professor Lupin said. "And your father and godfather would have been boasting to everyone who would listen that you'd managed the patronus at thirteen. Well done, Harry, very well done indeed."

"Thank you very much, Professor," Harry said.

"Thank you for being a dedicated student," Professor Lupin said. "You make this very much worth it."

"I hate that you won't be coming back next year," Harry said.

"I will miss it myself," Professor Lupin said. "Though let's not talk as though the year is almost up. It's only mid-March. There's still plenty of time. There is still much I should like to teach you."

"Like what?" Harry asked.

"Like why it is a bad idea to prank the Slytherine Quidditch team the night before the big game," Professor Lupin said.

"You didn't," Harry said.

"We most certainly did," Professor Lupin said.

Hermione and Ron were very excited when Harry told them about his patronus. They waited until the common room had emptied out that night before Harry showed them. He got a hug from Hermione and a slap on the back from Ron. Harry grinned at them. He felt lighter than he had in a
long while. It was the next day as he was thinking that he would have to show Professor Snape his Patronus that he thought again about his summer arrangements.

Things were going well with the professor. It seemed more and more that things would stay that way. The thing was, that Harry liked things the way they were. It felt stable. It felt sustainable. Harry didn't know how things might change if their relationship progressed to a different level. If Professor Snape took him in, how long would it take for him to get where he was now, feeling like he knew where he stood with the man. He had said it a number of times before, but he just didn't know how well Professor Snape would tolerate him on a more full time basis. The Dursleys had taken him in. They must have wanted him at some point. How long had it been before they had decided that he had been a mistake? The first time he had done accidental magic? Or had it been something else? He wished he could remember back that far. What had been the last straw for the Dursleys?

It was only two and a half months though, Harry thought. Then back to normal. Harry could stay out from underfoot for ten weeks. He could show Professor Snape that he was self sufficient, not needy at all, and he could try as hard as he could to be… whatever it was Professor Snape was looking for in a ward. He could do that for ten weeks. It didn't have to be perfect. He just couldn't tank it. That was all he had to do.

Harry sighed. He could manage. He probably could. Or he could talk the Headmaster into letting him stay at Hogwarts. He would want Harry to be safe. Things could stay the same between Professor Snape and Harry. Things were really great the way they were. Harry shouldn't risk it. Come to think of it though, where did Professor Snape live over the summer? Did he live in the castle? Maybe they could live 'together,' but separate, in the castle. That could be a happy medium. He could spend time with the Professor, but not too much time, and he wouldn't be forcing the man to take care of him. He should find out where Professor Snape lived.

Potions came first that day, and Harry had to run a couple of occlumency exercises just to pay attention in class. By the end of the day, Harry was antsy to see Professor Snape. He threw on his invisibility cloak and made his way into the dungeons.

It wasn't just that he didn't want to be seen going too often into the dungeons. He was trying to avoid Eric Eckelson, who was always somewhere in the halls, it seemed, cleaning for Filch as a detention. He hadn't directly confronted Harry since he had come back from his suspension, but he always gave Harry a murderous glare when he saw him and Harry usually found himself tripped up or otherwise jinxed whenever he passed Eckelson in the hall. He never actually saw the older boy do it, but he knew it was him. He thought Eckelson was smart enough to not try anything serious, but Harry would rather not cross paths with him again when there was no one else around.

"Hey Professor," Harry said, when he entered Professor Snape's quarters.

"Hello Harry," Professor Snape said, Harry thought he looked nervous. "Ready for your weekend, I am sure."

"I'm always ready for the weekend," Harry said. "I've got something to show you."

"Have you now?" Professor Snape asked. "Is it full marks on your Ancient Runes test?"

"Well it wasn't full marks," Harry said. "But I did rather well, and this is better. Ready?"

"I'm sure I am," Professor Snape said.

"Okay," Harry said, pulling out his wand. "Um, here goes."
Harry focused on his happy feeling. "Expecto Patronum," Harry cast. He felt the protection build up inside of him and spring forth as an ethereal doe. He heard Professor Snape gasp. Just looking at his patronus made Harry feel wobbly kneed and giddy. He felt like he was on top of the world. He turned to see Professor Snape looking at the Patronus with a look of awe and longing.

Professor Snape drew his own wand.

"Expecto Pantronum," Professor Snape cast. Another silvery doe burst forth into the room, the two creatures turning towards one another.

"They're the same," Harry said excitedly. He turned from the two Patroni to smile at Professor Snape. "That's so cool."

Suddenly Harry knew.

"I… I wanted to talk to you about this summer," he said, having not at all planned out how to actually have this conversation.

"Yes," Professor Snape said. "I have been wanting to talk to you as well, I know you will not be returning to your aunt and uncle. Perhaps I should start by saying that I paid a visit to your aunt."

Both patroni winked out.

"We just don't get along," Harry said immediately. "That's all. They don't like magic. That's all there was."

What had Professor Snape discovered? What did he know about Harry? What did Harry have to explain away?

"Harry, I know it's more than that you just didn't get along," Professor Snape said. "Your Aunt wasn't very good at hiding anything."

"Yeah," Harry said. "She talks like that about a lot of people. You should hear what she says about the neighbors. She just…" He didn't know what to say. What had Aunt Petunia told him about Harry. Harry didn't know what damage control was needed.

"What she said was plenty horrid, Harry," Professor Snape said and Harry could no longer look into those angry accusing eyes. "But there was worse I found in that house than that. I saw the cupboard under the stairs."

"Oh," Harry said. "That's…" There was a word a word for if anyone ever found out. What was the word? "A… agoraphobic… I was a little agoraphobic when I was small, I just liked small spaces was all. I have a bedroom. A proper normal bedroom."

"Yes," Professor Snape said. "With a good half dozen locks on it."

"They were worried for my safety," Harry said. "Because they knew people wanted to kill me."

"They only unlocked from the outside," Professor Snape said. "Enough Harry, I know everything." Harry paled. "Or I know enough. When I saw those locks, and that damned cat flap, and the blood… I legilimized your aunt. I saw more than enough."

"No," Harry said, but there was no denial he could make. He had told himself that he wouldn't let himself get close to Professor Snape unless the man could like him as he was, but he had never been able to show the man everything. He could only ever have hidden what the Dursley's had
seen in him for so long. Had it only been his aunt?

"If you had said something," Professor Snape said.

"I know," Harry said, cutting him off. "I'm sorry, I know it wasn't fair. I could have avoided this. I
know. Can't we just…"

"It's not about fair," Professor Snape said. "Fair would have been none of it happening."

Harry closed his eyes. He had known it was over when Professor Snape had said he had seen into
Aunt Petunia's mind. Now the man wished that none of the past school year had happened.

"I know," Harry said, backing up. "I'm sorry, I'll just… I'll just go."

"Harry, we need to talk about this," Professor Snape. "There are some things I want to address. If
this is another conversation you need to fortify yourself for then that's alright, but we do need to
talk about this."

"Why?" Harry said. "I get it, you don't need to explain. I'm really sorry; you gave me a chance to
back out and I didn't give you one. You don't owe me anything, you don't owe me an explanation.
The Dursleys already gave me one. So I just really need to go and we can pretend… I just need to
go."

"No," Professor Snape said. "We are not doing this again. I am not falling into this trap. We are
clearly having different conversations with one another. I do believe you have wildly differing
ideas of where this talk was going than I did and I am not going to do the whole thing where you
avoid me and your friends come to scold me."

"What?" Harry asked.

"I do not wish for our relationship to end," Professor Snape said. "I have been happy getting to
know you and I wish to continue to do so. I brought up your relatives because I felt that perhaps
your upbringing with them may have colored your perception of a healthy guardian/child
relationship and I wanted to address that with you before I asked you to to come live with me. I
know we talked about the fact that I could not acknowledge you publicly while the Dark Lord still
lives, but I would very much like to take you in as my son, even if it must be in secret."

"Wh- Your son? You want me to live with you?" Harry asked. "I- but the Dursleys. You saw…me.
You saw… You saw me through her eyes. Why would you want me. Why would you want me
after seeing that. After seeing me. I.. I don't understand."

"What I saw was a disgusting woman who destroyed her relationship with the best person she had
in her life," Professor Snape said.

Harry shook his head. "No," he said. "No, you don't understand. I… After I told you about the
letter… You told me everything. You told me all the reasons I might not want you in my life, but I
didn't do the same."

"Yes you did," Professor Snape said. "You told me dozens of things before you told me about the
letter. I understood what you were doing. You wanted me to accept you before you would take that
chance. I did accept you. I do accept you."

Harry shook his head. "I didn't tell you," he said. "I couldn't. That wasn't the worst. There were…
There was worse. I knew I should tell you, I knew you'd figure it out, but I couldn't tell you and I…"
Harry studied the ground in front of him. He couldn't have looked at Professor Snape then if
"Everyone knew, when I was younger," Harry said. "Everyone knew not to be my friend. Ron didn't. I didn't understand, I was so scarred, but... It felt so nice... When we met on the train. It was better than I had thought having a friend would be; better than I had imagined, but I was sure it would end soon. Ron would figure it out. But time went on and he didn't and I told myself that for all that Ron was the best friend I could have ever imagined that maybe there was something wrong with him; that he couldn't see me like everyone else did. Then Hermione came along and we made friends, but then too, Hermione had never really had friends before either, so she overlooked everything; she overlooks a lot. Everyone else got caught up in the boy-who-lived thing and then they'd go back and forth between seeing this idea they had about who I was and seeing me and hating me. But you; you'd always seen... my father. So when you stopped seeing him, I tried really hard to be a normal kid for you. I never let you see... I should have told you... like you told me."

"You don't owe me that," Professor Snape said emphatically. "I owed you that. You were placing your trust in me. You don't need to tell me everything you think is wrong with yourself. Though you can. So I can tell you not to worry about it. There's nothing wrong with you, Harry."

"Yes there is. I don't think I can tell you though," Harry said. "Not everything."

"And I told you you don't have to," Professor Snape said.

"You saw... you saw how much they hated me?" Harry asked.

"I saw that they were horrible people," Professor Snape said.

"I ruined their family," Harry said.

"They ruined themselves," Professor Snape said. "Harry, I've already made up my mind. I'll have you for my son if you'll have me."

Harry gaped at him, finally able to look up. "You... After all that, you want... me? As your son?"

"I do," Professor Snape said.

"I really don't understand," Harry said.

"That's alright," Professor Snape said. "Are you willing to give it a shot?"

"I don't know if I can," Harry said.

"Why not?" Professor Snape asked.

"Because what if it doesn't work out?" Harry asked.

"What if it does?" Professor Snape countered.

"That could be a big if," Harry said.

"I don't think it is," Professor Snape said. "I want to try and make this work Harry. You can't get anything in life if you don't take a chance. Are you willing to take a chance with me?"

"I... yeah," Harry said. "I am."

His dad smiled. Harry would keep the fantasy going as long as he could.
It was still cold when Steven woke up. Probably not actually freezing, but it was definitely too cold to be naked out in the woods very early in the morning. In spite of it though, he felt so energized, so full of life. There was blood all over him, he knew. He grinned, stretching his tired joints as he picked himself up. He felt satisfied. The hunt the night before must have been better than the previous month's. He cast his mind back, trying to remember any snippets of the night before. He remembered the smell of blood on the air, his howl in the night, the rush. He remembered the screaming.

The screaming. He broke into a sweat, even in the cold. He looked around frantically, and there it was. The body. The human body. Torn to shreds. Steven fell to his knees and started to heave, expelling the contents of his very full stomach.

"Now don't go wasting that," his companion said. "You had your fill last night. You sure worked for it."

"How can you say that?" Steven cried out, still transfixed by the mutilated corpse. "I ate… We ate… We… He's dead."

"Good riddance too," his companion said. "He was plenty annoying last week wasn't he. Not good for much besides prey. But then again, he was human, so that was a given."

"What?" Steven asked. "That asshole from the bar? How? This was an accident." He finally looked up at his companion.

"Not much of an accident," Fenrir Greyback said. "I'd had him marked since then. Charmed his shoe to be a portkey after you punched his lights out. That was a really good hit by the way. I kept telling you you had it in you."

"You're… You're Fenrir Greyback," Steven said to his companion, who no longer had any glamour on.

"Of course I am," Greyback said. "But you've known that for a while haven't you? You knew where this was going."

"I didn't," Steven said, shaking his head.

"Oh you didn't?" Greyback asked. "So I suppose you didn't say you wished we could be hunting that wizard who fired you instead of the deer last week. I guess you didn't laugh when I told you this prick here was the sort of prey that would scream like a girl under the full moon. You weren't just agreeing with me the other night that humans were below us."

"That was just talk," Steven said. "You've been tricking me."

"That was talk," Greyback said. "That was the wolf talking. Why were you looking at that corps like it was a person. That wasn't one of us. That was a human. We're not human. We're better than human. Do you think that swot ever shed a tear for eating a pork chop? There's an order here, and we're at the top. You felt it, didn't you? These past two years, you knew you were different. You knew you weren't one of them. The humans made you think you should be ashamed of it, but what other defense does a lesser being have when it is prey. They live and they die, in their pathetic, meaningless, weak worlds never knowing what it is like to truly be at the apex. What difference does it make if we carry one off to fulfill it's true purpose?"

"I just… I just need to go clear my head," Steven said. "I can't think about this right now." He was still covered in blood. He was still naked. There was still a body not three meters away. He still felt
the thrill of the hunt.

"Oh no," Greyback said. "There's no time to go anywhere. Your training's just begun."

Chapter End Notes

Recommended reading for all y'all. The Dragon King’s Temple. Avatar: The Last Airbender crossed over with Stargate SG-1. I really enjoyed it. I hope you all enjoyed this chapter and that you'll let me know what you think.
Chapter Notes

Ugh, two months, sorry about that. In other news, totally not an excuse or anything, I went to Japan for a couple of weeks, and I went camping for another week. Lots of fun.

Disclaimer: I don't own any of the characters from the Harry Potter series. Sammy, Erstwhile, and Eckelson are my own creation.

“You know,” Harry said, “it’s not too late to back out.”

“Back out?” Ron asked. “No, this is perfect, everything’s ready. Why would we back out.”

“Because it’s their birthday?” Harry said.

“Exactly,” Ron said. “They’ll really appreciate it. This was a great idea Harry.”

“I wasn’t actually suggesting it as something we actually do,” Harry said. “I just saw the potion in the book and thought about the twins. It seems a bit mean.”

“Teddybear spider Harry,” Ron said. “Giant teddybear spider.”

“See now,” Harry said. “When you talk about that, it seems more like this is about getting back at your brothers than it’s about pranking them as a birthday present.”

“Why can’t it be both?” Ron asked. “Come on Harry, you know they’ll think it’s brilliant. Also, we’ve already got everything done. Fred and George just ate the food we laced, you already tested the potions yourself, everything’s going to go great.”

They were walking behind the twins. Dinner had just ended and Ron had convinced Oliver Wood to tell the twins that there was a quidditch meeting in an unused office. Silenced and under the invisibility cloak, there was no way the twins would know they were being followed.

“Which one…” Harry began.

“You’ve got the one on the left, I’ve got the one on the right,” Ron said. “If we mess that up we’ll just look to the twins like we’ve been Confunded, you know?”

“If anyone comes up on us while we’re doing this they’ll think we all have been,” Harry said.

“Well I’m pretty sure that won’t be an issue since no one else’ll have any business out here anyways,” Ron said.

Harry looked at his watch and put a hand on Ron’s shoulder. The potions would activate in 5, 4, 3, 2, 1. He gave Ron’s shoulder a squeeze. Ron sent off a tripping hex at Fred. George kept on walking, completely oblivious, having neither heard nor seen his twin brother fall. The two of them pulled off the cloak and canceled their silencing charm as Harry ran up to help Fred up, and
Ron ran up to George who had noticed that Fred was no longer besides him.

“You all right there?” Harry asked.

“Yeah,” Fred said. “Too caught up in a future prank to watch where I’m going.” He looked around. “Hey, where’d you go, Georgie?” he called out.


“George,” Fred said dismissively. “My brother George,” he said in exasperation when Harry looked at him questioningly.

“Um, do you mean Ron?” Harry asked. “Or Percy, or is one of your older brother’s visiting for some reason. Wait, I thought there was a Bill and a Charlie, is there another one I haven’t heard of?”

“No, Harry,” Fred said. “My twin brother, he looks exactly like me only slightly less handsome.”

“Riiight,” Harry said. “Is this another prank, because I don’t get it.”

It was very hard not to look over his shoulder where Ron was having a very similar exchange with George a few meters down the hallway.

“Come on George,” he could hear Ron say. “If you’ve gotten up to mischief again you can’t go back to blaming it on your imaginary friend from when you were six. Back then you half had me convinced I did have another brother.”

The thing was, Fred couldn’t see or hear Ron or George at that moment; just as George couldn’t see or hear Fred or Harry. The twins had unknowingly taken the Perception Exclusion potion at dinner; Ron had said they’d never suspect Ginny, who had sat in between them. Fred’s had been charmed to respond to Ron and George, while George’s had been charmed to respond to Fred and Harry. Unless they literally ran into each other, they had no way to know that they were standing so close to one another.

“No Harry,” Fred said. “This isn’t a prank, he was just right here. Something’s happened to George. Why don’t you remember George?”

“Ummm…” Harry said, sounding confused.

“Damnit why’d the map have to go missing,” Fred said.

Harry shrugged, not knowing what map he was talking about. “Right, well I don’t know about remembering people who don’t exist,” Harry said. “But if, um, George, was just right here, then where did he go? People don’t just disappear into thin air and out of people’s memories.”

Fred gasped. “Not unless they’ve been attacked by a time leech,” he sounded strangled.

The week prior, Hermione had ‘conveniently’ read out loud from a book about rare, and probably mythical, creatures, the limit to her participation in the shenanigans.

“Well even if that were the case,’ Harry said. “If he got erased from time, how come you can remember him?”

“I don’t know,” Fred said dismissively. “It’s a twin thing.”

“Okay,” Harry said. “That doesn’t sound likely, but we should probably get a teacher. Professor
Lupin is just down the hall.”

“Right,” Fred said. “He probably knows what to do…” Fred trailed off, staring over Harry’s shoulder at the wall a bit down the corridor. Harry looked back to see that George and Ron had gone silent, and that George had written, “It’s a prank, brother mine,” against the wall with magic.

“Oh,” Fred said, pulling out his wand to write back a reply.

“Sorry mate,” Ron called, "I couldn’t keep a straight face when he said ‘time leech’.

“Oh, is it Harry?” he heard George ask Ron.

“No worries,” Harry said. “I’m surprised it got as far as it did.”

“Oh, don’t say that Harry,” Fred said, slinging an arm around his shoulder. “If you don’t think it’s going to work it just makes it harder to sell it. So. Was professor Lupin in on this too? Was he going to carry on the time leech thing?”

“Turns out he was a bit of a hell raiser when he was a student,” Harry said, glad that neither twin seemed upset.

“So how long does this last?” Fred asked.

“About an hour,” Harry said.

“Well then you’ll just have to be my replacement twin,” Fred said. “We were just going to test out some Zonkos products.” He started dragging Harry down the hall. “But first we’re going to see Professor Lupin, I want to see how far he’s going to take this.”

Professor Lupin was indeed very convincing and it was a contest of which of the two of them could keep up the ruse longer. Professor Lupin gave in when Fred made like he was going to fire call the headmaster. Most of the Zonkos products wore off after a while, but Harry had baby blue hair and cat eyes for a week. Ron was not so lucky.

Harry rather didn’t know where he stood with his dad. On the one hand, Professor Snape had asked Harry to live with him. On the other, Professor Snape had seen Harry through Aunt Petunia’s eyes. How could he not be questioning that decision now? His dad had said that he wanted Harry to be his son, but how long could that last? It seemed like so much had changed since the week prior, but on the surface a lot had stayed the same. Harry still helped out in the lab, they practiced Oclumency, and they still took meals together a few times that week. Everything had stayed the same, but everything felt different.

Harry was back in Professor Snape’s quarters for another meal. This one was special though, Easter Sunday. It had never really meant anything to Harry before, just another special occasion the Dursley’s kept him in the cupboard for, but it felt nice that the two of them had gotten together specifically to celebrate a holiday.

“So I was wondering if you lived in the castle over the summer,” Harry said between bites of roast lamb.
“I’m afraid you won’t be using the quidditch pitch this summer, Harry,” Professor Snape said. “I live in Cokesworth.”

“Oh,” Harry said. “That’s where you grew up, isn’t it?”

Professor Snape nodded. “Though I have been putting some thought into moving somewhere more suitable.”

“Oh, please don’t move on my account,” Harry said, both horrified at the prospect and flustered by the thought that his dad might actually go through the trouble for him.

“It isn’t the best area for a family,” Professor Snape said. “And also, I suppose, I have been trying to get away from holding on to the past. It is the house I grew up in.”

Harry had been able to gather that Professor Snape hadn’t enjoyed his own childhood and thought a bit about what it would be like to live as an adult at Privet Drive.

“Still,” Harry said. “You don’t need to make any big changes on my account. I’ve really already got everything I need and I can mostly take care of myself. It’ll be like having a flatmate.”

One of Professor Snape’s eyebrows rose.

“I have no intention of treating you as a flatmate, Harry,” Professor Snape said.

“Right,” Harry said. “But I’ll be super low maintenance. I won’t get in the way of your summer projects or anything."

“I fully intend to work spending time with my son somewhere into my busy summer schedule, Harry” Professor Snape said. “There is no need for you to feel as though you are intruding when it is I who has asked you to come live with me.”

“Right,” Harry said. “But you can, you know, tell me if I’m bothering you, or if you need me to do things or not do things.”

“Ah,” Professor Snape said. “Do not fear that there will not be ground rules; for the both of us.”

“You?” Harry asked.

“More as a reassurance,” Professor Snape said. “That matters will be different with me than they were at Privet Drive.”

“Oh,” Harry said. He turned his attention to his plate and moved his mashed potatoes around a bit.

“You’re different,” Harry said. “From before.”

“I won’t change back,” Professor Snape said.

“You said you used occlumency to change yourself,” Harry said.

“In a way,” Professor Snape said.

“Ron said you were able to completely mimic me when you tried to trick Greyback,” Harry said.

“That was temporary,” Professor Snape said. “It wasn’t the same thing. I’m not pretending to be someone different right now, Occlumency gave me clarity, I saw what I wanted to change and then
I worked on that. The mental arts help me solidify those changes, but it isn’t like flipping a switch. There is much of who I was that is still with me, but I work every day to be who I would like to be.”

“How do you do that?” Harry asked.

“How do you do that, is what I believe you are asking,” Professor Snape said. “I have told you, you are not broken Harry.”

Harry stared at his plate for a while.

“Occlumency is not merely a mental discipline,” Professor Snape said. “It is a magical art that affects your mind. Witches and Wizards have destroyed themselves trying to alter their own minds.”

“You did it,” Harry said.

“I was broken,” Professor Snape said. “And I was careful. The flaws I saw in myself had not been painted in my mind by the vitriol lavished upon me by my guardians since I was an infant. I would like to work with you on your perception of yourself, but you do not need to change who you are Harry.”

“Right,” Harry said.

Professor Snape sighed. “We’ll talk about purpose visualization during your next Occlumency lesson,” he said.

“Was that in the book?” Harry asked.

“No,” Professor Snape. “It isn’t so much an Occlumency technique so much as it is a technique that works well with occlumency. But enough about that for now, tell me how you’re coming along with the last match on it’s way.”

“I’m no collaborator,” Harry said.

“I wasn’t asking for Gryffindor’s strategies,” Professor Snape said. “Though you are welcome to tell me if you should like.”

Along with Easter and the twins birthday, April brought quidditch fervor into the castle. Not only was the final quidditch match approaching, but students around the castle were tuning in to the wireless to catch the final few matches of the national tournaments before the international games started. Hermione was keeping them to a rather fast paced study schedule as finals approached, but then so too was Oliver. As the last game of his Hogwarts career neared, Oliver’s fervor grew and grew. As much as he loved it, Harry was going to breath a sigh of relief when the final match was over.

“Hey, Potter,” someone called after him as he left the library to head down to practice. Harry turned and saw Cedric Diggory walking over to him.

“Um, hi,” Harry said. “How’ve you been.”
“Good, good, you?” Cedric asked.

“We’ve got quidditch practice in just a bit,” Harry said. “Oliver’s gone insane.”

Cedric smiled and Harry wished he could feel as carefree and relaxed as the older boy looked. “I’m jealous of Gryffindor for having the last game of the year,” Cedric said, he motioned for Harry to keep going, and Harry turned and headed for the stairs, Cedric walking besides him.

"You could be playing too if you hadn't switched with Slytherin," Harry said.

"It was the fair thing to do," Cedric said.

Harry rolled his eyes.

“It’s going to be a big game this year,” Cedric said. “Now that we’re out of the running, and Ravenclaw too, the only thing that’s going to be standing in the way of Slytherin keeping the cup again is Gryffindor.”

“Oh this is a pep talk,” Harry said. “I’ve heard a fair few lately.”

“Just thought you should know you’ve got most of the school rooting for you,” Cedric said. “Also, I wanted to see if you wanted to fly on Sunday. Cho already said she’d come.”

“Cho?” Harry asked.

“Cho Chang,” Cedric said. “Ravenclaw’s seeker. Think you’ll join us?”

“Sure,” Harry said. “I’ll look forward to it.”

“Great,” Cedric said. “I’ll see you then.”

Having reached the entrance hall, they parted ways, Harry to the pitch, and Cedric to his common room. It would be nice, Harry thought, to play around on the pitch outside of practice.

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"Alright now," Benjamin said. "I'm going to grab each of your wrists from behind."

This one was trickier than some of the others. After the older teen had grabbed him from behind, Harry stepped forward and to the side, going down to one knee while he brought his right arm over his head to meet the other. The effect caused Benjamin to over balance and let go, falling into a roll that had him popping back up to face Harry.

"Good job," Benjamin said. "Now I'm going to do a choke hold. This time, I want you to maintain control of my arm after you get out."

Harry hated those, but he had to practice.

“So are you going to take your DADA final with us?” Benjamin asked after they were done for the evening.

“Well I am a bit reluctant to take two DADA finals this year,” Harry said. “I’d still have to take the third year test.”
“Yeah, but think of it this way,” Benjamin said. “If you go into fifth year defense next year, you can take your OWL next year also and then you’ll have one less OWL to worry about in your fifth year.”

“Maybe,” Harry said, still reluctant to take classes without Ron or Hermione. “It’ll all be up to next year’s defense professor if I can take the fifth year class though.”

“Like they’d say no,” Benjamin said. “You’re a natural at defense.”

He had plenty of motivation anyway, Harry thought, unsure what to do with the praise Benjamin gave him.

“I wish I was a natural at the muggle sort,” Harry said.

“You’ve gotten loads better,” Benjamin said. “You’d probably do better with an actual teacher, but I’ve sure enjoyed getting to practice a lot.”

“You’ve been a great teacher,” Harry said. “I just wish I was big like you.”

“You’ll get there,” Benjamin said, eyeing Harry who was still the shortest boy in his year (and shorter still than many second years). “Besides, I keep telling you, size isn’t everything. Even the mighty fall.”

What other hope did Harry have should he ever face Greyback again.

“You should find a dojo over the summer,” Benjamin said. “Or a gym or something. You don’t want to go, like, stagnant or something.”

“Right,” Harry said. By unspoken signal, they both headed towards the door to head back to Gryffindor tower. Since the night that Harry had been attacked by Eckelson, Benjamin had always walked back with Harry. Harry hoped he wasn’t interfering with the older boy meeting up with Anna, who Harry was pretty sure was Benjamin’s girlfriend. It was nice though, to not have to worry about bumping into Eckelson as he walked back to the tower in the nearly deserted castle corridors. The older boy was still bitter about his plethora of detentions and he was still jinxing Harry in the halls if no one was looking. Harry was still worried for another direct confrontation.

On the walk back to the tower, Benjamin joined the many people who had wanted to pass on their encouragement to Harry for the upcoming Quidditch match. With little more than a week until the big game, the team was getting a lot of attention. Harry wondered what it was like for Malfoy in Slytherin. He had never gotten the sense that the same camaraderie existed in the dungeons, or rather, that their fellowship had a different flavor than Gryffindor’s.

Malfoy had been on Harry’s mind rather a lot of late. Besides having been the one who had started the rumor that Harry was a werewolf, and thus being partially responsible for Harry being poisoned and beaten up, Malfoy had been acting odd of late. Or rather, he was acting odd for himself. Harry couldn’t actually recall the last time Malfoy had said a cross word to him, or paid him any of the attention he used to spend on Harry. As well, it seemed that there was some sort of shift happening in Slytherin house. The whole lot of them were as secretive as ever, but Harry wasn’t the only one to notice that something was going on. Harry doubted that any of it, whatever it was, was good. His dad was being tight lipped about it too, which Harry thought was unfair.

Harry and Benjamin parted ways when they reached the tower. Harry had a lot of work to do if he wanted to take both year’s defense final.
The day everyone had been anticipating finally came. The school had spent three years since the last quidditch final and a fair few had been heard speculating that surely something would happen to derail matters again this year. Even Harry had felt that it was probably best not to get his hopes up that the match would actually happen. His dad had wished him luck the night prior, but had also made a point to say that he would of course be rooting for Slytherin to win. Harry had been confident enough to tell him that he would be by later to console him for Slytherin’s loss.

Oliver was clearly very nervous for his final school game and his last chance for the cup.

“And just remember Harry,” Oliver said for the second time during his pep talk. “For the point spread, we need to be thirty points ahead when you catch the snitch or we’ll win the game and lose the cup.”

Harry, who had heard this every practice and meeting since the previous quidditch game, just nodded his head and resisted the urge to ask, ‘wait, when we’re thirty points ahead, or when they’re thirty points ahead?’

“We all came here to win today,” Oliver said. “We’ve trained harder than everyone else and we’ve got the best damned team this school’s ever seen, so go out there and give it your all.”

It wasn’t long before Lee Jordan’s booming voice announced them and they flew out of the locker room to face Slytherin. Harry hovered in the air opposite Malfoy as Oliver and Flint met in the middle with Madame Hooch. Malfoy held his gaze with a calculating stare. Harry was nervous for this match. He had bested Malfoy the year prior, but this time he would have to be careful not to catch the snitch too soon and he would have to stop Malfoy from catching the snitch at the same time. Add to that that Malfoy had the faster broom and almost as slight a build as Harry did, and Harry knew that he was going to have to play like he’d never played before.

The quaffle was tossed, and Harry flew off to play his part. Much like Cho Chang’s tactics from the previous game, Harry focused mostly on Malfoy. If Malfoy spotted the snitch, Harry would have to intercept him. A seeker was constantly on the lookout for movement, focused on finding that tiny little ball zipping around the pitch. Harry made sure to fly through Malfoy’s line of sight frequently to distract him. He was tempted to try a Wronski Feint, but he knew Malfoy was as much aware as Harry was that Harry couldn’t go for the snitch until Gryffindor was up by thirty points.

Malfoy, for his part, did his best to ignore him, though Harry could tell he was getting on Malfoy’s nerves. They played that way for a long time. Harry staying ahead of Malfoy, occasionally interfering with the Slytherin chasers. The game was fairly lockstep for a while, neither team scoring very much as a fierce battle waged between the chasers and the beaters. Everyone knew it was a points game. The Slytherin beaters weren’t going to go after Harry unless Gryffindor was thirty points up, and until then they’d focus on making sure Gryffindor didn’t get those points. For their part, Fred and George knew that Malfoy was Gryffindor’s biggest threat and they were split between protecting the chasers and going after the seeker. With no player being able to hold the quaffle for longer than three seconds, the ball was constantly being tossed from chaser to chaser and turnovers were frequent.

Harry spotted the snitch twice before Draco did, it was very hard not to give chase. Gryffindor was ten points up when Draco spotted the snitch. If Harry hadn’t spent the past hour and a half marking the boy, he would have missed the barely visible tell as the golden ball caught Malfoy’s eye. Draco’s eyes tracked the ball, clearly not wanting to give away to Harry that he had spotted it,
while waiting for the ball or Harry to move in a direction that would guarantee his victory. Harry was waiting too, his attention split between Draco and the snitch while trying to pay attention to the game around him and not give away his ruse. He saw one of the twins going after a bludger. He shoved two fingers in his mouth and whistled shrilly. Fred had spent ten minutes teaching him how the week prior. Malfoy made his move and so did Harry, flying in to impose himself between the other boy and the snitch. Draco was forced to pull up short; he was ready to go around Harry, but he wasn’t ready for the bludger sent his way in his moments’ pause. Malfoy’s gauntleted arm shot out to take the blow and the boy spun in the air from the impact before he was able to right himself. Harry looked around for the snitch, but it was nowhere to be seen. Malfoy glared at Harry, the first real sign of their rivalry since the game had started.

In the roughly ten seconds that the whole exchange had happened the stands had gone wild with anticipation. Lee Jordan, who Harry normally tuned out if he was playing, was giving very excited commentary and he could hear Professor McGonagall telling him to tone things down. Gryffindor was ten points up and Harry was still marking Malfoy. The longer the game went on, the more of a chance Malfoy had of catching the snitch. Harry decided to keep marking Malfoy, but he paid a bit more attention to the Slytherin chasers, interfering with them whenever they were close by. Gryffindor scored another goal. This was the first time Gryffindor had been twenty points up since the game started. Slytherin scored not much later.

The game wore on, and Harry spotted the snitch twice while still waiting for the scores to be just right. The score was ninety to eighty when Angelina got the quaffle past Bletchley. Harry couldn’t help keeping a closer eye on the chasers after that as the two teams battled for the ball. Angelina, Alicia, and Katie were flying like they were doing a choreographed dance while Warrington, Pucey, and Montague flew evoking the images of birds of prey. There was a tension among both teams as Katie took possession of the quaffle and started heading towards Bletchley. She tossed to Alicia who tossed the quaffle over Pucey to Angelina. Harry passed through the formation forcing Warrington away from Alicia, though the bigger boy elbow checked him as he veered off, back to the chase. Harry flew off after Malfoy and had just flown right across the blond boy’s path when he heard the ding. Alicia had just scored and Gryffindor was thirty points up. Harry didn’t waste the opportunity.

He was already in front of Malfoy so he knew the other boy would see him. Harry dove. He kept himself at about a fifty degree angle from going straight down, he kept his head pointed forward, making sure he didn’t look back. A seeker didn’t take his eyes off the snitch. He could just see Malfoy out of the corner of his eye. He had taken the bait. Harry kept making course corrections, as he would if he were truly following a snitch trying to evade him. Then, fifty feet from the ground, Harry shot straight down, one hand outstretched. He heard the whistle of a bludger coming and did a corkscrew to evade it, feeling it graze his hair that flew behind him. Five feet from the ground Harry leveled off and let himself bleed off speed. He looked over his shoulder.

“Nice try Potter,” Malfoy called.

Harry shrugged in response.

The watching crowd was cheering and jeering, most of them had been taken in by the ruse as well, and likely had thought the game was coming to an end. The game continued, and now that Gryffindor was thirty points up, Slytherin’s beaters started paying attention to Harry. This kept Harry busy while at the same time taking some heat off of Gryffindor’s chasers. The point difference oscillated for another half an hour before Gryffindor was forty points ahead. It was still, of course, anyone’s game. It wasn’t long before Harry got too close to a bludger. Of course, it wasn’t anything to pause the game for, he’d had worse on a good day with the Dursleys.
The thing about the Wronski Feint, was that you couldn’t ignore the other seeker. If it looked like they were chasing after the snitch, then you had to assume that they had spotted the snitch. When Malfoy dove towards the sand pit below the pitch, Harry followed. Harry couldn’t see it yet, but if it was there, then judging by the angles, Malfoy was closer, and regardless, was on the faster broom. Harry pushed everything he had into going as fast as his broom could go. The odds were in Malfoy’s favor, but the game wasn’t over until one of them had the snitch in hand. Of course, quidditch was never a game between two people. Fred sent a bludger after Draco not long before Bole sent one at Harry. The snitch too didn’t stay in one spot, or fly in a straight line either.

Malfoy leveled off a hundred feet off the ground, he was moving in Harry’s general direction. Harry still couldn’t see the snitch, and if Malfoy was getting ready to do a feint, then he’d want Harry right on his tail. Harry had to do a flip in midair as something tiny and shiny flew by him in the opposite direction about ten feet to his right. His momentum carried him backwards several feet before he could get a forwards vector going.

Now both Malfoy and Harry were in hot pursuit of the snitch, which chose that moment to plummet to the ground. There was a reason the Wronski Feint was an effective move; the snitch had only so many evasion tricks charmed into it, and one of them was to dive and play chicken with the seekers. Harry and Malfoy dove towards the ground, both of them, their hands outstretched. Malfoy had a slight lead, and with his broom that lead was only going to grow. As the ground got closer and closer, the distance between the two flyers and the golden ball got smaller and smaller. The question was, was the snitch going to level out or was Malfoy going to catch it as it plummeted. The ball got closer and closer to the ground; Malfoy’s fingers were inches from the ball when it pulled up and started flying horizontal to the ground below. Draco’s lead carried him further towards the ground before he leveled off, while the few feet Harry was behind, and his faster reflexes, allowed Harry to follow the snitch directly.

The chase was still on though, and Malfoy was only just behind Harry as they moved in on their target, Malfoy’s Nimbus 2001 gaining till they were side by side, their fingers just inches from the snitch. Harry heard the whistle of a bludger, but there was no way he was moving out of the way till he had that snitch. A bludger impacted, but not with Harry, he heard an ‘oomph,’ from the blond boy next to him, and suddenly it was only Harry in pursuit. Three seconds later, Harry had caught the snitch.

The sounds of the stadium came rushing back to him and there was a cacophony of cheering. Harry held the snitch up in the air, a broad grin splitting his face. He only had a few moments before he was surrounded by his teammates. Fred and George were slapping him on the back, Kattie, Angelina, and Alicia were hugging everyone, and Oliver had tears on his face as he cheered. Harry hadn’t felt so light and ecstatic in forever.

They did a victory lap around the pitch, and landed for the presentation of the Quidditch Cup. Madam Hooch formally announced their victory, and Professor Snape handed the cup to Oliver, who held it up in the air to the cheers of the crowd. The cup was no longer in Slytherin’s possession. Harry nervously caught his father’s eye, wondering if he was disappointed; if he was angry. He got a small nod of his head, more than he could really expect in public.

“I could kiss you, Harry,” Oliver said with his arm slung over Harry’s shoulder as the team entered the locker room.

“Please don’t,” Harry said. Oliver laughed and ruffled Harry’s hair which had Harry ducking his head with a smile.

“I’m sure I don’t have to say this, but we are partying tonight,” Oliver called out.
“Already on it,” George said.

“All you have to do is show up,” Fred said.

Later, Harry would have a sneaking suspicion concerning where the butter beer and snacks had come from, though his lips would be sealed. They all changed quickly and made their way up together to be greeted as though they were returning champions from war.

With the Quidditch Cup over, Harry suddenly had a lot more time in his busy schedule. This was fortunate, since finals were coming up in less than two months and all of the professors were piling on the homework as though theirs was the only class he had. It was mid May when Harry finally handed off the finished writeup for his third year project to Hermione for her approval. Doing the potions experiments wasn’t enough. He had to gather all the data, compare each test, draw conclusions, and write it all up in a format that would pass muster. Both Professor Snape and Professor Flitwick were going to have to sign off on it, but Harry was done. Now all he had to do was resist Hermione’s influence next year, because there was little doubt she’d try to get him to do a fourth year project.

“You’re sure you don’t want to change this quidditch analogy, Harry?” Hermione asked, handing him back his writeup.

“It’s a good analogy,” Harry said. “Besides, I’m done. I am very done with this project.”

“Wish I could say the same, mate,” Ron said. “I’m going to be doing this chess project for years.”

“The important thing,” Hermione said. “Is how much progress you’ve already made. You’re animation spells are really improved and that paper you charmed to play tic tac toe with you was really good.”

“It lost almost every time,” Ron said. “I’m pretty sure random guesses would have been better.”

“It’s a stepping stone,” Hermione said. “Oh, and delimiting. That’s a fifth year technique and now you have it down so well. At the start of the year, do you think you would have expected to be able to do any of those things right now?”

“No,” Ron said. “It’ll be cool if I ever get good at this stuff, but it’s frustrating right now.”

“You’re getting better,” Hermione said. “You’re one of Professor Flitwick’s favorite students right now.”

“Whereas you’re every professors’ favorite student,” Ron said.

“Well, I’m pretty sure Professor Snape barely tolerates me now, and I’m also pretty sure Harry’s Hagrid’s favorite,” Hermione said.

“Also she pied pipered herself and us out of Professor Trelawny’s class,” Harry said to Ron. “I’m pretty sure Hermione isn’t on her favorite’s list.”

“Fair enough,” Ron said. “But every other Professor. I mean with all of your classes, there’s so
many of them. How did Muggle Studies go yesterday? It must have been so hard to take notes when you were sitting next to me in Arithmancy.”

Hermione just smiled, having taken to ignoring questions about her impossible schedule. His project done, Harry flipped open his Runes homework and started scratching out runes in a wooden practice tablet.

“The big question,” Harry said, trying to be more precise with his penknife. “Is how you find time to work on so many extracurricular projects.”

“Coffee helps,” Hermione said.

“You only stay up as late as we do,” Harry said.

“Oh I do, do I?” Hermione said. “I wasn’t aware you were privy to what goes on in the girls’ dorm.”

“And where are you getting coffee?” Ron asked. Caffeine wasn’t exactly banned, but it was frowned upon outside of tea or chocolate and Harry doubted that coffee was served anywhere outside of the teacher’s lounge.

“I have my sources,” Hermione said.

The twins, Harry suspected. It wouldn’t explain everything, but if Hermione could somehow get away without sleeping, then that might explain some of how she managed everything. There was no doubting though that part of it had to be her single minded drive and fast work pace.

“So how’s summer coming along?” Ron asked Harry.

Harry shrugged. “We’re getting along well,” he said.

“You don’t sound convinced,” Ron said.

“It seems too good to be true,” Harry said.

“You deserve to have a father you get along with,” Hermione said. “Do you know where you’re going to live?”

“Probably out in the country,” Harry said. “Professor Snape’s going to want someplace to grow potions ingredients and I’m going to want to go flying.”

“There’s a fair few plots in Ottery St. Catchpole no one ever developed,” Ron said. “We could see each other all the time. A few other families from school live around too. The Diggory’s, the Fawcets, and the Lovegoods.”

“The point right now is to keep it a secret,” Harry said. “Can’t exactly have the new neighbors coming around. As long as we’ve got a floo, I’ll be visiting whenever you want. Really, as long as I’ve got a place to stay that isn’t number four Privet Drive, I’ll be fine wherever we go.”

“So, wherever it is it probably won’t be a wizarding village if you can’t be seen together by other wizards,” Hermione said.

“Yeah,” Harry said. “As far as anyone else should be concerned I’m still with the Dursleys.”

“I still don’t like this secret stuff,” Ron said. “It seems really off if you ask me.”
Harry couldn’t tell his friends that his father was a spy against Voldemort, though he thought Hermione suspected, so he had no good reason to give them for why Professor Snape was keeping him a secret.

“It’s fine,” Harry said. “Besides I don’t want to be the center of attention when everyone finds out.”

It would also make it easier should Professor Snape decide he didn’t really want Harry in his life after all. It would be better if the whole world didn’t know that his own father couldn’t stand him.

“Are you looking forward to the summer?” Hermione asked.

“Oh,” Harry said. He didn’t think he’d ever really look forwards to the summer. Summer meant leaving his home. But what if things went well? What if he could have his home away from home?

“I don’t know,” Harry said. “Things are nice right now. I think I’ll just have to wait and see.”

“Don’t worry about it,” Ron said. “Don’t forget, I’m you back up plan. I will totally kidnap you if things don’t go well.”

Harry smiled for the support.

“Thanks,” Harry said. “And thanks for everything, the both of you. I don’t know how this is going to work out, but my plan for the summer would probably still involve just winging it at being homeless if you hadn’t prodded me a bunch.”

“We just want you to be safe,” Hermione said.

“And happy,” Ron said. “You’ve got to make sure it isn’t just homework and chores over the summer.”

“My dad mentioned something about making sure I didn’t wallow in teenage boredom the other day,” Harry said. “I think he’s going to try hard to make sure this works. Same as me. He’s really gone out of his way for me already.”

“You sound like you feel guilty about that,” Hermione commented.

Harry shrugged. “It’s not like he decided to become a dad. It just sort of got sprung on him.”

“Well sure,” Ron said. “But lots of people don’t always plan on becoming parents. That doesn’t mean they don’t have to try to be good at it. Mum and dad wanted a big family, but I can tell you, the only reason I was born after five kids was because they were trying for a girl. Just because I wasn’t what they were going for, doesn’t mean they ever treated me like I wasn’t wanted.”

“What if Ginny’d been a boy?” Hermione asked.

“Oh, I don’t even want to know,” Ron said. “I could have had five older brothers and five younger brothers. Mum would still be changing nappies.”

“Yeah, but either way, your parents wanted children to begin with,” Harry said. “I don't know about you, but I’m pretty sure, Professor Snape never thought how great it would be if one of his students just followed him home for the summer.”
“Let’s put it this way,” Hermione said. “Does Professor Snape seem like the type of person who would put in this much effort into something he didn’t want to do?”

Harry bit his lip and looked back at his essay. “He does have a strong sense of duty,” Harry said.

“I don’t know what to tell you, mate,” Ron said. “As strange as it is, ‘cause it’s Snape, not you, I think he wants this as much as you do.”

“Hmm,” was Harry’s response to that. He shrugged and turned back to his homework. Ron sighed and got back to his. The thing that worried Harry wasn’t so much that Snape didn’t want things to work out, rather, that the man didn’t know what he had gotten himself into.

A lot of things would be easier if Harry was not the boy who lived, Severus thought. A lot of things would be easier if Severus were not a spy. By and large, he was becoming more and more convinced that, though Harry seemed largely unscathed by the deprivations of his childhood, he still had a number of issues that lay under the surface, coloring his perception of the world and of himself. Occlumency was helping, a small amount, but Harry was still a novice, and occlumency could only do so much.

A part of Severus was tempted to return to Privet Drive, to extract every detail of his son’s childhood there so he could understand exactly what was going on in his head, although he knew that hearing every insult wasn’t going to give him that. Severus didn’t know exactly what the problem was, what went on in his son’s head, but he knew that he needed to help him. Counseling would be ideal, but between safety considerations and the necessity for secrecy surrounding much of Harry’s life, counseling wasn’t a likely solution.

Mental health in the wizarding world largely involved the use of highly specialized and trained legilimency, and Severus wasn’t about to experiment with that on his son. In the end, he felt the only thing he was left with was muggle knowledge on mental health. Unfortunately a foray to a muggle bookstore had produced contradictory materials that he was having trouble parsing together. He suspected that he should probably consult with a muggle professional; he did not have too much trouble passing in the muggle world and he could likely get some good advice.

Looking at Harry now, it was difficult to tell that anything was wrong. Harry had grown much more comfortable around Severus, they had grown closer, but Severus could tell that there was still a tension there. Harry was waiting for Severus to decide that he did not want him for a son. Part of that was surely their own checkered history, but Severus was sure that it largely centered around a self esteem that had been destroyed after years in the care of the Dursleys. Yet today, Harry had joined him in his lab while his friends went to Hogsmeade, and Harry was smiling and conversing and making occasional jokes with an impish grin and Severus could almost tell himself that the job was done; that he had shown Harry that he cared about him, that there was something to care about, and now the issues were solved. But he knew better than that. Emotional scars did not disappear like that. Severus did not miss the occasional frown or worried look cast in his direction. His son was constantly assessing their situation; he was constantly worried that he had said or done something wrong. He was constantly wondering where he stood with Severus.

The flinches were more rare. An unexpected movement could cause the boy to react. Severus had previously taken Harry’s occasional hyper vigilance to be a result of the numerous attempts on his life, yet now he saw a child who was used to having to defend himself in a domestic setting. There
were also the glances he would cast at the door, or rather, the exit, particularly when it was closed. He always wanted to know that he could make a quick escape. Severus didn’t make a thing of it. Making him more self conscious wouldn’t help.

“Just under four weeks until the end of term,” Severus said to Harry over tea. “It does look like we’ll probably be moving into the outskirts of Somerset.”

“Will I be able to fly?” Harry asked. The boy’s most pressing concern.

“Seclusion is one of the search criteria,” Severus said. “The headmaster will assist us with any warding that is necessary. You should be able to fly to your hearts content without worrying about being spotted by muggles. Next weekend I thought you might accompany me to a couple of prospective homes.”

“You want me to come with you?” Harry asked.

“You will be living there too,” Severus said. “You should have some input.”

Harry worried at his bottom lip. There was a flash of trepidation that was quickly gone.

“That’ll be fun,” Harry said, with a grin. “Are we going to be polyjuiced again?”

“Indeed,” Severus said.

“Are you going to make me pint sized again?” Harry asked.

“You seemed to enjoy yourself the last time,” Severus said. “Unless you have a preference.”

“Oh, whatever you have on hand is fine,” Harry said, reluctant as always to ask Severus to go out of his way.

“Ninety year old wizard it is then,” Severus said.

“Oh,” Harry said. “Well, maybe not that.”

“Do not worry, you will have an appropriate disguise,” Severus said. “A body suitable for a walk in the backwoods of the countryside.”

Harry was silent for a moment.

“Are you sure this is what you want?” Harry asked, not making eye contact. Severus was sure he wasn’t asking about the cottage in Somerset.

“It is,” Severus said. “The question is, is it what you want?”

Harry shook his head. “I’m the interloper.”

“You are my son,” Severus said.

Those words used to make the boy smile. Today he looked conflicted.

“An obligation,” Harry said.

“Yes,” Severus said. “An obligation I am happy to take on. There are fathers, Harry, who meet their obligation with an allotment of gold every month. I want more than that with you. Please keep in mind that I enjoyed your company before I knew you were my son.”
Severus did get a smile this time.

“So what’s happening in Slytherin?” Harry asked, changing the subject. His son had noticed many of the subtle changes that had been occurring among Severus’s House and though he did not understand what was happening, he was very curious; a trait to be cultivated in Slytherins and feared in Gryffindors.

“Virgin sacrifices and bloodstone rituals,” Severus said.

“I mean besides the usual,” Harry said.

“Oh,” Severus said. “Well, besides the usual dark wizardry, I do believe Miss Addison and Mr. Elspeth are planning a theatrical review.”

“Slytherin’s putting on a show?” Harry asked.

“There are students from multiple houses who are involved,” Severus said. “But it is being organized by two of my students. Not all ambitious Slytherins plan on becoming the next dark lord, Harry. The most renowned Chef in Britain came from my house. As did a significant portion of the top players in the professional quidditch leagues.”

“So what will we be seeing?” Harry asked.

“Well I do believe Miss Addison and Mr. Elspeth are performing a scene from Macbeth,” Severus said. “I do not know what else is planned.”

“So a play about murdering people to gain political power,” Harry said, a cheeky smile tugging at his lips.

“A play about what happens to those who seek power at all costs,” Severus said.

“They’re not dressing up as trees are they?” Harry asked.

Severus didn’t know that much about the Scottish play, outside of cultural references, but he knew that there were a bunch of people who pretended to be trees for some reason.

“Most likely they will be the Lord and Lady Macbeth,” Severus said. “I have not enquired past ensuring that there will be nothing too troublesome to a first year. Or rather, a first year’s parents.”

“Oh, so no one’s getting stabbed on stage?” Harry asked.

“If they do,” said Severus, “it won’t be in the script.”

Harry smiled at that. They spent the remainder of the afternoon brewing and talking. Severus didn’t see any more frowns or second guessing on Harry’s part. Of course, that didn’t mean there was nothing under the surface. Harry would relax around him, let his guard down, but still there was the boy who had been raised in a cupboard, and Severus couldn’t let wishful thinking trick him into thinking his son didn’t need help.

Harry left Professor Snape’s lab a bit before dinner, planning on catching up with Ron and Hermione after their trip to Hogsmeade. Though he had been to Hogsmeade a couple of times with
his dad, Harry was still a bit jealous of his friends’ free rein of the town. Still, it was nice they had time to themselves, where they didn’t have to deal with Harry. He really needed to put on a better face. If they knew he was worried about the summer, then they would worry about him over the summer. It wasn’t fair to them. It was good they had time to themselves.

Harry waited in the entry hall as students trickled in, returning from Hogsmeade. It had been over a month since the Quidditch Cup and Harry still got high fives from students passing him as he waited. As the arriving students thinned out, and Harry’s stomach started to growl, he started to dither on waiting for the two. They would find him at the Gryffindor Table, Harry was sure.

Harry picked at his food, not wanting to finish eating before Ron and Hermione showed up.

“Eating alone?” Fred asked. The twins were leaving the great hall. They had returned from Hogsmeade and eaten already. Harry looked at his watch; he looked around the very full Great Hall. It looked like everyone was back. Everyone except Ron and Hermione.

“Did you see Ron and Hermione today?” Harry asked.

“Saw them a few hours ago,” George said. “They were having a late lunch.”

“Oh,” Harry frowned. Even if they had skipped dinner they would have found Harry wouldn’t they have? Hermione was never late.

The last time he couldn’t find them after a Hogsmeade visit, he had found them leaving Professor McGonagall’s office. Harry looked to the head table where Professor McGonagall sat on the opposite side of his father from Professor Dumbledore. Something was wrong.

“Can you ask around?” Harry asked, getting up from the table. He started walking up to the head table.

His first instinct was to go see his father, but that would look strange. Under ordinary circumstances, he wouldn’t dream of telling any professor that his friends were late coming back from the village, but Greyback was out there and Harry couldn’t help but think of Ron’s words. That when he didn’t know where Harry was, he was worried that he had been kidnapped or worse.

Before Harry got up to the professors, Argus Filch had run up to the head table, making a bit of a scene. He whispered something into Professor McGonagall’s ear. Professor McGonagall frowned and stood up, her eyes scanning the hall. Harry reached the head table.

“Mr. Potter,” Professor McGonagall said. “Do you know where Mr. Weasley or Miss Granger are?”

Harry shook his head, feeling as though he was about to cry as his stomach turned. “Hermione wouldn’t be late coming back,” he said.

There was silence among the professors and a large part of the Great Hall. Professor Dumbledore stood up.

“All students will stay where they are for now,” the headmaster said. “Until everyone is accounted for.”

“Does anyone know the whereabouts of Ronald Weasley, Miss Granger, or Mr. Erstwhile,” Professor McGonagall asked.
The hall was silent a moment before a cacophony of whispers broke out. Harry could feel the weight of many eyes on him and he turned around to look at the student body. He could see the twins huddled with Percy and Ginny. Fred glanced back at Harry. Whatever was going on, they all knew that it probably had something to do with him. Whatever was going on had to do with Greyback, he just knew it. Harry thought about the secret passage to Hogsmeade and the invisibility cloak in his pocket.

“Mr. Potter, please come with me,” Professor McGonagall said. She had already come around the table and was standing next to him.

“Can you find them?” Harry asked.

“That is what we shall see,” Professor McGonagall said. “We will know more when we are in the headmaster’s office.

Harry nodded, turning to follow Professor McGonagall. Professor Dumbledore, Professor Lupin, and his dad walked with them.

“If we’re going to look for them, shouldn’t the Weasleys come too?” Harry asked.

“We will notify them if we discover anything,” Professor Snape said, his hand on Harry’s back, guiding him along the empty corridor. Harry didn’t know if he wanted to shrink away from the contact or draw strength from it. “The reason you are accompanying us is so that we can ensure that you do not leave the grounds before we can seal them off.”

“It’s me Greyback’s after,” Harry said, urgently. “I can help.”

“Greyback wants a pack,” Professor Lupin said. “There is no guarantee that he would let them go if he were to get his hands on you.”

“It is too early to speak as though we know where our wayward students are,” Professor McGonagall said.

“If Harry is convinced that Greyback has kidnapped his friends, then it is unlikely that we will be convincing him otherwise without actual proof,” Professor Snape said.

Harry knew he wasn’t going to convince anyone to let him help look, so he spent the rest of the walk to the headmaster’s office in silence. His dad was right. There was little anyone could do at that moment that would convince Harry that Greyback wasn’t responsible for his missing friends. He knew it in his gut, and it was all he could do then not to imagine his friends at Greyback’s nonexistent mercies. He felt as though he were going to throw up what little food he had eaten. He remembered the promise he had made to Mrs. Weasley the night before the school year had started, that he wouldn’t be the ruin of her family.

They arrived at the headmaster’s office and Harry had very little to do as Professor McGonagall and the Headmaster waved their wands over ancient scrolls and muttered incantations. He stayed close to Fawkes’s perch, silently willing the magical bird to fly him away to wherever it was that he needed to be.

“Our missing students are not in the castle or on the school grounds,” the headmaster said. “Minerva, please fire-call the ministry, Severus, I will ask you to alert the mayor of Hogsmeade.”

“Can’t you track them or something,” Harry asked. He turned to his father. “You said Greyback would be able to track me if I was on my own. Can’t you track Ron or Hermione.”
"We have, Mr. Potter," Professor McGonagall said. "Their magical signatures are being blocked. It is the same reason Fenrir Greyback was not recaptured the day he escaped from Azkaban."

"Then that means..." Harry turned to his father.

"If their magical signatures are being blocked then it is most likely that they have been kidnapped," Professor Snape said, looking at Harry with an unreadable expression.

Harry sat down hard on the floor. He didn’t breathe, he didn’t move. For a moment, everything seemed to stop. Even moments before, when he had already been certain that Greyback had taken them, he had not felt this dread.

"No," Harry said, shaking his head. "No, I can get them back. He wants me."

"He can’t have you," Professor Snape said fiercely, coming down to his level to put his hand on his shoulder and look him in the eye. "I won’t let him, I won’t let you."

Harry shook his head.

"You must stay here. Minerva, Severus," the headmaster sent them back to their tasks. "I will see to the grounds."

The two professors left through the fire to carry out their duties.

"Why did he take that other student?" Harry asked.

"It is difficult to say," the Headmaster said. "I can see no other connection between yourself and Kevin Erstwhile other than that he was perhaps nearby your friends. The wrong place at the wrong time."

"He wouldn't have taken him on a whim," Professor Lupin said. "He's too methodical. He has a plan."

Harry shook his head, not wanting to hear just how good Greyback was at getting away with every horrible crime he committed. He stood up off of the floor as the headmaster pulled out a large crystal ball that he started working over. Harry was sure it was fascinating, but he could not pay attention to it. He let the headmaster work. The sooner he was done, the sooner something else could be done.

"What happens next," Harry asked when the headmaster lifted his head from the crystal.

"The Aurors will search for clues from the abduction," the headmaster said. "Three students have been taken Harry, the ministry will leave no stone unturned."

"They haven’t found him yet though," Harry said. "They’ve been looking for months. The next full moon’s in three days!"

"Fenrir Greyback has made a bold move," the headmaster said. "He is taking risks, he has added a great many variables. The chances that he will make a mistake have increased greatly."

"I can’t wait for him to make a mistake," Harry said.

"There is a strong possibility that once he has you, Harry, that he will kill those he has captive when he no longer has need of them," Professor Lupin said. Harry flinched. "Sacrificing yourself
for them on their behalf will accomplish nothing. It will take a planned extraction to ensure their safety.”

“Then use me as bait,” Harry said. “I’d be a good distraction, and then you can get them out.”

“I will not trade one student’s life for another,” the headmaster said. “That is not how this will end. Know that your interference could very well seal their fate.”

“It’s better than doing nothing,” Harry said.

“We will not be doing nothing,” the headmaster said. “We will be assisting the aurors. You will be staying safe, so that Fenrir Greyback still has need of living captives.”

Ron and Hermione were gone. Harry felt useless. Back to the beginning, it was his mistakes that had let Greyback roam free. It was he who had failed. It was he whom Greyback wanted, and it was Ron and Hermione who were paying the price.

“Can I go?” Harry asked.

“Yes, Harry,” the headmaster said. “Though you father will likely wish to see you when he returns.”

Harry nodded. He didn’t know how long Professor Snape would be, and he didn’t want to see anyone else, so he wandered the castle for a while, mired in his own thoughts and recriminations. He would see his father later, and he would be told that it wasn’t his fault, and that it wasn’t his responsibility, and Harry would nod his head and wait for something to change.

“Is this part of the plan?” Amelia asked Albus after they had discussed the current efforts to find his missing students.

“Matters are moving as they must,” Albus said. “Soon, the students will be returned and Fenrir Greyback will be dead.”

“I suppose there was simply no way to keep matters on track without doing this to your students. I suppose their traumatization is essential to your plans to defeat Voldemort.”

“Unfortunately it is,” Albus said. “These events shape Harry greatly. Protecting those he loves is his primary driving force. Mister Weasley and Miss Granger are also essential to the final outcome. These experiences will also shape them in becoming the people they will need to be.”

“It all rests on the shoulders of children, then?” Amelia asked.

“I have seen it all play out,” Albus said. “I have seen it all transpire in so many ways. But it is always their generation that leads the charge. Not their parents’ generation, not their grandparents’, and certainly not ours. I know who will win this war. I would take it all on myself if I could, but I can not. I could make myself feel better by trying to spare them. I could try to defeat Voldemort. Yet the chances are that I would fail. I would fail, and I would leave an uncertain future upon the backs of children who have not been prepared. We do what we must Amelia.”

Amelia nodded. She knew the answer. She knew that greater sacrifices had been made for this
plan. She knew that it was likely that greater still would be called to end the evil that was Voldemort. Yet she knew too the evil that was Fenrir Greyback. She did not shy from the knowledge that those children were not being treated well.

Severus would have rather avoided a meeting with Draco just then, but he had certain appearances that had to be kept up and there were still matters that needed to be addressed within his house. Harry was withdrawing and Severus supposed he needed his space, yet still; he felt that he should be with his son at the moment, instead of playing house politics. In addition to Harry, though, his Slytherin’s needed him as well. One of their own had been taken, and Severus added another item to the list of reason’s he wanted to kill Fenrir Greyback.

“Do you think Potter’s going to go after Greyback?” Draco asked.

“He can not,” Severus said. “Mr. Potter is stuck within the grounds of the castle. You will not be rid of him so easily, Draco.”

Draco was silent for a moment. “There’s some saying Potter’s going to go after him and get Erstwhile back,” he said.

“He very likely would have tried,” Severus said. “The headmaster, however, has made sure that he can not leave. Do you know Mr. Erstwhile well?”

Draco shook his head. “Greyback’s not supposed to go after pureblood Slytherins,” he said. “He supported the Dark Lord.”

“He worked with the Dark Lord,” Severus said. “Greyback never supported the Dark Lord’s politics, he merely saw him as a means to an end, as the Dark Lord saw Greyback as a means to an end. How are your housemates holding up?”

Draco shrugged. “They’re alright I guess. Emily Perkins has been keeping an eye on the first years. They’ve been pretty spooked I guess. There’s plenty of people who’re angry, of course.”

“You said that there have been some who think Mr. Potter will come to the rescue,” Severus said. “What are they saying about Mister Weasley and Miss Granger?”

“Not much,” Draco said. “People are really upset about Erstwhile. Some people are angry at Potter because it’s him Greyback’s after. I don’t think anyone’s going to miss them if that’s what your asking about.”

“What do you think of them now?” Severus asked.

Draco paused. “Well they’re the enemy,” he said.

“The enemy of what?” Severus asked.

Draco rolled his eyes. “Fine, whatever, I just don’t like them. It’s been forever since I’ve actually wished they’d get carried off by one of the Gameskeeper’s pets. Isn’t that good enough. You act as if you want me to be friends with everybody sometimes.”

“A player who is friend to all is either exceptionally good at the game or he is not accomplishing
anything of worth. However, I do not ask that you befriend all of your peers, merely that you see that there is a value in life and a tragedy in death.”

“Okay, maybe I see your point in Granger. She’s probably going to discover another stupid use for dragon’s blood or something. But what value do you ascribe to Weasley’s life?”

“I do not know that he shall ever be a wizard of note,” Severus said. “Yet I have found myself in his debt, unexpectedly. I would not have anticipated that his life would ever add value to mine, and yet, it did.”

“The headmaster is peculiar,” Severus continued. “He is rather fond of expecting the best of people, and I do believe he is often poorly paid for it. However, there are times when he is handsomely rewarded. The scales, at least, seem to tip in his favor. You do not need to like someone to recognize that their death would be a tragedy, or that their loss would hurt others. Slytherin and Gryffindor are both struck by a loss right now, and both are waiting to know which side of fate this event will fall. You have a lot in common right now.”

Draco’s eyes widened. “You want me to make inroads to Gryffindor,” he said. “Now?”

“That would be transparent,” Severus said. “Small gestures, however, would be remembered for the future. Think on it. Do you wish to be a leader to all or a leader to some.”

Draco nodded. “What on earth did Weasley do, though, that you’d consider yourself to be in his debt?” he asked.

“He gave me some advice,” Severus said. “On a matter that is none of your business.”

Draco pondered that for a moment. He didn’t seem to be in the mood for one of his usual quips.

“Do you think the Aurors are going to find them in time?” Draco asked.

Severus paused, unsure if he should give his answer or not.

“It is unlikely,” Severus said. “But not impossible.”

Draco nodded. “I have work to do, I suppose,” he said, turning towards the door, he paused though, his hand on the knob.

“Ask,” Severus said.

“Are you doing the same thing with Potter?” he asked.

Severus didn’t bother to ask what he was talking about.

“I told you in the beginning,” Severus said. “The two of you have different purposes in life. I am preparing him for his, as I am preparing you for yours.”

“Isn’t that McGonagall’s job?” Draco asked, turning to face him.

’It’s his father’s,’ Severus thought. Though he did not want Harry to walk the hero’s path any more.

“If you want a job done right…” was all Severus said.

Draco shrugged and left. There would likely be more questions in the future, when the current matter was done with, one way or another.
Three days passed. Three days of agonizing worrying. Three days of sitting with Ron’s brothers and sister in silence because he couldn’t do anything but apologize when he opened his mouth. The Weasleys senior had visited their children and Harry could not make himself look Mrs. Weasley in the eye. He couldn’t understand how she could hug him too after she had seen to her own. He couldn’t stop thinking of his friends being torn apart under the light of the full moon.

His father was keeping a close eye on him, but had recognized Harry’s need to wander. With the school on lockdown, no one was really keeping too close of an eye on him. Really, the only thing keeping him in the castle was Professor Dumbledore’s words that Greyback would likely kill Ron and Hermione once he got his hands on Harry. That, and the hope that the aurors could find them. That they could find them with less than an hour before the moon rose. Harry took little comfort from wandering the upper recesses of the castle.

“You’re mine boy,” a voice said behind him. Harry spun around, drawing his wand. He didn’t recognize the older slytherin boy who stood before him, but judging by his bloody tattered robes, bruised face, and vacant stare, Harry could guess that he was facing Kevin Erstwhile.

“You’re mine,” the boy said, and Harry could imagine Greyback’s voice addressing him. “Your friends have been fun, but it’s time for you to join the pack. There’s a knot at waist level on the North side of the whomping willow. Tapping it will stop the branches and let you into the tunnel hidden below. Follow the tunnel to the Shrieking Shack. It’s a bit of a hike so you’d best hurry; you don’t have much time. Tell no one. If I get so much as a whiff of anyone but you coming to the rescue, your friends will die before you can get through the door. Tic tock, Potter. Tic tock.”

His message done, the boy started reaching into his robes.

“Stupefy,” Harry said. The boy didn’t put up a fight, he just fell.

There it was. This was Harry’s chance. He would save them. No matter what, he would save them. But he’d be damned if he followed Greyback’s instructions. Harry started towards the statue of the humped-back witch, looking around for someone he could trust as he moved along. He had less than an hour. He had next to no time at all. He had no idea how long it would take to run there, but Greyback had made it sound like he’d be too late if he didn’t hurry.

Harry spotted someone suitable up ahead.

“Hey, um, Sammy,” Harry said.

“Harry,” Sammy said, turning to face Harry with a nervous pitying look. Harry knew it wasn’t easy addressing someone who was facing loss. She hugged him. “Hi. Um... How are... things.”

“Better,” Harry said, trying to sound confident for the first year hufflepuff’s sake. “I found out where Greyback is but i need you to do me a favor,” Harry told the first year.

“Of course,” she said, looking scared. “I don’t think I’m good in a fight though, but I... I'll try my best.”

“Don’t worry about that,” Harry said. “I need you to carry a message for me. To Professor Snape. Tell him Greyback’s in the Shrieking Shack and I’m going to go find him. Okay? But Sammy, this is the important part. You can’t tell him for...” Harry looked at his watch, “thirty minutes. I
need a head start. He said he’d kill them if anyone but me came. So I need a head start okay? If you can’t find Professor Snape, find another professor, okay?”

The professors could get there almost instantly, so if Harry failed, they should be able to get there soon after he did. Sammy nodded her head, very wide eyed. Harry knew it was a lot to put on a first year, but he really needed that head start. The professor could use the floo to get out of the castle. With luck though, Harry would already be there. But if the Professors got there first, Greyback would kill Ron and Hermione.

“Alright,” Harry said. “I’m going now. You’ve got a watch?”

Another head nod from the wide eyed first year.

“Alright,” Harry said. “Thirty minutes.”

He took off through the corridor. He felt in his pockets for his gloves and his invisibility cloak. He sure wasn’t going to be walking through any doors. He wasn’t going to be playing Greyback’s game. He checked his back pocket, where he kept that single glove, the one that was supposed to have been burned with the rest of the prototype, the one that was dangerous. He sure as hell wasn’t going to be Greyback’s new chew toy by moonrise either.

Harry was running now. He had just gotten to the third floor landing when a spell impacted his side, sending him crashing to the ground. He watched helplessly as his wand fell out of his hand and flew over the banister, falling to the entry hall, two flights below. Harry grunted in pain as his entire side cramped up. He forced himself up. There was Eckelson, mopping the floor for one of his detentions, acting like he hadn’t just hexed Harry.

Harry could have screamed, but he didn’t have time to scream; he didn’t have time to run down two flights of stairs, and then back up. He didn’t have time to find his wand. He looked at his watch. He’d still need a wand to get through the tunnel though. He started running. Crouching low, he took Eckelson out at the knees with a wordless yell. They went into a sprawl. Harry jabbed the boy in the throat and took a jab to his eye in turn. Eckelson drew his wand, but Harry had been practicing manual disarming for months. The wand was his now, and a spell knocked out Eckelson. It only took two tries with the new wand and another blow to his stomach. Harry got up and started running again, glad he had succeeded in using the other boy’s wand. Perhaps by the end of the night, he would have Greyback’s, but he couldn’t focus on that now. He could worry about Greyback’s wand later, when Ron and Hermione were safe.

Harry reached the statue. “Dissendium,” he said, tapping the humped back of the one eyed witch to open the tunnel. Harry managed narrowly to not fall down the stairs in his haste. He was already winded. He had to slow down after a while, a stitch in his side, as he alternated running and jogging to make it through the tunnel. He kept one eye on the uneven terrain and one eye on his watch, counting down the minutes to the rise of the full moon.

Harry threw on his invisibility cloak before he got to the end. Phasing through the trap door in the cellar of Honeyduke’s, Harry ran out past a confused man who didn’t understand why his door had opened on it’s own, and made it out into the town of Hogsmeade. Harry got himself oriented and ran off towards the Shrieking Shack, leaving silent footprints in the dirt road.

Fifteen minutes to go, Harry stopped outside the back of the shack. No point in going through the front door. It was tempting to just barge in, but Harry stopped to catch his breath first. He tried to listen, to hear anything that might be going on inside, but the shack seemed as abandoned as it usually did.
Between the cloak and his silenced insoles, Harry should be able to slip in and Stupefy Greyback before the man even knew he was there.

Severus watched Lupin drain the potion with satisfaction, happy to keep the man in check. He turned to leave when the door was slammed open rather abruptly.

“Professor,” Miss Eldrich cried when she ran through his office door. “Professor Lupin, I need to tell you, I waited like I was supposed to, but then I couldn’t find Professor Snape, and it’s really urgent, and Harry’s going to be eaten and it’s all my fault.”

“Slow down Miss Eldrich,” Lupin said. “What’s going on.”

“Where is Harry?” Professor Snape said, dread filling him.

Miss Eldrich looked over to him, clearly relieved to have found him.

“Harry told me to tell you that he had found out where Greyback was and that he was going after him and that I had to tell you they’re at the Shrieking Shack, but that I had to wait ‘cause if anyone else shows up first Greyback’s going to kill them, but I couldn’t find you and now it’s late and they’re going to get eaten.”

“No one is going to get eaten,” Professor Lupin said.

Severus had no time for placating students; he was already out the door.

Harry wasn’t really expecting to find them on his first try, but there they were when he phased through the first wall. He had been prepared to find them hurt, he had seen what Greyback had done to his messenger, but he hadn’t really been prepared for the reality. Ron looked the most black and blue, but it was Hermione’s thousand yard stare that really gave Harry pause. She was trembling slightly, and there was a twitch under one of her eyes. He wondered if they’d eaten anything since they’d been taken. How long could you go without water? They were both on a four post bed, sitting opposite each other, with their hands bound over their heads. No one else was in the room.

“You need to be quiet,” Harry whispered. Ron turned to stare at where Harry’s voice had come from. Hermione didn’t move. She might not have heard.

“You need to get out of here,” Ron said. "Get Hermione and get out of here."

“Yeah,” Harry said. “We all are. Diffindo,” Harry said, cutting the ropes over Ron’s head. Harry cut Hermione’s ropes in time for Ron to huddle next to her, gently nudging her out of her daze.

“Behind you,” Hermione said suddenly, hoarsely.

“Accio cloak,” a gruff voice said behind him. Harry’s invisibility cloak whipped off of him.
“Mighty interested to know how you got in here, even invisible,” Greyback said, standing in the doorway, pointing his wand at Harry. Harry pointed Eckelson’s back.

“Harry,” Hermione said urgently. “You can still get out of here.”

“Like hell,” Harry said.

Greyback smirked. “Ready to take your mark?” Greyback asked.

“Yeah,” Harry said. “Just let them go.”

“Let them go?” Greyback asked. “What a waste that would be. You need some prey for your first hunt don’t you?”

“You can’t have them, and you can’t have me,” Harry said angrily. “Reducto,” Harry said.

Greyback threw up a shield, but Harry hadn’t been aiming at him. The plaster ceiling over Greyback crumbled and fell on him as Harry ran forward to get close.

“Stupefy,” Harry said, hoping Greyback wouldn’t have enough time to shield an almost point blank spell. The man twisted out of the way.

“Expeliarmus,” Greyback cried, and Harry lost Eckelson’s wand. That was when Ron tackled the older man. Harry lunged at him too, grabbing for Greyback’s wand, which was pulled out of his reach. That was when Ron got his hand around it and held on firm with first one hand and then two, trying to pull it free. It snapped.

Greyback didn’t look much aggrieved for the loss of the wand. Greyback backhanded Harry and threw Ron to the ground.

“Petrificus Totalus,” Hermione said, having picked up Eckelson’s wand. Greyback turned out of the way of that one too. But it was three on one, and if Harry and Ron could just keep Greyback distracted, Hermione could finish things. That was when the stranger walked in.

“Expeliarmus,” he said, and Hermione lost her wand. He roughly grabbed Harry into a chokehold and pressed his wand against Harry’s temple. Ron and Hermione froze.

“I told you to wait,” Greyback said with a snarl.

“Your wand broke,” the stranger said. He sounded timid under Greyback’s wrathful gaze.

“We were just having some fun,” Greyback said. “Wands come and go. These here where just getting interesting. I thought I’d gotten the spunk out of these two but they surprised me. We’re going to have some fun, aren’t we, Potter.”

“Go to hell,” Harry said.

Greyback’s wand had snapped, and Harry saw no sign of Eckelson’s that Hermione had just lost, that left the one held to his temple. Harry knew how to get out of a chokehold.

One hand came up to the wrist that was holding a wand to his head while he twisted and stepped to the right, placing his left foot behind the man’s right. His head popped out from the crook of his arm and Harry grabbed the man’s wrist and twisted, bringing it into a wrist lock behind the man’s back. As soon as he made his move, Ron was charging greyback, with Hermione going for where Eckelson’s wand had flown earlier.
Harry twisted hard on the man’s wrist and shoved his leg into the back of the man’s knees forcing him to the ground, face first. Harry plucked the wand from the stunned man’s hand while still maintaining control of the arm in the small of the man’s back.

“Stupefy,” Harry said. He had to try the spell again and the man below him stopped struggling.

“Flipendo,” Hermione said, and Greyback was shoved to the side, though Harry could tell there wasn’t much power behind it.


“Come on,” Ron said, grabbing Hermione’s hand and making his way to the door. Harry followed behind.

Harry followed them out the door, closing it as he went.

“Hermione,” Harry said. “Can you do something about this door?”

“Colloportus,” Hermione cast, sealing the door. “I’m not sure how well that’ll hold,” Hermione said. “I don’t think I’m well matched with this wand.”

“It’s Eckelson’s. Do you know where your wands are?” Harry asked.

“Shit,” Ron said. “I think he stuck them in his boot or something.”

Harry turned to face the door Greyback was behind.

“This close to the moon, Harry,” Hermione said. “I don’t think those stunners are going to last long.”

“Right,” Harry said. “Let’s get out of here. We can worry about wands later.” And his invisibility cloak as well, come to think about it.

It took them a few moments to realize that all of the doors to the outside were impervious to opening charms. Harry was about to try to figure out how to carry someone with him through the wall when Hermione found a room with a trapdoor in the middle. It probably led to the tunnel Greyback had wanted him to take. That would get them back to the castle.

Nothing happened when Ron crossed the threshold into the room, but when Hermione went through, with Harry close on her heels, both of the wands they held flew out of their hands and through a small hole in the ceiling. So that had been Greyback’s plan for when Harry left the tunnel. Harry shook his head. There was no use in worrying about it now. They clambered down through the trapdoor. It was completely dark, and Harry tried to keep up a strong pace, but both Ron and Hermione seemed at the end of their ropes. The uneven surface and variable height of the tunnel made things very difficult. Harry thought they might have been about two thirds of the way through, based off of his trek through the Honeyduke’s tunnel, when he made out the sounds of Greyback and his accomplice somewhere behind them in the distance.

“We have to run,” Harry said. Ron and Hermione didn’t make a sound but he knew that was asking a lot. Harry held on to Ron, and Ron kept a hold of Hermione. Harry kept a hand out in front of himself to avoid running into bedrock. A few more minutes passed, and Harry knew Greyback was getting closer. Looking behind himself, he thought he could almost see the glow of a wand beyond a turn in the tunnel. Harry shoved his free hand into his mouth and used his teeth to pull off the glove he wore before reaching into his back pocket. He pulled out the hidden glove and clenched it in his hand. He had made a promise and he was going to keep it. Greyback would
be upon them soon, and Harry was going to make sure that Ron and Hermione got out. Then the sounds of pursuit stopped to be replaced by yells. Harry had never seen a werewolf transform, but he thought for sure he was hearing it happen then. He didn’t know how long a transformation lasted, but they had to hurry.

They were all but sprinting then, and Harry could hear Ron and Hermione flagging just behind him. But there up ahead was light, just in time to hear a howl from behind. Harry made his way up to the end of the tunnel and felt around. He knew the Whomping Willow was planted right on top and that there was a knot to stop it from trying to kill them. He couldn’t find it.

“Harry, go,” Hermione said. Harry pulled himself up, quickly and reached back to pull up Hermione.

“Run,” Harry said. “It’s the Whomping Willow.”

He reached for Ron, he could hear two wolves snarling, coming closer. He got Ron up, hearing Hermione scream. He turned in time to see Hermione go flying, struck by a powerful blow from the tree.

“Hermione,” Ron yelled, running after her.

Harry passed him easily and tried to help Hermione up, taking a blow to his back that felt like a baseball bat and sent him stumbling forward. He flipped himself onto his back and got up in time to see another branch catch Ron around his stomach and send him flying. Harry watched as Ron landed wrong and he heard a snap before he saw what looked like Ron’s shin bone poking through his leg. Ron gave a strangled scream as he collapsed to the ground and then stopped moving.

“Ron!” Hermione screamed.

“Run,” Harry said. “I’ll get him.” That was when he heard the growl, but it wasn’t coming from the tunnel opening. It was coming from the direction of the castle. Harry looked up in time to see a werewolf running full tilt towards him and Hermione. Harry scrambled to put the glove still clenched in his fist onto his hand. But the wolf ran right past them and towards the tunnel entrance where another werewolf was crawling out. The werewolf barreled right into it just as it had crawled out and the two animals started to tear at each other with claws and teeth.

“Run,” Harry said again. Hermione was frozen in shock. He gave her a shove towards the castle and turned towards Ron, who had fallen just outside of the tree’s reach. He turned in time to see the other werewolf, this one was clearly Greyback, exiting the tunnel. It sniffed the air, and turned straight towards Ron and the blood oozing out of his leg.

“No!” Harry yelled, running to intercept. He only had one weapon. It was all about intent. Harry dove on top of the charging werewolf, driving his fist down on top of it’s head, willing his hand to go through the monster’s skull. The glove worked, tearing apart everything in it’s path; his hand passed through, and then his arm and before he knew it he was falling through, catching himself with his other arm around Greyback’s neck, everything reassembling itself as his arm exited Greyback, reassembled itself imperfectly. The two of them tumbled and crashed together, the werewolf on top of him shaking and snarling and shuddering as it hemorrhaged into it’s skull. In it’s death throws it lunged at Harry and he screamed as the dying creature ripped into his shoulder with it’s teeth. Harry pushed Greyback off of himself and rolled to get on top of the stumbling animal. Ron was only a few paces away and Harry had to make sure it didn’t get too close to him. He could still hear the other two werewolves battling behind him. Professor Lupin, Harry thought. That was who the other werewolf was. And now Harry was one too. Greyback fell to the ground and stopped moving.
“Accio Harry,” his father’s voice rang out into the night. Harry flew through the air and landed on a cushion of magic.

“Get away from it, Lupin,” his father said. One of the werewolves broke away from the other and his father held up a metalic spike, which he banished into the snarling creature. Silver, Harry knew.

The wound burned hot, the skin felt feverish. Madame Pomfrey worked about as though it was an ordinary laceration. Harry wasn’t about to start talking about it. She had fixed up Ron first. He had still been unconscious when he had been brought in and Madame Pomfrey had said it would be best if he just rested for then, though everything had been healed.

Professor Snape had left. There had been something he wanted to brew for Harry’s shoulder, and Harry couldn’t ask him to stay, couldn’t say anything at all. Madame Pomfrey had placed ointments and bandages, and given him something for the fever, but the cursed wound would not so easily heal. With nothing left to do for him, Madame Pomfrey turned to Hermione. The vacant stare had returned, and Madame Pomfrey started doing diagnostics with her wand. She closed the curtain around Hermione’s bed and Harry was left alone. Alone with his thoughts.

Something had gone wrong in the timing of the night's events. But then, things had been going wrong all year, and yet Albus had tried to keep everything moving along. Harry was not supposed to be a werewolf. One misstep and everything had been turned upside down. The changes were becoming too much, the predictability of the future had become so degraded that Albus could no longer dare to try to keep matters on course.

He had bargained so much on it though, on following the right path towards victory. Lives had been lost, people had been sacrificed on the altar of this plan, of keeping everything scripted; scripted deaths, scripted destruction, scripted loss. Albus could no longer see a way to ensure that events flowed as they were supposed to towards Voldemort’s defeat. He could no longer say that those sacrifices had served a purpose.

Harry was not supposed to be a werewolf. Yet as things stood now, if Voldemort found out that Harry was a werewolf, he would never use Harry in his rebirthing ceremony, and without the shared blood tie, there would be no way to destroy the Horcrux within Harry, and yet… and yet, if Voldemort did not know...

Albus pulled down several books and some scratch paper. The arithmancy on this would be tricky. At least now he knew why his future self had decided to interfere with time.

Clarity let him know he was failing. He knew that. Failing as Harry’s protector and failing as his
father. That didn’t change that he had an excuse. Frigga’s Brew would be the best thing to help
the wound heal quickly and with minimal scaring. The sooner it was applied the better, so here he
was, in his lab, brewing, instead of being with his son. It was easier. If only everything else were
as easy.

Yet the brew was easy enough, quick enough, and soon enough he was returning to the hospital
wing. Mister Weasley was still unconscious, Harry was still sat up on the edge of his bed staring
at the wall, and Miss Granger was behind a curtain with Madame Pomfrey. He knew that Mister
Erstwhile was behind another set of curtains, sleeping off his ordeal. He walked over to Harry.

“It’s best to put this on now,” Severus told Harry.

Harry looked up, startled. He opened his mouth to say something but no words came out. He
looked down at his lap.

“I’m not angry with you,” Severus said. He drew his wand and tapped the bandages that covered
Harry’s shoulder. “I knew full well what you would do, given the opportunity. I had thought
opportunity had been sealed from you, though.” He started applying the potion to the wound, glad
to see the red, puffy skin start to settle.

“He said he’d kill them if anyone else showed up,” Harry said.

“I know,” Severus said. “I’m sorry I couldn’t protect you.”

“It wasn’t your fault,” Harry said.

They were interrupted by the arrival of the Headmaster.

“Severus, Harry,” the Headmaster greeted as he erected several privacy spells.

“Is Professor Lupin alright?” Harry asked.

“He is recovering right now with Professor Hagrid,” the Headmaster said. “And I am sure that you
should like to take time to recover for right now, but I am afraid there is a matter I must ask of you
tonight.

“The ministry can hang if they want a statement right now,” Severus said.

“The ministry does not yet know what has happened tonight,” the Headmaster said, “and we must
be careful of what they do discover. We must be careful of what rumors might spread.”

Harry looked down.

“You mean about me being a werewolf?” he asked.

Severus couldn’t help but flinch at that.

“Yes,” the headmaster said. “There is a peculiar thing about Prophesies, Harry.” And here he had
both of their very undivided attention.

“They are very difficult to decipher until after certain matters have taken place,” the headmaster
said. “It is important that I say little more than what I am about to divulge. It is vitally important
that Voldemort not learn that you have been bitten tonight if we are to see an end to his ever
present threat one day.”

“That prophesy?” Harry asked, wide eyed. “The one about that night? I don’t understand. I
It is not,” Severus said, and Harry turned his panicked eyes upon him. “What involvement does Harry have in Voldemort’s destruction?” Severus asked the headmaster.

“I can not say,” the headmaster said. “But Voldemort’s discovery that you are a werewolf could ensure your own death.”

Harry paled. “What do you need me to do?” he asked. “I wasn’t planning on telling anyone.”

“For that, we shall need your friends,” the headmaster said.

The question of the prophesy wasn’t over as far as Severus was concerned, but he understood the importance of damage control this early in the game.

“I do believe that they are currently indisposed,” Severus said.

“I am aware that I must ask a great deal of them tonight,” the headmaster said.

The headmaster dropped the privacy charms he had erected.

“Madam Pomfrey?” he asked. There was a pause before the matron came out from behind her curtain. She looked very weary.

“I must borrow your patients for now Poppy,” the headmaster said.

“Absolutely not,” Madam Pomfrey said crossly. “These children need rest, they are in no state for anything but bed rest. There shall be no more galavanting around.”

“The last time a student was suspected of being a werewolf,” the headmaster said, “he visited the hospital wing twice with severe injuries. I should like to avoid such suspicions for all these students, so that they can recover with less public scrutiny.”

“Mr. Potter, perhaps, can go, his injury is healing as well as can be expected, and he is the one who shall need those protections, but Mr. Weasley and Miss Granger have been through an ordeal, and they do not need the added stress of whatever scheme you have cooked up.”

“It is important that there are no suspicions, towards any students,” the headmaster said. “For everyone’s safety.”

“I’ll help,” Miss Granger said, from behind her curtain, sounding much smaller than she normally did.

“You need your rest,” Madame Pomfrey said, rounding on her.

Miss Granger walked over to Mister Weasley’s bed and gently shook the boy awake.

“Hermione!,” Ron shouted, lurching up the moment his eyes opened, looking over the girl. “Are you alright? What time is it? The moon, where are we? Where’s Harry?”

“I’m right here,” Harry said with a great deal of trepidation in his voice. “We’re in the hospital wing.”

Ron looked between his friends and sighed in relief.

“Oh shit,” the boy said, unapologetic before his professors. He started running his hands over his
body, looking for injury.

“You are unharmed,” Professor Snape said.

“Harry needs help,” Hermione said.

“Oh,” Mister Weasley said. “Okay.” The boy was already getting out of bed, though he did not move an inch from Miss Granger’s side. “What’s going on,” the boy asked. “Are you alright?”

Harry shook his head, looking down.

“What happened to your shoulder?” Ron asked.

No one said anything.


“It is important for Harry’s safety that no one know what has happened tonight,” the headmaster said. “Fortunately, I have recovered your personal items from the Shrieking Shack.” He held up two wands and an hourglass, bound in a wire cage, on a golden chain.

“A time turner?” Madame Pomfrey asked indignantly. “For a third year?”

“What’s a time turner?” Harry asked.

“It’s sort of like a time machine,” Miss Granger said. “It’s how I get to all of my classes.”

“Then you can stop it all,” Harry said, an elated look on his face. “You can fix me.”

“Oh, no, Harry,” Miss Granger said, a devastated look on her face. “I can’t.”

“It is impossible to change time, Harry,” Severus said, and it hurt to take that hope away from him. “What has happened has already happened. Whatever temporal matters have taken place have already taken place. If you go back in time, nothing you do will change anything. Time travel is always a stable loop.” He turned to the headmaster. “You are sending them back to before the moon rose? So they can present themselves before witnesses?”

“Indeed,” the headmaster said. “You will go back and head straight for the common room. Your story will not change much. After receiving a message from Greyback, you rescued Mister Weasley and Miss Granger and managed to return to the castle with a half hour to spare before the moon rose. You will say, Harry, that you cut time off your journey by flying your broom, which you had had shrunken in your pocket. You will say that Greyback and his accomplice were incapacitated and that you do not know what happened to them, other than that, you alerted us to where you had left them unconscious. You will inform them that you have instructions from myself that no students are to leave the dormitories. We will inform the Ministry, that Fenrir Greyback and his accomplice escaped before turning upon the school grounds where they were killed by Professor Snape and Professor Lupin. Do you have any questions?”

The three students shook their heads.

The headmaster sighed. He handed Miss Granger the time turner.

“Three turns, five minutes from now,” the headmaster said. “Madame Pomfrey shall come to collect you later with accusations that you and Mister Weasley escaped from the hospital wing. Mister Weasley, your parents will likely be waiting for you in the hospital wing when you return.”
Miss Granger took the device.

Chapter End Notes

Thank you to my beta, althor42, who is still writing his awesome Horcrux Within story. I hope you enjoyed this latest chapter. I have been reading a ton of Miraculous Ladybug fan fiction lately. That’s what happens when one of your favorite authors starts writing in a fandom you’ve never heard of before. I normally don’t read Star Wars fan fiction, but I found a time travel, do over fic called Hindsight is Not Perfect by Anne Camp aka Obi-quiet. It has a WIP sequel that’s still updating. Please let me know what you thought about the chapter and happy reading.
Harry felt sick. At that moment, his past self was out there somewhere. He was about to be bitten by Greyback and he wasn’t doing anything about it. What was stopping him? They had told him that it was impossible to change time, but here he was, in the past. What if he just ran for it? Harry didn’t know what would happen. He wanted to scream.

The oddest thing held him back. The thought of leaving Ron and Hermione alone in the corridor terrified him. What would happen to them if they were alone and defenseless. He knew there wasn’t any threat in the castle. No great threat anyway. Yet the thought of them being alone just then anchored Harry to them. He had to protect them. He couldn’t let anything more happen to them.

“Y-you ready?” Ron asked Hermione. They were standing outside of the common room. Harry had noticed more and more that Ron just wasn’t budging from Hermione’s side, or taking his eyes off of her for more than a moment, other than to cast a worried look at Harry. Hermione for her part had grabbed the hem of Ron’s sleeve when they left the hospital wing and she hadn’t let go since.

Hermione nodded.

“Morte moriatur,” Harry said. The password had been changed right after Ron and Hermione had been taken, just in case. The portrait swung open and Harry walked through followed by-

“Ron!” someone cried. It was Ginny, and soon they were surrounded. Even Harry felt overwhelmed in the moment. Ron had just frozen a moment before he stepped bodily in front of Hermione. No one seemed to notice. There were hugs all around and Harry kept getting slaps on the back. Ron’s brothers and sister were the main ones surrounding them but it seemed like the whole house was pressing in on them.

It was hearing ragged breathing from Ron that dragged Harry into the situation. “G-give them some room to breathe,” he said. “They should sit down.”

“Oh,” Percy said. “Yes, come sit by the fire. Are you alright? Your wrists Ron, they’re all raw. Have you even seen Madame Pomfrey?”

“Professor Dumbledore said we’re on lock down,” Harry said. “Greyback’s out there somewhere. The moon’s about to rise.” Harry was out there now, about to be bitten.

“Oh, of course,” Percy said. “You heard him, no one leaves the tower!”

“Cut it pretty close there,” Fred said. They could see the moon almost risen over the mountains from the window. Harry was surprised to realize that there were tear tracks down his face. Had they been sitting here just watching the moon rise?
“You really did it,” George said. “Right before the moon rose. How’d you find them?”

Harry really did not want the spotlight just then, but he supposed it was better than it being on Ron and Hermione. He owed them a bit of a distraction.

“Well he wanted me to find them,” Harry said. “He imperiused Erstwhile and sent him with a message. He just wasn’t expecting me to have a few tricks up my sleeve.” Greyback hadn’t expected Harry to kill him.

Harry launched into his story. He let it drag on a bit.

“So we locked them in, but Hermione figured the stunners wouldn’t last long when they were that close to the moon, and Ron thought Greyback had their wands somewhere on him. Hopefully the Professors can get them in time,” Harry said. Dumbledore had held on to Ron and Hermione’s wands for continuity’s sake.

Harry suddenly realized that for the past ten minutes, he had literally been the only person speaking in the common room.

“Glad those gloves came in handy,” Fred said. Harry got another slap on the back. Harry felt sick as his mind called up the vision of his gloved fist sinking through Greyback’s head. The image of Greyback spasming and writhing as he died played again, tied into the memory of having his shoulder shredded by the dying man. Fred didn’t know that Harry had killed someone with their invention.

“They were a life saver,” Harry said.

“Are you two hungry or anything?” Ginny asked. “Did they feed you?”

Ron, who looked like he’d be asleep if he could close his eyes, turned to Hermione who just shook her head.

“We’re fine Gin, just need some rest,” Ron said.


“Do you think Dumbledore could keep her out if she knew he was here?” Fred asked.

“I’m sure someone’s letting them know now,” Harry said. He was pretty sure the Weasley’s senior had been at the ministry, awaiting news from the Aurors who had been searching for the kidnapped students.

“Right,” Percy said. “Then we’ll all wait for them. Do you two want to catch some rest?”

Ron shook his head. Harry knew the feeling of not wanting sleep after a big upset; of being afraid to sleep.

“You two alright?” George asked, perhaps for the first time realizing that not everything was going to be fixed upon homecoming. It was good that they were mostly healed, Harry thought; that Ron didn’t have to face his family looking as bloodied and bruised as he had been in the Shrieking Shack.

Ron took a deep breath. “Yeah,” he said. “Yeah, good to be back. Did you miss me?”
“Only a bit,” Fred said. “Don’t make anything of it.”

It was over two hours of awkwardness until Madame Pomfrey burst in, fuming about ‘escaped patients.’

“Ron!” Percy said, scandalized.

“Figured you’d want to see me for yourself,” Ron said. “Besides, Madame Pomfrey was smothering me.”

“Your parents should be arriving soon,” Madame Pomfrey said. “You all can see your brother in the morning.”

“My parents?” Hermione said, she sounded relieved. The first words she’d said since she had entered the common room.

“No,” Madame Pomfrey said. “I don’t believe…”

“They don’t know,” Hermione said. It wasn’t a question. “It’s for the best.”

“Come along,” Madame Pomfrey said.

There wasn’t much talking on the way to the Hospital Wing. They were greeted by Ron’s parents and two red headed men that Harry assumed were Ron’s eldest brothers.

“Ronnie!” Mrs. Weasley cried out when they walked in. “Oh my baby, you’re back.”

Ron was very quickly wrapped up in a hug. Mrs. Weasley was crying as she held her son. “I can’t keep doing this. I thought I’d lost you.”

Ron broke away and swallowed thickly. “I—I’m sorry I worried you mum,” he said.

“Don’t even… oh look at you,” Mrs. Weasley said. The hug over, Mrs. Weasley could properly look at her son. There was another quick hug before Mrs. Weasley was guiding Ron to a hospital bed. Ron’s head turned to keep his eyes on Hermione.

“You just need some rest, and something to eat,” Mrs. Weasley said. “My poor baby. If I could only get my hands on that monster.”

“I’ll be alright, mum,” Ron said.

“Of course you will be,” Mrs. Weasley said. “And you too Hermione dear. You poor thing, you look dead on your feet. You need rest, the both of you…” She glanced over at Madame Pomfrey. “Of course I know you are in good hands.” She seemed to realize that she had been stepping on the matron’s toes.

“They’ll both make speedy recoveries,” Madame Pomfrey said. “I was just interrupted earlier from their treatment. Perhaps you could grab me some dittany from the cupboard Molly.”

“Of course,” Mrs. Weasley said. She went over to the dispensary while Madame Pomfrey approached Ron with a roll of gauze. She started examining his wrists.

Mr. Weasley walked up to Harry. “You found them,” he said.

“Something like that,” Harry said.
“Thank you,” Mr. Weasley said.

Why did people keep acting like he hadn’t gotten his best friends kidnapped. He watched as the Weasley men gathered close by Ron’s bed as Madame Pomfrey tended to his wrists. The ropes, Harry realized. Ron had tried to pry his hands out from the ropes. Harry walked over and stood closer to Hermione’s bed. She should have someone be there for her as well, even if her parents couldn’t be.

Madame Pomfrey kept glancing at Harry, and Harry supposed she was restraining herself from ordering him into one of the beds. She couldn’t reveal that he had been injured though. Not long later, the Headmaster arrived. Harry would have to talk to the Aurors and it was going to be best if he was coached ahead of time to make sure nothing incongruous was said.

“You’re lucky though,” Professor Lupin said. “Or luckier than some. The headmaster will make sure you have Wolfsbane Potion throughout your schooling. It really makes a big difference. You’re not the first lycanthrope to attend Hogwarts, the staff handles these things very well.”

“Yeah,” Harry said. “I’ve always had the best luck.” It was a couple days after the incident, and Professor Lupin was recovered enough to resume classes.

“I’m sure it doesn’t feel like it now, Harry, but just remember, you survived. Your friends survived. You’re not facing this alone. I have a fair bit of experience, I won’t let you walk into this blind.”

Harry nodded. He knew he should be grateful for that, but it was hard in the moment not to be bitter.

“What if people find out?” Harry asked.

Professor Lupin was silent for a bit.

“It would be best if they didn’t,” he said.

“My father knew about you,” Harry said.

“He knew me as myself a long time before he learned about that,” Professor Lupin said.

Harry had spent enough of his life as a pariah.

“So what can I expect?” Harry asked.

“Well to start, you’ll probably hit a growth spurt soon,” Professor Lupin said. “Though I’d expect you were due one anyway.”

“A growth spurt?” Harry asked.

“Puberty accelerates a bit for younger werewolves,” Professor Lupin said. Harry blushed. “It’s why I’m a bit on the short side.”

Professor Lupin shrugged. “Things get a bit rushed. Plus, the later puberty starts the more childhood growth you can throw in before everything else kicks off.”

“Well that’s just perfect,” Harry said. “So am I going to be, like, an adult early.”

“No,” Professor Lupin said. “Physically you’ll probably finish developing by the time you’re sixteen, same as a few of your other class mates who may have had a head start on you, but mentally, there’s some things you can’t really rush. Certain parts of the brain will develop, but you’ll still be lacking in terms of general life experience and emotional maturity.”

“Is there any good news?” Harry asked.

“Sure,” Professor Lupin said. “You’ll see a bit better in the dark. Your hearing’s going to get better. Sense of smell too. Though that one can be a bit of a curse living in a dormitory. There’s also the added energy you have as the full moon approaches, though that’s a bit of a trade off since you’ll be pretty wrecked right after.”

“What else?” Harry asked.

“Well there’s a greater appreciation for protein around the full moon,” Professor Lupin said. “Your body has different dietary needs now. It’ll let you know what it needs.”

Harry thought on all of it for a bit. He knew the professor was probably trying to sugar coat things a bit, but he had been making being a werewolf sound more like an inconvenience more than anything else. So long as no one knew.

“So you remember what happens when you’re transformed?” Harry asked.

“Well with Wolfsbane you remember everything,” Professor Lupin said. “You’re in control. The point is, it becomes less like you’re a werewolf and more like you’re an involuntary animagus. Without Wolfsbane though, all you really have are flashes of the night before. It isn’t you, it’s an animal that is in control, and you’re pushed to the side.”

“Huh,” Harry said.

“You might as well ask,” Remus said. “I won’t be offended.”

“What?” Harry asked.

“There are a hundred and one rumors about werewolves running around the castle right now,” Professor Lupin said. “And I’ve got an inkling that you wanted to ask about some of them.”

Well Harry wasn’t actually going to ask about lycanthropes’ libidos or the dozen other weird things he’d heard tell in the halls and dormitory that year, but he’d rather Professor Lupin not start trying to guess so he asked, “Are werewolves stronger than regular people?”

“A bit,” Professor Lupin said. “Not by much. At least, assuming we’re well fed. You’re not necessarily going to bulk up, but our muscles tend to be a bit better at using what’s there.”

“Am I going to have, like, animal instincts?” Harry asked.

“Yes,” Professor Lupin said. “But then again you already did. Human’s have instincts the same as any animal, we’ve just learned to not let them rule us. It isn’t really any different than when a boy starts puberty. There are new desires and urges, instincts, and he is expected to control them, as appropriate. They’re new, though not necessarily stronger. You’ll notice them more as your first
moon approaches. People forget that wolves are social creatures that share a lot in common with humans. Fight or flight, being on the lookout for animals that could be food, stuff like that doesn’t really change. You’re already used to fighting instincts, though I suppose having new ones all of a sudden can take you by surprise.”

“What’s a weird one?” Harry asked.

Professor Lupin laughed. “Sirius found he could near well put me to sleep if he scratched me behind the ears,” Professor Lupin said.

Harry actually laughed at that. “What else?”

“There’s a thing where one wolf will show deference to another wolf by rolling onto their back and exposing their stomach. There was this one time we were getting dressed down by Professor McGonagall and I swear I had to stop my self from crouching down on the floor and rolling around on my back.”

Harry blushed at the mental image. He’d die if he did anything like that.

“What else?” Professor Lupin asked himself. “Oh, when I was little, my mom had to stop me from licking my skinned knees and whatnot. Seemed like a perfectly reasonable thing to do at the time. Let’s see, oh, I do feel as though I have a better sense than most people of when people are around me. As in, it’s rather difficult to sneak up on me. Perhaps I’m just naturally more perceptive though, or that might have been a side effect of growing up around Sirius and your father.”

That could be useful, Harry thought to himself. Though he had always been hyper aware of the people around him.

“Can-can I owl you over the summer?” Harry asked. “If I have questions.”

“You can owl me even if it’s just to tell me how your summer’s going,” Professor Lupin said. “I’d like to know that you’re okay.”

Harry smiled at that.

“Thanks,” Harry said. “I should go. Hermione’s very worried about the time she lost. We’ve got studying to do.”

“How are they?” Professor Lupin asked. The full moon had been two nights ago.

Harry frowned. “Madame Pomfrey fixed everything,” he said.

“But?” Professor Lupin asked.

“They’re really quiet,” Harry said. “Ron’ll put on a show of being alright but it doesn’t last long. Greyback beat them up a bunch. He just, he liked hurting people, didn’t he. He killed Ms. Adler for fun. He had them tied up, he didn’t need to keep hurting them. He… I don’t know. I think it’s good that they don’t have to ever worry about him again, but that doesn’t mean they feel safe.”

“Well they know they have a friend who will always be there for them,” Professor Lupin said.

“Yeah,” Harry said, suppressing a grimace. “I’ll see you professor.”

“Enjoy your weekend Harry,” Professor Lupin said.

Harry paused at the door.
“Were you disappointed in me?” Harry asked.

“Disappointed in you?” Professor Lupin asked. “I have to admit, I wish you had stayed safe, but Harry, I understand why you went after them. I can tell you with certainty your mother or father probably would have done the same for their friends.”

“No, not that…” he said. “Never mind… bye.”

Harry left the room quickly. He pretended not to hear Professor Lupin calling after him.

Harry started making his way towards the unused clubroom Hermione had claimed as her new study room the evening prior. It was free of distractions, she had said when Harry had asked.

“Harry!” he heard called from behind him. He turned around to find Sammy running up to him.

“Sammy,” Harry said. “I should have talked to you before.”

“I’m sorry,” Sammy said. “I’m really sorry, I messed everything up, I couldn’t find Professor Snape, and then I took forever getting to Professor Lupin, and then Professor Snape was right there, and you all could have been eaten.”

"Everything was alright though," Harry lied. "The professors got there just in time to stop them from escaping. I shouldn't have put that on you, it wasn't fair. Professor Snape could have been anywhere in the castle. It was a bad plan on my part. You shouldn't have had to be responsible for that. But everything timed out so we escaped and the professors stopped Greyback. So thank you for that." He wanted to tell her that if Professor Snape and Professor Lupin hadn't arrived when they had, that they would have faced two werewolves alone and wandless. Yet their story involved them being back in the castle by the time the moon rose.

"I was just so scarred I'd never see you again," Sammy said. "I'm glad you're alright."

"Yeah," was all Harry could say, since he really wasn't. "Hey Sammy, just, when I said I needed your help with the whole Greyback thing, you thought I wanted help fighting him and you said, 'okay.' Just, that was really Gryffindor of you."

"I was really scared though," Sammy said.

"Yeah," Harry said. "So was I. You've come a long way from the kid I met on the train, you know."

Harry rather abruptly found himself getting hugged. He spent a moment thinking that he was bringing new meaning to ‘a wolf in sheep’s clothing,’ before reminding himself that Sammy had visited him in the hospital wing when she had thought he was a werewolf. He returned the hug and wished Sammy a good weekend. She left to attend to whatever Hufflepuffs got up to on Friday nights.

He finally arrived at the unused and out of the way clubroom to find Ron and Hermione waiting for him.

“Harry,” Hermione said excitedly. “Thank Merlin, I thought you were going to talk with the professor forever. Alright, now, I’ve worked out how we’re going to make up for our missed time. It would have really helped if you hadn’t skipped classes Monday, Tuesday, and Wednesday though, now we don’t even have notes. Don’t worry though, I’ve worked out the time tables. We should be back on track by June first. Then we can go back to our previous schedule for finals. So we’re not going to have much time. So just get your charms book out and we can get started.”
Hermione started shuffling through her notes and Harry turned a questioning look at Ron. When had quiet Hermione disappeared, and where had this manic version come from? Ron just shrugged, opening his own charms book.

They stayed there for hours. Harry, who hadn’t been looking forward to joining their classmates in the Great Hall for dinner, was glad to find that Hermione had brought snacks for them to eat instead. Ron was still keeping very close to Hermione who didn’t seem to notice anything except the work that they were doing. Hermione would break the silence every few minutes to loudly and enthusiastically explain a concept from the reading or to ask them how they were doing with a question from the homework. Ron would startle sometimes when she did this. Ron though, Harry noticed, when he wasn’t focusing on his studies, was focusing on Hermione. Later, when he would leave, he’d realize that when Ron had spoken at all, it had only been to Hermione.

They all pulled out their wands after a while and did the practical exercises. Ron and Hermione had gotten their wands back the morning after the full moon. Their story wouldn’t have made sense if they had had them in the common room the night prior. Harry had had to explain why one of the wands found in the Shrieking Shack had been Eckleson’s instead of his own. The headmaster had looked as though he had had an unpleasant epiphany when he had told the story, but he hadn’t elaborated on the matter.

When Harry left, it was only an hour before curfew. He hadn’t wanted to leave Ron and Hermione alone, but his father had left a note for him that morning in class requesting his presence before he went to bed that night. He hadn’t seen his father much since the full moon, but he had felt a lot better sticking to his friends.

He hesitated, his hand poised to knock on the door. With a shake of his head he slipped into his father’s quarters. He did knock on the office door.

“Harry,” his father said, opening the door. “Good, I thought you had forgotten. Sit down and take your shirt off.”


“Your shoulder,” his father said, not explaining further. He seemed to be in a hurry, pulling a phial out of a drawer.

Harry sat down and started pulling off his robes and unbuttoning his shirt. He didn’t really want to be showing off his new scar at the moment. He felt very self conscious. Harry, already a scraggly teenage boy, had developed yet another reason to prefer to keep his shirt on.

Professor Snape pulled up a chair next to Harry and poured a generous dollop of the viscous potion into his hand. He quickly started rubbing the cool liquid into the pitted and puffy scar tissue. He stood up just as abruptly and a swipe of his wand cleaned the hand.

“What’s this going to do?” Harry asked.

“Watch,” Professor Snape said. Harry didn’t really want to look at it, but curiosity overcame him. He turned his head in time to watch the viscous potion sitting on his skin coalesce and then change color.

“Is- is my scar gone?” Harry asked. “I thought you couldn’t get rid of… that sort of scar.”

“It’s just been covered up,” Professor Snape said. “Hold out your hands.”

Harry did as asked. Professor Snape poured another dollop into Harry’s hand.
“Cover the entirety of both of your hands,” Professor Snape said. Harry rubbed his hands together all over.

“I don’t have any scars on my hands though,” Harry said.

“Do you have a sickle?” Professor Snape asked.

“Yeah,” Harry said. He’d been meaning to get rid of it so he could use that pocket again without worrying about burning himself. He had a thought about what Professor Snape was getting at though. He reached into his pocket and pulled it out. It was warm from being in his pocket, but it didn’t burn. He looked at his hands, which looked exactly as they had before he had applied the potion.

“So what is it?” Harry asked, curious. Professor Snape had already seated himself behind his desk and was reviewing a page of notes.

“A thin layer of temporary skin,” Professor Snape, not looking up. “It is used to treat a rather unpleasant curse, which I won’t be telling you about. But for you, it should keep your scar covered and protect your hands from silver, in case anyone ever decides you should be tested.”

“Can I use it on my forehead?” Harry asked.

“No,” Professor Snape said. “Why would you want to?”

“People stare at it,” Harry mumbled.

“Well people shouldn’t question why you are using a complex potion to cover a scar,” Professor Snape said. “They should not be wondering if you may have it to cover up a much more damning scar. Now, you will want to apply that once every three days.”

“Right,” Harry said. Looking at his hands, which didn’t look any different from before. He moved the sickle between his fingers. Looking at it, he held it between thumb and forefinger and brought it down on the inside of his left forearm.

“Ouch,” Harry hissed.

Professor Snape looked up, taking in the scene. “What’s wrong with you,” he snapped. “Put that away.” He got up from his chair and grabbed another phial out of his desk. Coming back around he quickly put a dab on the burn before returning to behind his desk. “Get your shirt back on,” Professor Snape said.

Harry quickly complied, feeling even more self conscious, his face burning more than his arm had. “I was just curious,” he said.

“Well you need to curb your curiosity,” Professor Snape said, already turning back to his notes. “I don’t have time to deal with these things.”

“Yeah,” Harry said. “I’m sorry.”

Professor Snape stopped and rested his forehead against his palm. He took a deep breath, and when he looked back up, there was a bit of a blankness to his face.

“It’s alright,” he said. “This is new to you. But you cannot experiment with this. You need to take it seriously. You should get back to your common room. Curfew is soon approaching.”
“Right,” Harry said. “Goodnight.”

“Goodnight,” Professor Snape said.

Harry walked back to the common room morosely. On occasion he rubbed his thumb over the spot where he had burned himself, though it had already disappeared. Ron and Hermione weren’t in the common room, and Harry was worried to find that Ron wasn’t in the dormitory either. He checked his watch. They were cutting things close. He waited on his bed, becoming anxious, looking back between the floor and his watch. As curfew passed, Harry stood up and rushed out the door. No sooner had he reached the bottom of the spiral staircase to their dormitory, than he saw Ron and Hermione coming in through the portrait hole. Both of them made their way quietly through the common room, Ron briefly passing his sister by with a quick goodnight when it looked like she wanted to talk.

Ron briskly nodded at Harry and passed him moving up the stairs with one final glance to Hermione who was climbing the stairs to the girls dormitory. Harry followed Ron up, but Ron was already climbing behind the curtains of his bed when Harry got to their room. Not knowing what else to do, Harry changed for bed, no longer needing to keep his shoulder hidden while doing so, and closed himself behind his own curtains for the night.

The rest of the weekend went about the same. Harry kept hoping that things would just fix themselves with his friends, but Ron was still silent, Hermione was still hyperactive, and Harry still didn’t know what to do about it. They spent most of the daytime in the unused club room, working on homework. When mealtimes came around, Harry would go to the Great Hall alone and bring back what he could.

It was Sunday when Harry realized that more than just that Ron seemed to have eyes only for Hermione, it seemed he had a hard time looking at Harry, when he wasn’t staring at him from the corner of his eye. Harry didn’t know if the constant worry on Ron’s face was leftover from his ordeal, or the knowledge that he was sharing a room with a werewolf. Harry had contemplated just leaving them to their own devices for a while, but the memory of his panic Friday night when he had been waiting for them kept him close.

It was making their way to Gryffindor Tower Sunday night before curfew that Harry encountered an irate Professor Snape.

“We had an appointment,” Professor Snape said.

Harry looked at him confused. Professor Snape just shook his head and motioned for Harry to follow him. He cast a glance back at his friends before following him, still not feeling comfortable letting them roam the halls alone.

Harry hadn’t seen Professor Snape all weekend. The professor had called an end to weekend lab time in favor of his assistants studying for their finals, and the man hadn’t been in the Great Hall when Harry had gone for meals.
Professor Snape led him to an alcove, reaching into his robes, he pulled out a phial of the Sang Olaes potion. “I do not have time to come chase you down right now,” Professor Snape said.

“The dementors are gone though,” Harry said. “I just redid the spell, I don’t need the potion.”

Professor Snape sighed and the scowl disappeared to be replaced by a familiar blank face. Harry preferred the scowl.

“Your current condition may not interact well with the spell,” Professor Snape said. “I need you to stay in the habit of taking this.”

“Oh,” Harry said. He had been looking forward to not needing to down a fowl potion once a week. His new monthly potion was unlikely to taste any better.

“I will see you in class tomorrow,” Professor Snape said.

“Right,” Harry said. “See you.”

Professor Snape walked away.

The week before finals was busy and frantic enough that Harry could almost disregard how awkward things were with his friends, or how Professor Snape was cold and distant, and clearing his mind half the time he had to interact with Harry. It was easy enough to write off Hermione’s frenetic energy as pre finals nerves, or Ron’s as worry for his grades, yet it was as he was making his way to the Great Hall during dinner for a food run that he got cornered by Ginny Weasley.

“Is…is Ron alright?” Ginny asked. “And Hermione?” She was looking more at his stomach than his face, a blush upon her cheeks.

Harry didn’t know how to answer that. “Umm,” he said. “He’s just…”

“He won’t really talk to me,” Ginny said, her eyes now on the floor. “I don’t know what to do, and he’s always off somewhere.” The, ‘with you,’ was left unsaid.

“I don’t know,” Harry said. “He’s doing… alright? He’s getting on I guess. Staying busy. Hermione too.”

“Is there anything I can do?” Ginny asked.


“I’m not doing anything,” Ginny said.

“You keep trying,” Harry said. “That’s something.”

Ginny didn’t seem satisfied with that, but she let him go back to his task. He returned to the unused classroom ten minutes later with food.

“Ginny asked about you,” Harry said.

Ron looked up at Harry, surprised. Harry realized that perhaps he had been almost as silent in the
past week as Ron had been. He just never knew what to say.

“About me?” Ron asked.

“Both of you, actually,” Harry said.

“Oh,” Ron said, shrugging.

“Well everything’s fine,” said Hermione. “Did you make sure to get fruit? We can’t live off of steak and potatoes.” She switched topics. “Now, I think it’s safe to say that we’ve finally caught up with our lost time, but with finals in just a few days, we mustn’t slow down.”

Harry and Ron took it as a matter of course. Harry certainly hadn’t expected Hermione’s energy to be focused anywhere else.

Hermione started going over their remaining time before finals and what she thought their schedule should look like. Again. Ron slid Harry a scrap of paper across the table.

‘She talked to you, though?’ the note asked.

Harry swallowed and looked up at Ron, who was still looking at Hermione. Harry looked up at Hermione, not sure why he felt guilty for passing notes, but she was very engaged with herself discussing their schedule.

‘We just talked for a minute,’ Harry wrote.

‘Is she alright?’ Ron wrote.

Harry looked back up at Ron, trying to gauge what he was feeling. ‘Well yeah,’ he wrote back. ‘She’s just worried is all.’

Ron just nodded and turned his attention back to Hermione.

Harry tried to pay attention to Hermione, even though his world was falling apart. He had felt so worried when they had been taken; so guilty. Yet here they were, they were back, they were healed, they were safe, but it still felt like they were gone. Suddenly, an intense feeling of anger overcame him. It was intense and it was directionless and it was paralyzing. He was losing his friends, he was losing his father, he was losing his sanity. He wanted to scream, he wanted to rage, he wanted to cry, but he did none of that. He just sat there as Hermione talked on with nervous energy, and Ron focused on him from the corner of his eye.

As quickly as it had come, it went, the anger was gone leaving him feeling drained and just sad. He tried to focus, to tell himself that everything would be alright, but he just felt lost.

Harry was glad that quidditch was over for the year. Or rather, he was glad he didn't have to deal with group showers. Professor Lupin had been right about puberty catching up with him. Harry was starting to sprout hair everywhere, and he had no desire to start showing it off. It had been little more than a week since he had been bitten but already it felt like his body was in a race to catch up to some of his peers. His voice had cracked for the first time earlier that day while he had sat in class. He'd gotten a slap on the back from Dean, who'd been sitting next to him, even as his
own face had flushed red. Madame Pomfrey had said that these changes could happen as late as fourteen, but for Harry, living in a dorm, he had been feeling left behind by his year mates for a while. Not that he was eager for anything besides maybe growing taller.

There were worse things than a changing voice box or growing hair though. It had been a while since he had messed the bed, though this was new, and in spite of Madame Pomfrey's talk of 'it's perfectly normal,' it was mortifying to wake up in the morning to damp underwear. Still though, at least he had cleaning charms for that. He just hoped none of the other boys had heard him muttering the charm that morning. There weren't any cleaning charms for his thoughts though. School robes came in handy for when he was at risk for embarrassing himself in public during the day.

Harry had felt so humiliated that morning when he had woken up in a mess, regardless that he was the only witness to the event. For all that he could recall the number of times Madame Pomfrey had said, 'it's perfectly normal,' he could still hear his uncle's voice, 'freak,' and his aunt's voice, 'disgusting,' playing in his head whenever he thought of some of his recent changes and thoughts and feelings. His aunt and uncle had used the same words to describe 'deviants' and 'perverts' as they'd watch the evening news while Dudley was asleep and Harry was in his cupboard. It had confused Harry at the time why they had used the same words to describe him.

Harry didn't want to be going through these changes. He looked at himself in the mirror. He didn't look any taller, he didn't think. Was his Adam's apple bigger? Other things? He was pretty sure all this stuff was supposed to happen gradually, but it felt like puberty was hitting him like a freight train.

Were these mood swings he'd been feeling? Or was he just still reacting to the events of the full moon? What about those new instincts and impulses that came along with being a werewolf? It was all getting jumbled up. He had so many questions and he wished he had paid more attention to the talk Madame Pomfrey had given rather than trying to melt into the floor.

Harry remembered Ron's offer from earlier in the year, if Harry ever had questions about body stuff. He couldn't ask Ron though. Not while Ron could barely look him in the eye, much less hold a proper conversation. Not when Harry doubted he could talk about these things to his best friend while he had these new invasive thoughts and feelings all the time. Not when a lot of his new thoughts and feelings centered around Ron.

It was probably just how worried Harry had been about Ron though. He was Harry's best friend, and dealing with all these new changes right after the kidnapping was probably just messing with his head. There was no way he could like Ron like that. That would be the end with Ron, Harry was sure, if Ron ever found out what was going through Harry's head. He could hear a few choice words in his head that Aunt Petunia or Uncle Vernon would use if they knew what Harry was feeling for his best friend. His thoughts were just jumbled up though; all these changes and all the stress. They were just intrusive thoughts. He just needed to think about something else.

Harry glanced around himself quickly. He already knew he was alone, but... He raised his arms and flexed them in the mirror. Were they bigger? Nope, still noodle arms. He resisted the urge to check in his pants.

All he really needed at that point was to thoroughly break out in acne and things would be perfectly horrible. At least people would be staring at his face for a different reason then.

Hermione had complained earlier about the food he was bringing from the great hall, but Harry had a hard time thinking about anything besides protein when it came to meal time. Was that his body fueling these 'changes,' or was that the wolf inside of him influencing his cravings?
His shoes had already been feeling a bit snug when he had been bitten, where they even tighter now? Harry wished he could just go to sleep for a few years and wake up when all this stuff was done changing. Maybe Voldemort would have finally loosed the mortal coil at that point too.

Harry left the bathroom. Ron was already behind his curtains. It really didn’t feel like ten o’clock on a Friday night. Defense Against the Dark Arts had been their last class before finals earlier that day and Harry didn’t know what he’d do tomorrow if he had to spend another day cooped up in their clubroom with everything feeling wrong.

He’d heard before that time healed all wounds, but that had never really felt like a truth. But things got better didn’t they? Things would go back to some manner of normal eventually, wouldn’t they? Ron and Hermione would start to feel better and then things would go back to normal. But what if Harry didn’t fit into normal anymore. He never really had in the first place.

Harry spent a lot of time worrying that night, long after Seamus, Neville, and Dean went to bed. Late enough to hear when Ron started tossing and turning and muttering in his sleep. Harry spent far too long wondering what he should do while he listened to Ron. Ron wouldn’t want Harry’s company to chase away bad dreams. Ron wouldn’t want a werewolf hovering over him as he came out of his terror. Harry couldn’t listen anymore though, so he got out of bed. He’d just wake him up and then leave him alone.

“Ron,” Harry hissed, gently shaking his shoulder. “Ron.”

Ron was very quick in shooting up in the dark and shoving Harry blindly.

“Get away,” Ron said, loudly scrambling out of his bed in the opposite direction. He looked terrified.

“It’s- it’s alright,” Harry said. He didn’t bother trying to quieten Ron who was scrambling around on the floor, trying to find his footing while being tangled up in his sheets.

The lights came on and heads poked out from behind curtains. Ron started blinking around looking owlish before he threw his sheets back onto his bed and stalked out towards the bathroom, mumbling, “Way to startle a guy awake in the middle of the night.”

Harry just stared after him, having no idea what he should do. The other boys were staring at him.


He rummaged around in his trunk for a moment and then got back into bed, drawing the curtains. He heard Ron eventually getting back into bed, long before Harry himself would try to get to sleep.

Harry got cornered by the twins that weekend, and then later by Percy; they were all worried about Ron. Lavender and Parvati both asked after Hermione, for all that they shared a room with her. Harry wondered if Hermione was as reclusive as Ron was in her own dormitory. He never had much to tell them, besides that they were all just focused on finals. Percy seemed to approve, though he still looked worried.

“Ginny bounced back rather quickly,” Percy had said, now seeming to try to reassure Harry. “He’ll
be back to himself in no time.”

“Yeah,” Harry had said, hoping very much that it was the truth.

But things still hadn’t gone back to normal. Harry had eventually had too much time cloistered in the clubroom. He’d gone to try and see if things were back to normal with Professor Snape. They weren’t. Professor Snape had begged off having too much to do to entertain Harry just then. Harry’s offer to help him in the lab had been rebuffed. Harry went and visited Hagrid for a while. He might have been imagining things, but he had thought that Fang had been particularly interested in sniffing him all over, like he was someone new.

But now they were in the middle of finals week, and Harry was blissfully distracted from troubles with his friends and his father and being a werewolf and being an adolescent and the hundred and one things that came along with that.

Monday started finals and Harry thought the first day had gone alright, the teapot he had turned into a tortoise had still had a flower pattern on its shell, but he was really glad to get tested on cheering charms later in the day. He had rather hoped it would have a bit more of an affect on Ron and Hermione though. Care of Magical Creatures had gone really well the following day, and Harry didn’t know if it was just getting out on the grounds or the host of magical animals he interacted with, but his own spirits were lifted by the time that final exam had ended. Ancient Runes was a bit stressful, and Harry kept working on the practical portion right up until the end of the exam, but he was confident he had passed.

Potions went alright that afternoon, for all that he was feeling very side tracked with worries about the professor at the front of the room. After that, he had an after dinner final which consisted of only himself and Professor Lupin, doing the fourth year final exam for Defense against the Dark Arts. Harry was confident by the end that he had aced the practical, though there were some technical questions on the written portion that he wasn’t sure about. Professor Lupin had congratulated him and wished him luck on the third year final that would be on Thursday. He’d had a bit of time after that to study with Ron and Hermione for History of Magic, and Herbology the next day.

Neither History nor Herbology were Harry’s strong points, but he muddled through, even though he had been dead on his feet after the midnight Astronomy exam the night before. Now, Harry, Ron, and Hermione were once more in the clubroom, studying for the last of their finals the next day. Hermione, Harry thought, seemed to be a bit better. She was in her element during finals.

“I got you two something,” Harry said nervously.

“What?” Hermione asked, looking up from her book. “You don’t need to get me anything.”

“I wanted to,” Harry said. “I thought, maybe it would help.”

“Help what?” Ron asked. He looked upset.

Harry faltered for a beat. “It’s just…” he began. “I wanted you to feel safe.”

“We do,” Hermione was quick to say. “You don’t need to worry about us, Harry. Everything’s great.”

“Right,” Harry said. “Sure, but I guess, I wanted to feel you were safe. Um, here, I owl ordered these last week. Just in case, you know, a back up.”

Harry held out two long thin boxes to Ron and Hermione.
“‘Just in case?’ These better not be back up wands,” Hermione said. “You are not allowed to spend that much on me.” She took the box, looking a bit surprised at the weight.

“Oh, they’re not,” Harry said. He wouldn't mention the cost, though it would probably be a bit apparent.

“Bit mental to buy someone a wand they’re probably not even matched with anyway,” Ron said, the longest sentence Harry had heard from him in a while. He took the box Harry held out to him with a frown.

“You used your uncle’s old wand,” Hermione said.

“A bunch to pick from though,” Ron mumbled, going red.

“Open them,” Harry said. Benjamin had really liked the one that Harry had given him as a gift for all the tutoring.

Hermione gasped as she took the lid off of her box, the short dagger clattered to the ground.

“What the hell,” Ron said, his face gone white.

“They’re just in case,” Harry said quickly. “Like if something happens to your wand, you’ll still have those. ‘They’re um, they’re a silver alloy.’

“What the fuck,” Ron said. His unopened box was tossed onto the table in front of him.

“I-I just wanted you to be safe,” Harry said, quickly. They were supposed to feel better. They were supposed to feel safer.


“I don’t understand,” Harry said, turning to Hermione who was staring off into space.

“We’ll just… we’ll just work on our Arithmancy,” Hermione said finally. She was shaking. “Let’s just focus on…” She started crying. Harry didn’t know what to do. They just sat there.

They didn’t see Ron again that night. Harry was feeling panicked. Only part of that was worrying about their relationship. An irrational part of him was scared that something was going to happen to Ron while he was alone. He felt like he had to be there, wherever his friend was. That night, Harry tossed and turned for a while, worrying about Ron and Hermione, about his father, about the upcoming moon and his life in general. Everything had been going so well and it had all changed so quickly. He felt overwhelmed. He alternated feeling angry and feeling sad. He was just about to rip the sheets off from over him and walk the halls till he could calm down when he felt his protection wash over him, his mother's love.

Harry hadn’t felt it since he had been bitten, and he had wondered if it was still there, but it was. He let the feeling wash over him as a small sigh left his lips, as if all of his worries had shrunk and been expelled through his mouth. He slept better that night than he had in a long while; better than he would for a time too.
The next day, Ron acted like nothing had happened by acting like Harry wasn’t there and Harry was exceptionally miserable for it. Harry was fairly distracted throughout the day but he was fairly certain he could have done the Defense final in his sleep, though he was pretty sure he barely scraped by in Arithmancy.

With the last of their finals done, and Harry now avoiding Ron and Hermione for the evening, he was left with the immediacy of his upcoming departure from Hogwarts. He was supposed to be going to live with Professor Snape, but Harry didn’t know where things stood now.

Harry was distinctly certain that his father did not like werewolves. Harry didn’t know how much Professor Snape’s sense of duty would affect matters. He didn’t know how much he wanted to just be another obligation for his father. He doubted Ron would be kidnapping him that summer though, and besides, Harry was now very much dependent on Professor Snape being a potions master. Harry did his level best not to freak out as he walked the halls late that night hidden under his invisibility cloak.

It had been inevitable, he supposed. Becoming a werewolf had just sped things up. He had hoped to have some time though. Some time to live in a home, with a father who cared about him. More than losing a home, Harry was losing his father. Some part of him had been tricked into hoping that it would work out. He’d grown horribly attached and now it was all going to disappear. Harry found a quiet corner of the castle to break down in.

Greyback was dead, but he was still taking as much as he could from Harry. Though Harry supposed he couldn’t complain. He had killed Greyback after all. Harry had thrown that glove into the common room fire. He hadn’t used the twins’ invention since the night of the full moon.

The last week of term dragged by. Final exams were reviewed, trunks were packed, and summer homework was assigned as teachers rushed to finish grading and tabulating report cards. The summer homework was a blessing since it gave Hermione something to do. The first few days after their last final had been an awkward torture. They worked together. Ron was still quiet but there was an undercurrent to it now. Anger? Hermione seemed less frenetic, but she had more periods where she would start crying, seemingly at random as far as Harry could tell. Ron was always next to her to offer comfort though.

As for Harry, he was starting to develop instincts. He now knew what people meant when they said that the hair on the back of their necks stood on end. He also had developed the strange urge to smell everything. He was doing alright resisting that one, for the most part. Of course there were other urges, not wolf specific, that were starting to plague Harry.

His shoes were definitely starting to get tight, and he was starting to think his hands were getting bigger also, though the hems of his robes seemed to be in the same spot so he was pretty certain he wasn’t growing vertically. Was it normal to grow different things at different times, or was that a werewolf thing. Were people going to look at his future giant hands and say, ‘ahah, you’re a werewolf?’

Harry found himself regularly feeling like he was moments away from that ‘ahah,’ moment. Any moment someone was going to notice his rapid decent into puberty, or his new food preferences, or he’d start sniffing around like a dog, and someone would know he was a werewolf. Or worse, someone was going to look at him and know what horrible thoughts were going through his head or that he had woken up with sticky sheets that morning. He’d die if they knew that he’d dreamed about the boy sleeping across the room from him.

Ostensibly he knew that those last things weren’t likely, though knowing that mind readers existed kept him occluding to the best of his ability. He thought it helped to keep certain thoughts out of
his head though. He was almost glad that his father ‘hadn’t had time,’ for Occlumency lessons this week. He did not need to deal with that.

Developing a keener sense of smell was, as Professor Lupin had put it, a bit of a curse, living as he did in a boys’ dormitory. He had long been hygiene minded, but he found himself paying more attention to detail in the shower, worried that he smelled just as bad to others. That was something that happened during puberty, he recalled. Was he sweating more?

He felt like the stress of everything was eating him up, but he felt bad when he abandoned Ron and Hermione, and some part of him couldn’t just turn to Ron and ask him if he wanted to go flying while Hermione read one of her books under the shade of a tree. Flying would feel so liberating just then.

Would he be able to fly over the summer? They’d never gone to look at those homes. Had Professor Snape given up on that when his son had been taken by lycanthropy? The closer the final day of school was, the more and more worried Harry became about his summer and his future. More than once, Harry thought about Professor Snape’s promise to never hurt him for punishment, and he wondered if that applied to werewolves.

Both Ron and Hermione got called to see Madame Pomfrey the day before term ended, though separately. Ron came back looking like he’d been in an argument. Hermione came back quiet. Harry remembered times growing up when something particularly horrible would happen. A severe punishment from his uncle, getting caught by Dudley’s gang when his cousin was really mad, a number of humiliating instances. He remembered feeling off for a bit afterwards. But he’d usually felt better after a while. That was all Harry had to go on now. The hope that they’d eventually bounce back, because he still had no idea how to make things better for them. He didn’t know how he could make things right. He didn’t know how to apologize for what his friends had gone through because of him. Once again, the thought passed through his head, ‘I’m glad he’s dead,’ thinking of Greyback, before he had to fight back horror at the thought.

He would do it again, to keep them safe, but he shouldn’t be off being happy about it. He shouldn’t be glad the guy was dead. He shouldn’t be happy that he was a killer. He couldn’t stop seeing the image of Greyback shudder and snarl in his death throes.

The night before they were all set to leave Hogwarts, Professor Lupin announced his retirement as a teacher to a great many groans from the student body. He had been inarguably the best defense professor they had ever had and his very early retirement to avoid the bizarre curse on their school felt about as unfair to Harry as everything else that had happened that month.

Hermione and Ron actually attended the leaving feast. Ginny sat next to Ron and quietly told him about her last two weeks of school while the twins and Percy sat opposite. The twins were rather quiet. Harry attributed the attendance to Hermione, who had been cheered up a bit by the final grades, which had been passed out that day. Ron just came, Harry thought, because that was where Hermione was. Hermione though, had somehow managed three hundred and twelve percent in her Muggle Studies class, as well as outstanding, if not dubious, grades in all of her other classes.

Ron and Harry had scraped together some rather respectable grades themselves, barring History of Magic, which Harry didn’t think should count. Ron stayed mostly quiet during the feast, though he did smile at a few things that his sister said, so Harry counted it as progress.
The house cup was awarded once more to Gryffindor. The quidditch cup had already put them in the lead, but the points Harry had gotten for finding Ron and Hermione had made the cup far out of reach for the other houses. Harry had gotten a lot of attention during the feast for the victory. The official events of the night of the full moon had of course spread throughout the school, and Harry thought that his recent seclusion probably had just fueled the rumor mill.

That night marked another departure from the norm when Ron had to stay up in the dorm packing his trunk for the next day. The other boys, who were mostly packed already, tried not to act like it was now unusual for Ron to be up and about in the dorm, but Harry could tell they wanted to ask questions.

That night Harry stayed up late worrying about his summer.

Everything had gone to shit. They were about an hour away from Kings Cross Station and they’d barely said anything to each other outside of the occasional data dump from Hermione on random topics. Was this it? They were about to part ways, and they still couldn’t talk to each other. Things would never be fixed. Harry knew that things were probably beyond repair with Professor Snape, but he’d held out hope that there was something still there with his friends. They hadn’t asked him to go. They hadn’t told him it would never be the same again. Yet, Harry was certain that if they got off the train without fixing things then that would be it.

The least he could do was apologize. He looked over at Ron, who had been looking very worried the whole trip, occasionally looking at Harry with a sick look on his face. Ron looked up at him and their eyes caught. Ron opened his mouth, the sick and worried look on his face scrunching up in a bit of determination.

“I’m sorry,” Harry said quickly, just as Ron was about to say whatever it was he had been about to say.

Ron stared at him like he had grown a second head. “What?” he asked.

“I’m sorry,” Harry said again. “To the both of you. I’m so sorry this all happened. I know you’ve probably figured that I’m dangerous as hell to be around. I know I’m not worth all… this, and I understand if you can’t be my friends anymore. I mean, you’ve been the best friends I could have hoped to have. I never could have hoped to have friends like you, but I can’t expect you to stay. I’ve been selfish. I know you can barely stand to be around me now, and I get it, but I just needed to know you were safe.”

Ron didn’t say anything, neither did Hermione, though she threw her arms around Harry and buried her face in his neck. She didn’t make a sound but Harry could tell that she was crying. It also didn’t feel like she was going to be letting go anytime soon. Harry looked down at the floor and tried to control his breathing.

“It’s been difficult,” Ron said. Harry looked up at him, ashamed.

“I’m sorry,” Harry said.

“Stop saying that,” Ron said. “You don’t get to say that to me; ever again. They were going to kill us. We were so close. They were going to kill us and then you came. They wanted to do worse to you, but you came and you got us. I couldn’t do anything. I got you bitten. You got bitten for
coming to save us.

“Sometimes I wonder when you’re going to realize that I’m holding you back. That you could do better than me for a sidekick. I let us get kidnapped, and then you had to come and get us. I couldn’t protect Hermione and I couldn’t protect myself, and you had to come and get me.”

“But you did protect me,” Hermione said. She had let go of Harry and latched onto Ron’s robes. “They hurt you so much because you were yelling at them every time they so much as looked at me.”

“They still hurt you though,” Ron said.

“It could have been worse,” Hermione said.

“You’re my best friend, and you’ve always been there for me,” Harry said. “I couldn’t possibly do any better.”

Ron thought that over for a moment. “I don’t think I’m up for any more adventures.”

“That’s fine,” Harry said. “No more adventures, just regular stuff” he brazenly lied. “How ‘bout a game of chess?”

Ron thought on that. “Sounds good to me,” Ron said.

They played in silence for a while, a comfortable silence. Harry broke it to ask tentatively, “Can I ask a question?”

Ron seemed to think about it for a bit before nodding.

“Why did you react like that about the daggers?” Harry asked.

“Mate, it’s pretty messed up giving your friends silver daggers when you’re a… a werewolf,” Ron said. “Just so you know. Next time you give me anything silver I’m giving it straight to Malfoy. Don’t buy Malfoy gifts Potter, it’ll go to his head.”

“Oh, yeah, I guess,” Harry said. “But you didn’t like it before you knew they were silver.”

Ron was silent again.

“Yeah, well, like I said. Things’ve been difficult,” Ron said. “I feel like, there’s so much I want to scream about, but most of the time I can’t even make myself open my mouth, and I’ve been feeling real bad about you getting bitten, but then I was also feeling bad about getting caught like that so when you gave me the dagger… It sort of felt like you were saying, ‘no excuses next time.’ I don’t know. I’ve just been angry a lot lately and, well, I don’t know. It was just an ugly reminder I guess.”

The train started slowing down as they approached the station.

“Are you going to be alright?” Harry asked, looking between Ron and Hermione.

“I dunno,” Ron said, with a shrug. “Hope so.” He turned to Hermione.

“I just need some time,” Hermione said. “Just make sure to write.”

“Sure thing,” Harry said.
“Don’t forget you’ve got a floo connection now,” Ron said to Harry.

“I won’t,” Harry said. The train came to a stop. “If you two need anything, you’ve got it, you know.”

“Just take care of yourself,” Hermione said. “And let me know if you have any ideas for next years project.”

He knew she’d want him to do another.

They started gathering their belongings. They were going to get off the train, and Harry didn’t know what was going to happen next. He didn't want to see Ron and Hermione go their separate ways. He didn't want to have to wonder if they were safe. He comforted himself with the knowledge that he could see them throughout the summer.

Stepping off the train felt like stepping into a new life.

“I shouldn't have to tell you that I’m in the middle of a large amount of paperwork right now,” Amelia said when she answered his summons.

“You do not, but I did think that you would find this a suitable reason to pull you away,” Albus said. “I believe it is time to go off script.”

Amelia certainly seemed to be stopped in her tracks. She took the time to sit down and pour herself some tea before she spoke.

“You couldn’t have decided that before your students were kidnapped?” Amelia asked.

“Matters were on course at that point,” Albus said. “Or so I thought. Suffice it to say that it is now impossible to get us back to where we need to be. Yet now we have been presented an opportunity.”

“Do you know where he is?” Amelia asked. “I can organize a strike right now. We can do it tonight. We can end the war tonight Albus.”

“I do not know where he is now, Amelia,” Albus said. “But I know where he will be in a little under a year.”

“If we’re off course, then how can you know what is going to happen? Where he’ll be in a year? He could be anywhere in a year?” Amelia asked.

“It is matters inside the castle that have been derailed,” Albus said. “Outside, everything is still going as it should. Voldemort has limited means by which to return. It will keep him more or less predictable.”

“So we wait until he is on the cusp of returning to his former power to pounce?” Amelia asked.

“Oh, you may certainly pounce on the appointed hour, my dear,” Albus said. “But Harry will be responsible for Voldemort.”

“You still intend to use Harry Potter?” Amelia asked. “He is fourteen Albus. I was skeptical when
you said he would face that monster at seventeen. Moral implications aside, what hope does he have against Him?”

“Harry was never meant to fight Voldemort,” Albus said. “Voldemort has always been the master of his own undoing and that will not change. But yes, Harry will face him.”

“So much for his choice,” Amelia said.

“Oh, he will have a choice,” Albus said. “That has always been very important for the magic. He has always fought for the ones he loves. I will give him that choice. That I know what he will say does not mean it is not his to make.”

“If we are going off script then I will be involved from now on,” Amelia said. “I won’t hide behind you while you make these decisions. If the child is to be a part of this operation then I want to meet him. For both our sakes, I certainly hope he can keep a secret.”

“A lot will rest on his ability to do so,” Albus said. “Though I understand he has a great deal of experience doing just that.”

The village had been evacuated decades past. Some muggle disaster. Yet there were some who remained. All elderly, mostly women, they wouldn’t leave their homes. He watched the few muggle women moving back and forth from the forest; they were bringing back aspen tree bark, a rarely used potions ingredient. It was the look in their eyes that let him know he was in the right place. He’d seen it often enough in the mirror the past many years. He drew his wand. He didn’t know what sort of reception he would receive. He walked cautiously into the small village, the few muggles who passed by ignored him.

“Insepia,” a familiar voice cried out behind him.

He threw up a shield and turned, sending a blasting hex into the ground to kick up enough dirt to cover his next move. He ducked behind a post box and tried to see where she was.

“You used to be better than that Bella,” he called out.

“Barty?” Belatrix asked, poking around a building. “Aren’t you supposed to be dead?”

“Surely you supposed to be in Azkaban?” Barty Crouch Junior asked.

Chapter End Notes

Thanks for reading. I hope you enjoyed. I normally recommend fanfics at the end of these chapters, but I haven't read anything big lately. I've read a lot of Miraculous Ladybug fanfic though. Love the fandom, the show is an acquired taste, like camembert. I can also recommend Gravity Falls, which just came out on Hulu. It's super fun.

I did want to address the amount of rather depressing story line that I've been writing. I've realized I've written a heavily depressing story and that was never my intention. (I just can't help myself). Things are going to be bad for a bit, I'm not going to go retconing a bunch of stuff, but I am going to work on making things more positive. Not this chapter though. Really really not this chapter.
Anyway, please send me a note to let me know what you think of the story.
The cottage was picturesque. Harry rather thought that magic might be involved. They were out in the countryside. Harry didn't even know where. He hadn't really talked to Professor Snape about their living arrangements since before Ron and Hermione had been taken. He was rather certain they weren't in Cokesworth, so this wasn't the home Professor Snape had grown up in.

The cottage sat at the edge of a small meadow and the surrounding forest looked to stretch on in all directions for miles. Only a small footpath that wound it's way through the meadow and into the woods even hinted that there was a town anywhere near them. The cottage stood two stories tall and looked as though it had been standing there since the previous century, though it was obviously well kept up. Surrounding the house was turned earth, clearly ready for something to be planted. Beyond that was grass and wildflowers. Besides the cottage stood a well. Not a hand pump, but an actual well with a stone base and a bucket on a pulley. Harry though the whole place looked great, but if that was the only source of water he would be pretty put out. Not that he had any room to complain, of course.

"So… so is this Somerset?" Harry asked.

"Yes," Professor Snape said. "The headmaster finalized matters for me. Let's get settled, shall we."

"Right," Harry said. He reached for the door handle. The house wasn't locked and the door opened for him. He pulled his trunk along with him, being careful with the baseboards. Everything looked old fashioned, though clean and in good working order. They were in the kitchen. Harry was glad to see an ice box similar to what he had seen at the Weasley's, as well as other magical appliances. It was indeed a magical house and glancing over, Harry was happy to see that there was a sink with a tap. Perhaps the well was just decorative. Though he'd reserve judgement until he'd seen the loo. He'd rather not use a chamber pot or any such. The ancient look was definitely nice, but he didn't want to live like it was the eighteen hundreds.

They walked through the house in relative silence. The door let them into the kitchen and from first sight, it was obvious the house was larger on the inside than the outside. Next to the kitchen was a sitting room. There was a fireplace that looked like it used to be used for cooking. The way the furniture was set up, it was as though the fireplace was the center of the room, much like a television in a muggle home. The sitting room had a staircase up to the second floor and two doors. One led to an office that was set up as a potions lab and was definitely a lot bigger than the dimensions of the house would suggest. It already looked like Professor Snape had been using it. The other door led to the cellar, which was earthy and barren. Upstairs were two bedrooms, and thankfully, two bathrooms. Even better, they had fully modern plumbing. One of the bedrooms had already been set up and clearly belonged to Professor Snape. The other one was Harry's, and besides some standard furniture and a mirror, it was rather barren.

"Color preference?" Professor Snape asked.
"What?" Harry asked.

"For the walls," Professor Snape said.

"Oh," Harry said. "Um, blue?"

Professor Snape held out a piece of paper with a bunch of blue squares on it. They were all different shades. Were they going to paint his room? That would be a family like thing to do. Harry looked at the paper, and picked one at random. Professor Snape nodded and peeled the square off. It was a sticker. He smacked it against the wall and just like that, his walls were blue.

"Oh," Harry said. "That's handy."

"Indeed," Professor Snape said. "You should unpack your trunk and get settled. Dinner will be at six."

"Right," Harry said. Determinedly looking his father in the eyes. He had been worried what he would see there since he had gotten off of the train. He looked tired. He was also obviously lightly occluding.

"I will be in my office," Professor Snape said. "If you have time, you can go flying. Just stay below the tree tops, and stay out of the woods."

"Okay," Harry said. "I'll be good. I promise."

"I'm sure you will be," Professor Snape said, and walked away.

Harry watched him go. He wanted to call him back. His father gone though, Harry gave in to the urge he'd had since they had arrived and started sniffing around at everything new. He stopped after a bit feeling fairly embarrassed for himself.

His new room was actually smaller than Dudley's second bedroom at Privet Drive, but even now, it already felt more personal than anything he'd ever had at the Dursleys. He wondered if Ron and Hermione were home yet. Ron should be, Harry hoped. It was Hermione Harry was really worried about. She had to travel home the muggle way. What if something happened en route? She was practically all alone. Her parents were muggles, what could they do if something happened? He should have gotten Hermione's phone number. Did the cottage have a phone?

"Right," Harry said to himself. "Unpacking." His first task and only distraction for the time being.

Harry set Hedwig's cage in a corner before letting her out. He opened the window for her, but she started investigating her new surroundings, much like Harry had done moments before.

Harry set about putting his few changes of muggle clothes into the dresser and he hung his robes in the closet. He doffed the school robes that he was wearing and got himself down to just his slacks and his button down shirt. He paused there before pulling out his school books. He propped them up on top of his dresser. He wasn't sure what the rules were here, but he was pretty sure he was good to leave his magic stuff out. He grabbed his broom next and propped it up in the corner. That looked good. There was something satisfying about that scene, like he was saying, 'yes, this is my room right here, can't you tell?' However much longer it would be his room though, he didn't know.

There wasn't much else he needed to unpack. He took his photo album out and placed it next to his school books.
The next thing that caught his eye was the letter from his mom and dad sitting in his trunk. It had been a while since he had read the stories that had been sent to him. With how things were going he could do with some time to enjoy them. He looked at his watch and frowned. If he was going to have dinner ready by six he was going to have to get started soon. He put away a few more things and went down stairs. He had helped Mrs. Weasley out in the kitchen a couple summers prior and he was pretty confident he could manage the magical appliances. He took a few minutes getting familiar with the kitchen. There wasn't a terrible lot by way of ingredients in the kitchen. There were a couple of small crates in the corner that Harry didn't think he could open without magic or a pry bar; he left those alone.

Harry pulled out some chicken and in the absence of a mallet, flattened it with a frying pan. He pan fried it quickly before he set it aside and put some tomato sauce in a pan and set that to heat before putting some water on to boil. He'd forgotten how fast things were in a magical kitchen though and the next thing he knew, he could smell the sauce and the water was roiling. He frowned. Was it okay for dinner to be early? Was six o’clock like a time limit; no later than, or on the dot? What were the rules? Maybe he should put things on hold. He added the pasta to the water along with some salt. Maybe if he was early, it would show Professor Snape that he was a hard worker.

He set the table while the pasta cooked, though that was rather quick too. All told, by the time he was done, it was five forty five and he was ready to serve dinner. Should he get Professor Snape? He walked into the sitting room and eyed the door to Professor Snape's office. He bit his lip, indecision gripping him. In the end though, he couldn't go wrong being on time. He put the pasta on plates stuck the chicken on top of that with the sauce going on last. He stuck them in the oven and set it to a holding temperature. He had time now. Should he start on the garden? No, the kitchen was a mess. He started cleaning. The garden could wait till later.

Harry kept an eye on his watch. At six o’ clock on the dot, he knocked on the door to the office and stuck his head in. Professor Snape looked up from his work. He looked upset at first, but then the usual blank look came over his face.

"Um, it's six o’ clock," Harry said. "Time for dinner."

"Yes, of course," Professor Snape said. "I'll be right there."

"Right," Harry said. He ran into the kitchen and got the plates out of the oven and set them on the table. Professor Snape walked in.

"Ah," He said. "You found dinner. Good, good, shall we?"

He was pleased. Harry almost sighed out loud. He sat down at the table after Professor Snape and began eating. He let some time pass. Professor Snape seemed to be eating quickly. Was he terribly hungry? Had Harry made enough? Maybe he shouldn't have served himself so much. He'd just been so much hungrier lately. Professor Snape didn't look put out though.

"Do you, maybe, want to play some chess or something after dinner?" Harry asked.

"Ah," Professor Snape said. "I'm afraid that now is not a good time. I am working on a time sensitive project right now. I'm going to be rather busy for a time."

"Oh," Harry said. "That's alright. I'll just go outside or something."

"Don't go flying after dark," Professor Snape said.

"I won't," Harry said. "This isn't the project we were doing during the year is it?"
"No," Professor Snape said. "We will likely continue that next school year. I'm working on a project for a client."

"A client?" Harry asked.

"Potions masters are often commissioned to solve problems," Professor Snape said. "The summer is a good time for me to take clients."

"Right," Harry said. "Okay."

They ate in silence for a while and before Harry was half way finished with his plate, Professor Snape was already getting up.

"I'll take care of the dishes," Harry said quickly.

"Thank you," Professor Snape said.

Harry cleaned up. Was there anything else he should be doing? He remembered the plot of tilled earth in front of the cottage. Maybe he was supposed to take care of that. Harry went outside. He looked around but he couldn't find anything to plant or anything to garden with. Maybe he should work on his summer homework. He went inside.

Harry threw a pinch of powder into the fire and walked into the green flames.

"The Burrow," Harry said as loudly and as clearly as he could while green flames danced around him. He was spun around and his world became a kaleidoscope of flashes of flame and people's worlds beyond. The whole event was an assault on his heightened senses, which seemed to be getting more and more sensitive as time went on since he had been bitten. He tumbled out the other end at the Weasley's home.

"Harry," a twin said while Harry picked himself up off the floor. "Just who we've been waiting to see."

"We've got some new inventions we've been wanting you to try out on your relatives," the other twin said, helping him up and thumping him on the back.

Harry took a moment to orient himself. His head was still spinning. The burrow hadn't changed much; but part of him felt like it was something new that needed to be investigated. He resisted the urge to start nosing around the room. He most definitely resisted the urge to do the same to the twins. This close to the full moon, Harry felt like he was being overwhelmed, though he hadn't yet felt like he couldn't deal with it. Professor Lupin had said he would get used to it.

"What about your last invention?" Harry asked without thinking. He tried not to think of the twins invention. There was too much caught up in that for him. He pushed the image of Greyback's dying throes out of his mind.

"Madame Tooling's got the prototypes in some sort of rigorous safety testing regiment," Fred said.

"Don't know why she doesn't just give them to some kids to try out," George said, grinning at Harry.

"Besides," Fred said. "As awesome as that is, I think we're pretty young to be resting on our laurels."
"There's great things in front of us," George said.

"We can't abandon the world to wallow in misery," Fred said.

"We have to be the future," George said.

"Why now, where would we be without a good gag?" Fred said.

"Completely unrelated matter, but can I interest you in a cream puff?" George asked, pulling the confection out from nowhere.

"No," Harry said. "I think I'm good. Just ate breakfast actually." Though he was still hungry. "Is Ron around?"

"He hasn't so much been around as he's been up in his room," Fred said.

"Oh," Harry said. He'd been hoping a change in scenery would be good for Ron. Although it had only been a couple of days.

"I'm sure he'll be happy to see you, though," George said.

"Right," Harry said. "See you."

Harry made his way up the Burrow's winding and narrow stair cases to the top where Ron's room was. The door was closed, so Harry knocked.

A moment later the door was opened by an angry looking Ron who looked like he was about to say something but closed his mouth when he took in who was at his door.

"Oh, hey," Ron said.

"Hey," Harry said, smiling tentatively. It was really good to see Ron. He'd been worrying a lot about his friends during the three days since school had ended. Though now that he could see Ron, he had new things to worry about, since Ron had dark circles under his eyes and if there was one word to describe him at the moment, it would be, disheveled.

"Uh, come in then," Ron said. He stood to the side and Harry walked into the room. It looked much like it had when Harry had seen it last, if a little messier.

"Everything alright?" Harry asked. "You looked a little…"

"Oh, yeah," Ron said, looking down and rubbing the back of his neck. "It's nothing, I've just been arguing with my parents. They want me to… It doesn't matter. Thought mum was trying to lure me downstairs again so she could talk at me some more. Your floo's working I see."

"Yeah," Harry said. "It's nice to be able to go wherever, you know? I figured I could visit Hermione too. Though I'd have to figure how to transit to her place from the Leaky Cauldron."

Ron nodded and asked, "so where are you living?"

"Somerset," Harry said. "It's really nice, though it's good we've got a floo, 'cause I'm pretty sure we're in the middle of nowhere. Like no neighbors or anything."

"That's not too far away," Ron said. "You could probably fly here in less than half an hour. Middle of nowhere, huh, does that mean you can fly as much as you want."
"For the most part," Harry said. "I should bring my broom next time, we haven't flown together in a while."

"Well if you don't mind using an older broom you could borrow one of the twins'," Ron said.

"That should be fun," Harry said.

Ron got surprisingly little resistance from the twins while borrowing their brooms. They passed Mrs. Weasley on the way out the door. Harry felt incredibly guilty when he saw her.

"Oh, Harry," Mrs. Weasley said when she saw him. "So good to see you. The twins said you flooed in. Did the Ministry attach you to the network?"

"Oh, no," Harry said. Mrs. Weasley didn't know he wasn't living at the Dursleys. "I took transit to London and flooed from there." He felt so awkward being around her.

"Oh, you poor dear, you must have been traveling all morning," Mrs. Weasley said. "Sit down, sit down, I've got biscuits and lemonade."

"Mum, we're going flying," Ron said.

"It'll only take a moment," Mrs. Weasley said. "Come now, everything's already ready."

Harry looked torn between the two Weasleys and he got the idea that there were some undercurrents here he really wasn't deciphering.

"Um, maybe we could take some biscuits to go," Harry said.

"Of course dear," Mrs. Weasley said. "Of course, take as many as you like." She held out a tin of biscuits. Harry took two, both to appease her and, well, experience had told him that they'd be really good. "You too Ronnie."

Ron groaned and walked out. Harry watched him walk out with a frown. He looked back at Mrs. Weasley who looked very worried.

"Thank you for the biscuits Mrs. Weasley," Harry said, going after him.

"Come back for more if you'd like," Mrs. Weasley said.

Ron didn't say anything when Harry got outside and they just started flying. They didn't play any game, they just flew. Ron started out flying rather impulsively and daringly, and Harry was happy to follow suite, but before long they slowed down till they were just floating lazily about the property. Whatever anger Ron had been carrying when they had gone out seemed to have been expended and now he just looked drained. If brooms were a bit more comfortable, Harry was pretty sure Ron would be sleeping mid-air.

"Anything you want to talk about?" Harry asked. 'Anything I can fix?' he thought.

"Don't worry about it," Ron said. "How're things at home."

"They're good," Harry said. He wasn't going to tell Ron that Professor Snape could barely stand to be in the same room as a werewolf for more than a few minutes. He wasn't going to tell him how much effort he had put in to show him that he could still be a good son that had gone completely unnoticed.

Harry started flying in a vortex formation.
"So what do you even do together?" Ron asked. "What's he like when he isn't at school."

"Oh," Harry said, pulling up short. "Not much difference. I don't know. He's been pretty busy doing work for a client."

"But he's, like, spending time with you, right?" Ron asked.

"Yeah," Harry lied, going back to his circles.

Ron frowned at him. "We talked about this," he said angrily.

"What?" Harry asked.

"Nothing," Ron muttered.

"Did you talk to Professor Snape?" Harry asked. "About me?"

"Yeah," Ron admitted. "And that's it right there. You're calling him Professor Snape again. You'd been referring to him as your dad for a bit back before."

"I call him lots of things," Harry said. "What did you talk to him about?"

"Just making sure he knew not to mess things up," Ron said.

Harry groaned. He was trying to make sure Professor Snape didn't think of him as a needy burden on his life.

"Everything's fine," Harry said. "He's just really busy right now. Things'll go back to normal soon enough." Anything was possible, but usually that line was used to explain the more messed up things in Harry's life.

"Well you let me know if things aren't working out," Ron said.

"Yeah," Harry lied. He knew things weren't going to work out, but he also knew he was stuck.

"Have you heard from Hermione?" Ron asked.

"No," Harry said. "I sent Hedwig off with a letter last night, I'll probably have a response tonight."

"Errol's been out since I got back," Ron said. "Percy's been using him and Hermes to finalize job stuff. He's probably got a spot at the Ministry."

"Do you have Hermione's phone number?" Harry asked.

"Oh," Ron said. "I never think about that thing. I think Ginny uses it now and then to talk to this muggleborn girl from Ravenclaw. I think I wrote her number down when I got yours. I didn't try it again after I tried calling you that one time. I'll stick my head into a fire any day, thank you very much. Do you want to try it out?"

"Sure," Harry said. He knew how to use one, of course, though he had never had occasion to use the one at the Dursleys. Who would he have called?

"Window," Ron said.

They flew up to Ron's bedroom window and climbed through. Harry wasn't sure if Ron was feeling blasé or if he was just very dedicated to avoiding his mother at that moment. It took a while of
sifting through a rather large amount of scratch paper and notes that Ron had accumulated before they found the phone number.

Harry and Ron went out the window and flew to Mr. Weasley's shed where lived all muggle contraptions that the Weasleys owned. Harry wasn't surprised to find that it was a bit dated, but he was pretty confident he could use a rotary. He started dialing the numbers a bit nervously. Hermione would probably prefer to talk to Ron, actually, but Harry supposed she probably didn't want to be shouted at. Ron would cotton on though. He just needed to see it work for Harry.

The phone started to ring.

"Granger residence," a voice he vaguely remembered as belonging to Hermione's mother came on the line.

"Um," Harry said, having completely disregarded the possibility that someone other than Hermione would pick up the phone. "Hi. Mrs. Granger? My name's Harry. I'm a friend of Hermione's from school.

"Oh, Harry, hello," Mrs. Granger said. "And here I thought you all just used owls."

"Oh, yeah," Harry said. "Sometimes the muggle way's faster I suppose. Is Hermione home?"

"I'm afraid she's out with her father," Mrs. Granger said. "Did you want to leave a message?"

"Oh, I'll call back later, when I can," Harry said, not really sure what was a proper way to end a phone call. "Thank you, good bye."

"Wait," Mrs. Granger said with a bit of urgency. "Before you go, I wanted to…"

"Mrs. Granger?" Harry asked.

"Did something happen at school?" Mrs. Granger asked.


"Of course," Mrs. Granger said. Harry thought that the both of them knew the other was lying.

"Okay, yeah," Harry said. "Um, Hermione got the best marks in our year, did she show you?"

"Of course," Mrs. Granger said. "We're very proud."

"Right," Harry said. There was a pause on the line. "Have a good afternoon Mrs. Granger."

"You too Harry," Mrs. Granger said.

Harry hung up the phone. That had been weird and awkward.

"What happened?" Ron asked.

"She wasn't home," Harry said. "That was her mom."

"Oh," said Ron.

"I don't think Hermione told her parents about what happened," Harry said. "Her mom asked me if anything had happened at school."
"She'd said she wouldn't," Ron said. "I wish my parents didn't know."

"Are they treating you… different?" Harry asked, worried.

"Of course they are," Ron said. "They're all acting like I'm going to break, or like I'm already broken. Merlin's beard, I yelled at my mom yesterday and I didn't even get any flack for it. Everyone just got quiet."

"Why'd you yell at her?" Harry asked.

"Well she's either smothering me or we're arguing about… it doesn't matter what," Ron said. "I just get angry real easy now. Everything's different now."

Harry hadn't quite gotten used to how quickly his temper could flare lately. Maybe it was a good thing his father was gone all the time, or else he might be yelling at his dad and he really really didn't think that would end well.

"Harry," Ron said, he looked worried and miserable. "Do you think of me differently now?"

Harry's eyes shot to Ron nervously. "What?" was all he could think to say. What had given him away? What was Ron going to think if he figured it out. The stupid thoughts hadn't gone away. He had hoped a bit of time apart might have changed his new feelings, but they'd only come more and more to the forefront of his mind.

"I figured," Ron started. "Well you know, after I got captured and hurt and I couldn't escape. I told you I didn't want any more adventures, and I don't, not ever. But I'm still with you, no matter what. Wherever that takes me. But if I can't be… strong, like you. Is that going to change things?"

Harry shook his head. "I told you; no more adventures," he said. "I just got lucky, I got real lucky, that's why he didn't catch me the first time. He should have caught me. I don't think less of you for getting caught like that. You can't win everything. I don't think less of you, I'm just worried about you, 'cause I know that it's hard to get hurt like that by someone. Do you think less of me for getting beat up by Eckleson?"

"No," Ron said. "Of course not."

"Yeah, well, same thing I guess," Harry said.

"Yeah," Ron said, looking down. "Same thing." There was a silence for a moment before Ron took a deep breath in and let it out. "Come on, let's get some biscuits."

They started walking back to the house, broomsticks slung over their shoulders.

"You going to shave that anytime soon?" Ron asked, pointing to Harry's chin. "I don't think you've got enough to grow anything yet."

Harry blushed. "Hey, you're looking a bit scruffy too," he said and started rubbing a hand over his jaw. "I think they started sprouting a few days ago. I'm pretty sure I know the spell to get rid of it, but, you know, no magic."

Seamus had been the first in the dormitory to start showing facial hair a bit over a year ago, followed soon by Ron. They'd both gone and tried to grow it out before realizing it wasn't going to amount to anything anytime soon.

"Have your dad do it," Ron said. "Or you can learn to shave the muggle way. Snape should teach
Harry looked down. "He's really busy right now, maybe in a bit."

Ron sighed, and Harry was worried that they were going to talk about his home life again. Instead Ron perked up and said. "I could teach you. It's easy, really."

"I guess I should learn," Harry said, shrugging.

They walked back into the Burrow where Mrs. Weasley was still in the kitchen, making sandwiches for lunch.

"How was flying?" Mrs. Weasley asked. She went to the cupboard to fetch two glasses and both boys were soon presented with glasses of lemonade.

"It was great," Harry said. "Sure can't do that in Surrey."

"Well don't you boys go too far, lunch is about five minutes away," she said. "Or did you want to take these to your room?"

"Here's fine mum," Ron said. "Thanks." He rather abruptly gave her a hug before grabbing Harry's sleeve and leading him to the sitting room where the twins were playing a game that involved throwing exploding snap cards into a hat and then at each other if the other missed.

They watched the twins play for a bit, and Harry was pretty sure the twins started to ham up the game when the two of them started watching. Lunch started soon after, and though no one said anything about it, Harry got the impression that everyone was quietly happy that Ron had joined them.

Ron and Harry went upstairs after they ate; Mrs. Weasley sent them up with more biscuits which they dropped off in Ron's bedroom before heading to the washroom.

"Okay," Ron said. "Real easy, like I said, we'll do it together." He yanked his shirt off.

Harry felt his stomach plummet. He hadn't planned on being alone with a shirtless Ron in the small confines of the bathroom. Ron looked at him expectantly.

'Just focus on the task at hand,' Harry thought, still flummoxed and annoyed, wondering where these stupid feelings were coming from. He pulled his own shirt off as well. Ron was staring at him now.

"Uh, Hermione said it was on your shoulder," Ron said.

"What?" Harry asked.

"The- you know, the bite mark," Ron said.

"Oh," Harry said. "Yeah, Professor Snape gave me this potion, goop, stuff. It's sort of like a second skin. I've also got it on my hands also, so I can touch silver."

"Oh," Ron said, turning back to the sink. "That's cool. Right, so anyway, you need three things: a razor, shaving cream, and hot water. So first just splash your face with a bunch of hot water." Harry complied and followed Ron's instructions as he showed him step by step what to do. None of it was difficult and before long, they were both clean shaven. It felt oddly significant, like Harry was taking some big step in his life.
"One thing I'm not going to miss about living with the Dursleys," Harry said. "Not that there's anything I miss about living with the Dursleys, but it's great living in a magical house. I'll never have to wait for hot water or worry about it running out again."

"Yeah?" Ron said, opening the door. "I couldn't imagine doing my chores without any magic stuff."

"Oh," Harry said. "You have no idea. Cooking's super easy, the washing machine folds my laundry, there's like, this duster thing you just have to point at what needs dusting."

"We've only been back a couple of days," Ron said. "Laundry? Dusting? What gives."

"Oh," Harry said, blushing. "Um, you know, just trying out the new appliances."

He wasn't going to tell Ron that he had been trying to make the house perfect so Professor Snape would think that he was perfect; and he definitely wasn't going to tell him that he had needed to wash his own sheets that morning. One of many reasons why it was awful not being able to use magic over the summer and why this whole bullet train through puberty thing really just put the icing on the god awful werewolf cake.

"I think you're the only teenaged boy who's ever been excited by new appliances," Ron said.

"You try doing all the housework since you were little without magic," Harry said.

"Have I ever told you your family sucks?" Ron asked.

"It's been mentioned," Harry said. They settled in Ron's room and started munching on biscuits. "It's not like they asked for me though."

"Why you defend them, I'll never understand," Ron said.

Harry shrugged.

"You're not allowed to do that with Snape, yeah?" Ron said. "He might not have experience being a dad, but that doesn't mean you brush things off, you let him know or he's just going to think everything's alright."

"Everything is alright though," Harry said. "I knew things weren't great at the Dursley's"

"See," Ron said. "You're calling it 'not great,' I'm pretty sure your bar is set pretty low."

"The bar is fine," Harry said.

"I hope so," Ron said. He munched on a biscuit. "Are you ready for tomorrow?"

"You're keeping track?" Harry asked.

"Yeah," Ron said. "Aren't you?"

"Well yeah," Harry said. "I might not be looking forward to it, but I understand the need to stay on top of that stuff."

"And?" Ron asked.

"I dunno," Harry said. "I'll take the Wolfsbane Potion and then I'll transform and probably just sleep through the night. If I can. I'm just lucky I've got the potion. I guess it's pretty terrible if you
don't have it. Like if it can't hunt it'll attack itself and you wake up covered in all sorts of injuries."

"Did that other werewolf talk to you about it?" Ron asked.

"Other werewolf?" Harry asked.

"You know," Ron said, his face darkened. "The one who fought Greyback's crony."

"Oh," Harry said. "I didn't think you even knew. Almost no one does, and you were out of it at the time."

Ron shrugged. "I asked Hermione for the details afterwards. I figured you wouldn't want to talk about it."

"Oh," Harry said. "Well yeah. He was at the school, but he was on Wolfsbane so he came to help when he found out what was going on. I went and asked him a bunch of stuff afterwards, just trying to figure out what I had in store for me. I think he sort of sugar coated things, but he basically said the most important thing was keeping it a secret."

"Strange that there was that whole hullabaloo about you last year and there was an actual werewolf there the whole time going un-noticed," Ron said.

"I asked him about that a bit ago," Harry said. "He said people see what they expect to see, and all these things people expect werewolves to be like makes them not notice actual werewolves even when they're, like, you know, disappearing at the full moon and all that."

"Wait, 'a bit ago?'" Ron asked. "Like you knew before hand."

"Yeah," Harry said. "I sort of figured it out."

"I think Hermione did too," Ron said. "She didn't say who it was though. I guess I shouldn't have asked, but I also feel weird not knowing. I mean he helped save us. I can't thank him."

"You could write him a note," Harry said. "I could get it to him."

"Cool," Ron said. "I never thanked you either though. It was weird when I knew that you'd gotten bitten for coming to get us. It's... You didn't even mention you tackled him to keep him away from me."

"You were unconscious," Harry said, and he really didn't want to revisit the details. "I couldn't have left you there."

"Yeah, well, thanks," Ron said. "I'll try to make it worth it."

"It already is," Harry said.

Ron shook his head. "I owe you a Life Debt, Harry."

"What?" Harry asked, hearing the emphasis and knowing that Ron wasn't being hyperbolic. "What does that even mean. Scratch that. I don't care what that means. Because there isn't one. You don't owe me anything. I don't want you to owe me anything."

He had saved Ron because he couldn't imagine his life without him. Or rather, he didn't want to imagine his life without Ron. But he already second guessed every relationship in his life. He didn't need to add this to the tallies.
"That's deep old magic Harry," Ron said. "If Ginny had been a bit older at the time, she would have owed you one as well. Well, I mean, there's always regular indebtedness, but, you know, just not the magical sort. Don't worry about it. It just means I owe you one and the universe is going to hold me to it."

"Well I'm not collecting," Harry said.

Ron shrugged. "That's up to you, or maybe it's up to the universe, old magic is weird."

"Old magic can stay out of things," Harry said.

"Isn't that what's kept you safe from You-Know-Who?" Ron asked.

"Yeah, well," Harry huffed. He did not need to deal with this life debt malarky.

"I won't bring it up again, if that's what you want," Ron said. "We can pretend whatever. It doesn't have to mean anything if you don't want it to."

"Well we're officially going to act like it doesn't exist," Harry said.

Ron nodded.

"Are you alright?" Harry asked.

"I'm just tired," Ron said. He'd been growing more and more sedate during the conversation, like he had while they were flying. He looked like he was going to nod off.

"Have you been sleeping?" Harry asked.

"Sometimes," Ron said. "When I can't help it."

"What about dreamless sleep?" Harry asked.

"Can't," Ron said. "What if something happens?"

Harry knew that feeling; but Ron had something Harry didn't.

"I could read or something, if you want to sleep for a bit," Harry said. "I'll wake you if, you know, something happens."

"You don't have to," Ron said. "I know I'm being stupid."

Harry shrugged. "I'm really behind on 'Witch Broomstick,' I haven't read anything at all about the run up to the quidditch cup coming up."

Ron looked sorely tempted.

"I mean don't get me wrong," Harry said. "The zombie look is in, I heard, but I think if something did happen, you know, it'd probably be good if you weren't about to fall asleep on your feet."

"Yeah," Ron said reluctantly. "Just a quick nap then."

"Sure," Harry said.

Ron slept till Mrs. Weasley stuck her head in to announce that dinner would be soon. Harry looked at his watch. It was five forty five.
"I have to go," he told Ron, who was rubbing sleep out of his eyes.

"You could stay for dinner," Ron said.

"I'm having dinner with my dad," Harry said, making sure to use the familiar term for Ron's sake.

"Kay," Ron said. "Good luck tomorrow."

"Thanks," Harry said. "I'll see you."

He went down stairs running through his head what he could make for dinner in ten minutes. They were running out of food and Harry was going to have to go shopping soon.

"Good bye, Mrs. Weasley," Harry said.

"Oh, won't you stay for dinner," Mrs. Weasley said.

"I need to get back," Harry said. "Thank you for having me today."

"Any time, Harry," Mrs. Weasley said. "Come back soon."

"I will," Harry said.

Harry took out the small pouch of floo powder from his pocket and threw a pinch into the fireplace. "Diagon Alley," Harry said, entering the flames. He would have to make two trips. It wouldn't make sense to the Weasleys if they heard him calling out the alpha numeric designation of his new home.

Two stops later, Harry brushed himself off and headed to the kitchen.

Severus needed more time. The clock was running down and he still hadn't made any headway. He needed far too much time to even come close, never mind that he could have never had anything tested and ready in time. He was failing. He had failed. He had failed before he had started. This had at least been something he could have fixed, yet nothing was working. He had thought he could have at least made some headway. It was well past time that he admitted defeat, at least for now.

Severus exited his lab. He found Harry in the kitchen.

"Harry," Severus said. "I'm going out for a short while. We need to have a talk when I get back, so don't go anywhere."

"Oh," Harry said. He bit his lip. "Okay, I'll see you then."

Severus nodded and left, walking up to the fireplace.

"Pinegrove Den," he said as he stepped into the green flames. He was greeted on the other side by a rather bemused Remus Lupin.

"Severus," Lupin said. "What on earth are you doing here. Today."

Severus scowled. "I need your help."

Lupin paused, looking a bit bewildered. "Well, do sit down then. Tea?" He was always acting like they were acquaintances on friendly terms.
"No," Severus said. Taking a seat. "To be clear, I am not asking you to do me a favor. I am asking you to do this for Harry."

"Harry?" Lupin said. "What does he have to do with- whatever this is?"

"That is a secret you must not tell anyone," Severus said. "Future efforts against the Dark Lord rely on it."

Unease shone through the stoic expression on Lupin's face. "Who knows this secret?" he asked.

"The Headmaster, Minerva, Poppy, Mr. Weasley and Miss Granger," Severus said.

"Very well," Remus said. "Tell me."

"He is my son," Severus said.

"Come again," Lupin said.

"Lily became pregnant when we were fifteen with my child," Severus said. "She told no one and used a variant of the Draught of Living Death to place the child in stasis. She resumed the pregnancy during the war and Potter used some adoption ritual at Black's behest. She left a letter to be delivered to Harry when he turned thirteen explaining matters and Harry revealed himself to me during this past school year."

"That's... I don't know what to do with that," Lupin said.

"He is still Potter's kin," Severus said. "If you cannot help my son, you can help Potter's son."

"I'll help Harry," Lupin said. "For Harry's sake; and James's and Lily's and Sirius's sake as well. They all loved him. Me too. You don't need to convince me to help him Severus, he has my help."

Severus nodded his head, the only thanks he could muster.

"Harry cannot take Wolfsbane," Severus said. "He inherited hemophilia from me and there would be complications. You have lived without the potion for most of your life. I need you to prepare him as well as you can to go through his transformation tonight. Every trick or technique you've learned over the years. I know that a werewolf locked up during the full moon will sustain injuries, but I'm trying to make sure that Harry gets through this with as little harm as possible. What has helped you?"

Lupin's usual stoicism broke and he looked angry.

"Damnit Severus, the full moon is tonight and you're just telling me this now? I wish I'd known all of that before I'd sold him on how wonderful Wolfsbane was. He's not going to be ready," Lupin said. He sighed. "The truth is, he should have been preparing before this. This is going to be a difficult transformation regardless of what he does to prepare. But there's still a lot he can do."

"He's going to want to transform on a full stomach. Mostly red meats. You can trick the wolf for part of the night to think that it's had its fill. After that you're going to want to use scent banishing spells. Use them as close as possible to the full moon. If the wolf can smell humans nearby that it can't get to, it'll only agitate it more."

"Cushioning charms on all of the surfaces to reduce injuries. Try to make sure Harry is as calm as possible before hand, though that's going to be difficult. Scattering chamomile leaves around the transformation area is supposed to help but I've never been too sure of its effectiveness and you
need a lot besides. There isn't much else. Back before, I had my friends to help me, but now, that's all I really have to make the transformation easier."

"How did your friends help you?" Severus asked.

Lupin sighed. "They became animagi, and kept me company during the moon. They were able to distract me from hurting myself during the full moon."

"Of course they did," Severus deadpanned. "Could you do that for Harry?"

"No," Lupin said. "Locked up like that? We'd likely feed off of each other's rage."

"What about an actual animal? A dog?" Severus asked.

"It would be terrified and agitated being locked up with Harry during the transformation, it's not exactly a pleasant scene, there's also a good chance it would want to fight," Lupin said. "Besides which, what they did was actively distract the wolf, they weren't just there, they actively interacted with the wolf to keep it occupied."

"What if you had Wolfsbane?" Severus asked.

Lupin looked thoughtful. "That could work. Though it would be best if the ministry never found out we were transforming together. Do you have it ready?"

"I do," Severus said. "I had hoped to have something for Harry, but..."

"You sort of look like you've been working on this nonstop," Lupin said. "Will you be able to stay awake tonight?"

"Of course," Severus said. He had potions for that. Severus looked at his watch. "You'll need to take your first dose soon. If you come with me you can take it now and talk to Harry."

"Of course," Lupin said. "Though we'll probably have to have the same conversation tomorrow."

"I suppose we will," Severus said. He gave him the floo code and they both arrived at Severus' home.

Harry had been a ball of nerves since the day had begun. That night he was going to transform into a werewolf for the first time and he knew it was going to be terrible. The fuller the moon became as this month had worn on, the stronger Harry could feel it's pull. He could feel it as it rose each night and every day it grew stronger. His instincts were becoming stronger as the full moon approached. He didn't feel ready for the full moon. It didn't really make sense though, that he was worried more about Professor Snape than he was about the full moon just then.

Harry heard the floo and walked into the sitting room with a great deal of trepidation. He was rather surprised to see Professor Lupin, but he supposed it made sense. He had been waiting for something like this, but now that it was here, he didn't know how to deal with it.

"Harry," Professor Snape said. "Good, you should sit down, I will return in a moment."

Harry nodded and walked over to the sofa and sat down. Professor Snape walked out of the room and into his study.

"How are you doing Harry?" Professor Lupin asked.
"Um," Harry said. "You know about Professor Snape?"

"I do," Professor Lupin said. "He came to ask me to help you out."

"Are you taking me away?" Harry asked.

"We'll actually need to talk with… well, with your father, about that," Professor Lupin said. "There are a few options I know of if you don't already have a place to transform."

Harry shook his head. "Are you taking me off of his hands?" Harry asked. "Is that why you're here?"

"What are you… Okay, what's going through your head right now?" Professor Lupin said.

"Well he doesn't like werewolves does he," Harry said. "I mean he tried, I guess, but it's obvious that he doesn't want to raise a werewolf. It was stupid to unpack."

"Okay Harry," Professor Lupin said. "First of all, he asked me here to help with your transformation tonight. I'm not taking you away."

"O- oh," Harry stuttered, feeling a bit choked up at this revelation. He shook his head again. "I didn't want him taking care of me out of a sense of obligation."

"Harry," Professor Lupin started, but at that moment Professor Snape re-entered the room carrying a smoking flask.

"Alright," Professor Lupin said. "Severus, you're an idiot."

"Excuse me," Professor Snape said dangerously.

"You've been working on this little project nonstop since the previous full moon, right?" Professor Lupin said. "Probably haven't had time for anything else, I'm guessing."

"That's right," Professor Snape seethed. "I suppose you could have done better. You think you could have found a solution? I recall you doing rather poorly with potions."

"No," Professor Lupin said. "I know full well that that's something far out of my league, but I wouldn't have forgotten to spend time with my son."

"I haven't had time," Professor Snape said indignantly.

"Exactly," Professor Lupin said. "You haven't spent time with your son since he was bitten by a werewolf and left him to draw his own conclusions as to why."

Professor Snape was brought up short.

"What's going on?" Harry asked and he felt ragged as he demanded to know his future.

"Oh Harry," Professor Snape sighed. He took a moment to collect himself. "You can't have Wolfsbane, you see…"

Harry paled. "No, please!" he said. "I'm sorry. I'm so sorry. But I couldn't let my friends die. It was all my fault. Please. I need the potion. You can ground me forever. You can punish me however you want. I've been doing all my chores and I've been doing my homework. I'll be super good, I promise, but, please. I don't want to hurt myself tonight. I don't want to lose my mind. Please!"
Everything had hinged on that potion. Everything would be manageable as long as he had that potion.

"Harry that's not what I meant," Professor Snape said. "I told you already I did not blame you for going after your friends. I have not stopped caring for you since you were bitten. The Sang Olaes Potion is contraindicated for the Wolfsbane Potion."

Harry shook his head. "So we use the Sang Vitalis Charm."

"The last hemophiliac who contracted lycanthropy died his first full moon when the transformation nullified the charm. Werewolves are resistant to a lot of magic during the full moon. The Sang Olaes Potion is the only thing that will keep you alive during the transformation when your body will be tearing itself apart."

Harry felt numb. He couldn't ever take the potion. Once a month he was going to turn into a rage beast that was going to try like hell to devour any human it could find. He was going to be locked up. He was going to howl and rage and he was going to tear into himself. A thought brought him back to reality.

"You've been trying to fix it," Harry said. "That's the project you're working on."

Professor Snape nodded. "I had hoped I could find a solution. This has been difficult on you and I did not want you to worry any more than you already were. I see that I could have handled this better."

"I know you didn't sign up for dealing with a werewolf for a son," Harry said. "I'll understand if you don't."

"I do," Professor Snape said. "I want to be your father, though it seems I am not very good at it. I did sign up for this, Harry. I asked you to be my son. I made no stipulation that you stay… fully human all of the time. I have not stopped caring for you since you became a werewolf."

Harry very much did not want to cry in front of everyone; he was feeling particularly overwhelmed at the moment.

"Do you mean it?" he asked, his throat feeling very tight.

"I do," Professor Snape said.

"I'm sorry I've cause you so much work," Harry said.

"You are not the cause, you are my motivation," Professor Snape said.

Harry looked at Professor Snape, searching for the truth in his eyes.

"Perhaps we should be telling Harry about tonight," Professor Lupin said. Both Harry and Professor Snape turned to look at him. Harry had forgotten he was there.

"I have to be locked up," Harry said.

"You will transform in the basement," Professor Snape said. "Lupin will transform with you. He will be taking Wolfsbane and he will distract you from harming yourself. He has a few other recommendations that might make the transformation easier. We will try to make this as easy as possible for you Harry."
"You'll be with me?" Harry asked.

Professor Lupin nodded. "It helps a great deal to have company. I'll walk you through everything up until the moon rises."

They spent the afternoon preparing for that night. The full moon would be rising a few minutes before ten though, so they had plenty of time. The basement was already structured to contain a werewolf, but they added charms to soften the ground and the walls. A box was set in the wall for items that they didn't want destroyed during the full moon. There wasn't much for Harry to do and he felt rather useless being unable to do any magic. Professor Snape left for a while and returned with a rather large quantity of chamomile tea leaves which were scattered around the basement. There were a few charms that would be cast right before the moon rose and the only thing left was to have a large dinner.

Professor Snape had procured a rather large take out order as well and Harry ate dinner with both the professors. They both had to convince him to eat more though. He had had quite the appetite lately, but right then, as nervous as he was for the full moon, he really had to force himself to eat anything.

The two adults distracted him by asking him how his last few weeks of school had gone and what he had been doing with his summer. Harry kept feeling distracted. He felt as though something were pulling him. He felt as though there was a charge in the air. His skin was tingling all over.

They wasted the evening with an anxious Harry until it was time for Harry and Professor Lupin to head down to the basement. The rule was, Professor Lupin had explained, that Harry needed to be at his transformation site two hours before the full moon, and he needed to be locked in half an hour before the transformation. It wasn't that he might transform early, but if he was always early, it was that much harder for something to cause him to be late. He would always have to plan his life around the moon.

Harry got an actual hug from his father, which he rather didn't know what to do with, before the door was closed for the night. Upon closing, the door simply disappeared, replaced by blank wall.

"You're going to want to try and be as calm as possible as we approach the moon," Professor Lupin said.

Harry nodded and attempted to clear his mind with only a little success. He was very high strung. He supposed it was good practice, but he gave up after a bit. Professor Lupin started telling him stories about his school years.

When professor Lupin's watch chimed he stood up and started an incantation which removed all scents from the room, which was actually a really odd feeling. Another charm on Harry and himself stopped them from producing any scent for a while. That done, he went over to the box that had been set into the wall and placed his wand in there, along with his watch.

"Everything goes in Harry," he said.

Harry tossed his wand in along with his own watch but paused when he saw Professor Lupin taking off his robes.

"When you said everything..." Harry said.

"Everything you don't want destroyed," Professor Lupin said. "Though you definitely don't want to transform wearing clothes. Your wolf will not be amused and you don't want to give it any more
reason to be upset."

"Right," Harry said, blushing. Now he had to be naked too.

"How about I'll put my stuff away and then go face that way before you put your stuff away," Professor Lupin suggested.

Harry faced away from Professor Lupin while he took his clothes off. Harry was sure he blushed even harder when his treacherous brain decided to wonder what Professor Lupin looked like just then. He was glad he was facing away. He really needed to get a handle on these stupid thoughts. It's not like he was like that. He was rather certain he was just a bit confused after everything that had been going on with his life.

"Your turn," Professor Lupin said.

"Right," Harry said. He pulled off his clothes and closed the box. It wouldn't be able to be opened until the moon had set. He sat down with his back to Professor Lupin and drew his knees up to his chest. At least the ground was soft.

"It's a clear night," Professor Lupin said. "And it's supposed to stay that way. It should be an easy transformation."

Harry wished he still had his watch.

"Does it get easier with time?" Harry asked.

"You get used to it," Professor Lupin said. "You can adapt to anything Harry. Just trust in yourself."

"If something happens," Harry said. "If I escape somehow. You'll stop me, right?"

"That's not going to happen," Professor Lupin said. "Don't worry, I won't let anything happen."

The tense feeling Harry had been feeling all night was becoming stronger. His skin felt like it was crawling with ants and he started trembling. He knew the transformation would be soon. The anticipation was really really building. Harry knew that no potion was going to make the actual transformation part better.

Harry had read that a wolf had three hundred and twenty one bones in its body, while a human only had two hundred and six. Werewolves had a rather unpleasant way to add all those bones. At nine fifty six, as the full moon rose, Harry felt the first bone snap. He screamed.

The first thing Harry was aware of as he came to was the feeling of his bones scraping together. He opened his mouth to scream, but only a hoarse gasp came out. He squeezed his eyes shut and tried to ride out the pain. Trying to clench his fists only made things worse. Every muscle in his body felt like it was contracting and burning. He tried to move his legs, to loosen them up but he stopped as a blinding white shot of pain tore through his body. He gasped in and out, unable to do anything else. Eventually though, his bones stopped scraping together, and his muscles relaxed enough for him to move and he started to catch his breath. His skin felt like it was crawling with ants and his bones felt like they were moving inside of his own body. His fogged mind started to clear and he
opened his eyes and found he was lying on the dirt ground. He was also naked. He had a sudden moment of clarity, realizing that something was horribly wrong. He pushed himself up, or rather, he tried to. He let out an involuntary yell as he put weight on his right arm, which gave out from underneath him, planting his face in the dirt. He was very certain it was dislocated. Had he been attacked? He was supposed to be safe. He heard a groan from behind him.

He rolled over, putting his good arm up. There was Professor Lupin, lying down in the dirt as well, and very much naked. He looked out of sorts. Harry shook his head. He could feel himself panicking. He knew he wasn't suppose to panic but he couldn't stop the feeling creeping up around him.

"What's going on?" Harry asked. "Where are we? What happened to me?" "Why are we naked?" he didn't ask.

"It's alright Harry," Professor Lupin said drowsily. He started to get up. Harry couldn't get up but he managed to scramble back. Moving hurt a lot. Every muscle was on fire. His bones scraped together. He covered himself as well as he could.

Harry heard a door open, he looked over his shoulder and was both relieved and terrified to see Professor Snape standing there.

"What's going on?" Harry asked.

"It's alright, Harry. It was the full moon last night Harry," Professor Snape said, as if Harry would have forgotten something like that. He walked over to the opposite wall.

"No, that's tonight," Harry said. "I would have remembered. I got hurt, somehow. What's going on?"

"You don't remember because you didn't use Wolfsbane," Professor Lupin. "You're going to have to explain everything to him again Severus."

Professor Snape nodded. Turning around, he tossed Harry his robes, before tossing Professor Lupin his own as well. Harry could see that there was some sort of box set into the wall behind him.

"This is largely my fault," Professor Snape said. "I should have prepared you for this."

"What did he mean, I didn't use Wolfsbane," Harry asked. "And why wouldn't I remember that?" Even with his hoarse voice, he was shouting. Why was he shouting? He wasn't supposed to shout at Professor Snape.

"The Sang Vitalis Charm is negated by the transformation, Harry. The only way to keep you from bleeding to death from the transformation itself is for you to keep taking the Sang Olaes Potion, which is contraindicated for Wolfsbane Potion."

"Your father has been working for the past month trying to find a way to make it work Harry," Professor Lupin said. "I transformed with you so I could help prevent you from hurting yourself last night."

Some part of Harry remembered this. Not the words, but the feeling. The relief when he realized his father had been trying to help him, still wanted to help him. The horror too, as he realized he may forever have to transform and completely lose himself.

"Was it so terrible you obliviated me?" Harry asked feeling dread as he struggled to cover himself with his robe. None of his limbs wanted to move right. With the panic dying down, he was starting
to just feel overwhelmed.

"You don't remember yesterday because of how short term memory is converted into long term memory. Your brain typically does that when you sleep. Everything in your short term memory was, for the most part, destroyed when your brain transformed along with the rest of you last night."

"I'm sorry Harry," Professor Lupin was saying. He was standing up now, and though he looked tired, he didn't look anywhere near as messed up as Harry felt. "If I had known you wouldn't be able to take the potion I would have gotten you ready for this better. In the future, you'll want to keep a journal of what happens the day of the full moon. Now come on, lets get you out of the dirt. You probably need a lot of healing."

"I thought he would be better off," Professor Snape said. "You said you could keep him from hurting himself."

"You've never seen a caged werewolf the day after a full moon," Professor Lupin said. "A lot of this, though, is just that Harry's body isn't very good at transforming yet. You'll get better with time. The transformation becomes smoother, you'll put yourself back together better too. A lot of things get better."

There was an echo of pain, of agony, some part of him remembered the transformation.

"Will it hurt less?" Harry asked. And why were there tears in his voice. What was wrong with him?

"No," Professor Lupin said. "But it will be faster. It took you about five minutes to transform last night. It's hard to tell for myself, but it takes me about twenty seconds I think. It will get better. For now though, just remember to try not to move too much afterwards. You've got a bunch of stuff not put together just right, like your shoulder there."

Professor Snape used a charm to clean Harry up, and then another one to lift him up and Harry was brought into the sitting room. Harry had bones that were dislocated and bones that were rubbing up against each other, and bones that were just plain broken. On top of that were torn muscles and ligaments. Luckily though, Madame Pomfrey was waiting for him in the sitting room. Harry was mostly silent while she worked. He felt completely out of sorts, and it wasn't just his body. He felt like he was going to loose it at any moment. Madame Pomfrey left him with a few potions, and after declaring Professor Lupin fit, she left with admonishments for Harry to take it easy for the day.

Professor Snape brought him a light breakfast of toast and fruit, he put it down with a look of concern at Harry. "How are you feeling?" he asked Harry. The question was accompanied with the smallest of gestures. He smoothed down Harry's hair with his hand, resting it for just a moment on Harry's temple. Harry broke down sobbing. Part of him tried desperately to stop while the rest of him babbled.

"All this time you were trying to help me," Harry said. "I thought you didn't want me anymore. I thought everything was ruined. I thought you didn't want to be my father any more. I'm sorry I ruined everything. I'm sorry I always mess things up. I swear, I swear I wont be a freak. I'll try so hard to make this worth it for you. I'll be whatever you want me to be. I promise. And I'm sorry for crying like this, I don't know what's wrong with me. I can't stop."

Professor Snape had sat down next to him, he arm around his shoulder.

"It's alright," Professor Snape said. "Everything's going to be alright."
"I'm being stupid" Harry said.

"It's the transformation," a reticent Professor Lupin said. "I told you, you're not very good at putting yourself back together. Wolfsbane would have protected your mind, but right now your brain chemistry is out of sorts. You'll be fine tomorrow. The effects will diminish as you get used to this. Right now, you need rest. Take it easy today. The best thing for you right now would be to eat something and then take that sleep potion Madame Pomfrey left you."

Harry shook his head miserably. "And you had to stay with me all night and be my minder," he said miserably. "I'm such a bother. It must have been horrible for you. I'm so sorry."

"It's fine Harry," Professor Lupin said. "Come on, can you eat some toast for me?"

Harry couldn't deny him anything after he had been such a burden. He struggled through the meal before reluctantly taking the potion. Professor Snape wanted him to kip on the couch where he could keep an eye on him.

"That should be all Lupin," Severus said once Harry had fallen asleep. "Until next month." He gestured to the fireplace.

"Are you addressing that?" Lupin asked.

"Addressing what," Severus said.

"That display there," Lupin said. "His state of mind might have been altered from the transformation but those words came from somewhere."

"I am well aware," Severus said. "I am addressing it."

"By locking yourself away?" Lupin asked.

"The Wolfsbane Potion takes priority right now," Severus said.

"He asked me if I was taking him off your hands Severus," Lupin said. "He thought you didn't want him since he was a werewolf now. I don't think ignoring him for the rest of the summer should be your priority."

"It will be different now," Severus said. "I'll make time, I'll let him help in the lab."

"He needs more the that," Lupin said. "Have you considered a mind healer?"

"Of course," Severus said. "I have also considered that Harry has far too many dangerous secrets to have someone rooting around in his head. As I have said, I am taking care of it."

"Or rather, you were taking care of it until you cloistered yourself in your lab for a month," Remus said. "I am not trying to say that you can't handle this Severus, but if you need any help I'm here. But don't worry, I'll be doing it for Harry since you've made it clear I'm not here to help you. I'll see you in a month Severus, preferably sooner if you so choose, but I will be seeing Harry later this week. If he won't be living with wolfsbane he's going to need a lot more advice from me."

A moment later and Lupin had left through the floo. Severus scowled after him. He supposed he would be seeing a lot more of the man.

Severus conjured a blanket over Harry, who was still sleeping like the dead under the effects of the potion, before retrieving his notes from his office. He was going to find an answer. He was certain
something would come to him.

"Harry," Mrs. Weasley exclaimed as Harry popped out of the fireplace. "So good to see you." She started brushing soot off of him.

"Hello Mrs. Weasley," Harry said. He had no idea how to act around her. He knew she should hate him. "Thank you for having me over."

"Of course dear," Mrs. Weasley said. Her smile faltered. "I thought perhaps you would talk to Ron about..."

"Mrs. Weasley?" Harry prompted.

The smile came back. "It's nothing dear," Mrs. Weasley said instead. "Come to the kitchen dear, grab some biscuits. You look a bit pale, have you been alright?"

"I caught a stomach bug a couple of days ago," Harry lied. "I'm better now though."

"Oh you poor dear," Mrs. Weasley said. "And trapped in the muggle world to boot. We have some potions for an upset stomach."

"Oh, I'm fine now," Harry assured her.

"Well I'll make some chicken soup for lunch," Mrs. Weasley said.

"You don't have to bother," Harry said.

"It's no bother Harry," Mrs. Weasley said. She pulled out the tin of biscuits and put several on a plate.

Harry didn't understand her. "Why are you being so nice?" Harry asked.

"Whatever are you talking about?" Mrs. Weasley asked.

"You should hate me," Harry said. "I promised you I wouldn't get Ron in trouble and then I-"

"You didn't, dear," Mrs. Weasley said. "I know very well who to blame for that, Harry. You did what I asked. You didn't go looking for Greyback. He came after you; that wasn't your fault."

"He took Ron to get to me though," Harry said.

"Because he was a monster," she said. Harry looked down. "You did nothing wrong. It was our war, Harry. We didn't do enough. We didn't stop it all from coming back. You weren't supposed to have to deal with this. My children weren't supposed to have to deal with this. We failed you. We didn't keep you safe. We didn't stop things properly the first go around. Fenrir Greyback took my Ronnie for his own twisted reasons. You brought him home. I will always be grateful for that."

'I could have stopped him though,' Harry thought, and not for the first time the snap of Greyback's wand echoed through his mind. Harry would never know if it could have been a match or not.

"Thank you for the cookies," Harry said.

"Of course dear," Mrs. Weasley said. "Make sure you boys save room for lunch."

"We will," Harry said. He wasn't going to have any trouble in that department. He had become
positively voracious lately. He was definitely growing. It was the first of the grab bag of changes he was going through that he actually appreciated.

As he made his way upstairs he wondered how Ron would be that day. He was impatient for things to start going back to the way that they were, though he knew that that was never going to happen. The door was closed when he got to the top and Harry knocked before opening it.

"I've got biscuits," Harry said.

"I'm getting stuffed with biscuits," Ron said, and Harry's first impression was that Ron looked like shit. "Mum won't stop baking them." He was grinning though and that was a good sign. "You look like shit by the way," he told Harry.

"I look like shit?" Harry said. "Have you looked in a mirror lately?"

"Sure," Ron said. "I broke it. How was Wednesday?"

"Complicated," Harry said.

"Yeah?" Ron asked. "I was hoping you'd be back sooner. It looks like it was rough; I thought that potion was supposed to make things easier."

"Yeah, well, I can't take the potion, as it turns out," Harry said. "Also, like, my body doesn't know how to put myself back together properly yet so the transformation's really rough right now, but P… my friend who's a werewolf says it'll get better with time."

"What do you mean you can't take the potion?" Ron asked. "Snape isn't giving it to you?"

"No, no, no," Harry said. He explained how the two potions wouldn't mix.

"Well shit," Ron said.

"Yeah," Harry said. "But he's making the potion for my friend so they can keep me company during the moon and keep me from hurting myself. Oh, also, um, so it turns out my dad wasn't so much ignoring me this past month as he's been trying to figure out how to get both potions to work at the same time."

"Parents never tell you important stuff," Ron said. "They don't think we can handle things, you know? Still though, at least he was being a dick for the right reasons."

"Yeah," Harry said. "I helped him in the lab yesterday. It was nice."

"Yeah, and now your whole summer break's turned into a detention," Ron said.

Harry laughed. "Yeah well my dad's going to see the Headmaster about something so I got let out on parole today so I could see you."

"I'll have to thank your warden," Ron said. "Have you heard from Hermione?"

"I've gotten a couple of letters," Harry said.

"I got her on the muggle floo connection thing," Ron said. "We've got strict orders to act as if nothing's wrong if we meet her parents."

"Aren't they leaving soon for France for the summer?" Harry asked.
"I guess that trip's been canceled for some reason," Ron said. Harry could tell that Ron probably did know why. "They're taking a bunch of smaller trips all over though. Hermione says we can meet in London on Tuesdays after four if we want, though one of her parents are probably going to be chaperoning."

"That's an oddly specific time table," Harry said. "Does she have her summer study schedule down to a t?"

"Something like that," Ron said and again Harry had the impression that Ron knew exactly what was going on. "So," Ron said. "Want to fly?"

"I brought my broom," Harry said. "It's down stairs. How bout after lunch though, I'm pretty knackered right now. Do you mind if I read in here for a bit?"

"You are absolutely transparent," Ron said.

"Would you prefer I said you look like you could use a nap?" Harry asked.

"Yeah that is worse," Ron said. "You don't mind?"

"You've got the best Quidditch Weekly collection I've ever seen," Harry said. "I learned so much last week."

"I've got the only collection you've ever seen," Ron said. "So, well, um, thanks."

Harry shrugged. "I bet anyone downstairs would, you know, like, keep watch, if you asked them," he said.

"I don't need to give them another reason to think I'm broken," Ron said.

The comment made Harry uncomfortable, for how often had he had the same thought about himself.

"I was really upset when I thought my dad had stopped wanting me around after I got bitten," Harry said. "I wish I'd said something, I could have made things better or something. You know the twins were, like, a mess last month. I know they don't act like it now, but they were really worried about you. Everyone was. They already know your going through a tough time. You just need to talk to them and maybe things'll get better."

"I don't need to talk about what happened," Ron said.

"Sure," Harry said. "So talk about what you need right now."

"Did my mom talk to you about this?" Ron asked.

"No," Harry said. "She started to, maybe, about something, but she didn't say what."

"So how did we get from me giving you all sorts of advice on dealing with your dad to you giving me advice on my family?"

"I learned to meddle from the best," Harry said.

"Hermione?" Ron asked.

"Yep," Harry said. "Soooo… nap time?"
"Yeah, yeah," Ron said.

Five minutes later Harry groaned miserably to himself right after having the thought that Ron looked ridiculously cute when he was asleep. He flipped open a magazine.

"Thank you for seeing me, headmaster," Severus said as he entered the tower office.

"I am always happy when you visit over the summer, Severus," the headmaster said, setting out tea. "How are you adjusting to your new home?"

"Very well," Severus said. "Thank you for finalizing those matters."

"I was happy to help you and Harry to have a comfortable place to stay this summer," the headmaster said. "How did Harry's first transformation go?"

"It could have gone better," Severus said. "I was not able to resolve the potions issue. Fortuitously, though, an alternative was found in the form of Lupin transforming with Harry. It does appear to help. Where you aware that Potter and Black became animagus to keep him company?"

"Did they indeed?" the headmaster asked, his eyebrows raised. "Though I would not say that I could have imagined that, it does not surprise me. You will continue to make the potion for Remus then?"

"It seems to be the best solution for now," Severus said. "Though I am still focused on finding a better one."

"Harry is lucky to have a potions master for a father," the headmaster said.

"Perhaps," Severus said. "Though that is not all he has in me. It is time you told me more about what you intend for Harry."

"I intend for Harry to live for a good long while," the headmaster said. "If you would like me to be more specific, perhaps you could narrow your question."

"Tell me more about this prophesy," Severus said. "What do we need to do to prepare him? What's our time table? What is Harry's exact role in this?"

"I must still insist, Severus, that the less said the better where the prophesy is concerned," Albus said. "However if you would like to prepare Harry, perhaps you could determine if Harry is better suited for a dagger or a sword."

"What?" Severus asked.

"I couldn't possibly elaborate," Albus said. "Now of course, Harry's second year does come to mind, when Harry slew the basilisk with the Sword of Gryffindor, however I do not believe he had much by way of choice in weapon at the time."

"If you're telling me Harry is to kill the Dark Lord with a blade I'm taking him to Canada," Severus said.

"Why Severus, that would be ridiculous," the headmaster said. "Voldemort will be gone by the time he may have need of it, but have need of it he very well may, and he had best be comfortable using it when he does. As for the timing, now that must be a complete secret. If Voldemort knew what our time table was he would put too much together, and then our shot Severus, our one shot is
lost to us. I am not throwing away this shot. Doing so would be perilous to Harry and the entire wizarding world."

"So what does Harry need to defeat the Dark Lord?" Severus asked.

"He already has it," Albus said. "It will be almost entirely up to Harry if Voldemort survives this prophesy. What Harry must prepare for is surviving what happens afterwards. It would be best if Harry focuses on defense this year. I have already spoken with this year's instructor, and Harry will be welcome in the fifth year classes. Though I'm sure you could offer him a unique perspective on fighting the Dark Arts."

"I will be there," Severus said.

"Severus?" the headmaster asked.

"When he faces the Dark Lord," Severus said. "Whenever fate has this showdown planned, I will be there. Are we clear?"

"Of course," Albus said. "I do not intend for Harry to survive on his own, though I expect that he could."

Severus nodded.

"So, who did you find to fill the spot this year?" Severus asked.

"Alastor has already grown tired of his retirement," the headmaster said. "He has his own unique perspective on fighting the Dark Arts."

Severus resisted the urge to groan miserably. The coming school year was going to be a nightmare.

"Let's talk about how we're going to hide the fact that Harry disappears once a month," Severus said.

Severus did not return home after his meeting with the headmaster. He made his way into muggle London. He had an appointment to keep. He entered a well kept up office park and entered a nondescript suite.

"Please sign in here," the receptionist said. "You can fill in the paperwork in one of those chairs."

Severus wasn't very comfortable with a pen, but he managed very well, he thought. He lied his way through most of the questions. None of them were really relevant to his endeavor.

"We're ready for you now, Mr. Klepper," the receptionist said, addressing him by the pseudonym he had taken on for the afternoon's exercise.

"Thank you," Severus said. He was shown into a small office that was filled with a number of nicknacks and a couple of comfortable looking chairs. A muggle man was sitting in one of them but he stood up when Severus walked in and offered his hand.

"Come in, Mr. Klepper," the man said as they shook hands. "Please have a seat. My name's Dr. Abbasi, I've just had a chance to look over your intake paperwork. Did you want to tell me a bit about yourself or would you like me to go over how I practice with you first."

Severus cut to the chase. "I recently discovered that one of my students is in fact my son. He has come to live with me this summer, and I have found that I am ill prepared."
"Parenting offers a lot of challenges," Dr. Abbasi said. "Particularly if you are thrown off the deep end, as it were. Where do you feel you are struggling at the moment?"

"I do not believe I have properly addressed the many difficulties my son has had growing up," Severus said.

"I was going to ask why the decision was made to remove him from his current home," Dr. Abbasi said.

"His parents died when he was fifteen months old," Severus said. "He has been raised since then by his Aunt and Uncle and… they were most unfit guardians."

"I see," Dr. Abbasi said. "How did you react when you found out about that?"

"With more restraint than was warranted," Severus said. "To be clear, I am not here looking for counseling for myself. I believe that my son needs counseling, but he will not come, so I would like to consult with you on how best to handle his needs."

"Counseling by proxy is certainly not ideal," Dr. Abbasi said. "The best course of action would be to address why he feels he can not attend counseling in the first place. How old is your son?"

"Thirteen," Severus said. "Let us proceed for now as though his attendance is out of the question."

"One of many issues with that would be that I can only tell you how best to approach him based on how much you can tell me about him. You may know him as your student, but it sounds as though you have not had much of a chance to get to know him as your son. Do you know the extent of the abuse?"

"Beatings for minor or nonexistent infractions, starvation, humiliation, confinement to a cupboard, a complete withholding of affection for the past twelve years, treating him as if he were the maid, emotional manipulation," Severus said.

"Yes," Dr. Abbasi said. "I can see why you would be concerned for him. Now what can you tell me about how your son is handling the effects of this environment and the recent changes in his life."

Severus took a breath and thought about the answer. "He often appears well adjusted, however I have parsed together that he feels that there is something wrong with himself that would cause people to despise him. He has shown a great deal of recklessness in the past with his own safety and a proclivity to put everyone else's needs above his own. He very regularly second guesses himself when he is interacting with others and he has a laundry list of perceived personal failings that he could likely recite to you."

"Well, there are a number of therapeutic techniques that we have to help people who have been through trauma and emotional abuse. Though not all of them would be suited for a do it yourself approach," Dr. Abbasi said. "It's important that you remember that your job is to be a parent, trying to be his therapist isn't necessarily going to mix with that. I can also talk to you about parenting a teenager though. There are a number of pitfalls you can avoid."

"I feel as though I've fallen in a number of them already," Severus said.

They talked for a while about options and agreed for Severus to return regularly for assessment. Dr. Abbasi stressed that it would be best if Harry attended in person. Severus couldn't say that that would be pointless, since Harry couldn't actually talk openly with the muggle man.

"So what school do you teach at?" Dr. Abbasi asked as the session came to a close.
"Auldridge Preparatory," Severus said. That was the name that muggleborn students were told to give to relatives and friends who asked where they attended. All anyone would find was that Auldridge was an exclusive and private school with a good reputation. Judging by the look of interest on Dr. Abbasi's face, he had heard of the school before.

"It is quite fortuitous that your son attends where you teach," Dr. Abbasi said.

Severus shook his head. "His parents were alumni, as am I, his name has been on the roster since he was born," he said. "I have a lot to think on, I will return as scheduled."

"Good luck, Mr. Klepper," Dr. Abbasi said. "Perhaps with a bit of luck your son can come with you when you do."

Severus made his way out. He rather wished he had that time turner. He wasn't sure when he was going to have time to finish any of his projects.

Harry wouldn't have been able to predict that he would enjoy spending most of his free summer time in his father's lab, but he was, for the most part anyway. It wasn't exactly fun, but he was spending time with his dad, and more importantly, he was showing him that he was helpful to have around.

The chores Harry had been doing the week before the full moon had been mostly unnoticed. Also, it turned out that the crates in the kitchen were some sort of ready meals, that his dad had called bachelor chow. The whole week prior to the full moon, his dad had thought that Harry had just been opening magical meal packets. He hadn't been happy when he found out Harry had gone grocery shopping and had spent his own money. Harry actually had an allowance now. Which felt weird.

Most of their time was spent in the lab, but today Professor Snape had finally gotten fed up with threatening to take him clothes shopping and had actually followed through, saying he was tired of seeing Harry in nothing but his school slacks and button down shirt, both of which were starting to ride up. It felt very weird having someone else spend money on him. He still wanted to grab his own money pouch and put his own gold down on the counter. He was probably getting pretty expensive. Harry had heard that teachers in the muggle world didn't get paid a lot and he found himself wondering just how much his dad made and just when he would realize that Harry wasn't worth it. He frowned at the bags in his hands and the bags in his dad's hands as they strode down Diagon Alley in their Polyjuiced disguises.

"What is wrong?" Professor Snape asked him.

"You're spending a lot of money on me," Harry said.

"Professor McGonagall bought you a broomstick. This is not so much," Professor Snape said. "I can certainly afford it. What thought was going through your head just now?"

Harry had been getting a lot of questions like that over the past couple of weeks. He had been mortified to find out that his dad had gone to see a muggle therapist about him. He didn't want his dad thinking he was mental and he didn't like the questions. He didn't really want to answer this one.

"Just that, maybe you might think I was too expensive or something," Harry said.

"Or something?" his dad asked.
"Wasn't worth it," Harry said. It sounded worse when he said it out loud.

"You very much are worth it," his dad said. "Though this isn't a transaction, I'm not looking to get my money's worth. I want you to have what you need. It is as simple as that. What is another thought you could have?"

Harry had been getting a lot of questions like that as well. They were hard to answer and he had to think on it for a while.

"Maybe that I should just be grateful, instead," Harry said.

"You're making that a judgement against yourself though," his dad said.

Harry groaned in frustration. He wished his dad would just tell him the answer he wanted to hear.

"How about, I'm glad I have new clothes," Harry said.

"That works," his dad said, though Harry thought there was probably a better answer his dad was looking for.

Now Harry was supposed to focus on the thought, and the next time he thought about not being worth the cost, he could just focus on being glad for his new clothes instead… in theory.

"When was the last time you had your eyes checked?" his dad asked. They were passing in front of an optometrist.

"Um, before Hogwarts," Harry said.

"Before this previous school year?" his dad asked.

"Before first year," Harry said. "About a year before."

"Are your glasses still working for you?" his dad asked skeptically.

"Sure," Harry said. "I can get by just fine."

"Which is code for: you aren't completely blind so why go to the school nurse," his dad said. "Come on, I'm sure this will be much faster than what you're used to in the muggle world."

Neither his dad nor the optometrist had been happy with how well Harry did with the eye chart using his current glasses. Harry left with a new pair focusing on how nice it was to be able to see all the more clearly.

"However did you see the snitch?" his dad asked.

"A golden snitch is about as easy to see as a golden blur," Harry said.

As their hour came to a close, Harry and his dad parted ways. Harry went into the loo while the transformation wore off, while his dad went home. Harry was going to be meeting Ron in the Leakey Cauldron and the two of them would go meet Hermione outside in the muggle world. It would be the first time Harry would be seeing Hermione that summer and Harry was worried she was going to look as sleep deprived as Ron did.

As it turned out, Hermione was looking to be in much better shape than Ron was, though she looked a little run down. Like Ron, though, she was acting a bit more like herself and they talked easily enough as they made their way through some muggle shops and eventually settled for dinner
in a quick service place called Poppies where they got fish and chips. Ron had been right about Hermione's father chaperoning them, though besides making some pleasantry he had kept to himself and gotten a different table from them. They couldn't talk too openly with all of the muggles around but they still managed to talk about school and their summer breaks just fine. Hermione and her parents had been taking trips through the Chunnel and had so far visited Paris, Belgium, and Germany. Their next trip would be to Barcelona. No mention was made as to why their longer, planned trip to tour France had been canceled, but Harry focused on being happy that he got to see both of his friends together and that Hermione was looking like she was feeling better.

It felt wonderful to be with both Ron and Hermione again. The niggling fear that they were in danger while they were away had never quite gone away, and Harry was happy to have both of them nearby for the time being. He felt better knowing he could be there if anything were to happen. Of course, before long, it was time to say goodbye.

Harry got a surprise when he got home later that evening. There was some manner of mannequin in the sitting room, and sitting on the coffee table where a few different daggers and swords.

"What's this?" Harry asked his dad.

"The headmaster would like to know which one of these you might have an affinity for," his dad said. "Feel free to try out any one you like."

"What, on the mannequin?" Harry asked.

His dad nodded.

"Um… What?" Harry asked.

"That was much my own reaction," his dad said. "However, it is apparently very important."

"Oh," Harry said. He picked up one of the smaller daggers and faced the mannequin. He looked over his shoulder. "Um, you weren't going to watch were you?" he asked feeling self conscious.

"Clear your mind," his dad said. "Do not concern yourself with my presence."

"Right," Harry said. He cleared his mind and pushed back the thought that he was about to flail about like a child at play in front of his father. Once his mind was cleared he started to focus on the task at hand. He made a few slashes and jabs, focusing on the feeling in his wrist and his arm. He cycled through each weapon. More than worries about his father, he found himself having to push back a squicked out feeling as he made violent motions at the human facsimile.

"This one maybe?" he asked his father, holding up a long dagger with a comfortable grip.

"The only right answer is the one that is right for you," his dad said. "Put that one aside, we're done with this for now. Would you like to join me in the lab?"

"Sure," Harry said, glad to be done with the task. "I've been wondering. Why did you stop occluding all the time?"

"I was not occluding all the time," his dad said. "I was barely clearing my mind. It helped hide my concern. I didn't want to worry you. I do know, though, that I did an abysmal job at that."

"Oh," Harry said, not wanting to touch the second part. "But doesn't it help with all this potions stuff."
"It might help if I was doing a complex brew," his dad said. "It would help you to focus on a test, but I am not trying to do something by rote, or to recall that which I know. I do not need to keep out errant thoughts. I need to be creative, I need to find solutions and draw conclusions. Clearing my mind does not help. Occluding, for all of it's benefits, still takes up a great deal of your cognitive faculties. Though we should talk more about occlumency, I think it is time we resume lessons. I think there are many techniques that could help you right now."

"Um, does that involve you being in my mind again?" Harry asked.

"For some techniques," his dad said. "It will be like before, we will practice the technique well before we try to practically apply it, you should not have difficulty hiding anything from me."

That would be fine if his mind hadn't been feeling like a random thought generator lately. Largely, with thoughts about Ron.

"Maybe we can just practice," Harry said.

"Practical application is the best way for you to cement these techniques," his dad said.

"Please?" Harry asked. His dad had been telling him repeatedly lately that he wanted Harry to ask for the things he needed.

His dad sighed. "Very well," he said. "Though I should tell you I am well aware that you have worries that extend beyond thoughts that I will decide that you cost too much. You can keep your worries to yourself Harry, but if you talk to me about your concerns we can address them. I do believe that that is what families are supposed to do."

"Right," Harry said. "I just think we should focus on practicing is all."

"Alright," his dad said. "Well for tonight we've got some potions to test, so why don't you start by getting the anise root prepared."

Harry started working. After working for a while in silence they started talking on trivial topics. 'This is nice,' Harry told himself. He could keep this up.

And he did. Another couple of weeks went by and Harry helped in the lab, visited with Ron, practiced his occlumency, did his homework, and just in general kept moving forward as if nothing was wrong. Professor Lupin visited a couple of times to talk to him about being a werewolf. Harry took it all in, determined to make sure that being a werewolf affected his life, and his dad's life, as little as possible.

Harry kept on moving forward, and to be frank, it was actually the best time he had ever had away from Hogwarts; but he never let his guard down. He couldn't stop thinking that he couldn't let his dad see that he was broken.

Chapter End Notes

Hey, thank you for reading. I hope you enjoyed this latest installment. No super long authors note this time. One of the things I’ve found is that my concept for this fic and where it's going keeps changing. I'm still excited to keep working on it, and I think I know how it's going to end, but the journey there keeps changing and expanding as the
characters speak to me.

As always, thank you to my beta, althor42. They're still working on their Horcrux Within fic but they took a quick break to write a really awesome BH6/The Martian xover fic. I've already read it, and it's awesome. Should be coming soon.

The line about moving to Canada is a very loose reference to althor42's Isis' Bane: A New Home, where Harry's adoptive father, Jack O'Neill (Stargate SG-1) threatens to do the same.
Hey, sorry for a bit of a delay. I sort of just kept adding stuff till the chapter got super long.

Warnings for internalized homophobia and vague allusions to suicide. If you are interested in reading this chapter without either of those, please PM me.

The feeling of his bones reshaping themselves was familiar this time, though no less painful. Professor Lupin had said that yelling helped to deal with the pain, that he shouldn’t try to hold anything back during the transformation. He’d also said that some people passed out as soon as their brain turned human again, but Harry wasn’t so lucky. As his body put itself back together Harry screamed and yelled and swore worse than he ever had in his whole life. He didn’t know if it helped to do anything but make sure he would be hoarse when it was all over.

When his muscles stopped tearing, and his bones stopped scraping, and his skin finally settled Harry lay panting on the ground, trying to get a firmer hold on himself. Harry had strict instructions not to try moving about until he had been healed, so his first instinct to curl up in a ball until the world stopped spinning worked just fine for him. He held his throbbing limbs close and tried to just ride out the lingering pain for just then. He felt completely drained. Harry heard Professor Lupin get up somewhere on the other side of the room about the same time as the door opened and his dad walked in.

A moment passed before his dad was kneeling next to him.

“Are you all right?” his dad asked.

Harry nodded.

“Can you move?” his dad asked.

Harry thought about it for a moment. He shook his head.

“That’s okay,” his dad said. A couple of spells cleaned Harry up and his robes were draped over his huddled form.

“We’ll get you fixed up in no time,” his dad said, smoothing Harry’s hair down, before levitating him and taking him upstairs to Madame Pomfrey.

The good news was that there were fewer fractured bones this time, and nothing was dislocated. There were plenty of torn ligaments and tendons though. Unfortunately, whatever stupid brain chemistry thing had been messing with him the last month felt just as bad this go around. Harry thought it felt like there was a dementor in the room but he couldn’t have occluded or cast a patronus just then to save his life.

He felt like a small child who had to be taken care of, which was particularly galling since he had been taking care of himself from a very young age. Madame Pomfrey left with instructions for
how the rest of Harry’s day should go and Harry found himself presented with a tray of breakfast to be chased down by a few potions.

Harry had loosened up enough while Madame Pomfrey had healed him that he was now able to properly put on his robes, but he was soon curled up on one end of the couch, occasionally reaching out to snag a small piece of fruit from the tray whenever one of the adults looked like they were going to remind him to eat something.

“Can I please have my log book?” he asked in a small, hoarse, voice.

“Nothing of great importance happened yesterday,” his dad said. “You should read it after you’ve gotten some sleep.”

Harry shook his head.

“You’ll feel a bit better after you’ve had a kip,” Professor Lupin said. “Your head’s probably not in a good place right now for reading anyway.”

“I need to know what I forgot,” Harry said urgently, not looking up from his plate, one hand reaching up to grip at his hair. “Even if it’s bad, I need to know. I can’t just forget.”

“Nothing bad happened yesterday,” his dad said.

Harry frowned, staring intently at the knees that were drawn up to his chest. “Please,” he asked, even as he was so scared he would be denied. He felt a desperate need to read his log just then.

His father sighed. “All right, but I want you to eat while you read and then you take your potions right after.”

Harry nodded. His father went upstairs to Harry’s room to get his log and Harry soon had the book in one hand and some toast in the other as he read the first entry in his logs of forgotten days. It took him a moment to focus on the words. His head really wasn’t in a good place for reading just then. But knowing that he had just forgotten an entire day of his life was distressing. He needed to know what he was missing. He started from the beginning.

Ron came over this morning. I wouldn’t have thought he’d want to be around me on a day like today, but he did. I guess I’m supposed to write about the things we did and what we talked about so it won’t be weird later if I don’t remember. Still haven’t told him about that part. I don’t think I want to tell anyone about that.

I’m supposed to relax today, so we went flying. We didn’t talk too much, which is good, ‘cause I don’t want to have to transcribe a bunch of stuff. The quidditch cup is coming up though, and Ron’s really excited. His dad might be able to get some tickets from work maybe. That would be cool if Ron got to go. He talked about the Cannon’s this past season. Nothing new there, it’s fun how excited he gets when he’s talking about them though.

All this werewolf stuff is super intense right before the full moon. I saw a deer through the trees earlier and my first thought was that I should chase after it. Then, when Ron came over... it was like this pack thing, I think. It felt like he was super important. Like he’s part of my pack. That’s weird when I write it out like that. It sounds like something Greyback would go on about. Ugh. But yeah, you know that thing dogs do when they meet one another. I’m pretty sure I wanted to do that today when Ron got here. It wasn’t like some overwhelming urge or anything, but still. Blech. There’s a bunch of other stuff, but I don’t need to go into it all I guess... Okay, one weird thing, It turns out I can, like, smell other people’s emotions and stuff. It’s weird. It’s only when
the moon’s really close to being full. I asked Professor Lupin about it, he confirmed that I’m not imagining things. Ron’s smell changes a lot. He goes from being happy to being afraid or just sad really quick, like often, even when he doesn’t look like anything’s wrong. I know he’s been having trouble with everything, but part of me wonders if he’s afraid every time he remembers he’s with a werewolf and it’s almost the full moon.

Oh, this is important to remember. Ron said Hermione’s leaving for Amsterdam tomorrow, he’s meeting her in London this evening.

We had lunch with my dad. He gave me a couple of odd looks. I don’t know what that was about. Be on the look out.

Professor Lupin came over after Ron left. I gave him the letter Ron had written him. He asked to make sure I was doing everything right. Dad’s been making sure I follow all of the instructions. It’s all about reducing stress hormones in my body or something so I’m just a bit less agitated when the transformation happens. I hope all this stuff works, though I’m not feeling really stress free. The closer we get to the full moon, the more I feel like I’m constantly on edge.

Ugh, I am totally writing this like it’s a journal. This isn’t a journal, I’m writing this just so I don’t forget about stuff. Don’t forget next time. THIS IS NOT A JOURNAL.

Dad said maybe I should keep a journal, but that would be weird. So let’s just keep it to the facts. Right.

I told Professor Lupin about my diet the past couple days, and about doing a bit of exercising and meditation. He said I should start a routine. He sounded like that was important. Maybe I should ask him more about it.

I cooked dinner. Dad thought I should be relaxing, but I really needed something to do with myself, and I think it helped, so definitely do that next time. Can’t just sit around being lazy while I wait for the moon to rise.

All this effort to relax and avoid stress and now I feel like a mess knowing what’s going to happen, what I’m going to go through, what I’ll be like tomorrow. Maybe I should just meditate all day or something.

Dad has been hovering all day. I think he feels bad he hasn’t figured out the potions stuff yet. From what I understand of all the ingredients, I think he’s looking for some sort of miracle combination. I really don’t want to transform without Wolfsbane, but I don’t like that he’s still working so hard on this. Maybe I should talk to him. He’s wasting his time on me. He’s working hard because he cares. Even though he shouldn’t. I don’t think there’s a solution.

Good news though, Professor Lupin and dad seem to be keeping civil. Maybe they’ll actually become friends eventually. For all that I’m supposed to be avoiding stress, it feels a bit stressful to have so much tension in the house. We talked about DADA over dinner. Professor Lupin said we’ve got a really good teacher coming next year, but dad seems apprehensive about them. Not that he’s going to say anything negative so close to my transformation. I doubt they’ll be as good as Professor Lupin. He’s the best.

What if dad does figure out the potions stuff? Would he still make wolfsbane for Professor Lupin?

And there I go writing like this is some stupid diary. Anyway, we played chess after dinner. They want me to go take a bath now to relax. I’ve got half an hour until I’m supposed to be locked up downstairs. I don’t think I’ve had a bath since I was, like, 3. They’re putting tea in the water.
What are you even supposed to do sitting in the tub for so long? Should I bring a book? It’d get wet. Try to think of something for next month.

Harry finished reading the journal. He’d eaten most of the piece of toast. He put it back, hoping he’d eaten enough to satisfy his dad.

“Do I have to go to sleep now?” Harry asked. He sounded winey even to his own ears. Why did his dad even put up with him?

“You need your rest,” his dad said.

“I’ll have trouble sleeping later,” Harry said, trying very hard not to whine.

“We have potions for that,” his dad said.

Harry shook his head.

“Well, you need to take these potions now,” his dad said. “Unless you’re still hungry.”

Harry shook his head and reached for the first one, he hadn’t been hungry to begin with.

Ron woke up to the smell of baking bread. Lunch hadn’t been that long ago but he was thinking about maybe picking up a snack before he left. He started stirring from his spot at the kitchen table and no sooner had he shown signs of life then he was being accosted by his Mum.

“Was I making too much noise dear?” Mum asked. “You can go back to sleep, I just finished putting the dishes away.”

“No that was great Mum,” Ron said. “I should get going, I’m going to Diagon Alley to see Harry.”

“You just went yesterday,” Mum said.

“To see Hermione,” Ron said. She didn’t know he had spent most of the day with Harry.

“The three of you should coordinate better so you aren’t traveling around so much,” Mum said. “You’re not getting enough rest as it is.”

“I’m fine Mum,” Ron said. “Really, I feel great, I’ll see you tonight.” Feeling great was a relative term really, he did feel a lot less sleep deprived. He hadn’t hallucinated anything lately, so that was a plus.

“Okay, well stay safe,” Mum said, giving him a hug.

“I will,” Ron said. He walked over to the floo. He’d actually have to go to Diagon Alley first, so he wasn’t technically lying to his Mum.

“You are a bit early Mr. Weasley,” Snape said, when Ron spun out of the fireplace. “Harry won’t be waking up for another hour.”

Harry was asleep on the couch, curled up in a ball at one end. Besides the discontented look on his face and the horrendously messy hair, he didn’t look like he had been a wolf seven hours ago.
“Oh,” Ron said. “Well good, gives us a chance to talk.”

“We do not need another one of those pep talks,” Snape said, motioning Ron to follow him into the kitchen. “I can assure you I have not been torturing Harry in the dungeons all summer.”

“See,” Ron said. “It’s the same with Harry. You’ve both set the bar way too low. I’m not worried you’re torturing him in the dungeons, I’m worried… wait, do you have dungeons here? Are you, like, incapable of sleeping above ground?”

“Mr. Weasley,” Snape said with more than a tinge of exasperation. Ron felt a moment of panic that he had to squash down. He wasn’t going to let Greyback ruin his free rein to tease Snape. Let the Slytherin see him wobble and he’d turn the tables on Ron.

“So no dungeon,” Ron said, taking a seat at the kitchen table. “That makes sense. So I’ll cut to the chase. What are you getting Harry for his birthday?”

“I do not believe it is customary for Harry to know ahead of time,” Snape said.

“I’m not going to tell him,” Ron said. “I just need to make sure you’re not messing up.”

“It is an excellent present,” Snape said.

“I’m sure it’s awesome, but that’s not the point, the point is…” Ron sighed. “Okay, story time.”

Snape, who really did look like he hadn’t slept the night before just looked resigned at this point.

“So a year ago when I’m turning thirteen, I get this present from my brother Percy,” Ron said. “It was really nice, I could tell he’d gone out of his way to find it, and well, you know, with our allowance, well, it was a nice gift, or it would have been a couple of years prior. See I used to be really into this comic book series, Max the Mage. Besides the Cannon’s, it was probably the thing I talked the most about way back when. Then I grew out of it. Couple years later, Percy gets me an original copy of the first issue. Great gift for ten year old Ron. But I was thirteen, and I hadn’t cared about Max the Mage in years, and I was sort of able to mark thereabouts the date that Percy really stopped paying any attention to me. He tried, you know, but he didn’t really know me anymore, not really. The gifts we get from family matter a lot. So let’s make sure Harry’s first proper birthday is awesome.”

“It will be his first proper birthday, won’t it,” Snape said. He had a dark look on his face, and Ron wondered if Snape hated the Dursleys as much as he did. “I have gotten him a potions bandolier that can be worn unobtrusively and will be stocked with a number of potions useful in an emergency.”

“See,” Ron said. “This is why I asked.”

“It is a good gift,” Snape said. “And should he ever need it, I will be very glad that he has it.”

“Yeah,” Ron said. “I’ll be glad for Harry to have it too. Go ahead and give it to Harry, just not as a birthday present.”

“Why ever not?” Snape asked.

“Okay,” Ron said. “Let’s say Harry’s birthday wasn’t for months yet. Wouldn’t you probably just give it to him a lot sooner, ‘cause, you know, you want him to have it for emergencies.”

“Yes,” Snape said.
“If you’d give it to him regardless, it isn’t a birthday present,” Ron said. “Birthdays are for things he wants, not things he needs.” And didn’t it suck that Harry really needed that.

Snape paused.

“What does Harry want?” Snape asked.

“Not a lot,” Ron said. “Remember what I said about the bar being low? But that doesn’t mean there aren’t things he wouldn’t love if you got them for him. I made a list.”

Ron pulled a piece of parchment out of his pocket and slid it across the table. Snape picked it up and started looking it over.

“I am not getting him a flying death stick,” he deadpanned.

“It’s just one of the options,” Ron said. “Beside’s it’s the safest broom on the market.”

“No, it has the most safety features on the market, because it’s also the most dangerous broom on the market.”

“I’m pretty sure Harry talks about that broom in his sleep,” Ron said.

“Harry has been known to make poor decisions regarding his own safety,” Snape said.

“Like I said,” Ron said. “One of the options. Just, you know, think about it.” He had to at least try. What were best friends for?

“Let’s talk the big day,” Ron said.

The adults had been right when they had said that Harry would feel better after he had gotten some sleep. Much like the month before, though, better was very much a relative term. Still though, waking up to hear Ron’s voice from the kitchen was nice, it was really nice. He smiled briefly. He felt nice for about three seconds before Harry’s brain caught up with him. That wasn’t a thought a boy should have about his best friend. That wasn’t a thought he should be having at all, and what the hell was Ron doing there?

Had Ron told Harry he’d be coming over today? He probably had and Harry just couldn’t do the one thing he was supposed to do and write it down. Why was he always fucking things up? He was such a fucking nightmare. Why did Ron even put up with him? Why did anyone? Harry didn’t know why, but he’d bet anything that Ron wouldn’t put up with him for a second if he knew the stupid thoughts Harry had been having about him lately. He’d think Harry was disgusting. He could hear Aunt Petunia’s voice in his head, calling him a freak. Harry shut his eyes again and reached up to yank at his hair, desperate to stop that train of thought as the word freak echoed around in his head. He tried for a while to think of something else, he tried to occlude, to focus on the feeling of his mother’s love, but his brain just wasn’t working right. He should be better at this. He was so fucking useless. He was such a burden to others.

Harry didn’t know how long he stayed there like that, curled up on the couch and stuck in his own head, but it was the scraping of a chair in the kitchen that brought him out of it. Was Ron coming into the sitting room? His eyes shot open and he let go of his hair. Just act natural. He forced the
miserable expression off of his face, and did his best to look like he was just waking up. It didn’t help that he felt like he needed to catch his breath.

“Oh, hey,” Ron said. “You’re up. How’re you doing?”

Harry did his best to smile for Ron. He was a little shocked to see that Ron was coming out of the kitchen with his dad. Of course that was who Ron had been talking to. What had they been talking about though? Harry felt nervous.

“I’m, um, good,” Harry said, feeling panicked. “Just tired.” He hadn’t told Ron how much of a mess he was after the full moon. He could see his dad giving him a raised eyebrow over Ron’s shoulder.

“That’s cool,” Ron said. “We can just chill.”

“Yeah,” Harry said.

“Are either of you hungry?” his dad asked.

Harry shook his head, looking down at his lap.

“Lunch wasn’t too long ago for me,” Ron said.

“I will be in my lab,” his dad said. “Let me know if you need anything.”

“Sure,” Ron said.

There was a bit of silence until his dad was gone.

“So how’d it go?” Ron asked.


“What do you mean broken bones?” Ron asked, and Harry remembered that he had definitely not been going to tell Ron about any of that. “When you said you didn’t get put back right, I thought you meant more like how some people might mess up in Transfiguration.”

“It’s not a big deal,” Harry said, trying to reassure Ron. Why did he always have to put his foot in his mouth, like a prat? Ron already felt bad about everything. “Madame Pomfrey comes over to put everything right.”

“Yeah?” Ron said, worrying at the hem of his sleeve. “Still, you weren’t kidding when you said it was rough.”

Harry shook his head looking down. Now Ron was upset. Ron had been having a perfectly good day and then Harry had just had to ruin things. Like he ruined everything. He didn’t deserve a friend like Ron, and soon enough Ron was going to realize it, and so was Hermione, and then his dad, and then everyone would know that he was a useless, stupid freak who shouldn’t even have been born. Greyback should have torn into his throat instead of his stupid shoulder. What business did Harry have claiming Ron as a friend? Why the hell was he still here? Why did he have to mess it up?

In the middle of it, he lost track of his surroundings. He didn’t realize he was crying until Ron said. “Shit.”

“Fuck,” Harry said. “Sorry.” He was such a mess.
“Hey,” Ron said. “It’s all right. Um, don’t worry about it. Not like this is a first.”

Harry shook his head, trying to calm down.

“It’s okay to be upset, you know?” Ron said. “Things have been pretty messed up lately.”

“I’ve been messed up lately,” Harry said. He’d always been messed up.

“You and me both,” Ron said, as he awkwardly sat next to him on the couch and threw an arm around Harry’s shoulder and drew him into a side hug. Harry struggled, trying to keep his emotions in check. He wanted to draw strength from the contact, to feel as though Ron would always be there for him, but all he had was the certainty that everything was temporary, that he was going to lose everything. As hard as he tried he couldn’t stop crying, any second, he knew, Ron was going to give up on him in disgust.

Harry felt like the walls were closing in, he felt that everything was coming to an end, he couldn’t imagine things ever being better. Suddenly though, Harry’s shuddering sobs turned into a gasp when his mother’s protection enveloped him. He soon found himself returning Ron’s embrace as a feeling of peace suffused him and he could accept the comfort his friend was offering him. He rested his head on Ron’s shoulder and started to calm down. He felt his mother’s love. He knew that Ron was there for him, just as he had been there for Ron. He knew that both he and Ron had been going through a hard time, and Ron wasn’t going to judge Harry for having a bad day.

They stayed like that while Harry caught his breath and got himself back into a semblance of all right. He hoped that as the magic faded he would be left feeling like normal, but as the protection drifted away from him he found that while he no longer felt like the weight of the world was crushing down on him, he still felt incredibly weary and strained. Still though, he knew he would be all right. He pulled back from Ron and sighed. He wished the protection would always activate like that when he needed it.

“Thanks for coming over,” Harry said.

“I just wish I could have been here for you your last sick day,” Ron said, and suddenly Harry was reminded of his first visit to the Weasley’s after the previous full moon. He had had to tell Mrs. Weasley that he had been sick to explain his haggard look and Ron had said that he’d have to check in on him if he had any more sick days. He had thought Ron had been joking, since he knew that Harry wasn’t really sick.

“You don’t have to,” Harry said.

“I know I feel better when I’m feeling down and you visit,” Ron said. “Same with seeing Hermione. It’s what friends are for. Speaking of, you really helped me out.”

“Yeah?” Harry asked.

“Well, there’s only so much restraint we can expect from them,” Harry said. “Still though, I’m glad you’re getting some sleep. How was Hermione yesterday?”

“Good,” Ron said. “Doing better than me, by the looks of things. Though I think part of that is putting on a good front for her parents. She told them she’s got depression or something so they’d let her see a muggle mind healer. That’s why they canceled their vacation. She sees this bloke
every Wednesday. She didn’t want you to worry, but yesterday she said you might worry less if you knew she was getting help.”

“Oh,” Harry said. “Well good, if it’s helping. If they’re a muggle though, how’s she getting around the statute of secrecy?”

“Lying a lot, I guess,” Ron said. “Muggles get kidnapped and stuff too I suppose.”

“So what about you,” Harry asked.

“I’m doing all right,” Ron said. “Things are getting better. Don’t worry about it.”

“Still though, if it helps,” Harry said, he was still very worried about Ron. “What’re you going to do when school starts.”

“Sleep in class,” Ron said with a shrug. “I don’t know, it’s a long way off.”

“Yeah,” Harry said frowning.

“So do you wanna do anything?” Ron asked.

Harry didn’t feel like he had the mental fortitude to get up off the couch. Really, just holding a normal conversation was a bit of a strain. As nice as it was to have Ron over, he didn’t really feel up to anything.

Ron could probably tell as much by the face Harry made because he waved off the question he had asked and said. “I could read to you from this book I brought.”

“You want to read to me?” Harry asked.

“Sure,” Ron said. “That’s what we normally do when someone’s laid up in bed. I read Ginny the entirety of the Astrid’s Clan series when she had dragon pox. That’s why I’m her favorite.”

“I thought Charlie was her favorite,” Harry quipped.

“Lies,” Ron declared.

“What’d you bring?” Harry asked.

“It’s from the Auror Lyle series,” Ron said. “He’s a squib see, so he has to solve crimes without magic. Not that there’re actual squib Aurors but it’s fun. Bill got me hooked on them when I was younger. They’re serials so you don’t need to have read the previous ones.”


Harry took it easy the next couple of days. It took him a while to really start feeling like he was completely recovered.

“How do you feel today?” his dad asked when he got downstairs for breakfast the third day after the full moon.
“Good, I think,” Harry said, it was mostly true. "What's this?” He asked, eying a parchment paper wrapped bundle at his spot at the dining table.

"It is a gift," his dad said. "You should open it."

"It isn't my birthday yet though," Harry said. He was pretty sure his dad knew when his birthday was.

"It isn't a birthday gift," his dad said. "It is something I wanted you to have regardless."

"Oh," Harry said, curious. "Okay."

He untied the twine and pulled off the paper. "Oh hey, potions," he said. "Is this a carrying thing?” He held up a leather belt with a number of pouches on it.

"It is," his dad said. "I would like you to wear it wherever you go."

"So it's that sort of potions," Harry said.

"Can you guess which one is which?” His dad asked.

“Ummm, Polyjuice,” Harry said, pointing to one. "Sang Olaes, Vitality Draught, Dittany, that's just a bezoar, umm Healall, is that Widow's Shield?"

"It is, and it is charmed with a rather complex locking spell," his dad said. "There is a brush so it can be applied to a door. Can you name any others?"

Harry shook his head, was this a test?

His dad pointed. "That is Mercury's Elixir, for speed, and Hercules Blood for strength. This is Polyglots Draft, for a short period of time, you will speak the tongue of whoever you speak to. Oh, and this is a contraception potion."

Harry covered his face with his hands. "Not necessary, dad," he said, hoping to head off any sort of conversation of that nature. It took him a moment to realize what he had said. He uncovered his face and saw that his dad was smiling, though whether for the 'dad,' or for his embarrassment, Harry didn't know. Not exactly the scenario Harry had pictured for calling his dad 'dad' to his face for the first time.

"Needless to say all of these potions should be saved for emergencies, and I should not need to remind you that enhancement potions will take a heavy toll on you, however, should you, for whatever reason, find that you need anything replaced, I want you to tell me. You can say you lost it, or that the vial shattered, it does not matter, because I want you to have it, and I don't want you to be worried about telling me. All right?"

"All right," Harry said. "Um, thanks. I won't use anything unless I have to. Can I join you in the lab today?” He was quick to change the subject, lest the topic of that last potion come up again.

"There will be no potions today,” his dad said. “Today there will be foolish wand waving."

“Um,” Harry said. “I don’t think the ministry will appreciate that.”

“The ministry won’t see what happens at Hogwarts,” his dad said. “It’s time to start training you for this prophesy.”

“Who’s going to train me?” Harry asked with a bit of trepidation. He was glad to be able to learn
magic during the summer, but he was still pretty unsure of how he was supposed to feel about the whole prophesy thing. He hadn’t been thinking about it much.

“I will,” his dad said.

Harry frowned.

“I am more than qualified,” his dad said.

“No no,” Harry said. “I’m just… I don’t want to embarrass myself.” This sounded like a great opportunity to look like a complete mess in front of his dad.

“Why do you think you’re going to embarrass yourself?” his dad asked.

Harry blushed.

“Because I’ll probably mess up a lot,” Harry said.

“You tested very highly while taking two years exams at the same time,” his dad said. “I am sure you will do fine.”

“Those were just tests though,” Harry said.

“You have proven yourself very capable of keeping your cool in a fight,” his dad said.

Harry frowned.

“What’s going through your head right now?” his dad asked, going back to his psychiatry stuff.

“I don’t know,” Harry said. “I just feel like I’m going to mess up.”

“You might,” his dad said. “This will be complicated, and it’s practical application is difficult even in training. You are worried about making mistakes. How can we reframe this scenario?”

Harry sighed. “Umm, maybe- its better to make mistakes in practice than when you really need it.”

“That’s good,” his dad said. “Mistakes are how we learn.”

Harry wished he could record that and go play it back to his dad three years ago.

“So it is all right to make mistakes,” his dad continued. “So what about your worries about embarrassing yourself?”

“Well,” Harry thought. “Um, I guess, so I probably will make mistakes, and you’re expecting me to make mistakes, so when I do, it’ll be okay and I don’t need to be worried.”

“Excellent,” his dad praised, and Harry thought he got the most praise from his dad when he went into his psychology schtick. “Now, I will be training you in magic, as well, there is going to be someone who will teach you to use that dagger so you won’t impale yourself with it.”

“Is the dagger really necessary?” Harry asked.

His dad sighed. “We shall have to trust the headmaster on that,” he said. “Either way, you will be better prepared to defend yourself. I had Lupin send me your work from your finals. You did do very well, but defense is a lot more than just being able to do the right spell. This is going to be hard work.”
“I can do that,” Harry said.

“I know you can,” his dad said. “Today we’ll be reviewing what you’ve learned, tonight you can start studying more advanced materials.”

Harry ate his breakfast in silence, thinking about this latest development.

“Am I supposed to kill Voldemort?” Harry asked.

His father did not answer for a moment. “I believe it is likely,” he said. “Though I have not heard the complete prophesy. Regardless, you will be involved, and you must be able to protect yourself.”

Harry didn’t eat anymore. They went to school where they were greeted by the headmaster and they got to work.

"I can't believe you didn't tune in to the game," Ron said to Harry. "Ireland smashed through Spain's fancy Chaser formations."

Ron was more animated and excited than Harry had seen him in a long while and he was happy to see it, in spite of the bags under Ron’s eyes. Ron described the game like he had been there. Up ahead, the twins and Mr. Weasley led the way towards Tooling’s Charm Shop where they were supposedly going to be finalizing business matters.

"So then Vasquez comes right through their center line, but McLaughlin sends a bludger straight at Flaherty who redirects at Vazquez right as he's tossing. The Quaffle goes way off, and Collins catches it and near well throws it halfway down the pitch to Carmichael. Collins probably has the best arm in the league, you know. Certainly not the best on a broom, but no one throws like him, and- Shit!" Ron choked out.

Hands grabbed Harry and he was pulled sideways. He could smell Ron’s terror, a sharp acrid smell, and his hackles rose. He twisted out of the grasp and reached for his wand, even as he realized that it was Ron who had grabbed him. They were in an alleyway now, between a used bookstore and a tea shop. Harry hated that they’d split from the older Weasleys. He couldn't hear any commotion and he peered cautiously around the corner. Nothing seemed out of place.

"Ron, what is it?" Harry hissed. He got no answer besides Ron's excited breathing.

"Ron what did you see?" Harry asked turning towards Ron. Ron had slid against the side of the tea shop. Harry's first thought was that Ron had been hurt in some way, but there wasn't any blood. Ron was clutching at his robes like he needed something to hold on to, rather than clutching the source of any injury, but he did look pained.

"Ron what happened?" Harry asked.

"Stupid, stupid, stupid," Ron said, under his breath, shaking his head.

"Ron?"

"Nothing," Ron said. "It was just... I thought I saw... Forget about it. He’s dead. I was just being
stupid."

"Are you all right?" Harry asked.

Ron shook his head. Harry didn't need to ask what had happened, he didn't need to ask who was dead.

"I did the same thing," Harry said, sitting next to Ron in the little alleyway. "Remember, I freaked out on Benjamin while we were training? For a bit I thought I was back being man handled by Him. It's okay if--"

"None of this is okay," Ron said. "It's not going to be okay."

"It's going to be better," Harry said. "Hasn't it been getting better?"

"It's been two months," Ron said. "I should be over this. Instead I'm acting like its some accomplishment I can nap during the day if someone's watching my back and I'm panicking 'cause some guy vaguely resembled that piece of shit."

"But you're doing loads better," Harry said. "You got so animated when you were talking about the game just now. I had nightmares for, like, a month after the Chamber of Secrets. My uncle's a light sleeper and he'd give me a hard time if I woke him up in the middle of the night 'cause I'm tossing and turning. But you know, it got better after a while, and then it got better still. You're still getting better. You're going to keep getting better."

"What if I don't?" Ron asked. "What if I never get better? What if I just carry this shit around with me for the rest of my life."

Harry shrugged. "You'll have friends who help you out," he said. "Forever."

"I can't keep on being useless like this," Ron said.

"You're not useless," Harry said, upset to hear Ron say that.

"There you are," Harry heard one of the twins say as he rounded the corner. "What are you doing sitting in an alley? We were worried sick."

Harry just stared at Fred, not sure what to say. Ron was silent too. George came up, calling their dad who was probably also looking for them.

"You all right?" George asked.

"Yeah," Ron said. "I just… didn't like the crowd was all, needed a breather. I'm good. Sorry. Let's go."

Ron stood up and started walking away, like everything was fine. Harry stared after him for a moment before getting up himself. The older Weasleys gave him questioning looks, but Harry looked down and pressed on. They arrived at Tooling’s Charm Shop and Harry and Ron went to look around while the twins and their dad went to speak to Madame Tooling.

"Oh this would be handy for potions," Harry told Ron, holding up a stone bowl. "It’s charmed to grind up beetles." He looked at the tag. "And only beetles. That’s oddly specific."

"Hmm." Ron replied.

"There’s some really nice chess sets here," Harry said.
“Yeah,” Ron said. “Hermione keeps telling me to work on my project over the summer, but I’m having enough trouble concentrating on my homework.”

Harry didn’t think it was wise at this point to say he had already finished his.

“Percy could probably help you with any homework,” Harry said.

“Not likely,” Ron said. “Did I tell you he got his job? He’s working in the Department of International Cooperation. He’s working crazy hours, we hardly see him anymore. When we do, of course, he won’t shut up about his job. The new head is some up and coming and Percy wants to model his career after her. Don’t worry, I’ll do all right on homework.”

They kept looking around.

“Oi, Potter,” Fred hollered. Harry looked up.

“Did you mention the gloves to the aurors?” George asked.

“Um, yeah,” Harry said. “I’d used them to get past, um, Him, at the Shrieking Shack. Why?”

“Because the DMLE’s already put in a pre-order,” Fred said. “We’re already getting paid.”

“Oh, cool,” Harry said trying to stay in the moment. Trying not to think of what else he had done with the twin’s invention that night. He heard a gurgling snarl in his head and turned his attention to a random product in front of him. He held it up for Ron’s perusal. “Quill of Perfect Handwriting,” Harry said.

“Think it’s allowed at school?” Ron asked.

“We shall see,” Harry said, sticking the quill behind his ear for later purchase. He almost added, ‘it’s only a galleon,’ but thought better of it. He kept up the small talk, trying to keep Ron engaged, trying to keep him from returning to his darker thoughts of Greyback. It helped Harry keep his mind off of that too.

“Ron, Harry, we’re done up here,” Mr. Weasley called.

Harry made his purchase and left with Ron.

“So how many did you sell?” Ron asked.

“Twenty,” Fred said. “Can you believe it? That’s just a trial buy, they’ll probably buy more when they see how useful they are. I bet they’ll want to outfit the hitwizards too.”

“And you better believe everyone’s going to want a pair after they see the aurors using them,” said George.

“We won’t have any trouble opening our joke shop now,” said Fred.

“We should stock up,” George said. “Our products won’t invent themselves.”

“Can we stop at the apothecary dad?” Fred asked.

“Now you shouldn’t be spending all of that at once,” Mr. Weasley said.

“Don’t worry about that,” George said.
"More’s to come,” said Fred.

“You should never assume,” Mr. Weasley said. “Save some for a rainy day.”

“This is England dad,” George reminded him.

“When isn’t it a rainy day?” Fred asked.

“Still,” Mr. Weasley said. “You never know, but oh well. Come on then. Ron, Harry, did you want to meet us in the Leaky Cauldron in half an hour.”

“Sure,” Harry said after Ron nodded.

The elder Weasleys walked off leaving Ron and Harry alone. The both of them started walking to Quality Quidditch.

“So your birthday’s tomorrow,” Ron said.

“Yes,” Harry said. He wasn’t exactly nervous per se, but he did feel that there was something important about his first birthday with his dad and he was worried that something would spoil it, like Christmas had been.

“Got any plans,” Ron asked.

“My dad’s taking me to this fair in Hogsmeade,” Harry said. “We’ll be disguised of course.”

“Ohay,” Ron said. “How long are you going to be there? ‘Cause that’s a lot of doses of Polyjuice. Does he even know there’s stuff besides potions for that?”

“Some people can see through glamours,” Harry said. “And I don’t think Transfiguration was his best subject… Don’t tell him I said that.”

“Never,” Ron said. “So do you want to drop by afterwards. I already talked to Hermione about coming over. There’ll be cake.”

“Sure,” Harry said. “Oh, so my dad made me something.” He showed Ron the potions belt he was wearing with his slacks under his robes.

“Neat,” Ron said. “Anything fun?”

“Mercury’s Elixir might be,” Harry said. “But everything’s for emergencies.”

“That sucks,” Ron said. “I heard a guy beat a cheetah on that stuff. That would probably be fun.”

“Yeah, and then my legs fall off afterwards,” Harry said. That was an exaggeration, but there was a reason enhancement potions weren’t used often.

"So did you ask your dad about the quidditch cup?" Ron asked.

"I don't know if we're going to have time," Harry said.

"Yeah, but did you ask?" Ron asked.

"No," Harry said.

"It can't hurt to ask," Ron said.
"Yeah," Harry said.

"So you're still working on that potions stuff huh?" Ron asked.

"Yeah," Harry said. Though now training at Hogwarts was taking up most of their time. Harry hadn't told Ron about that. It wasn't the sort of secret he'd normally keep from Ron, but he didn't want Ron worrying about why Harry needed that training. Ron didn't want anymore adventures. It wasn't like it was the worst secret Harry was keeping from his best friend.

They walked into Quality Quidditch together. The Firebolt was still prominently displayed in the store, and Harry took some time to admire it. It had survived the year as the best broom on the market though there was talk of a new broom coming out soon. At least that might explain why the price had gone down recently. There was a lot of speculation in Ron's latest edition of Witch Broomstick about what new features might be included.

"Wouldn't hurt to ask for that either," Ron said.

Harry laughed. "That would be really pushing it," he said. "I'm pretty sure he's gotten me whatever he's gotten me.

"Still," Ron said. "Could you imagine everyone's face if you showed up on the pitch with one of those. Slytherin would be in tears."

"Yeah, I bet Malfoy's face would be priceless," Harry said.

"Did you hear the rumors about Malfoy at the end of the year?" Ron asked

"No," Harry said. "What rumors? And where were you hearing rumors at the end of the year." Ron hadn't exactly been interacting with the rest of the school body those last few weeks.

"Oh I didn’t hear it then," Ron said. "Just heard about it now. They said he led a luck ritual for Kevin and us to come back safe."

"Erstwhile?" Harry asked.

"Yeah," Ron said. "While we were… you know."

"Yeah," Harry said. "What's a luck ritual?"

"That's ancient magic," Ron said. "Like the stuff they did before there were wands. It's, like, supposed to change probability or fate or something."

The magic his father had sold his soul to Voldemort for.

"And people are saying he did it for you and Hermione too?" Harry asked.

Ron shrugged. "It sort of makes sense if you think of what a ritual like that would entail. There's so many stories about the old magic. Most of them are cautionary tales, but you know, you pick stuff up. But like with luck, you're not changing reality, you're changing odds. If one of us died, then the odds were the rest of us were in a situation where we were going to die. Best to wish for everyone to be all right."

"How'd you hear about it?" Harry asked.

"I heard Dad talking about it to Mum," Ron said. "The ministry’s investigating to see if any laws were broken. Of course it's a Malfoy, so I'm sure they'll find they weren't. I wonder if a sacrifice
was involved.”

“Sacrifice?” Harry asked, horrified. His head was filled with horrific images of some sort of blood ritual.

“The stories usually mention a sacrifice,” Ron said. “It varies. I dunno, something is given up. Either physical or metaphorical. There’s some really messed up stories out there, like sick stuff people did to, like, grant themselves skills or beauty or whatnot. But there’s only one story I remember about a luck ritual and it involved like a prized possession or something.”

“I can’t imagine Malfoy giving up any prized possessions for anybody else,” Harry said.

Ron shrugged. “He’s up to something. That’s for sure. It’s probably some plot. Whatever it is, let’s stay out of it, yeah?”

“Sure,” Harry said, now very curious to know exactly what Malfoy was playing at.

“So do you think it worked?” Harry asked.

“Who knows?” Ron asked. “You wouldn’t really.”

“I mean, everything didn’t exactly go off without a hitch,” Harry said, rubbing his shoulder.

“Well you wouldn’t have been covered by the luck,” Ron said. “Though you could very well have been an agent of it. The old magic’s unpredictable. That’s why there’re so many cautionary tales. A bunch of old sorcerers had weird stuff happen. Unintended consequences and careful what you wish for and all that.”

There had been a lot of unintended consequences that night, Harry thought. Yet in the end, Ron and Hermione had been brought back.

“So you’re on a first name basis Erstwhile?” Harry asked.

“I’ve written him a couple times,” Ron said, shrugging. “We all spent a bunch of time together. I guess he’s doing all right.”

Ron got silent after that, and Harry thought he was probably thinking of that time spent together.

“Check out this practice quaffle,” Harry said, distracting Ron.

The two boys perused the store together for a while before heading to the Leaky Cauldron for lunch, the twins’ treat.

"So how is Harry doing?" Dr. Abbasi asked Severus after he had gotten settled for the session.

"Better, I think," Severus said. "Though he is resistant in most areas to this endeavor. He prefers to say that everything is fine."

"And yet he is doing better," Dr. Abbasi prompted.

"He is putting in the effort." Severus said. "He struggles though, to come up with alternatives, and
"I suppose I struggle not to feed them to him."

"It is important that he feel that he is part of the process, that these thoughts come from him," Dr. Abbasi said. "You've been living together for a month now, how do you feel he has adjusted?"

"We are coming along," Severus said. "Slowly. There is a part of him that I feel I saw earlier on in our relationship before he had told me I was his father. When he was more relaxed around me. Now that our relationship is more formalized, I feel that he is mostly trying to walk on eggshells. I think, more and more though, I'm starting to see his more carefree side. Gradually."

"Sometimes when children gain a new guardian, and a new home, they will act out, try to see where the boundaries are," Dr. Abbasi said. "Have you seen anything like that?"

"Goodness no," Severus said. "He is very clearly trying to be perfect. I haven't really known him to act out since he was twelve. Thank goodness he learned better ways to handle stress. No, the most he’s tested the boundaries has been slightly edging towards the light banter we had before he moved in."

"What happened when he was twelve?" Dr. Abbasi asked.

Severus considered his answer for a moment. "There was a rather unpleasant disturbance at our school, and the culprit went uncaught for a long while. There was an unfounded rumor that Harry was involved and a number of students turned against him. Harry became rather frustrated and wound up with a number of detentions that year. Of course that did nothing to help the rumors. He was vindicated in the end, but I'm rather certain that having most of the school turn against him did poorly for his self esteem."

"Tell me a bit about his support system at school," Dr. Abbasi said.

"That would mainly consist of Mr. Weasley, and Miss Granger," Severus said. "His best friends. Additionally he is on his house team. He is moderately close to his teammates. I don’t know that he is at all close with any of the other students. I believe he holds a great deal of respect for his head of house, but I don’t think he particularly trusts her."

"Do you know much about his friends?" Dr. Abbasi asked.

"Harry enjoys a great deal of camaraderie with Mr. Weasley, who is a bit more outgoing than Harry is and I believe is responsible, in part, for bringing Harry out of his shell so to speak. Miss Granger is largely responsible for Harry's grades. Which isn't to say that Harry does not work very hard himself, but he is easily distracted without Miss Granger's guidance. The three of them have had their fair share of adventures together. Both of them were heavily involved in Harry and myself beginning a filial relationship. As to the house team, they are all older than Harry, one of them just graduated. Two of them are Mr. Weasley’s older brothers. I believe they are close as team mates but they don’t interact very much outside of their shared interest."

"Is Harry comfortable confiding in any of them?" Dr. Abbasi asked.

"To an extent," Severus said. "Mr. Weasley and Miss Granger knew about me being Harry’s father long before I did. But I do not believe Harry has ever really confided about the Dursleys with anyone past that they did not get along."

"Adolescents often keep the things that bother them to themselves,” Dr. Abbasi said. “It can be important for them to have people they are comfortable confiding in. Even if that person is not you, you should encourage Harry to talk to his friends or yourself if he feels that there is something
that is affecting him.”

“I know that there are many secrets he is keeping from me,” Severus said. “Some are likely in relation to the Dursleys, and I have some suspicions on others.”

“A lot of adolescents become secretive,” Dr. Abbasi said. “Part of that is because they’re trying to establish their own identity, something that is unique and separate to themselves. They might not always be ready to share that with everyone. It can also be detrimental to try to find out every secret your child has. It can cause an adversarial relationship. Watch out for signs that Harry may be doing something dangerous to himself, but for the most part, you need to accept that there are some things that he’s going to keep to himself. What you can do is to comport yourself in a manner such that he will feel that he could confide in you if he so chose. We can talk about that more in a bit, but there is something I wanted to go over that you brought up in your last session.”

“What is that?” Severus asked.

“You mentioned that he would list off his own detractors,” Dr. Abbasi said. “As though he had an internal list of personal failings.”

“Yes,” Severus said. “Before he told me I was his father, he… tested me, by trying to determine if I would still care for him if I knew about his negative traits. I get the feeling that the list is a lot longer and deeper than he ever got to though. I find it baffling considering his many accomplishments.”

“Perhaps he needs another list then,” Dr. Abbasi said. “We often have the most trouble seeing ourselves clearly. I’d like to focus the majority of this session on how you can develop that with him. You say you found the list baffling, what if Harry saw what you saw when you see him.”

“That sounds wise,” Severus said. Of course he himself had not always seen Harry clearly.

Harry didn’t stay up late that night. He didn’t wait for midnight and the moving of the clock from eleven fifty-nine to midnight. He didn’t wait to become fourteen. He would have a new tradition now. He would spend his birthday with the people he cared about. Harry went to bed a thirteen year old, and woke up fourteen. He didn’t feel any different than he had the day before, but he rather thought that he was a fair bit different from when he had turned thirteen, and not just because he was now a werewolf.

“You are not supposed to make breakfast on your birthday,” his dad said, walking into the kitchen on the morning of the thirty-first.

“I’m not?” Harry asked.

“I thought adolescents were supposed to sleep in,” his dad said.

“That’s what alarm clocks are for,” Harry said.

“And just what are you making?” his dad asked.

“Eggs Benedict,” Harry said. “Dean visited America last summer and he said it was the best thing he had there.”
“So he brought the recipe back with him?” his dad asked.

“Crumpets, ham, a poached egg, and hollandaise,” Harry said, shrugging. “He didn’t know what the sauce was called, but I’m pretty sure it was hollandaise. I figured it’d be a good birthday breakfast.”

“I’m sure it will be,” his dad said. “Perhaps it can be a birthday tradition.”

“Well let’s see how it comes out,” Harry said. “Dean also likes to put fried eggs on top of his pancakes and smother it in syrup, so who knows.”

“Perhaps the tradition could be trying something new,” his dad said.

“Well everything’s new today,” Harry said.

“I suppose it is,” his dad said.

“Do you have any birthday traditions?” Harry asked. “Hey, when is your birthday?”

“January ninth,” his dad said.

“You didn’t say anything,” Harry said.

“It has been a long while since I have celebrated my birthday,” his dad said. “My only tradition is putting up with the Headmaster’s annual reminder that I am a year older. At any rate, it is far too close to Christmas.”

“I didn’t even get you anything though,” Harry said.

“You have given me a great deal,” his dad said.

Harry almost choked on that. “Oh,” he said. “Eggs are ready.”

Plating was pretty quick and they were eating soon after.

“You said you don’t like to cook,” his dad said.

“Did I?” Harry asked, casting back. “Oh, I said it got repetitive. Do the same fry up every morning, the same rotation every other week for dinner. I’d thought early on I could, like, impress Aunt Petunia if I got good at cooking, so I really tried, and I learned stuff, and I read her homemaker magazines, and there was all this stuff I wanted to try out, but um… it didn’t go like I thought. So yeah,” Harry said.

“You know, Harry,” his dad said. “Nothing you could have ever done would have ever been enough for them. It was never any inadequacy on your part, it was their obstinace.”

“Oh,” Harry said. He’d rather not do the whole psychoanalysis thing today. “Right.”

“This is very good,” his dad said. “Perhaps we should try Mr. Thomas’ pancake concoction.”

“Ummm,” Harry said. “Maybe next birthday.” He suddenly found himself unable to talk and it took him a moment to force the next words out of his mouth. “So um, can I ask you for something?”

“Well you can ask, but I did already get you a birthday present,” his dad said.
“Not that sort of something,” Harry said. “Um, so, like, you’ve been spending a lot of time working on this potions problem.”

“I know it is hard for you right now, Harry,” his dad said. “But I’m going to make this work.”

“That’s the thing,” Harry said. “You had some ideas in the beginning but you already, like, disproved them and now we’re trying a bunch of stuff you know isn’t going to work. I think maybe there isn’t a solution.”

“We don’t know that yet,” his dad said.

“I sorta think you already do,” Harry said, biting his lip.

“Why on earth do you want me to stop trying,” his dad said. “I’m doing this for you. So this won’t be so hard on you.”

“All you do is work on it, and if you’re not doing that you’re training me to, like, fight Death Eaters, and if you’re not doing that you’re seeing a shrink about me,” Harry said.

“What do you want me to do?” his dad asked. “I can’t just work on another project when I know you’re going to be suffering under the full moon.”

“It’s going to hurt no matter what,” Harry said. “That’s not going to change. Professor Lupin helps a lot, just being here, and the whole, um, moodiness thing is going to go away eventually. I hope. Nothing else is really going to change if you figure out the potion, except the whole forgetting a day thing.” Though that was definitely something Harry could do without, that and the whole part where he looses his mind and wants to kill everyone around him.

“You’ll be dependent on Lupin,” his dad said. “What will you do if something were to happen to him? Who would you transform with?”

Harry shrugged. “You wanted a potions garden,” he said.

“What?” his dad asked.

“There’s a bunch of turned earth outside the cabin,” Harry said. “You wanted a potions garden for your new house, but you never got to it because you’ve been working on a problem that doesn’t have a solution. You had a bunch of research projects you had planned too. You also mentioned, you know, having some stuff planned to make sure I don’t go stir crazy, and I’m not complaining about you trying to help me, but I don’t want to be the reason you gave up everything and I think everything would be better if, maybe you worked on other things.”

His dad was silent for a while.

“This has been bothering you,” his dad said.

Harry sighed as his dad turned to his psychoanalysis thing.

“I just want this summer to be the way it was supposed to,” Harry said.

His dad sighed. “A great deal of time would still need to be spent training you.”

“I know,” Harry said. There was a pause as Harry waited to see what his dad would make of his request. He looked pained.

“Then what should we do with all of our extra time?”
“I’m not bad with a garden,” Harry said.

“It is a bit late to start planting,” his dad said.

Harry shrugged.

“We’ll think of something,” his dad said. “Come, the dishes can wait.”


There was a surprise waiting for Harry in the sitting room.

“That’s a big box,” Harry said. It was almost comically large, the edges all overlapping the coffee table.

“The size is mostly for obfuscation,” his dad said.

Harry gave him a questioning look but his dad merely nodded his head towards the box.

Harry pulled the ribbon on the top and stood back as the box unfolded and the sides fell down. Inside was a much smaller box. Harry gave his dad a bemused look.

“I do not believe the box is magical,” his dad said. “It is unlikely to open itself.”

“Is there an even smaller box inside?” Harry asked, trying to keep his tone light. Ostensibly he knew that his dad had really gotten him a gift, but another part nervously recalled being given fake presents at the Dursleys.

“The headmaster handled the packaging,” his dad said.

“So this is from…?” Harry asked.

“Myself and the headmaster,” Severus said. “But to tell that story would be to ruin the surprise.”

“Hmmm.” Harry decided that the best course would be to just open the box. The box really was very small. It fit in the palm of his hand. He removed the lid and pulled out a scale model of a broomstick.

“Oh,” Harry said. “Um, it’s really nice. Is it a charm?”

“Pull off the tab on the side,” his dad said.

Harry inspected it closely. “That’s a shrinking sticker,” he said.

“What you should pull off,” His dad said.

Harry looked at the tiny broom in his hand before looking back up at his dad.

“Is this… Is this a joke?” he wished he didn’t sound like there was a frog in his throat.

“It is not,” his dad assured him.

“I mean you didn’t really…” Harry looked at his father, before looking at the tiny item in his hand. He looked back up at his father who raised an eyebrow at him. He looked back at his palm and tentatively pulled the sticker off. Suddenly a full sized broom was in his hand. A full sized
“Oh no, you didn’t,” Harry said. “What the ffff…what? Is this really…? I mean, no way! Just, what!?”

“I take it, by the eloquence of your speech, that you like it,” his dad said.

“How’d you even know I wanted one?” Harry asked, he’d never said anything.

“Harry, I am fairly certain that everyone who plays quidditch wants a Firebolt,” his dad said. “Also, Mr. Weasley seemed to think it was a good idea.”

“Ron?” Harry asked. “But this is too much. It’s way too much.”

“I have missed a fair few birthdays,” his dad said. “Additionally, the headmaster did seem to think that you should start keeping a broom on you, so when I mentioned Mr. Weasley’s suggestion, he did seem to think that you should have the fastest broom available. So you may consider this a joint present from the both of us. Of course, should anyone ask, it was given to you by an anonymous benefactor.”

“I’ve got a Firebolt,” Harry said.

“Indeed,” his dad said.

“It’s an actual Firebolt,” Harry said.

“Yes,” his dad said.

“And you shrunk it?!” Harry asked scandalized, turning his attention firmly to the broom, making sure it was all right.

“I was rather serious about keeping that with you wherever you go,” his dad said. “The shrinking sticker will not have had an effect. Besides, I do recall that you shrunk down your Nimbus along with your entire trunk when you tried to run away from the Leakey Cauldron.”

“That was a Nimbus,” Harry said, as if it hadn’t been one of the nicer brooms still on the market when that had happened. “This…this is a Firebolt.”

“We have established that, yes” his dad said.

“I need to fly it,” Harry said.

“Unfortunately, that will have to wait,” his dad said.

“What?!” Harry asked.

“We have a tight schedule today,” his dad said. “The dueling spectacle at the fair is starting soon. Simply no time at all. Shrink it down Harry, you’ll have time later.”

“But,” Harry said, looking down at his broom. It did not do to forget that your dad was capable of great evil.

The fair was fun, but Harry found himself distracted by the Firebolt in his pocket.
It wasn’t really a surprise party. No one jumped out of hiding spots when he got there. He just arrived at the Weasleys to find that a number of his schoolmates were there. It took him a moment to figure out what was going on. At first he thought the twins had invited Oliver, Katie, Alicia, and Angelina over for their own thing. Then he spotted Neville through the doorway to the kitchen and wondered if he was friends with Ginny. When he spotted Parvati talking to Hermione though, he realized that he had no idea what was going on.

“Happy birthday Harry,” Angelina called out when she spotted him.

This was a party. It was Harry’s birthday. This was a birthday party for Harry.

“Oh,” Harry said. “Hi, um, thanks.”

There were a lot more ‘happy birthdays’ from around the room.

“About time you caught up with the rest of us,” Ron said. “Finally fourteen.”

“Was this you?” Harry asked.

Ron shrugged. “Oh, I figured you should have a party, but I let everyone else actually plan it.”

“You didn’t have to,” Harry said.

Ron just shrugged.

It was a low key party, mostly just hanging out. The twins came up with a few party games and there were snacks and eventually there was cake. Percy came back from his work at one point and after wishing Harry a happy birthday just started a conversation about international standards for cauldrons that Harry didn’t escape for a good ten minutes. When the party was winding down, Harry nudged Ron, who was looking a lot more tired than he had at the beginning of the party. “I’ve got something to show you,” he said.

“What’s up?” Ron asked. Harry nodded his head towards the stairs. They went up to Ron’s room.

“Did you really tell my dad to get me a Firebolt?” Harry asked.

“Of course I did,” Ron said. “Classic birthday tactic. See, you ask for something big, then when they say no you ask for something else and you’re more likely to get it. So what did your dad get you?”

Harry pulled out his Firebolt and unshrunk it.

“No bloody way,” Ron said.

“I guess Dumbledore helped ‘cause they want me to have a fast broom for emergencies,” Harry said.

“Oh my god,” Ron said. “It’s going to happen. We get to see Malfoy’s face when he finds out you have a Firebolt. Why is this a secret? You should show everyone else.”

Harry shrugged. “Didn’t want to lie to everyone when they’re all here for my birthday,” he said. Because of course they would all ask where it had come from.

“So what’s it like?” Ron asked.
“I don’t know,” Harry said. “My dad gave it to me and then was like, ‘well, time to go, things to do, people to see,’ and then we were out the door, and I still haven’t flown it.”

“That’s rough, buddy,” Ron said.

“I know, right?” Harry said. “It’s like torture.”

Ron grimaced at that, and Harry paused himself from feeling bad about not being able to fly his racing broom yet.

“So anyway,” Harry said. “As soon as we get a chance we’ll have to try it out. Gryffindor’s going to be unstoppable with a Firebolt and a Nimbus on the team.”

“A Firebolt and a Nimbus?” Ron asked.

“Well, I mean you’d have to make the team, but there’s an opening and all and you could totally try out this year,” Harry said.

“Um,” Ron said.

“So, well, like do you want my Nimbus?” Harry asked.

“You want to give me your Nimbus?” Ron asked.

“Well yeah,” Harry said. “Who else would I give it to.”

“Dude, you could sell that for a bunch,” Ron said. “Your Nimbus is still a great broom.”

Harry shrugged. “Well it’s not like I bought it in the first place,” he said. “It was a gift. I guess there’s no reason it can’t be a gift again.”

“Are you for real?” Ron asked.

“Yeah,” Harry said.

“You’re not supposed to give away brooms on your birthday,” Ron said.

“Well I don’t have it on me now, so I suppose I can give it to you tomorrow,” Harry said.

“You’re crazy,” Ron said.

“I mean you’re basically the reason I have a Firebolt, so…” Harry said.

“Yeah,” Ron said. “Okay. But, like, you’re sure?”

“Yes,” Harry said.

“Right,” Ron said. “Not where I thought today was going to go.”

“Maybe we should have stayed in divination,” Harry said.

“I see a bunch of soggy leaves in your future,” Ron said, flopping down on his bed and resting his eyes for a bit. Harry hoped he was about to nod off and actually get a bit of sleep. He didn’t say anything and let a bit of silence follow. He had the thought that Ron looked really cute just then and mentally kicked himself. To avoid looking at Ron, he let his eyes roam around the room for a bit; he caught sight of a book on Ron’s nightstand.
Ron didn’t fall asleep though. He groaned and rubbed his eyes a bit and sat up.  

“We should probably get back to the party,” he said.  

“Is that a muggle book?” Harry asked. He had never seen a paper bound book in the wizarding world before, and the book on Ron’s nightstand had a distinctly manufactured look to it. It was the parchment paper book jacket that really caught his eye; it was like some kids from primary school had their school books, wrapped up by their parents so they wouldn’t get damaged.  

Ron was suddenly very much awake. “It’s nothing,” he said urgently, getting to his feet and grabbing the book.  

“…Okay?” Harry said, rather flummoxed. There was a moment of silence as the two of them stared at each other awkwardly.  

“Right,” Ron said. “Just gonna put this away.” He shoves the book underneath his mattress.  

“Sooo,” Harry said, drawing out the word.  

Ron sighed. “It’s like a journal,” he said.  

Harry raised an eyebrow.  

“See, you’re really letting Snape rub off on you,” Ron said. “That’s really a Snape look there.”  

“I mean you don’t have to tell me if you don’t want to,” Harry said.  

“Well it is a bit like a journal,” Ron said. “It’s this workbook thing. For like therapy. Um, it’s for teen’s who’ve been through, like, trauma and shit. Hermione got it for me from her therapist.”  

“Oh,” Harry said. “How does it work?”  

“It talks about stuff and then I’m supposed to write about stuff, like how I feel and whatnot,” Ron said.  

“Does it work?”  

“I dunno,” Ron said. “She just gave it to me on Wednesday. At least it’s gotten my parents off my back a bit.”  

“That’s what you’ve been fighting about?” Harry asked.  

“Yeah,” Ron said. “Don’t worry about it.”  

“You keep saying that,” Harry said.  

“Yeah, well,” Ron said. “Don’t.”  

“I mean if it could help,” Harry said.  

“Harry I can’t go to the bloody mind healer,” Ron said, and Harry felt the sting of his frustration as it lashed out.  

“Well why not?” Harry asked.  

Ron let out a groan. “Cause I’ve got secrets,” he said angrily. “I’ve got your secrets and they’re
all wrapped up in that night and what happened and if a mind healer get’s in my head and starts poking around that whole ordeal they’re going to have your secrets so just leave it alone.”

“Wait,” Harry said. “You’re not getting help because of me.”

“No,” Ron said. “Just… This is why I told you not to worry about it. It’s not a big deal. I’m doing just fine.”

“You’re the opposite of fine,” Harry said.

“Oh, you’re one to talk,” Ron said.

“What are you going to do when school starts?” Harry asked. “You can’t exactly sleep during the day.”

“I’ll figure it out,” Ron said, clearly agitated. “Maybe the stupid book’ll help or something, I don’t know. I’ve got a whole ‘nother bloody month to work it out.”

“Don’t healers have to be like confidential?” Harry asked. “So what if they find out?”

“Harry, people tried to kill you because they thought you were a werewolf,” Ron said. “What if some asshole healer gets freaked out because a werewolf’s going to Hogwarts? I’m not taking that fucking chance so just fucking drop it. You think I like this? The last time I accidentally fell asleep all by myself I fucking woke up screaming. It took like twenty minutes to calm down. I’ve got to have a fucking baby sitter if I want to catch a nap. Mum’s practically yanking her hair out with worry, Dad acts like I’m one wrong word away from a complete breakdown, my little sister thinks she has to take care of me, and the twins are coming at me with kid gloves. You think that time in the alley was the only time I freaked out over nothing? Merlin’s balls, I’ve lived with that damned ghoul in the attic since I was three and now all of a sudden, whenever I hear an odd sound in the house I think someone’s coming to get me. It sure as hell doesn’t help that the twins keep blowing shit up in their room, and you know what? There’s so much fucking more I’m not even getting into. I would fucking love it if someone could just make it all go away. I even wish I could go to that muggle guy at least, but I couldn’t pass as a muggle to save my fucking life, so all I’ve got is this stupid fucking book. So can everyone just stop acting like I don’t know I don’t actually have it handled.” Ron had been yelling towards the end. Yet as he came to an end he paused and looked at Harry. “It just is the way it is, and now… and now you look like someone just killed your puppy, and it’s your fucking birthday and it’s me. I just killed your fucking puppy on your birthday, ‘cause I’m fucking messed up.”

“It was the best birthday,” Harry said, holding back a few tears. “Don’t worry about it. I’m not upset, nothing’s ruined.”

“Of course your upset,” Ron said. “Because you still think everything’s your fault even though it isn’t. Those assholes are the reason I’m messed up, not you. You came and saved me.”

Harry didn’t know what to say to that, since he really didn’t want to argue with Ron anymore.

“I’m getting better,” Ron said.

“Yeah,” Harry said.

“It’s still not your fault,” Ron said.

Harry nodded.
Ron sighed.

“If you can’t talk to a mind healer, you can talk to me, if you need to,” Harry said. “Or Hermione.”

“Oh,” Ron said, sighing. “Yeah. Come on, we should get back to the party.”

“Yeah,” Harry said.

“Harry?” Ron said.

“Yeah?” Harry asked.

“It really wasn’t your fault,” Ron said.

“Yeah,” Harry said, and then because it was the only thing he could say. “Thanks… for looking out for me.”

“What are friends for?” Ron asked.

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“Do I really need to go to this thing?” Harry asked.

“Yes,” Severus said, as he gave Harry’s dress robes another once over.

“It’s like they’re throwing a party because I killed somebody,” Harry said.

“You are being awarded for rescuing your friends,” Severus said. “I am being awarded for killing somebody,” and Severus did not have the same qualms as Harry did over celebrating Greyback’s death.

“I’m still the one who killed him though,” Harry said.

“You saved two lives,” Harry. “That is what they are praising you for. If you do not want to be rewarded for that night, you can pretend it is a belated award for saving Miss Weasley.”

“I don’t want to be the center of attention,” Harry said. “There’s just going to be a bunch of strangers.”

“Your friends will be there,” Severus said.

“That’s another thing,” Harry said. “They don’t need a night dedicated to what happened to them. That’s going to be horrible for them.”

“A good reason for you to be there for them,” Severus said.

“Why is this important to you?” Harry asked. “They’ll still give you yours if I don’t show. They don’t even know you’re my dad. They could be all like, where’s Potter? And you could just be like, ‘I don’t know, he’s not my responsibility.’”

“It is important because for a short time you will be in the spot light. You will get your award and then a couple of days from now people will be back to raving about the quidditch quarter finals. If you stand up the Minister for Magic when he is awarding you the Order of Merlin, that will not
pass from the public’s notice soon. If you will recall, you need less scrutiny, not more.”

Harry sighed in exasperation. “He’s just using this to distract people from the fact that none of the fugitives have actually been caught by the Ministry.”

“Be that as it may,” Severus said, glad that Harry was becoming more aware of the greater wizarding world around him. “This is the reality you must live with. Now, how do I look?”

“Like you’re about to murder Colonel Mustard in the library with a lead pipe,” Harry said.

Severus did not always understand his son, but he took the glib response for the joke that it likely was and smiled.

“The tabloid says he likes quidditch,” Rookwood said. “He will likely be at the cup.”

“So will half the Auror force,” Crouch said. “They are still looking for us, and I doubt they will be too far away from Potter.”

“We don’t even know what sort of protective pendant he has or where he keeps it,” Dolohov said. “We know we can’t portkey him away, but can we apparate him?”

“Divestus would take care of that,” Belatrix said.

“Divestus would remove everything that isn’t charmed to stay on him,” Crouch said. “I doubt they’ve neglected that.”

“We could blast off anything that Divestus doesn’t remove,” Belatrix said.

“One piece Trixie,” Crouch said. “We are to deliver him in one piece. What if it is a belt, will you blast him in half?”

Belatrix looked like she would like to blast him in half.

“If he is in the tournament, he will not be able to compete with charmed items on him,” Crouch said. “Jorkins was sure of that. Hogwarts’ anti-portkey wards will be relaxed so that the Triwizard Cup can deliver the champion from the maze. No one needs to get close to him. He will win and he will deliver himself to us.”

“You want to put an operative under Dumbledore’s nose for a year?” Rookwood asked.

“Eight months. Moody’s an eccentric,” Crouch said. “Anything off will be attributed to that.”

“We could have Potter in three days,” Rookwood said. “You want to wait nine months.”

“We aren’t ready for the ritual,” Dolohov said. “At best a month, if we don’t have any more issues with materials. Do you want to keep the boy a month.”

“A month to make him pay is so much better than one night,” Belatrix said.

“A month with every witch and wizard in Britain looking for him,” Crouch said.
“Greyback managed it,” Belatrix said.

“That was a matter of days,” Dolohov said. “And Greyback is dead,”

“You just want to trade one risk for another,” Rookwood said.

“We will use the Triwizard Tournament,” Voldemort said, his voice silencing the others.

Rookwood spoke up after a moment. “Master, perhaps…”

“The Dark Lord has made his decision,” Crouch said severely.

“The Boy-Who-Lived shall win the tournament, for all to see,” Voldemort said. “Let them think there is something exceptional about him. They think he is my downfall. Let them think him great. I will kill him in the end and they will know that there is no salvation that does not come from me.”

“Yes, master,” Rookwood said.

“Crouch,” Voldemort said. “Be ready to take on Moody. Rookwood, you used to be friends with several Aurors.”

“Yes, master, in service to you,” Rookwood said. “Though I do not believe they still consider me a friend.”

“Did you ever happen to visit one of them in their home?” Voldemort asked.

Harry woke with such a start, but the jolt of adrenaline was quickly smothered by the great sense of fatigue and malaise he felt all over. He tried to focus on what had woken him, but the details were sifting through his mind and he couldn’t grasp on. The one thing he could solidly identify was that his scar hurt a great deal, and Voldemort was planning to kill him.

In spite of it all, it took Harry a moment to roll out of bed. He tumbled to the ground with a groan and had to force himself up onto shaky legs. The previous night had been his third full moon, and while his dad and Professor Lupin had said that this moon had gone better for him, he still felt like shit. He couldn’t wait till he got to be like Professor Lupin, up and about right after the transformation. If he ever got there. Honestly, he was just pathetic enough he’d never get there. He was going to be a right mess, a royal burden on his dad every month after the full moon. Who knew how much longer his dad was going to put up with him like this. How much longer before he realized what Harry was. Harry closed his eyes and tried to run through one of the lists he had worked out with his dad, but nothing stayed in his head. He tried to occlude before cursing himself and all the practice he had been doing the past month. He was still pathetically incompetent after the full moon, his mind was still mush, he was such a mess. He was such a waste of space. He was such a freak.

Harry grabbed his hair for a moment before knocking on his own head, trying to knock the thoughts out. His scar, he thought, he needed to focus. He continued on shaky, useless legs out the door and over to his father’s room. He stopped outside of the door. He had never woken his father up before. Would he be mad? Did his scar really hurt that much? Was he imagining it? Maybe he was being a baby. It was just a stupid dream. He was just imagining things. His dad had stayed
up the night before. Harry shouldn’t be waking him up for something stupid.

The door opened and his dad stepped out.

“Harry?”

“It’s nothing,” Harry said, turning around. “Night.”

“Did you need a sleep potion?”

“No,” Harry said quickly. “It wasn’t… I should just go back to bed.”

“Tea time,” his dad said.

“It’s past midnight,” Harry said.

“We just need the right tea,” his dad said.

Harry frowned at him. He really just wanted to go to his room right then.

“Come along,” his dad said, turning down the hall. Harry followed him with a great deal of unease.

The aftermath of this full moon had been a bit different for Harry this go around. He’d had a compound fracture that had broken the skin for one. That had not been fun. One thing though, he rather thought he was a bit less depressed the day after. Though he felt like he had traded a bit of depression for a great deal of agitation and a short temper. Ron’s visit had been awkward.

In the kitchen, Harry set the pot on to boil, but his dad sent him to the table to sit down as he got out a tin of tea from the cupboard.

“Were you having trouble sleeping?” his dad asked.

“I fell asleep after a bit,” Harry said. His dad made him get a full eight hours sleep right after the full moon set so it was hard to sleep the first night after.

“Something woke you,” his dad said, putting a cup of tea in front of Harry.

“It was probably just a dream,” Harry said.

“Probably?” his dad asked.

Harry looked at his tea for a bit.

“Well, I thought that maybe my scar hurt when I woke up,” Harry said.

“Does it still hurt?” his dad asked.

“No,” Harry said. “I don’t think he’s here or anything. He wasn’t here in the dream.”

“You dreamed about him?”

Harry nodded.

“What do you remember?”

Harry thought about that, trying to recall what had been said.
“There was something about a wizards tournament,” Harry said, and his dad’s eyes narrowed.

“Who was there?”

Harry frowned, looking down at his tea.

“I think it was the escaped Death Eaters, and someone else, and Voldemort,” Harry said.

“What did they say about the tournament?”

“They were arguing about whether to do something at the tournament or at something else. They decided on the tournament. I remember Voldemort deciding on the tournament. There was other stuff. Something about a belt and someone who was upset. I’m pretty sure they mentioned Aurors.”

“What are they planning at the tournament?”

“It was probably just a dream,” Harry said.

“Do you know where the tournament was to be held?”

“I don’t remember,” Harry said, really wishing his dad would stop asking questions. “Hogwarts was mentioned, but I don’t know. It probably was just a dream though.”

“What were they planning, Harry?”

“It was just a stupid dream,” Harry said.

“Your scar hurt, Harry,” his dad said. “You do have some manner of connection to the Dark Lord. Just tell me what they were planning and you can finish your tea and get some more sleep. It’s a night time blend.”

“I don’t really remember much,” Harry said.

“Perhaps if I entered your mind—“

“Oh, for crying out loud. They’re planning to kill me. All right?” Harry said, wishing thoroughly that he had just stayed in bed. “It was just a stupid dream, and I’m all achy from last night so that’s probably why I thought my scar hurt, and now I’m causing a big fuss, and I don’t want tea, and I don’t want to go back to sleep, can you just leave me the fuck alone about it?”

He stood up from the table and turned towards the stairs on wobbly legs.

“The Triwizard Tournament is being held at Hogwarts this year,” his dad said, stopping Harry dead in his tracks.

“Well that’s just great,” Harry said. He made his way upstairs and locked himself in his room.

Severus returned to his home with a burst of green flames. The headmaster had been unreadable while they had discussed Harry’s vision and Severus was desperate to know what the man was thinking.
Severus frowned when he glanced over at the kitchen table to see that Harry had not touched the breakfast he had left for him. Had he even come down from his room? It was half past ten. He went upstairs and knocked on the door. He heard the rustling of bed sheets and then silence.

“Harry, are you all right in there?”

There was a long pause. “Yeah,” came the timid reply.

“I’m coming in,” Severus said.

“Oh…”

The door was locked.

“Right,” Harry said and Severus heard the patter of feet before the door was unlocked, though still left unopened. Severus opened the door. Harry was still in his night clothes. He still had dark bags under his eyes and he still looked haggard and pale.

“Are you feeling all right?” Severus asked.

Harry had a grim look, but he nodded his head.

“Hold your arms out in front of you with your palms up,” Severus said.

Harry frowned but did as instructed. He had a look of concentration, but he couldn’t stop his hands from trembling.

“That’s fine,” Severus said. “You’re still recovering, but I expect you’ll be much better tomorrow.”

“Oh,” Harry said. “So, you’ll do it then?”

“Do what?” Severus asked. Though at this point he was already confident he knew what was in Harry’s mind.

“You’ll punish me,” Harry said. “When I’m better.”

“I told you I would not be hurting you as punishment,” Severus said, and he really wished Harry looked like he believed him.

“Oh, yeah,” Harry said. “Right.”

“Come on,” Severus said. “Haven’t you been hungry?”

“Am I allowed?” Harry asked.

Severus wanted to murder Petunia.

“You are always allowed to eat,” Severus said. “Harry, did you ground yourself?”

“Aren’t I?” Harry asked.

“No,” Severus said. “Come along, you ought not skip meals. Especially after the full moon.”

Severus left the room. It was a moment before he heard Harry follow him. He sat himself down at the kitchen table, opposite where Harry’s breakfast had been left. Harry joined him a moment
later. He waited for Harry to start eating, but the boy seemed more interested in staring at his food.

“I did not understand why you were reluctant to tell me about your vision last night,” Severus said.

Harry was chewing on his lip.

“You can chew on your food if you’re hungry,” Severus said.

“What if it’s just a dream, and I worried you for nothing,” Harry said.

“Regardless,” Severus said. “I would want to know. Your life is well worth worrying me over a dream. In this case we have strong reason to believe it could be more than just a dream, but even so. I will not be upset with you if you share your worries with me.”

“So what’s my punishment?” Harry asked.

“There is none,” Severus said. “Harry you became short with me under the stress of the recent moon and a vision of the Dark Lord. Your behavior last night was atypical and I do not expect it to continue. I will admonish you to always inform me if there is even a chance that there is a danger directed at you. I will also recommend that you work to control your temper, though I acknowledge that that is likely difficult as your brain continues to struggle to adjust directly after the full moon. I do not believe a punishment is necessary, regardless of the fact that you seem to have seen fit to punish yourself.”

“I’m sorry I yelled at you,” Harry said. “It wasn’t just the moon. I’ve felt like I’ve been all over the place lately.”

“Mood swings are a symptom of both puberty and trauma,” Severus said. “I would be surprised if you weren’t all over the place. We haven’t discussed your Occlumency exercises in a while. Are you ready to resume practical application?”

That definitely brought Harry up short. Severus wondered if it would not be better to directly confront Harry about his concerns.

“No,” Harry said. “I mean, I’m doing well with the exercises, but I think I should just keep practicing on my own for now.”

“Very well,” Severus said. “But eventually you will reach the limit of what you can do practicing on your own.”

“Right,” Harry said. "Um, so what's this tournament thing?"

"The Tri-Wizards Tournament is a competition between Hogwarts, Beauxbaton, and Durmstrang. We will be hosting this year. Beauxbaton and Durmstrang will send delegations and one student from each school will compete in three events."

"Huh," Harry said. "Sounds interesting."

Harry’s owl swooped in at that moment, disrupting their conversation.

“Hey Hedwig,” Harry said. He stroked his owl and fed her a piece of cheese from his plate. At this point the owl had eaten more of Harry’s breakfast than Harry had.

Harry relieved his owl of her letter. Severus watched him read it as his eyebrows shot up accompanied by an ‘oh,’ of surprise, only to be replaced moments later with a frown.
“Anything I should know about?” Severus asked.

“No,” Harry said. “It’s nothing.”

Severus raised an eyebrow.

“Ron’s dad got tickets to the Quidditch Cup,” Harry said. “But obviously I can’t go, so…”

“The game is in two days?” Severus asked.

“Yeah,” Harry said.

“You should be adequately recovered by then.”

“Yeah, but…” Harry had a wide eyed look.

“You would have to stay with the Weasleys the entire time,” Severus asked. “But it is unlikely there should be any great danger.”

“Are you serious?” Harry asked.

“Indeed.”

“They’re offering to have me for the last week of summer,” Harry said. “My training…”

“Ah,” Severus said.

“I couldn’t just tell them that the Dursleys want me back for the last week,” Harry said.

“We’ll just have to make up for it when school starts up again,” Severus said.

“Really?” Harry asked.

Severus nodded.

“Okay, wow” Harry said. “Thanks. I need to pack. Lets hope this doesn’t get awkward.”

“You need to eat,” Severus said. “And what would get awkward.”

Harry froze, before saying, “I’ve just been lying a lot; this whole summer really. Mrs. Weasley’s going to notice I don’t look a hundred percent tomorrow, and everyone’s going to ask about my summer and, well you know, it’s mostly all made up.”

“Some day there will not be this need for secrecy.” Severus said. “Now how about you eat that breakfast and we can spend some time reviewing what you have learned this summer before you leave.”

Harry finally started eating. He still looked under the weather, but it was clear he was looking forward to the game. Severus briefly questioned if this was for the best, but Harry had had a rough summer and could definitely use the event. As well, the game was going to be well protected, and they already had an inkling that Voldemort’s plans were not immediate.
Harry had never been camping before, though he wasn’t sure this counted. The wizarding tents the Weasleys had brought seemed a bit like cheating. Still though, they were making a campfire, and Ron had gone off with his brother Charlie to go get some water for the kettle. It seemed a bit like camping. Perhaps there would be s’mores. It still didn’t make sense to Harry why everyone had to camp at the event, but it didn’t seem at all bad. He just wished Mrs. Weasley hadn’t insisted that Mr. Weasley make sure Harry didn’t do anything strenuous (he still looked plenty off from the full moon). Hence, why Charlie had gone with Ron instead of Harry.

Harry noticed as a smartly dressed woman walked up to their campsite.

“How’s that fire coming, Arthur?” she asked, sitting down.

“Just about have it, Dianne,” Mr. Weasley said. Harry had been helping him get it lit the muggle way, but Harry wasn’t exactly a boy scout. “I wasn’t expecting to see you out here.”

“I just needed to borrow your son for a moment.”

“Oh, I don’t know,” Mr. Weasley said. “You’ve borrowed him a fair bit lately. His mother says she never sees him anymore.”

“It will just be a moment,” she said. “Rogers has gone to deal with a fiasco at the IWSA and Percy had been working with him on the prep for the Bulgarian delegation. I just need a few moments.”

“Well if it’s just a moment,” Mr. Weasley said. “Keep in mind, he’s going to insist that he can drop everything and go assist you, but I’d rather he actually take his holiday.”

“No worries Arthur,” she said.

“Percy!” Mr. Weasley called at the boys tent entrance. “Could you come out here a moment.”

“Just a second,” Percy called back. “The twins have hidden my glasses somewhere.”

“If the twins have hidden your glasses, I don’t expect you’ll find them in a second.”

“All right,” Percy said, popping his head out of the tent. “Do we have company?” he asked, squinting.

“Percy Weasley, just the man I was looking for.”

“Ms. Cooper,” Percy said, now looking flustered. “I’m sorry I didn’t recognize you. The twins—well my glasses. Right, what can I do for you ma’am?”

“Rogers got taken away on short notice and I needed to pick your brain a bit,” Ms. Cooper said.

“Of course,” Percy said. “It’s perfectly all right, I can get to work right away.”

“Nonsense,” Ms. Cooper said. “Ministry policy, you know, can’t let you work when you’re taking time off. That being said, I was hoping I could ask you a few questions while we sat around your campfire.”

“Of course, of course,” Percy said. “What do you need to know?”

Harry supposed that this must be Percy’s boss in the Department of International Cooperation. He looked a bit flustered. Harry noticed as the twins came back to their camp, Percy definitely noticed, because he gave them a squinty eyed glare.
Percy talked to his boss for a while. He certainly seemed to have an answer to all of her questions. Ron came back with Charlie and a kettle full of water. They had certainly been gone for a while. By that time, the fire had been started and before long they had tea.

A wizard walked up to their campsite.

“Arthur,” he said. “Wonderful day, wonderful day, are you all excited for the big game?”

“Well of course we are, Ludo,” Mr. Weasley said.

“Mr. Bagman,” Ms. Cooper greeted the newcomer.

“Oh, Diane, you are looking as beautiful as always, so glad I’ve found you. I’ve been going insane dealing with these Bulgarians.”

Mr. Weasley turned back to everyone else. “This is Ludo Bagman, the Head of the Division for Magical Games and Sports, he got us our wonderful seats.”

There were a chorus of thank you’s all around.

“Oh it was nothing, absolutely nothing,” Mr. Bagman said.

“Tea?” Mr. Weasley offered.

“Happy to,” Mr. Bagman said. “I suppose I just grab a bit of space on a log do I, my goodness I haven’t sat by a campfire since I was a boy.”

“Any news about Bertha?” Mr. Weasley asked.

“None, no,” Mr. Bagman said. “But it’s like I’ve been saying, ‘ol Berty’s just lost track of time and probably her map. She’ll be back any day now with souvenirs from half a dozen countries that weren’t even on her itinerary. I’m sure she’s just enjoying her vacation.”

“I’ve put out some inquiries at a few consulates,” Ms. Cooper said coolly. “But nothing’s gotten back to us. Ms. Jorkins seems to have fallen off the face of the Earth.”

Harry frowned, the name Jorkins tugging at his memory. It wouldn’t come to him. Yet he had a very ominous feeling.

“Yes, but that’s Berty for you,” Bagman said. “You know she once got lost for an hour in one of the sub-basements. Now let me see, I think I know most of the people here, at least by reputation. You must be Bill and Charlie. Percy I’ve seen around the office. These must be the wonder twins. I’ve heard great things. Any new inventions in the works?”

“Well,” George said excitedly, but he got headed off by Ms. Cooper.

“Third time’s the charm when it comes to business ventures, eh Mr. Bagman? Or was last time the third?”

Bagman laughed like she had made a great joke. Harry had the thought that Ms. Cooper didn’t like the man.

“Nonsense, nonsense, so now, that just leaves this to be Ronald and you must be Ginny. Now correct me if I’m wrong, Arthur, but I thought you only had seven kids.”

He was obviously speaking in jest. He had eyed Harry’s scar the moment he walked up, and no
one would mistake Harry or Hermione for Weasleys.

“Of course, I haven’t made introductions,” Mr. Weasley said. “These are Ron’s friends, Harry and
Hermione.”

You all are going to be sitting in the best seats in the arena.”

“I think it’s time we handle your Bulgarian problem, Mr. Bagman,” Ms. Cooper said, standing up.

“Come now, Dianne,” Bagman said. “I’ve just started my tea.”

“There’ll be tea at the conference room,” she said. “We need to iron out this extra seat business
now or we’re still going to be dealing with it when the quaffle drops.”

“Ah well,” Bagman said. “I suppose.” He turned back towards everyone else. “Enjoy the game,
everyone.”

There were a few more visitors while they drank their tea, and then Harry, Ron, and Hermione
went to explore a bit with the twins. There were people from all over the world; distinguishable
not only by dress and speech, but by the flags that hung from poles and tents and trees. The
campsite was very colorful with flags and banners from countries and organizations all over. Harry
tried to identify as many of them as he could, but he had never been that great with Geography. He
blushed and stared for a bit when he spotted the rainbow flag, hanging from one of the tents. He
looked away, and hoped none of the others had seen him looking.

There were other colors in the campsite. Notably, the Aurors. Like everyone else, they weren’t
wearing robes, but they were distinguishable by the red shirts they wore. Harry was fairly certain
at least one was tailing him.

They saw several classmates among the throng. Word of the Firebolt had reached Oliver, who
pumped Harry for details. It looked like he would be signing with the Wasps soon. The whole
campsite was awash with strange people and all sorts of things he had never seen before. The urge
to sniff everything was strong, though manageable, and just as when he was outside his home, the
sight of any small animal through the trees deftly caught his attention, he resisted the urge to chase
after them. The urge to keep close to Ron and Hermione and make sure nothing was a threat to
them was one he followed though. Both seemed a bit nervous in the crowd, but both seemed
determined to act normal.

Before long, it was time to go to the arena. Seeing it in the distance was something indeed. The
stadium rose high above the tree line and it looked quite odd for it to be in the middle of the
woods. The complex was incredibly ornate, the entire thing was all shiny metal and polished
stone. Harry paid a bit of mind to wonder how wizards did construction.

“Get your programs here!” cried a hawker.

“Official merchandise! Show your team spirit! Right here folks!”

“Omnioculars!” called out one man. “Don’t miss a moment of the action. Get your Omnioculars
right here!” He was waving a device that looked like a pair of steampunk binoculars. By the
number of dials and switches on the thing, Harry rather thought that it did a bit more than get a
close up of the action.

“Awesome!” Harry said, stopping in front of the salesman. “I’ll take three of those.”
“That’ll be thirty galleons.” Harry’s eyebrows rose at the price, but he pulled out his gold.

“Whoah,” Ron said. “He’ll take two of those actually.”

“Don’t you want one?” Harry asked.

“You gave me a broomstick less than a month ago,” Ron said.

“Yeah…” Harry said, not following.

“I don’t want one, Harry,” Ron said, a little steely, and Harry frowned.

“Two, I guess,” Harry said.

The man shot Ron a bit of a sour look but he still happily took Harry’s money and presented two of the brass omnioculars. Harry handed one to Hermione.

Their seats were in the top box. This had seemed exciting at first, but the arrival of some of the other guests somewhat soured the score. Draco Malfoy and his parents were in the top box with them. Draco coolly ignored them when they entered, but Harry got a severe look from Malfoy senior that Harry sent right back at him. Harry hadn’t forgotten the diary that the man had slipped into Ginny Weasley’s cauldron any more than Malfoy had likely forgotten Harry’s slimy sock. Lucious Malfoy’s gaze turned then to Mr. Weasley.

“It seems they’ll let just anyone in here,” Malfoy said, his disparaging gaze lighting upon Hermione.

Harry saw Ron step in between Hermione and Malfoy.

“It really does,” Mr. Weasley said. “Why they’ll allow people who should be in Azkaban even.”

“You mustn’t be so harsh on yourself,” Draco said, surprising both adults. “Why, I think wizards should be allowed to do whatever they wish with Muggle artifacts. That flying car nonsense was really blown out of proportion, I think. It certainly wouldn’t have been worthy of Azkaban.”

“Certainly,” Harry said. “Your father must have been referring to people who tried to kill children for political points.”

Draco ignored him. Harry saw Malfoy’s hand tighten on the head of his cane where Harry knew he kept his wand. Tensions in the box were getting high, but the next person to enter the booth, while not exactly an improvement in Harry’s opinion, did immediately diffuse the situation, merely by his presence. Fudge walked in, followed closely by a few witches and wizards Harry didn’t know, though, by the foreign look of their clothing, he suspected that they were Bulgarian.


“Ahh,” the man said, turning to his cohorts and speaking rapidly in what Harry assumed was Bulgarian while pointing at Harry. Harry smoothed his bangs down. While the man spoke to his countrymen, Harry distinctly heard him say, ‘Voldemort.’ Most of the British in the box visibly shuddered.

“Everyone, may I present to you, Dimitar Bakalov, my Bulgarian counterpart,” Fudge said,
wanting now to change the subject. “And he doesn’t speak a bit of english so I don’t know why I’m bothering.”

There wasn’t a lot of talking after that, none of them spoke Bulgarian, and none of the Bulgarians spoke English. Though it was comical to watch Fudge try to gesticulate his meaning across. Harry was tempted to get out his Polyglots Draft, if only to show up Fudge.

Soon enough, Ms. Cooper and Bagman arrived. There was a lot of hand shaking and grand standing, and Ms. Cooper was roped in to playing translator for everyone. Harry felt that he couldn’t really have a conversation with his friends with all these adults and the Malfoys around. He wanted to get at what Ron’s problem had been earlier.

“Minister?” Bagman called out jovially. “Shall we begin?”

“Ready when you are, Ludo,” Fudge said.

“Sonorus,” Bagman said, pointing his wand at his neck. “Welcome,” he said, his voice amplified for the entire stadium, and yet, not too loud for those sitting next to him. “Welcome to the final of the four hundred and twenty-second Quidditch World Cup!”

There was a loud cheer from the crowd and Harry started settling into his seat, ready to see a great game and to forget about the disagreeable people he and his friends were sharing the top box with.

“And now, let’s give a very very warm welcome for the Bulgarian National Team Mascots,” Bagman announced.

“Oh, I wonder what creatures they’ll have,” Harry heard Charlie say.

“Oh my!” Mr. Weasley exclaimed. “Veela.”

“What are veela?” Harry asked. Only Mr. Weasley wasn’t quite able to answer his question, as he looked rather transfixed by the sight in front of him. Veela, it appeared, were women. This was not what he was expecting. They were very beautiful, to be sure, but Harry hadn’t had this in mind when he had heard, ‘team mascot’ or ‘creature.’

There was a lot of noise from the crowds. A great deal of whistling and yelling.

“Oh honestly,” Hermione said.

Harry looked at Hermione, who was scowling, and then to Ron, who was staring transfixed at the women down below with a look of absolute adoration. That was when Harry noticed that just about every man around him was acting rather oddly. It was as though they were bewitched.

Were Veela some sort of magical creature who just looked like beautiful women? Were they using some sort of magic on the crowd? Though, if so, why wasn’t Harry feeling anything? Wizards all over were acting enthralled, yet at the same time, Harry could see plenty of witches who were, much like Hermione, looking a bit put out.

That was when it clicked, and Harry’s breath hitched with realization. Veela only affected wizards, or, Harry supposed, they only affected people who were attracted to women, and Harry wasn’t attracted to women at all. Harry threw a guilty look at Ron before shooting his attention to look at his shoes.

“Fuck,” Harry said quietly.
‘Freak,’ he heard his aunt say in his head. ‘Disgusting,’ came the echo of his uncle.

There weren’t any more excuses he could use. He wasn’t confused by his best friend’s near death experience. He wasn’t going through a phase. It wasn’t hormones and living in a boys dormitory. He was gay. He felt dread and guilt coil in his stomach. Things passed in a blur for a bit. That feeling he had so often, that he was at the precipice of loosing everything, was strong.

Gold raining from the sky brought him out of his stupor.

“Leprechauns,” he heard someone say, likely about the Irish team mascot.

He realized he must look off, to anyone who might notice him. He was at the Quidditch World Cup, surrounded by gold, and he was just sitting there like he was at a freaking funeral.

Unbidden, images of Greyback’s dying throes entered his mind, but he shut them out. Had the man even had a funeral? He started clearing his mind, and then he started fully occluding. He was just a normal boy, having fun at the highlight of his summer. He was just a normal, straight boy. He started running through the list he had made with his dad. He reminded himself of quidditch victories and a Troll with a wand up its nose. He reminded himself of Ron seeing his sister for the first time after thinking she was dead. It helped. He tuned himself into the game, and ignored the boy sitting next to him.

“Now before we begin our last session for this summer, Mr. Klepper, I do want to remind you that you can always call while you and Harry are away at school.”

There were no phones at Hogwarts, but Severus just nodded for Dr. Abbasi.

“How has Harry been since we last spoke?”

“Better, in many ways,” Severus said. “Then again, we had an incident a couple of days ago.”

“What happened?” Dr. Abbasi asked.

“Harry had gotten a bit short with me one night and then proceeded to lock himself in his room,” Severus said. “I’d thought to leave him to cool down and had a meeting the next morning, I came back and found that he was still locked in his room, and he hadn’t eaten the breakfast I had left for him. He was basically grounding himself, and for him, he decided, that meant no food. When he let me into his room he was basically waiting for me to start beating him.”

“How did you handle that?”

“I brought him downstairs for breakfast and reminded him that he was never going to be punished like that,’ Severus said. “We talked about his behavior.”

“That might actually be a good sign,” Dr. Abbasi said.

“That he stopped eating because he thought he was in trouble?” Severus asked.

“Not that, no,” Dr. Abbasi said. “Actually, try to keep an eye on his eating habits. No, I meant that Harry lost his temper with you. You said yourself that he was trying very hard to be perfect for you. It was a sign that he did not feel secure in his position in your household. It may be that he
has gotten a bit more comfortable with you.”

“And then he stopped eating,” Severus said.

“Recovery is rarely a straight line, and what's more, Harry has now seen that he can mess up and it will not be the end of the world,” Dr. Abbasi said. “How was list making?”

“Not a complete disaster,” Severus said. “Harry has a very hard time accepting a compliment. The list rather focuses on concrete actions that Harry has taken rather than character traits. Instead of saying he’s loyal, he’ll remind himself of a time he stood up for a friend. Things like that.”

“That’s all right,” Dr. Abbasi said. “It’s a step in the right direction. Harry is taking steps towards becoming emotionally healthy.”

‘Fuck,’ Harry thought for about the hundredth time that evening. He hadn’t been able to occlude through the whole game, it had been too taxing. But by the time he had come back into himself, he was at least better able to handle things. Still though… ‘Fuck.’

It was easy enough to avoid people just then. Everyone was so excited about how the game had ended. People were partying, there was laughter and cavorting and a whole lot of spirits from what Harry had seen. No one really noticed him hole himself up in the tent. Or rather, no one had come looking for him.

Harry was brought out of his thoughts when Ron rather abruptly walked into the tent, wide eyed, red faced and out of breath. He stopped suddenly when he saw Harry. His sharpened sense of smell was waning with the moon, but Harry thought Ron smelled like shame.

“Oh,” Ron said, looking like he hadn’t expected Harry to be there.

“Are you all right?” Harry asked.


“Did something happen?” Harry asked. He shouldn’t be asking. He should be staying away from Ron. Ron didn’t need someone like him hanging around, and yet, seeing Ron, clearly upset, Harry couldn’t turn away.

“Yeah,” Ron said. “I just… I freaked out, again. It was stupid.”

Harry shook his head. “It’s all right. Don’t worry about it.” He had been a bit worried that Ron wasn’t dealing with the crowd too well, but he had seemed to be holding up, Harry had thought. Then again, he had been avoiding looking at Ron since his… revelation.

“What are you doing in here?” Ron asked. “Why aren’t you celebrating?”

Harry shrugged. “I’ve had a lot on my mind lately. How’s Hermione doing?” He should have been keeping tabs on his friends rather than having a pity party.

“She was with Ginny,” Ron said. “I think she’s all right.”

“Okay, well, wanna play chess?” Harry asked.
“Where my head’s at right now, I don’t think I could think more than two moves ahead,” Ron said.

Harry, who could rarely think more than two moves ahead, shrugged. “I could read to you,” he said.

“I didn’t bring any books,” Ron said.

“Dean gave me a muggle mystery book for my birthday,” Harry said. “You can see how it compares to Auror Lyle.”

Ron hesitated, but nodded. “Yeah,” he said. “Though you’re going to have to explain the muggle stuff to me.”

“Sure,” Harry said. “You’re always explaining the wizard stuff to me.”

They settled down on the couch and Harry pulled out the book. He was almost finished, himself, but he started from the beginning. Ron’s wide eyes relaxed after a while and before long he was wrapped up in the mystery. This was good, Harry thought. He might not be avoiding Ron, but he was helping, and he could at least focus on the book rather than the boy opposite him. Ron fell asleep about fifty pages in. Harry knew he still wasn’t getting much in the way of proper sleep, and the whole day had been especially taxing.

Harry really couldn’t deny it, just then, that Ron was really cute when he was asleep.

“Fuck,” Harry said quietly.

It was past midnight, but Harry was still lying awake on his bunk when Mr. Weasley ran into the tent. “Boys!” he said urgently. “Wake up, grab a jacket. We need to go.”

Harry rolled out of bed promptly, Ron though was dead to the world.

“Ron!” Harry said. Harry grabbed his shoulder. Ron jolted awake with a great gasp.

“Something’s wrong,” Harry said. “We need to go.”

Ron stayed frozen for a moment.

“Ron!” Mr. Weasley yelled. Ron started getting out of bed, but there was a quiver to his limbs. Harry went and grabbed their jackets. They went outside, unsure of what was happening, though now Harry could hear a commotion off in the distance. Once outside, he could see what was happening. There was a tightly packed crowd of wizards marching by the far tree line. They wore pale masks and hoods and most of them had their wands pointed straight in the air. They marched along, blasting tents out of their path, setting their surroundings on fire. There was screaming, people were trying to get away, but there were others, there were others who gathered around, who followed behind, who pointed and laughed.

The marchers were following the tree line. If they kept going, they would eventually get to the end of the clearing where the Weasleys were. The crowd around the marchers grew. Harry could see a couple of red robed Aurors trying to get through, but the crowd was getting bigger and bigger.
Hermione and Ginny ran out of the girls’ tent. Hermione gasped at the sight, and Ginny was ghostly pale. Just then, as the group passed a burning tent, Harry saw what some where laughing at. Illuminated over the heads of the masked wizards were four people suspended in the air. Harry recognized the muggle man who ran the campsite. He supposed the rest of them were the man’s family, a woman and two children. It was like the people in the air were puppets, slaves to the wands holding them up and controlling them. The woman was being contorted into impossible shapes. Harry could see the little boy being spun like a top.

Ron started hyperventilating next to him. Harry grabbed his shoulder to steady him. Mr. Weasley reappeared, followed by the rest of the Weasley boys. They all had their wands drawn.

“You children need to get away,” Mr. Weasley said. “Stay together, get into the woods. We’re going to help the Ministry. I’ll find you later.”

With a yell, Ron ripped himself from Harry’s grasp and started running towards the revelers.

“Ron!” Mr. Weasley yelled. Harry tore off after him. He heard Mr. Weasley tell someone to grab Ginny and go.

Luckily it was dark. Harry caught up with Ron when the other boy tripped.

“Ron,” Harry said. “Are you okay?” He reached down and pulled Ron up.

“Get off me!” Ron said desperately. In the faded firelight, Harry could see a frantic looking Ron.

“It’s not safe,” Harry said.

“They can’t protect themselves!” Ron yelled. “No one’s going to help them! It’s not right! They don’t deserve that!”

“Ron!” Charlie Weasley called out as he caught up with them. He grabbed on to his brother. Bill Weasley caught up too, followed by Percy and their father. Hermione wasn’t far behind, her wand out, and a pained look on her face.

“Charlie,” Mr. Weasley said. “Get Ron out of here. Get all of them out of here boys.”

Charlie nodded and Ron sent Harry a pleading look. He was desperate. Charlie and Ron disappeared with a pop. Percy grabbed Hermione, and Harry had to bite down a spike of rage at her shocked face, even as the two of them disappeared too. Bill was reaching for him, but it wouldn’t work, not with Harry’s pendant, but Harry still wasn’t going to get caught. He ran. He pulled out his invisibility cloak first. His shoes were already silent. He pulled out a potion next. Mercury’s Elixir for speed, his father had said. Harry tore through the campground. Perhaps he could outrun a cheetah. Hercules Blood for strength; he really hoped there wasn’t actually any blood in it. The first of the revelers who crossed his path, cheering at the dancing muggles, went flying.

Before long, Harry was in the press of bodies that surrounded the masked marchers. He threw people away from himself right and left, but before long the mob surrounded him. Hands grasped for him, but he shoved them away, his body moving so fast, it was his brain slowing him down. He drew his wand, a little late, and started using everything his dad had taught him that summer, but it was draining. The press of the mob was disorienting and he got turned around several times. He had to look up to the family suspended in the air to set his sights.

This wasn’t going to work though. He couldn’t fight everyone. He couldn’t take on all of the masked wizards. There were too many of them. The potions would wear out. There were,
however, only four people to be rescued, and Harry had one more trick up his sleeve. He pulled out his broom.

Tearing off the shrinking sticker, Harry was in the air, his small space in the crowd quickly filling up. From the air, he could see the Aurors trying to get through the crowd, there were more of them now. He could see the Weasleys too. Perhaps people below could see him as well. He definitely didn’t have time to properly position the cloak for his broom, but he hoped he had enough covered that he was a rather small target. He definitely intended to be a fast one. He flew up to the little boy, still spinning like a top.

“Protego!” Harry said, putting everything into the spell, making his shield big enough to cover himself and the boy. The spells tormenting the boy were severed and he screamed as Harry caught him. Now, he was a very visible target. Harry darted off, flying erratically, noticing flashes of spell fire that leapt after him; but his broom was faster than a peregrine falcon. Harry stopped by a group of Aurors, trying to get through the mob.

“Here you go,” Harry said, invisibly thrusting the boy at a red robed wizard. He didn’t wait for a response. The clock was ticking down on the potions, and he really wished he remembered how long they were supposed to last.

He knew that they would be looking for him this time. There was angry yelling from the mob now that one of their toys had been taken from them. Some people were shooting randomly into the sky, and Harry flew evasively. Just like quidditch, Harry thought, trying not to think of what those spells might do. He couldn’t shield himself without giving away his position.

The little girl was next. She was older, but with the Hercules Blood, she didn’t weigh a thing. Putting up a shield to negate the spells that held her captive was very taxing though. He wished he hadn’t put on his display down below before he had thought to use his broom. The masked marchers had stopped moving, and now everyone seemed to be trying to fling spells into the sky drunkenly. He began to feel a great deal of fatigue as he dodged and swerved. When he dropped the little girl off, he pulled out the Vitality Draught before he took off again. Strength and speed didn’t give him energy.

“Who are you?” a red robed witch asked as she checked over the little girl.

“Best I don’t say,” Harry said, after he downed the potion. Taking off again, Harry flew high, much higher up than the two remaining muggles. Surveying the field below, Harry dove, picking up speed. Pulling up to a screaming halt, Harry stopped by the contorted woman.

“Protego!” Harry cast, and even with the Vitality Draught, he felt drained by the spell. Still though, he caught the woman, speeding her away. She was a larger target than her small children had been. He felt the Mercury’s Elixir wear off as he was making his way back to the Aurors. His legs all but went limp. Suddenly it became a bit difficult to guide his broom while he held onto the poor woman, who was screaming for her children in his ear. He didn’t land this time when he dropped her off, he knew his legs wouldn’t support him. He also figured that the Hercules blood wouldn’t last much longer either. He didn’t have any time. He flew as fast as he could, making a beeline for the man.

Something clipped his foot, dangling out from his cloak, and it took Harry just a moment to realize that his shoe was on fire. He blindly cast Aguamenti just as he made his final approach.

“Protego!” Harry cried out one last time, and he felt something inside of him whither and a wave of dizziness rolled over him. The man was falling though, and Harry had to dive to catch him. He almost didn’t. Leveling out over the mob, Harry beelined it towards the Aurors, relying now solely
on speed. That was when the Hercules Blood wore off and Harry’s body went limp and he lost his ability to control his broom. He dropped the poor muggle man. It was good that they weren’t terribly high up. The broom wouldn’t exactly let Harry fall though, and it started decelerating when Harry lost control. Still though, he was going down.

The mob surrounding the masked marchers served one small purpose. They broke Harry’s fall. Pretty quickly though the lights of several spells were being cast all over. Harry couldn’t even turn his head to look, but he seemed to think that several more Aurors had arrived on the scene. Someone stepped over him, their foot crushing his stomach. Harry tried to move but he couldn’t. His limbs were like jelly. That, more than the prospect of being trampled, sent Harry into a panic. He couldn’t move. He was completely helpless.

“Harry!” Percy said, when he busted his way to where Harry had fallen. Harry realized his cloak had slid off his head. “Merlin, are you okay?” He crouched over Harry, who was hyperventilating and felt so incredibly vulnerable just then, he wanted to scream. Harry felt Percy take the cloak off of the rest of him to get a better look at him. He could see red robed Aurors marching past in his periphery. Harry reminded himself that Percy was there to help. He tried to calm down.

“I can’t move,” Harry said, between gasps for breath.

“Right,” Percy said. “Don’t even try, I’m getting you out of here. He grabbed onto Harry and tried to dissaparate them. Nothing happened.

“My pendant,” Harry said. “You can’t. What happened to the muggle man?”

“Someone’s taking care of him,” Percy said, reaching for Harry’s neck.

“You can’t,” Harry said. “Only I can take it off.”

Percy tried, but he couldn’t even grasp the chain. “Right,” he said. “I’m going to cary you.”

“My cloak,” Harry said. “My broom.”

“I’ve got them,” Percy said, casting the feather-light charm on Harry. The crowd had moved on by now. Harry could hear a great commotion off in the distance. Percy picked up Harry, and Harry hung limp like a rag doll in his arms. He was trembling all over. He felt completely helpless and sick to his stomach.

Percy walked up to two Aurors who were attending to the shell shocked muggles. Harry could see that the muggle man that he had dropped was already there, looking a bit better off than Harry felt.

“I’ve got your mystery flyer right here,” Percy said, and Harry groaned. He had hoped to fly under the radar, so to speak. Though with all the magic he had been doing, he supposed it was a moot point. He was rather horrified to wonder if that letter would be going to his dad, or to himself. He wondered if there was any way to keep this from him.

“The Boy-Who-Lived?” exclaimed a wizard. “Well of course it is. What else could go phenomenally wrong tonight?

“What’s wrong with him?” a witch asked.

“Spinal chord, I think,” said Percy. “I wasn’t comfortable trying to fix it myself.”

Harry tried, and failed, to shake his head as Percy laid him down.
“Potions wore off,” he said. “Enhancement potions.”

“Enhancement potions? As in plural? How are you even conscious right now?”

“Vitality Draught,” Harry said.

“Oh, I see,” the witch said, nodding. “You’re insane. Can’t help you there. Have fun. He just needs rest.”

“Percy!” Mr. Weasley called, running up, out of breath. “Did you find him?”

“He’s right here,” Percy said.

“Thank Merlin,” Mr. Weasley said. “Is he all right?”

“He will be,” Percy said. “I’m ready to get back to help.”

“It’s over,” Mr. Weasley said. “We caught who we were going to catch, and everyone else got away. Stay with Harry, I’ll go check on the rest of the kids.”

Mr. Weasley disapparated with a loud crack.

The witch started checking Harry over for injuries. He had weathered his fall rather well, but he had several bumps and bruises. He also had a nasty burn on his ankle, but that was taken care of rather quickly.

“You can take him away if you want,” the wizard said. “He mostly just needs rest. He’s also magically exhausted. I’d tell you not to do magic for at least a week, but that shouldn’t be an issue, should it?”

“My mum’ll make sure he gets some rest,” Percy said. “He’s got a Pizio Gamma Charm, though. Until he can move his arms, he’s not going anywhere.”

“Well, you should settle in then,” the witch said. “Because that’s going to take a while.” She headed back to where the muggles were and Harry heard their voices sounding like they were getting farther away.

Percy sighed. He tiredly pulled up a patch of ground next to Harry and pulled off his glasses to polish them against his shirt.

“You’re making a habit of this,” Percy said.

“It just sort of happens,” Harry said.

“You saved Ginny’s life,” Percy said. “Same thing with Ron. It’s not that I’m not grateful.”

“…but?” Harry queried.

“But you’re making a bit of a habit out of this,” Percy said. “And you need to stop.”

“They needed help,” Harry said. “It was wrong what they were doing to them. It wasn’t wrong to help them.”

“That man could have died when you dropped him,” Percy said. “He doesn’t have magic to protect him.”
“But he didn’t,” Harry said. “I didn’t exactly plan on dropping him.”

“You didn’t have a plan period,” Percy said.

“It worked out,” Harry said. “It’s not like I wanted any of this to happen. I’m perfectly happy to just go through life without horrible stuff happening.”

“Sure,” Percy said. “But horrible stuff does happen. You need to be smart when it does.”

“Why do you care?” Harry asked.

Percy was silent for a moment and Harry was wary of having talked back at an adult while he was completely helpless.

“Fred and George were named for my uncles,” Percy said. “Fabian and Gideon Prewett. That’s my earliest memory; their funeral. I don’t really remember them, but I remember missing them. I was five. It’s likely I’ll go to a few more funerals in my time, Harry, but I’d rather not go to yours any time soon. Or Ron’s, or Hermione’s. There are a million ways this night could have gone.”

“Hey,” Harry said. “I stopped Ron from trying to have a go at them. I don’t want him involved in this stuff anymore than you do.”

“Yeah,” Percy said. “You did. I appreciated that. He’ll still follow you into hell, though.”

“Percy,” a woman said. Harry thought it was Ms. Cooper. “There you are. Have you seen Diggle or Rawlins?”

Harry was growing tired of his limited view of the nights sky.

“I haven’t,” Percy said, standing up to meet his boss.

“If they had sense they apparated to the ministry,” Ms. Cooper said. “I sent Frederick to check and see if anyone’s checked in. What’s this I hear about you taking up your wand tonight Weasley? I’m training diplomats, not Aurors.”

“Hey, yeah,” Harry said. “How’s that any different from what I did?”

Percy gave a very tired sigh and ignored Harry. “They needed help,” he said. “Most of the Aurors hadn’t arrived yet.”

“He’ll be sure to be extra diplomatic tomorrow,” Harry said.

“Well, see that you do,” Ms. Cooper said. “This is going to be a shit storm. What about yourself Mr. Potter? I can’t imagine you’re getting much stargazing done with all the firelight.”

“He’ll be fine,” Percy said. “I’m staying with him until… this… wears off.”

“All hands tomorrow,” Ms. Cooper said. “As soon as you can get away.”

“I’ll be there Ms. Cooper,” Percy said.

There was silence as she walked away.

“She seems nice,” Harry said.

“She is the best department head in the ministry,” Percy said. There was more silence.
“It wasn’t the same,” Percy said, after a while.

“What wasn’t?” Harry asked.

“What the both of us did tonight,” Percy said. “It wasn’t the same.”

“We both went to help.”

“I went to help the Aurors,” Percy said. “You went to do your own thing. You didn’t have back up. No one knew where you were. If something had happened, you’d have been on your own.”

“It’s not like they would have let me help,” Harry said.

“No,” Percy agreed. “They wouldn’t have. And yet, you had a good idea. It had a better chance, though, with a fully trained adult carrying it out. Did loaning your broom to an Auror occur to you?”

“That doesn’t work,” Harry said.

“What doesn’t?”

“Going to an adult,” Harry said. “I’ve tried it out before. They don’t listen, you’re lucky if they just tell you to get lost. You can’t trust people when the stakes are that high.”

“Yes,” Percy said. “You can. The Aurors were here to help.”

“There were only a couple in the beginning,” Harry said. “And how am I supposed to trust anyone when just about everyone I saw was joining up with those masked weirdos?”

“Most people were running away,” Percy said. “Most people weren’t okay with what happened tonight. And Harry, even if there’s only two Aurors, you could have still gone to one of them and said, ‘I have an idea.’”

“If it gets out of my hands then I can’t make sure it works out all right,” Harry said.

“If you go into a situation without everything you need, and that includes help from others, it won’t work out all right period. What were you going to do if I hadn’t been the one to find you? At best it’s just a drunk who doesn’t recognize you, at worst you could have landed on one of the Death Eaters.”

“The Death Eaters are with Voldemort right now,” Harry said. “And there’s only three, it’s not like I would have actually met one tonight.”

“All of those masked assholes tonight were Death Eaters Harry!” Percy said. “Did you not realize that? Those were all Death Eaters who never went to Azkaban. They were never caught or they slipped through the system. Did you forget you sat through the game with one?”

Harry felt cold inside. It hadn’t occurred to him to think of who was behind those masks. Not in the moment. He hadn’t realized that there were that many Death Eaters outside of Azkaban.

“How do you know they were Death Eaters?” Harry asked.

Percy sighed. “Hooded cloak and skull mask.”

Something landed on Harry’s chest. He couldn’t look up.
“What’s that?” Harry asked.

“Oh, Owl,” Percy said. You’ve got a letter.”

Thank Merlin, Harry thought. It hadn’t gone to his dad.

“Could you?” Harry asked.

The weight was lifted from his chest and Harry heard the tearing of an envelope.

“Let’s see,” Percy said. “Detected underage magic, previous warnings, unusual circumstances, inquiry… I can take care of this tomorrow.”

“Really?” Harry asked.

“I did say I was grateful,” Percy said. “Besides, it’s a good opportunity to network. Always be on the lookout, Harry. You never know when a good contact might come in handy.”

“Right,” Harry said. “I don’t suppose you know how long I can expect to be useless like this?”

Harry asked.

“Probably for a while,” Percy said. “There’s a reason most people never do enhancement potions. Where’d you even get them?”

“No comment,” Harry said.

“Was it the twins?” Percy asked.

“I can neither confirm nor deny,” Harry said.

“Hmm. Well, there just might be a little politician in you yet,” Percy said.

“Eww,” Harry said.

“Definitely the twins,” Percy said. “All right, they’ve cleared the area, it looks like. I don’t know about you, but I don’t want to spend all night out here. I’m carrying you to the tent.”

Harry didn’t exactly want to be carried through the campsite, but he doubted that he had a say in the matter.

Chapter End Notes

Thanks for putting up with such a long chapter. Sorry, I just wanted to get through the summer. althor42 says I just had to one up them since they did a 21K chapter so I did a 22K chapter. If you haven’t checked out their most recent story, Big Hero Martian, I definitely recommend it. It’s a crossover between BH6 and The Martian. It is already complete and they’re back to working on The Horcrux Within. As always, please let me know what you think of the story. I hope you all had a happy halloween. I volunteered in a haunted house, which was fun, and marathoned Over the Garden Wall, which was awesome. I’m going to try to get another chapter out in a month
before life gets crazy over the holidays.
Norman had long thrived on overtime. With no one at home to miss him, he had never hesitated to volunteer to stay late or pull an extra shift. Still though, it had only been moments after he had gotten home from a sixteen hour shift guarding the Quidditch Cup when he had gotten the call that the camp was being overrun by blasted Death Eaters.

Now that everything had been taken care of and he had been on his feet for well over twenty-four hours, he was well ready to get something to eat and get some sleep. Pulling out a mug from the cupboard he poured himself some frosted hard cider and checked over his ready meals while he put the cider bottle back in the ice box. Taking a sip, he reached in to pull out a lamb stew pie when his entire body suddenly went limp and he fell face first into the ice box and then slumped down onto the floor in a puddle of cider.

He frantically assessed himself to identify what had happened. It didn't take a genius to figure out. He couldn't move a single muscle, not even the ones that controlled eye movement. His diaphragm was still working, but he could not control his breathing, which was rapid, an autonomous reaction to his situation. His heart rate was spiked from adrenaline and his bladder had emptied itself. His body continued to function, but he had no control over it. Paralysis Draught had this effect, which meant he had been poisoned and he would be completely helpless until it wore off. If he lived that long.

Norman heard footsteps enter his kitchen and he was unceremoniously rolled over onto his back. He heard the icebox door shut.

"Scourgify," a man's voice said, followed by, "Oculo Medietus," which caused Norman's eyes to look straight forward at the ceiling.

"That's better. I have to say, I had been sure you would be drinking something stronger thirteen years later, but I get in here and what do I see? Hard cider. I remember I used to try and get you to drink firewhiskey with me. Still don't like the burn?"

The man paused as if he was waiting for Norman to reply. He loomed over Norman and Norman had no doubt that he would not live long enough for the potion to wear off.

"It's been a long time," Augustus Rookwood said. "The wards still remember me though. I was ready to have to dismantle them and then set them back in place before you came home, but they still remembered me. The Dark Lord disappeared and you became lax Norm, or was that sentimentality?"
Norman wanted to scream and snarl at the man who had used and betrayed him but his breathing was evening out now that his body was adjusting to the initial spike of adrenaline and all he could do was pant and stare straight ahead as the traitor stood over him.

"I'm not here to kill you," Gus said. "If that's any comfort. I just need a bit of information."

'Die in a fire,' was what Norman wanted to say. He would be damned if Gus ever got another bit of intelligence from him.

"I saw the shadow box over the mantle. First Level Field Commander," Gus exclaimed. "Congratulations, you never thought they'd promote someone like you that far. Good for you, I suppose. Better for me though."

Gus took a step over Norman so that his feet were straddling his sides and he looked down directly into Norman's eyes.

"Best to get this over with quickly, so let's start, shall we? First question. Where does the Ministry think the Dark Lord is?"

Norman could feel Gus's presence in his mind. He definitely wasn't being subtle now that Norman knew his true allegiances. He hastily threw up his best Occlumency defenses. He wouldn't be fooling Gus, but he could keep him from seeing anything he shouldn't. Let him think that the Ministry just might actually have an idea where the damned spirit was hiding.

Gus tisked and promptly crouched down and straddled Normans hips, leaning down so their eyes were inches apart. Norman wanted to buck and writhe and throw Gus off. He wanted to claw at his face. He lay there, incapable even of closing his eyes.

"Where does the ministry believe the Dark Lord to be?" The presence in Norman's head increased, but Norman held firm for what felt like an eternity under the mental onslaught. The presence in his mind receded.

Gus frowned. "Well, I suppose I must. You've gotten a lot better at Occlumency Norm, I can tell, but a concussion should interfere with your defenses though."

"So can you move yet?" Ron asked.

"I can wiggle a bit," Harry said. He had really hoped that he'd be a lot better after a few hours of sleep. Far from being better though, Harry was now also incredibly sore all over. He was also using every ounce of his mental discipline to keep himself from focusing on the fact that he was effectively paralyzed and completely defenseless. At least he could talk. At least Ron was there.

The two of them were in the boys tent. The lot of them were basically stuck there until Harry could move again. Percy had been able to apparate to work, but the rest of the Weasleys were still there. Fred and George were still asleep. Harry was pretty certain that Hermione and Ginny were too. Mr. Weasley and Ron's eldest brothers were trying to manage some sort of breakfast out by the campfire. Ron was sat on Harry's bed, where Harry had been propped up the best he could be. Ron was keeping an eye out the door of the tent where Harry was pretty sure he was keeping vigil to make sure the girls tent went undisturbed.

"What if I move your hand and use it to grab the necklace?" Ron asked.

"Your dad already tried that," Harry said.
"Huh," Ron said.

There was a pause.

"Soo," Harry said.

"So," Ron agreed.

"What happened last night?" Harry asked. "What happened to 'no more adventures?"

Ron sighed. "I meant it."

"Alright."

"I still do," Ron said.

"Yeah?" Harry said probingly.

"It's just," Ron said. "I don't know. I just sort of went… They couldn't defend themselves. At all. They were muggles. They were completely powerless. I had to do something. Not that I could have. I'd have probably puked before I even got there."

"No, I think you'd have gotten there," Harry said.

"Do you really think that?"

"You're still you," Harry said.

Ron frowned and looked away. "Can I ask you something?" he asked.

"Well I'm not going anywhere?" Harry said.

"Right," Ron said. "Well, I was wondering. Um, did you do all that last night because of me?"

"Of course not," Harry lied.

Ron was quiet for a bit.

"I mean it's not like you asked me to or anything," Harry said defensively. He didn't know why he was so defensive on this point.

"I didn't," Ron agreed. "Except I sort of did, so… I'm sorry."

"For what?" Harry asked.

"For putting you in that position," Ron said.

"You didn't," Harry said.

"This isn't how life debts are supposed to work," Ron sighed.

"Forget the life debt," Harry said, a bit exasperated.

"Easy for you to say," Ron said.

"You don't owe me anything," Harry said.
"Don't worry about it," Ron said.

"You keep saying that," Harry said.

"Yeah, well you've got enough on your plate, you shouldn't have to worry about things that you can't control," Ron said.

"See, telling me not to worry, doesn't stop me from worrying," Harry said.

"What are you worried about though?" Ron asked.

He was worried that he would never know if Ron stayed his friend out of obligation.

"It's just, I didn't go after you so you'd owe me," Harry said.

He'd gone after them because he couldn't imagine his life without them. Because he couldn't fathom the guilt of knowing they had died in his stead.

"Of course you didn't," Ron said. "So what's wrong with me owing you?"

"You're my friend," Harry said.

If Ron ever found out what Harry was, would he stay friends with Harry just because Harry had saved his life?

"Friends can owe friends," Ron said.

"Maybe I owe you," Harry said.

"Ummmm."

"You've gotten me through a lot of stuff," Harry said. "You rescued me from the Dursleys. You kept me sane when everything was going crazy. You put up with me."

"Of course I put up with you," Ron said. "You're my friend. None of that's on a level with what you did."

"Well, it is to me," Harry said.

Ron looked disbelieving as he shook his head.

"You and Hermione are also the reason I've had a decent home this summer," Harry said.

"Oh, I still think getting Mum and Dad to take you in for the summer would have been awesome," Ron said.

"Yeah, well there's also the Firebolt," Harry said.

"Okay," Ron said. "You've got me there. We might be even for that. The universe, though, might disagree. Just- It'll work itself out."

"Huh," Harry said.

"So how're you going to handle everything when you see Snape again?" Ron asked, changing the subject.

"Well right now I'm hoping he doesn't find out," Harry said.
"Sure," Ron said. "Best case scenario. What's plan B."

"Well, I'm not going to see him for a week, so hopefully he'll have time to cool down," Harry said. 
"Though that's assuming he doesn't just blow all pretenses and just comes and drags me back home the moment he finds out."

"Avoidance is good," Ron said. "You know what you're going to say?"

"I don't know. We're probably going to disagree on whether or not I should have done it in the first place," Harry said. "Um... so you've got normal parents, right?"

"Harry no one in my family's normal," Ron said.

"Yeah," Harry said. "But what do you think your dad'd do if you'd done that last night?"

"Remember his reaction to us busting you out with the flying car?" Ron asked.

"I don't think he'd have just asked you how it went," Harry said.

"Well now he think's I'm all fragile and shit, but if I actually pulled it off? I don't know. I think he'd scold me and then get me ice cream or something. It's Mum who'd flip. She'd obsess over everything that could have gone wrong. I'd probably get a lot of chores and a lot of tearful hugs with her telling me to never do something like that again. I think she was too wrapped up with Ginny to really process me going with you into the Chamber of Secrets, though I did get told off for it eventually, just, you know, after she'd had time to cool down. That's really the best tactic. Avoidance and distraction. So right now, though, the thing I can't get over, is you asked if my parents are normal, because you want to know how your dad's going to react, as if he's normal."

"Well I figure your parents can be like a baseline," Harry said. Though right then his dad finding out about last night should be the least of his worries. What would ever happen if his dad found out he liked boys?

"Well yeah, but then my two parents would have two completely different reactions, chores or ice cream. That's a pretty broad baseline."

Harry sighed.

"How'd he handle the whole thing at the end of the school year?" Ron asked.

Harry shrugged. "He said he understood why I did it. He said he wasn't angry."

"Well see?" Ron asked. "There you go."

"We'll see," Harry said.

"Don't worry about it mate," Ron said. "Even if he is angry, he'll have time to cool down before you get back to school. Besides, after first year didn't you say the Dursleys would be upset you hadn't died saving the stone? At least Snape'll be happy you're not dead."

"Probably," Harry said.

"Definitely," Ron said. "Oh hey, Hermione's up." He looked forlornly out the entryway to the tent.

"You should go see how she is after last night," Harry said, though he very much did not want to be left alone.
Ron chewed on his bottom lip casting a torn look between the door and Harry. "She was pretty upset last night," Ron said, staying where he was. "She wasn't the only one," Harry said. He wasn't dense enough not to realize that Ron and Hermione would be affected by the sight of the captured muggles after their own experiences. "I got over it," Ron said. "Do you talk to her about that stuff?" Harry asked. "Not really," Ron said. "I'm supposed to, I think. That book I told you about talked about group therapy and stuff. But what if Hermione just wants to forget about everything that happened? She actually got help. Maybe she's just ready to put everything behind her."

"I don't know," Harry said. He'd never been one to bring up the demons from his past, though that was in part because Harry knew that a lot of his past was his own fault. Nothing that had happened to Ron or Hermione had been their fault. "How's it going with the book?"

"I don't know," Ron said. "It's nice to know that a lot of everything I've been feeling is sort of normal."

"How's the whole sleep thing going?" Harry asked. "Still not good," Ron said. "I try now and then to just sleep like normal. I either lie awake for hours or I fall asleep long enough to wake up in a panic."

"So what do you think is going on?" Harry asked.

Ron huffed. "I'm scared," he said honestly, but also with a tinge of bitter sadness. "I feel like I always am. Even when I'm distracted by something else, it's like it's still there in the back of my mind. It's worse at night. It's worse when I'm alone, or maybe it's worse when I'm in a crowd, or maybe it just comes and goes on a whim and I attribute it to whatever's going on at the time… Sometimes I feel like I'm back there, like you never rescued us."

"Still a no on potions?" Harry asked. Ron froze at that, frowning. "Last time I got dosed to sleep someone tried to kidnap you," Ron said, an argument he had used before. His reluctance was really not something Harry had any grounds to be arguing with Ron over. Not when he had his own rather large aversion to potions. "So are you scarred something's going to happen to you or someone else?" Harry asked. "Both," Ron said. "So what happens when someone's keeping watch?" Harry asked. "I dunno," Ron said. "I tell myself if something happens they can wake me up. I just feel better, like I can let my guard down for a moment."

"Huh."

"You wanna try moving again?" Ron asked.
Harry hummed and tried to move his arm. It felt ridiculously heavy. It lifted about a half an inch, after a great deal of effort, and then fell back down.

"Try to make a fist," Ron suggested.

Harry was able to make a very loose fist, which also seemed to inflame a lot of muscles in his arm. 

"Okay, so how about, I put your hand on the charm, you grasp it, then I move your arm to pull it off? That way it might sort of kind of be moving under your own power."

Harry very much hated that he was so especially useless.

"It's worth a go," Harry said. "Though maybe try the other hand. I think this one's spent."

Ron grabbed Harry's forearm and guided Harry's hand to the thin chain around his neck. Harry grasped it, feeling it's weight in his hand while also being very aware of the warmth of Ron's hand on his arm. He hoped he wasn't blushing as much as he felt he was. The pain in his forearm was a good distraction.

"I think I have it," Harry said.

"Here goes," Ron said, moving Harry's hand up and over his head. The charm came off, grasped in Harry's hand. He dropped it as soon as it was clear, wishing he could shake out his hand, which was cramping up.

"Looks like we can leave after breakfast," Ron said.

"Yeah," Harry said.

"So did you know this would happen when you took all those potions?" Ron asked

"I didn't think it would be this bad," Harry said. "Dad made me read up on each potion he gave me so I'd know what mixed with what and what shouldn't be mixed and everything. It was definitely discouraged to take multiple enhancement potions together. It was also rather discouraged to mix one with a Vitality Draught except in extreme circumstances. Also mixing enhancement potions tends to reduce their effective time. Probably not good I mixed two enhancement potions and used them with the Vitality Draught to boot. If I had it to do over again, I'd definitely have forgone the Mercury's Elixir. With my broom, that really wasn't necessary. I wish I'd thought of that first before I thought of bashing my way through everyone."

"Hey Ronnie," Bill Weasley's voice called out through the open tent flap. "Breakfast is ready, are the twins up yet?"

"No," Ron hollered back, a blush on his face, perhaps for his brother's un-ironic use of his nickname. "I'll wake them."

Ron went through the doorway to one of the tent's bedrooms. "I'll bring you something," Ron said when he emerged from the bedroom a moment later. He headed out of the tent. Harry tried not to panic being alone and immobile.

Breakfast was rather simple. Crumpets and jam with bacon and tea. Harry didn't eat much, being very embarrassed to have Ron attempting to feed him. The twins teased them for it.

Harry was a bit disappointed afterwards, to leave. Not that he wasn't well and done with the whole camping experience, but he had hoped to be able to leave while standing on his own two feet. Mrs.
Weasley was likely to be rather upset when he returned to the Burrow being carried by Charlie.

"Was it really necessary to go through all that, Norm?" Gus had levitated Norman out of his kitchen and into his bedroom and was now in the process of awkwardly changing him into his night clothes. "It's been nice catching up though. Or rather, I've been catching up. You're not going to remember any of this, but think of it this way, Norm. Next time can be a whole new reunion for you."

Gus tapped his wand on the knot on the side of Norman's skull and a lot of the fog that had covered his head alleviated, along with some of the lingering pain. Gus frowned.

"You're probably going to have a headache when you wake up. Healing has never been my strong suit. I'd tell you not to fight me so much next time but, well, you know. Maybe take a day off or something. I think they're working you too hard. Don't you have enough rank to get out of night shifts? I waited so long for you. Oh well, get some rest. Until next week, Norm."

The last thing Norman saw after Gus pulled the sheets up to his shoulders was Gus's wand pointed between his eyes.

"Obliviate!"

As it turned out, Mrs. Weasley was not just distressed to see Harry being carried in, she had already been fairly upset having read an article in the Daily Prophet that had detailed the events of the night prior, but had also featured Harry role in it prominently, if not entirely accurately.

"What part of don't over do it did you not understand?" she had asked as soon as she had assured herself that Harry wasn't at death's door and had him laid up on the couch. There was scolding and admonishments to stay safe in the future before the children were left to their own devices.

"Okay," Fred said. "Let's see if the paper got it right."

Harry hoped it was very inaccurate and that his dad would never know how much danger he had put himself in the night prior.

Harry didn't know how the reporter, Rita Skeeter, had gotten so much information about that night, and had it ready for print the following morning. The article had started out lambasting the Ministry for sending so many Aurors home after the game, but it had then taken a sharp right turn and become all about Harry. The article, somehow, prominently featured Harry's actions during the Death Eater incident without really mentioning the muggle victims, except in passing. Harry, the article would have you believe, had decided to take matters into his own hands, specifically because he was fed up with the ministry's incompetence.

Rita Skeeter had found out about the enhancement potions, and even knew that Harry had been riding a Firebolt. She had managed to get Percy's name wrong though and the twins were already crowing about Payce Wesley. She had also made a rather unpleasant remark at the end connecting the enhancement potions to his position on the school quidditch team without actually saying anything. Which was stupid, since Harry would have to be stupid to think that Hercules Blood or Mercury's Elixir would be anything short of disastrous for a quidditch game.

"It doesn't say who got arrested last night," Hermione said after Fred had finished reading the article out loud.

"I hope they got Malfoy," Ron said.
"Snakes slither through," Fred said.

"So much for the teachers not finding out though," Ron said.

"Who cares about them?" Fred said.

"Harry can't get in trouble with the school," Hermione said. "Though the Ministry may be another matter."

"Percy said he'd take care of it," Harry said.

"So, have you started a scrapbook?" George asked.

"What?" Harry asked.

"For all the times you've been in the paper," Fred said.

"Those blurbs from last summer don't count," Harry said. "Someone actually got paid to follow me and tell the prophet what candy I buy in the alley and stuff. Stalking does not go in a scrapbook."

"Still though," George said. "There've been a lot. You were in the Prophet three days straight after…" he glanced over at Ron who was sat very close to Hermione on the other couch.

"At the end of the school year," Fred finished. Harry was entirely not used to the twins holding their tongue to spare Ron's feelings.

"No scrapbook." Harry said.

"This one was actually a lot more accurate than what they printed our second year," Ron said.

"I made the paper for that?" Harry asked. "Why didn't I hear about it?"

"It came out at the start of the summer," Ron said. "Everyone went home and told their parents all the gossip about what happened. I thought it was sort of funny when it came out, there was a lot of really off speculation."

"Still," Harry said. "No scrapbook."

"Fair enough," Ron said.

"Do you need some more sleep?" Hermione asked. Harry doubted any of them looked like they didn't need any sleep.

"Yeah," Harry said reluctantly. He hated sleeping during the day though.

Mrs. Weasley had walked in on that, however, and any semblance of a choice was removed. The twins were sent to their room, and Hermione was staying in Ginny's room for the week. Harry wasn't sure where Bill and Charlie Weasley had gone, but they seemed to have escaped being sent to their rooms. Harry was rather stuck where he was, though he doubted he'd get any better sleep on the pull out in Ron's room. Mrs. Weasley settled herself in a rocking chair and picked up her knitting. Ron settled on the other couch, content to get his sleep under his mother's protective watch. Harry was then left to his own devices.

He was very unused to sleeping on his back, and like the night prior, he felt very uncomfortable trying to do so. He wasn't about to ask Ron to roll him over onto his side though. Expected to sleep now, Harry was left with his own thoughts. At this point he was alternating between numbness and
panic over his revelation from the day prior. The Quidditch match and the bloody Veela felt like so much longer ago than it was at the moment.

Harry didn't know what to do about his sexuality, but he had to do something. There had to be some way to change it. He had been trying so hard to stop thinking about Ron like that. Even before he had realized why, he had tried to think about girls, he had tried to be straight. Magic could do so much though. He couldn't stand to lose his father for being gay. He didn't want to lose his friends for this. Though he had long feared that someday they would wise up to him, that they would realize there was something wrong with him, to be faced with this now was like a timer had been set and it was counting down to the implosion of his life. There just had to be some way for magic to fix him. He was sure of it. There had to be a way.

Harry hadn't really been aware of falling asleep. He would have thought he had been too preoccupied with everything else to do so, but he had also been spectacularly tired. He slept for six hours and woke up in time for a late lunch. He hadn't really noticed how much he was starving until he had food placed in front of him. At this point he could feed himself, though it was good that he wasn't eating anything messy because it would have been all over him. Everything hurt, and he was a bit shaky, but he was moving on his own.

"I have an appointment in London tomorrow," Hermione said with a bit of trepidation while they were eating.

"That shouldn't be any trouble, dear," Mrs. Weasley said. "We'll make sure to have you there on time."

"My parents want to take everyone out for dinner afterwards," Hermione said, and Harry did not think that this was something that Hermione was thrilled about.

"Everyone?" Ron asked.

"Your family," Hermione said. "And Harry's was invited too, but…"

"They must graciously decline," Harry said.

"Right," Hermione said.

"But, like, in a muggle restaurant?" Ron asked.

"Yes," Hermione said. "You've eaten in muggle restaurants with me before."

"I know," Ron said. "But they haven't." He gestured to the twins who put on a show of being offended. "What about you and dad?" he asked Mrs. Weasley.

"The last time did not go very well," Mrs. Weasley said. "But there were many lessons learned. We would love to join them for dinner. Do they know how many of us there are?" Mrs. Weasley too sounded hesitant. As though she did not very well know how this would all play out.

"I didn't know Bill and Charlie were going to be here when I left home," Hermione said. "But since the Dursleys aren't coming I don't suppose they will be surprised by the numbers. They are planning to get a private dining room, so there shouldn't be too many issues with the rest of the muggles." She was clearly reluctant, but she was dutifully relaying her parents offer.

"That's a good idea," Mrs. Weasley said. "It sounds lovely. I will make sure that everyone can attend."
"Great," Hermione said, with a smile that did not reach her eyes. "There are just a couple of small matters I should go over first though."

"Don't mention anything dangerous?" Harry asked.

"They know about You-Know-Who and the war," Hermione said. "But as far as they're concerned, he's dead and gone and certainly has never stepped foot in the school while I was there. Also the Chamber of Secrets never happened and we definitely won't be talking about dementors or anything else that happened last year. They know that some dark wizards escaped from prison, but they have no reason to think it has anything to do with us. The most adventure I have at school involves watching quidditch. I had mentioned your trip to the Forbidden Forest, with the spiders, but I sold it as boyish bravado. I certainly have never stepped foot in the Forbidden Forest, it is after all forbidden. Oh, and the troll; that did not happen."

"Well Merlin," Fred said.

"What's left to talk about?" asked George.

"School work," Hermione said. "And Quidditch, of course, and your plans for your joke business, and... gossip or something. I don't know. Surely you talk about something other than our misadventures when we aren't around don't you? Oh, yes, and the time turner, best we don't mention that."

"Time turner?" Fred asked, his eyes lit up with a great deal of mischief.

"Hermione was using a time turner to go to a bunch more classes," Ron said. "All the classes really."

"Really," Mrs. Weasley said. "Is that healthy?"

"No," Ron said. "The time turner was cool though."

"I'm pretty sure they are going to think I was over working myself," Hermione said.

"Yeah, but this is perfect," Ron said. "They already think something's wrong. We bring up the time turner, they get worried, blame everything on stress from school, you agree to cut Divination and Muggle Studies, and then they get to think that they've solved everything."

"Wow," George said.

"I'm actually impressed," Fred said.

"We've clearly rubbed off on you," George said.

"Boys!" Mrs. Weasley said in exasperation. "I'd best never feel as though I were being managed, like that."

"Oh, of course not mum," Fred said.

"Never," George replied.

"As if we could," Fred added.

"See that you don't," Mrs. Weasley said.

"Never," Ginny said very solemnly.
"But I don't want to give up Muggle Studies," Hermione said.

"You're muggle born," Ron said. "You don't need to worry about it, you could pass the NEWT without taking the class. Do you really want to go another year with the time turner? That was a ton of work for you."

"I like work," Hermione said. "And, it's fascinating how the wizarding world views the muggle world."

"You were really stressed last year," Ron said. "I mean, more than usual."

"I was handling it," Hermione said.

"Yeah, well we're supposed to be avoiding stress, aren't we?" Ron said.

"I don't want to give it up because of him," Hermione said.

"It's not because of him," Ron said. "You'd be doing it for you."

"No, it would be because he hurt me and now I'm supposed to take it easy," Hermione said.

They were talking about Greyback now, and everyone at the table knew it. Harry saw Mrs. Weasley pale and the twins became unusually solemn. Yet as was usual when Ron and Hermione fought over something, they seemed to forget that everyone else was in the room.

"You wouldn't be taking it easy. And you know what? This was a problem before all that. You were constantly running around, staying up who knows how late doing homework. Merlin knows you weren't just using that time turner for classes, you were using it to do all those projects. Did you think I didn't notice how on edge you were last year? You did so much second year without it, but the moment you got a time turner in your hands the ability to do a bajillion things at once was too tempting and suddenly you're working yourself to the bone to keep up. And you know what? There isn't anyone to keep up with, you're already kilometers ahead of everyone else. What's it all going to be worth if you burn out?"

Hermione was silent. Harry had been expecting a big blowout after that. He was relieved that Hermione seemed to be thinking about what Ron said rather than getting a head of steam. He also felt guilty, because he hadn't really noticed. He hadn't really taken in just how much Hermione had taken on the year prior nor had he realized how it had been affecting her. Ron had; because he was a much better friend than Harry was.

Suddenly there was a commotion from the front door that had Ron scrambling for his wand, but it was just his father, who walked into the kitchen very excitedly, breaking the odd atmosphere of the room.

"We got him," he said excitedly. "They weren't spreading it around last night, but Lucius Malfoy was one of the ones we apprehended last night."

"No way," George said.

"Hear that, Gin, the bastard's been arrested," Fred said.

Ginny was silent on the matter.

"Have they charged him?" Mrs. Weasley asked.
"I don't know," Mr. Weasley said. "It's all being kept quiet while they process everything. But this is good. He can't worm his way out of this one. They can charge him under my own Muggle Protection Bill, which he tried to quash."

"That would be wonderful darling," Mrs. Weasley said.

Glancing at Ginny, though, Harry didn't think that any of the Weasleys were thinking of the crimes Lucius Malfoy had committed the night before. Mr. Weasley went back to work eventually, after there had been a lot of speculation on Malfoy's fate, and Bill and Charlie Weasley later came back from wherever they had been and joined in on the impromptu celebration.

"So," Ron said, later that evening. "How worried are you about this dinner?"

"Well as long as nobody says anything they aughtn't," Hermione said.

"So you're terrified?" Ron asked.

"A great deal," Hermione said.

"They can't keep you out of Hogwarts," Ron said.

"We'd come bust you out if they tried," Harry said.

"I know that," Hermione said. "But I don't want to fight about it, and I'd really rather they don't have to worry about something they can't control. I mean it's bad enough I only see them for a handful of weeks during the year, everything I am and do is alien to them. I just want to keep everything pleasant."

"And the timer turner?" Ron asked.

There was a drawn out silence.

"I'll drop Muggle Studies," Hermione said, much to Harry's surprise. "You were right, I was sort of running on empty most of the year."

"Well only you could have done all that," Ron said. "Even with a time turner, and don't worry about the dinner. My family shouldn't get too crazy.

"I'm sure everything will go fine," Harry said, for lack of anything insightful to say. He was still very much in the dark on how normal families were supposed to interact.

It does go well, for the most part. Bill and Charlie are a godsend, being able to tell tales of their jobs and their own times at Hogwarts that have nothing to do with Voldemort or Greyback. Even Percy, who had reluctantly left work on time for the evening, was able to normalize the concept of being an adult wizard with a normal job, though he did talk about politics a bit too much.

The twins were, of course, the twins, casually bringing up mountain trolls and whomping willows while Ron glared daggers at them, unnoticed by the Grangers senior.

Harry had been somewhat worried that the Grangers would start interrogating them about what was happening at school, but everything was, for the most part, pleasant. Harry definitely felt extraneous though. Ron's family was meeting Hermione's family and Harry was just there. He acutely felt his dad's absence. He wished his dad could be there and Harry could introduce him as Hogwarts's notorious potions professor. He wished he could tell them that he wasn't an orphan any
more. He had a dad now, or rather, he had a dad for now. He felt like he was lying just by coming
to the dinner alone.

"So tell me about this chess game you played against one of your teachers," Mrs. Granger asked
Ron.

This story skirted on dangerous grounds.

"It was a school competition," Hermione said, hurriedly. "Against charmed playing pieces. Ron
was the only student to beat it."

"Well let him tell it dear," Mr. Granger chided.

"Right," Ron said, looking very put on the spot. "So it was a competition." He took Hermione's
lead.

"There were teams," Harry said. "It was a bit different from a regular game of chess."

"Yeah," Ron said. "So it wasn't like regular chess. It was a life sized chessboard. You and your
teammates take the places of actual pieces. You could win in two ways, either checkmate the other
side or get all of your players to the other side. So it was Hermione, Harry and me trying to get
across. Hermione played castle, Harry played bishop, and I played the knight, we were all
queenside.

"So was it more difficult to play when you didn't have an overhead view of the game?" Mrs.
Granger asked.

"Oh, yes," Ron said. "Also, there were certain pieces I couldn't really sacrifice, obviously. And all
of the pieces were huge and it was hard to see around some of them without stepping out of my
square."

"So why not play the king?" Mrs. Granger asked. "One less piece you can't lose."

"Oh," Ron said. "Well since getting everyone across the board was an option, I didn't want anyone
to be stuck moving one square at a time."

"You should have seen it," Hermione said. "It was very exciting with all of the pieces moving on
their own."

"It must have been," Mr. Granger said. "Do you have a lot of fun challenges like that at school?"

"Oh, sure," Bill said. "But the curriculum is rather full. It's mostly studying."

"Well it helps if you can make some extra time for yourself like Hermione can," Ron said.

"Ron!" Hermione said severely.

"You didn't tell them?" Ron asked.

"Tell us what?" Mrs. Granger asked, looking concerned.

"It's nothing mom," Hermione said.

"Hermione Jean Granger," Mr. Granger chided.

"Well," Hermione said with audible reluctance. "It's just that I was taking two or three more
electives than most students this past year."

"That sounds like you would have less time, not more," Mrs. Granger said.

"Well yes," Hermione said. "But they gave me a time turner so I could get a few more hours into each day. Um, a time turner is sort of a time machine, but I've been very responsible with it."

"I'm sure you've been very responsible with it," Mr. Granger said, taking time travel in stride. "But that sounds horribly unhealthy. I can't believe they'd let you do that. You're sleep cycle alone. No wonder... you've put yourself under a terrific amount of stress."

"I've been keeping up with all of my classes," Hermione said. "It's not that bad."

"How many extra classes have you been taking?" Mr. Granger asked.

"Only two more than the maximum load," Hermione said.

"Well I think you're going to need to give two up," Mr. Granger said.

"Oh, but I couldn't," Hermione said.

"Hermione," Ron said. "You hate Divination, and we all know you could pass the Muggle Studies OWL right now if you wanted."

"That's not-"

"Hermione please," Mrs. Granger said. "We've been worried about you."

"Well," Hermione said, sounding very reluctant. "It has been rather difficult. I suppose... Alright. I'll tell Professor McGonagall I won't need the time turner anymore."

"It's for the best, dear," Mrs. Granger said, sounding relieved.

The argument over, Harry loosened his grip on his silverware. Just like anytime when he witnessed an argument at the Burrow, a part of him always expected the situation to escalate. Ostensibly he knew that the Weasleys weren't the Dursleys, the Grangers too, but a part of him was always ready for family disputes to turn violent. Even when the argument was manufactured.

"You really traveled through time though?" Mr. Granger asked, a bit of wonder in his voice now that the argument was over.

"It's not as exciting as it sounds," Hermione said. "You can only travel a few hours."

"It's only not exciting if you only use it to get to class," Ron said, glibly. "She wouldn't let us have any fun with it."

"You wouldn't know how to have fun with a time turner if it was Malfoy's birthday and you had Zonko's entire catalogue," Fred said.

The dinner might have devolved from there into a bit of goading back and forth between the siblings, but all in all it was a success. Hermione definitely looked relieved when the night was over.

"Minerva," Severus greeted as he opened the door to his office. "How was your conference?"
"Disappointing," Minerva said. "Have you seen the news?"

"I have been preoccupied with preparations for the new school year," Severus said. "Has something of great import happened."

"Death Eaters decided to have a revel after the Quidditch Cup and Harry decided to rescue the muggles they were tormenting for sport. He succeeded."

"He what?" Severus asked. This was definitely some form of cosmic punishment. "Is he all right? What was he thinking?"

"Keep in mind your son is a Gryffindor," Minerva said.

"Gryffindor nothing," Severus said. "That is distinctly Harry's own brand of foolishness. Is he all right?"

"He is fine," Minerva said.

"These were not the convicts," Severus said.

"No," Minerva said. "Lucious Malfoy, among others."

"Lucious was caught?" Severus asked.

"He was," Minerva said.

"Did Harry catch him, or did the Aurors?" Severus asked.

"The Aurors, I believe, or some other ministry workers, I understand it was a large hodgepodge. To my knowledge Harry's only role was to rescue the muggles. It was front page news."

"That child is going to be the death of me," Severus said.

"How will you handle this?" Minerva asked.

"Is that why you came down here?" Severus asked.

"Yes."

"How would you handle this?" Severus asked.

"You may recall I awarded him house points for jumping on a mountain troll's back," Minerva said. "Though at the time I did not anticipate that he would have so many opportunities to risk his neck over the next few years."

"So I should be blaming you," Severus said.

"You do seem to be taking this well," Minerva said.

"I expect Harry to be Harry," Severus said.

"I also expect the Weasley twins to be the Weasley twins," Minerva said.

"True," Severus said. "I actually spent the summer discussing Harry with a child psychology expert."

"I would not have anticipated that," Minerva said.
"It was enlightening," Severus said. "Harry was forced to take responsibility for himself and the world around him at a very early age. Suffice it to say, I think that at some level, Harry expects the adults around him to behave as his Aunt or Uncle would behave. If the question is, would they help this person who is in need, then the answer is no, and if no one else is going to help, then it is up to Harry to do so."

"So how will you address this?" Minerva asked.

"Harry will continue to be Harry," Severus said. "I will help him be as capable as he can be, and perhaps somewhere along the way, he will learn that he can trust me to help when help is needed."

Harry was walking through the castle, he had to keep moving. He needed to be quick, but for some reason he couldn't run. He was trying to keep ahead of Ron; he knew the other boy was looking for him. He couldn't let Ron see him. Or rather, he couldn't see Ron. Ron didn't understand though. He didn't understand why Harry couldn't bear to see him. Harry had to stay away from Ron. It was for both of their sakes.

"Harry?" Ron called out. He sounded so close. At the sound of his voice, Harry wanted to stop in his tracks and turn around, but he knew he couldn't. Harry rounded the next corner. He couldn't let Ron find him. He couldn't get close to Ron. He couldn't control his thoughts when Ron was around. He was a mess when Ron was around. He resisted the urge to look behind himself.

Suddenly, Ron's footsteps were much closer behind him. He felt a tension building up inside of himself and he was desperate to run to get away from it but all his legs could do was walk.

"Harry wait," Ron said, and a treacherous part of Harry, that wanted to do just that, to let Ron catch him, caused him to falter, but he kept going. He heard Ron's footsteps hurry to catch up. Ron was just behind him.

Suddenly Ron's hand was on Harry's shoulder which lit up with sensation and Harry was spun around to face Ron, and Ron was... beautiful. They were close now. They were so close, their faces were inches apart, their lips... Ron closed his eyes and leaned forward as the tension in Harry reached a crescendo and Harry... woke up with a gasp and a fading warmth in his shorts.

It took Harry a moment to understand what was happening.

Damnit, Harry thought as he came out of his dream haze and became aware of the mess he had made in his pajamas. Fucking damnit. It had happened again. He was such a disgusting freak. He had tried so hard to keep his mind out of the gutter. Occluding before bed obviously had no effect on his perverted thoughts when he was asleep.

"Are you all right?" Ron's voice asked behind him and Harry froze, mortified. He had just made a mess in his shorts and here Ron was, still up, because of course he was, and Harry couldn't clean himself up without Ron knowing exactly what had happened. Ron would think he was so gross. What if Ron figured out what Harry had been dreaming about? That wasn't even the worst dream he had had about Ron, not by a long shot.

"Bad dream?" Ron asked.

"Yeah," Harry said, staying curled up on his side with his back to Ron.

"Want to talk about it?" Ron asked.

Definitely not. "No," Harry said, his voice feeling a bit choked. "It was just a normal bad dream.
The spiders." Ron wouldn't pry into that, though Harry felt like a heel for invoking Ron's phobia.  

"Oh man," Ron said. "You get that one too? That's rough."

"I don't think I'm going to sleep anytime soon," Harry said. "Why don't you get some."

"Oh," Ron said. "Are you sure?"

"Yeah," Harry said. "Don't worry about it."

"You'll wake me when you're ready to get back to sleep though, right?"

"Of course," Harry said.

"Okay, well, thanks," Ron said. "Wake me in a bit."

"Night," Harry said.

Harry waited a good bit while the warmth in his shorts turned cold and damp. He focused on not thinking about his dream. When he was sure that Ron was asleep, he carefully lifted his covers and got out of bed before turning to examine the sheets. He was immediately glad that he slept on his side and that it didn't look like the mess in his shorts had been pressed up against the linens. At least he wouldn't have to change the bed.

Harry very quietly padded over to his trunk and gingerly opened it up and pulled out a change of underwear before carefully rooting around for another pair of pajama bottoms. Casting a furtive glance at Ron, Harry quickly stripped down below the waist and wiped himself up as well as he could with his already messed underwear which he quickly wrapped up in his pajama pants which he shoved into the bottom of his trunk, all while being careful not to get anything nasty on his hands.

Redressing quickly, Harry got back under the sheets of the pullout mattress. Ron was lucky, since Harry doubted he would be feeling sleepy anytime soon. Left to his own devices, he had plenty of time to berate himself for what had just happened. It was bad enough being gay, but having that happen while he thought about his best friend, who was sleeping a mere meter away, was just a whole other level of messed up. Still though, it was better than some of the dreams he had had about Ron, with similar results. It was also definitely better than the occasional werewolf nightmare he'd had about Ron. Those, he did not get back to sleep from once he woke up.

Two hours later, when Harry woke him up, Ron chastised him for staying up too late. The least Harry owed his best friend was a bit of sleep though. He had wanted to give him more, but he knew Ron would be upset if Harry had accidentally fallen asleep when he was supposed to be keeping watch. Harry drifted off into an uneasy sleep after that, hoping to Merlin that he didn't dream again that night.

"Ron! Breakfast in ten minutes!" Ron heard Ginny holler up the stairs. He put his little book of Chess Puzzles down a little bleary eyed and glanced down at Harry who hadn't woken up yet. He frowned a bit seeing Harry's posture. It was one of many reasons to hate the Dursleys. It was something he had noticed the summer before his second year, when Harry had slept in his room then too, but he hadn't known what it meant back then, not until he had seen it again this summer after his own captivity.

Harry always slept curled up on his side, nothing really unusual there, but now and then, he would have his arms weird. His bottom arm resting against his face while his top arm rested over his
stomach; the tension visible throughout his body was what really set it apart. It was the position you took when you were on the ground and someone was attacking you. Ron wondered if he himself ever slept like that now. He wondered how Harry could sleep when he looked so tense.

Ron reached a foot off of his bed to nudge Harry in the ribs. He got swatted for his troubles before a sleepy Harry sat up and looked around.

"Breakfast's soon," Ron said.

Harry nodded; he still looked a bit upset from the night before. When Harry got out from under his covers though, Ron noticed something else.

"Uhhh," was Ron's eloquent response.

"What?" Harry asked.

"Um, well, it's just, well, I'm pretty sure your pajamas matched when you went to bed last night."

"Oh," Harry said. "Um, yeah, I just, um, got hungry, you know, last night. Spilled some… chocolate, on my lap."

"Yeah?" Ron said. "Okay, must have been a big chocolate spill if you decided you needed to change afterwards. Doesn't explain why you're blushing more than I've ever seen you blush before."

That was when Ron realized just why Harry might have had to change in the middle of the night.

"Ohh," Ron said.

"I wet the bed," Harry said quickly after that.

"What?" Ron asked. "No you didn't, you didn't change the sheets. You'd seriously rather I thought you wet the bed than that you'd had, you know, the exact opposite of a bad dream last night?"

Harry wasn't blushing after that, he went pale.

"It's not a big deal," Ron said, trying to calm a somewhat panicked looking Harry. "Happens to a lot of blokes."

"Really?" Harry asked.

"Yeah," Ron said. "Didn't you pay attention when Madame Pomfrey gave us the talk?"

"I was actually trying really hard to melt into the floor," Harry said.

"Your loss," Ron said. Harry still looked mortified. "Look if you must know, I've had, um, a couple of rude awakenings myself, you know, way back when, it's really not a big deal."

"You have?" Harry asked, looking simultaneously scandalized and relieved.

"Sure," Ron said. "Did you think you were the only guy who's ever had a wet dream."

Harry shrugged. "Well, maybe not the only guy."

"Yeah," Ron said. "I bet you just thought you were the randiest guy in the world or something?"
Harry did not respond to that but just blushed again.

"Didn't your dad talk to you about this stuff?" Ron asked.

"We mostly talked about, um, contraception and not being a jerk and stuff," Harry said.

"Guess he figured you'd already heard this stuff from Pomfrey," Ron said.

Harry shrugged. "So you said you used to get them," he said.

"Yep," Ron said.

"As in, you don't anymore?" Harry prompted.

"Oh," Ron said. "Well you know, I figured I could take care of things while I was awake so it didn't happen when I was asleep. You know, whatever you do in the bathroom is your business, you don't have to feel like you can't do that just 'cause you're in my house."

"What?" Harry asked.

Ron made a crude hand gesture to get his point across.

Harry's eyes widened. "No," Harry said. "I- I don't do that."

"Oh, yeah right," Ron said, before taking in Harry's demeanor. "What, are you for real? Like you seriously don't ever?"

Harry shook his head.

"Like never ever?" Ron was absolutely bewildered. Was that even healthy?

Now Harry looked guilty and Ron raised his eyebrows to invite comment.

Harry looked like he was choking on his words before he got out, "Just a few times."

"And what?" Ron asked. "You didn't like it?" Was that even possible?

Harry looked down at the floor. "I felt bad afterwards."

"Bad?" Ron asked.

"Guilty," Harry said. "Dirty, you know?"

Ron had to pause after Harry said that. He didn't know. He couldn't think of any reason why Harry would feel like that.

"Is that a muggle thing?" Ron asked. "Wasn't there some mad queen or something who made all the muggles celibate?"

Harry opened his mouth to reply to that before closing it for a moment. "Yeah?" Harry said, sounding unsure. "I'm not sure what Queen Victoria's thing was. Maybe it's a Dursley thing though," he mumbled.

As if Ron needed another reason to hate the Dursley's.

"What'd they do?" Ron asked.
"They didn't do anything," Harry said quickly, keeping his eyes downward while he chewed on his words. "It's just, I don't know. There were a lot of things. Like, any time anything came up on the telly that had anything remotely to do with um… sex…"

Harry absolutely looked like he was waiting for someone to come and smite him for using the word.

"Yeah?" Ron prodded.

"Well, Uncle Vernon would get flustered, and Aunt Petunia would make a snide comment, or something," Harry said. "Stuff like that. They were always talking about stuff being disgusting or unnatural or perverted. I don't know, I could hear them while they watched the news after Dudley went to bed and they'd use the same words if the news mentioned a sex offender as they'd use if a show had, like, a sexual reference or something. Um, I guess, I got punished really bad once when I was like five for, um, having my hand in between my legs or something. I don't know, I just, I always got the idea that there was something wrong with all that stuff. It's, like, dirty, or something. And then here everyone's all like, oh we need to talk about sex and I'm like, well I'm not making a baby anytime soon, so why bother?"

Ron didn't know what to say to all that. He wondered what 'punished really bad,' could mean, when Harry had been five.

"Um… Well it's not dirty," Ron said. "Touching yourself, that is. It's just, well everyone does it probably, you know? You're not hurting anyone, are you, so why feel bad about it? It's normal."

"Really?" Harry asked.

"I do it," Ron said, blushing. "Every day even."

Harry went bug eyed at that confession as his face became brick red.

"Do you think I'm dirty?" Ron asked, with a little bit of trepidation.

"No," Harry said quickly. "Of course not, you're, well, you're not."

"Okay, so I don't know, I mean, it's private and what not, right? But that doesn't mean it's bad," Ron said. "Oh, I know, it's like, um, going to the bathroom, you know?"

Harry shook his head and arched one eyebrow like Snape liked to do.

"Well yeah," Ron said. "Everyone goes to the bathroom. There's nothing wrong with it, but it's private, you don't do it in front of everyone else and you don't typically talk about it unless your making a rude joke. You know, not at the dinner table or in front of girls."

"Huh," Harry said.

"See?" Ron asked, hoping that he was getting through. "Okay, well, so can I talk trash about your family?"

"Um…yeah?" Harry said reluctantly. Ron almost felt bad, but Harry needed to hear this.

"The Dursley's are shit people," Ron said. "They were, like, absolutely horrid to you for no reason."

"They didn't ask for me," Harry interrupted. "I was really difficult."
"See, you keep defending them," Ron said. "And you put yourself down to do it. You should hate them; you don't need to do that."

Harry looked down at the floor and mumbled something Ron couldn't make out.

"Look, my point is, they're bad people, and they're really not the sort you should be taking your life lessons from," Ron said.

"Well yeah," Harry said. "But I also heard Aunt Petunia tell Dudley to look both ways before crossing the street, and that's really a good thing to do, so how am I supposed to know what's... the Dursleys being the Dursleys, and what's actually right?"

"Umm," Ron said. "Well, I mean, if something they said makes you feel like shit, it's probably bunk. And when in doubt, you could always ask me, or Hermione. Your dad too, I guess, but you know, I'm your best friend, so obviously I give the best advice."

That got a grin out of Harry.

"So is there anything else the Dursleys've said that's got you feeling bad?" Ron asked.

Harry frowned. "No," he said without making eye contact, which basically meant he was lying.

"Well, you know, if you got anything you want to talk about," Ron said.

"Yeah," Harry said.

"So, I'm not trying to tell you what you should do," Ron said. "But, you know, if you wanted to try it again, well, there wouldn't be any reason to feel bad about yourself."

"Hmmm," was Harry's vague reply.

"And you know," Ron said. "Um, that book I got on trauma said that everybody's, like, their own worst critic, so, if you did feel bad about yourself over anything else for whatever, well, you could talk to me about it. I'd probably tell you you're good."

"Sure," Harry said. "Any progress with that workbook thing?" He was definitely changing the topic; Ron let him.

"Well I finished it," Ron said. "But it's not like it's something you finish, you know, so I read all the material and I've written out a bunch of stuff for the writing prompts, but I'm supposed to go back and like re-evaluate and write more and stuff. Hermione also got me these books on therapy techniques and psychology, which, I think they're more like a textbooks for an intro class or something, not really a how to, but it's interesting."

"Ron! Harry! Breakfast is going to be gone soon!" Ginny hollered up the stairs.

"Oh," Harry said. "I'm totally gross. I wanted a shower before I ate."

"Go ahead," Ron said. "I'll save you something."

"Don't worry about it," Harry said. "I'm not really hungry."

"I'll save you something," Ron repeated, and then just to get a reaction out of Harry he added, "feel free to have fun in the shower."

Harry sputtered at that.
"Or not, up to you," Ron said. "Just don't leave a mess. That's like the one rule Charlie told me. That's, just, the one mess mum doesn't ever have to clean up after."

"Please stop talking," Harry said with both hands over his face as Ron walked out the door, leaving Harry to get a shower.

Harry wished his mind could take a shower. He wished he hadn't listened to Ron's pep talk. Ron wouldn't have said any of that if he had known what was really going through Harry's head. He wouldn't think that was normal. How long until he figured it out?

Harry knew better, but he kept getting his hopes up like this. He couldn't help it. As much as he tried to avoid it, some part of him kept putting himself in positions where he would eventually get hurt. Making friends, getting a dad, looking forward to some make believe future, it was all just a recipe for loss; but Harry would always let himself be lured in. Just a few nice words from Ron and Harry let himself think that everything was all right, but it wasn't. He was gay, and he still hadn't figured any way around that. The Dursleys may have been wrong on a lot of accounts, but they had known Harry before he had known himself.

He hadn't been able to stop himself from getting attached to his dad, he couldn't stop himself from being so completely dependent on his best friends. Eventually everything was going to get ripped away and it would all be like it had been before Hogwarts, before he had people in his life who cared about him.

Harry wished he could wash himself down the drain before he had to find what it was like to have all these great people in his life and then lose them. Harry started going over the list he had made with his dad to calm himself down to the point where he could clear his mind of thoughts like that.

He knew he didn't always think like this. Like everything was closing in on him, like he could see the end of his world approaching, and even though it all felt perfectly rational to him, he wondered if this was part of the mood swings teenagers were supposed to go through. He definitely felt like there were times when he felt more prone to thoughts like this, but was he lying to himself now or when he felt better about himself? If this was some symptom of puberty, then Harry thought it a cruelty of nature that he should be made to mistrust his own head.

Once his mind was cleared and he had redirected his thoughts towards what his dad had called 'mindfulness,' he was able to shut off the hot water that had been cascading over him and get ready to go face the people downstairs.

Their final days at the Burrow went by quickly. A part of Harry wondered if he could last another year without everyone figuring him out. Would he ever be invited to the Weasley's again? He shouldn't think about it, he should just enjoy it while it lasted.

This year marked the first train ride to Hogwarts that Harry didn't get a visit from Malfoy, and there was a lot of speculation in their cabin on the fate of his father. The news had broken about the man's arrest, but so far no one seemed to know what was going to happen to him.

When speculations about Malfoy ran dry, Harry brought up a subject he had definitely been reticent to talk to Ron and Hermione about. He wouldn't bring it up at all if they didn't have a right to know.

"Voldemort's planning to kill me this year," Harry said.
Both Ron and Hermione stilled at this declaration. They were sitting next to one another opposite Harry.

"How do you know?" Hermione asked.

"I had a dream a couple nights before the Quidditch Cup," Harry said. "The thing was, I woke up and my scar was hurting. I told my dad about it and he was able to verify something from the dream so we think it might have actually happened."

"What did he verify?" Hermione asked.

"Well in the dream, Voldemort and the Death Eaters were talking about how they were going to use a tournament at Hogwarts to get to me. I remembered they called it a wizards tournament or something. According to my dad they're holding something called the Tri-Wizard's Tournament at Hogwarts this year. That's a secret though."

"But it could have been a dream," Hermione said.

"Yeah," Harry said. "It could have been. I don't know."

"So we assume it was real," Hermione said. "Is there anything we can do?"

"I'm telling you so you know that someone's probably going to be coming for me," Harry said. "I don't want you to get hurt when they do."

"Well we don't want you to get hurt either!" Hermione exclaimed.

"I know," Harry said. "Look, my dad and the Headmaster know, and Voldemort doesn't know they know, so really, he's at a disadvantage. It's probable nothing's going to happen at all. I just wanted you to know."

Ron had stayed silent through all of this. Harry noticed that he seemed to have scooted closer to Hermione.

"I know you don't want the excitement of all this, but you have a right to decide what you do from here on out," Harry said heavily.

"There's nothing to decide," Hermione said.

Ron stayed silent. Harry felt guilty.

Most of the rest of the train ride was awkward silence but Sammy Eldrich came to visit towards the end of the trip. Sammy had spent the summer living with Janette Hinkley's family, a Hufflepuff in her year. Her brother, Justin had been taken in by a friends family also. Sammy had spent most of the train ride swapping summer stories with her brother and now she wanted to come and ask Harry about fighting Death Eaters. Harry was glad to find out that she had found a good place to stay now that she couldn't live with her father anymore.

She was entirely enthralled by the tale, though Harry made sure to keep out things that might be upsetting to Ron or Hermione, like describing what had been done to the muggle victims. Justin came by eventually to collect his sister and remind her that she needed to change into her school robes. Justin left with a head nod to Harry and Harry spent a bit of time before the train pulled into the station thinking about the boy who had given up his home and his father for his sister. He thought about that right up to the point where he started thinking about how attractive Justin was and he quashed all thoughts about the older boy. Not for the first time he envied Sammy. Though
she had lost a lot, magic had been able to help her to have a body that matched who she was. Harry could only hope that magic might have a similar solution for him, to make him like girls instead of boys, like he was supposed to.

During the welcoming feast, Harry kept shooting Malfoy glances, trying to gauge what was going through the blond boy's head, but Malfoy only ever looked stoic and reserved. Harry also kept shooting glances towards his dad at the head table, trying to gauge if he looked upset or not. Surely a week was a good long time for him to calm down. He debated with himself whether he should sneak off after the feast to try and see his dad.

Harry was also keeping a close eye on Ron and Hermione. Harry knew now that Ron at least felt nervous in a crowd, and he had been largely silent since the train ride, horribly reminiscent of the last weeks of the previous term. He knew he had done the right thing in telling them, but he felt like he had made a mistake all the same.

Harry had noticed them sitting close together on the train, and again in the Great Hall. Their shoulders brushed and Ron's kept glancing at Hermione, as though making sure she was still there.

Harry found it difficult to remain in poor spirits, in spite of all of the things he had had to be worried about, it felt good to be back in the castle. He had a home with his dad, for now, but Hogwarts would always feel like his real home, even if it too had an expiration date hanging in the future.

After catching up with his fellow fourth years and eating more than he normally would, Harry noticed the headmaster rise for his yearly opening remarks. Forbidden forest? Still forbidden. Magic in the halls? Don't get caught. Quidditch cancelled? What the hell?

Harry had known that the Triwizard Tournament would be held that year. He had known that said tournament might actually be involved in some plot to kill him. He had not known that this mumbo jumbo was going to involve cancelling quidditch. Nothing short of a basilisk was supposed to cancel quidditch. Just who's idea had this stupid tournament been?

Harry's musings on the matter were interrupted by the late arrival of their new Defense Against the Dark Arts teacher, who definitely knew how to make an entrance, throwing the doors open wide and thumping down the hall towards the head table. Harry wondered if this was the man that Professor Lupin had mentioned with esteem and his father had looked wary of.

Ron perked up to hear that the man was to be called, 'Professor Moody,' or "Mad Eye Moody," as Ron called him, a venerated Auror from the war, Ron explained in his longest string of speech since they had gotten off the train. Harry could certainly understand where a nickname like Mad Eye might come from The man had one eye that looked normal, and another that was electric blue and spun around every which way, even towards the back of his head. It definitely didn't help that said eye was sat in perhaps the most worn and scarred face Harry had ever seen.

Once Mad-Eye Moody was settled at the head table, the Headmaster continued explaining the tournament to the excitement of the students at large. As the name would suggest, the tournament would be between three students from three European schools; Hogwarts, Beauxbatons, and Durmstrang. Apparently it was very dangerous though, and hadn't been held in some time due to a death toll, which was par for the course, but the ministry was going to make sure no one died this time, which didn't instill Harry with much confidence at all. Still though, the promise of glory and a thousand Galleon prize sounded tantalizing, even to Harry, even if the tournament was only for students seventeen and above.
Harry wondered how such a tournament could be used to kill him. There would be no way he would be competing, so he supposed that maybe Voldemort would use one of the visiting schools to sneak in his death eaters. Whatever the plot was, Harry would just have to be on the lookout. He would need to take his training seriously. He would also need to do whatever he could to make sure that if something happened, Ron and Hermione wouldn't be in any way involved.

After the feast ended, Harry decided not to ditch his friends on the first night back at the castle. Harry would see his father the following day. He went to Gryffindor tower along with everyone else getting several comments about his actions at the Quidditch World Cup that ranged from accolades to eye rolls, as though at this point it was just an eccentricity that people expected from him. As he went up to the dorm, Harry worried about how Hermione might be adjusting to being back to the castle, but decided that she was probably doing a lot better than Ron was.

There was a bit of catching up with their dorm mates. Dean and Seamus had gone for a beach holiday together while Neville had traveled the world with his Grandmother and Great Uncle, portkeying to the tops of tall mountains like Everest. Harry wasn't sure what the point of that one was. Harry didn't have much to tell, or rather, not much he could tell. Next came a lot of speculation about the Triwizard Tournament and who would compete.

That night, as they got ready for bed, Harry eyed Ron, trying to gauge how he was doing. He looked to be doing better now, in the relative comfort and seclusion of the tower. Harry wondered what Ron's plan was for getting any sleep during the term. He supposed that if Ron skipped dinner and just went to sleep right after classes let out, he could get a good block in while someone else kept watch before everyone else went to sleep. In that vein, Ron would then be stuck doing his homework in the middle of the night alone. Unless, of course, Harry wound up staying up with Ron. It was something he was considering. He told himself that it had nothing to do with being able to spend more waking hours with Ron.

Going with that plan, though, Harry wouldn't get to spend much time with his father. Not if he was sleeping after classes and waking up after curfew. Maybe he and Hermione could set up a rotation.

Really, Harry knew that none of this was a solution, especially not in the long term. Yet Ron had already had it out with his parents on the matter. In the days leading up to the start of term there had been a resurgence in talks about seeing a mind healer or the use of sleeping potions. Ron was still as stubborn as he had ever been, but though he had seen many improvements in his overall mental health over the summer, he was still incapable of sleeping normally without issue. Harry wasn't sure where he fell in the dispute. On the one hand, he wanted to stand by his friend, but on the other, he knew that Ron needed help that he wasn't getting.

"What's your plan for tonight?" Harry asked Ron quietly.

Ron shrugged. "I'll try to get some sleep," he quipped, with a show of gumption, as though he felt trying to get some sleep with no one there to keep an eye out was a brave act. Harry knew that, for Ron, it was.

"Oh," Harry said. "I was sort of expecting you would try sleeping from last class to curfew and then do your homework at night."

"That was actually my plan," Ron said. "But it was a pretty bad plan as these things go. I also sort of figured you'd probably decide to keep me company and I didn't want to do that to you."

"Because of the life debt?" Harry asked.

"Because being nocturnal sucks," Ron said.
"You can wake me if you need to," Harry said.

"I can't drag you into the land of insomnia with me," Ron said. "Um, I'm going to set up a silencing charm around my bed, I don't want to wake anyone up if things don't go well."

"How will I know if you're all right?" Harry asked.

"The idea is that you get your sleep," Ron said.

"You can totally wake me though," Harry assured.

"Thanks," Ron said. "But I'm hoping I won't need to."

"Good luck," Harry said.

"Thanks," Ron said.

How messed up was it that Ron needed a good luck for a good night's sleep? Harry pulled out a couple of chocolate frogs and put them on his nightstand.

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Alastor Moody woke up with the worst crick in his neck and the haze of a drugged sleep dissipating. One hand went for his wand while his other probed at his empty eye socket. He was on the floor, he very quickly realized, the floor of Albus Dumbledore's office.

"You'll have to forgive me Alastor," Albus said. "I was comfortable replacing your leg for you, but I did not think I should reinsert the Eye of Ba'al until it had been cleaned to your satisfaction."

Alastor pulled himself up by the bookshelf next to him.

"He'll have to do no such thing," Amelia Bones said. "We let you be captured by a Death Eater, Moody. He's tied to that chair over there."

"Crouch?!" was all Alastor could say as he took in the man tied up before him in a chair at Albus's desk where both the Headmaster and the head of the DMLE were having tea. "You knew he would get me?"

"It's a rather long story," Bones said. "How do you feel about impersonating a Death Eater who was supposed to be impersonating you?"

"Well I'll need some whiskey first," Alastor said.

"I'm afraid all of your flasks have been compromised," Albus said. "Unless you'd be willing to have some of my own."

"Make it the expensive stuff," Alastor said, transfiguring a nicknack on Albus's desk into a mug and taking a seat.

"Well I brought the Veritaserum," Bones said after Alastor had had a stiff drink. "Who wants to do the honors?"

"That would be me," Alastor said.

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Ron did wind up waking up Harry that night.
"You awake?" Ron asked quietly.

Harry was not, in fact, awake, but he wasn't deeply asleep either.

"Wassa?" Harry slurred in the very early morning hours.

"Sorry," Ron said. "Thought we could talk."

"Yeah," Harry said. "Sure."

"Right," Ron said. "Just gonna." Ron crawled onto Harry's bed and sat himself opposite Harry against the bedpost. Harry spared a moment to wonder if he should feel bad for having a boy in his bed.

"You sleep?" Harry asked.

"I sort of drifted for a bit," Ron said. "Couldn't really get the feeling like something bad's going to happen out of my head. Do that spell?"

Harry cast the fairy lights to float around the bed space.

"Something bad is going to happen," Harry said. "You're going to fall asleep in class and Hermione'll get cross at you."

"You think so?" Ron probed.

"What?" Harry asked. "Of course not; it's a joke. Hermione knows you're having trouble sleeping."

"Yeah, but I should be over it by now," Ron said. "She basically is."

Harry grabbed the two chocolate frogs off his nightstand and tossed one to Ron.

"Getting better isn't a competition," Harry said.

Ron looked sour about that. He started unwrapping his chocolate.

"What did you want to talk about?" Harry asked.

"I told you I was done with adventures," Ron said, frowning.

Harry felt a pit of dread form in his stomach.

"I- um, yeah," Harry said. "Right." It would be better this way, Harry thought. "I get it. The whole thing's messed up. You shouldn't be anywhere nearby if someone's trying to kill me."

"Oh stop that," Ron said. "Of course I'm going to be near by. It's just I... I said that, and I meant that, but I don't think I can live it. You saw what happened at the Quidditch Cup. I just don't know what's going to happen, but I'm going to be here with you. Even if crazy people are trying to kill you."

"If this is about the life debt," Harry said. "You can repay me by living a long long time, okay?"

"Bollocks if that's how it works," Ron said. "And this isn't about the bloody life debt."

"So what's it about?" Harry asked.

"It's about not being worth saving," Ron said.
"What does that even mean?" Harry asked.

"You tackled a werewolf that was about to kill me," Ron said. "All you got for it was a curse and a friend that can best be described as a bundle of nerves."

"I got to keep my friend," Harry said, and Merlin, he didn't mean to come out as if Ron owed him friendship.

Ron shook his head. "We're rehashing an old argument," he said. He munched on his frog.

"So how does it work?" Harry asked.

"What?" Ron asked.

"The life debt," Harry said. "You said that's not how it worked. So how does it?"

"It's different, you know?" Ron said. "It isn't a spell, it isn't a contract, it's just… magic at its most primal. The life debt doesn't need either of us to accept it, it just forms out of the chaos of the moment."

"But it follows rules," Harry said. "You said Ginny would have been under one if she'd been older."

"I think that's more to do with the development of her magical core," Ron said. "I think it's like, magic doesn't really see us in stages. It saw you as if you were an adult and her as if she was a child. It's an adult's duty to protect children so there's no debt."

"How do you know all this?" Harry asked.

"Bill had me read a book," Ron said. "He didn't want me caught unawares. Not that it's all really predictable. Like I said. It's primal magic."

"So how do you know you can't repay me by living a long life," Harry said.

"Well none of the stories go like that," Ron said. "Also, I wouldn't feel like I was repaying you. It is my debt to repay, not yours to collect."

"Humph," Harry sighed.

"I'll be fine," Ron said. "So how do you think You-Know-Who's going to use the tournament to get to you?"

Harry didn't feel like the argument should be over, and he didn't appreciate the sudden topic shift but he answered, "He'll probably sneak someone in with one of the visiting schools, like Quirrell."

Ron nodded. "So we'll keep an eye out. What do you think about the tournament itself?"

"I don't know," Harry said. "It sounds like fun, sort of, but I'm glad it's only for the older students."

"What?" Ron asked. "Why?"

"I'm pretty sure a bunch of people would try to get me to put my name in," Harry said. "And worse, whoever's judging the contenders might just be like, oh, well the Boy-Who-Lived should totally be the champion."

"But you'd totally win," Ron said.
"Flattery's not getting you another chocolate frog," Harry said.

"Seriously," Ron said. "You've done way more than everyone else ever has. No one would stand a chance."

"They all know way more stuff than I do," Harry said. "The tournament's supposed to test knowledge and whatnot, I'm way behind the older students."

"You do more with less," Ron said.

Harry rolled his eyes even though having Ron say stuff like that to him put a warm feeling in his stomach.

"You're acting like you don't even want to compete," Ron said.

"Well I can't," Harry said. "Last thing I need is for the eyes of the wizarding world to be on me while I'm trying to hide the fact that I turn into a wolf once a month. Besides, Voldemort's already trying to kill me. The last thing I need is to compete in some tournament with a history of dead contestants and tasks that are so dangerous you can only compete if you're a legal adult. No point making it easy for him, you know?" Even if it did sound like fun.

"Fair enough," Ron said. "Still though, you'd totally win."

"What about Hermione though?" Harry asked.

"Oh she'd kill it," Ron said. "No question. Though she'd probably complain the whole while that it was a waste of time. 'This award's ceremony is really lovely, Professor, but I was in the middle of a bit of light reading I really want to get back to,'" he said in an imitation of Hermione.

Harry smiled at that.

"Bet we could talk her into putting her name in," Ron said.

"She's only going to be fifteen," Harry said.

"McGonagall gave her a time turner," Ron said. "I think we both know who could get away with murder in this castle."

"So what about you?" Harry asked. "Would you put your name in if you could?"

Ron sat on that for a bit. "I suppose another me would have. Don't get me wrong. A thousand Galleons and eternal glory sounds great; really, really great, but I don't think I could handle it."

"I think you'd surprise yourself," Harry said with a smile that turned into a yawn.

"I'm keeping you up," Ron said, starting to get off of Harry's bed.

"You going to try for some sleep?" Harry asked.

"Yeah," Ron said.

"Sleep tight," Harry said.

"More like up tight, all night," Ron said.

"You'll work it out," Harry said.
"Night," Ron said.

"Night," Harry responded.

Harry had butterflies in his stomach that night as he drifted off, thoughts of being the Hogwarts champion running through his head; images of himself competing while Ron cheered him on putting a guilty smile on his face.

Ron was already dressed and ready to go when Harry woke up a few hours later. He didn't particularly look like he had gotten any sleep. They met up with Hermione and went to breakfast where they got their time tables. Hermione wasted no time in starting to fill out her school work planner.

Harry was disappointed, though not terribly shocked, to find that taking fifth year DADA meant sacrificing another slot as well. He would be taking DADA with the fifth year Gryffindors, which would be nice, since he would be with Benjamin, but that slot overlapped Gryffindor fourth year potions, so Harry was slotted to take Potions with Hufflepuff and Ravenclaw while Gryffindor fourth years were in DADA. Luckily, he didn't have potions or DADA that day, so that was a problem for future Harry.

As Harry had predicted, Ron fell asleep in class first period. Professor McGonagall was not pleased but she also looked concerned and Ron got away without any lost points or detentions.

It was very good to be back in classes, and Harry hoped that keeping busy would be good for Ron. Hermione was already prodding Ron about his chess project and heavily hinting that Harry should be working on a new project.

Double Arithmancy ended the day for them and Harry bid them goodbye as he donned his invisibility cloak and headed to the dungeons. It was time to face the music. As Harry trudged to his dad's office he felt a level of anxiety building up within him. It wasn't just that he was worried about his dad's reaction to the whole Quidditch fiasco, Harry had gotten used to Ron and Hermione being around, and much like in the early aftermath of their kidnapping, Harry found himself worrying about Ron and Hermione when they weren't around.

Arriving at his dad's office, Harry was bade to enter and found himself just standing there near the door, trying to gauge his dad's disposition, waiting to see how matters would unfold. He mentally went through all of the promises his dad had made.

Hugs had definitely not been on Harry's list of possibilities, but Harry found himself getting a hug after his dad had crossed the room to greet him. Had he not read the paper? Did he not know about what had happened at the Quidditch Cup?

"You are an impossible child," his dad said.

"Umm…"

"Welcome back to the castle," his dad said. "Tell me about the Cup."

"Oh," Harry said, still not sure what his dad knew. "So the Bulgarian Seeker, Viktor Krum, caught the snitch even though he knew it would end the game in Ireland's favor. He'd done an awesome Wronski Feint earlier too. It was a great game to watch."

"Tell me about your encounter with Death Eaters," his dad corrected.
"Oh," Harry said. "You heard about that?"

"Yes, Harry. I heard about you charging into a riot surrounding a pack of Death Eaters. That is the sort of news that travels."

"Are you mad?" Harry asked.

"I was fairly well exasperated," his dad said. "Though at this point I find that I expect the behavior."

"I wasn't planning to do it," Harry said. "It just sort of happened."

"What happened?" his dad asked.

"Ron was-" Harry stopped himself. Would it sound gay if he said he had felt the need to intervene to make Ron feel better? Because Ron had been upset? "Ron and Hermione got really upset seeing the muggles being held captive like that. I just felt like I had to do something."

"Tell me what happened," his dad said, giving no indication that he had noticed Harry's course correction. "From start to finish."

Harry told him about using the potions and about the battle through the rioters. He admitted to having thought about his broom far too late, and about fighting through the waning effects of the temporary enhancements. He almost left out the part where he had fallen, completely useless, in the end, but he left that part in.

"Did you have any direct interaction with any of the Death Eaters?" his dad asked when Harry had finished relaying the tale.

"No," Harry said. "I only fought the people surrounding the Death Eaters, and then when I was in the air, I didn't attack anyone after that."

"Good," his dad said, without elaborating. "What did you do right that night?"

"I wouldn't think you'd think I'd done anything right," Harry said.

"Harry, you rescued four people from Death Eaters."

"Drunk Death Eaters," Harry said.

"Regardless," his dad said. "You did many things right, and many things wrong. Whether or not you should have attempted this in the first place is something to discuss afterwards. The fact is that you did take on a mob by yourself so we will take your experience and you will learn from it. What worked and what didn't work. This will not be your last battle. That we know for certain. So, what did you do right?"

They went over it for over an hour. Harry kept eyeing the clock, worrying about Ron and Hermione being off alone. When the topic was exhausted, his dad offered him some tea and they talked about the new school year and Harry's classes. Harry was very excited for OWL level defense, though he was also nervous for the higher expectations. Eventually though, his dad brought up resuming Occlumency and mental magic training and Harry faltered. Now more than ever, he could not have his dad looking into his mind.

"I don't know," Harry said. "I'm doing good practicing on my own. I don't think I'll really have time for that. You know? I mean, between my advanced classes and a fourth year project and you're still
training me to fight and everything. I think I should just practice on my own in my free time."

His dad nodded, well used to Harry's rebuttal. "I didn't know you planned to do a fourth year project," he said.

"Yeah," Harry said, having not planned to do one until he had needed to make his schedule sound hectic. "Wards," he said. "You know, really apply my Ancient Runes and Arithmancy classes."

"Very good," his dad said. "I'll be happy to look over your project proposal before you begin."

"Right," Harry said. "Probably next week."

"Excellent. Speaking of your schedule though, we will resume your combat training on Wednesday in the afternoon," his dad said.

"All right," Harry said. "When am I going to learn how to use that dagger?"

"When the headmaster has found you a suitable teacher," his dad said.

Harry nodded at that, he still wasn't sure how he felt about it all.

"So I figured Voldemort's probably going to sneak someone in with one of the other schools," Harry said.

"That is what I have presumed as well," his dad said. "Though each event is going to be open for viewing by champions' families and delegates from the three governments."

"So there's no way to know for sure."

"You should know, that the Headmaster for Durmstrang was a known Death Eater," his dad said.

"What?" Harry asked. "Why isn't he in Azkaban?"

"After the war, he testified against other Death Eaters and supporters," his dad said.

"Okay," Harry said. "But why is he the headmaster of a school?"

"Not every wizarding government is as open to muggleborns as ours is," his dad said. "There are many places where they had very different views towards the war and old magic. Igor Karkaroff was from Hungary originally. Once Voldemort was gone, he tried to escape back to his homeland, but he was caught."

"So he could be the one who's supposed to get me," Harry said.

"Unlikely," his dad said. "There is only one punishment for betraying the Dark Lord. If Karkaroff had any clue that the Dark Lord had resurfaced he wouldn't come anywhere near Britain."

That sent a shiver down Harry's spine, thinking about his dad's definitive betrayal of Voldemort.

"So what do I do about Karkaroff"

"Keep an eye out for him, but it could be literally anyone else," his dad said.

"Right," Harry said.

"While the other schools are here, I'm going to encourage you to not walk the castle alone, and if
you must, then travel under your cloak. Do you still carry around the Weasley's invention?"

"It's in my trunk," Harry said. "I haven't used it since, um, Greyback."

"Best to be on the safe side," his dad said.

"Right," Harry said. "So, who do you think the Hogwarts champion will be?"

"Mr. Warrington would be a good champion, he has already stated his intent to apply, though I am hoping Miss Abbott will put her name in."

"Abbott?" Harry asked.

"One of my sixth years," his dad said. "I believe you know her sister."

"Huh," Harry said. "So you think the champion will be a Slytherin? Gryffindor has a lot of good contenders."

"Perhaps," his dad said. "But it takes a lot more than Gryffindor Bravado to win. This tournament has a long history of being embroiled in internal politics. The champion will have to be very competent in handling others."

"Well don't count Gryffindor out," Harry said. "I think we'd surprise you."

"Unfortunately their best contender is too young to compete," his dad said meaningfully.

Harry smiled at that even as he denied his chances. He left eventually to go get some schoolwork done with Ron and Hermione before dinner. It was going to be an eventful school year.

Chapter End Notes

Hey, hope you enjoyed this chapter. I stole the bit about what Harry's other dorm mates had done over the summer from althor42's story the Horcrux Within which he just recently updated.

I am sure that this is something you all already know, but I wanted to stress that Harry is both an unreliable narrator and additionally he is dealing with great deal of internalized homophobia. He thinks many things about himself that are bad. Harry thinking something is not me endorsing that thing.

If you are looking for something awesome, I recently watched My Hero Academia, which was very very awesome. I've fallen into the fanfiction and it is also awesome. SportsAnimeRuinedMyLife (KnightOfRage) on AO3 wrote the Extra Salty/twitterverse, which is a great little fluff series. While Authoress on AO3 wrote prince and prince which I just started chapter seven on and is the reason I stayed up late and didn't post this yesterday. PitViperOfDoom on AO3 has written a number of stories for this universe and everything is... well everything PitViper does is awesome, though I've really particularly enjoyed Yesterday Upon The Stair.

I hope you all enjoyed this chapter and that you will take a moment to leave me a comment.
Rumors

Chapter Notes

Hey, new warning. I make a reference to the topic of rape in this chapter. There is no rape scene or anything like that, but if you would like a version of this chapter that does not include this reference, please PM me.

This chapter is a very long one, over 28K. Sorry about that. I went on a cruise with althor42 and spent most of my time writing.

See the end of the chapter for more notes

It took longer than expected for Draco to come seek him out. He had noticed the boy, both in class and in the halls. He knew him well enough to see that his well-polished exterior was barely holding up.

"You never summoned me," Draco said after letting himself in.

"I felt it best to give you some space," Severus said.

"I've had too much space," Draco said. "No one wants to associate with me."

"That will be fixed in time," Severus said. "How have you been holding up?"

"How do you think I've been holding up?" Draco asked hotly.

Severus responded with an arched eyebrow and Draco's scowl became directed at the floor rather than at him.

"I'm angry," Draco said.

"Anger is to be expected," Severus said. "You certainly have a right to be angry. Who are you angry with, I wonder?"

"You're going to make this about Potter, aren't you?" Draco accused.

"Am I?" Severus asked. "I had not planned to bring him up. Why Draco? Do you blame Potter for what has happened to your family?"

"If he hadn't interfered…" Draco said.

"Your father would have continued playing with his muggle prize in his drunken state until the ministry drew more Aurors," Severus said. "Your father was never going to win anything that night. His best hope was to eventually be forced to flee. No account that I have heard indicates that Potter fought any of the Death Eaters. He secured the Muggles, and that was that. We have spoken before about seeing the world as it is and not as we would prefer it to be."

"It could have gone differently," Draco said.

"It could have," Severus agreed. "But who was responsible for what happened that night?"
"You want me to say that father was," Draco said.

"You seem to have many opinions on what I intend for this conversation," Severus said. "Perhaps you could continue it from here. What am I going to say next?"

"Father is his own master," Draco said with a twisted look on his face. "Father put on that mask and cloak and sent me into the woods while he tormented muggles for sport in the middle of an international ministry function. Father started a battle he could not win. Father got caught."

"You said you were angry."

"Well, of course I'm angry," Draco said. "Wouldn't you be angry?"

"Why are you angry, Draco?"

"Because he threw everything away for a spot of fun!" Draco said. "He wasn't trying to change the world, he wasn't protecting the House of Malfoy. He wanted to have his fun and so he had it. And yeah I'm angry, I'm so fucking angry with him."

"But you feel guilty," Severus said.

"Well... he's my father," Draco said. "And he might go to Azkaban and I don't even know what to do about that. What if they charge him for everything back from the war? What if I never see him again?"

"It is all right to be angry with him even as you worry for him," Severus said. "I know that you love him, but you have every right to be angry with how his actions have impacted you and your mother."

"What if he does go to Azkaban?" Draco asked. "How do I get up every day and go about as if my father isn't surrounded by dementors in a cold hard cell in the middle of the ocean."

"I do not know," Severus said. "Yet countless people have made that adjustment and I have no doubt that you would as well. The way forward will not be easy, but your path forward has never been easy."

"Not easy? It's impossible. I'm supposed to be a leader," Draco said. "It's my purpose to bring the wizarding world together and make it stronger. But I was supposed to be doing that from the high seat of Malfoy. That's meaningless now. We've been disgraced. How do I bring the name of Malfoy back from this?"

"Perhaps you do not," Severus said. "None of my training has relied on you coming from a powerful house. I can guarantee you that Mister Atkins and Miss Ramirez, at least, did not join your Luck Ritual last May because you came from the house of Malfoy. They followed you because you gave them agency when they felt helpless. You provided them with leadership and they followed. Your goals have been set back, but you are not finished."

"What's my strategy?"

"You tell me," Severus said.

Draco nodded and paused for thought. "Pull back," he said. "I mean I already have, but I need to assess everyone else and my true standing right now. I need a posture that distances myself from what father has done that doesn't make me look like a fair-weather friend to my own family. I need sympathy, but I also need to show strength. I'm not going to make any ground in Slytherin soon,
that's a long game. I'll start with Ravenclaw, move on to Hufflepuff. Once I've got them I'll show Slytherin I'm not out of the game and they'll form behind me again. I think I'll play aloof with Gryffindor for now but encourage links between them and Hufflepuff. I'll need a lot of distance from this before I have any hope of getting Gryffindor behind me."

"You've already thought this out," Severus said.

Draco shrugged.

"I have to, don't I," he said. "MacMannon is making moves now that I'm out in our house."

"MacMannon is good at making alliances but he has trouble keeping them. You just need to bide your time.

Draco shook his head. "I may not have it. Mother was talking about moving to Germany. There are some cousins on her mother's side there. She acts like we should just pick up and start over new somewhere else. As if father's already in Azkaban."

"She's worried about you," Severus said.

"Should she be?" Draco asked.

"What do you mean?" Severus asked.

"The Luck Ritual," Draco said. "When I did it, I had the weight of the house of Malfoy behind me. But now? The ministry could decide that it contravened the Ancient Magics Convention of 1789."

"The ministry already said that you had not contravened the convention," Severus said. "Which is important since the ministry does not like to be wrong. Going back on their previous position is not something they like to do. One reason why it is somewhat unlikely that they will decide to charge your father for the war."

"The old administration decided not to charge my father for the war," Draco said. "Who's to say what Fudge will do to distance himself from the house of Malfoy."

"Time will tell," Severus said. "Do not dwell on it. It is out of your hands. I don't think your mother will pull you from Hogwarts. Focus on your tasks, focus on your studies, and here," he pulled a book out of his desk. "Read this."

"You're giving me homework?" Draco asked, with a hint of disdain.

"This is different," Severus said.

"Coping with grief?" Draco asked, reading the cover. "Father's not dead."

"Death is but one of many forms of loss," Severus said. "Whether he goes to Azkaban or not, you lost something the night of the Quidditch Cup and it is alright to mourn for that."

Draco grimaced but put the book in his bag.

"Take some time tonight," Severus said. "Your public face is slipping. You must be in control. I will expect to see you next Monday at three to go over your progress."

"All right," Draco said, he looked like he wanted to say more. "I'll see you in class Professor."

Severus wished he had had more time for the boy, but his attention was split fairly unevenly in
Harry’s favor and that wasn’t going to change. He wouldn’t mind getting his hands on the time turner that Miss Granger had had the year prior.

The first three weeks of term went by fairly quickly. Even with no quidditch practice, Harry still found himself incredibly busy. Of course, some of that was his own fault. His quick excuse to his dad that he was planning a wards project had had to become a reality now and Harry had spent a fair bit of time working on a project proposal that would satisfy Professor Babbage and Professor Vector.

OWL Defense was on another level altogether. Professor Moody was a fantastic teacher, in that he drew on all sorts of experience from fighting dark wizards. He preferred practical application but he also needed to prepare them to take the OWL at the end of the year. For this reason, book learning had been relegated to homework. Students were expected to come to class ready to apply what they had read the night before. Harry was spending more time on DADA homework than he had the year prior when he was taking the third and fourth year curriculum together. Harry was drowning in it, but at the same time, he comforted himself with the knowledge that it would be one less OWL he would have to worry about the following year.

One thing about Professor Moody though, was that he definitely seemed to take issue with Harry’s dad. This wasn't exactly surprising, considering that his dad was a former Death Eater and Professor Moody was a former Auror who was constantly on the lookout for people who might be trying to kill him. It could easily be expected that the two might not get along, but Harry definitely didn't have any idea how he should feel about it. On the one hand, he could understand why Professor Moody would be hostile to his dad, but his dad was… well, his dad, and a part of Harry felt as though anyone being hostile towards his dad was being hostile to him. It was odd to be both in awe of the man and also a bit resentful.

Another thing that felt very odd was taking the class with the fifth year Gryffindors. He kept waiting for someone to tell him to get back with the fourth years. Meanwhile, the older students were still doing their DADA study sessions and Harry was still attending once a week. He hated to admit it, but he didn't know if he could have actually handled doing quidditch on top of everything else. It was nice to spend a bit more time with Benjamin though. He'd talked Harry into continuing their sparring from the year prior. Harry was careful not to incorporate anything his dad had taught him over the summer. He wouldn't be able to explain the increase in skill.

It was odd taking classes without Ron and Hermione though. Since his fifth year DADA class overlapped with Gryffindor’s fourth year potions slot, he was taking potions with Ravenclaw and Hufflepuff and it was a completely different dynamic to taking potions with Gryffindor and Slytherin. It wasn't just that there was a certain air of menace that was lacking without the two rival houses. During practical lessons, the whole class paired up in teams that consisted of one Ravenclaw and one Hufflepuff, and for the most part they seemed to work together very well. Harry, though, had thrown a bit of a wrench into their perfect system by virtue of existing, but he didn't mind being the odd man out. He had been shocked, though, when he had learned that it had been Draco Malfoy of all people who had suggested the pairing off to Justin Finch-Fletchley the year prior.

Draco was another oddity in the castle at the moment. His family had been very publicly disgraced and the Ministry was actually charging Lucius Malfoy with inciting a riot and muggle harassment. (Harry thought harassment sounded very light for what he had done. Both charges were very light.)
Draco, though, was very much a mystery to Harry. He would have expected the other boy to have thrown some sort of tantrum. He would have expected whatever false veneer he had worn the year prior to shatter, but, if anything, Draco had doubled down on his good guy act and Harry was at a loss for what he should be expecting next. Harry was making sure to keep a close eye on Draco though.

Draco was just one of many distractions. Harry was back to helping out as a lab assistant with his dad's now resumed research. There were two new seventh-year lab assistants as well. All-in-all, Harry was exceptionally busy.

Harry wasn't the only one struggling, though Ron would probably be doing alright if he was actually getting any sleep. He said he was, but Harry was pretty sure that Ron considered that moment when your eyes close in class and you're suddenly brought to attention as your head falls forward as a moment of sleep. Even though he caught up a bit during the day over the weekends under Harry's and Hermione's watchful eyes, Ron was looking about as bad as he had at the beginning of summer and his nerves were obviously becoming shot.

"I get a bit of sleep at night," Ron said.

"With or without nightmares?" Hermione asked.

"With," Ron muttered, red-faced.

"Well that hardly counts as sleep, doesn't it," Hermione said.

There had been a few times when Ron had not dealt well with the press of students or an unexpected noise. There had been times when Harry had had to pull Ron into an unused corridor or classroom so that he could calm down. It wasn't just his nerves that were shot, his temper would flare also. Sometimes pulling him aside to catch a grip on reality was just a reminder that he wasn't doing well and he'd insist that he was fine.

Additionally, Ron had picked up his chess project from the year prior. Harry wondered if he pursued it now only to have an excuse to stay up a bit later every night. He was still making progress, but like his work in all of his classes, it was clear the lack of sleep was taking a heavy toll. His frustration came out as they did homework and when they practiced in class as he struggled. Harry had almost caused a scene when Lavender had said something about Ron being worse than Neville now, which wasn't fair to either of them. Ron acted like he hadn't heard, but Harry knew he was upset by it. The teachers too had noticed though that Ron was struggling. Ron had been summoned to the infirmary three times since school had started but nothing had changed.

In contrast to Ron, Hermione was doing spectacularly. She was excelling in all of her classes, as would be expected, and by all accounts she seemed to be doing well. If there was anything that Harry would point to and say, 'that's not right,' it was that Hermione rarely raised her hand in class anymore. It wasn't that she was timid, Harry didn't think, but rather, it just seemed that she didn't seem to care as much about impressing the teachers anymore. At the same time, she too seemed uncomfortable in the press of the school, and though she handled it better than Ron, she often looked relieved to find a quiet area to do homework.

Ron and Hermione together seemed like something new, also. They seemed closer. They were definitely always together. Ron always sat next to Hermione. Ron always showed a great deal of interest in Hermione and how she was doing, and Hermione showed a great deal of concern for Ron as well, when Ron wasn't inclined to see concern as an indictment of his capability as a person or as a wizard. All-in-all, they both seemed hyper aware of the other. Oddly enough, since their discussion about the time turner, Harry didn't think they had had a serious disagreement, though
there had been more than a few opportunities in the past few weeks. They'd bicker now and then, which was normal, but they hadn't had anything big in a while and Harry was pretty sure that that was a good thing.

Harry wasn't sure what it all meant though. He was pretty sure that they had become closer during their confinement together, which also brought up Kevin Erstwhile. The two of them had also been kidnapped with Erstwhile, and while Harry had known that Ron had written the other boy a couple of times over the summer, he had been fairly shocked when Ron had gone to see the Slytherin boy after dinner a couple of times. Though, both times he had asked Harry to make sure he would be walking Hermione back to the common room. Hermione would roll her eyes whenever Ron did something like that, but so far, there had been no discussion about it, and it certainly seemed like the sort of thing the two would row about.

All-in-all, Harry was very busy and his attention was split all over the place, but at this point in his life, that was what he needed. He was too busy to worry about everything going wrong in his life. Every night he went to bed a little exhausted. There was just one thing he let himself worry about, and that was one of the things that were keeping him busy.

There were times now and then when he would slip away from Ron and Hermione, using a visit to his father as an excuse, when he would go to the library for a bit of independent research.

He had had the idea before, that magic could somehow change the mind. His father had said that Occlumency couldn't really change a person; that people could change, but that it took work. Occlumency could help, but one couldn't just flip a switch using occlumency and change something about themselves. There was just one switch right now that Harry was desperate to flip though, and if Occlumency couldn't switch it, Harry was determined to find the magic that would.

Unfortunately, there didn't seem to be anything that Harry could find that offered any solutions. There were a number of books on mental magics that Harry had found, though a number of them referenced books that Harry was pretty sure would only be found in the restricted section. None of the books, though, addressed his problem. None of them offered him a way to turn himself straight.

Harry became a bit more desperate to find the solution the closer they got to the full moon. Similarly to the previous month, Harry's senses, already powerful, became more and more hypersensitive. One downside of this, among many, was that he was extremely aware whenever Ron was around. People, Harry had found, all had a distinct scent to them, and Ron was no different, except his scent seemed particularly captivating. Harry wound up becoming very distracted whenever Ron was around as the moon approached.

Harry was actually glad when the day of the full moon finally arrived. He was getting far too charged up by the approach of the moon, he had been far too jittery the night before to get very much work done. It was a Friday, he could finish up his classes, go transform, and have the weekend to recover and collect himself. The plan for Harry, that evening, would be to leave under his invisibility cloak directly after an early dinner. Ron would be impersonating Harry that night using polyjuice, just long enough to make an appearance in the common room and then head up to the dormitory for an early night.

Ron's absence that night would be easily excused. Madame Pomfrey, having grown fed up with Ron's declining health, had insisted that he report to the hospital wing to spend the night where she would ensure he got sleep. Unfortunately, Ron wouldn't be getting anymore sleep than usual, since he was going to be sleeping in the dorm in Harry's bed, impersonating him right after the moon rose and then right before it set the next morning. Harry would have an alibi and no one should be the wiser.
Harry was a bit upset that the full moon coincided with Hermione's birthday, but then again, she had never really had much of a celebration at Hogwarts, so Harry wasn't missing much by cutting out early.

Harry had really been looking forward to getting Friday out of the way, right up until he got into the Great Hall for breakfast and every head, it seemed, turned his way. Harry was distinctly reminded of times when everyone thought he was the Heir of Slytherin, or secretly a werewolf planning to rampage through the castle. There were several people looking at him with curiosity on their faces, as though something about Harry had changed, while others had looks of disbelief, or worse, disgust. Harry saw more than a few people crowding around newspapers, trying to all read the same article at the same time. He thought he could smell hostility in the air.

Was this it? Had someone found out he was a werewolf? He had plenty of secrets, but that was one of the only ones he was really expecting to become a big issue in the future. Surely no one could have figured out he was gay. Not yet. Fred and George Weasley were suddenly walking down the Gryffindor table towards them, a light in their eyes. The twins would definitely not want a werewolf anywhere near their brother.

"Is it true?" George asked. He didn't smell upset or angry, just amused.

"Um," Harry said. "No."

"He has no idea what you're asking about," Hermione said.

"Is Snape really your dad?" Fred asked.

"And if he is," George said. "Do you think you could use the family connection to get us a pass to the restricted section?"

"What?" Harry sputtered.

"Well there's this book by this tenth century potions master who-"

"What about Harry and Snape," Ron corrected, clearly agitated. "No one cares about your bloody book."

"That's not true," Fred said. "Hermione cares about all books."

"Except comic books," George said.

"Can you be serious for a minute?" Ron asked. He smelled irritated and much more worried than he usually did to Harry when he was around while Harry had his super senses.

"Relax," Fred said. "It's a joke, just some stupid article in the Prophet. Can't believe they published it. Rita Skeeter thinks Snape's Harry's dad. It's ridiculous. It's the sort of article you'd see in the quibbler really."

"Though if it isn't ridiculous, we do really want that book," George said with a grin. "What do you say, Harry? You seem to be on his good side these days."

"Hey, wait a minute," Fred said, eyeballing the three of them. "None of you are laughing."

"Yeah, this is the point when you're all supposed to laugh about the Prophet printing that stupid article about Snape being Harry's dad," George said.
"Because it's totally not true," Fred said.

"Hahaha," Harry tried, far too late. Ron joined in a beat later.

"Oh shit," George said, wide-eyed.

"You can get us the book."

"Forget the bloody book," Ron said. "Just, forget all of this. Okay? We're going to go sit down, and laugh with everyone, yeah?"

Harry didn't want to laugh with everyone.

"What does the article say?" Harry asked.

"I don't know," Fred said.

"Didn't read it," George said.

"Word's just traveling fast."

Harry groaned.

"Here comes the professor," Hermione said.

Harry looked up, and sure enough, his dad was walking right towards them.

"Be gone," his dad said dismissively towards the twins. "You three, come with me."

He looked very passive as he turned and started walking towards the dungeons. Besides smelling like his dad, Harry couldn't pick up anything that would denote his mood and Harry had the feeling that he was fully occluded.

Harry gave the twins a parting look and Fred pantomimed opening a book. The trio followed his dad down to his office.

"Won't this look suspicious?" Hermione asked.

"We are beyond pretense," his dad said. "Ms. Skeeter has conclusively written her article and there is little point in hiding anything. Even if we could convince the public, those we would have wished to fool will not take such chances. The point is moot. I see no reason to hide our relationship anymore. Though I would have preferred to have had more control over the situation."

"How'd she find out?" Harry asked.

"You bled at the Quidditch World Cup when you crashed," his dad said. "Rita Skeeter has a history of reporting on tawdry affairs and illegitimacies. I could imagine she takes any opportunity that presents itself to get any sort of sample from someone who is famous on the off chance there is anything to discover. She likely returned to the place you had received treatment and looked for any blood on the ground."

"That's sick," Ron said.

"It's been over a week since the Cup, though," Harry said.

"There were a number of interviews with my former classmates about my relationship with your
mother, as well as interviews with some recently graduated students who were able to speak to our previous… hostilities. She has been thorough."

"Does she know that I moved in with you, or that I'm not at the Dursleys?" Harry asked.

His father frowned. "She knew you did not return to them this summer. It seemed clear from the article that she had likely visited your Aunt or Uncle, and if that is the case, then it is likely that she received a lot of information from them. She would not hesitate to use unscrupulous means to question them. I have no doubt that she is a Legilimens."

Harry paled, but before he could ask his next question Hermione asked very indignantly, "Wouldn't that be illegal though?"

"On muggles, there might be a fine, if anyone could prove anything," his dad said, looking completely unconcerned about the fact that he himself had used Legilimency on Harry's Aunt. "Muggles do not have natural defenses on their minds so there is nothing that Legilimency would disturb, no trace. If she were particularly keen on hiding her tracks, she could just alter their memories afterwards so they would remember telling her about anything she gleaned from Legilimency. So long as it was not involved in any sort of financial fraud or interfered in muggle politics, I don't expect anyone to bother looking into the matter."

"Did she write anything, um, else, that she might have gotten from the Dursleys?" Harry asked.

"No," his dad said. "Do not worry about that."

Harry frowned. His dad had stopped occluding when they had gotten to the office and Harry could smell the unease from him as he answered. He was rather certain his dad was keeping something from Harry.

"I thought Privet Drive was protected, though," Harry said.

"It has not been protected since your aunt disowned you," his dad said. "That action would have caused them to collapse."

"So what did you want with us?" Ron asked.

"I felt it best to speak with Harry about how this should be handled," his dad said. "And I did not wish to leave the two of you to field questions from your classmates in the meantime."

"Does she know about the stasis potion? Or the adoption ritual?" Harry asked.

"She speculated on the adoption ritual, since you look so much like James Potter and his name would also have been revealed by the heritage test, but she does not know about the stasis potion."

"So she's making it sound like my mum had an affair," Harry growled.

"That was one intimation, yes," his dad acknowledged.

"So we need to set the record straight," Harry said.

"We can if that is what you want," his dad said.

"Of course it's what I want," Harry said. "We can't let people talk about my mum like that. You're very calm about all this. Shouldn't you be upset? People are saying bad things about you and mum and now you can't spy on Voldemort when he comes back." Harry found that he wasn't actually
upset about that part at all, though Ron's eyes nearly came out of his head at that statement, the smell of his shock filled the air and Harry briefly wondered if he should have brought that up in front of his friends."

"It cannot be changed," his dad said. "More importantly, I need to stay calm because I am trying to keep you calm. This article has come out on a very bad day."

"I'll be fine," Harry said. "I'll occlude a bunch later before moonrise."

"The stress hormones will not leave your system by then," his dad said. "You should start clearing your mind now."

"I should be clearing mum's name now," Harry said.

"You can do that," his dad said. "With a calm mind. Have a seat at my desk, clear your mind and then use my stationary to compose a letter. If you want to explain matters then you will have to write a letter to the editor of the Daily Prophet and request that they publish it. You can explain the letter you received from your mother and about your decision to tell me. First, though, you need to calm down."

"What about the whole thing where we kept it a secret?" Harry asked, trying to focus his mind and push his anger and upset aside. "I can't just say you were a spy for the headmaster."

"You can just say that with your celebrity, you did not want the whole world gossiping about this as you started a very new relationship," his dad said. "You wanted some privacy as you became accustomed to having a new family. In the end, Harry, you owe no one an explanation."

"I owe it to mum though to make sure no one thinks she cheated on my father," Harry said.

"If that's what you want," his dad placated, he turned to Ron and Hermione. "You two should get back to breakfast. I will give you a note for your first class if you are late."

"Oh, it's just history," Ron said. "We can stay and make sure Harry's all right."

It was a silly thought, but Harry didn't want them walking alone through the dungeons to get back to the Great Hall. His dad though shook his head and handed them a hastily written note.

"You may answer your classmates questions with discretion," his dad said to Ron and Hermione.

"Right," Ron said. "So what time should I show up tonight for the whole impersonating Harry thing?"

"Your services are not required tonight," his dad said. "I feel it best to make the most of this article. It seems an excellent excuse that the two of us decided to take some time for ourselves after this news broke to let the rumors die down. Harry and I will be returning to our home for the weekend, as soon as classes are over. We do not want to overuse any of our various ruses to hide Harry's monthly disappearance, so if we can use this one for tonight then all the better. You, however, should have already put out that you have been ordered to the hospital wing for the night, so that is where you should go."

"What?" Ron asked.

"You fell asleep in my classroom Mr. Weasley," his dad said. "And I expect it to not happen again."
"She's going to want to dose me," Ron said.

"That will be between you and Madame Pomfrey," his dad said.

Ron groaned and took the note for class as he and Hermione left.

"It's my fault if Voldemort ever comes after you," Harry said.

"You are not responsible for having been born. That responsibility lies distinctly with your mother and me. The Dark Lord will likely not be pleased to find that I sired his downfall, but there was always a possibility that the Dark Lord would have killed me the moment I returned to him, rather than ever trusting me again," his dad said. "It would have always been a gamble."

"Then why was that even ever an option?" Harry asked.

"Because the possible usefulness of my position within his ranks outweighed the risk," his dad said.

"You're very useful as my dad," Harry said. He had been so scared lately that his father would reject him that he had forgotten to be afraid of losing his father to death. He had lost his Aunt, Uncle, and Cousin, he supposed, when they had rejected him. He had lost his mother, father, and godfather to death, though. He had both to worry about.

"Do a breathing exercise with me," his dad said. "And then I'll help you write your letter."

Harry nodded. He couldn't really afford to worry about any of this today.

Harry's dad helped him a lot with writing the letter, while also making him eat breakfast at the same time. Some of Harry's early attempts had included language and insinuations about the paper that they likely would not have published. In the end, Harry supposed it was the best he was going to get to vent his frustration and anger and still accomplish his goal.

Dear Editor

I know accuracy and journalistic integrity are important to the Prophet, so I felt it best to address some of the missing information in your recent article, 'The Scandalous Beginnings of the Boy-Who-Lived.' I would have been happy to have addressed these matters prior had I been consulted before this article was published. I actually have a good deal of information on the matter. I received a letter a little over a year ago on my thirteenth birthday. It had been written by my mother and father, Lily and James Potter, to be delivered many years later in the event that they did not survive the war that they were both involved in.

The letter was from the both of them and it included a great many things that they wanted me to know about them, things that I would likely have learned had they survived the war and gotten to grow up with them. There were stories about their youth, and how they became engaged; a number of stories from their time at Hogwarts. There was one thing, though, that I do not think they would have ever told me had they survived. They told me that I had a biological dad named Severus Snape. As your article explained, my mother had dated Professor Snape for a time when they had been in school together before they had a falling out at the end of their fifth year. What your reporter did not know, was that my mother had in fact become pregnant with me during that time.

Being so young, my mother was, of course, not ready to have a child, so she used a stasis potion which kept me from developing at the time. She told no one until a few years later when my father asked her to marry him. They did not decide to have me until during the war, when my mother was injured during a fight and they almost lost me. My late Godfather, Sirius Black, was the only
person besides my mother and father who knew, and it was he who suggested the Adoption Ritual that your article speculated on.

The letter from my parents concluded by saying that it would be up to my best judgment if I wanted my dad in my life. At the time, I had no intention of telling him at all. I will not try to deny that, as your article explained, we have had a poor relationship in the past. To put it simply, we had always butted heads.

Soon after I received that letter, though, I left my home due to an attempt by Fenrir Greyback to kidnap me. While I lived at the Leaky Cauldron, there were many Aurors who guarded the alley, however, Headmaster Dumbledore, who has long been involved with my security, assigned Severus Snape to guard me while I was there.

It was he who stopped a second attempt to kidnap me. I believe that event made your paper, but for security reasons, it was not revealed at the time that I had someone keeping watch over me. By the time school started again, I think we were tolerating each other more, and I became curious to get to know him better. I took on a potions project as an excuse to spend more time with him and later volunteered to be his lab assistant and eventually found that we could get along rather well. A bit before Christmas, in a decision that rather surprised myself, I decided to tell him that he was my dad. I brewed a heritage potion as proof, and to make a long story short, we decided that we should be a family.

This whole thing was still very new to the both of us. Having had far too much media coverage in the past, neither of us wanted to have our new filial relationship splashed around on the headlines while we were both still becoming used to having each other for family. We decided to wait before we told others. I had told my closest friends about my dad long before I told him, and my dad later told Headmaster Dumbledore and Professor McGonagall. We had wanted, though, some privacy before it became a big deal.

Perhaps we waited too long. I am not ashamed to have Professor Snape as my dad, or to have been brought into this world in such an unconventional fashion, but I did know it was going to be a rather big story and there were certain details that I felt were just plain private.

So that's it. Perhaps it's not exactly the sordid tale you were expecting, but that's what happened. I'm not looking to do a tell-all or anything, but should you ever find yourself running an article about me on your next slow news day, do feel free to consult with me before you print.

Respectfully,

Harry James Potter

"Do you think they'll print it?" Harry asked.

"I think a letter from the Boy-Who-Lived will sell very well in the Prophet," his dad said. "So yes, I expect they will print it. Why don't you send that off and get to class."

"It's just history," Harry said. He was reluctant to face the student body. "Hey, what about your class."

"Right now is my NEWT class," his dad said. "I left instructions on the board."

"Huh," Harry said. "All right, well, wish me good luck."

"Goodluck Harry."
It was a relief to floo back to his dad's cottage that afternoon. Everyone, it had seemed, felt they had the right to ask Harry about the article. There had been more than a few nasty rumors going around and one truly horrid one that had made Harry rather angry. He found himself occluding on and off throughout the day.

Harry had gone flying right when they got to the cottage. He had felt charged all day and he had definitely felt cooped up with all of his classes being in the castle. Care of Magical Creatures would have been great. The two of them spent the evening relaxing. His dad ran him through some different meditations that had less to do with occlumency and more to do with calming down. Professor Lupin came by a bit before dinner time and they played chess together while his dad went to prepare the cellar.

Harry made an early dinner that night, beef stroganoff with a side of pickled beets and the three of them sat down to eat. Harry didn't know if Professor Lupin hadn't seen the article that morning, or if he just knew better than to bring it up right before the full moon, but all they talked about was the first three weeks of classes, and how Harry was enjoying OWL level defense. Harry thought that his dad and Professor Lupin were actually tolerating one another rather well, in so much that he hadn't caught his dad glowering at his old schoolmate once.

The moon would be rising at seven o' seven that night, so as soon as dinner was over Harry was given twenty minutes to write in his log book before he was sent to relax in the tub. Harry rather thought that perhaps his dad hadn't wanted him to write in the log book this month, if only so that he wouldn't revisit the events of that morning, but he likely knew that there would be an argument if he put his foot down on the matter.

Harry had found it easier to not start writing his log like it was some journal since he had that time limit hanging over his head. It was very tempting to rant about what had happened that day. He almost didn't write down that he had heard some older boy from Ravenclaw say that his dad must have raped his mum, but he didn't want to be blindsided by it when he returned to school. It was hard to stay calm with all of that going through his head, even while running through various mental exercises. Perhaps writing in the journal hadn't been the best idea. Perhaps he should have just had his father tell him what he knew the following day. He just so despised the thought of forgetting a day. He found it hard not to ruminate in the tub later.

A half an hour before moonrise, Harry and Professor Lupin went into the cellar, the door disappearing behind them. Professor Lupin started conjuring chairs and a table with a chessboard. Harry supposed the man was tired of sitting on the ground every month for half an hour. They talked for a while and played chess. Neither one of them put too much effort into the games, it was just something to pass the time. They talked about school, a bit, and Professor Lupin told some stories about his time as a student and a couple of anecdotes from when he had been a professor. Harry was nervous for this transformation, perhaps only because his dad had made such a big deal of his upset from that day.

All-in-all though, Harry felt all right. It was hard not to when he could feel the thrill of the pull of the moon. He felt as though he had an ever changing relationship with it. On one hand, it turned him into a raging beast every month and could easily bring ruin upon his life at any moment in the future. On the other hand, the moon brought him vitality and excitement. He could feel it's pull, and followed it as it waxed and waned. Even though he was supposed to be relaxing, he felt like he was full of energy, like he could do anything. The moon would rise in a few minutes and Harry
would yearn to be able to see it and walk in its light before it transformed him.

Speaking of the moon, though, it was about time to get ready. He started on the buttons of his shirt.

"Umm, time to get ready, isn't it," Harry said.

"It's a bit early for that, don't you think?" Professor Lupin asked.

"The moon's about to rise," Harry said.

"I forget sometimes what I've told you and what I haven't."

"What do you mean?"

"You don't just watch moonrise and fall. The moon rises tonight before it actually becomes full. We have another three hours before we transform."

That caught Harry off guard. "Then why are we locked up in here?" Harry asked, a bit put out.

"It's common practice," Professor Lupin said. "There's a story from about three hundred years ago where on one such night, werewolves all over transformed in the time between moonrise and fullness. Theory is that since moonlight is basically the reflection off the lunar surface of solar radiation, that on that night a solar flare coincided with that in between time and caused the transformation to come early. Of course, it could just be a legend. Or someone published a bad lunar chart. No one really knows. It's never actually been properly documented that a werewolf has transformed before the moon was actually full, but we don't like to take chances."

"Yeah, that makes sense," Harry said. He had had more than one nightmare that had revolved around him spontaneously transforming around his dad or his friends.

"Fullness is at ten o'clock tonight. So we have some time yet."

"That's a lot of time," Harry said. "Okay, so..." he wasn't sure what he was going to do with so much time on his hands with just the two of them. "Got any long stories?"

Professor Lupin grinned. "Well, I suppose it's about time I told you the story of the great prank war of nineteen seventy-two. It all started when Martin Scarborough got hexed in the halls."

Harry listened to the tale raptly; Professor Lupin was an excellent storyteller. After a while, though, he became restless. It wasn't that the tale didn't hold his attention, he just had too much energy running through his veins to sit still. After he had fidgeted for a while, marveling at Professor Lupin's calm, he got up and started pacing, still listening to the story, making the appropriate noises of awe and humor but he couldn't keep himself still. The moon was up. Without doubt he could point to it through the ceiling. He could almost feel the wolf inside, it longed to see the moon and so did he.

The tale was eventually over, and though it had been a long story, there was still so long before it was time to transform. Harry wondered if that was the first time he had heard that story, or if Professor Lupin had told it before as they waited to transform and Harry just forgot it every full moon. He didn't like to think about forgetting what happened every month. He rubbed at the back of his neck and banished the unhappy thought.

Professor Lupin asked if Harry had any stories to tell. Harry didn't want to tell anything from his adventures at Hogwarts. Those were too exciting, he thought his blood would boil over if he told any of them. He told the tale of the letters from no one and how he discovered he was a wizard. He
told about his denial, that surely a mistake had been made. He talked about remembering all the times he had done accidental magic as a kid and how he had chalked it up to coincidence even as he had wondered at the feeling of a building tension within right before any of the strange things that would happen. The tale was erratic and he kept having to go back and fill in missing portions, but Professor Lupin kept smiling and encouraging him.

"How are you so calm right now?" Harry asked. "Is this just me, am I just really sensitive to the moon? Because I feel like, like, woosh, like I can feel the blood flowing in my veins and I feel like I could jump and touch the ceiling and- Wait a minute."

Harry jumped up, his fingers just barely missing the ceiling. He growled and tried again and again until his finger tips brushed the wood beams above. He whooped and grinned and then blushed at the display he had made.

"I've been transforming since I was a young boy Harry," Professor Lupin said smiling at him. "I am very used to this."

"But you're full of energy too, aren't you?" Harry asked. "We should do something. I know, we could do a practice duel. That would be fun, wouldn't it?"

"That sounds like fun, but I don't think you have the best control right now Harry," Professor Lupin said. "We could do some calisthenics if you need to get out some restless energy."

Harry gasped. "We could play tag!"

"We don't have that much space in here," Professor Lupin said. "Come on, let's see some pushups."

"Aww," Harry said dejectedly. "Okay. I bet I can do more."

"We'll see," Professor Lupin said with a chuckle.

Pushups turned into sit-ups which turned into jumping jacks. Harry had been too excited to keep count. Eventually, though, he collapsed onto his back breathing hard.

"Arm wrestle?" Harry asked. Professor Lupin indulged him.

He lost. Five times.

"Is it bad I'm so excited," Harry asked. "Shouldn't I be relaxed?"

"It would be best if you were," Professor Lupin said. "But your biggest worry is stressors like anger or worry or frustration. That's why we have you relax so much before the moon rises. I think you'll be alright, though. Though I might have my hands full keeping you in line while you're transformed. Don't worry. We'll make it through."

"Hmmm," Harry said. "Okay. So tell me how you got so good at defense."

Professor Lupin started telling him what Harry supposed was a highly edited tale of the early days of the war and about his travels after it ended. This conversation lasted a long while and it ended when it was time to disrobe and lock everything up before the transformation. Harry undid the buttons of his shirt with his back turned while Professor Lupin took care of his clothes before the man went and sat down in the corner with his back turned to Harry so Harry could shed his own clothes.

Just a few more minutes now and all this energy could be released with his transformation. He
wasn't worried, though, he was looking forward to it. Professor Lupin would take care of him and make sure it went well. He was thinking about Professor Lupin's tales, all his adventures and learnings. That was when he had the idea, and he should have had it earlier. It was only that his sexuality was definitely something he couldn't think about on a day he was supposed to be avoiding stress. Yet Professor Lupin was so smart. He knew about all sorts of magic. If anyone would know about magic that could affect the mind, to change something like that, it would be him.

How to bring it up, though, without giving anything away; and too, he wasn't going to remember anything the following morning. He was already upset to be loosing these last three hours of his life. Three hours that were actually really fun. He could just ask Professor Lupin to remind him in the morning, though, if he got the answer he was looking for, and surely he would. Professor Lupin was so smart.

"Hey Professor," Harry said, once his clothing was shed and the strongbox had been closed. He sat down on the ground with his back to him. "I was wondering about mind magic. Have you ever come across a curse or anything that could change a person's mind or something."

"Well there's the memory charm I suppose," Professor Lupin said. "If someone has made a decision based on a set of information, you could make them misremember that set of information so that they will come to a different conclusion and make a different decision."

"No, no, no, no, no," Harry said urgently. He really didn't have much time. "I mean like, okay, so let's say my favorite ice cream flavor is chocolate. Could you make it so my favorite flavor was vanilla?"

"Oh, yes," Professor Lupin said, and Harry perked up. "Memory charm again. I could make you forget about chocolate ice cream altogether, though I'd need a very thorough memory charm. The thing is, most people don't only like one flavor. If I removed all the flavors you like more than vanilla though, you'll think vanilla was your favorite. Of course, if you ever tasted chocolate again…"

"Noooooo," Harry moaned. He did not want to hear about the bloody memory charm again. "Not like that. Don't make me forget anything. Okay? Just make it so vanilla's my favorite. Please."

There was a moment of silence and Harry realized he had really sounded off.

"I mean-" Harry started to say.

"There are parts of our personalities that can't really change," Professor Lupin said. "You are you. You can change you, but change comes from within. Though, some things can't be changed, by yourself or by magic. They might change over time, like favorite flavors, or music, or book, but some things are more stable."

Professor Lupin paused there and there was an awkward silence as Harry felt as though the pit of doom had come to swallow him whole.

"Of course," he said, and he sounded unsure of himself. "If you like chocolate instead of vanilla, that's all right. Even if most everyone else likes vanilla, it's all right to like chocolate."

Harry shook his head, even though Professor Lupin wouldn't be able to see it. He just wanted him to stop talking.

"I suppose it's the same with sexuality," Professor Lupin said, almost timidly but with an air of
certainty and Harry froze now that the actual topic was out in the open. "The sort of people we are attracted to can't really be changed. Even a love potion couldn't change that, they could cause an obsession, an exceptionally strong affinity, but not a sexual attraction, not if it doesn't have anything to work with within that person. But Harry, it's all right-

"It isn't all right," Harry shouted. It was over, it was all over, and then something clicked in his head and he felt absolute despair. This was it. He was so completely horrid. He had messed up and now there was nothing he could do. He was such a disgusting freak and Aunt Petunia and Uncle Vernon had always been right about him. They had always known that there was something wrong with him.

He knocked on the side of his head, wishing he could get it all out. He was rambling swears when he wasn't hyperventilating and this just had to fucking happen when he was naked and sitting in the dirt.

"Harry. Harry, deep breath, you need to calm down. Harry stay with me, it's going to be okay."

Harry felt the first bone snap and he screamed as the transformation started.

Harry screamed and swore as he rode out the transformation, flashes of the night before playing in his head. He remembered rage. He remembered the taste of blood in his mouth, but it had only frustrated him more. It hadn't been the right blood. He had been furious. It was almost better to focus on that feeling as it slipped away than to feel the agony of the transformation. It always hurt, but Harry thought that perhaps this month it was worse. This assessment was backed up as he lay panting on the ground when he realized that he was bleeding from his arms and legs. Dark jagged gashes littered his body and unbidden images of Ms. Addler's corpse and Greyback's hemorrhaging death-throes enter his mind and he was very uncomfortably centered on the horror of it all. The smell of blood permeated the air and his writhing on the floor had coated him in a bloody mud. He was so done with this shit.

Professor Lupin normally would take a bit to collect himself before he got up, usually sometime after his dad came back in, but that morning he was up and retrieving his wand from the strong box as the door at the top of the steps opened and his father came in.

"What the hell happened?" his dad exclaimed loudly.

"Last night did not go well," Professor Lupin said, quickly shooting a couple of spells at Harry to wrap up his bleeding extremities.

"I can see that Lupin," his dad said, kneeling down next to him and brushing his hair out of his eyes. Did being covered in blood remove the need for clothes?

"Uh, 'm naked," Harry rasped out past his sore throat, irritated and embarrassed that everyone was more worried about his injuries than they were about giving him his stupid robes. Professor Lupin tossed his robes to his dad who draped them over Harry. Harry was brought upstairs and placed into the care of Madame Pomfrey who tutted over him and listed out his various injuries, like he needed to hear them for some reason. It seemed he had replaced broken bones and torn ligaments for bites and scratches. His body was doing a better job of putting itself back together so he had just had to go ahead and fuck it all up. His father retrieved a special potion that would prevent scarring.
That probably cost an arm and a leg. Great job, Harry. He could smell anger wafting off his father like he was wearing it for cologne and it had him set on edge.

Madame Pomfrey left not long after, leaving him wrapped up nearly from head to toe as the potion did its thing.

"Log book," was all he got out through his irritated throat as breakfast and a bunch of potions were put in front of him.

"Now is not the best time," his dad said.

"I can already tell things didn't exactly go right yesterday," Harry said testily, trying to speak through the rasp in his throat. "You don't need to protect me from things that already happened. It's not like I'm going to gnaw on myself again if I get upset."

A severe look briefly passed over his father's face before it was schooled under calm and he left to go retrieve Harry's book. A large part of Harry did not care that he had just spoken so to his dad, but another part was screaming at him to cower and make it better.

"Thanks," Harry mumbled when it was handed to him.

"Eat," his dad said.

Harry nodded. He noticed his dad drag Professor Lupin to the kitchen as he picked a grape up off the plate and opened up the book. He was annoyed that he could hear the two men having a hushed but somewhat harsh discussion in the kitchen. He was trying to read, damnit.

It didn't take a genius to see that Harry seemed to have swapped out depression for irritability as his post transformation mind-fuck. He couldn't wait until his body got completely used to the transformation and his brain didn't get zonked the day after. Still, though, he didn't think he was going to bawl on anyone's shoulder today, so that was a plus.

It didn't take him long to figure out what had probably set him off the previous night. He had written it out pretty plainly the evening before what it was.

"What a fucking piece of trash," Harry exclaimed, his throat still raw and scratchy.

The argument in the kitchen quieted for a moment and Harry resisted the urge to apologize for cursing. Grownups swore all the time.

"Are you eating?" his dad called out.

"Yeah," Harry said right after he shoved a piece of toast in his mouth just so he could talk with his mouth full. Harry continued reading and the grownups continued arguing. Harry rubbed at the back of his neck, one of the few places not injured in some way, though it stretched out a few of the wounds on his arm, so he snagged a piece of fruit instead.

The grownups were still arguing after Harry finished reading his entry. What a piece of work. Who did that? And no warning either. Just going out and publishing personal stuff about people's lives. Talking about his mum like that. Harry was livid.

The grownups were still talking, but now they were speaking normally. Did they think Harry didn't know they were talking about him? He wasn't stupid.

"Shouldn't Professor Lupin be resting too?" Harry called out, his voice hoarse and breaking in the
"Fuck," he swore, slapping a hand over his mouth. He hated his voice breaking like that. Puberty was complete hogwash. Absolutely none of it was worth getting taller. Fucking messes in his sheets, acne, stretch marks, getting a fucking crush on his best mate, thoughts he shouldn't be having, puberty was the absolute worst and he was still rocketing through it with a rush of hormones that were extra potent because he was a fucking werewolf.

"I think you're right," Professor Lupin said coming into the room. "I should probably go. Harry…" He looked like he wanted to say something. "Everything's going to be all right."

"Oh great," Harry said. "Did they cure lycanthropy?"

Professor Lupin sighed. "You'll feel a lot better when you get some sleep."

"I don't want any fucking potions," Harry said.

His dad sighed. "How much longer?"

"A few more months," Professor Lupin said. "Maybe more."

"Any possibility that next month he'll be ridiculously happy post transformation?"

"You never know," Professor Lupin said.

"I'm right here," Harry said.

"I had a good visit last night, Harry. I'll see you in a month," Professor Lupin said.

"What happened to your arm?" Harry asked, noticing for the first time that one of Professor Lupin's forearms was wrapped up like his own.

"Small accident last night," Professor Lupin said.

"You mean I bit you last night?" Harry asked. Here he was being a brat while Professor Lupin was sporting a fresh wound that Harry had given him.

"You were trying to bite yourself. It was an accident. It was your wolf, besides. It wasn't your fault."

"I'm sorry," Harry said. "I'm really sorry. Shit. Is it going to be okay?"

"It's going to be fine," Professor Lupin said. "Just like you're going to be fine. You had a rough night last night."

"Yeah, fucking Rita Skeeter," Harry sighed.

"People will find something else to gossip about soon enough," Professor Lupin said.

"Yeah, right after she figures out I'm a werewolf," Harry said.

"We're keeping that under wraps," Professor Lupin said. "Get some rest."

"Bye, professor," Harry said.

Professor Lupin left through the floo.

"I suppose you're not hungry," his dad said.
Harry shrugged, looking down at the plate he had barely touched. He shook his head.

"Alright, then it's time for your potions," his dad said.

"You just want me to go to sleep because I'm annoying," Harry accused.

"I want you to get your rest so that you will be able to go back to classes in full health on Monday. It would be best if you didn't look like death warmed over after a weekend with your dad."

Harry sighed dejectedly. "I don't feel as worn out as I did last month."

"I'm fairly certain that you're running on anger and spite right now. Even Lupin needs his rest every month."

"Yeah, 'cause he's staying up all night making sure I don't claw my face off."

"The point is," his dad said. "You were both up all night, both transformations are very draining, you bled a lot, and you need your rest."

Harry groaned in defeat, reaching for his first potion. It would be just his luck if Voldemort and all his death eaters stormed the cottage looking for vengeance on Professor Snape right after he conked out.

"Hey," Harry said, leaning up against the doorway to his dad's study. His legs were very wobbly, his head felt too heavy, and he really didn't feel like he had just slept for eight hours, but he had woken up with the strong urge to go talk to his dad.

"You shouldn't be up," his dad said. "Let's go to the drawing room. Are you hungry?"

Harry shook his head. "I'm sorry."

"You don't need to apologize for getting up," his dad said.

He got up to Harry by the door and steered him back into the drawing room, keeping an arm around Harry's back as they walked.

"I'm sorry I was such a brat this morning," Harry said.

"It's all right," his dad said, depositing him back on the couch. "I give you a fair bit of leeway after the full moon. You also do seem to be recovering much more quickly this month."

"You put up with a lot," Harry said.

"Harry, I put up with over a hundred annoying students every day. You are my mild- mannered son who occasionally looses his temper and gets sassy, I think I'm doing all right."

"Still," Harry said.

"I do feel that you are hiding something from me, though," his dad said.

Harry felt panicked. "No, I'm not."
"It's just that I feel that there are times when I get to see much more of you, but you hide yourself most of the time. You become much more chatty when your guard is let down."

"I did nothing but talk back to you this morning," Harry said.

"Perhaps you could have said things more diplomatically," his dad said. "But you clearly had a lot to say, and very often you hold your tongue."

"But then I'm just going to mess it up saying the wrong thing," Harry exclaimed.

"I didn't realize this at the time, but there was a three hour lag last night between moonrise and moon fullness," his dad said, changing the subject a bit. "Lupin told me about it this morning. Apparently, it is hypothetically possible to transform during that time, but exceptionally unlikely. Still, though, you were downstairs that whole time. According to Lupin, you became very animated and talkative after the moon rose."

Harry rubbed at the back of his neck. "What did I talk about?"

"I am sure that that is between you and Lupin," his dad said. "The point is, I feel that there is a part of you that you hide from everyone else, that only comes out every now and then."

"What if you don't like him?" Harry asked.

"I'm sure I'll survive," his dad said.

"So you want me to talk more?" Harry asked. That was never a message he had gotten from an adult before.

"I want you to be yourself," his dad said. "Whoever that is. I don't want you to hide from me."

Harry doubted his dad would say that if he really knew who Harry was, but it was a nice sentiment. Maybe there was more that Harry could be open about; within reason.

"I wish I could remember last night," Harry said.

"I do too," his dad said. "Wait here. I'll get you something to eat."

Harry spent most of the day on the couch. He was still fairly irritable, and being cooped up did no one any favors, but he did feel like he was getting better faster this month. He read over his log book a couple more times. It was important to remember who had talked what trash about his family the day before. He was also very worried about the fact that Rita Skeeter had visited the Dursleys. No good could possibly come from that.

Sunday was mostly focused on homework. Additionally, Harry was finalizing his project proposal. It would be pretty interesting, he was planning on testing the resonance properties of runic trigger wards. It had been done before, but there wasn't really anything new and groundbreaking within Harry's level. It would be a good project for him to develop his understanding of esoteric magical concepts. It was weird, but Harry felt that he was consistently making future career choices based on last minute ruses to trick his dad.

That was assuming he didn't go for professional quidditch or become a potions master though. Did his dad want him to become a potions master? A part of him could almost hear his dad say that he'd want Harry to pursue whatever career made him happy. But maybe he would secretly want Harry to follow in his footsteps. Perhaps it was all irrelevant. Maybe Harry was going to have to choose a career that wouldn't expose his lycanthropy. Pro-quidditch was probably impossible, even
if he were that good.

Schoolwork was a good distraction, but he was not looking forward to going back to school.

It did not take long after he returned to the castle for Draco to seek him out.

"You're his father," he said accusingly and without preamble as he walked into his office.

"I do believe that Harry has actually separated myself from James Potter by referring to him as his father and me as his dad," Severus said.

"The hell do I care," Draco said. "This whole time-"

"Not this whole time," Severus said. "I had no idea he was my son when I started helping you to become the leader you were meant to be. The fact that he is my son has not changed anything with regards to you. You are not involved in any plot that involves Harry. I have told you many times that you are two separate individuals that have different roles in this world. Now to put it plainly Draco, why do you care? I thought you had put this rivalry behind you. You haven't payed Harry much mind in some time. Why do you care that he is my son?"

"You didn't tell me," Draco said.

"It was a private family matter," Severus said, and there was the briefest flash of hurt on Draco's face when he said it that was very quickly schooled away.

"Yeah," Draco said. "I guess it was."

"Draco," Severus said. "You know I served the Dark Lord."

"You served with father," Draco said.

"You also know that I do not support his goals, you know that I have worked for years in this school under the Headmaster, you know I protected the boy-who-lived before I knew he was my son, what do you think I would have done had the Dark Lord ever returned."

"He's not going to return," Draco said.

"We do not know that," Severus said. "And I know you know better than to plan only for the best."

"You didn't want the Dark Lord to know that you were Potter's dad. That you had allegiances to his enemies."

"We weren't exactly going to put that in the Prophet," Severus said.

"What was your plan for me if the Dark Lord returned," Draco asked.

"That would have been up to you," Severus said.

"As if," Draco said.

"You would be in the position I placed you," Severus said. "Either you would lead pureblood
houses away from the Dark Lord, or you would become one of his many servants, bowing to kiss
the hem of his robes as he decided whether he was going to torture you for some perceived failure.
I think you know where I would have encouraged you to go."

"And you would have kissed his robes so that you could report to Dumbledore," Draco said.
Severus nodded his head. "We all have our roles to play."

"So what's your role now?"

"Guide you, as I have been," Severus said. "And prepare Harry for his role."

"You want him to fight the Dark Lord?"

"I expect him to fight the Dark Lord," Severus said. "I have abandoned thoughts that he will not be
involved. He has always known his role better than I have. I have no illusions that I can keep him
from this. What else can I do but to prepare him to survive?"

"So what about me?" Draco asked.

"You are an exceptional young wizard with a great deal of potential," Severus said. "You told me
what you want for your future. My goals still align with yours. We move on as we have. Speaking
of which, how have you progressed?"

Draco stared at him for a moment, likely deciding whether he would allow Severus to change the
subject. "A lot of doors are closed to the house of Malfoy right now," he finally said.

"Don't focus on houses right now," Severus said. "Don't ignore them, but focus on the students that
don't come from influential houses. And don't focus on the house of Malfoy. You are Draco. Do
not forget that, and do not allow them to forget that. How did you like those books?"

"Your muggle books?"

"I am an accomplished Legilimens Draco. I will not say that wizards and muggles are completely
the same in how they think, but I have seen inside the minds of wizards and I have seen inside the
minds of muggles and I have seen that much the same drives both. Muggles have made a large
study of how people interact with one another and influence one another. There is only so far you
can progress if you only read Wizarding books on the subject."

"Well they were interesting," Draco said. "But I doubt most of those tricks would work on a proper
wizard though."

"Name three proper wizards or witches in this school," Severus said.

"Warrington, Diggory, and Mathias," Draco said without hesitation, picking a student from each
house besides Gryffindor.

"Perhaps a test is in order," Severus said. "Who is strongly in your camp but isn't very publicly
associated with you?"

"Dryer," Draco said.

"Teach Ms. Dryer the Little Favor Big Favor technique," Severus said. "Come up with what those
favors should be, and have her employ the method on Mr. Warrington, Mr. Diggory, and Ms.
Mathias. Offer her a bounty for each success."
"I don't know how much of a bounty I can offer," Draco said. "One way or another, father is ruining us. Mother's been making a number of sizable donations in his name all over. I don't know if St. Mungo's would have the balls to have a Malfoy Ward now, but they're getting enough gold to build a whole other level. We're hoping father can get out with a large fine. He still has friends on the Wizengamot.

"I probably shouldn't be telling you this. You wouldn't want father free to go about fighting for the Dark Lord if he ever comes back."

"I am well aware of your mother's donations," Severus said. "Do you think it will work?"

"Who knows," Draco said. "I'm pretty sure I have a great great uncle who bought an Order of Merlin way back. I do know she's willing to go broke to keep father out of jail."

"She has options should she spend all of the Malfoy gold."

"What, live like a Weasley?" Draco asked.

"Well that would be an option, but no," Severus said. "Your mother is the last living Black who has not been disinherited or incarcerated for life. She could lay claim to the family headship."

"She would have to divorce father," Draco said. "And I would have to renounce the name of Malfoy if I wanted to inherit."

"Well perhaps you could ask Mr. Weasley for some advice," Severus said.

"Oh ha," Draco said.

"What did you think of last year's defense teacher?" Severus asked.

"Lupin?" Draco asked. "Second hand everything. He actually looked poorer than a Weasley."

"What did you think of his knowledge of magic?" Severus asked.

Draco dithered. "Well he was a lot better than I would have expected."

"You in fact learned a great deal from him," Severus said.

"Well I wouldn't go that far," Draco said. Severus raised an eyebrow. "Okay fine, but you know what? It just goes to show. He had a lot going for him, didn't he. Yeah, he had a lot of talent, he knew a lot, but what did he do with it? Nothing. A broke copperless man moving from one failure to another probably. I bet he's someone all those muggle manipulation techniques would work great on."

"And yet you learned from him," Severus said, smiling perhaps not only because he knew he had led the conversation where he wanted it.

"Yeah," Draco said.

"And your defense professor from the year prior?" Severus asked.

"What, that peacock?" Draco asked, sneering with extreme distaste. "Well I'll tell you, I only ever learned what not to do from that idiot."

"And yet he was a great success in life," Severus said. "Wielding both fame and fortune."
"So what are you saying?" Draco asked. "It's better to be a broke genius than a wealthy idiot? I'm not an idiot though, I was a better wizard at twelve than that clown. I can be both. And you know what, even if it is all gone, I'll get it all back. I'll rebuild my house, because I'm not just smart, I know how to use it, and I'll make something of it and I'll make something of myself."

"I have no doubt that you could do that, Draco, but we have gotten away from my point. Both came to this castle to do the same job. One of them succeeded and one of them failed. One of them enriched the lives of his students and one of them tried to destroy the lives of his students. Wealth is one measure of a man Draco. But between the two of them, which man had worth? Which one provided you with worth? You would still have worth Draco, even if your family lost every last knut."

Draco actually blushed at that.

"I always got the impression that you hated Lupin."

"Oh I do," Severus said. "But for a good deal of my life I had forgotten to see the world as it was so that I could see it as I wanted to see it. I have said it many times already, and I wish to drive it home to you in part because I brought ruin upon my own life for that sin, in so many ways, and I am determined not to do it again. Yes, I hate Lupin, but if I did not allow myself to see his worth I would be making myself weak so that I could satisfy my petty desires. Is it not tempting to see your enemy as less? Do we not say things to deride those we do not like? If we are not careful, we give them advantage, because we start to believe things about them that are not true. When you do not see the world as it is, you lose."

"So you think I don't see Potter as he is," Draco said.

"One of these days, I am going to record you so I can play back to you the number of times you bring Harry into the topic at hand. I was not speaking about Harry. If you wish to answer that question, perhaps you should ask it of yourself."

"So do you actually like him, or is it just that you have to like him because he's family?" Draco asked.

Severus rolled his eyes.

"Believe it or not, I had actually become somewhat attached before I found out he was my son."

"But he's a Gryffindork," Draco said.

"He's my Gryffindork," Severus said. "Now have a good night Draco."

"Watching Potter is way too reminiscent of Gryffindor's biography," Draco said, shaking his head on the way to the door. "You two deserve each other."

That was actually nice to hear. Though Harry deserved a fair bit more.

Harry's return to school had not been very fun. The prophet had printed his letter, but there were still a bajillion rumors going around and most of them were unpleasant. He got personally thanked by a couple of people for their latest detention with his dad. Without a doubt, his parentage had
conclusively taken the place of the Triwizard Tournament as the hot topic of the school.

His dorm mates were thankfully silent on the matter, and so was Draco Malfoy, though Harry had noticed him staring at him a few times since the news had come out. Malfoy was still acting weird, or rather, he wasn't acting the way Harry would have expected him to act. Not with his father still facing Azkaban prison and not with the latest news about Harry coming out. Would his silence hold if Rita Skeeter published anything she had gleaned from the Dursleys?

Once the rumors about his mum started to die down, and Harry's blood wasn't exactly boiling all the time, he started paying more attention to that unique threat hanging over his head. How bad was it? Had she talked to his aunt or his uncle? Both knew horrible things, but some things were worse than others. Had she gotten to Dudley? Did she know what a loser he had been in primary school? Like the time Dudley's gang had caught him on the way to the loo and locked him in a closet till he'd wet his pants. Did she get out of Aunt Petunia just how needy he was? Had his uncle told her how pathetic he was?

What would Ron or Hermione think? He found himself fantasizing about what such an article might have in it, with varying levels of dread attached and a sick feeling in his stomach throughout. He even considered having a pre-emptive talk with his friends or his dad, but he quashed that idea very quickly.

He didn't have much time to worry about it though. So much of it was spent on homework, or training with his dad, or his own research into how not to be gay. A week after the full moon, Harry was introduced to a woman named Viktoria Nikiforov, who had more than a few scars, though not near as many as Professor Moody. She was there to teach him to wield a dagger. It was a good thing they started out with wooden ones, because Harry would have probably needed a trip to the infirmary afterwards. He felt clumsy with the thing. One other thing took up his time, and though he didn't have much of it, this one at least was nice. Though the quidditch season had been canceled, Cedric Diggory had started a couple of pickup games over the weekend. Harry was keeping himself occupied, but he never forgot that Rita Skeeter had spoken to the Dursleys.

There were very few saving graces when the next article finally came out. One, was that it came out a week before the next full moon, a small blessing, and two, was that she hadn't, it seemed, gotten some of the worst stuff. Still, though, 'The Boy-Who-Lived-in-a-Cupboard,' caused a fair bit of a ruckus when it eventually came out.

"We've got some inventions," Fred said.

"Easy enough to send in the muggle mail," George said.

"We could make their lives really interesting."

"Are we talking about the Dursleys?" Harry asked.

George nodded.

"Oh," Harry said.

He should have been ready for this.

"Did you read it this time?" Ron asked with more focus than he'd shown for anything recently. He
was still deteriorating, but with the weekend just over, Harry was pretty sure this was the most rested Ron had been in a while.

"Yeah," said George.

"How bad is it?" Harry asked.

"Well we don't know how bad it was for you," said Fred. "So if there's anything worse she could have put in there, I couldn't tell you, but…"

"It's pretty messed up," said George.

"Oh," Harry said. "Sorry."

"What?" Fred asked.

"Harry gets weird when you talk about the Dursleys," Ron said. "So what have you got? Anything disfiguring?"

"Ron that's not going to help," Hermione said.

"Don't do anything." Harry said.

"He's also weirdly protective of them," Ron said.

"They took me in," Harry said.

"They'd have done you a favor if they hadn't," Ron said.

"I don't think they had a choice," Harry said. "They didn't ask for me. I was really—"

"Don't say it again," Ron said. "I don't give a damn if you were the most difficult child there ever was, that's not an excuse. You being a fucking wizard wasn't an excuse, you being an orphan wasn't an excuse, you being different, or unexpected, or special wasn't a fucking excuse and they should have been bloody happy to have you in their family. I told you they were shit people and I didn't need an article in the paper to tell me that. You know why? Because I always see the effect they had on you. They made you feel like shit about yourself, and it doesn't take a genius to see it. They deserve a lot worse than a few lousy joke products, and you go around feeling like you should be grateful you didn't have it worse or like they aren't the scum of the earth. And you know what?"

"Ron, stop!" Hermione said.

"But I'm right," Ron said.

"I know," Hermione said. "But that doesn't mean you get to tell Harry off for feeling the way he feels about his family. Our feelings are valid even if we don't like them."

"Oh, is that what your muggle shrink told you?" Ron asked hotly.

"Yes," Hermione said. "Because I actually got help for my problems."

"You know why I can't!" Ron exclaimed.

"I know the excuses you use so you don't have to actually deal with it," Hermione said.
"I did the whole bloody book you gave me," Ron said. "And I've read the others besides. Fat lot of good they've done me."

"Yeah," Hermione said. "Anything so you don't have to expose yourself to another living soul."

"Who am I going to talk to?!" Ron yelled. "A muggle who's never going to understand, or a wizard who wants to go rooting through my head so he can 'fix' me, make me exactly how he thinks I should be, so I act the way I'm supposed to act, and do what I'm supposed to fucking do."

"No," Hermione said. "But that doesn't mean you don't have options."

"Fucking who?"

"Me," Hermione cried.

"I talked to you," Ron said indignantly.

"About being hungry, or cold, or sore," Hermione said. "I was there too! I went through it too. I have no one to talk to about what I'm feeling and you're the only person here besides Kevin Erstwhile who even has a clue. I gave you those books… I'd hoped you'd talk to me about it. I wanted to talk to you about it."

"I thought you were doing all right," Ron said. "You got better. You don't need me dredging up that shit so I can get it off my chest."

"I did get better," Hermione said. "That doesn't mean I'm all right."

Fred cleared his throat.

"Wow," said George.

"So," Fred said.

"You two talk," George said.

"We'll deal with this other thing," said Fred.

"Shit," Ron said, turning to Harry. "Sorry."

"It's okay," Harry said.

"Not really," Ron said. "Are you all right?"

"Ask me after I've read this article."

"You don't have to," said Ron.

"No I really do," Harry said. "I need to know what everyone else knows."

He really hoped it wasn't as bad as it could be. Though the twins had read it and they weren't upset with him in the extreme.

"Alright," Ron said. "Forget about the Dursleys for now. I'm sure you two can come up with something that will get the castle talking about something else real soon."

"Not a bad idea Ronnie," said George.
Ron flipped him off for the use of his nickname before turning to Hermione. "So, um, you want to talk?"

"I want to get breakfast so we can go to class," Hermione said. "But yes I want to talk. Can we, later?"

"Yeah," Ron said. "We can."

"You don't have to," Hermione said.

"Hermione, we'll talk," Ron said.

"Okay," she said.

The twins steered Harry away from the two.

"So that was awkward," Fred said.

"I get it," Harry said.

"Yeah I guess you would," George said, and handed him that morning's edition of the Daily Prophet.

As much as he had psyched himself for it's coming, and though there weren't as many terrible anecdotes from his childhood as Harry had feared, he did not feel that he was at all ready to deal with it. The article mainly painted a picture of what growing up with the Dursleys had been like. Based on some of the anecdotes, Harry was rather certain that Skeeter had seen Aunt Petunia. Besides the blasted cupboard under the stairs, the article mentioned harsh punishments for accidental magic, starvation, and a few humiliating instances from his childhood, hinting that there was worse that they weren't printing. There was also mention of Harry's departure the previous summer being less than voluntary on Harry's part.

The article was written from the standpoint of 'oh poor Harry Potter, how could such a thing have happened.' There was a lot of sympathy and outrage written in, but Harry could just imagine Skeeter grinning over her quill as she wrote about him being forced to eat rancid food or being locked up for multiple days without being let out. If the woman had felt any sympathy for him, she wouldn't have written the article. The whole thing was reminiscent of those true murder stories Aunt Petunia watched when Uncle Vernon and Dudley were out of the house and Harry was in his cupboard.

Harry swore rather a lot as he read the article. The twins offered up a few new swear words for Harry's repertoire.

It could be worse, Harry thought when he finished reading the article.

"Worse?" George asked.

Out loud. Harry had said that out loud.

"Don't worry about it," Harry said.

"Well what should we worry about?" Fred asked.

"What Ron said," Harry said. "I don't want people talking about this."

"We can provide a number of distractions," said George.
"But people are going to talk about this," said Fred.

"They're going to want to talk to you about this," said George.

"But what better to deter people from talking to you than our latest product?"

"The Human Swamp."

"Ask us what it does."

"I think I can guess," Harry said. "Might cause more problems than it solves."

"Write that down, George, the name effectively describes the product."

"We've been doing market research."

"That mostly entails giving our products to first years and seeing what they do with them."

"It's not irresponsible if you write down the results," George said proudly.

"But about the Dursleys," Fred said.

"Forget the Dursleys," Harry said.

George sighed. "We are rather fond of you."

"Even though you're a little bugger."

"Point is we're hot for some blood right now."

"Of the Dursley variety, particularly."

"But we'll lay off if you say so," George explained.

"But you can change your mind anytime," Fred said.

"And, um, you know, Ron isn't the only one who might need to talk about stuff," George said.

"I've talked to my dad about it," Harry said. "He knows."

"That's still really weird," Fred said.

"Is he like, a dad dad?" George asked.

Harry had to think about it, because he didn't exactly have the best frame of reference for what a dad dad was.

"Yeah," he said. "I think so. He's trying really hard."

"So what's your plan for today?" asked George.

"Um," Harry said. "Avoidance."

"Playing hooky?" asked Fred.

"Yeah."
"Good luck," said George.

"Thanks," Harry said. "My first class is Transfiguration so we'll see how long I last before I'm dragged out of the tower."

"Oh, what if you took ill?" Fred asked.

"There should be a product for that," George said.

"I like the way you think," Fred said.

"I'm not going to the infirmary," Harry said. "Anyways, thanks, I guess. I'll see you later."

"Good luck," George said.

"Just remember," Fred said. "We've got a family deal, three Dursleys for the price of one."

He made it through the day evading any attempts to get him back to class. He wondered if any of his teachers would let him get away with saying he'd felt sick to his stomach. Well, Hagrid probably would. Maybe Professor Sprout.

He figured his dad probably wouldn't be too keen on it though, so after classes were done for the day, Harry threw on his invisibility cloak and headed down to the Dungeons. There would probably be less wrath for him in the dungeons than there would be in the tower when Hermione got back. He had no doubt that she would not appreciate him taking off a whole day of classes.

"Accio invisibility cloak," the voice of none other than Draco Malfoy said from behind him.

Damn, Harry thought as the cloak flew off of him and he spun around to face Malfoy.

"Give it back," Harry demanded of the boy who was looking admiringly at the cloak in his hands.

"Potter family heirloom I suppose," Malfoy said. "Exceptional quality, I always wanted one when I was younger."

"Well you can't have it," Harry said drawing his wand.

Malfoy snorted, and threw it back to Harry. "A proper wizard doesn't need one, besides."

"Oh, like you can disillusion yourself," Harry said. That was a NEWT level spell. "And how did you know I was there?"

"I could hear you," Malfoy said. "You're invisible, not silent."

"I've got silencing insoles," Harry said.

"Congratulations, you're footsteps are silent. You though, are noisy as hell. I mean honestly, one little thing goes wrong in your life and all you do is sigh and moan about it all day."

"See, I knew it," Harry said. "You can play your little games with everyone else, but I knew you wouldn't be able to resist coming to poke fun now that that damned article came out."
"I'm not here to poke fun," Malfoy said. "I'm here to tell you to stop acting like it's the end of the world. My dad's in prison, you don't see me missing classes for it, or skulking around the castle in a damned invisibility cloak. You think hiding's going to do anything but show the school how weak you are?"

"I'm not weak," Harry said.

"Yeah? Then hold your damned head up high," Malfoy said. "You're worried what people are going to think because those muggles beat you up so you hide from everyone? Real smart. That doesn't sound like the guy who fought a basilisk. It doesn't sound like the guy who went after Greyback."

"Yeah well it is," Harry said.

Draco scoffed. "What are you hiding from?"

"Assholes like you," Harry said.

"Well by all means," Draco said. "Continue to hide. We can all have a good laugh behind your back. But here's an idea. How about you come to dinner tonight, and the first asshole who says shit to you gets you laughing in his face. Say, 'yeah, all that stuff happened, worse even, but it didn't stop me from being twice the wizard you are, my record speaks for itself.'"

"Yeah, well I am twice the wizard you are," Harry said.

Draco laughed like he'd made a joke.

"What in the hell are you giving me a pep talk for, anyway?" Harry asked. "Why the hell do you even care? You hate me. I don't know what game you've been playing with everyone in the castle, but I'm not falling for it, and I'm going to figure it out too."

"No game, Potter," Draco said. "This is what I do now, I see problems, I fix them."

"I'm not a problem," Harry said.

"No," Draco said. "You're not. So stop acting like one."

Without another word he turned to leave, going back the other way, not even a glance back at Harry. Harry groaned in frustration.

"Wait," Harry said.

Draco turned.

"Why did you do the ritual?" Harry asked.

"I saw a problem, I fixed it," Draco said.

"I fixed it," Harry said.

"Maybe you succeeded because I did the ritual," Draco said with the air of someone who didn't really care. "It doesn't matter I suppose. The result was the same."

"What did you sacrifice?" Harry asked.

"My Nimbus," Draco said.
"No way," Harry said.

"You can ask anyone who was there," Draco said.

"So what, you probably went home and got a new one," Harry said.

"I went home and got a Firebolt," Draco said.

Damn.

"Why'd you do it?" Harry asked.

"Why did you?" Draco asked.

"They're my friends," Harry said.

"If Erstwhile had still been there, would you have left him behind?" Draco asked.

"No," Harry said. "Of course not."

"Well I suppose people can be altruistic," Draco said.

"Not you," Harry said.

Draco grinned. "Because I'm a Malfoy?"

"Because you're the guy who said he hoped Hermione would get killed by the basilisk," Harry said. "Because you spent so much time desperate to show everyone how much of an evil little asshole you are."

"Yeah," Draco said. "I was a little shit wasn't I. Is that what you're upset about? You want me to keep being evil? You Gryffindors do need your foils, don't you."

"You're not my foil," Harry said. "And I don't need you to keep being evil, I just know you are."

"Says you," Malfoy said. "Time will tell I suppose. I'll see you at dinner, Potter. Assuming you're not invisible."

Draco left, and Harry huffed before turning around and continuing on to see his dad.

"Hey," Harry said, entering his dad's office.

"How are you?" his dad asked.

"Upset," Harry said.

"I had imagined you would be," his dad said.

"I'm angry they published that," Harry said.

"As am I."

"I'm worried about what everyone else is going to think."

"What do you think everyone else is going to think," his dad asked.

"They probably think that something's wrong with me," Harry said.
"And is there?" his dad asked.

"N-no," Harry said.

"I do not think you believe that," his dad said. "I think you still believe that the Dursley's hurt you for some deficit of your own rather than of theirs."

"I don't," Harry said.

"Then why should everyone else believe that?" his dad asked. "I have told you you are not at fault for how the Dursley's treated you. To my knowledge they did not abuse your cousin. Was he spared because he was a saintly being? Did your Aunt and Uncle only punish wicked children? No, what they did to you was their fault, not yours. You could not have deserved that. Nothing you could have done would have justified it."

"Okay, fine," Harry said. "They're bad people. They shouldn't have hurt me. Alright? That doesn't mean they didn't have their reasons."

"Because you were a wizard," his dad said.

"It was more than that," Harry said.

"What then?" his dad asked.

"Just forget it," Harry said. "I skipped classes today, don't you want to talk about that?"

"Sure," his dad said. "You have detention. Now sit down and talk to me."

"I can't," Harry said.

"Why not?"

"Because then you'll know."

"Know what?"

"Everything," Harry exclaimed.

"What happens if I do?"

"Then I'll lose this," Harry said. "I'll lose everything and I don't want to. I like having a dad. I like having friends."

"You're not going to lose that," his dad said.

"You don't know that," Harry said.

"Harry, you forgave a good deal from me when you decided you wanted me to be in your life," his dad said.

"Because I wanted this," Harry said. "I'm glad I did."

"But you are not the only one who is invested in this relationship."

"I know that," Harry said.

"Then trust me just a bit," his dad said.
"I do trust you," Harry said.

"Then tell me what you think the Dursleys felt was so wrong with you that they decided you didn't have the right to eat."

"I can't," Harry said. "I just can't. I'm sorry. You didn't sign up for this mess."

"You keep saying that even though I told you explicitly that I did. I Severus Snape do hereby sign up for being Harry Potter's dad and all the bloody mess that comes along with it. Do you want me to sign up for it again tomorrow? How about the next day? We could start a roster and every day I could sign up again, just so that you could feel as though it is all right to not be the perfect son I never expected you to be."

Harry just sat there, begging him silently to just move on.

"You are my son. I love you. That is not going to change."

"You can't say that," Harry cried.

"Why not?"

"You have to mean it."

"Why do you think I don't?"

"Because I lost my chance at that a long time ago," Harry said. "I gave up on that a long time ago. I don't get to be loved."

"You never lost it," his dad said. "You told me yourself, you carry her love around with you everywhere, you can still feel it."

"It's a memory, it's a magical shadow of what was," Harry said. "Yeah, it's nice. It's nice to know she loved me, but she loved a baby. I'm not that Harry anymore. She never knew the me that's here now. Everybody loves babies. They don't always love you when you get older, do they? That's why Sammy Eldrich doesn't live with her dad anymore. Everybody loves you when you're a baby, it doesn't mean anything. That's all I've got. A moment in time when my mum loved me because I was her baby. That's all I get."

"Your mother would have loved you so much, Harry."

"You don't know that. You can't know that. She's dead. She was a great mom. That doesn't mean I'm a great son."

"Why did you ask me to be your dad?"

"Because I liked you," Harry said. "I needed a place to stay, and I thought you might just like me enough to put up with me if I could just keep from being too much of a bother."

"You're not a bother," his dad said.

"Yes I am," Harry said. "I'm being a bother right now."

"Having difficulties in your life does not make you incapable of being loved."

"You don't get it."
"How can I when you won't tell me."

Harry planted his face on the desk and gripped at his hair.

"I can't, I can't, I can't. I'm sorry, I'm so sorry I involved you in this, but I can't. Can't you just forget it? Please. You'll figure it out eventually, and then that will be that, and I won't make it difficult, but for now can't we just drop it? You like me. I like being your son. That's enough for now."

His dad sighed.

"Did you eat breakfast?"

Harry shook his head.

"Did you eat lunch?"

"I had some chocolate," Harry said, lifting his head from the desk.

"You are not allowed to skip meals," his dad said. "You are a growing boy."

"I'll eat dinner," Harry said.

"I will find you if you do not," his dad said.

"So, are we done?" Harry asked. "With the conversation?"

"For now, we are," his dad said. "You still have a detention."

"Oh," Harry said. "Frogs?"

"After we have reviewed what you missed in class today," his dad said.

"Rats," Harry said.

"I have those for you too."

Harry nodded and pulled up his book bag.

"Harry?"

"Yeah?"

"You are still my son, and I still love you."

Harry gave him the smile he knew his dad wanted to see. For now, maybe.

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There were people who pointed at him, and people who stared at him, and whispered to the people next to them.

"No wonder he'd rather live with Snape," someone said.
There were some quiet snickers and pitying looks and Harry hated every moment of it, but he went
to dinner and he sat next to his friends. Hermione was not pleased about him missing classes, but
she seemed mollified to hear that he had received a detention.

Hermione and Ron were acting as though they hadn't had a blowout earlier that morning. They
were still sitting shoulder to shoulder at the dining table. Ron kept sneaking glances at Hermione
through tired eyes, making sure she was still there. They told him a bit about what was going on
around the castle.

"Well I said it before, but even though hitting kids is pretty messed up, it's not like it's against the
law," Ron said. "Though I guess it's different for muggles. But all the starvation stuff and locking
you up is what I think most people are worked up for, that and 'cause they punished you for doing
magic, which is crazy. Still though, don't listen to the stuff about obscurials, I don't think that could
have happened to you. So, yeah, um…"

Not for the first time, Ron completely spaced out, going a bit glassy eyed. Harry frowned. Right
after the weekend, he'd have hoped Ron would be a bit less symptomatic. He nudged Ron.

"Huh?" Ron asked, snapping to. "What was I talking about?"

"You said I couldn't have become an obscurial," Harry said. "But I don't know what that is."

"Oh, um," Ron said, gathering himself again. They'd gotten to the point where they'd ignore these
episodes. "Right, well it's when a kid tries to suppress their magic. It sort of like becomes a
parasitic being that's attached to them, trying to come out and wreak havoc, and um kills them
eventually."

"That can happen?" Harry asked, a bit of shock replacing his worry for Ron.

"Yeah, but not since we made the muggles forget about us," Ron said. "Or, I mean there was one
not too long ago in America that caused a big fuss. Grindewald was involved I think."

"Why doesn't it happen anymore?" Hermione asked.

"Because you can't suppress your magic if you don't know you have it," Ron said. "It was always
muggleborns who thought they were going to hell for being witches or something. That's why it
probably wouldn't have happened to Harry. You didn't know you had magic."

"I sort of did though," Harry said. "Not really, but I knew weird stuff would happen and I usually
felt weird beforehand. I thought it was more of a premonition though. Like something else caused
it and I just knew beforehand that something was coming. I didn't think it was coming from me,
you know? One time I thought it might be some sort of guardian angel or something, but I figured
that it was all pretty random and, you know, it usually caused more problems than it fixed."

"Did you ever try to stop it from happening?" Hermione asked. "Because of the punishments?"

"Oh," Harry said. This wasn't a good memory. He swallowed a lump in his throat. "Once. Uncle
Vernon would always try to get new clients for his company. I always knew if I ever did anything
to mess something up I'd be dead so one time, I don't know, I felt this build up and I knew nothing
freakish could happen in front of this client so, I, like, wished it away."

"What happened?" Ron asked.

Harry shrugged. "It went away. I felt, um, off for a while after that. It was… unpleasant. I never
tried it again."
"Well I'm glad you didn't," Hermione said.

"I suppose you read it," Harry said.

"Yeah," Ron admitted.

"The article made it sound worse than it was," Harry said defensively.

Ron, it seemed, was no longer trying to prove a point, because he just nodded and went on saying, "There's some people tacking on anti-muggle sentiment, as if no one in the wizarding world's ever been a horrible parent. I heard a couple people say that the article explains your weird behavior."

"What weird behavior?" Harry asked, more than a little alarmed.

"You know," Ron said. "Fighting mountain trolls and basilisks and the like."

"You fought a mountain troll, and you went into the Chamber of Secrets too," Harry said. "Heck, Hermione drank a potion she knew my dad had brewed back when we thought he was trying to steal the stone for Voldemort. Why does me having the Dursleys have to mean something?"

"People are trying to sound smart," Hermione said. "They're trying to make sense of everything. I know you probably don't actually want to hear this, but you don't really need to worry about this. It's going to blow over eventually. You're the boy who saves the day and wins quidditch games, that's what everyone's going to pay attention to eventually. Just don't give them any reason to think that this is big news."

"Like what?" Harry asked.

"Like skipping classes and meals," Hermione said.

"Yeah," Ron said. "Just hold your head up high and roll your eyes if someone talks shit."

Harry choked on his pumpkin juice, and not because he thought that Ron would have more trouble than anyone with that advice.

"That's what Malfoy said," Harry said around a coughing fit.

"What?" Ron asked, sounding disturbed. "When did you talk to Malfoy?"

"He stopped me when I was going to see my dad," Harry said. "Acted like he was giving me a pep talk."

"What's his game, anyway?" Ron asked.

"I don't know," Harry said, turning to find the blond boy at the Slytherin table. "But it can't last, I don't think. I bet he's chomping at the bit to be the biggest prat there is and all this playing nice is driving him mental. Still, though, if he's going through all the trouble, it's probably something big."

"Well he'll show his true colors eventually," Ron said. "You can't trust a Slytherin… Oh, um, sorry."

"No, it's okay," Harry said. "I just pickled like a million rat spleens."

"Well that will teach you to skip classes," Hermione said.

"I did study," Harry wheedled.
Hermione did not seem mollified, and Harry turned to his pudding.

"So what are we going to do about Rita Skeeter?" Hermione asked.

"Um, nothing," Ron said.

"What can we do?" Harry asked.

"Nothing," Ron said. "You don't do anything."

"Well there has to be something," Hermione said. "This isn't news; this is harassment. Harry didn't sign up to be a public figure."

"Hermione, there isn't anything to be done," Ron said.

"Why ever not?" Hermione asked.

"Because she's vindictive," Ron said. "You want her digging up dirt on you?"

"I have no dirt on me," Hermione said.

"Yeah," Ron said. "Because it would be great if she decided to do a piece about us being captives of one of the most violent assholes ever to make the Ministries Public-Enemy-Number-One. Or maybe she'll just make something up. She makes a career of ruining people with her quill."

"It's okay," Harry said, trying to head off what looked to be the start of their second big argument in one day. "I don't need you to save me from Rita Skeeter. I'm pretty sure she got all my skeletons."

That was a big fat lie, and Hermione gave him a look that let him know that just because she couldn't bring up his lycanthropy at the dinner table, didn't mean she was letting the topic go.

Harry took in a deep breath, reminded himself that he was a Gryffindor, straightened out his back, looked up and said to the table at large in a loud voice, "So, um, the article was all true for the most part, but I'm living with my dad now, and things are good, so you don't really need to concern yourself with it at this point. Um, yeah, that's all I have to say about that."

There were a lot of eyes on him. "Are you okay?" someone Harry didn't see asked.

"Well yeah," Harry said. "It's never stopped me from learning magic, or jumping on trolls, or whatever. It's in the past. It wasn't fun, but I'm fine. Just 'cause it's in the paper doesn't mean it's news."

"Okay," Seamus said. "I didn't get the memo. When did jumping on trolls become an example of sanity?"

"When the hat put you in Gryffindor," Ron said.

"Nah," Dean said. "I'm pretty sure the hat got put on all thee of your heads and it wanted to make a whole new house just for you nutters."

"Well, I mean, if you want Crazy House to win all the House Cups from now on instead of Gryffindor, that's fine," Ron said. "We'll also take our own dormitory where you don't fling your smelly socks everywhere."

"Hey, I'm not the one who splatters the mirror with toothpaste when I brush my teeth," Dean countered.
"I can see where this is going," Hermione said. "And I do not think we should have this competition at the dinner table."

"Yeah," Seamus said. "The grossest roommate competition starts when we get back to the dorm."

"Oh you just don't want me bringing up your dirty underwear," Dean said.

"Shhh," Seamus said. "At least it's better than Neville's flies."

"They're for my toad," Neville was quick to tell the table at large. "And they don't fly around. And I don't leave them lying around or anything."

"You're not supposed to defend yourself Neville," Dean said. "You're supposed to tell on someone else."

"Yeah," Seamus said. "Complain about Dean."

"Hey," Dean said.

"Okay," Hermione said, getting up. "I think I'll skip pudding."

"Oh yeah," Ron said. "Me too."

Harry got up to follow them. That was when the twin's 'distraction' went off. From the Slytherin table, what had to be every Zonko's firework the twins probably had on hand went off sending food splattering all over the Hall. Harry managed to get by untouched by food or drink and took a moment to marvel at the sheer scope of the event before pandemonium broke out and Harry prodded Ron and Hermione away from the mayhem.

"So that happened," Ron said, laughing as they walked away.

"And we had nothing to do with it," Harry said.

"Well we didn't," Hermione said. "We don't even know that that was what the twins were talking about earlier."

"Of course," Harry said.

When they were away from the Great Hall and away from everyone else, Harry asked. "So, um, are we going to do homework, or were you two going to, um, talk, like, from this morning?"

"Oh, um, well, how're you doing?" Ron asked.

"Okay," Harry said. "I'll be fine. I don't need a cheering up committee or anything. If you two want to do your thing I'll just go work on my project."

"Are you just saying that?" Hermione asked.

Harry shook his head. "It wasn't as big a deal as I thought," he said. "I blew it up in my head like it was the end of the world, but um, then everyone decided to talk about their dirty underwear instead and the Great Hall exploded so… I don't know. The jury's still out, we'll see how it is in the morning, but for now, um, I think I'm all right."

"Okay, then um," Ron looked at Hermione who nodded. "Yeah, I think we'll do our own thing. We'll be in that classroom we used last year."
"Yeah," Harry said. "Okay."

They parted ways and Harry went and cracked open a book about curses that affected the mind. This probably wasn't the project Ron or Hermione had thought Harry was referring to, but he couldn't exactly talk to them about this one. He was starting to think that what he was looking for wasn't going to be found in the library proper, and he was considering a trip to the restricted section. Rumor had it that all of the books that told you how to make a love potion were in the restricted section, and Harry wondered if there could be whole books about sexuality in there. The only thing really stopping him was the knowledge that a lot of the books in there were hexed against snooping students, and the last thing he needed was to be caught trying to get a book like that.

After skimming his book, and being rather disturbed by what it had contained, Harry mentally crossed it off of his list and pondered on the matter for a bit, trying not to worry too much over another dead end. What he really needed was someone who's brain he could pick for information. Of course he couldn't just ask outright, and he couldn't ask just anyone. Granted, if there was anyone who would know about magics that affected the mind, it would probably be his dad, but there was no way he was going to ask him.

Professor Lupin though, he was really smart about defense, he probably knew a lot about that sort of magic too. Harry wished he had thought about Professor Lupin before the previous full moon. With all that time they had had down there to talk, Harry could have started a conversation about mind magic and gotten it around to something near what he was looking for and then just ask the professor to remind him the next day about what they had talked about. Maybe he'd have time for it this coming moon, but he'd only have that half hour window to talk to him outside of the company of his dad and Harry was reluctant to put the stress of such a conversation so close to when he was going to transform. Being upset about that previous article had already caused him to maul himself last month. He really didn't need a repeat.

He had to find something though. Trying really really hard not to be gay wasn't working. Thinking about girls wasn't working. He felt like he was crushing harder on Ron every day and noticing other boys too besides. Cedric Diggory had caught his eye the other day as they had played pickup quidditch and then not one hour later, some upperclassman he didn't think he'd ever even seen before had had him doing a double take in the hall. Worse, was when he'd finished sparing with Benjamin the previous week and the older boy had clapped him on the back and said good job and Harry had just blushed and grinned like an idiot before coming to his senses before he could get too excited by the sudden fantasy of kissing him. He tried pinching himself every time he had a bad thought about another boy like that, which was all the time, it seemed, but that didn't seem to do any good. Should he kiss a girl? He wasn't about to ask Hermione. Were any of the students in his year even dating? He hadn't heard of anyone. He couldn't just go up to a random girl and say, "hey, do you want to kiss me?"

Ron and Hermione came back about an hour later, by which time, Harry actually was working on his wards project. They were a bit more quiet than usual, but neither of them seemed upset. Harry thought that might be a good sign.

Similar to his worries from the year prior, Harry had been concerned that Professor Moody would treat him differently in class. After the article about the Dursleys had come out, Harry had been worried that the professor wouldn't take him seriously or would have him sit out certain classroom
exercises. Much like the previous year though, these fears were unfounded. It didn't take long for him to realize that the Professor still had the same expectations from him that he had from everyone else. It wasn't long after the article came out that they got a rather intense lesson in facing the dark arts.

"It's hard giving you all practical exercises in fighting the dark arts, there's only so much we can do in a classroom setting. There's even less we can do to prepare you to actually experience dark spells, to fall victim to them and keep going. There isn't much we can do, but today we're going to do just that."

Professor Moody's announcement was met with a mixture of eagerness and apprehension from the class.

"The Imperius Curse doesn't cause injury, it doesn't have any lasting effect on the mind, it doesn't hurt or even cause discomfort to those it controls, but it is a curse that has caused some of the worst damage to our society. It is also a curse that each of you will be experiencing today, and perhaps resisting."

The usually bravado of the Gryffindor/Ravenclaw class was diminished at this pronouncement. Harry himself felt terror building up within him at the thought of it, the idea of losing control over his mind. He couldn't let terror stop him from learning though, so he fought himself for control over his own mind.

Within a short period of time, he was able to tune back into the class. Professor Moody had started lecturing about the curse. The thing was, that once hit, it wasn't about any counter curses, it was something from within. It was an attitude, or perhaps it was a matter of one's will. None of it had anything to do with what the curse was forcing one to do. It was a resistance to the control rather than a resistance of the command.

"Not everyone can manage, so it's best to just not get hit in the first place," Professor Moody said. "Which is why we must have..."

"Constant Vigilance," the class intoned.

"Let's start with the students who sit in the back," Professor Moody said. "Jipson, front and center."

Georgia Jipson got up from her desk without hesitation, but looked nervous making her way up to the front of the classroom.

"Wand away," Professor Moody said. "You won't be needing it."

There was no other preamble. "Imperio!" Professor Moody called out.

Jipson tensed up for a moment, but then seemed to relax. She was more relaxed than she had been before she had been cursed, but other than that, there was no indication that she was under anyone's control.

"Sing us your favorite song," Professor Moody said. "As loud as you can."

Harry was rather certain that she was under the professor's control, because he rather doubted that she would have voluntarily sung in front of the class with a voice like that. He thought he was starting to feel queasy. He hoped he wouldn't be made to sing anything. Though that the wrong attitude to take to the matter. He didn't want to be controlled at all, regardless of what he was to be made to do. His body belonged to him and no one else. He already had to deal with losing control once a month to the wolf. No one else could control him.
More of his classmates went up. Some of them danced, some of them did acrobatic feats or made stupid faces. Harry watched Benjamin try to swim on the stage. He thought of himself under control like that, completely helpless, completely at the mercy of another. His own mind taken away from him. Forced to do unspeakable things. The terror he had felt earlier was still tucked away in the back of his mind.

Harry felt chilled as he watched classmate after classmate go up. Could the mental arts help? What if he were occluded when Professor Moody cast the spell?

‘Constant Vigilance!’ The professor’s catchphrase echoed through his head. He was here to learn to resist the spell, and he couldn’t be occluded all the time. He had to learn to do this regardless of the state of his mind. He had to be able to protect himself, especially at his most vulnerable.

It was no different from the Dementor, or from errant legilimens. He felt the onset of a new drive within himself. He had to learn this. He had to be sure of his defenses. He couldn’t go through life, just waiting to be attacked, just hoping for the best.

“Potter, you’re next.”

Harry went up to the front of the class, his mind defenseless. The feelings he had been holding at bay flooded his mind, but he didn't let them control him either. No one else had succeeded, but failure wasn’t an option. He wouldn’t be defenestrated of his own free will.

“Imperio!” It felt wrong to just let the spell wash over him, but that’s what he did. He had to submit in order to fight it.

He felt a sense of calm overcome him. Everything he had been worrying about left his mind. He felt happy and carefree. It almost felt like his mother’s protection.

But it wasn’t.

“Start shadow boxing,” something foreign said in his head.

‘This is wrong.’

His body started moving.

‘This feeling is wrong.’

He seized on that thought and everything stilled.

“Keep going,” the thought thundered through his head.

‘No,’ said another voice. His own voice inside of him. ‘This is wrong. This is my body.’

Some part of him that was well experienced at cutting through a chaotic mind seized on that thought, and from there, it was actually the mental arts that brought his mind out of the mental haze and he found himself standing in front of his class. The shift was jarring and he lost his control over his mind, but the curse was already broken. Now all that was left was the horror of it. The realization that for a time someone else had had possession of his body. He felt dirty. He wanted to just go off and hide somewhere.

“Did you see that?” Professor Moody roared next to him and Harry jumped, feeling very out of sorts, feeling wrung out and hunted, with his mind invaded and everyone staring at him. He wanted to pull out his invisibility cloak. He wanted to sink into the floor.
“It took him a moment, but he fought it,” Professor Moody said. “He took back control. Any insights for your classmates Potter?”

Harry froze up, put on the spot. His mouth wouldn’t move. He became disgusted with himself and he forced the words out.

“It felt wrong.” Harry said. “I mean, it felt great, like I didn’t have a care in the world, but it was…” He swallowed around a lump in his throat. “It wasn’t how I’m used to feeling. I focused on the thought that the feeling was wrong.”

“A stranger to calm, Potter?” Professor Moody said. “That’s how you’ve survived. Always alert. Constant vigilance!” He turned back to the rest of the class. “It isn’t the same for everyone. You have to find your own source of resistance within you.” He turned back to Harry. “You were pretty quick there, Potter. Do you think you could be faster?”

Harry nodded. He had to be, and as it would turn out, he was. By the end of class he could almost instantly throw off the curse. They kept going till the bell, students trying over and over to resist the curse. Some of them succeeded by the end. The terror and horror of it all started to dissipate. The Imperius Curse was terrible. It was an abominable spell, but Harry had overcome it. He let himself feel strong. It was, oddly enough, a good experience.

Harry had thought better of telling Ron or Hermione about the class when they met up later that evening. He didn’t think either of them would enjoy hearing about his experiences with a curse that took away your free will when they had been captives for so long. Ron and Hermione could tell that something was off with him, but with everything that had been going on, it wasn’t hard to brush off their concern. If he had known that Professor Moody was going to be giving the same class to the fourth years the following week, he would have given them all the warning he could have. It took him a while after classes let out for the day to find them.

“Hey,” Harry said, a little out of breath when he arrived at the unused clubroom that they’d used the previous year. “Dean told me.”

From their posture, it looked like Ron was comforting Hermione. They sat next to each other on the couch, and Ron was turned towards her with his arm around her shoulders. It was clear though which one was in need of comfort. Ron was stone faced and pale while Hermione merely looked concerned. She was murmuring something to him.

“Are you…” Harry started to ask, but realized it was going to be a stupid question. “Do you need anything?” he asked instead.

“We were going to go over notes for Charms,” Hermione said.

Normality, and Ron’s best subject.

“Sure,” Harry said. “Probably for the best. I wasn’t sure about asymmetric animation.”

They went over notes, and after a while Ron joined them enough to work on the potions homework that was due the next day. Harry didn’t ask how the class had gone; he’d gotten a couple of the messier details from Dean. Ron didn’t need to relive it. He just needed his life to be normal. Harry left after a while to go collect dinner. He tried to pick out Ron’s favorites.
“Ron’s a bit off today,” Harry murmured as he passed the twins. They’d been, in general, more considerate towards Ron since Greyback, but Harry’d rather head off any comments they might make in passing that could set him off the next time they crossed paths. The twins didn’t have to ask why Harry was just grabbing food to go.

Harry wasn’t surprised at all that night when Ron woke him up. He was surprised by the state of him. Give him some bruises, and he’d look just like he had the night Harry had found him in the shrieking shack. The dark bags under his haunted eyes didn’t help. Ron probably didn’t need to hear that he looked like shit though. Harry just grabbed some chocolate and set fairy lights to drift over his bed.

Just as he’d assumed, Ron wasn’t there to talk about what had happened, so Harry pulled out his latest mystery novel and started reading out loud from the beginning. Harry wasn’t sure if he was following along though. He wasn’t sure if Ron was still aware of where he was. His eyes were wide and scared, and he kept his gaze on the curtain, as if he were waiting for something to come through. Harry wanted to reach out and hug him, to hold him tight and make whatever was going on in his head to just disappear. He wondered if a kiss would do it. He shot that thought down, with guilt and shame. He didn’t hug Ron.

Harry kept his voice low and calm, but it was clear that Ron wasn’t going to be read to sleep that night. Harry himself drifted off, some time in the night, and when he woke up the next morning, Ron was waiting for him, already dressed and trying to tie his shoe with shaky hands. Harry was glad it was Friday. They could try to make up some sleep over the weekend.

Though it was obvious to anyone who looked at him that he wasn’t alright, Ron was back to putting on a brave face and acting like he wasn’t slowly crumbling away from the inside out. For the most part, everyone let him get away with it. They went to classes, Harry tried not to glare at Moody, and they joined in on speculation over the two schools that were soon to arrive and the tournament that would follow. It was the new normal.

Life, of course, marched on, regardless of how any of them were doing. As the next full moon approached, Harry was undecided on if he should attempt to talk to Professor Lupin about mind magic, and after it had passed Harry didn’t know if he had or hadn’t. Professor Lupin didn't say anything the following day, so either he had been a dead end and Harry hadn't asked him to bring it up the next day, or Harry had chickened out and hadn't brought it up in the first place. Either way, Harry was going to have to find some time to talk to him about it that wasn't right before the full moon.

The moon had risen a bit after six, so a couple hours prior, Harry had just made like he was going to spend the evening with his dad. The plan for this month had involved Ron again, who was going to impersonate him with Polyjuice just long enough to turn in for an early night before everyone else. This was where bed curtains came in handy. The following morning the plan called for his dad to impersonate him, use a fancy potion that would make him temporarily impervious to normal physical injury and then 'accidentally' fall down the stairs. No one would think it weird that Harry was spending the day in the hospital wing after that. Though having everyone think he fell down the stairs was embarrassing.
Harry had returned to abject depression as his post moon mind-fuck. His body was getting put back together alright for the most part, though. His knee had been a bit off until Madam Pomfrey had tapped it back in place, but that was it. Also, he had managed to not maul himself, which was a big plus. All that being said, it was very frustrating that his brain chemistry was still all wonky afterwards? How long was it going to take his body to get used to the transformation? At least it didn't seem to last as long this moon. One thing that sucked, though, was that the full moon had been Sunday night. That meant Harry's recovery day was Monday. It had been nice to have a whole weekend the previous month to recover.

Ron and Hermione kept him company after classes let out and Harry spent Monday night in the hospital wing. Harry thought that at the point he was at then, that the only thing really keeping him off his feet was general exhaustion and the post-transformation mind-fuck. He felt less and less like a wobbly legged faun post-transformation and more just like he was really tired. If in a few more moons he was finally putting his own body back together one hundred percent, and there were no more mind-fucks, then he was pretty sure he could be like Professor Lupin, who was up and about post transformation. All he'd really need was a bit of coffee to get himself through the day after a sleepless night.

Ron was living off of coffee at this point. Not that it seemed to do him much good. Though he would catch up on as much sleep as he could over the weekend, he was a bit like a zombie by the time each Friday rolled around. There were more than a few rumors going around about him, to include one about recreational potion use. Ron tried to act like he didn't care, when he didn't come close to starting a fight, but Harry felt like everything was just piling up and he was growing fitfully worried about him. Ron seemed more upset about the things people said behind his back than the fact that he wasn't getting any sleep. Harry was pretty sure Ron's grades had never been any lower than they were at that point.

There would be times when Ron would be struggling with a spell, or have just calmed down from a panic when he would turn to Harry or Hermione with a shameful guilty look that made Harry nervous. Yet even as he deteriorated, he persevered. He got his homework in, he got to class, he made a semblance of being alright. It was just that Harry knew he wasn't. Harry was at the point where he was ready to drag his friend to the hospital wing and beg him to just get a sleeping potion. The last time Harry had brought them up, though, Ron had gotten very upset and stormed off.

Still, though, Ron seemed just as excited as everyone else about the upcoming tournament. With the start of the new week there was a marked change in the atmosphere of the school. In just under two weeks Beauxbatons and Durmstrang would be arriving and the champion for each school was going to be selected. There were a million rumors about what the tasks would entail and what the other students would be like, and who was going to put their name in.

Harry was glad to discover that just about no one was talking about either of the Skeeter articles and rumors about his home life didn't seem to be going around anymore; he hadn't heard the word obscurial in a whole week. Which wasn't to say that there were no new rumors about him. He didn't know how it had started, but somehow a number of people were convinced that it was a fact that Harry had declared his intent to enter the competition somehow. He'd also heard someone say that the Headmaster was probably rigging things for Harry to be the champion for Hogwarts.

"You're not though, right?" Hermione had asked as they took a study break in the library.

"I can't," Harry said. "I really can't. There would be way too much attention on me if I was the champion. All that's dying down now. I don't need people paying mind to my comings and goings and realizing I've got something going once a month on the full moon. Besides, you know my luck,
they'd probably have part of the competition coincide with the full moon or something."

"Well yeah," Ron said. "But would you if that wasn't an issue?"

"Well my dad basically did say he expected me to do crazy stuff," Harry said.

"I'm not sure you get a free pass if you aren't saving someone," Hermione said.

"Oh darn," Harry said. "Better not."

"Oh, for real though," Ron said.

"Ummm," Harry said. "Yeah, it would be fun, wouldn't it, but I'm already going crazy just trying to get all my schoolwork done and everything, I don't know. What about you?"

"As if," Ron said. "I'll be happy to watch someone else risk their neck. I'm pretty sure I'd choke in front of the whole school if I didn't just have a heart attack. What about you Hermione?"

"Mr. Potter," Professor McGonagall's voice said from behind him and Harry mentally checked to see if he had done anything he shouldn't have lately before he turned around to face his Head of House.

"Professor?"

"I need you to come with me."

"Oh," Harry said. "Um..."

"You are not in trouble."

"Okay," Harry said.

Harry packed his things quickly and left with the professor.

"Is everything all right?" Harry asked.

"Everything will be all right," Professor McGonagall said.

"And I'm not in trouble," Harry said.

"No," Professor McGonagall said. "You are not. I have been asked to take you to see the headmaster."

"You didn't say anything in front of my friends," Harry said.

"You are to be questioned in regards to Lucius Malfoy's upcoming trial, since you were involved with that incident. I did not wish for there to be rumors started," Professor McGonagall said.

"Okay," Harry said.

They walked in silence for a while.

"I have been deferring to your father in some matters," Professor McGonagall said. "But I know that you have had some difficulties this school year and I wanted to make sure you knew that you could still come to me if you needed assistance."

"Oh," Harry said. "Yeah, um, I'm all right."
"This is where I leave you," Professor McGonagall said. "Good luck."

"Thanks," Harry said, hopping onto the moving staircase before it got to the top and he'd have to climb all the way.

Arriving at the top, the door to the Headmaster's office opened before he could knock. Sitting inside was the headmaster and a woman Harry recognized as Madam Bones.

"Um, hello Professor, um ma'am," Harry said.

"Harry," the headmaster said. "Have a seat. Would you like some tea?"

"Oh," Harry said. "Sure." What he wanted was to know what this was about, because the both of them did not look like they were about to ask him a few questions about the Quidditch Cup. Madam Bones was giving him a piercing look and the Headmaster looked a bit sad.

"Harry, I'm sure you remember Madam Bones," the headmaster said. "As the Head of the Department of Magical Law Enforcement, she is responsible for our Aurors, the Council of Magical Law, the Council of Barristers, and the security of wizarding Britain."

"Hello," Harry said again, not really sure what half of that meant.

"Mr. Potter," Madam Bones greeted. "I will not mince words. A number of years ago, a prophesy was made concerning the dark wizard Voldemort. As of right now, only Professor Dumbledore and I know it fully. We have spent the past many years ensuring that it would be fulfilled. A task made most difficult by the very nature of prophesies. However, recent events would seem to have put certain matters in place and we believe an end is in sight."

Harry glanced at the headmaster, because Harry was pretty sure that 'recent events,' meant Harry becoming a werewolf.

"I am to kill him then?" Harry said.

"In a matter of speaking," Madam Bones said.

"Okay, but like, in the sense like he's going to try to curse me and it'll bounce off and do him off for good, or in the sense that I'm supposed to stab him with some stupid dagger, because there's, like, a whole lot of in-between there."

"For now it is best if you don't know," Madam Bones said. "It may be galling to you, but for now secrecy is the only thing that will see this plan through. No one outside of this room knows the entire plan. There will be things happening in the near future that will require you to react appropriately. It cannot seem as though you had been forewarned. That is essential. At this moment, there is only one thing I need to know from you. One thing I need to hear from you."

"Okay," Harry said, feeling a great deal of trepidation.

"Are you willing to give your life to see an end to Voldemort?"

Harry thought his heart had stopped beating for a moment before that sensation was replaced by a cold knot in his stomach. He nodded his head with his eyes to the ground. When he felt that he could, he asked, "is this… Is this like my mum dying to save me? Do I need to die too?"

"No," Madam Bones said. "But to say that you will be in extreme danger would be an understatement. If this plan works, Voldemort will be gone. Your fate is unknown. The prophesy
does not guarantee that you will survive Voldemort's downfall. We will endeavor to see you out the other side, mostly unharmed, but it is entirely possible that you will die. You are not a pawn in this. This is your choice to make, and you must make it alone. No one else can know of it. You have very little time to make it."

"Well, I mean, I'll do it," Harry said. "Whatever it is. I just- What about my dad?"

"No one can know, Harry," the headmaster said. "He is rather attached to you, he is training you for what he sees as an inevitable confrontation. I do not think he would approve, however, of our attempts to force that confrontation within the year. What's more, however, is that this plan does rely upon the utmost secrecy. You will be made aware of certain matters as they become necessary, but no one else must know. Not your father, not your friends, and in some matters, not even you. The fate of the wizarding world relies upon it. Your life relies upon it. I cannot stress that enough."

"Oh," Harry said. "Right, um, well I can keep a secret, and I know Occlumency well enough. Within a year then?"

"Within a year," the headmaster said.

"Right," Harry said. "Okay. I can- I'll do whatever you need me to. I just- Will I have warning?"

"Yes," the headmaster said. "Shortly before, you will have warning. It is difficult, but we are attempting to balance the success of this plan with your chances of survival."

"The plan has a better chance of succeeding if I have a better chance of dying?" Harry asked.

"It does," the Headmaster said. "Not by much, but it does."

"Then don't tell me," Harry said. "If I'm just supposed to stumble my way into defeating Voldemort, then lets do that."

That seemed to take Madam Bones by surprise, but not the headmaster.

"It is my intention to see you through to the end," the headmaster said.

Harry swallowed and rubbed at the back of his neck. "It's my intention to make sure Voldemort doesn't kill my friends or my dad. So, um, was there anything else?"

"No Harry," the headmaster said. "That will be all. It would be best if you were not gone for too long. If anyone asks, you will tell them that you were questioned in regards to the night of the Quidditch Cup in preparation for Lucius Malfoy's upcoming trial and that you are not supposed to talk about it."

"Um, I don't think I'd have anything relevant to say for his trial anyways," Harry said.

"Precisely what Madam Bones discovered after questioning you," the Headmaster said.

"Okay, right," Harry said. "So, that's that then. Um, bye."

Harry walked out with a charged feeling welling up in him that he couldn't describe.
"Why is he different for you, I wonder?" Amelia asked Albus once the boy was gone.

"I am rather fond of Harry," the headmaster said.

"You sacrificed his parents, you sacrificed his godfather, you let some of your students condemn themselves to Azkaban and others to be captured by Greyback. I'm certain you were fond of many of them. I approve of giving the boy agency, but why is it suddenly so important to you that this one survives?"

"Perhaps because I have already taken so much from him," Albus said. "And perhaps because now that we are making our own fate, rather than sticking to the script, I feel that my decisions are my own responsibility once more. It is easier to sacrifice someone when it is proscribed by fate that they must die. In this case, we do not have that certainty. All of their lives mattered. I am not saying that Harry's life matters more, but the game has changed, and so have I."

He might have told Professor Dumbledore that he should be left in the dark, but Harry felt incredibly antsy the next several days. What exactly did within a year mean? Usually everything happened right around the end of the school year, but that wasn't some hard and fast rule, was it? Madam Bones had said that Harry hadn't had much time to make his decision. Did that mean that it was really soon, or was it just so something could be set in motion? Within a year could mean a whole other summer with his dad and the start of another school year. It could also mean tomorrow.

Should he be studying more; practicing more? Professor Dumbledore hadn't said anything about that. He was supposed to be acting like he didn't know something was coming. Though, it wasn't exactly a secret that Voldemort was gunning for him and that Harry was really serious about defense.

The arrival of the other schools was a very welcome distraction from his worries. The entire school was incredibly excited and Harry got a few good-lucks from people who seemed to think he was going in for the tournament. Both schools arrived with a great deal of fanfare; Beauxbatons was first in their flying carriage and Durmstrang second in their submersible ship rising out of the lake.

"Remember," Ron muttered to Harry with heavy bags under his eyes. "One of these guys might be here to kill you." Ron had been becoming more and more agitated in the days leading up to their arrival, and Harry was definitely regretting telling Ron about the plot to kill him.

"I haven't forgotten," Harry said. "Oh, right, um, my dad says I'm not supposed to walk around alone anymore unless I'm under my invisibility cloak."

"Probably a good idea," Ron said.

He was also walking around with the twins invention once more. He had felt like his fingers burned when he had pulled the pieces out of his trunk, but he was still carrying them. They were a constant reminder of Greyback whenever he noticed their presence.

The entire school was lined up to greet them as they arrived and Harry eyed Karkaroff the moment he got off the ship. This was the Death Eater people let run a school and his students who had trained under a dark wizard. Ron wasn't eyeing Karkaroff, though, he had zeroed in on one of those students.
"Oh Merlin, Harry, it's Viktor Krum," Ron exclaimed. There were a number of other people who also seemed to have spotted this fact. Harry looked, and sure enough the Seeker for the Bulgarian National Quidditch Team was dressed in Durmstrang robes and walking close behind Karkaroff.

"I didn't know he was still in school," Ron said. "This is so awesome. I bet he'll totally be their champion."

"I didn't realize being good at quidditch was such an indicator of success," Hermione said.

"Look at Harry," Ron said.

"Harry isn't representative of every quidditch player," Hermione said.

"I wouldn't even count myself as a success," Harry said. "I mean, Hermione can barely fly on a broom at all and she's probably going to be more qualified than whoever the Hogwarts champion turns out to be."

"I can too fly on a broom," Hermione said, not addressing his assessment of her as a champion. "I just don't see the point when I'll be learning to apparate."

"I prefer flying a broom," Harry said.

The Durmstrang delegation made their way up from the shore of the lake and Headmasters Dumbledore and Karkaroff greeted one another as though they were friends, though Harry could see cold calculation behind Karkaroff's eyes. With everyone arrived, they all went into the Great Hall for the opening feast.

Besides the delegations from Beauxbatons and Durmstrang, there were two delegates from the Ministry of Magic that Harry recognized; Percy's boss, Ms. Cooper, who headed the Department of International Cooperation and Bagman who headed the Division for Magical Games and Sports. They both sat at the Head Table along with Karkaroff and the Headmistress of Beauxbatons, Madame Maxime. Madame Maxime had caused a bit of a stir among the students because she was almost as tall and large as Hagrid was. Harry had always thought that Hagrid was a one of a kind.

Ron was very disappointed that Viktor Krum and his fellow students had found seating at the Slytherin table and Harry was irked that Krum was actually sitting across from Draco Malfoy. The students from Beauxbatons were sitting at the Ravenclaw table, and Harry thought that Hermione was disappointed to not be able to meet any of the foreign students yet.

The kitchens had pulled out all the stops for this feast and there were a number of dishes that Harry was fairly certain would be more familiar to the students from Bauxbatons and Durmstrang. There was a small disturbance when one of the students from Beauxbatons came by their table to see if they had any extra of one of the french dishes. Bouliahbase, Harry thought it was called.

Objectively, Harry knew that the girl who had approached their table was exceptionally gorgeous. He just wished he could have had Ron's reaction to seeing her, because Ron was obviously instantly enamored.

"Oh Merlin," Ron said, red in the face and grinning slightly as she walked away. "They don't make girls like that at Hogwarts."

Hermione, who was sitting right next to Ron, huffed at that, but Ron seemed entirely oblivious.

"You don't think she's Veela though, do you?" Ron said, turning a serious look towards Harry.
"Oh yeah," Harry said. "She was beautiful." Did that sound right? Was he leaving out some reaction that was separating him from the other boys around him? He glanced at Seamus and Dean but they had returned to their meals. Neville was blushing though. Some of the girls looked a bit put out. He hoped he'd never acted that way around another boy before.

After the feast, the headmaster got up and announced the opening of the Triwizard Tournament. Filch, the caretaker, brought out a bejeweled box from which a plain looking wooden goblet, full to the brim with a blue flame, was brought out. Those who wished to enter into the tournament had only to place a slip of paper with their name on it into the goblet, the headmaster explained. Students who would not be seventeen by the time of the first task of the tournament would be kept from entering by a magical age line around the goblet that would stop underage students from crossing. The magical goblet would somehow choose the best candidate from the names put in it.

Once he was done explaining the tournament, and reiterating the danger of the tasks, the headmaster dismissed everyone and Harry, Ron, and Hermione made their way up to Gryffindor Tower. All twelve of the Gryffindor students who were old enough to compete had a lot of attention placed on them by the underclassmen. Though a few people were asking Harry how he planned to get around the age line.

"I'm sure I won't get around Professor Dumbledore's age line," Harry said.

"Aren't you studying wards or something?" Dean asked.

"I'm a beginner," Harry said. "Come on, I'm really not planning to enter."

"You can't give up that easy," said Lavender.

Harry groaned.

The other boys were much too excited to get to sleep at a decent hour that night, and they all stayed up late. Harry stayed up a bit later with Ron, who'd gotten fairly melancholy after dinner. He wasn't sure what it was, but Ron seemed upset about something and he wasn't saying what. He'd been so tired that day. Fridays were always the worst. Harry tried not to look at Ron too closely, he never liked to notice the weight lost, or the bags under his eyes, or the dead look that sometimes graced his face. Every week that went by, Ron seemed to decline more and more.

"I shouldn't ask you for any favors," Ron said just as Harry was getting up to go to his bed. "Forget the life debt," Harry said. "Ask."

"If something happened to me," Ron said. "You'd make sure Hermione was alright, right? Ginny too?"

"Nothing's going to happen to you," Harry said, taken by surprise by the question. "Okay? Nothing. Forget the fucking life debt. Just... okay? If you owe me, then, no jumping in the way of any curses heading for me, all right."

"I wasn't…" Ron said but stopped. He wasn't looking Harry in the eyes and he sounded frustrated. He sounded on edge. "Look, I've had more than one near death experience and that's not on you, but I just want to make sure. They'll be all right."

"Don't talk like that," Harry said.

"Harry please," Ron said.
"Of course I’d make sure they’d be all right, but nothing’s going to happen to you. I’ll make sure of it, okay? You can make sure they’re all right yourself. Got it?"

Ron nodded. "Thanks," he said. "I think I’ll get some sleep."

Harry nodded. "Night," he said. "I’ll see you in the morning."

"Yeah," Ron said.

Ron was still going to bed with one way silencing charms around his bed so he wouldn't wake anyone up when he had a nightmare if he managed any sleep. Later that night though, Harry woke up in the middle of the night himself and found himself checking up on Ron as he did now and then. Ron was also awake and looked surprised to see him, and though he let Harry in, he didn't seem up to talk. His eyes were haunted, and somewhere in the middle of Harry trying to hold a one sided conversation about the Cannons he realized that Ron was quietly crying next to him in the dark. Harry threw an arm around him, not even thinking about the contact with the other boy.

Ron started sobbing and he threw his arms around Harry. Harry didn't know what to do. He patted Ron's back awkwardly. A few minutes went by and Ron's sobs turned to sniffles.

"I'm sorry," Ron said. "I'm so sorry."

"It's okay," Harry said. "You let me cry on your shoulder."

Ron shook his head, another sob escaping. They stayed like that for a long while and Harry didn't realize when Ron finally fell asleep on his shoulder. He stayed up worrying well past sunrise. It was Saturday, but there would be a lot of excitement that day. He didn't want to rely on Ron getting sleep later. He let Ron have a lie in. The way things were going, the way Ron had been deteriorating, Harry actually wondered if Ron could survive the school year.

Ron woke up eventually, apologizing for keeping Harry up, which Harry brushed off, and the two of them went to find Hermione so they could go to breakfast.

Rumors abounded that day about who was entering. Most of the eligible Gryffindors entered, but the only one that Harry actually knew was Angelina Johnson. Harry found himself rooting for her. Of note from the other houses was Warrington from Slytherin and Cedric from Hufflepuff. Harry wasn't aware of any of the Ravenclaws who entered. Fred and George had attempted to enter but had been rebuffed by the age line and gotten hexed by it besides. The trio got to witness the spectacle and joined in the laughter of everyone else to see the twins had been hexed to sprout very full beards. He split off from Ron and Hermione to follow after them as the twins made their way to the Hospital wing to be rid of them.

"Hey," Harry said.

"If you're looking for our help entering," Fred said.

"You might notice we didn't have the best of luck," said George.

"Do you think you could get past it with more time?" Harry asked.

"It's a rather simple ward," George said.

"Though it's strength rather lies in the skill level of the caster," said Fred.

"It would probably take a while," said George. "Definitely couldn't do it on the sly."
"But probably," Fred said.

"Eventually," said George.

"Not in time for the tournament though."

"I don't care about the tournament," Harry said. "Ron's still not sleeping much at all."

"Well you know he's not going to listen to us," George said. "You and Hermione are the best ones to get him to take this seriously."

"You want us to ward his bed?" Fred asked, a rare divergence from his brother's train of thought.

"Maybe he'll sleep more soundly if he knows adults can't get to him at night," Harry said.

"Maybe," Fred said.

"Give us a couple week," George said.

"Or three."

"We can definitely figure out how to draw an age line."

Harry thought Ron could last a few more weeks.

The day being Saturday, they normally would have spent most of it catching up on homework while making sure that Ron got a good block of sleep, but Harry thought even Hermione was a bit too excited to concentrate properly and Ron slept fitfully part of the day as they studied next to him on the couch. A bit before dinner, the three of them put away their homework and headed down to visit Hagrid. Hagrid, though happy to see them, seemed to have been expecting someone else. He was all dressed up, nicer than Harry had ever seen him, though it looked like he had combed his hair down with axel grease. The visit was going on just fine right until Madame Maxime showed up and Hagrid left them to escort her to the castle. Harry got the distinct impression that Hagrid might have a thing for her.

The three of them left for the Great Hall where another amazing feast was spread out for them. None of them were really interested in the food though. Harry was pretty sure that everyone was very eager for the feast to be over and for the goblet of fire to be brought forth so that the champions could be announced.

Harry knew he should be excited but he just felt a great deal of unease. He was on edge and just generally upset, and everyone else just seemed to want to exacerbate that. A couple of people still asked Harry if he had managed to enter. It was a bit exasperating, and a bit ago a part of Harry would have been somewhat flattered that a lot of people thought of him being the champion. Yet now everyone just seemed to get on his nerves. There were so many things that he had to worry about and all they could think about was the damned tournament.

Eventually the food disappeared and the candles that lined the hall went out and the only light left was the goblet of fire. The entire hall went silent and the headmaster gave very little fanfare besides stating that the champions were soon to be chosen and that those whose names were called were to proceed to a chamber behind the Head Table. Harry watched with rapt attention as the flames of the goblet started to sputter and spark. Suddenly a piece of paper was spat out of the goblet to be caught by the headmaster.

"Viktor Krum shall be the champion for Durmstrang," the headmaster said.
No one cheered louder than Karkaroff who definitely seemed to have favorited Krum beforehand.

"Told you," Ron said, putting on a good face for the event, though Harry could tell he was on edge as well. "Didn't I tell you?"

"You told us," Hermione said, looking a bit sour.

The cheering stopped as the goblet started spitting sparks once more. Another slip of paper shot out and the headmaster called out, "Fleur Delacour," for Beauxbatons.

"It's her," Ron said as the Beauxbatons champion started walking down the aisle.

It was the girl from the night before, the one that Ron had obviously been attracted to, though now he seemed a lot less enthusiastic.

"Wow," Harry said, hoping that he sounded properly straight like Ron did.

The goblet started spitting sparks once more and Harry felt a sudden spike of anxiety. Was it going to spit out his name? Everyone had seemed so sure that for a moment, Harry believed it himself.

"Cedric Diggory," the headmaster called out for Hogwarts and Harry released a breath he hadn't realized he had been holding right as Hufflepuff table exploded in the loudest cheering and stomping that Harry had ever seen in the hall. Ron actually visibly paled at the commotion and scooted, if anything, closer to Hermione.

Harry was disappointed for Angelina, but he couldn't help but to think that he really wanted to see Cedric compete for Hogwarts. Cedric had just made his way down the aisle and had disappeared out of the hall when the goblet started sputtering and sparking again. A hush fell down over everyone and once more a slip of paper flew out of the goblet, caught once more by the headmaster.

Well shit, Harry thought.

"Harry Potter," the headmaster said, loudly and clearly.

Harry felt like his heart was in his throat. There were no cheers for him. Everyone was quiet and staring at him. The hall seemed to darken, and Harry thought that the goblet of fire was dying out. Very suddenly, Ron was grabbing the front of Harry's robes. He had an intense look in his eyes.

"Did you?" Ron asked. "Did you enter?"

Harry shook his head, panicking. "No," he said. "You know I can't."

Ron gave him a searching look, and if anything, Harry thought he looked afraid.

"Mr. Potter," the headmaster said. "If you could please."

Harry was still in the middle of a bizarre stare off with Ron. Ron nodded, swallowed hard and stood up.

"Harry did not enter his name," Ron called out. "He has been entered against his will. By- By the danger of this tournament and the fact that he has been magically bound to, um, to contravene his agency, it is clear that this has been done by those who want to do him in. By the blood of my life, by the debt of my life, owed to him-

"Mr. Weasley stop," the headmaster's voice echoed across the hall.
"I demand to take this binding on his behalf, that his body and his magic may be unbound, that I-
That I Ronald Billius Weasley shall carry out this contract by my debt owed."

Very suddenly there was a burst of light, and Harry turned his head to see a red spout of flame burst
from the goblet before the entire thing died out and the Great Hall went dark. Harry felt as though a
burden he hadn't even known about had been lifted from his shoulders, but it felt wrong, everything
felt wrong. The candles that lined the hall relit and there was an angry buzzing from the students
throughout the hall. Harry looked at Ron, still feeling like he was in shock. Ron looked sick.

"Mr. Potter, Mr. Weasley, please join the champions in the back," the headmaster said. He did not
sound pleased.

That was when Harry suddenly wondered if his name coming out had been supposed to happen, if
this had been part of the plan. He did not know how it would be, but he somehow knew that
something had just gone profoundly wrong.

Hermione nudged his arm and Harry looked at her, still a bit in shock.

"You need to go," she said. She was prodding Ron up from the table. Harry nodded and got up.
The two of them walked down the aisle and entered the room with the three champions.

"Right," Cedric said, taking a look at the two of them. "Something's gone wrong, hasn't it?"

"What do you mean?" Fleur Delacour asked. "You have a message for us, yes? They wish for us to
return?"

"What Cedric said," Harry replied.

Cedric rolled his eyes. The door opened behind them and in streamed the three headmasters,
Harry's dad, Professor McGonagall, Bagman and Ms. Cooper.

"Well, a good bit of excitement, wasn't that?" Bagman said. He sounded excited too, like this was a
good thing somehow.

"Professor Dumbledore, can you determine which one is bound?" Ms. Cooper asked.

The headmaster turned to the two of them and withdrew his wand which he used to examine the
both of them. Harry was desperately hoping that whatever Ron had just done had not worked. His
dad came to stand beside him.

"Mr. Potter is not bound to the tournament. Mr Weasley is," said the headmaster, and though he no
longer seemed upset, Harry knew he was not pleased.

"Hogwarts wanted two champions, didn't you, but you couldn't even get that right," Karkaroff spat.

"Harry didn't enter," Ron spoke up. "We don't know how this happened."

"What is this?" Fleur Delacour asked.

"Well as I said, a good bit of excitement happened after you three left," Bagman explained. "The
gooblel provided another name, Harry Potter's. But then this lad over here, Ronald, invoked a life
debt and it seems that now he is the fourth champion."

"But there can not be four champions," Madame Maxime said angrily. "This is the Triwizard
Tournament, Hogwarts cannot have two bites of the apple."
"Mr. Weasley is a fourth year," Professor McGonagall said. "Are you truly worried about him competing or do you feel that a Gryffindor fourth year is a match for a Beauxbatons seventh year?"

"How could Weasley call in a life debt? If anyone, Weasley would owe Potter the life debt, not the other way around," Cedric said.

"I do owe him," Ron said. "So I took his binding."

"You took the chance to compete?" Krum asked. "That is repayment?"

"I invoked my right to defend him," Ron said.

"How did that work out?" Bagman asked.

"The magic of the life debt overpowered the magic of the goblet," Ms. Cooper said. "Though I wouldn't have thought he could invoke it in this case."

"I've done my reading," Ron said awkwardly, shrinking back as everyone turned their attention back to him. "Back in the war of, um, whatever, I forget, um, long ago," he blushed. "Right, so, this bloke was like crippled but he had sworn on his magic to fight in some battle and this other guy invoked his life debt to switch places."

"This is not war," Viktor Krum said. "This is a chance for glory and honor."

"Not to mention gold," Karkaroff said. "This is ridiculous."

"People die in this tournament," Ron said, squaring off his shoulders but visibly gulping. "Harry was entered against his will. He doesn't want to compete. I say that the danger is real. It is my debt to pay to keep him safe."

"Of course he wants to compete," Karkaroff said. "Who else entered him."

"Did you enter your name, Harry?" the headmaster asked.

"No," Harry said.

"Did you ask an older student to do it for you?"

That had been an option?

"No," Harry said again. "Ron's right, I didn't want to compete. I wouldn't have entered if I could have."

"Of course, he is lying," Madame Maxime said.

Harry got red faced, but it was his father who said. "If Harry had entered, he would have done so with Mr. Weasley at his side and Mr. Weasley would not be here right now. It is the two of them who should be upset at what has transpired."

"None of you are thinking of this from the right angle," Professor Moody said, entering the room.

"And just what angle is that," Karkaroff asked the old auror with an angry look on his face.

"Fourth years couldn't have done this," Professor Moody said. "Someone powerful and highly skilled overpowered that goblet and convinced it that there should be four champions instead of three. A powerful artifact like that? This wasn't done by students. I doubt many on the faculty
could have either."

"The father then," Karkaroff spat. "Looking for some glory from your son, Severus?"

"I have enough trouble keeping him away from danger," his dad said. "Harry has more than enough glory to his name."

"Perhaps Dumbledore wanted his champion to compete," Madame Maxime said. "You tried to stop the boy from taking his place."

"I did," the headmaster said. "Ancient magic contravening ancient magic, magic at it's most wild and untamed, I did not want to risk any unintended consequences. As it is, it seems that this freeform ritual worked seamlessly, but time will tell if this will cause ruin."

"I actually like the way the Weasley boy thinks," Professor Moody said, casting both Harry's dad and Karkaroff dark looks. "The danger of the tournament? Perhaps someone was hoping Potter would die in the competition, or that it would give them an opportunity to arrange for an accident."

"What nonsense," Madame Maxime said.

"You may not know of him, madame, but Professor Moody is so convinced that people are trying to kill him, he once smashed a birthday present because he thought it contained a basilisk egg, only to find it was a carriage clock. Apparently, he is now instilling the same paranoia in his students."

"Paranoid am I? Potter's had more attempts on his life in this school than years he's attended. Now with so many Death Eaters running around unchecked, you think it paranoia that someone might be trying to kill the Boy-Who-Lived? I wonder who had access to the goblet that might have had motive. A grudge perhaps, for things from the past."

"How dare you?!" Karkaroff spat.

"Enough," Ms. Cooper said. "It is done. Mr. Weasley is the fourth champion. The goblet has gone out, and all four students are bound to compete. Nothing can change that. Now, Mr. Bagman has some instructions for the champions; we can discuss the ramifications of this without them present."

"Yes," Bagman said. "Yes, the instructions. The first task will take place on Tuesday November the twenty-fourth. The first task tests your courage. You will be allowed to start the task with no magical items except your wand. That's it. No more details. It's going to be a big surprise, so be ready for anything."

Just like that it was over. The headmasters left together with Bagman and Ms. Cooper. Fleur Delacour gave the rest of them a dismissive look and left followed soon by Victor Krum. Professor Moody gave his dad a suspicious look with both eyes, but he left too.

"Well shit," Ron said.

His dad sighed.

"Can we do anything to get Ron out of this?" Harry asked.

"Yeah," Ron said. "That would be nice."

"I mean it originally bound me, maybe I could take it back, there could still be a pathway or something," Harry said.
"What?" Ron asked. "No, you said you don't want to compete."

"Well that doesn't mean I want you to compete," Harry said.

"I do not believe there is anything to be done," his dad said. "But the answer is not to shift it back to you. You should both get back to the tower. We'll discuss this in the morning."

"You'll think about it?" Harry asked.

"I will think about it," his dad agreed before pulling Harry into a sudden hug. "I about had a heart attack in there. Mr. Weasley, I recommend you write to your parents."

"Ginny's probably already told on me," Ron said.

They left, finding soon that Cedric had waited up for them.

"So that was something," Cedric said. "I was actually worried for a bit there."

"There's still plenty to worry about," Harry said.

"You think so?" Cedric asked looking at Ron appraisingly.

"That's not what I mean," Harry said. How the hell could he keep Ron safe while he was competing?

"So are you angry?" Cedric asked.

"What?" Harry asked.

"That you're not competing," Cedric said.

"I didn't want to compete," Harry said.

"Come on," Cedric said. "For real though."

"For real I didn't want to compete," Harry said, actually feeling a bit hurt that Cedric didn't believe him. "Look, I'll see you later."

"Yeah," Cedric said. "Later."

They had approached the stairs and Harry wasn't sure where the Hufflepuff common room was, but he was pretty sure it wasn't upstairs.

Now it was just him and Ron walking up to the tower.

They walked in silence for a while, neither one of them had actually spoken to the other since they had been in the Great Hall and the goblet had spat out his name.

"You shouldn't have done that," Harry said just before they entered the tower.

From the looks of things, everyone had decided to throw a party. There was a cheer when they walked in.

"Which one of you's the champion?" someone asked.

"Ron is," Harry said when it looked like Ron wasn't going to say anything.
There was a second cheer, but it definitely lacked the same energy of the previous one.

"There goes Gryffindor's chances," someone said.

Ron got dragged in. It seemed that everyone wanted to talk to him. Harry too. People wanted to know how he'd entered. "I didn't," Harry said. People wanted to know if he was angry with Ron. "I'm not," he lied. A number of people expressed skepticism that Ron was really trying to save Harry from some nefarious plot. The general consensus was that Harry had entered himself and that Ron was screwed.

Harry was sort of stunned and unsure of what to do about the whole thing. He looked around for Hermione, but she was nowhere to be seen. She wouldn't have wanted to be around the noise and press of the party. Harry looked back at Ron, who looked uncomfortable. He was surrounded by other students, a lot of people were shouting. Ron didn't handle crowds well. He looked a bit shell shocked.

If there was anyone who Harry would have expected to be thrilled by this turn of events, it was the twins, but both of them looked very disapproving at that moment.

It took him a while to get Ron out of it all. Everyone, it seemed, wanted to stop them and talk to them about what had happened. Dean had pulled a Gryffindor banner out from somewhere and surprised the two of them by throwing it over Ron's shoulders and tying it like it was a cape.

"We've actually got to go," Harry finally yelled at a couple of students who looked like they would be the next to waylay them. Harry dragged Ron to the stairs and the two of them made their way to the dorm while the rest of the tower stayed below to party.

"Are you okay?" Harry asked.

Ron was actually sweating and shaking and he was struggling to get the banner untied from around his neck.

"Here," Harry said. "Let me."

"I've got it," Ron said angrily, and gave the whole thing a great tug and pulled it over his head.

"Are you all right?" Harry asked.

"I'm fucking fine," Ron said. "Stop asking me that. I can handle a bit of a party."

"I know that," Harry said. "Okay, so look, you know. Thanks for trying to help, but if we can get you out of this, we're going to do that, okay?"

"I'm not transferring it back to you," Ron spat. "They already said it's done. So forget it."

"No," Harry said. "You can't do this."

"No, you can't," Ron said. "You said it yourself, if there's anyone who can't compete it's you."

"Well it's better me than you," Harry said.

"Yeah, I figured that's how it is," Ron said. "You know, I figured everyone would probably want you to be the champion instead, but I don't need you telling me I'm doomed. I could hear it just fine down there. Everyone thinks I'm going to flame out spectacularly. Well I don't need to hear it from you, all right?"
"That's not what this is about," Harry said.

"That's what everyone's made it about," Ron said. "I didn't want to do this. But now you all made it pretty clear that you think the head case's going to get himself killed. Well I may be messed up, but I'm not doomed and I'm not backing out, so you can shove it."

"I didn't jump between you and Greyback so you could get yourself killed less than a year later," Harry said.

"Getting myself killed, am I?" Ron asked.

"Well what do you think is going to happen?" Harry asked. "People are trying to kill me, I didn't tell you that so you could jump in the way."

"Like you got in the way?" Ron asked. "I didn't ask for this debt."

"Yeah, well, I saved you so you'd be safe," Harry said. "So if you owe me anything then you owe me that."

"That's not how this fucking works," Ron said. "That's not how this works at all. It's my debt to repay, not yours to demand."

"Oh and you're an expert on life debts now?"

"Yeah," Ron said. "Because I actually researched this. I'm not a complete idiot, you know. I'm not completely fucked up. I'm not. I'm still... I'm bloody well still here and I can do a bit of reading without expending my limited usefulness."

"Stop making this about all that," Harry said. "No one thinks you're an idiot, no one thinks you're crazy, no one thinks your useless."

"Everyone does," Ron said. "That's all anyone thinks every time they look at me, and you do too. Don't even try to deny it. There goes Ron Weasley, he got ruined by- by Greyback. Oh look, Weasley's fucked up in class again, look, his hand's shaking too much to do the spell. Hey, look, there's Ronnie, can't even sleep, wonder what he sees when he closes his eyes. I can hear people talk. I know what everyone thinks, but I'm not ruined, I'm not a fuck up, and I'm still passing my fucking classes and I don't need everyone acting like Ron died back in May and I'm just his fuckwit corpse who forgot to get in the dirt."

"I don't think any of those things."

"Yeah you do. You'd rather risk everyone finding out all your secrets than even consider for just a moment that maybe I won't fuck this whole thing up. I didn't expect you to think I was going to win, but the least you could do is not act like I'm already dead."

"That's not what this is about," Harry said. "But you know what? Yeah, because I've been scared you're just going to fall down dead trying to get to class. You do look like a fucking zombie. How are you going to handle this fucking tournament? And what about your family? Do you know how devastated they were when Greyback got you? How do you think they're going to feel now? What are they going to do if you die in this?"

"Oh fuck you," Ron said. "What is it? You got the Dursleys so it's okay to try and get yourself killed?"

"Stop making everything about the Dursleys," Harry said.
"It's always been about the fucking Dursleys," Ron said. "They fucked you up and now you go around acting like a nutter, but with you, everyone acts like it's what you're supposed to do. You know what? You're way more messed up than me. They fucked you up good."

"Yeah," Harry said swallowing hard, feeling shaken. It was happening. "I knew you'd figure that out eventually. Well now that you've handled your life debt I guess you don't have to saddle yourself with a fucked up mess like me."

Ron gasped and paused. "Like you haven't been looking for an excuse," Ron said angrily. "Like you don't look at me and regret getting cursed for a sorry sack of shit. Like I haven't been a fucking downer for you to babysit."

"Your words, not mine, but you know what? Whatever you need to tell yourself. Sure. This one's on me. However you want to spin this," Harry said bitterly.

"Get fucked," Ron spat.

"Yeah," Harry said, storming to his bed. "Whatever." He closed the curtains on Ron and sat there feeling numb. It had happened. Ron had realized how fucked up he was, the life debt was satisfied, and Ron didn't owe Harry anything anymore. Ron was done with him, and Harry knew that the first domino had fallen.

Chapter End Notes

So that happened. Sorry, not sorry. Cool, so I haven't read much since the last chapter I posted so this chapter I will just recommend PitViperOfDoom’s My Hero Academia fics. They’re really good. On AO3. Also Homesick at Space Camp, by Kobot on AO3. This one’s a Voltron fic and it’s pretty silly, as most fake dating stories are, but I really enjoy it. A bit of fluff to make up for the dumpster fire up above.

althor42 pointed out yesterday that the plot of Rogue One was very similar to my story Avenged. (Scientist kidnapped by evil organization and forced to work on doomsday device but he’s secretly sabotaged it.) althor42 joked I should get royalties, but I pointed out that I had gotten the idea from another author, linked on the AO3 page for the fic, and that I work for Disney which owned all the properties involved, to include all of my own intellectual work. Oh well. No royalties for me. Like ever. I put a lot of effort into this chapter. I hope you enjoyed this, as much as it ended on a pretty low note. Please review.
Harry woke up the next morning and didn't get out of bed. He heard everyone else leave while he pretended to still be asleep. His dad had told him that skipping meals was against the rules, but Harry couldn't summon up the will to move. The fight from the night before kept running through his head; how it had unfolded, how it could have gone differently, how Harry could still have had Ron in his life. It was all stupid to think about; it had been inevitable. He knew it was stupid, but he couldn't stop trying to figure a way around it. Was there something he could have said? Yet what would prolonging the slow decay have gotten him? Would it hurt less if this had happened a month in the future?

Would Hermione take this as her cue? Would the wheels finally start turning in his dad's head that Harry wasn't the son he wanted? And what was going to happen to Ron? He was in so much danger. How could Harry keep Ron safe if he wasn't there with him?

His curtains were rather abruptly pulled aside.

"I can't leave you boys alone for a minute," Hermione said irately.

Harry stayed silent, not turning over to look at her.

"I mean, honestly," Hermione said. "What's gotten into you two? Stop acting like this is the end of the world. Go talk to him. You'll work this out."

Harry tried to say something. He had to say something. He had to say anything he could to keep Hermione. The words wouldn't come out though. He hated himself for it.

"Harry?" Hermione asked. "Talk to me."

Harry shook his head, but somehow the motion jumpstarted his mouth. "He doesn't want to talk to me," he said. "He doesn't want to be friends anymore." It wasn't an excuse, it wasn't a plea, the only thing that came out was the truth. What was even the point of trying to keep Hermione. He knew she'd see things Ron's way in no time at all.

"Well that's nonsense," Hermione said. "He's very upset, you just need to talk to each other."

"Is he alright?" Harry asked.

"Well of course he isn't all right," Hermione said. "He's suffering from severe sleep loss and he thinks he's lost his best friend, he's miserable. Which is why you should go talk to him."
Harry shook his head. It was better this way. A clean break.

"He's going to need your help," Harry said. "If he's going to survive this, he's going to need to be ready."

"Okay," Hermione said. "Why don't you help me out with that? We can both help him together."

"You don't need me," Harry said.

"Oh god, you boys are both such... boys," Hermione let out in frustration. "Okay, Harry, I know you're upset right now, but this is fixable. You've both been through a lot lately, tempers flared, you've been very close for a long time, it's surprising you've never really had a fight with each other before. Lavender and Parvati fight all the time. It's not over unless you want it to be over."

"He wants it to be over," Harry croaked out around a throat that felt too tight.

"Neither of you wants anything to be over, that's why you're both upset."

"You should make sure he's alright," Harry said.

"He'll be alright if you go make up," Hermione said.

"That's not going to happen," Harry said. "He's going to need to get his sleep. He didn't get too much yesterday. He needs to catch up today before classes start tomorrow."

Hermione sighed. "What are you going to do?"

Harry shrugged.

"You need to eat, you've got homework to do, you can't just lie here all day."

Harry nodded.

There was a moment of silence.

"Alright, well, it's going to be all right, you'll see," Hermione said. "I'm going to go check in with Ron. Maybe you should come with me."

Harry shook his head.

"Okay, well," Hermione didn't seem to know what to say. "Just don't stay in here all day," she said.

Harry nodded.

There was a pause before Hermione huffed and left. She would wise up too. It was only a matter of time.

He didn't know how long he lay there before he got another visitor.

"You skipped two meals today," his dad accused from behind him.

"I wasn't hungry," Harry said, not moving at all.

"I think it unlikely that your body did not need nourishment today," his dad said.

Harry didn't have a response to that.
"I thought you would want to talk about what happened last night," his dad said. "You wanted me
to think upon the matter."

"Did you think of anything?" Harry asked.

"No," his dad said. "Mr. Weasley is most likely going to have to compete."

"Oh," Harry said.

"You are very worried for Mr. Weasley," his dad observed.

Harry nodded.

"So worried that you lost your appetite?"

Harry didn't respond.

"I might have expected you to be with him right now," his dad said.

"We had a fight," Harry said. "We aren't friends anymore."

"I find that hard to believe," his dad said.

Harry didn't find it hard to believe at all, as much as he wished otherwise.

"Perhaps if you talk to him later when you both have had time to cool off you will find that such
things can be easily mended," his dad said.

"That's not how it worked out with you and my mum," Harry said.

"There was a great deal wrong with our relationship before we fought," his dad said. "What did you
fight about?"

"The tournament," Harry said. "It doesn't matter. It wasn't really about the tournament, was it?"

"What do you mean?" his dad asked.

Harry just shook his head.

"I expect clearing your mind is a bit beyond you right now," his dad said. "Come on, get up, you're
coming to my quarters."

Harry sighed and pondered if getting up was even possible.

"I will not hesitate to conjure cold water from my wand to motivate you," his dad said.

Harry sighed and supposed that getting up was doable. He rolled over to face his dad and pushed
himself up to a sitting position. He rubbed at the back of his neck and sighed again. Getting up was
an act of will. His dad packed a number of his books into his bag and guided Harry out of the room
and down the stairs. He didn't notice Ron or Hermione in the common room. Not knowing where
they were gnawed at him.

They didn't talk as they made their way to his dad's quarters. Once inside, his dad directed him to
the dining area where food was waiting for him.

"I'm really not hungry," Harry said.
"Just eat a little bit," his dad bargained.

Harry sighed and sat down at the table. He ate a few bites mechanically.

His dad pulled out Harry's homework planner.

"Have you done your charms assignment?"

Harry shook his head.

His dad pulled out Harry's charms book and opened it to the appropriate chapter. Much in the way one would with a small child, he guided Harry through the assignment in an odd sort of calm monotony that was strangely comforting. Now and then he would suggest Harry take a bite of food, and Harry would.

"I'm sorry I'm being difficult," Harry said once the assignment was finished.

"Well, I will remind you that I signed up for this," his dad said. "Do a breathing exercise with me."

Harry followed along with the exercise, focusing on his breathing and the calm tone of his dad's voice as he guided him through the process. Breathing turned into mindfulness as the minutes went by. Mindfulness turned into meditation some time later, which turned into completely clearing his mind and by the end, Harry had completely lost track of time and had gotten lost in his dad's guiding voice.

"At this point, Harry, I'm going to stop guiding you, and I want you to completely occlude. We aren't going for clarity right now, that can come with time, right now we're going to put last night aside, we will deal with that later. Right now, last night is not an issue, the tournament is not an issue. Right now you are visiting your dad. We're going to work on your homework We'll cook dinner together, and we'll play chess after we eat and we'll talk."

Harry followed the instructions.

"What about combat training?" Harry asked.

"I think we should cancel with Ms. Nikiforov tonight," his dad said.

That was probably a good idea. "What assignment should we do first?" Harry asked, completely unaffected by the night before.

"Well since it is your homework, I expect you know best what needs work right now," his dad said.

"Transfiguration," Harry said.

"Very well," his dad said.

They worked on his homework like his dad had said. They cooked dinner together; curried beef with rice, and the whole while, it wasn't like Harry had forgotten the fight, he just wasn't thinking about it. It wasn't on his radar. The whole process was mentally taxing, hence why it had been nice to have his dad to help him with his homework, but he was functioning. It was nice spending time with his dad. Cooking with him was fun. They talked about his runic trigger ward project while they ate. Harry would be ready to get his project off paper in another month and should be actually playing with some simple wards soon enough. He told his dad about his idea for the twins to ward Ron's bed.
It was dissonant to think about Ron. With the fight locked away, thinking about the other boy felt like trying to do a complex arithmancy problem in his head without scratch paper.

They settled in the sitting room to play chess. Chess was odd to play with his mind occluded. It was easy enough to focus, easy enough to think a few moves ahead, but any creativity he might have had with the game went out the window.

"I want you to stop occluding, Harry," his dad said.

"Should I?" Harry asked.

"Yes," his dad said. "You can't occlude forever. I did say we would deal with it later."

"This is nice, though," Harry said.

"It is," his dad agreed. "But you need to be able to function without occluding. You will need to be able to get up tomorrow and go to class without relying on occlumency. We will deal with this tonight."

"Okay," Harry said. The pain was distant, the memory of it put aside, it didn't frighten him as it should have. Letting it all back in felt crippling and he gasped as he lowered his defenses.

"It is your move," his dad said, gesturing to the board in between them.

In a sudden fit of anger, Harry flung the board away to the dismay of the pieces.

"I didn't save him so he could throw it all away," Harry yelled out. "He's going to get himself killed and I can't do anything about it!"

"You paid a heavy price for his life," his dad said.

"I did," Harry said. "And I told him what he could do with his stupid life debt, I told him his job was to live and that was that."

"You wanted him to be safe," his dad said.

"Of course I wanted him to be safe," Harry said. "He's- he's the most important person in my life and I lost everything for him."

"What did you lose?"

"My future, my independence, my ability to fucking pretend I have my life in order," Harry said. "I'm not even human anymore."

"You are human where it counts," his dad said.

"Tell that to everyone who gave me shit last year," Harry said.

"That was unfair to you," his dad said. "You have shown time and again that you place the well-being of others above your own, and while I could tell you about the value of a bit of selfishness now and then, that characteristic is the defining element of your own humanity and it certainly isn't something you have lost. In spite of your falling out, you are still very concerned for Mr. Weasley. You have expressed more concern for his well-being than for your friendship."

"That hurts too," Harry said.
"Of course it does," his dad said. "Anyone would feel hurt right now if they lost a friendship."

"How do you make it better?" Harry asked.

"You focus on what you do have in your life," his dad said. "You keep moving forward. You go to class. Do your homework. Eat. You talk with Miss Granger. You interact with people you normally don't interact with. In the end, Harry, I am ultimately the story of a man who made the worst decisions after a loss. I will make sure you do not follow the same path I did."

"What if he dies?"

"Whoever put your name into the goblet will be forced to change plans. They will not just target Mr. Weasley because he is now the bound champion. The tournament is still dangerous, but we will do our best to see that he comes out unscathed. You, however, are still in danger. Your name coming out of the goblet was a clear act against you, and just because their plan has been thwarted does not mean that they will now give up.

"This is at least beneficial for you. They will be forced to change plans. They will be going with plan B. Shifting gears means more chances for them to make mistakes. They are exposed and they are struggling to adjust."

"I think it's probably best for Ron that we've stopped being friends," Harry said.

"We have taken steps to protect you," his dad said. "Mr. Weasley is not in so much danger by being near you. He has also benefited greatly from having you in his life."

Harry shook his head.

"I could argue the point with you," his dad said. "But I think I will remind you that it is okay to be a little selfish. It is okay to want his friendship for your own sake."

"I can't force him to be my friend," Harry said.

"You cannot," his dad agreed. "But it is alright to seek friendship for your own right."

"Maybe," Harry said.

"What was going through your head this morning?" His dad asked.

"I dunno, just going over the fight a lot in my head. Trying to figure out when I messed it all up."

"What did you decide?"

"That it was inevitable," Harry said.

"Was it?"

"I think this is going to be something we disagree on," Harry said.

His dad inclined his head. "What else was going through your head?"

"I dunno; stuff," Harry said.

His dad frowned before carrying on. "Sometimes, when people are under a great deal of stress or when they experience loss, they start having thoughts of death. Have you thought of hurting yourself, Harry?"
"What?" Harry asked in a strangled voice. "Why would you ask that? I'm not… I wouldn't..."

"That wasn't exactly a no," his dad commented calmly.

"Well, n- no."

His dad arched an eyebrow. "It's all right to talk about this."

"Well I wasn't," Harry said. "Not really."

"Not really?"

"It was just a stupid thought," Harry said dismissively.

His dad met him with inviting silence.

Harry growled. "I just thought it would be nice if whoever was behind everything would just get it over with and kill me already. I know it was stupid, I know I need to focus on the prophecy."

"Your life has much more meaning beyond the prophecy," his dad said. "It definitely has value to me. But I understand what was going through your head. Have you ever thought about killing yourself?"

Harry answered him with silence.

His dad met him with silence.

"It was stupid," Harry said eventually. "It was a long time ago, I didn't really understand everything."

"What didn't you understand?"

"That life isn't a fairytale," Harry said.

"What happened?"

Harry thought about how best to answer. "I wasn't raised religious, you know? I don't think I've ever been to church, the Dursleys love to talk about hell and stuff but they only go Christmas and Easter, but this girl at school was talking about her dog going to heaven and I just got it in my head that if I died I could go be with my parents instead of the Dursleys."

"How long did you think about that?"

"Not long," Harry shrugged, looking away. "I might have sort of said something stupid about it to my Uncle and he might have said something about there being no reunions in hell."

"Did you think they were in hell?"

Harry frowned. "They always made it sound like they were bad people, but I never really knew what to think of the afterlife."

"How old were you?"

"Eight," Harry said. "It was stupid, I was stupid."

"You were grappling with extreme circumstances and a child's understanding of death. Have you
thought about killing yourself since then?"

Harry shook his head. "More just thoughts about wishing I didn't exist," he mumbled.

"I know this isn't easy to talk about," his dad said. "Thank you for being honest with me."

Harry swallowed. "Yeah," he said.

"Your life has changed a great deal lately and it seems that you face one trial after the next. It is alright to feel overwhelmed and hopeless, but you are facing each trial with aplomb and I am very proud of you. And Harry, if you ever feel like you want to hurt yourself, I want you to tell me. I want to help you."

Harry nodded. "Did the shrink tell you to ask me about that stuff?"

"He did," his dad said. "If I had reason for concern."

"I'm sorry I worried you," Harry said.

"I will remind you again that I signed up for this," his dad said. "I also want to keep having you in my life."

Harry smiled bitterly.

"Now," his dad said. "It is alright to take time to process this and work through this, but I still expect you to go to all classes, do all your homework, and attend every meal. You are more than welcome to join me for dinner."

"Thanks," Harry said.

"Enough of this," his dad said. "Let's pick up these pieces."

"Sorry about that," Harry said.

"I'm sure I can find some way to forgive you," his dad said.

When Alastor had made his way up to Albus's office, Bones was already there and as soon as he had passed on Albus's perfunctory offer of tea, their meeting began.

"Best laid plans, eh Albus?" Alastor asked.

"Indeed," Albus said, betraying little of the frustration that was likely inside.

"Are you up to a meeting with a Death Eater?" Bones asked.

"You mean where I don't arrest them?" Alastor asked.

"I've already initiated the meeting procedure we learned from Mr. Crouch," Albus said. "It should come out in tomorrow's Classifieds in the Daily Prophet. If we can rely on our information then you should be able to meet with one of them tomorrow at noon at their prearranged location."

"So how do I convince them that I can still deliver Potter?" Alastor asked.

"They know that he wears an anti-portkey charm, so you will have to convince them that you will be able to remove it while the wards are relaxed for the final task of the tournament," Bones said.
"The thing's charmed so only the wearer can remove it," Alastor said. "And we already know that Potter can throw off the Imperius Curse."

"He can," Albus said. "Ultimately we want Voldemort to believe that everything is running as smoothly as possible. This rather large bump in the road is most likely going to cause him great upset. We don't want him deciding to use someone else for the ritual, rather than waiting to be able to obtain Harry. We need to be able to assure him that you can deliver Harry to him."

"Mr. Potter has already shown that he is willing to sacrifice everything for his friends," Madame Bones said. "Tell them that you will use his friends. The Weasley boy will be occupied with the tournament, but I'm sure you can sell them on the idea that Mr. Potter would remove the charm if you threatened Miss Granger."

"I'm not sure I'm comfortable advertising Potter's vulnerabilities to Voldemort," Alastor said. "If everything goes balls up, that's going to be a weakness that Voldemort can exploit easily."

"Mr. Potter has already done that himself," Bones said. "Everyone knows he faced down Greyback to get those two back. You won't be telling them anything they haven't already gleaned from the Daily Prophet. You are only selling them on the course of action that Crouch would take to complete his mission."

Alastor nodded. "I'll spend some time with Crouch then. Make sure I can pull him off."

"It is imperative that this meeting goes well," Albus said. "If Voldemort goes another route, if he uses someone else for the ritual, then all will most certainly be lost. I cannot stress that enough."

"No pressure, Alastor," Bones said.

"Don't worry about me," Alastor said. "Things have gotten pretty boring teaching at a school. This is just the thing to get the blood flowing."

"Just try to keep it all in your body," Bones said.

Harry made it through class the next day, just like his dad had said he would. He ate in the great hall and he did his homework and he did it alone. Besides the few times Hermione would try to run interference, Harry stayed away from her and Ron. He felt empty, he felt alone, and he felt a great pit of worry for what might come next, but he soldiered on as best as he could. Ron didn't want him in his life, so Harry was going to stay away, and he'd just have to deal with it. His classmates though, did not stay away from him. He was hounded constantly by people who wanted to comment about what had happened.

Gryffindors were excited by it all. He had more than a few of his housemates try to console him for having lost out, but they all seemed to think it great that a Gryffindor would be competing. Ravenclaws were generally contemptuous of the whole thing, though he had had a pair of Ravenclaw upperclassmen come to ask him how he had gotten the cup to spit out his name after it had already given Cedric's. Slytherin seemed to think the whole thing was hilarious. Hufflepuff, though, was angry. They didn't usually get much recognition in the school and it seemed all of them thought that Harry had taken attention away from their champion. He didn't think any of them were going to believe that Harry hadn't put his name in.

It also wasn't exactly subtle, the fact that Harry and Ron were staying as far away from each other as they could. Everyone, it seemed, thought he had entered the tournament and Harry and Ron's fight must stem from Harry being angry to have lost out on the tournament. All in all, things were
pretty shitty.

The rest of the quidditch team seemed to believe him, though. That was nice. Though the twins were clearly upset that Ron was competing. Harry had seen them having what looked like serious discussions with Ron during lunch.

Life went on, he supposed. He made it through the week. Largely, he managed this by keeping to himself until he could go bother his dad after classes. Hermione would try to convince him to go talk to Ron every day. Harry wouldn't let her stay long, even if the company was nice. Ron needed her more than Harry did. She'd come to see things the way Ron had soon enough anyways. It was best to start weening himself off of her.

"How's he preparing for the tournament?" Harry asked her on Friday after they left Charms, Ron walking a few paces ahead.

Hermione sighed as she wound down from another attempt to get Harry to go see Ron. "We're going for as much of a broad training plan as we can since we don't know what's coming. He's going to be as topically well versed as he can be when the first task comes around. Sort of a jack of all trades master of none approach."

Harry nodded. "Shield spell?"

"We're going to focus on that next week," Hermione said. "I talked to the twins. They told me about your idea for the age line. We haven't told Ron about it. It seems a bit more difficult than they might have thought initially. We'll be lucky if they work it out before the first task."

"It would be nice if the first task was on a Monday," Harry said. "At least then he can go in right after he's rested over the weekend."

"Ginny thought we'd do a rotation, the week before the first task. Take turns staying up so he can get some sleep."

"That's a good idea," Harry said.

"You could be part of the rotation too," Hermione said. "You could help me get him ready. You're way further ahead in defense."

"That's not happening," Harry said.

Hermione growled. "You're miserable, he's miserable, at least you could be miserable together," she said.

Harry shook his head. "Thanks for putting up with us."

"You're both impossible," Hermione said in exasperation. "Okay, I need to go over my notes before the quiz, have fun in defense. I suppose I won't see you at dinner."

"Nope," Harry said. "See you."

They split ways, Hermione heading towards the dungeons for Potions while Harry headed upstairs.

Harry hadn't eaten dinner in the great hall all week. He spent most of his evenings in the dungeons. As soon as DADA was done for the day and Harry was out of sight of his classmates, he threw on his invisibility cloak and headed to the dungeons. It was practically routine. He'd do his homework while his dad graded papers and tests. They'd cook dinner, they'd talk, they'd practice defense.
Harry wouldn't leave until just before curfew. It was nice. It wasn't the same, but it was nice.

The weekend came and went and Harry spent it in the dungeons. He practiced defense with his dad and Sunday night he practiced with the dagger with Victoria. He thought it nice to take out some of his upset out in training. Things changed on Monday though.

"It's been a week," his dad said when Harry had shown up.

"Yeah?" Harry said. They hadn't actually talked about the fight since the previous Sunday.

"You are always welcome here," his dad said. "Wherever I live can be a home for you. But Harry, you can't spend the rest of you schooling in the dungeons."

"I'm sorry," Harry said. "I know-"

"This is not an apology situation," his dad said. "I have not grown weary of your company. I am concerned that you have isolated yourself from your peers."

"Isolating myself from my peers has been a really useful survival technique in the past actually," Harry said. He was trying to do as his dad had asked and had been speaking his mind more.

"You have friends in this school," his dad said. "You have your teammates, you have Miss Granger, I'm sure at least one of your dorm mates is at least somewhat fond of you. If you do not wish to attempt to patch things with Mr. Weasley, then it may be time to get to know some of your classmates a bit better."

"What?" Harry asked. "Just go up to one of them and start talking?"

"Yes," his dad said.

"Like, for no reason?"

"For good reason," his dad said. "Companionship."

"Sometimes you don't sound very much like Professor Snape," Harry said.

"Well I could threaten you with detention and call you a dunderhead if you prefer," his dad said.

"Sure," Harry said. "And I could start accusing you of being the one trying to kill me all over again," Harry said.

"When did you think I was trying to kill you?" his dad asked.

"All of first year," Harry said.

"I spent that year trying to keep you alive," his dad said.

"Ironic," Harry said. "Then in second year we thought it was Malfoy behind the Chamber of Secrets, but we got the wrong Malfoy."

"Hmm, you could also go and strike up a conversation with Mr. Malfoy."

"Hah," Harry said. "I think I'll go chat up Neville before you decide to set me up on a play date with the wannabe Heir of Slytherin."

"Have fun," his dad said. "Though the play date can be arranged."
Neville was with Ginny when he found him. Harry still wasn't sure where he stood with her. He didn't think she had ever gotten over having a crush on him, but she had seemed to get used to his presence sometime over the summer. Still though, she had seemed fairly animated talking to Neville right up to the point Harry got there when she seemed to become more reserved and self-conscious.

Harry didn't stay long. The whole thing was just awkward. He was making things awkward. He checked a few questions from his Herbology homework with Neville and left. He found Benjamin and Anna studying with a couple of people Harry knew from their defense study group. He'd already seen them all the previous Thursday, so he had already had to go through the whole thing where everyone seemed to have an opinion about the whole tournament thing.

At the least, he'd interacted with the others from the defense study group for about a year, and some of them were willing to give him the benefit of the doubt, but he still got dirty looks from a couple of the Hufflepuffs. Benjamin and Anna, though, were studying with Bruce and Hailee, who were both Ravenclaws like Anna, so there weren't any hostile tension while Harry studied with them. They worked together until dinner and the two Gryffindors split off from the Ravenclaws when they got to the Great Hall. Harry ate dinner with Benjamin and a couple of other fifth years. This section of the table wanted to talk about the tournament and guess about what sorts of dangerous tasks were going to be in it, which Harry didn't appreciate since he was already worried enough. He struggled not to keep glancing at Ron and Hermione.

All in all, though, it wasn't a terrible experience. He felt like a hanger on most of the evening, but he got through it. He spent some time with Dean and Seamus after dinner and discovered that for the past year and a half they had been collaborating on a comic strip that centered on making fun of things at Hogwarts. He'd sort of known that Dean liked to draw but found it odd that he hadn't had a clue that they'd compiled over a hundred comic strips. Then again there was a lot of things his dorm mates didn't know about him. The comics were funny, though he got the idea they were being selective in showing them to him.

There were jokes about the other houses and a few about Gryffindor, there were jokes about their teachers that they probably weren't planning on showing them. There were a couple about Harry, though Dean seemed hesitant to show him them. One of them was actually a fairly verbatim exchange that Harry had had with Malfoy back in first year, the other one was a joke about how Dumbledore always awarded him points at the last minute for the house cup. Harry had been drawn in caricature, as were all of the people in the comics, with way too large glasses and a prominent scar on his forehead and looking about a foot shorter than everyone else in his year.

"What are you going to do with all of them?" Harry asked.

"We were thinking of putting them in a book," Seamus said. "I've been trying to get this copying charm down."

"He keeps blowing stuff up, though," Dean said and pulled out a comic that made a joke about just that.

"So you'll, like, sell it to everyone?" Harry asked.

"Something like that," Seamus said.

"We'll just have to hope your dad doesn't give us detention for it," Dean said.

"Are there any comics about that?" Harry asked.
"About Snape? Tons," Dean said. "We had a running series at the start of third year when everyone was trying to puzzle out why he'd stopped being… um, Snape."

"Oh," Harry said. "Yeah, no I meant about him being my dad."

"Oh yeah," Seamus said, leafing through the loose parchment. "Here."

The first panel was a mock up of the Daily Prophet proclaiming "No Harry, Professor Snape is your Father," which Harry was pretty sure was a Star Wars reference. He'd only ever heard bits and pieces of it through his cupboard wall. The first panel was followed up by a recurring character from their comics who represented the average Hogwarts student who was telling another student, "Honestly, at this point the only thing that surprises me is that his dad wasn't secretly a time traveling Salazar Slytherin."

"Do people still think I'm the Heir of Slytherin?" Harry asked.

"Well no one thinks you set the basilisk on anyone," Dean said. "But I'm pretty sure that- well you know, with the whole talking to snakes thing- well some people think you could be a descendant or something."

"Huh," Harry said. "I didn't think that was still a thing."

"You do realize that you make up most of the Hogwarts rumor mill," Seamus said.

Harry sighed. "So how many of those are about me?"

"Oh," Seamus said.

"Only about a third," Dean said.

"A quarter," Seamus said almost on top of him.

"A quarter," Dean echoed.

"They're not mean or anything," Seamus said.

"We didn't do anything with that last article," Dean said.

"Huh," Harry said. "So what's this one about?" he asked pointing to the one Dean had been drawing when he got there.

"Oh, it's about Hagrid and the Beaubatons headmistress, Hannah thinks they're dating or something. We haven't worked out the punchline, though."

"How about something with the skrewts?" Harry said. "Like Hagrid and Madame Maxime are walking on the grounds together and in the background, one of the giant skrewts is walking with one of those winged horses."

"We can try that out," Dean said.

"So how long is this thing with Ron going to go on?" Seamus asked.

"Yeah, the dorm's weird now," Dean said.

"Sorry," Harry said.
"How long are you going to be sore about not competing?" Seamus asked.

"I didn't put my name in," Harry said for the millionth time. "I was just upset because now he's in danger. It's complicated."

"So kiss and make up," Dean said. Seamus pretended to gag.

"What?" Harry asked a bit shrilly.

"Or, you know, whatever," Dean said. He had turned his attention to a bit of scratch paper where he was trying his hand at drawing a skrewt. "Have a duel, yell at each other, you've got to do something."

Harry sighed. As he made forays into mingling with his fellow students throughout the week, he got a lot of advice on how he should patch things up with Ron. When you were the school celebrity, everyone seemed to follow your life, and everyone seemed to have opinions. It wasn't like Harry could say that Ron had had about as much of Harry as he could stand. He couldn't say that Ron had wizened up to him.

He was glad, though, when Sammy had found him during the week. She'd just asked him if he had entered or not and when he said he didn't she hugged him and told him she'd take care of everything. Harry wished that she could.

He liked to think that he'd gotten to know a number of his classmates better over that week, though it wasn't all smooth sailing. There were times when he felt that he could deal with how his life was heading and then there were other times when he felt overwhelmed by the pain of it all. It got to be so much Wednesday night that after dinner he had just shut himself off behind his bed curtains and focused on just not completely breaking down for a while. He was pretty sure his grades had started to slide after the restructuring of his life.

At the core of it was the feeling that he had lost his best friend. It didn't help that he still had feelings for him. He wondered at times if Ron had been able to tell that Harry was gay, or if it had been everything else that was fucked up about him that Ron had gotten fed up with. It would have been easier if he could have hated Ron, hated him for getting sick of him. But Harry couldn't blame him for that. It wasn't like Harry could really stand his own company lately. Ron was still Ron though, and Harry missed him achingly.

When Friday rolled around, Harry was ready to be done with the week. He just wanted to spend the weekend with his dad. It wasn't that he had been bothered by the company of the other students, rather that he felt socially drained. He'd gotten on friendly terms with some of his classmates, he'd also come to the conclusion that while still devastating, the loss of Ron as his friend was not the end of the world, it just felt like it was. Harry was capable of living his life. It was a skill he had had before he had made his first friend, and in this Dursley free zone, he was modifying the skill to include other people. The key, Harry decided, was to be friendly with a lot of people, but not actually get close to anyone.

He was glad that his dad had encouraged him to interact with his other classmates. He was also glad when DADA was over that day. He wanted to intercept Hermione and find out how she and Ron were doing. They should have just finished up with Potions, so Harry would hopefully be able to cross paths if he headed downstairs.

They intersected in the entryway, or rather, Harry and Hermione did.

"Where's Ron?" Harry asked, turning around to walk with Hermione upstairs.
"He got pulled out of class earlier for something to do with the tournament," Hermione said. "I think they were taking photographs or something. I don't know if they're done yet or not."

"Well I guess that gives us a bit of time to talk," Harry said. "How's it been going?"

"It would be going a lot better if you could help out," Hermione said.

"He doesn't want my help," Harry said.

"He's miserable, Harry," Hermione said. "I swear he misses you. The both of your are so stubborn. You're both just such...boys."

"Yes," Harry said. "I think that's been established." He wasn't sure why Hermione thought that things would be different if they were all girls.

"But how's he doing?" Harry asked. "You're going to start the sleep schedule next week?"

"He's learning as much as he can, but you know he has trouble just keeping his eyes open. I'm pretty sure he started hallucinating about some murder mystery while we were studying last night. He started babbling about fingerprints."

"Oh, that's a book we were reading over the summer," Harry said, the memory of it making him sad now. "So about sleep."

"George is going to stay up with him tonight," Hermione said. "They also think they might have the warding ready a bit before the first task, but we'll see. One way or another, we're going to make sure he's as rested as he can be."

"Good," Harry said. "Are you all right?"

"I'm keeping busy," Hermione said. Harry supposed that in a stressful environment that that was the best thing for her.

"All right," Harry said. "We went over this spell in defense today, I thought Ron should learn, it's basically a really watered down version of the notice me not spell which they teach in sixth year, but it works as long as you're not doing anything that might draw attention to yourself or if someone's looking for you. It also works on some animals. I know a lot of the tournaments in the past have involved magical animals."

"That sounds good," Hermione said. "I can add it to the list."

"Oh, delightful, just the boy-wonder I was looking for," a woman Harry had never seen before said walking up to the two. "Now, just how is a girl supposed to get the full story when she can't talk to one of the key players. Harry Potter, it is so delightful to meet you at last. I must say, everyone has just been dying to get an interview with you for some time."

"What?" Harry asked, feeling somewhat set upon. "Who are you?"

"Oh, where are my manners," the woman said. "Julia Semple of the Daily Prophet, I'm covering the Tri-Wizards Tournament."

"I don't think Harry wants to talk to the Prophet," Hermione said.

"Oh but of course he does," Ms. Semple said. "He said so himself, he wants us to get things right. Though of course, I can see why you would be cross. Simply terrible putting those two articles in.
But this isn't a private matter, is it? The tournament is very public and you, Harry, are very publicly a part of it. Now how can I tell this story if I don't have your side of it?"

"Oh," Harry said. "Well, I'm not really a part of it. Someone put my name in, but I'm not the champion. Cedric's the Hogwarts champion, someone just made it so my name would come out too, and I'm not competing, Ron is. You should be covering the fact that someone tried to force me to compete and Ron stopped them."

"But surely there's a story there," Ms. Semple said. "Now, no one's in trouble are they? There's no detention to be had. You can tell me, what made you want to enter into the competition?"

"I didn't enter," Harry said, the words were growing very stale in his mouth every time he had to say them.

"All right," Ms. Semple said. "But surely you were tempted to, what might have motivated you to want to enter?"

"Well, I mean-" Harry started but was cut off by Hermione.

"Harry, stop, she wants a quote. She just wants to be able to print something like, 'When asked why he wanted to compete, Harry said…' She still wants to write it like you entered."

"Oh, nonsense," Ms. Semple said staring intently at Harry. "Now surely Mr. Potter doesn't have anything to hide from me."

Harry suddenly felt a presence in his mind and he broke eye contact while he struggled to hastily order his mind, to shocked in the moment to call her out.

Harry heard a passerby gasp in the hallway. "Miss Skeeter, oh my goodness, I can't believe you're here at Hogwarts. I just read your biographical expose on Millicent Bagnold, it was so shocking; they don't talk about any of that in history class." The older student was talking to Ms. Semple.

"Skeeter?" Harry asked, finding his voice and taking a step back.

Rita Skeeter gave a vapid smile to the student who was, for some reason, a fan of hers. "You never know just what you can dig up on some people," she said, eying Harry. "Never trust a politician dear, they're always hiding something. I'm delighted you liked my latest book, but if you'll excuse me, I just need to finish interviewing young Harry here."

"Oh, I can't wait to read your next article then," the student said, turning to walk away.

"I think the interview's over," Harry said coldly, deliberately looking off to the side, but keeping her hands in the periphery of his vision.

"Now come come dear, surely you want to set the record straight, don't you? Did you feel betrayed, to have your best friend take your victory from you? You saved his life didn't you?"

"Ron was protecting me," Harry said. "Because I didn't want to be in the tournament, someone forced me into it. He didn't steal anything from me. He doesn't want to compete either. I just want him to be safe."

"Then surely you must be worried about the Tournament's historic death toll," Skeeter said.

Didn't that just hit the nail on the head, but what did she want from him? Whatever it was, he wasn't giving it to her.
"Ron'll surprise you," Harry said, and without another word, he turned and left, Hermione on his heels.

Skeeter called out after him. "Growing up with those muggles, you must have always starved for attention, is that why you decided to enter the tournament?"

Harry heard Hermione give an indignant squawk and he had to turn back to drag Hermione back. "Don't give her anything," he said.

Hermione ranted about Skeeter the whole way back to the tower. Harry was angry too, but he didn't want to talk about it at all. There wasn't any sign of Ron in the common room. Harry said goodbye to Hermione so that she could go focus on making sure Ron survived the first task. He was more than a little resentful that the little bit of time he had had with Hermione had been ruined by Skeeter.

Harry went upstairs to drop off his schoolbag. When he got up to the fourth year landing, though, he froze when he heard what sounded like a struggle. Dropping his bag, he grabbed his wand and rushed into the room. The frantic sound was coming from Ron's bed. Harry rushed over and ripped open the curtains. The scene before him was horribly familiar. Ron was lying on the bed with his hands tied together over his head to one of the bedposts, just like he had been tied up when Harry had found him in the Shrieking Shack. Ron was thrashing and pulling at the ropes, desperately trying to get loose.

Harry was frozen for a moment, but the next he was using his wand to cut Ron loose.

"Ron, what happened?"

Ron didn't seem to hear him. He had scrambled away from him and fallen off the other side of his bed. He sounded like he was hyperventilating. Harry looked around, looking for any sign of anyone else in the dorm.

"Ron, who did this?" Harry asked. "Ron! Are they still here?"

Ron had curled himself up in the space between his bed and his nightstand, his hands gripping his head as he tried to regain his breath.

"Ron this is important. Are they still here?"

Ron shook his head.

"What happened?"

"Don't tell anyone," Ron said.

"Ron!" Harry exclaimed.

"Just shove off," Ron said, red faced. "Leave me alone. No one did anything, so bugger off."

Harry studied Ron for a moment. He went back and grabbed his book bag and left it by his bed, grabbing his Charms book for homework.

"Hermione's waiting for you downstairs," he said.

"Shit," Ron said, covering his face with his hands. He said it a few more times.

Harry went downstairs, shaken, but not sure what to make of the whole thing. He went and studied
with Lavender and Parvati. It took a while, but eventually he calmed himself down in their company. It wasn't his business. Ron wasn't hurt; there wasn't anything Harry could do. Ron eventually came down stairs and started working with Hermione. Harry focused on his homework and tried to pay attention to Lavender and Parvati's gossip and eventually he got roped into helping Lavender braid Parvati's hair. It was hard to keep himself from glancing over at Ron and Hermione. Braiding hair wasn't all Lavender and Parvati wanted to do that night, and somehow, by the end of it all he'd had his fingernails painted green. It matched his eyes, he'd been told. He wasn't exactly sure how he had agreed to that. If anyone asked, he'd tell them he'd been pranked by the twins.

He didn't have to wait long for the next Skeeter article to come out. It arrived the next morning at breakfast. It wasn't exactly as shocking as the previous two, but it was still horrid. Skeeter had quoted him as saying that someone had forced him into the tournament, but made it sound like he had been saying that someone had forced him to enter himself. The article didn't paint Ron in a good light either. He came off as an attention seeker who was probably crazy. It was clear that she had interviewed some of the other students. She knew that Ron had been having trouble in class and she was sure to mention his time spent as Greyback's hostage. She made the whole thing as scandalously as she could.

Unlike the previous two articles that had been about Harry, this one wasn't front page news. It might have been if Lucious Malfoy hadn't been sentenced to Azkaban the day prior. He had been found guilty of assembling a riot and assault on muggles and been sentenced to a year in the island prison.

Draco Malfoy seemed to be taking his own advice. When Harry looked over at Draco during meals the boy was always there looking sombre but with his head held high. Harry still wished he knew what was going on with the boy.

It was a couple of days later that Harry got some more news during breakfast, only this news didn't come from a newspaper. Hedwig brought him a letter from Remus. He tore into it curiously.

'Dear Harry,' it read.

You had asked me a question previously that I had been unable to answer to your satisfaction at the time. I have an answer for you and thought you might like to talk about it in person. I know you have a Hogsmeade visit this coming Saturday, so I thought you might like to meet for lunch. 11:30 at the Leaky Cauldron? Let me know if this will work for you.

Best regards,

R. Lupin

He must have asked Professor Lupin about mental magic after all. This was great, it sounded like Professor Lupin had something for him. Maybe this was it. Maybe he could fix himself. What if Ron had been able to tell on some level what Harry was? What if he had stopped being his friend because he had figured out Harry was gay? If Harry could stop himself from being gay, maybe Ron would want to be his friend again. Maybe he could make everything work. Who knew?

Harry practically spent the day walking on air. He wasn't used to being so optimistic, but some part of him felt like he was due some manner of good fortune. Somehow things just had to work out. He was going to fix himself, he was going to get Ron back and not have to worry about being attracted to him, he was going to help Ron with the rest of the tournament, and everything was going to be fine. Or, at least, it would be fine up until he had to face down Voldemort. He might die then; but if he did die, then at least he'd be spending his last days with a couple of great friends and his dad.
But hey, the headmaster had said they were going to try real hard to make sure he survived, so, there was that too.

The full moon was on Wednesday and Harry yearned to get out from within the walls of the castle and be around the forest and the open skies. Harry visited Hagrid that evening and they took a walk together while Hagrid tended to the grounds and the various animals under his care. They talked about Care of Magical Creatures and about Harry's classes. They visited the giant pegasi that had come with the Beaubatons contingent and Hagrid told him all about their special care.

Hagrid had wanted to talk about the fact that Ron and Hermione weren't there, but Harry had evaded the topic. Either Ron was going to want to be his friend again when he was straight or he wasn't, it wasn't something that needed to be discussed. Saturday, though, couldn't come fast enough. The ironic thing was that that Wednesday, only two days away, would be the full moon and he would have Professor Lupin all to himself for a half hour before the moon rose, but of course, he wouldn't be able to remember what they talked about. He'd just have to wait a few more days after that. Now that he had an answer in sight, the suspense was filling him with an intense anticipation… or maybe that was the moon, hanging in the sky. It looked so full already. He wanted to just spend the night under it's pale beauty.

Harry yelled and screamed and cursed and spat as he rode out the jarring pain of the transformation as he became human again. All sense of time was lost to him. His only judgement on the matter came because Professor Lupin always stopped screaming first. He transformed much faster than Harry did. Eventually it was over, and as he lay there panting and trembling, physically human once more, still dealing with a rather jarring muscle cramp in his leg, he had the odd thought that he had never felt so alive. It was definitely odd, since he still felt really tired and just, in general, like shit, but he was also full of energy and it was such a really odd dichotomy that he actually laughed at the bizarre nature of it all.

"That's new," his dad said, draping Harry's robes over him. Harry hadn't noticed him coming in.

"Anything broken?" Professor Lupin asked.

"Nope," Harry said. "How'd I do?"

"You did wonderfully," Professor Lupin said.

"Cool," Harry said. "What's for breakfast?"

"You have an appetite?" his dad asked.

"I'm starving," Harry said. "Oh, we should have pancakes. I can make them."

"Your eyes are half closed," his dad observed, using a levitation charm to get Harry upstairs.

"I feel weird," Harry said. "Hi, Madame Pomfrey," Harry said. "I feel weird."

"Well let's see how you are dear," Madame Pomfrey said, and proceeded to cast diagnostic charms on him while he chattered on.

"I bet I could go to class today," Harry said. "How about after lunch? I feel up to it."

"You look exhausted," his dad said.

"But I'm really really awake," Harry said.
"You have a lot of dopamine in your system," Madame Pomfrey said.

"What does that mean?" Harry asked.

"It means you feel a lot better than you are," she said. "That being said, besides a couple of pulled muscles, you did very well this transformation."

"So I can go to class?" Harry asked.

"You need sleep," his dad said. "And besides, everyone thinks you have been hexed mute, and I do not think you could stop yourself from talking right now."

"I could too," Harry said. "I could be so quiet, you have no idea. Being quiet used to be my job."

"And right now your job is to rest so that you can go back to school as soon as you can," his dad said. "I am sure Miss Tonks will take good notes for you."

This month, a metamorphmagus Auror named Tonks had taken Harry's place. She didn't know about him being a werewolf, only that the headmaster had had an important but secret reason for Harry to be away from the castle. Since she couldn't be expected to talk like Harry would talk, they had pretended that Harry had been hexed from behind and was temporarily mute.

Professor Lupin walked into the sitting room and gave Harry a plate of breakfast.

"Ooh," Harry said. "Cool, thanks. Oh, hey, can I get my log book?"

"Of course," his dad said; he went upstairs to Harry's room.

"Well, I'll see you in Hogsmeade, Harry," Professor Lupin said, heading to the fireplace.

"Oh, right, thanks for that, I'll see you, Professor," Harry said.

"You're welcome, Harry, try to get some rest," Professor Lupin said.

His dad returned with Harry's log book. "Where did Lupin go?" he asked.

"He went home," Harry said. "He should stay for breakfast, at least. Do you still hate him?"

That gave his dad pause. "I prefer not to be in his company," he said. "I thought you were hungry."

"Oh yeah," Harry said. He started shoving food in his mouth and pulled open his log book, which Harry skimmed through as he ate. Nothing much seemed to have happened the previous day, which was good. Harry finished the plate before he knew it.

"What about your classes today?" Harry asked.

"Oh, I spent all last night harvesting moon bulbs in Romania," his dad said. That was probably what had been circulated to explain his absence. His dad would have stayed close through the night. "No one will think it odd that I requested a substitute today."

"Huh," Harry said. "Well, I guess that means we can spend the day together."

"We can," his dad said. "After you get some rest. Time for your potions."

"Do I have to?" Harry asked. "I feel really good right now."
"I'm sure you do," his dad said. "But the reality is that your body is healing and is incredibly taxed. I'm glad you feel good, but that is because of a chemical imbalance in your brain. When that wears off, you will be glad to have had your rest.

"Oh, alright," Harry said.

He started taking potions, leaving the sleeping potion for last. The thing was, he really did feel great, it was a bit of a novel experience, and he didn't want to sleep through it. Maybe he'd still feel this good when he woke up.

Harry rode out that good feeling when he woke up and tried to get as much out of it as he could as he spent the rest of the day with his dad. He returned to Hogwarts a little bit before curfew. He was still worn out from the transformation, but he was steady on his feet. They flooed into his dad's quarters and Harry made his way under his invisibility cloak back to the tower.

The twins were in the fourth year boys dorm when Harry got there.

"Oh, good," Fred said.

"We were hoping you'd be here," George said.

"Figured you'd want to see it for yourself," said Fred.

"Did you figure out the age line?" Harry asked. They were standing with Ron around his bed.

"Oh, you can talk again," Fred said.

"Yeah," Harry said. "It just wore off on its own."

"So now you can tell us who did it," Fred said.

Harry shrugged. "Got me from behind."

George patted him on the shoulder. "Well in other news, we did indeed figure out the age line," George said.

"It was Harry's idea here," Fred said, nudging Ron in the ribs.

"Hermione told me," Ron said, not looking at Harry.

"Pretty nice of him," George said.

"The bloke's been pretty worried about you," Fred said.

Harry cleared his throat.

"All right, now," George said. "We've already charmed the chalk, and we've prepped the area so now we just need to draw it."

Fred pulled out an ordinary looking piece of chalk and drew a line around Ron's bed. George followed behind him using another piece of chalk to etch in runes along the line. Finally, Fred pulled out his wand and poked at the center most rune and the whole thing lit up golden before all traces of it disappeared.

"Is that it?" Ron asked.
"That's it," Fred said.

"How do we know it works?" Ron asked.

"Well, no one fifteen or older can cross the line, so, you could always invite a fifth year in here to see what happens?"

"Huh," Ron said and shoved Fred toward his bed. Fred bounced spectacularly off the invisible age line and wound up on the floor looking like he had been petrified.

George laughed. "Okay, now I don't feel guilty." He bent down and released his brother from the curse.

"Guilty about what?" Ron asked.

"You'll see," Fred said. Grinning wickedly at his little brother. "Now get some sleep."

The twins exited and Harry was left looking at Ron who nodded at him and turned to his trunk to start getting ready for bed.

Harry hadn't really talked to Cedric since the night the older boy had become the Hogwarts champion. It didn't bother him nearly as much as not talking to Ron did, but it still bothered him. He was pretty surprised when, the day after he returned from recuperating from the full moon, Cedric approached him.

"I heard you got hexed," Cedric said.

"Yeah," Harry said. "Don't know who. It wasn't terrible, I just couldn't talk."

"Have people been giving you trouble this whole time?"

"Some," Harry said. "It hasn't been too bad. Last year was a lot worse."

Cedric frowned. "You know you've got a fan in Hufflepuff, right? Sammy Eldrich."

"I wouldn't say she was a fan," Harry said.

"She was telling some people off for not believing you," Cedric said.

"They're not giving her trouble for it, are they?"

"No, it's fine," Cedric said. "The thing was, last year, when she told some of our housemates that she felt like she was supposed to be a girl, not everyone believed her. Then she told you, and you helped her."

"I just took her to see Professor Sprout," Harry said.

"I should have taken her to see Professor Sprout," Cedric said. "I was her Prefect. I didn't know what to do, I thought she was just going through a phase. You helped her."

Harry shrugged.

"Did you really not enter your name?" Cedric asked.

"I really didn't," Harry said.
Cedric sighed. "I'm sorry I didn't believe you. Why are you and Weasley fighting?"

"It's complicated," Harry said.

"Want to talk about it?"

Harry shook his head.

"Well, if you want to go have a fly or something, let me know. It's been too long since we've had a pickup game."

"We'll see," Harry said. "Tell Sammy I said thanks."

"Will do," Cedric said.

The next day was the first Hogsmeade visit of the school year and it was time for Harry to get some answers from Professor Lupin. Hermione was going to be running Ron through spells all day with the twins so Harry promised to get her some supplies in town. It would make meeting Professor Lupin in private easier. He went to the dungeons after breakfast where he was still working as one of his dad's lab assistants and afterwards left with the other two assistants and they rode to Hogsmeade together in a carriage. Once there he tagged along with different groups for a while, going to the different stores; he wasn't really supposed to be on his own. When eleven-thirty approached, Harry separated from the other students and put on his invisibility cloak since he would be traveling alone and made his way to the Leaky Cauldron.

"It's good to see you again, Professor, outside of our usual circumstances," Harry said.

"It's good to see you too," Professor Lupin said. "I've been wanting to have this conversation with you for a while. Here," he said, pulling out his wand and casting a few privacy spells.

"So I asked you about mind magic last month?" Harry asked.

"You asked me two months ago actually," Professor Lupin said. "Harry, I think my response was largely the reason you had such a rough go of things then."

Harry froze.

"I've told you a lot of stories about your father, Sirius, myself" Professor Lupin said. "There were some parts I have been keeping out."

"Like what?" Harry asked.

Professor Lupin didn't answer. He pulled out a book and put it on the table. He kept his palm on the cover obscuring the title.

"This book does a good job of answering your questions, if you'd like to read it for yourself. Or rather, it answers the question you weren't asking, I think. The thing is, Harry, I had looked into this myself when I was younger. A lot of people your age do, I think. One of the things I leave out of stories from when I was younger was the fact that I had more than just a friendship with Sirius. We started dating in our seventh year. We were partners until the end of the war."

"What?" Harry asked.

"I'm gay, Harry," Professor Lupin said. "Compared to being a werewolf, our society is a lot more tolerant of homosexuality, but still. When I was younger I looked to see if there was any way to"
make myself straight. I looked into mental magics. I never found the answers I was looking for. The answers, I think, you were looking for."

Harry shook his head. Professor Lupin slid the book across the table to Harry. Harry almost reached out to take it, his hand hovered before he pulled it back to rub at the back of his neck.

"To summarize," Professor Lupin said. "There are some things that are innate to our being. Our sexuality is one of them. It's been debated of course. There are many who would like to discount that. Just as there are those who still hold on to outdated beliefs about muggleborns."

"There has to be some way, though," Harry said, not even trying to deny anything at this point. "I don't want to lose everything because of something I can't control. I have to be able to do something."

"You can read through that book Harry, but it's only going to tell you more of what I've already said. The only thing you can do is to come to terms with who you are. There's nothing wrong with being attracted to men, Harry."

"It's not natural," Harry said. "It's gross, everyone would think I was disgusting."

"Do you think I'm disgusting?" Professor Lupin asked.

"Of course not," Harry said immediately.

"Do you think you are disgusting?" Professor Lupin asked.

Harry had nothing to say. Nothing he could say out loud.

"There's nothing wrong with you Harry," Professor Lupin said.

"Yes there is," Harry said. "I don't want to be like this. I don't want everyone to hate me."

"I know this is difficult for you to imagine now, Harry, but this isn't the end of the world. Yes, there are people out there who would judge you and shut the door on you because they find out about your sexuality, but I have met a lot of people who could care less, who've supported me. I felt so blessed to have friends who didn't turn away from me. I can't promise you who in your life is going to be supportive or who's going to come around or who you're going to have to write off, but I can promise you you're not going to be alone in this. You can contact me whenever you want. You can also count on Professor McGonagall. I know for a fact she is very supportive."

"What about my dad?" Harry asked.

Professor Lupin sighed. "I don't know if it's ever come up. He knows I'm gay, but he disliked me long before he found out about that. I will say that he never made an issue of it. Your father of course was one of my closest friends and Lily was one of the best people I knew. They both knew I was gay, and they still welcomed me into their lives."

A server walked up to the table, and Harry quickly schooled his expression. They ordered and soon they were left alone again.

"What makes someone gay?" Harry asked, not sure he wanted the answer.

"I don't think anyone knows," Professor Lupin said. "Some people think that it is something you are born with."
That perked Harry up a bit. "It's not a werewolf thing?" he asked.

"Most assuredly not," Professor Lupin said. "Just like there isn't anything that could make you straight, there isn't anything that can make you gay. People have certainly tried time and again to ascribe a cause, or to prove that it is a choice, but the fact is that some people are just gay, or bisexual, or… there's a million ways to be, Harry. Anyone telling you that you have to be one way or another is just looking for a reason to be cruel. I might have thought that after your experience with Miss Eldrich you would have been less conflicted over your sexuality."

"That was different," Harry said. "Sammy was really nice, and Professor Sprout said that she was just a girl born with the wrong body, sometimes the body and the mind don't match up. I'm a boy; my body's fine, but boys are supposed to like girls."

"Most boys like girls," Professor Lupin said. "That doesn't mean there's anything wrong with a boy liking other boys. Most people like steak, Harry, but we don't ascribe a moral failing to someone who is a vegetarian. The only morality that should accompany sexuality, or anything really, lies in how we treat others."

Their food arrived.

"I think it's time I told you some different stories about my time at school," Professor Lupin said.

Harry nodded, trying to make the feeling that he was lost at sea go away. He had placed so much hope into this meeting. He had convinced himself that he could fix everything if he could just make himself straight, but now he was still faced with the prospect of losing everything.

Professor Lupin told a story about falling for one of his best friends and eventually finding his feelings were returned. After a while, Harry took interest. He started to calm down a bit. It didn't sound like something terrible. Harry picked at his meal and tried not to think about how the boy he wanted to fall for him above all others didn't want anything to do with him and probably definitely had feelings for a girl. Maybe there wasn't anything wrong with being gay, but that didn't mean it was something he wanted for himself. He didn't want to lose the people around him for something that was out of his control.

Harry took the book with him when he left, for whatever good it would do him. He didn't feel up for company. He didn't really feel up for anything at the moment. In his worry and disappointment, he had forgotten to wear his invisibility cloak. The only person who spotted him though was Hagrid.

"There ya are Harry," Hagrid said. "Enjoying your very first Hogsmeade weekend?"

Harry schooled his glum expression.

"Oh, I've been before with my dad," Harry said, putting on a bit of cheer. "What brings you to town?"

"Oh, I was looking to get some heavier gloves for handling the skrewts. Burnt through my last pair yesterday. Now what brings you down here all by yourself?"

"Just needed some time to myself," Harry said. "Hermione's running Ron through a bunch of spells to get him ready for Tuesday."

"Well tell him I'm rooting for him," Hagrid said. "Or are the two of you still fighting?"

"We're not fighting," Harry said. "We're just… not friends."
"I don't understand ya lot," Hagrid said, shaking his head. "What you all went through together, I wouldn't have reckoned that you'd ever split. How are you doing with it all?"

Harry shrugged. "It is what it is."

"Tell you what, I have something of a surprise to show you, but it's a secret, you've still got your cloak haven't ya?"

"Of course," Harry said, it was in his pocket.

"Great, meet me at my cabin tonight at midnight," Hagrid said.

"Midnight?" Harry asked.

"Has to be late," Hagrid said. "But it's worth it. You'll see. Should cheer you up. You'll come won't you?"

"Of course," Harry said. What on earth could Hagrid have to show him in secret at midnight?

"Right," Hagrid said. "Well if you don't have company, why don't you join me?"

"Sure," Harry said, trying hard not to act like he just wanted to curl up in bed and ignore the world for the rest of the day.

After a while, Harry eventually broke off from Hagrid and made his way back to the castle where he did actually make good on his plan to cloister himself away from everyone else in the dorm. He buried Professor Lupin's book at the bottom of his trunk.

He went to dinner that night, if only because he was worried that his dad would come and find him otherwise. He faked going to bed early and got under his invisibility cloak and waited for someone to open the portrait hole. There was still time until midnight so Harry spent most of the evening practicing occlumency as he meandered around the castle. If he couldn't make himself straight, maybe he could get really good at pretending to be straight.

Eventually, midnight approached and Harry found himself outside Hagrid's cabin by the edge of the forest. He removed the silencing spell encased in his cloak and knocked on the door. Hagrid answered promptly.

"That you, Harry?" he asked.

"Yeah," Harry said from within his cloak.

"Right, come on in, it's almost time to go," Hagrid said.

"Where are we going?"

"You'll see, it's a surprise," Hagrid said. "Scone?" he offered.

Harry was saved from Hagrid's baking by another knock on the door.

"Keep the cloak on," Hagrid said. He opened the door and standing outside was Madame Maxime.

"Bong sewer," Hagrid said genially, butchering the French.

"Good evening," Madame Maxime said. "So what is this surprise you wish to show me?"
So Harry wasn't the only one in the dark, but what could Hagrid want to show the both of them.

"Well it's a surprise," Hagrid said, winking at her. "You're going to love it, just you wait. Mind, you can't tell anyone I showed ya, it's supposed ta be a secret."

"But of course," Madame Maxime said, and now she was batting her eyelashes at Hagrid. What on earth was going on?

Hagrid stepped out into the night and paused a moment to let Harry out before closing his door. Extending his arm to Madame Maxime, the two stepped off towards the forbidden forest.

Was Hagrid on a date? Was that what he wanted Harry to see? Harry followed dubiously behind, keeping his distance. He had to jog a bit since the two in front of him had considerably longer legs and looked like they were just out for a stroll. They started skirting the edge of the forest. They went for a fairly long time and Harry could no longer see the castle behind him. He was starting to get winded when out in front of him he saw a bit of flame. He heard yelling. He grabbed his wand, just in case. They were coming upon a bend in the tree line and in front of him, Madame Maxime let out a gasp.

"Dragons," she breathed out, a bit of a gasp and a bit of awe.

Harry caught up, giving them a berth, glad for his silencing insoles and mindful of his heavy breathing. In front of him, in a clearing, were four dragons in chains, angry and spiteful as a couple dozen men ran around them trying to keep them contained.

"Stunners on three," one of the men yelled.

Red spell light competed with dragon fire to light up the clearing. It looked like each dragon had about six handlers and they had all fired at once. The dragons all went down, their massive bodies sent small tremors through the surrounding forest, a few small fires still burned around the clearing.

"All right there, Charlie?" Hagrid called out.

"Hagrid," Charlie Weasley greeted before frowning. "Oh, I didn't know you'd be bringing her. The champions aren't supposed to know."

"Oh, I thought she'd like to see 'em," Hagrid said, though all the attention he had previously been paying to the woman on his arm had been shifted to the dragons. "So you haven't told Ron?"

"Can't," Charlie said. "We all took vows not to help any of the champions when they contracted us back in July. I couldn't even tell mum, 'cause I know she'd tell Ron right away. Also, she'd have kittens."

"How is your mum?" Hagrid asked.

"Worried sick," Charlie said. "It's all she writes about in her letters. Except when she's been ranting about the Prophet. First she got to have a field day over Harry, and now I'm sure she's sending howlers over what they wrote about Ron. How's he holding up?"

"He's doing all right," Hagrid said in that way of his where you could tell he wasn't being honest. Charlie sighed. "Have you taught anything about dragons in class?"

"Here and there," Hagrid said. "I try to keep all of my lessons to things they can see in front of
them. Still, he's a good lad, I think he'll do all right."

"I feel like someone's been trying to kill off my youngest siblings these past few years," Charlie said. "Now I get to bring a dragon to Hogwarts for him to fight."

"So they have to fight them?" Hagrid asked, frowning.

"I don't think so," Charlie said. "Just get past them. Though, mind, they specifically asked for brooding mothers, so there's probably going to be a fight unless they know their stuff. Mind you, I've got a count of all the eggs, so don't get any ideas Hagrid."

"No, of course not," Hagrid said. "That a Hungarian Horntail?"

"It is," Charlie said. "And I really hope Ron doesn't get her. Probably the most dangerous of the lot; her tail is almost as dangerous as her front. That one there, now, is a Common Welsh Green, and we've got a Sweedish Short-Snout over there, and I'm on this girl's team here; Becky's a Chinese Fireball."

"They're beautiful," Hagrid said, turning to Madame Maxime. "Don't you think?"

"Oh, yes," she said. "Such a shame to see them chained like this."

"Well you wouldn't want to see them without them right now," Charlie said. "They did not like the trip at all. It's a good thing they have a few days to calm down before the competition."

As they had been talking, the other handlers had been tightening chains and securing them to the ground with heavy metal spikes. Eventually the talk turned to Charlie's work in Romania and by the time Hagrid and Madame Maxime started walking around, admiring the dragons, Harry was ready to leave.

The horror of the concept of Ron facing off against a dragon was just sinking in when Harry saw off in the trees another figure. He got closer and saw Karkaroff spying on the clearing. Well, so much for it being a secret. He shook his head and kept going. It didn't matter. He'd stopped caring about who won the damned thing the night the goblet had spat out his name.

It took him a good long while to walk back to the castle. It was half past one when he finally walked back into the common room. He had just slipped off his invisibility cloak when he heard the rapid patter of feet down the stairs to the boys dorms. Ron entered the common room in a rush, freezing when he spotted Harry, standing by the entryway.

"Oh," Ron said, his chest heaving and a bit of a wild look on his face.

"What's wrong?" Harry asked.

"You were-" Ron started to say before shaking his head. "Never mind."

"Were you checking up on me?" Harry asked, perplexed.

"No," Ron said. "Just…" He sighed, still a bit out of breath. "Look, I just, now and then, after, um, certain bad dreams… Can we just forget about it?"

"I thought the age line helped," Harry said.

"It helps," Ron said. "It didn't just fix me. What were you even doing out?"

"Um," Harry said. "I'll tell you, but, well you probably won't get back to sleep so, maybe in the
"Look Potter, let's just say I'm probably not getting any sleep anytime soon," Ron said. "So let's not drag this out, just tell me whatever you've got to tell me and be done with it."

"Right," Harry said, his cheeks going red. "Hagrid had me meet him tonight. He showed me what they've got for the first task. It's dragons."

"Bloody fucking hell," Ron exclaimed.

"Yeah," Harry said.

"How in Merlin's name am I supposed to fight a dragon?" Ron asked.

"Charlie said he didn't think you have to fight the dragon, just get past it," Harry said.

"Charlie?" Ron asked.

"He was one of the dragon handlers," Harry said. "Um, he said he'd have told you but he's, like, bound not to help any of the champions."

"What else did he say?" Ron asked.

"Oh, um, your mum's really worried and so is he," Harry said.

"About the task!" Ron said, frantic.

"Oh," Harry said. "Um, the Hungarian Horntail is the worst, and um, well, not much actually. Oh, hey, he did say that they're all nesting mothers for some reason."

"Shit," Ron said. "Anything else?"

"Not really," Harry said. "Charlie didn't know I was there. He mostly talked to Hagrid about what he's been up to in Romania."

"Right," Ron said. "Okay… okay, um, I just need to… I just need to get past a nesting dragon or something. That's all right. I'll just, um, read about dragons, yeah. I've got what… two and a half days. That's all right. Okay… shit. I need Hermione."

"Right," Harry said. "I'll um, go try knocking at their dorm."

"You can't," Ron said. "The stairway's charmed against boys."

"Oh," Harry said. "Well, then, um…"

"Just go to bed Harry," Ron said.

"Oh," Harry said, red faced, not sure why he was surprised to have been dismissed. "Yeah, I'll just…" He headed towards the stairs.

Harry didn't know about Ron, but he didn't get much sleep that night himself.

It was maddening, Harry thought, to be relegated to a position of not caring. Ron didn't want his help, he kept reminding himself. Ron had Hermione, he had his siblings. He didn't need Harry and that was that. He found himself in the library, working on his homework alone, keeping an eye on
Ron as he stressed and poured over books that were piled high at another table.

He shouldn't be in the library. He definitely shouldn't be practically spying on Ron. He was very worried though. It had taken six full grown wizards to stun each dragon the night before. What was Ron supposed to do against one alone? Dragons could spew fire, tear you apart with their claws, devour you whole, club you with their tail, or carry you off and drop you from a hundred feet up. How could Ron defend against that? How were any of the champions supposed to defend against that?

Cedric didn't even know. Fleur Delacour probably knew, and Viktor Krum definitely did. Cedric was probably the only one who didn't know. Harry frowned, a common expression for him that day, and got up to leave. He shouldn't be in the library anyways. It took a bit of asking around for Harry to find Cedric.

"Hey," Cedric said, flashing his usual grin. "What's happening? You look too serious; it's the weekend, wanna fly?"

"Oh, um, homework," Harry said. "Haven't you been preparing for Tuesday?"

"I've got a schedule," Cedric said. "If I don't get a bit of fun in, though, I'll just stress myself out before the first task."

"Right," Harry said. "Well, I don't want to get in the way of that, but, well I found out what the first task is and I think you're the only champion who doesn't know."

"How'd you find out?" Cedric asked.

"Oh," Harry said. He didn't want to get Hagrid in trouble. "You know me, always finding stuff I'm not supposed to. But I know Madame Maxime knows and I saw Karkaroff snooping, and I already told Ron, so, well anyways, the first task is dragons. There're four of them. One for each champion."

"Oh," Cedric said. "Dragons. Well they used to always have some sort of creature for at least one of the tasks, so I've been reading up, but, huh, didn't really expect them to actually go for dragons. All right, well, I guess I have some reading to do."

"Good luck," Harry said. "I think Hermione's pulled all of the books on dragons."

"I'll check with Cho," Cedric said. "Ravenclaw has a good library in their common room."

"Right," Harry said. "Well, I guess I'll just um… I've got homework, so…"

"Yeah," Cedric said. "Hey, thanks though, for telling me. Who are you going to be rooting for on Tuesday?"

"I think I'll be rooting for no one to get fried by a dragon," Harry said.

"They said they'd make sure no one died," Cedric said. "Although…"

"Dragons," Harry said. "I don't have that much faith."

"Hm," said Cedric.

"Well, good luck," Harry said. "Don't die."

"I'll try my hardest," Cedric said.
He told himself he shouldn't, but he returned to the library. He buried himself in his homework and tried not to look over at Ron's table. He didn't notice when Hermione walked over. "We could use some help over here," Hermione said. "There are a lot of books for us to be referencing."

"There's five of you," Harry said. "I'm sure you don't need me. Besides, Ron doesn't want my help."

"Obviously he needs your help since we wouldn't be studying about dragons right now if it wasn't for you," Hermione said. "Now pack up your homework and come help us out. I don't have time for this."

A part of Harry told him to rebel against the order, but a glance over at Ron showed him a pale boy who was trying to reference two books at once while he wrote down notes, looking about ready to pass out. Even the twins looked worried and focused.

"Alright," Harry said. "But he doesn't want to talk to me, so he can do his thing and I'm going to do my thing."

"That's fine," Hermione said.

Harry moved over to the other table. Ron spared him a glance but no words were spoken between the two of them. Hermione had him start looking at spells that involved fire across a scattering of books. They all worked on their own thing for a while.

Ginny broke the silence a while later. "What about potions?" she asked.

"I can't take anything with me," Ron said. "Just my wand, remember?"

"What if you take something ahead of time?" Ginny asked.

"What, like an enhancement potion?" Ron asked, glancing at Harry out of the corner of his eye.

"It worked for Harry," Ginny said.

"Would that be cheating?" Hermione asked.

"They said I couldn't bring anything," Ron said. "That was like, the only rule. I don't know if having it in my body would count, though."

"Let's say you can, though," Fred said. "Is it worth it? We saw what happened to Harry."

"He'd have to take it right before the task starts," Harry said. "He'd also have to finish the task as soon as he could. If it wore off in the middle he'd wind up a sitting duck like me. Though I used three potions, so that was worse but still, you'd be taking a risk. Stacking greatly reduces their effective times, so you should just pick one."

"So it would have to be speed then," George said. "You could dodge better and you could do whatever you have to do as soon as possible."

"What about other potions," Hermione asked. "There's a potion to make you impervious to physical attacks."

"They might not stack," Harry said. "Most enhancement potions stack together, though you have diminished returns, but Mercury's Elixir, at least, has vispit bile in it and that reacts with a lot of other potions."
"What about forgetting about potions," Ginny said. "If they're so problematic. There are spells for that stuff aren't there?"

"That's NEWT level," Hermione said. "We have two days to teach Ron and he's going to have a lot more to learn besides that. I don't think we can focus our resources on this.

"Well then what about rituals? There are rituals for strength and agility, aren't there?" Ginny said.

"Yeah," George said. "We'll just go ask Malfoy if he has any suggestions."

"There are other old families in the school," Ginny said.

"My dad might know some," Harry said. "He used to study old magic."

"You're all forgetting there was a reason they banned all that stuff ages ago," Ron said. "The stories about people getting better skills or strength or whatnot, those rituals always had horrible sacrifices or unpredictable shit that happens also. There's a reason it's all taboo."

"A lot of those are just stories, though," Fred said.

"They're trying to scare you away from that stuff," George said.

"Yeah," Ron said. "For a reason. Look, let's just run with the potions thing."

"Well we need more information," Hermione said. "Ginny, could you go ask Professor McGonagall about the rules for the first task? Find out if Ron can start the task with an enhancement potion in his system. Fred, George, you two figure out what Ron could take."

"We've got our potions references in our dorm," Fred said. The two of them got up and left after Ginny.

"Right," Hermione said, pulling out her wand. "Haerant," she said, pointing it at Harry before repeating the spell on Ron.

"Hey," Ron said. "What was that?"

"Sticking spell," Hermione said. "I've had enough, we're talking."

"We're in the library, Hermione," Ron said. "You just hexed us in the library."

"Oh, it's not even a jinx," Hermione said, delimiting a silencing spell around them. She'd actually learned delimiting the year prior from Ron who'd been using it for his project. "Besides, I don't care, you two need to talk."

"Don't think I won't wriggle out of my robes," Ron said.

"Want me to really start hexing you?" Hermione asked.

Harry stared agape. "There's nothing to talk about," he said when she turned her attention towards him.

"Yes, there is," Hermione said. "Now this has gone on long enough. Harry, why don't you want to be Ron's friend anymore?"

"It's not about that," Harry said. "He got fed up with me, I can't make him be my friend."
"Oh don't even," Ron said. "This is about you getting fed up with having a head case for a friend."

"Oh, like you weren't just so desperate to be done with that whole life debt thing so you could ditch me," Harry said.

"I didn't do that so I could be done with you," Ron said. "I did it to protect you. I wanted to protect you."

"Well I lost everything to keep you safe," Harry hissed. "I only asked one thing of you."

"Saving my life didn't make you my master," Ron said. "You don't get to decide that."

"I know that," Harry said.

"Stop it," Hermione said. "The both of you."

"You wanted us to talk," Ron accused.

"I wanted you to answer my question," Hermione said. "Now stop being dramatic. You didn't lose everything, Harry. Harry's not trying to order you around, Ron, he's just scared for you. Now maybe you'll answer my question. Why don't you want to be friends with Harry anymore?"

"He's the one," Ron said, pointing at Harry.

"Well it seems that's both of your answers," Hermione said. "So let's be clear. Ron, did you want to stop being friends with Harry?"

Ron went red in the face. He stayed silent for a bit.

"Ron," Hermione said.

"Well of course I wanted to stay friends," Ron said. "Why wouldn't I?"

"Gee, I don't know, maybe it's because the Dursleys fucked me up," Harry said, throwing Ron's words back at him.

"Well of course you're fucked up," Ron said. "I figured that out first year. That doesn't mean I didn't want to be friends with you."

"Why would you?" Harry asked.

"Because you were my best mate and I didn't want to stop being your friend just because you have some baggage." He said it accusingly.

"Well, stop acting like I got fed up with you for having problems after Greyback," Harry said. "You put up with so much, you let me sob on your shoulder. Why would you think I was just going to dump you because you've been having trouble sleeping."

"It's not just trouble sleeping, it's everything," Ron said. "It's freaking out every other day, and it's being afraid all the time, and it's waking you up in the middle of the night, and it's just everything. I'm useless to you."

"You don't need to be able to fight dark wizards, which you have, by the way, to be my friend. That's all I ever wanted; to be your friend. I didn't need a sidekick," Harry said.

"Harry," Hermione said. "Answer my question."
"Well of course I didn't want to stop being Ron's friend," Harry said. "But it was inevitable, wasn't it."

"Of course it wasn't inevitable," Ron said.

"Do you want to be friends with Harry again?" Hermione asked.

Ron swallowed. "Yeah," he said. "Of course I do."

Harry's breath hitched. Hermione turned towards him.

He opened his mouth and closed it again. Ron looked down, red-faced.

"You're just going to figure me out eventually, aren't you," Harry said. "So what's the point. What's the point if I have to go through this all over again?"

Ron turned his head and crossed his arms.

"Figure what out, Harry?" Hermione asked.

"Everything," Harry said, feeling cornered.

"Try me," Hermione said.

Harry shook his head. He couldn't say any of that out loud.

"If it's all inevitable, then why not just tell us now?" Hermione asked.

Harry stayed silent, he could feel his secrets welling up inside of him. He could feel the pain of them just as he could feel the pain of losing his friends and his dad.

"Harry," Hermione said.

"I'm gay," Harry shouted, before his hands slapped over his mouth. He looked around, instantly grateful for the silencing spell. He looked back at Hermione and said, "I'm gay, all right? And I tried really hard not to be, but there aren't even any spells for it, I looked everywhere. I tried to use occlumency and I tried to think about girls the way I think about guys, I even tried using a stinging hex every time I had a thought like that, but it wasn't any good. So just… you see? I keep waiting for someone to figure it out and then everything's going to go even more to shit, so you know what? What's the point in fixing things if they're just going to get broken again?"

"That's it?" Ron exclaimed. Harry's head swung towards him. Ron just shrugged. "Well, you should have talked to Charlie when you had the chance. Is he still here? I was hoping to go talk to him when I had a chance."

"What?" Harry asked.

"Charlie's totally gay," Ron said. "He's also, like, my favorite brother."

"You don't care that your brother's gay?" Harry asked.

Ron shrugged again. "It was weird for a bit," he said. "Mum and dad didn't know how to deal with it at first. They were really worried. But he was still Charlie, wasn't he, so we figured it didn't matter. Mum just told him he'd have to adopt so she could have grand babies or something. Fred and George tease him about it, but then again, they'd teased Bill about having girlfriends back before he moved to Egypt to get away from them. Ginny was just disappointed Charlie didn't have
some sort of super fashion sense after he came out.

Harry remembered over the summer how much everyone had been so happy to have Bill and Charlie home. He remembered Ron turning to Charlie for advice and affection.

"You wouldn't care about sharing a dorm with a gay guy, though?" Harry asked.

"Well I have been already, haven't I," Ron said. "And I've already got one gay brother, so um…" his ears turned red. "What's one more."

"Really?" Harry asked, feeling choked up.

"Yeah," Ron said. "Do you, um, want to be friends again."

"Yes," Harry said, feeling overwhelmed in the moment.

"Hey," Ron said. "This is a good thing, why are you crying?"

"I'm not crying," Harry said, wiping his eyes.

"You were literally just talking about sobbing on my shoulder," Ron said.

"Fine, I'm crying, I'm just happy," Harry said.

"Well I am too," Ron said. "I told you didn't I, next time you feel bad about yourself, you run it by me."

"Yeah, well you to," Harry said.

Harry felt like the whole conversation had been surreal. He couldn't believe he'd just told his friends he was gay. He couldn't believe how it had turned out. He turned to Hermione, who was unusually quiet.

"Umm…" Harry said.

"Well," Hermione said. "I mean you're still Harry, of course."

"Sure," Harry said.

"And, well, it's not like it's against the rules," Hermione said.

"Should we ask Professor McGonagall?" Ron asked.

"Well, of course it doesn't matter," Hermione said. She got up and gave Harry a hug, which was awkward for Harry since he was still stuck to his chair.

"Oh," Hermione said. "Right, of course." She pulled out her wand and unstuck the both of them.

"So we're all friends again?" Ron asked.

"Well, of course," Hermione said.

"Cool," Ron said.

Harry grinned. It all felt so unreal. There was relief; overwhelming relief. Riding underneath it, though, was caution. Nothing was permanent, he reminded himself. Ron and Hermione were just two people. Two of the best people he knew. He couldn't get complacent, and he couldn't let
himself ever think that things couldn't or wouldn't go wrong again.

The twins returned first, a number of books and scrolls in their arms.

"The potion you're looking for's called Rhino's Build," Fred said. "I'm pretty sure you could get gored by a rhino and you'd be fine."

"We think we can make Mercury Elixir stack with it, but we'd need to swap out Dzjeet Skin for Oliphant Skin and that's going to reduce effectiveness," George said.

"And we can't tell you by how much," Fred said.

"Anything that could make me fireproof?" Ron asked.

"Not unless you have a week and salamander eggs laid at high noon," George said. "You're better off with flame-freeze."

"Dragons breath is too powerful, it can overpower flame-freeze if I don't cast it strong enough," Ron said. "And I probably can't cast it strong enough."

"You don't have any other options," Fred said. "Besides not getting hit in the first place."

"Yeah, just do your best," George said. "That's what mum always said."

"We'll be nearby with buckets," Fred said. "Just in case."

"Not to put you out, though," George said.

"To scoop up the ashes," Fred said.

"You know how sentimental dad gets," George said.

"Ha ha," Ron said. That was when Ginny came back.

"What did you find out?" Hermione asked.

Ginny had always been shy around Harry, but he'd noticed over the summer that Ginny had a hard time making eye contact with Hermione also, which must have been awkward since they'd shared a room for the last week of summer.

"He can't bring any potions with him to the tournament," Ginny said, she turned to her brother. "When you leave the castle, the only magical item you can have on you is your wand. He can't have anything he wouldn't normally have. Anything you do beforehand, though, is fair game."

"Well how long before he competes does he have to leave the castle?" George asked.

"Too long for an enhancement potion," Harry said.

"Well at least we can optimize the Rhino's Build," Fred said.

"Though that won't last forever either, but at least you won't be hobbled when it wears off," George added.

"How long will it last?" Hermione asked.

"It depends on a lot of things," Fred said. "You're not limited by magical properties, you're limited
by how fast your body metabolizes the dandelion wine."

"Wine?" Ron asked. "You want me drunk while I'm facing a dragon?"

"There's not that much in there," Fred said. "So you're probably going to metabolize it in an hour or two. You'll want to keep calm after you take it before you compete so you don't have your heart beating too quickly."

"Right," Ron said. "Just keep calm."

"So what's Ron's strategy for the event then?" Harry asked. "If brute speed isn't an option."

"Strategy!" Ron exclaimed.

"Yeah?"

"It's like chess," Ron said.

"Umm sure," Harry said. "But, um, is it, though?"

"Every player has strengths and weaknesses," Ron said. "Their own style. I don't play Percy the same way I play Charlie."

"It's not a sphinx Ron," Fred said.

"You can't just challenge it to a game of wits," George said.

"You said one of them was worse than the others, didn't you?" Ron asked.

"The Hungarian Horntail," Harry said.

"So are they all different?"

"Yeah," Harry said.

"Okay," Ron said. "What were the others?"

"Oh," Harry said. "Um, well there was a Chinese Fireball. Charlie was responsible for that one. There was also a green… um, a Welsh Green, and…" Harry thought back, but it wasn't coming to him. He occluded, focusing on the night prior. "A Swedish Short-Snout," he said.

"Right," Ron said. "They're like players on a board, right? You don't attack a castle the same way you go after a rook. What was special about the horntail?"

"It had spikes on its tail," Harry said. "And it was more temperamental, I think."

"Okay," Ron said. "We need to learn as much as we can about each breed."

"All right," Fred said. "George and I'll start brewing."

"You lot work the dragon breed angle," George said. "We'll want a list of spells for Ron to learn tomorrow."

"Don't bother with higher level spells," Fred said. "There's no point spending all day learning one spell when he can learn a dozen others."

"Right," Ron said. "Harry, do you want to check out more about the horntail. I'll take the short
snout, Hermione can take the green, and Ginny can have the fireball."

"Sounds good," Harry said.

"You two are getting along pretty well," George observed.

"We're friends again," Ron said.

"Did you kiss and make up?" Fred asked.

Ron rolled his eyes.

"Well..." Harry said, reminding himself of how excited all of the siblings had been when their older brother had visited that summer. "I'm gay, but I'm pretty sure Ron likes girls, so we didn't think a kiss was the best way to go with things." It was so weird saying it out loud.

Ginny gasped.

"That's not something I'm spreading around," Harry said.

"For real, though?" George asked.

"Yeah," Harry said.

"I mean, I thought for sure you two were hiding a romance this summer," Fred said.

"What?" Ron asked.

George shrugged.

"Hah," Ron said. "Shows what you know."

"Oh, well, you're right," George said. "We just don't know anything."

"Hey," Fred said. "You don't mind if there're any weird side effects from this potion, right?"

"Yeah. You wouldn't mind doing the first task with neon pink skin, right?" George asked.

"It's just we don't know much about this potions stuff," Fred said.

"Might mess it up a little bit," George said.

"Don't you dare," Ron said. "Charlie's going to be there, I'll sick him on the both of you."

"Well, I mean we'll try our best," George said.

"As terrible as our best is, you know," Fred said.

"But who knows what might happen," George said.

"I guess you won't know until you take it," Fred said.

"Right before you step out in front of the whole school and our family and the Ministry," George said.

"Do you think there's any sort of potion that could vanish someone's clothes?" Fred asked.
"Ron should be fine with that," Ginny said. "He told mum he'd rather go starkers than wear the dress robes she got him from the thrift shop."

"Ginny," Ron said.

Harry blushed.

"Don't you have brewing to do?" Hermione asked.

"Boy and how," Fred said.

"Just once in your lives..." Ron called after them.

Ginny punched her brother in the shoulder. "They won't do anything, they don't want you distracted during the tournament," she said. "Right Harry?"

"Um, yeah," Harry said, not used to Ginny directly addressing him.

Ron looked between the two of them and snorted.

"Well, anyway," Hermione said. "Let's get started, shall we."

There wasn't that much on each individual breed. They collected everything they could and consolidated their notes and Harry went to see Hagrid to figure out if they were missing anything. Hagrid gave a passing comment about not being supposed to help any of the champions but said he'd love to talk to Harry about dragons. Harry compiled everything and went back to the castle. Before he went back to the library though he went to see his dad.

"Harry," his dad greeted, opening his office door. "How are you?"

"Great," Harry said. "Ron has to face a dragon, but we're friends again and I'm going to help him study and I have to cancel with Vicky tonight."

"It seems a lot has happened today," his dad said. "We'll have to catch up when the first task is over."

"Yeah," Harry said, having no intention to tell his dad about the linchpin of the conversation. "Hey, is there a reason I don't have Rhino's Build for my Bandolier?"

"It isn't shelf stable," his dad said. "Also, you're most likely to be attacked with a magical attack, rather than a physical one. Is Mr. Weasley looking into potions?"

"Yeah," Harry said. "The twins have it figured. I've got to get back. See you around."

"Good bye Harry."

Harry went back to the library with all of his notes where Hermione, Ron, and Ginny were still compiling spells.

"Okay," Hermione said. "Remember, there's only so much you can do between now and Tuesday, so whatever strategy we work out should be as simple as possible. Don't get so caught up in the differences between each dragon that you ignore the things all four have in common."

"Right," Ron said. "Let's get started."

By dinner time, they had a list of a dozen spells that Ron needed to either learn or get better at.
Only a couple of them were specific to any one dragon. Hermione wanted Ron to learn three from the list before bed that night.

"I suppose we should skip classes tomorrow," Hermione said.

"Hermione Granger!" Ron exclaimed. "Skipping classes willy-nilly, I should report you to a prefect."

"Just be careful they don't make you a prefect," Harry said. "I mean first you're reporting on your fellow students, then you're winning tournaments, you'll be a shoo-in."

"With my grades this quarter?" Ron asked.

"Some things are more important than grades," Hermione said.

"Are you feeling alright?" Harry asked.

"Come on," Hermione said. "We can't practice spells in here."

They got to bed late that night. Ron still looked dangerously sleep deprived. A week of what was still poor sleep was not enough to erase the damage done. He was also now completely disheveled after practicing some of his spells. They both went to get ready for bed.

"Are you going to be all right tonight?" Harry asked, after he had brushed his teeth.

"Sure," Ron said from within his shower stall. "At least now I feel like I've got a plan. Ask me tomorrow night, though. I don't know if I'll be able to sleep the night before."

"Yeah," Harry said. "I doubt I'll get much sleep tomorrow night either. You can, um, wake me up, if you want."

"We'll see," Ron said. "So, um, everything's good, right?"

"Yeah," Harry said. "I mean, if everything's good with you."

"Mate, I'd still want to be your friend if you had a thing for Malfoy," Ron said. "Just, you know, please don't."

"Eww," Harry said. "Not a chance."

"Good," Ron said.

"Though, I mean, he is sort of cute," Harry said, with a big blush. He wished he'd actually talked with Professor Lupin when he'd had the chance. He had zero experience talking about this stuff with anyone.

"Uuugh," Ron said.

"Teasing," Harry said. "Just teasing." He started getting ready to hop in the shower.

"Yeah, well, if you ever come out to the school," Ron said. "I'm totally telling him you said that."

"Well that's never happening," Harry said.

"It wouldn't be the worst thing," Ron said. "A lot of people are okay with it."
"A lot aren't," Harry said.

"Miller doesn't get too much flack," Ron said.

Thomas Miller was perhaps the only other gay student in Hogwarts, at least as far as Harry knew. He was a Ravenclaw fifth year who'd beenouted the year prior some time while Harry, Ron and Hermione had been hiding from the rest of the school in the aftermath of Greyback. Harry recalled having spent Christmas with the boy in the dungeons during the Christmas party. Another student who hadn't gone home for the holidays.

"Miller isn't the school celebrity," Harry said. "Everyone has an opinion about me. A lot of people wouldn't be okay with me being gay."

"Are you?" Ron asked.

Harry thought about it. "I really really wasn't. I don't think I was until you said you still, um, wanted to be my friend. I still feel like… it's something I should be embarrassed about, but- I don't know. I don't know how I'm supposed to feel about it. I still wish I wasn't."

"Is that more Dursley stuff?" Ron asked.

"It's everybody stuff," Harry said, stepping into the stall next to Ron's and turning the water on full blast. "I mean, you can't act like it isn't an issue. Sure, the Dursleys had plenty to say about gay people and stuff about perverts and hell and whatnot. I remember Aunt Petunia telling Dudley to stay away from this one teacher at primary 'cause he had a ponytail and an earring and there were rumors or something. She made it sound like he was a monster. Hell, after that, I was scarred of him. They'd make comments about me too. Like they knew. But you know what, there were lots of other people who'd say stuff. Like the other kids would call each other poofter or fairy to be mean."

"Well the Dursleys are rubbish," Ron said. "And so is everyone else. Just, don't feel bad about it."

"Well if you say so," Harry said.

"I do," Ron said. "You know what Charlie told me once?"

"What?" Harry asked.

"You should only feel bad about yourself if you're doing something that hurts someone else."

"Huh," Harry said. Professor Lupin had said something similar. "So does Charlie tell everyone he's gay?"

"He came out at school his seventh year," Ron said. "I don't think he's told all of his co-workers though, I think his boss is a bit of an ass. Are you going to tell your dad?"

"Well... isn't that a loaded question," Harry said.

"Something to think about," Ron said.

"He wants me to tell him," Harry said.

"Your dad wants you to tell him you're gay?" Ron asked.

"Well, more like he knows I'm hiding stuff and he's told me it's all right for me to talk to him about it."
"Charlie tested the waters before he came out," Ron said. "He, like, brought up a classmate who was gay and stuff to see if anyone would freak out or not."

"How old was he?" Harry asked.

"Sixteen," Ron said. "You know, he graduated the year before I came to Hogwarts. I always thought it was unfair I didn't get to go when he was here."

"We'll see about my dad," Harry said. "He's always seemed so proper."

"Depends on your definition of proper," Ron said.

"Yeah," Harry said. "Still, I don't know. It was nice telling you, 'cause you were great about it, but it's not something I can take back, can I?"

"You'll work it out," Ron said.

They finished showering in silence. Harry had a lot to think about. Even with a lot on his mind though, Harry was exhausted and he actually managed to fall asleep easily that night.

The next day was focused on teaching Ron everything on the list. Ron and Hermione completely skipped class, while Harry only went to Transfiguration and Arithmancy to turn in everyone's homework. He felt guilty for having spent so much time on his own homework while Hermione had been helping Ron. He felt like he had wasted so much time on a stupid miscommunication. Professor McGonagall didn't even bat an eye over her two missing students. Harry rather thought that none of the Hogwarts Professors were going to mind. Even Professor Sprout, who had initially been put out over her houses victory being overshadowed had become supportive the closer it came to the first task. They worked non-stop on spells and all three of them were exhausted by the time they got to bed that night. Harry hoped Ron could get some sleep. He was going to need every edge he could get if he was going to come out of the next day unscathed. Ron hadn't even gotten through training unscathed. One of the spells was very energetic and Ron had gotten pretty banged up practicing it.

Harry was vaguely entertaining the idea of talking to Malfoy about another luck ritual when Ron's voice said. "Coming in," through his curtains.

Ron poked his head in and crawled onto the bed. Harry was a bit baffled that Ron would want to be in the same bed with him now that he knew he was gay.

"Shouldn't you try to sleep?" Harry asked, reaching into his nightstand drawer for some chocolate.

"I'm too keyed up," Ron said.

"You learned everything on the list," Harry said, casting fairy lights to dance within the four posts of his bed.

"There's a lot of stuff that never made the list because we figured I couldn't learn it in time."

"You're going to do fine," Harry said.

"We'll see," Ron said, accepting a piece of chocolate from Harry.

They talked for a bit about things the other had missed while they hadn't been talking to each other. Eventually though, Harry had to ask.
"So, what happened Sunday night?" he asked.

Ron ducked his head. "Oh," he said. "Well, I dunno, um, sometimes I have these dreams, and then afterwards I just feel like I need to make sure they weren't real. It's stupid."

"It's not stupid," Harry said. "You dreamed something happened to me?"

Ron shrugged. "Did you know the girls staircase is charmed to turn into a slide if a boy tries to climb it? Found that out the hard way in the middle of the night."

"You were going to go into the girls dorm?" Harry asked.

"I dunno," Ron said. "Id've probably gotten to the door and realized I was being an idiot."

"I've felt like that before," Harry said.

"Like an idiot?"

"Like what if my dream was real and bad stuff happened to certain people," Harry said, looking away from Ron for a bit.

"Well we're all still here," Ron said.

Harry nodded. "I've also been wanting to ask about the whole rope thing," Harry said.

Ron groaned. "Can I persuade you to forget about that?" he asked.

"I mean, I doubt I could," Harry said.

Ron sighed. "It was supposed to vanish itself after a few minutes. They'd pulled me out of class early for this wand inspection thing and when I got out before classes ended I thought I'd have a go at it before everyone got back to the dormitory."

"You tied yourself up?"

"Yeah," Ron said. "It's complicated."

"It looked like when you'd been in the Shrieking Shack," Harry said.

"That was the point," Ron said. "Um, well, I guess it's no secret that I've been scared of just about everything since that whole mess."

"I wouldn't say everything," Harry said.

"Still," Ron said. "I've been on edge and I keep on remembering being in the shack. Not just remembering, though, like it feels like I'm really there. I thought, how am I supposed to do this whole tournament thing if I'm still scared of people who are dead?"

Harry swallowed and nodded for Ron to go on.

"There was this thing in one of those psychology books about getting over fears. It's like you expose yourself to something you're afraid of in a controlled environment till you're not afraid of it anymore."

"You're afraid of getting tied up?"
"No, but I figured it would remind me of being there," Ron said. "It's not like I could expose myself to **him** or anything. But, you know, it did work, didn't it, I did get really freaked out by it."

"Were you supposed to get freaked out?"

"I'm not really that sure how it's supposed to work. The book only really described the technique without actually going into the how-to. I just figured, if I tie myself up for a minute and then, well, you know, I'd see that I was fine and then maybe I'd do it again for longer. I'd conjured the rope, and I thought I'd done a weak enough conjuring I'd be lucky if it lasted a minute, but I guess I misjudged."

"You haven't tried it again, have you?"

"Well that was the last time I tried it," Ron said. "I'd done it twice before, but I'd done a slip knot, so I could undo it really easy, but then, like the moment I started panicking I just pulled myself free so I didn't figure it was working right if I wasn't really stuck for a bit."

"So what do you want to accomplish?"

"I don't want to be scared anymore," Ron said.

"Have you talked to Hermione about it?" Harry asked.

"Not this," Ron said. "I think I knew she'd probably say I shouldn't try anything without talking to a shrink first, but that's not happening and I had to try something. I'd tried a couple of other things before the rope, in a similar vein, but all I ever did was mess myself up. I've got to get better, Harry. I've got to face a dragon, what if I freak out in the middle of the arena?"

"You'll be fine," Harry said.

"How do you know?"

"Because I have faith in you," Harry said.

"Yeah, nice try," Ron said. "You're still scared I'm going to get eaten."

"Yeah, well I'm not supposed to say that right now," Harry said in more jest than he felt. Ron rolled his eyes.

"Hey, come on, that was a good idea with the chess thing," Harry said. "You've got a good chance of doing well."

"You think so?"

"Yeah."

"Mum and dad are going to be there," Ron said. "I'd really rather not die in front of them."

"Well then don't," Harry said.

"Well, I mean if you say not to, I guess I won't," Ron said.

"Good," Harry said. Ron still looked nervous.
"So I told you I was gay," Harry said.

"Yes, you did," Ron said, nodding his head.

"So, now it's your turn," Harry said.

"What, you too?" Ron asked. "I like girls, dude."


"Since when do you want to talk about that stuff?" Ron asked, incredulously.

"I don't," Harry said. "But you're all worried about the dragon, and I think teenagers are supposed to be worried about dating or something." Also, Harry thought that if he had some sort of confirmation then he could finally get over his crush on his best friend. Even when they hadn't been speaking to one another, it hadn't gone anywhere.

"Well who says I like anyone in particular?" Ron asked.

Harry shrugged.

"Well what about you?" Ron asked.

"You want a list?" Harry asked, his cheeks felt very warm.

"Yeah," Ron said. "And I want it alphabetized."

That would put Ron last.

Harry opened his mouth but no names would come out.

"Oh, you can't even tell me one," Ron accused.

Harry ducked his head, blushing more. "Umm,"

"Don't say Malfoy," Ron said.

Harry was going to regret saying that. "Cedric," he said eventually

"Oh, great," Ron said. "You've got a crush on my competition. You will root for me, won't you?"

"Of course I will," Harry said. "And I didn't say I had a crush on him."

"So you like pretty boys, huh?" Ron asked with a smirk. "You didn't have a thing for Lockheart did you?"

Harry scowled. "I hated him the moment I met him," he said. "Besides, I didn't like anyone like that back then."

"So when did you know?" Ron asked.

"Quidditch Cup," Harry said. "The Veela didn't do anything for me. I'd been in denial for a couple months at that point, though. Okay, now it really is your turn."

"Uhhh," Ron said.

"I mean I could guess," Harry said.
"Is it obvious?" Ron asked.

"To me it is," Harry said. "But then again I spend most of my time with the two of you."

"You don't have any idea how difficult this is," Ron said. "I mean here I am trying to learn everything I can so I don't get fried tomorrow and I spend half my time hoping I can do something to impress her, when in reality I'm just going to be running around trying not to get stomped on."

"I think she's already impressed," Harry said.

"Yeah, right," Ron said. "She spent the past few weeks cramming spells into my head that she could have learned in her sleep. Hermione's just really special and I almost lost her and sometimes I feel like she's the only one who could understand me after everything that happened, and I know we fight a lot, but I just always have this feeling like I want to be next to her and make sure she's all right, even though I couldn't protect her when she needed me to."

Confirmation did nothing.

"She said you did protect her," Harry said. "She said you kept their attention on you."

Ron looked down.

"Part of that was trying to distract them," he said. "Greyback especially. He had to do all sorts of stuff to throw off magical trackers. He'd already had it set up so he'd know if the ministry was trying another trace on the three of us and when they did he'd have to counter it. I figured if I could get him to mess up... but yeah, other times he'd come back to... gloat and be horrible and I just... I'd get so angry and I didn't even want him looking at Hermione."

Harry remembered how black and blue Ron had been when he'd found them. Looking at him now under the pale lights Harry saw him hunched in on himself, looking like his mind was off somewhere else.

"I shouldn't be talking about this," Ron said shaking his head. "Happy thoughts."

"I think Hermione's going to be impressed tomorrow," Harry said.

"She'll probably draw up her own scoring card and critique my spell casting," Ron said.

Harry laughed. "Yeah, well, I've been impressed, you know? With everything you've got going on, you just keep on moving forward."

"Well, what other choice do I have?"

"I've gotten a bit partial to just not getting out of bed," Harry said.

"Did you really do that?"

"Yeah," Harry said. "Did Hermione tell you?"

"She said you were miserable," Ron said.

"Yeah, well she said you were miserable too," Harry said.

"Erm, let's not do that again," Ron said.

"Okay," Harry said.
There was a bit of silence.

"Are you sure you can't sleep, 'cause you look exhausted," Harry said.

"I always look exhausted," Ron said.

"Does the age line work or were you just humoring everybody?" Harry asked.

"It works," Ron said. "For the most part, it just helps me feel like I can relax enough to go to sleep. I don't have as many nightmares, but they're still there."

"I think you should try to sleep again," Harry said. "You're going to need all the sleep you can get before tomorrow."

"I'm too excited," Ron said.

"Want me to read you a bedtime story?" Harry teased.

"Yeah," Ron said. "Why not?"

"Um, well, maybe because the only novels I have are murder mysteries," Harry said. He'd been joking about the bedtime story.

"I like murder mysteries," Ron said.

"How about I keep watch tonight," Harry said. "You'll be protected by the age line and me."

"You need your sleep too," Ron said.

"Not as much as you do," Harry said. "Come on, Hermione and your siblings took their turns. Now it's mine."

"I mean you could just go to bed after I fall asleep," Ron said.

"But I won't," Harry said.

"You want to stay up all night?" Ron asked.

"I want you to sleep all night," Harry said.

"Alright," Ron said. "Come on then, bring a book or something. You'd better not fall asleep when I'm in the arena tomorrow."

"Not a chance," Harry said.

They settled down again, now behind the ward around Ron's bed. Harry propped himself up against one of the bedposts opposite Ron.

"Well then, um, thanks," Ron said.

"What are friends for?" Harry asked.

Ron looked at him thoughtfully for a moment. "I used to wonder what sort of friends I'd make at school," he said.

"Yeah?"
"I sold you pretty short before I ever met you," Ron said. "You're a better friend than I ever imagined for myself. I'm sorry I ever let you think that I didn't like you for having baggage."

Harry was silent for a bit. "I never thought I'd have friends," Harry said. "I sort of wondered what would happen without Dudley around, but I didn't really have any expectations. I don't think I could have imagined having a friend like you. I don't think many people have friends who would have done half the things you've done for me, so I'm pretty sure you've got me beat. So, I'm sorry I made you think I didn't have faith in you. I do, and I mean you followed me after the philosophers stone, into forbidden forest, and chased after a basilisk. You even ran after a bunch of Death Eaters this summer. I do have faith in you. I just worry a lot."

"Well, soon you won't have to worry so much," Ron said. "I mean, what could be worse than dragons?"

"I can't believe you just said that," Harry said.

" Seriously," Ron said. "What are they going to do, bring out a Nundu? It'd kill the entire audience, Harry."

"Good night Ron," Harry said.

"Night," Ron said, flopping back against his pillow.

Harry kept watch. Ron woke up the next morning having gotten more continuous sleep than he had gotten in a long time.

Harry thought it was stupid to make everyone wait till after lunch for the first task to start. It wasn't like anyone was going to be paying attention in class. Harry definitely wasn't. Part of that was that he was having a lot of trouble keeping awake. He didn't know how Ron had gotten so good at managing without sleep.

When he wasn't struggling to keep his eyes open, he was worrying. He didn't think he would be any more nervous if it was him about to face off against a dragon. The three of them met up again at lunch, Harry coming from Defense and Ron and Hermione coming from potions.

"Malfoy told me to do Hogwarts proud," Ron said.

"Who's he fooling?" Harry asked.

"I know," Ron said.

"This whole thing's distracted me from figuring out what he's up to," Harry said.

"Do you want to go over anything again?" Hermione asked, anxious. She had been visibly anxious all day.

"I think I'm as ready as I'm going to be," Ron said, with bravado that was likely for Hermione's sake.

Harry didn't feel ready when Professor McGonagall came to collect Ron. Even Professor McGonagall looked upset. He wanted to give his best friend a hug, like he was saying goodbye. He didn't though. He watched as Ron pulled out the potion the twins had made and palm it as he left with Professor McGonagall; he wouldn't take it until the last possible moment before leaving the castle. Harry hoped the potion would last long enough. They hadn't really known how long before
the event started Ron would have to leave the castle. Harry looked at his watch. If the event started
at two, that didn't leave too much room.

Harry and Hermione stayed at lunch a bit after that, but neither of them were really eating.

"We should go see if Ron's family is here," Hermione said.

"Yeah," Harry said.

It was still a bit early, but they went out to where the stadium had been erected near where they had
been keeping the dragons. It wasn't hard to find the Weasleys. Fred and George had found their
parents, and Percy was there too. Harry supposed that Charlie was working with the dragons. The
Weasleys all looked serious, though Fred and George were still cracking jokes. Mrs. Weasley's
eyes were splotched, like she had been crying and Harry wanted to apologize for everything. The
stadium filled up and eventually, Harry saw the headmaster, Madame Maxime, and Karkaroff take
their seats next to Percy's boss who had already been in the judges' booth. A few minutes later,
Bagman made what looked like a last minute run into the judges' booth and a moment later his
magically amplified voice filled the stadium.

"Welcome, ladies and gentlemen," Bagman said. "Welcome to the first task of the Tri-Wizards
Tournament. I hope you all came prepared to see something spectacular, because we've brought
some of the most dangerous animals in the wizarding world for our champions to face today. Your
judges will be myself, Ludo Bagman, the headmistress of Beauxbatons, Madame Maxime, the
headmaster of Durmstrang, Igor Karkaroff, the headmaster of Hogwarts, Albus Dumbledore, and
the head of International Cooperation, Diane Cooper. Each judge will be providing a score out of
ten for each champion. Each champion will be graded based on their ability to use magic to
accomplish the task, their time, efficiency, fast thinking, and whether or not they complete the task.
Points can be deducted for injury or any other setback or as deemed appropriate by the judges.
Each champion is tasked with retrieving a golden egg, and no folks, they aren't stealing them from
magical geese. Let's bring out what our first champion will be facing."

There was a loud response from the crowd as the first dragon was brought out, the Swedish Short-
Snout. In sharp contrast to the crowds 'oohs' and 'ahs,' Mrs. Weasley gave out a quiet wail as Mr.
Weasley held her tight. Harry crossed his fingers, hoping that Ron would be first. There were two
dragons that they were hoping Ron could face and this was one of them. Additionally, there was
the matter of the fact that they weren't sure Ron's potion would last long enough.

"Just remember, our champions did not know what they would be facing until just fifteen minutes
ago. They've had only that time to come up with a strategy. The task will end when our champion
has the golden egg in their possession. Now our first champion is the very lovely Fleur Delacour
from Beauxbatons, let's see what she makes of the Swedish Short-Snout."

Fleur came out, her head held high, but she looked very tense. She took a moment to study the
dragon, which had focused on her the moment she entered the arena. She turned her head to study
her surroundings. There were terrain features in the large arena like boulders and hills and
miniature chasms. Eventually, she started. Her wand was in her hand, but she seemed to do a
swaying dance, her eyes trained on the dragon.

"Is that dragon falling asleep folks?" Bagman's voice rang out. The dragon didn't seem to notice his
voice though, it did, in fact, look like it was falling asleep, or at the very least, its eyes, which were
riveted on Fleur, were drooping and its head was swaying slightly in time to Fleur's dance.

"Just look at her dance," Bagman said. "Everyone, I know you came out for a show, but I'm not
sure this was what you were expecting. She just might get that egg without a single blast of
dragon's fire. Many of you will know that dragon hide is highly impervious to spellfire, but Miss Delacour is doing a very good job of visually enchanting it. Oh, now she's approaching."

Fleur started to walk forward, still performing her swaying dance, and avoiding the terrain features that might block her from the dragon's eyesight. It was a slow procession; the dragon never took its eyes off of her. Eventually, Fleur got so close to the dragon that it had to lay down its neck to keep her in sight. Here, Fleur paused and her dance slowed, though her movements became more pronounced. The dragon's eyes drooped even more before it lay it's head on the ground and closed them. That was when it took in a deep breath before a great spout of flame came out of its nostrils in a rumbling snore. Fleur dodged to the side, but not fast enough. She had to quickly pour water from her wand to extinguish part of her robes that had caught fire. She looked like she was in pain.

"That was a close one," Bagman shouted. "But it looks like her dragon's still fast asleep. The way looks clear for our first champion."

Fleur hurried now and collected her golden egg. The moment she had it in her hands, six dragon handlers moved out from around the arena to secure the dragon. Madame Maxime had left the judges booth and was down in the arena to collect her student.

"Well our first champion has gotten her golden egg, and in a very respectable amount of time," Bagman said. "Though she has gotten a bit crispy, so we'll see how she scores."

"There's still the Chinese Fireball," Hermione said.

"Let's hope it and Ron are next," Harry said, looking at his watch.

Cedric was next, he faced off against the Welsh Green. Cedric also got burned, but more severely, Harry could see blisters across the side of his face as he exited the stadium with his golden egg. He worried about Cedric. He was starting to freak out about Ron.

The next dragon into the stadium was the Chinese Fireball and Harry crossed his fingers hoping that Ron would walk out of the tent next. He didn't though, Viktor Krum did. Hermione's breath hitched next to him and Harry felt his stomach do a flip as he looked at his watch. Ron would be facing off against the Hungarian Horntail and he'd be very lucky if his potion lasted long enough.

Krum caused a commotion when he fired a spell at the dragon's eyes and it started rampaging around blindly. He managed to get his golden egg unscathed, though his golden egg and a number of the real eggs had been smashed by the rampaging dragon. The whole while, Harry was willing him to just get his egg so that it could be Ron's turn before it was too late.

Last into the arena was the Hungarian Horntail.

"Now last we have Hogwarts's second champion, Ronald Weasley," Bagman said, sounding more excited than before. "So far none of our champions have had a perfect go at things, so let's see how our youngest champion fares."

Hermione grabbed Harry's arm tightly and didn't let go when Ron entered the arena. He surveyed everything around him, but he didn't really have time to dally. If the Horntail had any weakness, it was it's comparatively shorter wings which made it a bit less agile in the air, so there wasn't any real strategy specific to facing it. It would have been far better if he could have had the Fireball or the Green.

Ron went and crouched behind the nearest boulder. He quickly went through the charms he had drilled on for the start of the event. The first spell was applied to his hair, his skin, and his robes.
They all changed color to match the grass that covered most of the arena.

His second spell was tricky. Silencing spells were more easily delimited to an area or encased in an object. When Harry silenced himself under his cloak, the spell was attached to the cloak and applied to everything within it. That was why he needed his silencing insoles, his feet were beneath the cloak but they weren't within it. Ron needed to cast the spell so that it would be delimited around him and move around with him even though he had nothing to encase himself within.

The third spell was the one Harry had recommended, a weaker version of the notice me not spell that may or may not work on dragons. None of their research had told them if it would.

Lastly, Ron cast a spell that Harry was very familiar with. He made himself scentless. Ron's overall strategy was to sneak up on the dragon. It would have been nice if Ron could have disillusioned himself, but that was far too advanced. Ron lay down in the grass, and Harry was happy to see that he had colored himself well to match it. Now Ron slowly started crawling out from behind the boulder, his body very close to the ground. As he came into view of the dragon, he let his whole body lie flat on the ground, even the side of his head as he dragged himself through the grass.

It was very slow. Maddeningly slow. But this was something that couldn't be done quickly. Their only hope was that the dragon wouldn't notice his movement. He also couldn't go in a straight line. The grass didn't cover the entire arena, there was dirt and rock and some areas had been scorched black. Ron had to stay where the grass was green so that he could blend in. It was the slow and steady approach. Any flash of movement could catch the attention of the dragon. Harry wished desperately that there was some sign that the potion was still working.

Ron was getting close to the eggs. There was a tension in the crowd as Ron got closer and closer, not only to the end, but to the dragon. He was close enough that the dragon could reach out and pick him up in her jaws. He was almost there when the dragon started sniffing the air. Ron froze. Either the spell hadn't been cast completely effectively or it was wearing off. It must have worked some or the dragon's powerful nose would have picked him up a long time before, but it was definitely picking up something just then.

All of a sudden, the dragon's great spiked tail swung around, making a powerful wide sweep of the ground. Harry's breath hitched as it caught Ron on one of it's great spikes and Ron went flying. There were screams from the crowd and Ron landed in a sprawling heap several meters away from the dragon. Harry covered his mouth with his hands and waited, begging for Ron to get up, looking for any signs of blood, praying that the potion was still working, because he couldn't imagine Ron surviving that without it. He waited, and he waited. Mrs. Weasley was crying a couple of seats down. There was a great hush in the stadium as students and teachers alike were trying to work out if they had just witnessed the death of Ronald Weasley. Harry felt like he was going to throw up.

But eventually Ron pushed himself up on shaking arms. Hermione screamed. Harry cheered. It was time for plan B. The dragon had Ron in its sights now, and a great plume of fire shot after him. Ron was ready, though. He did a quarter turn, pointed his wand at the ground behind him and cast a propulsion charm, jettisoning himself away. It wasn't at all an elegant spell. Ron might as well have been launched from a catapult, but for however long the potion lasted he would survive the fall, and it must surely still be working for Ron to still be alive. He did a graceless arc of pinwheeling limbs and landed haplessly on the other side of the dragon, which had followed him the entire way, it was getting ready to blast him again but Ron was already relaunching himself, this time, a bit more controlled. He landed close to the eggs, quickly getting to his feet. Now he was running. He was so close, but one of the dragon's massive claws came down and pinned him in place. It couldn't pierce his skin, but it could roast him, which was exactly what it looked like it was going to do. Ron performed a silent spell on himself as the dragon screeched at him and drew
in a great breath. Ron, now shining with magical grease, pointed his wand in the opposite direction of the eggs and jettisoned himself, sliding across the ground, right at the pile; his wand also flew right out of his hand. He scrambled around, unable to get any traction on the ground and just reached out for the egg. He grabbed it but it slipped right out of his hands. He grabbed his robes and scooped the egg up into them, securing it with one hand before flinging himself away from the pile of eggs and the dragon.

The egg in his possession, the handlers came out and secured the dragon while the stands went wild.

"And our youngest champion gives our most spectacular performance, after a bit of a slow start," Bagman said, sounding disbelieving. "Wasn't that exciting?"

There was cheering from all around. Mrs. Weasley was still crying, but she looked happy now. The whole lot of them got up to go see Ron, who was sitting on the ground, still green. With the grease spell, he wouldn't be able to walk until someone removed it. Professor McGonagall approached him and waved her wand around until he was no longer green, not slippery, and probably not silent. By the time they made their way over to him they could hear him denying any need to go see Madame Pomfrey.

"Oh, Ronny," Mrs. Weasley cried giving him a great big hug.

"I'm fine mum," Ron said.

"You're alright?" Mr. Weasley asked, holding him out at arms length. Ron was trying to hold his shredded robes together. It could as easily have been his skin.

"Better than I've been for a while," Ron said grinning.

"You gave me such a scare," Mrs. Weasley said, pulling out her wand to mend his robes.

"Yeah," Fred said. "Why'd you take so long getting back up. It's not like you were hurt."

"For a moment," Ron said, "I was so sure that I must have been, that I just sort of waited to feel, like, great big puncture wounds from all those spikes."

"They're giving your scores," Hermione said.

They turned to the judge's booth where each one used their wand to display the score they had given Ron. From Bagman, Ms. Cooper, and the headmaster he got nines. Madame Maxime gave him an eight, but from Karkaroff he got a four.

"Four," Ron said indignantly. "What did he give Krum?"

Harry hadn't been paying attention to the scores for the other champions.

"You still scored really well," Hermione said. "You did great."

"Yeah well I would have been toast if it hadn't been for you lot," Ron said.

"Come along, Mr. Weasley," Professor McGonagall said. "It's time to receive your instructions for the next task."

"Okay," Ron said. "Someone go find Charlie. Make sure he doesn't leave without saying hi."

Ron went back into the tent that all of the champions had come out of, leaving the rest of them to
talk about the tournament.

"So he had no idea there were going to be dragons," Percy said, giving Harry and Hermione a look.

"Harry saw them a couple of days ago when he was out flying," Hermione said.

"Oh, that's wonderful," Mrs. Weasley said. "You all keep helping him."

"We will," Hermione said.

"Well, let's go find Charlie," Mr. Weasley said.

"Yes, let's," Mrs. Weasley said. "Dragons," she muttered under her breath.

They went over to where the dragons were once more chained down. A number of students had gathered to get closer looks. Charlie saw them coming and flagged them down. Harry sort of wished he could have a real talk with him. Not long later, Ron came back and talked excitedly with his older brother. Eventually, though, Mr. and Mrs. Weasley and Percy had to go and the younger Weasley siblings walked them to the gate.

With all the excitement dying down, Harry found himself really feeling the fact that he hadn't slept the night before.

"So if we throw you a party are you going to duck out of it?" Fred asked.

"I'll be good," Ron said. "I think. I mean I just faced off against a dragon. I think I can handle a party."

"I think you could handle the whole tournament," Harry said.

"I think you could win," Hermione said.

"Oh wow," Ron said. "No pressure or anything. Well if you want me to win, I'm going to need a lot more help."

"You've got us," Harry said.

They went back to the castle. Tomorrow they could worry about the second task. This afternoon they would party. As they walked back to the castle, Harry thought about everything he'd put on the back-burner during the run-up to the tournament. He hadn't thought about the prophecy in some time, and that was definitely something he couldn't forget about. Voldemort was still trying to kill him.

Of course, there were even scarier things. Ron thought he should tell his dad he was gay. Harry didn't know if that was something he should do. He didn't know if that was something he could do. He figured he should at least write Professor Lupin and thank him for meeting with him. He should probably look through the book he had given him too. He wasn't sure what to think about it all. A large part of him still felt like it was something he should be ashamed of. He still felt like it was a horrible secret, but his friends had been great. Ron still wanted to be his friend; his best friend. That felt amazing. It was so amazing to be able to tell someone that great horrible secret and have them support him, to be able to talk about what he'd been going through, but how would his dad react?

Harry shook his head. So much for leaving everything for tomorrow. Tonight was for celebration. He was going to stick to his friends and he was going to have a good time. He wouldn't let himself
worry about anything. At least for one night.

At the end of the day though, both Harry and Ron were exhausted. They both wound up sitting on a couch together as people stopped by to chat and congratulate. Harry wasn't sure how long he lasted through the party. He didn't notice when Ron fell asleep against his shoulder that evening in the middle of it all. He had fallen asleep moments before himself.

Chapter End Notes

Hey, so here's a happy ending for this chapter, right? I hope you enjoyed this chapter and that you'll leave a comment.

Fic recs. The Undying Fire by Boogum on FF. It's a great WIP about Zuko going through a bit of a different journey of self discovery back in AtLA. There's also Summer Stars by PitViperOfDoom on AO3 and I know I already recommended PitViper's BNHA stories but after the latest update, I just had to pump this one again. Until next time, happy reading.
Chapter Notes

So I made some hefty changes to previous chapters. I had introduced Sammy's character being transgender in an authors note rather than in the story and I've been feeling pretty conflicted about that. On the one hand, I didn't want to misrepresent anyone's experience but at the same time, it was sort of like I was erasing her story and it just made the fic disjointed. I was comfortable writing gay or bisexual characters, since I'm bi, but I didn't want to screw up writing her story. I put a call out on Tumblr and I was very happy that a few people responded to help me with those scenes.

Sorry this took so long. I'd thought this chapter would be easy to write since I've been looking forward to the last scene, but it all sort of got dragged out of me.

See the end of the chapter for more notes

Augustus waited nervously for Norman to come home from work. The man had never been able to clock out on time. Everything would be so much easier if Norman was more predictable with his comings and goings. When the door to the flat opened, Augustus nearly jumped out of his seat. It wouldn't matter if he did though. He was invisible and silent and Norman had no idea that he was there. Or rather, he wasn't supposed to have any idea that Augustus was there. As he had done the past couple of times Augustus had made his weekly visit, Norman paused in his entryway and looked around. He looked cautious. Eventually, though, he shook his head and went to his ice box.

Here too though, Norman paused. With the door open he hesitated, but taking a deep breath and sighing, he still grabbed his usual cider and poured himself a glass before walking towards his sitting room. He hadn't taken a drink yet though. Augustus frowned. Norman settled into his recliner and set his drink down next to himself and turned on the wireless. He seemed to be ignoring his drink. Why wasn't he drinking? Why had he been more cautious when he came in? What should Augustus do?

He was sat in front of a charmed mirror Norman kept. Norman had never developed a great sensitivity to magical signatures, so Augustus's own signature was currently being masked just by his proximity to the mirror, but if he started moving around, Norman would sense the shift in the balance of the room. The decision of what to do was removed from him when Norman finally took a drink of his cider. Augustus heard the glass and the drink spill down Norman's front as Norman's body went limp.

Augustus sighed a bit in relief and he left his perch by the mirror and entered the sitting room. He made himself visible, though Norman's head was slumped forward and he would just be able to see Augustus's feet.

"Scourgify," he cast upon Norman. He set the glass to the side and pushed Norman's head back against the headrest of his chair. "Haerant," he cast, so that he could keep Norman's head upright.

"I brought you a present Norm," Augustus said. "It wasn't easy to get either, but I went out of my way." He pulled out a small phial from his robes. "Veritaserum," he said. "You may not recall, but it's been terribly hard on you these past few weeks. The things you make me do to get a little bit of information out of your head. Now that won't be necessary. Three drops now, is it? Don't you
worry Norm, this will all be over so much quicker than it used to."

Norman's mouth was already slack and open. Augustus placed three drops on his tongue and stared into Norman's eyes. Norman couldn't talk, of course, but the Veritaserum would bring the answer to any question he asked to the forefront of Norman's mind. Legilimency allowed Augustus to quickly glean what he wanted to know.

"Where does the ministry believe the Dark Lord to currently be?" Augustus asked.

Same answer, as usual, 'probably Eastern Europe,' oh, and also South America now, maybe. That was laughable.

"How far along is the ministry into the investigation over Potter's name coming out of the Goblet of Fire?"

Honestly, it was like they weren't investigating it at all. It really was laughable that so many thought Potter had put his own name in.

Augustus paused here. He didn't really have anything else that needed to be asked. The veritaserum really did speed everything up considerably.

"Why did you hesitate when you walked in? And when you opened the ice box?"

Norman didn't know. Augustus frowned.

"Alright then, Norm, I think it's time you took a nap. Let's get a bit of dandelion juice in your mouth. Here you are, that'll clear your head. All right. You see how easy that was? We should do this again sometime. How about next week, same time?"

He chuckled as he released the sticking charm on Norman's head and it slumped forward in a nod.

"Excellent," Augustus said. "It's a date. Obliviate," he cast followed quickly with, "Somnium."

"You really shouldn't fall asleep in your recliner," Augustus said. "What am I going to do with you. Oh well. Sleep tight."

He walked back into the kitchen and opened up the ice box. He pulled out the jug of cider and eyeballed it before retrieving the jug he had swapped out earlier. He poured out a little bit into the sink so they matched and replaced the non-drugged jug back into the ice box. Grabbing the remaining jug, he left.

The first couple of weeks after Ron had faced his dragon during the first task had been hectic. After coming out to his friends, there were a lot of things that Harry was trying to face head on instead of ignoring or trying to halfway deal with. Everything from taking his survival training more seriously to trying to come to some sort of peace with his sexuality, he was trying to face things as they came at him. He couldn't afford to curl up in a ball on his bed and wait for the world to stop feeling like shit. There was too much at stake for that. At least he had Ron by his side once more; he didn't know what he'd do if he didn't.

Night time wasn't even a reprieve from it all. He kept dreaming of Ron facing the dragon, only in his dreams, Ron never got back up after he'd been hit. Those were the worst dreams he was dealing with just then.

A good thing was that Harry felt that he was closer to Ron than he'd ever been before. They were
having a lot more late night chats now. Harry thought part of it was Ron needing to relax a bit before he went to sleep, of which he was getting a lot more of now, though probably still not as much as he should. But they were really talking now, about things Harry had thought he'd never talk to anyone about. Things he didn't like to think about in his own head. Things he'd buried deep. Coming out to Ron was somehow one of the best things he'd ever done in his whole life.

Ron and Hermione were talking about things more too. Twice in the two weeks since the first task the two of them had gone off to talk. Ron said they mostly talked about coping and less about what they'd actually gone through. Harry's dad was still playing armchair psychologist now and then, but the focus of most of their time together seemed to mostly be on preparing Harry for the prophecy of late.

Harry felt that he was doing alright for himself, for the most part. There were things that lingered, like the feeling that his dad's affection was transient, or that everyone would turn on him, or that he was going to fail and Voldemort would win, or…. all sorts of things, but he wasn't going to let that stop him from getting through his day. There were a lot of times Harry wished the floor would swallow him up, when negative thoughts felt overwhelming, but as he was getting used to, he'd just clear his mind and get back to work. He didn't have time for what-ifs or should-haves, or could-haves. His dad had talked to him of this more than once. He had to take the world on as it was. Harry was a werewolf, he was gay, he had to face Voldemort, and just… everything else. There were things he couldn't change, and Harry was happy enough that he actually seemed to be getting better at accepting that. All he could do was work to make things better, whether that was preparing for each month's transformation, or training with his stupid dagger, or trying to figure out how his dad felt about gay people.

"So anyways, after that, I ran into Thomas Miller, from Ravenclaw and we started talking about Hexes that follow Adria's Principle," Harry said. He had stuck around after potions since it was the last class of the day. "I was thinking of doing my essay on that."

"That's a good topic," his dad said, reacting not at all to Harry name dropping an outed student. "We could practice some of those the next time you train."

"Yeah," Harry said. "I'll make sure I'm ready for that… Do you know Miller?"

"Harry, I've taught every student in this school," his dad said.

"Right," Harry said. His dad probably wasn't even clued into the student rumor mill. This was probably a bust. Why was he even trying this in the first place? It wasn't like he was ever going to tell his dad in the first place.

"So unless I am mistaken," his dad said. "Professor McGonagall announced the Yule Ball earlier today."

"Oh yeah," Harry mumbled. "That." What on Earth was he going to do about that?

"You do not seem so very enthusiastic," his dad observed.

Harry swallowed, were straight boys supposed to be excited about the dance? Ron liked girls and he didn't seem all that thrilled either. "Oh, yeah, um, just… nervous about asking out a girl," he said. Normal boys were nervous to ask out girls, weren't they?

"Ah," his dad said. "Here, I'm afraid, I do not have very much good advice. I will tell you that as a fourth year, I would not place too much worry over it. Ask someone you would like to spend the evening with. You need not give this more weight than it warrants. Additionally, you do not have
to bring anyone to the ball. There will be plenty who will go stag."

"Well Ron has to have a date," Harry said. "Professor McGonagall said so, 'cause he's a champion."

"How unfortunate for him," his dad said. "Is there anyone you wanted to ask?"

"Oh," Harry said. "Um, I mean there's so many to choose from. You know... girls. At least Ron probably has someone in mind."

"Has Mr. Weasley become taken with someone?" his dad asked.

"Yeah," Harry said. "But I don't think I'm supposed to say who."

"Well if there is anything you wanted to discuss regarding the ball, I would be happy to discuss it with you," his dad said.

"Right," Harry said. "Did they have dances when you went to school?"

"Hogwarts had her one millennia anniversary when I was a seventh year, we held a solstice ball to celebrate."

"Did you ask anyone out?" Harry asked.

"I did," his dad said. "I thought the whole thing was stupid; I generally thought everything was stupid back then, but there was a lot of pressure for the upperclassmen to not go stag and so I asked out a girl from Ravenclaw."

"How was the dance?" Harry asked.

"About as stupid as I thought it would be," his dad said.

"Oh," Harry said.

"Don't worry on it overmuch," his dad said. "It could be fun."

"Careful you don't oversell it, dad," Harry said.

"I'm sure it will be fun," his dad said. "Just approach the ordeal as a fun experience rather than checking off a box from a list of adolescent expectations and you'll be fine."

"Hmmm," Harry replied. "I'd probably just embarrass myself trying to dance anyway."

"One does not need a date to dance at the ball," his dad said. "Perhaps one of the nice things about going stag is that you can dance with a number of people,"

"So instead of being nervous to ask out one girl, I'm supposed to ask a bunch of girls to dance."

"Asking a girl to dance should be much less pressure than asking a girl to be your date," Severus said.

"Lots of pressure," Harry countered. "I can't dance."

"Ah," his dad said. "I cannot help you there either."

"Didn't you dance with your date?"

"I placed one hand on her shoulder and one hand in her own and I tried to move in time to the
"Did that work?" Harry asked.

"It did not work," his dad said.

"I'm just going to embarrass myself," Harry said.

"I am fairly certain a number of students feel the same," his dad said. "Most of your classmates have not had dance lessons. I do not expect you to stand out."

"I always stand out," Harry said. "At least I don't have to open the ball."

"I imagine that would be a lot of pressure," his dad said.

"Yeah," Harry said. "Well, I've got to go get some homework done before our defense study group tonight."

"Have fun," his dad said. "Oh, and I wanted to give you a warning."

"Did I do something?" Harry asked.

"No," his dad said. "It's not that. It's about Rita Skeeter. She has a habit of overhearing conversations she shouldn't be able to and she has definitely taken an interest in you. Remember that there are some things important to the prophecy that must not be said out loud."

"I'll be careful," Harry said, throwing on his invisibility cloak since he would be walking the halls alone. "I'll see you."

Harry didn't keep a schedule for when he visited, so Severus had taken to meeting with Draco when Harry had his defense study group.

"Why on earth do we need to have a ball?" Draco asked.

"You grew up going to balls," Severus said.

"I grew up hating going to balls," Draco said.

"What do we do when faced with something we don't like?" Severus asked.

"Find an opportunity," Draco said, rolling his eyes. "And I've already identified several but that doesn't mean I'm going to enjoy the ball."

"I identified an opportunity of my own," Severus said.

"What's that?" Draco asked.

"Dance lessons," Severus said.

"I don't need... Oh, of course," Draco said. "Yes, it would be a shame if our school put on a poor show in front of the delegates. Who better to teach everyone else than someone who's had ballroom dancing lessons since he was five."

"Perhaps you could partner with a housemate who could provide lessons for Hogwarts girls," Severus said.
"Oh, Bethanie Zane would probably like that, she always shows off at Ministry functions," Draco said. "I don't know how many people will show up, I've lost a good deal since father was sentenced."

Draco's face remained impassive, but Severus was well aware how hard he was taking his father's imprisonment.

"You've lost fair weather friends," Severus said. "You've gained good allies. You will continue to gain good allies. You are doing very well with Hufflepuff, perhaps it is time to take Gryffindor seriously."

"You realize Potter will actively step in if he sees me encroaching on his hegemony," Draco said.

"Hegemony is most definitely not the word to describe his role in Gryffindor," Severus said. "Which goes to show that you have not been taking Gryffindor seriously. Start watching them, do not act until you know you have your angle."

"So what about Potter?" Draco asked.

"Watch and decide," Severus said. "Keep in mind he is neither your rival nor your enemy."

"Tell that to him," Draco said.

"Invite Gryffindors to your dance lessons," Severus said, ignoring Draco's comment.

"You said to watch and wait," Draco said.

"That would be a good opportunity to watch," Severus said.

"They're not going to come," Draco said.

"Then when the ball comes they will regret having not accepted your olive branch," Severus said. "Though I will see what I can do to encourage participation."

"You're going to get Potter to come?" Draco asked skeptically.

"We shall see," Severus said. "How have you liked your reading?"

"Well you were being a bit transparent with the whole Anastasi thing," Draco said. "Nature and nurture. When you assigned me more reading on psychology I assumed it was going to be more analysis of human behavior, not something political. Though that bit about DNA was interesting. Muggles do the weirdest things without magic."

"I was attempting to be transparent," Severus said. "I did not think subtlety was warranted."

"Are there genes for being a wizard?" Draco asked. "Only, why are there muggleborns?"

"To my knowledge, a wizard's genes have never been studied; beyond that, I do not know. It certainly raises questions."

"Well I have more immediate things to think about," Draco said. "Like homework. I still have that you know."

"Yes, I do believe I assigned some of that," Severus said.

"I can't remember the last time I had any free time," Draco complained with a flare of melodrama.
"You told me you had several far-reaching goals, did you imagine you would not have to work harder than your peers?" Severus admonished.

"I know," Draco sighed, and for a moment he looked vulnerable. "I've just… been tired of late." The look was gone from one moment to the next.

Severus relented. "Perhaps a less time-consuming assignment for this week is in order then. I want you to do something nice for someone."

"What?" Draco asked. "I'm nice all the time."

"Something that doesn't benefit you in any way," Severus said.

"Why on Earth?"

"You can tell me afterwards if you can answer your own question," Severus said.

"So this is a publicity thing?"

"The less publicity the better," Severus said.

"Did you read this in a muggle book?" Draco asked.

"We will discuss that after I return from vacation," Severus said.

"This is some Hufflepuff nonsense," Draco said. "Fine, one good deed coming up."

"Try not to sound too put out," Severus said.

Draco rolled his eyes.

"Where did Hermione go?" Ron asked returning to their spot in the library from the bathroom. They had been haunting the library a lot together in search of a clue for Ron's egg. So far all they had managed to do was to determine a number of things that had no affect on it. Every time the golden egg was opened it let out an unearthly shriek.

"She gasped, said 'Oh,' and then ran off to the back of the library," Harry said.

Ron nodded and sat down. This was not an uncommon occurrence.

"So are you going to ask her to the ball?" Harry asked.

Ron's eyes widened. "Ask who?" he asked with red cheeks.

"You know who," Harry said. "I mean, not you-know-who, but, you know, Hermione."

"Who said I was going to ask her," Ron said.

"Who else are you going to ask?" Harry asked.

"What if she says no?" Ron asked. "What if she wants to go with someone else?"

Harry shrugged. "What if she's waiting for you to ask her? I've seen, like, half a dozen girls get asked out since Thursday, the clock's ticking."

"Why are you all concerned about it?" Ron asked.
Harry squirmed a bit. "I just figure you've got enough to worry about. You should just get this done and over with." He was also hoping that if he could see Ron and Hermione happy together he could get over crushing on Ron.

"It's not like I'm that worried about it," Ron said.

"So ask her then if it's no big deal," Harry said.

"What about you, who are you asking?" Ron deflected.

"Um, are you forgetting something?" Harry asked.

"No," Ron said. "I figured you might still go with someone, friendly like. I don't think everyone's going to start dating whoever they're taking to the ball. So who would you ask if you could take a boy without it being a big deal?"

'You,' Harry thought instantly. "Oh, I don't know," Harry said, trying to think of a response that wouldn't be weird. "Um, ah, Cedric would be nice, but, um, he's like a foot taller than me," Harry said.

"Also he's three years older than you," Ron said.

"There is also that," Harry said. "Benjamin's got a girlfriend; I guess Dean. Not that I've got any reason to think any of them would even be interested, but you know, if it's all pretend." He flushed. Ron kept acting like it wasn't a big deal, and kept bringing up Harry's sexuality casually when they were alone, and Harry was trying to be as casual as he was, but even still, Harry felt guilty for naming those other boys. He didn't think they'd want Harry associating them with any of that.

"So are you going stag?"

"Yeah," Harry said. "What else am I supposed to do?"

"I dunno," Ron said. "You could ask a girl to go as a friend."

"I don't know. What if I ask someone and they think I want to kiss them or something?"

"Think of it as an opportunity to practice," Ron said.

Wouldn't it be nice if that could just make him straight, Harry thought. The thought of kissing a girl seemed wrong though. He knew he didn't want to kiss girls. Though, he thought it would probably be weird to actually kiss a boy, outside of his daydreams.

"Would you practice with a boy?" Harry asked.

"What, no," Ron said, looking flustered.

"Well, that's what it'd be like practicing with a girl," Harry said quietly.

"Arent't you worried about being the only boy without a date?" Ron asked.

"I doubt I'll be the only boy without a date," Harry said.

"You could take Ginny," Ron said. "She won't be expecting any kisses. That way she can go to the ball too since she's a third year."

"Maybe," Harry said. He was used to wearing masks.
Hermione suddenly arrived with a half dozen books in her arms.

"I think I've got our next area of research," she said, dropping the books in front of Harry and Ron. "Poaching the egg?" Harry asked.

"For the last time, we're not cooking the golden egg," Hermione said. "Magicryptography?" Ron asked, flipping open one of the books.

"We'll have that egg solved in no time," Hermione said. "What language is this in?" Ron asked.

"English," Hermione said, already engrossed in one of the books. "This is not English," Ron said.

Harry nudged Ron in the ribs. When Ron glanced his way Harry made a subtle nod towards Hermione.

Ron gave a wide-eyed shake of his head.

"So what are we looking for, Hermione?" Ron asked, trying to sound casual. Harry elbowed him again.

"Just flag anything applicable to sound modification and I'll look through it later," Hermione said.

Harry nudged Ron again and this time got a finger jabbed in his ribs for his trouble.

"So Hermione," Harry said. "What do you think about the Yule Ball?"

"Oh, not you too," Hermione said. "Everyone's just so excited about it. It's all everyone talks about. You wouldn't think we're still in the middle of term. Why can't they just ask someone out and then be quiet about it?"

"You're right," Harry said. "Everyone makes too big of a deal out of it all. Right, Ron?"

Ron glared at him, which Hermione did not see since she hadn't lifted her head up at all during the exchange.


"So Hermione," Ron said. "Um, well what did you think about maybe going to the ball with me. As a friend."

This got Hermione to raise her head. She looked surprised. "Well alright then," she said. Then she frowned. "You two haven't even opened your books yet. Honestly, how are you going to feel when everyone else has figured out the clue and you're just completely unprepared."

"I've got more than two months Hermione," Ron said.

"You're going to need it," Hermione said. "You're letting that dragon go to your head."

"It was pretty spectacular," Harry said.

"Yes, well, I'd rather not have another opportunity to think you're dead during the next task so
we're going to be prepared," Hermione said opening a book for Harry and Ron each.

Harry sighed. "Anything that has to do with sound modification," he said, starting with the table of contents.

They went back to reading. Ron nudged him with his elbow, a smile on his lips.

The final days of term wound down in a flurry of activity that left Harry, per usual, feeling like he would dearly like to sleep for a week. He was really really looking forward to the Christmas break. He was also looking forward to having a proper Christmas with his dad, and he hoped it all wouldn't get pushed off to the side like it had the year prior. Of course, not everything would stop come that Friday. The holiday would be coming with plenty of homework to keep them busy and his dad had told him that he'd be getting additional training sessions. Though, they would be taking a vacation.

Still though, he found himself enjoying the frenzy. He had his friends, he still had his dad, Ron had made it through the first task and Harry could feel true confidence that he could make it through, and also, Harry had played his first game of pickup quidditch since his name had come out of the goblet. Things felt like they were going well. He should be wary.

"Okay," Benjamin said. "Now dig your hip in. Right, now step forward, other foot, drop your hips and curl…"

The older boy was flung over Harry's shoulder and onto the mat on the ground.

"How was that?" Harry asked, helping the older boy up.

"You're too nervous about it; you're not going to break me," Benjamin said.

"Right," Harry said.

They repeated the throw a few more times until Benjamin declared that there had been some improvement, and it was time to move on.

"Grab a dowel," he said.

"What are we doing?" Harry asked.

"Wand to the head," Benjamin said.

"I'm good at that," Harry said. "I did that in real life at the Shrieking Shack last year."

"Oh, you never said," Benjamin said. "Good on ya. Still though, it's good to practice, and now, I want you to turn the move into a throw while maintaining control of the wand hand."

Harry tried to envision that in his head. "I think I can do that," he said, handing Benjamin the dowel.

"You can do that," Benjamin said. "Ready?"

"Yes," Harry said.

Benjamin's left arm snaked around Harry's chest while his other arm pressed the dowel against his temple. Harry's heart thudded in his chest and his stomach clenched, but he focused. He twisted out of the grip while bringing his hand up to deflect the wand before grabbing the fist and drawing the
arm outwards as he continued the rotation, overbalancing Benjamin before sending him hurling over Harry's shoulder. Harry maintained his grip and soon had Benjamin flipped over with his arm twisted behind his back.

"Ready to switch?" Harry asked, letting go of Benjamin's hand.

"You should do it a few more times," Benjamin said, doing a fancy roll to get to his feet.

"I'm ready to switch," Harry said. He'd never liked the parts of defense that involved getting grabbed.

"All right," Benjamin said. "Do a couple practice falls so I don't have to feel bad about throwing you." He always said that size didn't have to matter in a fight, but he always treated Harry a bit with kid gloves.

Half an hour later, they were done with practice and Benjamin walked with him back to the tower.

"So, hey," Benjamin said. "A few of us are having an end of term get together tomorrow, you should come."

"Oh, thanks," Harry said. "But my dad and I are leaving for Sydney tomorrow after classes."

"Are you missing the Yule Ball?"

"Oh, it's only a few days," Harry said.

It was actually the full moon the next day and Harry would be having an 'accident,' in DADA so he could get out early.

"You're taking an international portkey for a trip that's only a couple of days?"

"There's an international potions thing happening so that's probably the main reason we're going, but, hey, why not enjoy the beach a bit. Get away from the snow."

"Well have fun," Benjamin said. "So who's the lucky girl?"

Harry had heard that phrase a few times and he wondered that people seemed to think him some sort of prize.

"Oh, I didn't ask anyone to the ball," said Harry, who was feeling a bit like he was tiptoeing around a precipice with the conversation.

"Well you've got one day to ask someone if you're leaving right after class tomorrow," Benjamin said. "Otherwise you'll cut it pretty close."

"I don't know, I might just go stag," Harry said. "Must be nice already having a girlfriend. Most of the boys in the school are acting like this whole thing's a nightmare."

"Oh, well I still asked Anna," Benjamin said. "Girls like to be romanced, Harry."

"Yeah, but you pretty much knew she'd say yes," Harry said.

"So is that why you're not asking anyone? Afraid you'll get turned down?"

Harry shrugged. "Got enough to worry about," Harry said.
"I guess you do," Benjamin said. "So there isn't a special girl you've got your eye on?"

"Oh, um, sort of, um, she already got asked out though," Harry fibbed.

"Ah, that's rough," Benjamin said. "Well, maybe you can get a dance with her at the ball."

"Maybe," Harry said.

"So what are you doing in Sydney?" Benjamin asked.

"Mostly I think I'm going to try and avoid the myriad of poisonous flora and fauna," Harry said.

"Ah, don't worry about that," Benjamin said. "Make sure you check out the Daintree Rainforest."

"That sounds like the sort of place that would be full of poisonous things," Harry said.

"Probably," Benjamin said. "But there's nothing like it here in Britain."

"You've been?" Harry asked.

"With my uncles when I was little," Benjamin said. "It was a lot of fun."

"Well I'm looking forward to it," Harry said. "It'll be our first family vacation."

"Sooo, how is that all going?" Benjamin asked. "The family thing."

"Have you been wanting to ask that for a while?" Harry asked.

"I didn't know what to think when all that came out," Benjamin said. "I figured I wouldn't bring it up if you didn't."

"It's been really nice actually," Harry said.

"I guess we have you to thank for potions class being more tolerable," Benjamin said.

"Not really," Harry said. "I wouldn't have ever told him he was my dad if he hadn't stopped being a git before hand."

"Huh. So how much of that had more to do with your other family?" Benjamin asked awkwardly.

"Oh," Harry said. People usually didn't bring up the Dursleys. "It mostly started because I was curious about him and then I sort of realized we could actually get along. But yeah, I also really wanted to get away from them."

"Honestly, out of everything, Snape being your dad's probably been the weirdest thing that's happened since you came to Hogwarts."

"What?" Harry asked. "Weirder than Voldemort living on the back of Professor Quirrell's head?"

Benjamin gave a nervous laugh at Harry's use of Voldemort's name "Well you expect weird stuff with the defense professor."

"That's fair," Harry said. "Though Professor Lupin was pretty normal."

"Well there has to be a normal one every now and then to throw you off," Benjamin said as they arrived at the tower. "Well then, I hope you have fun in Sydney."
"See you in class tomorrow," Harry said.

"See you," Benjamin said.

Harry went and found Ron and Hermione and worked on finishing his history essay which was due first thing in the morning.

The next day went by pretty slowly and Harry spent a good bit of time debating with himself on if he should be asking a girl out while he still had time. In the end, he never really decided and when DADA came up, Harry idly speculated on asking one of the fifth year girls in the class. He didn't know if Katie had been asked by anyone but he thought it might be weird to go with a teammate. Honestly, it would be weird to go with anyone.

Halfway through the class, Harry purposely flubbed a bombardment hex during the practical exercise and Professor Moody, who was in on the whole affair, sent him to the infirmary. He wasn't really injured, they'd practiced earlier in the week how Harry would mispronounce the hex to get an effect that looked a lot more traumatic than it was. Harry clutched his ribs and tried to look dazed as Anna walked him to the infirmary.

"Is your head all right?" she asked.

"Huh?" Harry asked, hamming it up a bit.

"Well I guess that answers my question," she said. "Don't worry, Madame Pomfrey will take care of you."

'Doesn't she always,' Harry thought.

Anna dropped him off and left after she made sure Madame Pomfrey knew that Harry was there. As soon as she was gone, Madame Pomfrey ushered Harry into her office and he flooed home. His dad would be finishing his class before joining him, but Professor Lupin arrived shortly after Harry did and they worked together to get the cellar ready. They worked together in an awkward silence, their most recent conversation weighing heavily between them. Harry wanted to say something, but his dad arrived right after they finished in the cellar and the three of them went upstairs to get dinner ready. The moon was rising at five thirty that night, so there wasn't much time. They had an early dinner and Harry didn't have much time to write in his log book before it was time to head downstairs.

Professor Lupin didn't bring up their meeting in Hogsmeade, likely because he didn't want to get Harry upset right before the transformation, but Harry had some stuff to say.

"I didn't want to write too much in my last letter," Harry said. "But I wanted to apologize for what I said in Hogsmeade."

"You don't need to apologize," Professor Lupin said.

"Yeah, well, when I said some of that stuff about myself, it was sort of like I was saying it about you too, so I'm sorry."

"How are you doing with everything?" Professor Lupin asked.

"I feel better now," Harry said. "Sort of. I told Ron and Hermione, about being, um, gay. Things are good."

"Did you really?" Professor Lupin asked, sounding a bit surprised. "Well I'm glad that worked out
"Well, um, thanks, for talking to me about it, and the book, I guess I needed that."

"I'll remind you later since you won't remember this, but let me know anytime you need someone to talk to about this. Any of this. Your sexuality, being a werewolf, anything."

"Sure," Harry said, glad that he had apologized and the weight between them was gone. "So my dad said that you had a ball in your seventh year."

"We did," Professor Lupin said. "James was very excited to be able to take Lily on a fancy date."

"Did you go with anyone?" Harry asked.

"Sirius and I officially went stag," Professor Lupin said.

"Did anyone say anything about that?" Harry asked.

"There was some surprise about Sirius, he was very popular and very handsome, no one could fathom why he didn't have a date. I've always wished we could have danced together at the ball, not that I have any fondness for dancing, but it would have been nice."

Harry entertained thoughts of what it would be like to dance with Ron and suddenly it didn't seem so odd that the rest of the castle seemed to think the dance a big deal. Of course, he wouldn't be able to dance with Ron at all. Even if he could get away with dancing with another boy. Ron had Hermione.

"Come on," Professor Lupin said. "You're worried about the ball, I can tell. Let's talk about something else before the moon rises. No worries, alright?"

"Well, did you know we're going to Sydney after I'm better?" Harry asked.

"I didn't. Good though, you can get outdoors without the chill, how long will you be gone?" Professor Lupin asked.

"Just a few days," Harry said. "We'll be back before Christmas and the ball."

"That should be nice," Professor Lupin said. "Will this be your first time out of the country?"

"Yeah," Harry said. "Though I've heard Australia isn't all that different from England, except there's a lot of things that are poisonous."

"They seem to manage there. I'll remember to tell you about some of my travels in the East another time."

"You'll have to tell me sometime what all we talk about down here," Harry said. "I always wonder afterwards." He never liked that he forgot. He rubbed the back of his neck and wished he could remember everything.

"I've told a lot of stories from my time as a student," Professor Lupin said. "I could write a book."

"You tell good stories," Harry said.

"I'll tell you tomorrow, so you won't have to wonder anymore," Professor Lupin said. "How about you tell me a story tonight," Professor Lupin said.
"Oh, huh," Harry said, thinking. "Okay, so did you know I didn't know I was a wizard until I was eleven?" Harry asked.

"You told me," Professor Lupin said. "While we waited for September's moon."

"Oh," Harry said. "Okay, what about the mountain troll?"

"I've heard of it, but not from you," Professor Lupin said.

"I shoved my wand up its nose," Harry said. Which, that was the wrong place to start the story. He began again from the beginning. "So Ron and I didn't get along with Hermione at first…"

The return portkey dropped them back at the ministry of magic, and from there his dad apparated them to the small clearing outside their house. Apparating right after portraying wasn't fun, and Harry was left clutching his dad's arm to stay steady. He wished that he hadn't just eaten dinner, but the feeling quickly passed.

"It is currently seven thirty in the morning," his dad said and handed him a small phial of potion. "Take this and you will be able to go to sleep at your normal time tonight."

"Thanks," Harry said. "It's weird, I feel like the day's supposed to be over. Are we going right back to school?"

"We are," his dad said, approaching the front door of their home. "I think I have a solution to your dancing problem."

"Is there a potion for that?"

"One of your fellow students has decided to offer dance lessons for students who are interested."

"I don't think that I'll be needing to know how to dance," Harry said.

"Just in case then," his dad said. "It could be a nice way to spend time with your fellow students. Besides, I very much doubt Mr. Weasley has much experience and he will be opening the ball."

"Well, I guess if Ron goes," Harry said, though he didn't think he wanted to see Ron dancing with someone else.

"Tonight after dinner," his dad said. "In the lecture hall on the East Wing of the fifth floor."

"We'll see," Harry said.

"It might be fun," his dad said.

"It will definitely be awkward," Harry said.

"That is true," his dad said. "But it might also be fun."

His dad stepped into the fireplace and flooed to Hogwarts, Harry followed after him.

"Think of it like combat training," his dad said, brushing soot off of Harry's robes when he got to the other side.

"I'm going to battle the girls of Hogwarts?"
"You're going to develop your agility and balance."

Harry resisted the urge to roll his eyes. "All right, I'll give it a try," Harry said.

That got a smile from his dad.

"Have fun," his dad said.

"Thanks," Harry said. "And I did. Have fun, I mean. On the trip. It was really nice."

"I'm glad you enjoyed it," his dad said. "We'll have to decide on somewhere to go for the summer."

"Sure," Harry said, still feeling unsure of if this would last that long.

"Do you have your invisibility cloak?" his dad asked.

"Of course," Harry said, pulling it out from his robe pocket.

"All right," his dad said. "I will see you tomorrow evening for Christmas Eve."

"Yeah," Harry said. "I can't wait. See you."

Harry threw on his cloak and made his way up to the tower. He passed a slow trickle of students making their way to breakfast, though with it being the holidays, most students were sleeping in a bit more. Harry went through the portrait hole, slipping off the invisibility cloak. Harry was somewhat surprised to see Ron up in the common room when he got in, but it was a good feeling. He consciously wiped a fond smile off his face before anyone noticed. For crying out loud, it had only been a few days. He couldn't be acting like a lovesick teenager, even if he was.

"I'm back," Harry said.

"Hey, good to see you," Ron said. "How was the down under?"

"It was great," Harry said. "I'd forgotten what it was like to go outside without applying five heating charms first."

"I see you didn't die," Ron said.

"Oh, no, I got stung by a jellyfish, I'm just a really opaque ghost now. See I can turn myself invisible." He threw his cloak back on.

"Hah," Ron said. "Did you really get stung by a jellyfish?"

"Yeah," Harry said, taking the cloak back off. "But it wasn't one of the murder ones. My dad had a potion for it so, besides that, I managed to survive my vacation unscathed."

"You know, most people survive visiting Australia," Ron said. "You don't need to sound boastful about that."

"Everything there wants to kill you," Harry said.

"You shouldn't have read that book Hermione gave you," Ron said.

"It was really interesting, actually," Harry said. "You should read it too."

"I don't need to look at pictures of spiders," Ron said. "I noticed, by the way, that even though
you're scared of all the poisonous stuff, you still went swimming."

"Well I've always wanted to go to the beach," Harry said. "Also my dad actually did have the antidote to just about everything, so I figured it was an acceptable risk. Besides, I didn't think they'd get me if I was just walking through the waves."

"You didn't go swimming?" Ron asked.

"I don't really know how," Harry said. "I was supposed to learn in primary, but Aunt Petunia told them I was allergic to chlorine."

"What's chlorine?" Ron asked.

"Um, muggle chemical that keeps swimming pools clean."

"Huh," Ron said. "So I'm guessing you're not allergic."

"Not as far as I know," Harry said. "I think she just didn't want me to learn."

"Why even?" Ron asked.


"Well we figured out the egg," Ron said.

"Finally decided to cook it, huh?" Harry asked.

"No, it was that sound modification stuff Hermione had us looking into," Ron said. "We needed to change the pitch, it's mersong, only what it sounds like out of water."

"What, like mermaids?" Harry asked.

"Merfolk, yeah," Ron said. "They're going to hide something of mine in the lake and I have to go get it."

"Hide something?"

"Something I'll dearly miss," Ron said.

"It better not be your broomstick," Harry said.

"Oh they'd better not," Ron said. "It probably will be though, it's the best thing I've got; also it is waterproof, of course. Still, though, I don't know how they'll figure what to take. Whatever sweater mum knits for me this Christmas I'll just tell everyone how much I love it."

"So, what, you have to do the task underwater?"

"We're looking into it," Ron said. "I bet you've missed the library."

"Oh, of course," Harry said. Sydney was supposed to have a really great magical library but oddly enough Harry hadn't asked to go there. "So how have you been?" As much as he'd made a thing about being worried about all the poisonous flora and fauna of Australia, he'd for the most part done most of his worrying over Ron and Hermione. It wasn't like right after they'd been abducted when he felt horribly anxious when they were out of his sight, but he still didn't like being away from them, not knowing they were safe.
Ron shrugged. "I was all right for the most part. Sunday night I started to head over to your bed for a chat before I remembered you were gone."

"You sleep all right?"

"Nah, I wrote that night off and studied," Ron said. "Then the following day a first year bumps into me in the hall and I, like, flung myself away like he was a manticore."

"At least you didn't hex them," Harry said. "Are there many underclassmen still here? They can't go to the ball."

"There's a couple," Ron said. "Danny Latimer stayed again this year, dragged him off for a snowball fight the other day since there aren't any other Slytherins below fourth year who stayed. Couple other students too."

Harry felt a twinge of guilt, he hadn't really talked to Danny since the last Christmas break when they had made sure the solitary Slytherin first year wasn't alone for the holidays.

"So you won't guess what Malfoy's doing?" Ron said.

"Running away to join the circus?" Harry asked.

"Well that's really off," Ron said.

"You said I wouldn't guess, so I said something I wouldn't actually guess if I was actually trying."

"Right," Ron said. "Well, he's giving dancing lessons tonight for anyone who wants them."

Harry gasped. "That sneaky Slytherin."

"I don't know, Harry," Ron said. "I don't see how he's going to use this for some plot."

"Well you never know," Harry said. "But I'm talking about my dad. He sort of convinced me to go tonight without telling me it was Malfoy."

"So he Slytherin's you too?" Ron asked.

"Of course he does," Harry said. "I should have seen it coming when he didn't say who was giving lessons."

"Are you still going to go?" Ron asked.

"Well, what about you?" Harry asked.

"What about me?" Ron asked.

"Do you know how to dance?" Harry asked.

"Just move in time to the music," Ron said.

"You're literally going to be on display opening the ball," Harry said.

Ron grimaced. "Don't remind me. Still, though, I don't need to learn how to dance like a prat."

"What if he really is plotting something?" Harry asked. "We should investigate."

"Oh merlin, you really do have a crush on Malfoy," Ron said. "You want to spend time with him"
now."

"I do not," Harry said. "That was just a joke." Thinking he was cute didn't mean Harry had a crush. Malfoy was a horrible person and as horrid as it was to have crushes on about four different boys, including and especially his best friend, at least he didn't have a thing for just every boy who looked good. His heart definitely knew that Malfoy was an off-limits toe rag.

"Whatever you say," Ron said. "So we're going?"

Harry shrugged. "We're spying on Malfoy, it'll be like old times."

"Why are we spying on Malfoy?" Hermione asked from the base of the stairs to the girls' dormitory.

"Well obviously he's up to something," Harry said.

"He's always up to something," Hermione said. "How was Australia?"

"It was fun," Harry said. "Nothing tried to kill me."

"What about the jellyfish?" Ron asked.

"It was like a bee sting," Harry said. "Well, like a bunch of bee stings, but my dad took care of it and it wouldn't have killed me so I was good."

"My dad always vetoes Australia," Hermione said. "Are there any good pictures?"

"I don't even have a camera, Hermione," Harry said.

"Well surely your dad-"

Harry shook his head.

"Well that's alright," Hermione said. "Did you learn anything interesting at the potions conference?"

"There's a guy working on an invisibility potion no one thinks is going to work," Harry said. "Everyone was talking about really high-level stuff. My dad gave a talk about his project; I understood most of that, but that's just because I've been helping him with it for over a year now."

"I'm so jealous you got to go," Hermione said.

"Did you already eat?" Ron asked. "We should get to breakfast."

"I just had dinner, actually," Harry said. "But I could do with some toast."

"So when are we spying on Malfoy?" Hermione asked.

"Tonight," Harry said. "When he's doing his dance lesson."

"Oh, thank you," Hermione said. "I'd tried to talk Ron into learning something before the ball."

"Just move around in time to the music," Ron said. "It's not that hard."

"We're opening the ball Ronald," Hermione said.

"What's there to learn, anyways?" Ron asked.
There was a lot to learn, actually. If the dance was held on the grounds with brooms, Harry was sure he’d be fine, but on his own two feet he felt clumsy and awkward. Another thing that was awkward was practicing dancing with girls he didn’t really know. No one was dancing with their date for the ball. Harry had stepped on a few feet that night, but to be fair, his own feet had been trodden on also, so he didn’t feel particularly horrible about it.

"Who knew dancing could be this complicated?" Ron asked when they took a break.

"I'm pretty sure everybody," Harry said. "But forget that. Why are so many people on a first name basis with Malfoy?"

"I know," Ron said. "Right? What's going on?"

"He hasn't even sneered at anyone tonight," Harry said.

"Also there's only a few Slytherins here," Ron said.

Most of the people who had come were Hufflepuffs. There were a handful from Ravenclaw, and even a few upperclassmen from Gryffindor too, but Ron was right, considering who was teaching the lesson, there were very few Slytherins in the room.

"So how's moving around in time to the music?" Hermione asked.

"Great," Ron said. "How are you doing?"

Hermione gave a tight smile and Harry didn't think she was particularly enjoying herself.

"He's making friends," Hermione said.

"Who, Malfoy?" Ron asked.

"That's what this is all about," Hermione said. "That's what everything's been about."

"Yeah, but why?" Ron asked.

"He wants to influence people," Hermione said. "This may not be a specific plot so much as him making contacts."

"He's definitely plotting something," Harry said.

"Well I don't think we're going to figure it out tonight," Hermione said.

Their break was over and they went back to learning the Viennese Waltz. Harry kept one eye on the step charts and the other on his own two feet. It was close to curfew when they called it quits.

"Didn't think I'd been seeing you tonight, Potter," Malfoy said, approaching Harry at the end.

"No point in looking like a fool tomorrow just to avoid you," Harry said.

"Then I'm glad you came," Malfoy said. "I would hate for anyone to look a fool in front of the other schools."

"What do you want Malfoy?" Harry asked a bit tersely.

"Did Granger figure out the egg?" Malfoy asked.
"That's none of your business," Harry said.

"Like I said," Malfoy said. "I would hate for anyone to look a fool in front of the other schools."

"Oh, and you've figured out the clue and want to help, is that it?" Harry asked.

"I haven't figured it out," Malfoy said. "But it has something to do with water. That's where Diggory's shifted his research. Magical animals that live in water, charms that have to do with water. Probably something to do with the Great Lake."

This more than anything, shocked Harry. Because by all evidence, Malfoy had actually just given him good information. Unless he had already figured that Ron and Hermione had started researching underwater stuff as well.

"What's your game?" Harry asked.

"No game," Malfoy said. "It's not like I want Weasley to win. Diggory's the champion, and Weasley's Weasley. But this is an important event, and we should all be working hard to show the other schools that Britain is strong. Politically, we still haven't recovered our standing since the war. I'm helping you because it's the smart thing to do. The times for childish rivalries are over Potter. We have bigger things to worry about now."

"Oh, childish rivalry. That was all just fun and games to you?"

"Well, I suppose it felt like bigger things back then," Malfoy said. "Look, don't take my word for it. Ask Diggory. You helped him with the dragon, didn't you? He'd probably just tell you."

"How do you know about that?"

"I'm a sneaky Slytherin," Malfoy said dismissively. "Anyway, it's almost curfew, and I have a bit further to travel than you do, so I'll cut this short. Make sure Weasley's set for the second task. It would be great if he could beat one of the other schools." He turned to leave.

"Hey," Harry said challengingly. "Don't forget he's leading this thing right now. He'll win this."

"Night, Potter," Draco said, without looking back.

Harry watched him walk out.

"What was that about?" Ron asked when he and Hermione had joined Harry.

"He told me Diggory was researching water creatures and water related charms," Harry said.

"What's his angle?" Ron asked.

"I know," Harry said.

Hermione sighed. "I'm going to bed."

"Come on," Ron said. "We don't want Harry's dad catching us out after curfew."

"Hey," Harry said.

"That would just be embarrassing," Ron said. "Getting detention from your best friend's dad?"

"I could probably talk our way out of it," Harry said.
"Now I wouldn't mind watching that," Ron said.

"So did you stick to wizarding spaces in Australia or did you go muggle at all?" Ron asked. Harry really should be sleeping. Regardless of the potion his dad had given him, he had been up for twenty-five hours, but when they had said goodnight to Hermione they'd just settled on Harry's bed and Harry was happy to have time alone with Ron.

"Well the first couple days we did the conference, but then we spent two days sightseeing. Most of that stuff is muggle, you know? I mean I don't think there was a magical beach or anything. Did you know witches and wizards don't wear robes over there?"

"What do they wear?"

"Like ancient Greek stuff," Harry said.

"What, like curtains wrapped around them?" Ron asked. "Wizards still wear that in Greece, but I didn't think they did it anywhere else."

"Yeah, so there was a big wizard war in Greece around the time Britain was first colonizing Australia so a bunch of refugees moved there."

"Tell me you tried one on," Ron said excitedly.

"I did," Harry said.

"Wait," Ron said, crestfallen. "You guys didn't take any pictures."

"We did not," Harry said.

"Well that's no good, mate," Ron said.

Harry shrugged. "We saw a lot of cool stuff. My dad just sort of hopped us all over the place, so we saw these, like, desert and rainforest and swampland areas, and then we went on a boat and saw sharks, which were really cool, cause they'll dangle food for them over the water and they'll jump out to get it."

"So you had a good time?" Ron asked.

"Yeah," Harry said. "What about you? You said you had a snowball fight? So you haven't spent too much of break in the library, have you?"

"More time than I'd like, but yeah, I got out a bit," Ron said. "Christmas at the castle is really different with so many people staying for the ball. You never asked anyone, did you?"

"No," Harry said. "I just figured I'd save myself the hassle. Luckily, I won't be the center of attention."

"I do not want to have to dance for everyone," Ron said.

"At least you sort of know how to dance now," Harry said.

"I'm going to have Hermione murmuring steps in my ear the whole time," Ron said.

"She'll give you a markup afterwards with areas for improvement," Harry said.
Ron laughed and Harry grinned to see Ron's face light up. He found himself blushing for no reason whatsoever.

"Um," he said turning his face. "Here, I brought back some Australian sweets." He opened up the backpack he had had on the trip and brought out a packet of chocolate covered sandwiched biscuits. It was muggle, but Harry was pretty sure you couldn't get it in Britain.

"Cool," Ron said, ripping open the package and handing it out to Harry. They ate cookies for a while.

"So, guess who asked Ginny to the ball," Ron said.

"Um," Harry thought. "Merlin."

Ron rolled his eyes. "Neville did, and guess what; she said yes."

"Neville did?" Harry asked. "So what do we think about that."

"Well he better be a gentleman is all I know," Ron said.

"I'm pretty sure his gran would kill him if he wasn't," Harry said.

"Forget his gran," Ron said.

"I'm pretty sure you have nothing to worry about," Harry said.

Ron shrugged. "So how was the full moon?" he asked. At this point, it was just common practice to put up some basic privacy charms whenever they were alone.

"I wasn't really hurt bad at all," Harry said. "And I was mostly just tired the next day." He wasn't quite on a level with Professor Lupin, but he was doing so much better post-transformation than he had in the beginning.

"That's good," Ron said. "So are you doing all right with the whole werewolf thing now?"

"Well the actual transformation is still painful," Harry said, an understatement. "But I'm recovering really well now and it's all sort of getting routine. The thing I'm still not used to is the smell."

"What smell?" Ron asked.

"Well you for one," Harry said.

"Oy," Ron said, prodding Harry with his foot.

"It's my nose," Harry said. "It's super sensitive now. Especially around the full moon. For a few days, I can actually smell emotions off people and stuff, sort of. But, like, smelly socks and stuff like that? Ugh." He wasn't going to tell Ron that he had a smell all his own that lingered within the confines of his bed curtains after the other boy went to bed at night.

"Is that why you've been trying to clean up in here?" Ron asked. "Why didn't you say anything?"

"I don't like to make a big deal about stuff," Harry said. "I'm sort of paranoid that people will figure things out, like if I complain about things being smelly they'll suddenly realize that I've got a heightened sense of smell and then they'll realize I'm a werewolf. Really, worrying about people finding out is probably the worst part about being a werewolf right now."
"So what else is different when you're a werewolf?" Ron asked.

"I dunno," Harry said. "I can see better in the dark, I can hear really well, there's weird little quirks I have to repress."

"Quirks?" Ron asked.

"Like wolf instincts," Harry said. "Like wanting to sniff things that are new, or run after animals in the forest and things like that."

"What's the worst one?" Ron asked.

"Oh, it's definitely the food," Harry said. "Like all of a sudden, I feel like if meat's been cooked anything past rare it's been ruined. I'd talk to someone about the food here but I'm not about to tell anyone I've turned into a bloody carnivore."

"Anything good?" Ron asked.

"Oh, I dunno," Harry said. "I feel like I have a much better sense of where people are around me. It's, like, impossible to sneak up on me."

"That's probably handy," Ron said.

"Yeah," Harry said. "Though I get antsy if it's really noisy and there's a lot of people around. The ball's probably not going to be that great."

"I feel you there," Ron said, and Harry was reminded that he didn't really have anything to complain about.

"Yeah," Harry said. "Are you going to be alright?"

Ron shrugged. "I dunno, I've got to be, though, don't I. I'll be on display."

"I should teach you a bit of occlumency," Harry said.

Ron snorted. "Sure, I'll just put that somewhere on our very full schedules."

Harry shrugged.

"So you got dance lessons, are you going to dance with anyone?"

"Maybe," Harry said. "I'm not planning anything."

"Well, I heard talk going around," Ron said. "People were asking if you're going to the ball with anyone."

Harry huffed. "People are always talking about me."

Ron shrugged. "I got asked out," he said.

"What?" Harry asked. "By who?"

"Dunno," Ron said. "I'd never talked to her before. Really awkward, especially since Hermione was right there."

"Was she angry?"
"Maybe?" Ron said, sounding unsure. "She acted like she wasn't. I dunno, maybe I was supposed to have announced to everyone that I had a date."

Harry shrugged. He didn't want to talk about Ron's love life anymore. He wished he could move on from his stupid crush.

"We should get some sleep," Harry said.

"Oh, yeah, how's the Portkey displacement?" Ron asked. "Eleven hours wasn't it?"

"Yeah," Harry said. "My dad gave me a potion though, so I should be fine tomorrow. Have you been sleeping alright?"

"On and off," Ron said. "It's gotten better, but it's never really all better."

"Well have a good night then," Harry said.

"You too," Ron said.

Ron headed off to bed and Harry was left with his own thoughts. He resisted the urge to just occlude everything away. He couldn't just always solve his problems like that. He did organize his mind a bit though. It was getting easier. It had always been really easy, relatively speaking, to clear his mind and occlude when he had been learning with his dad, but when he was upset or when his thoughts were in absolute chaos it was so much harder to get started and all the harder to maintain. Hell, when he was really caught up in his own head it was hard just to remind himself that he should be calming himself down.

In an odd way, it had become easier since he had come out to his friends. He felt lighter, less like he was going to explode. In the month since he had come out, he found himself more able to calm his own headspace, to deal with his worries and focus on the moment. It wasn't that he didn't still have a lot of things to worry about, but he felt that he had gotten better at not obsessing over things he couldn't really control. As much as he had denied needing it, a lot of the things his dad had taught him for taking care of his mental health seemed to have an effect when he had the wherewithal to put in the effort.

It was just that there wasn't any mental exercise that could turn off his crush for Ron. He could temporarily clear Ron from his mind, he could stand back and look at everything he was feeling objectively, but he couldn't get rid of it. The knowledge that he could never really be with Ron was not new, but just then it formed an icy pit in his stomach that he pushed away.

He wanted to get over it, he needed to get over it. Ron was a great friend. He was cute, he was funny, he made Harry feel like he mattered, and Harry was so very aware of how important Ron was to his life. Harry just needed to stop having a crush on him. Ron needed to be very solidly put into the best friend category in his brain and not in the love interest slot. He was friends with a few other boys at school, he even thought a few of them were ridiculously good looking, but Ron was the only one he couldn't stop thinking about. It wasn't just that Ron was never going to be into Harry, it was that he was his best friend and Harry didn't want to destroy their friendship with an unrequited crush.

Harry just wished he knew what to do about it. He wasn't going to solve it tonight though. Slowly and systematically, Harry cleared his mind and relaxed. It was a good habit to be in, he'd found, right before he went to sleep. There were fewer nightmares if he took the time before he went to sleep. Harry drifted off and dreamed of a red-haired boy who smiled at him like Harry was the world to him.
Christmas Eve dawnd the next day and Harry was slightly nervous for some sort of event to come along and get in the way of another family Christmas. Though, all in all, even with the tournament and the dragon, this year had been a lot calmer than the last. Harry had cautious optimism that he was going to survive the holidays with nothing horrible happening.

Harry found Danny in the library after lunch. He was surprised to see Sammy with him, who he had assumed would do Christmas with the classmate she was staying with over the summer, but he supposed she had stayed in the Castle to be with her brother. He joined them at their table.

"Hi Harry," Sammy greeted him happily. Danny looked surprised to see him, and Harry supposed that was fair since he had completely ignored the boy since the previous winter break.

"Hi," Harry said. "I didn't know you two were friends."

"We're in debate together," Sammy said.

"Also we're the only second years here," Danny said.

"We have a debate club?" Harry asked.

"Draco started it in October," Danny said. "I don't think we have any Gryffindors."

What was Malfoy up to?

"Danny has to argue for no more pudding after dinner when everyone gets back from holiday," Sammy told him.

"What?" Harry asked. "Why?"

"Malfoy says it's harder to argue for things you don't want," Danny said.

"Right," Harry said. "Well, I thought we could have another game of color tag like we did last year. Are you busy after lunch tomorrow?"

Danny shook his head. "No, I can come."

"That sounds great," Sammy said. "Can I bring Justin?"

"You can bring anyone," Harry said. "Isn't there a first year running around somewhere?"

"His name's David and he only likes books," Sammy informed him.

"Didn't even want to have a snowball fight," Danny said.

"Well invite him if you see him," Harry said. "We'll play out on the grounds."

"Sure," Sammy said.

Harry found Thomas Miller studying in the back corner. It wasn't surprising to find him studying alone, since that was basically what he had been doing for most of the previous year's Christmas festivities, but now that Harry knew the older boy was gay, he wondered if his aloofness was at all related.

"Hey," Harry said.
"Potter," Miller said, eying Harry warily.

"We're going to play tag again tomorrow after lunch," Harry said. "I thought you'd want to come along since you played last year."

"Are you for real?" Miller asked.

"Uhh, yeah?"

"I know you go back and forth with being the school celebrity and being an outcast, but I hardly think hanging around me is going to do you any favors," Miller said.

"Oh," Harry said. "Well it's good I don't really care about that stuff then."

"What, really?"

Harry shrugged. He mostly didn't care.

"Whatever. Look, I'm pretty busy right now, thanks but no thanks."

"Right," Harry said. "Um, happy Christmas."

"Happy Christmas."

Harry threw on his invisibility cloak and headed back out into the halls. It would have been nice if the only other gay kid in the school was more approachable. Though if that book that Professor Lupin had given him was to be believed, there were probably a lot more in the school. They were just all hiding, like Harry was. Harry shook off his pensive thoughts. It was Christmas Eve and he should be focusing on getting into the holiday spirit. He was going to spend time with his dad, he was going to play in the snow, and was going to have fun.

Harry had dinner with his dad that night, and even though it wasn't much different than dinner usually was with his dad, something about it being Christmas Eve made it feel special. Harry found himself with a strange urge to come out to his dad that he tamped down. That would be a great way to kill the Christmas spirit.

Harry's dad wasn't very affectionate, but he got a hug that night before he went back upstairs to the tower. Ron was right about Christmas being different with everyone staying over. There was a Christmas party in full swing when Harry got to the tower, and they all wound up staying up late. That night, Harry didn't clear his mind, he wanted to go to sleep with the anticipation of the next day. He was only slightly anxious for some calamity getting in the way of another Christmas day. All in all though, with the exception of the ball, and Harry was excited for the day to come.

Ron was asleep when Harry woke up the next day. The other boys were up but seemed to be making sure that they didn't make too much noise. If Ron was getting some sleep then there wasn't any point in waking him. Harry went and took a shower. He wanted to be able to go see his dad after he had done presents with Ron.

"Happy Christmas," Ron said when Harry came back from his shower.

"Happy Christmas," Harry said.

Ron took Harry's entry as his cue to start opening presents. "Oh, thanks," he said enthusiastically as he put the Chudley Cannons hat that Harry had gotten for him on his head. It looked a bit off though, since Ron was still wearing his pajamas.
"What did your dad get you?" Ron asked.

"Oh, just a sec," Harry said. He wasn't going to open presents in a towel. He grabbed some clothes and ducked behind his curtains.

"Let's see," Harry said, coming back out moments later. "Now you didn't tell him what to get me this time did you?"

"I figured after the Firebolt he'd do alright," Ron said.

There was a trio of packages all wrapped in Slytherin green and silver and tied together with twine. Recognizing his dad's writing on the small card on top, he picked it off and opened it.

To my dear son,

These gifts are but a small measure of how glad I am to have you in my life. This past year has given us both joys and sorrows, but you continue to be a source of strength and pride. Thank you for giving me the chance to be your father. Thank you for giving me a family.

Sincerely,

Dad

"You know you only have to read the card first if your dad's there, right?" Ron said. He had just torn into the package he had gotten from his mum and was already starting on one of her mincemeat pies.

Harry was grinning. The card was the best part, he thought. He started opening presents.

"Goggles!" Harry said.

"Prescription?" Ron asked.

Harry shoved them over his head. "Yeah," he said. "They're perfect." He picked up the insert. "I haven't talked to Cedric in a bit, we should do some pickup games over the break."

"You should invite Krum," Ron said. "Can you imagine getting to play against Krum?"

"You should come," Harry said.

"Oh, I wouldn't miss that," Ron said.

"I mean you should play," Harry said.

"Isn't it just team members?" Ron asked.

"There's no rules," Harry said. "We're already rotating people throughout the games. Besides, Gryffindor doesn't have a Keeper right now, you could get some practice in."
"Well, see if you can get Krum to go," Ron said. "What else did you get?"

"Let's see," Harry said tearing into the second package. "Wand holster aaand, oh, a picture frame."

"Lemme see," Ron said.

Harry passed it over.

"Who're these people?" Ron asked.

"That's me and my dad," Harry said. "We're polyjuiced. That's from the fair we went to on my birthday."

"Only your dad would consider that a family portrait," Ron said. "Also, you look like you're ten. Where does your dad even get all this stuff for polyjuice?"

"Barbershops, I think," Harry said.

"Ew," Ron said.

"When have potions ever not been ew?" Harry asked.

"Fair point," Ron said. "Now come on and open the rest of your presents, I'm starving."

"You just ate one of your mum's mincemeat pies," Harry said.

"Yeah," Ron said. "Just one, I'm saving the rest. I'm still starving."

"All right," Harry said. He opened his presents from Ron, "hey, thanks," and Hermione, "well that'll be useful," and Mrs. Weasley, "I'll wear this to breakfast," and Hagrid, "sweets!"

"Where's your jumper?" Harry asked

Ron went a bit red.

"Is it maroon again?" Harry asked. "You've got to wear it; it's tradition."

Ron groaned. He pulled out a knit sweater in gold and red with a Hungarian Horntail emblazoned on the front.

"Hey," Harry said. "That's actually pretty cool."

"I'm going to look like I'm bragging," Ron said.

"You were telling everyone who would listen what it was like in the arena," Harry said.

"Yeah," Ron said. "When they asked. Also, that was weeks ago."

"You should wear it," Harry said.

"Yeah, I will," Ron said. "If only because I know the twins would do something if I didn't."

Hermione complimented Ron's new sweater, which made him blush. They headed down together and split off when they got to the great hall. Harry continued downwards in his invisibility cloak, avoiding Slytherins on their way towards breakfast. His dad was in the kitchen when he walked into his quarters.
"Happy Christmas," Harry said, removing his invisibility cloak.

His dad smiled at him. "Happy Christmas," he said. "Do you want to help me make breakfast?"

"Sure," Harry said. "Thanks for the presents, I'll probably be wearing those goggles as soon as I can get a game together."

"Are you wearing your wand holster?"

Harry held up his forearm and flicked his wrist. His wand shot into his hand.

"You should keep that on you from now on," his dad said.

"I will," Harry said. "It's good to be prepared."

"Indeed it is," his dad said. "Are you prepared for the dance tonight?"

"I am," Harry said. "So as it turns out, it was Malfoy teaching those dance lessons."

"Oh, did I fail to mention that?"

"You did," Harry said.

"Did you learn anything?" his dad asked.

"Never trust a Slytherin?"

"Did you learn how to dance?"

"Well I think that might be a matter of opinion," Harry said. "But I guess I learned a few moves. So what is Malfoy up to?"

"I believe he wanted to make sure that the school put on a good show in front of our guests," his dad said.

"Yeah, but he's been up to something for, like, over a year now," Harry said. "I know you're probably behind it."

"I wouldn't say I was behind it," his dad said.

"I'm sure you wouldn't say a lot of things," Harry said a bit cheekily.

"I'm sure I wouldn't," his dad agreed. "You should invite him to your pickup games."

"Oh Merlin, you do want us to be friends," Harry said.

"I want you to be able to get along with people you don't like," his dad said. "It is a good life skill."

"So is that why Malfoy tries chatting me up now and then? He's supposed to be learning life skills?"

"He is learning life skills," his dad said.

"You want me to just act like bygones are just bygones?"

"You've done it before,"
"That was different," Harry said, a bit more upset than he thought he would be on Christmas day. He shouldn't have brought up Malfoy.

"Not by much," his dad said.

"It's not like he's asked me to forgive him."

His dad was silent for a moment and Harry felt awkward.

"I mean, I can kick his butt at quidditch if that's what you want."

"Harry, I treated you truly terribly," his dad said. "I wronged you repeatedly. I've taken so much from you."

"It's not a competition between you and Malfoy," Harry said.

"I never apologized," his dad said. "You forgave me but I never said I was sorry. I never asked for your forgiveness."

"You didn't need to," Harry said.

"I think I did," his dad said. "I'm sorry, Harry. I'm sorry I didn't give you a chance when you were a first year. I'm sorry I went out of my way to make you miserable. I'm sorry I gave you reason to think I wanted you dead."

"It's okay," Harry said.

"It was never okay," his dad said.

"Well then I forgive you," Harry said.

His dad sighed. "You're very forgiving," he said, and Harry was suddenly on the receiving end of a hug.

For a brief moment, Harry felt like he could tell his dad anything, but the words died in his throat and Harry pretended that that was alright.

"We should eat this while it's hot," Harry said.

"Yes," his dad said. They settled at the table.

"So what are your plans for today?" his dad asked.

"Well later we're getting together for color tag," Harry said. "I guess I'm not doing much. I'll have to get ready for the ball at some point. I should probably do something about my hair."

"I don't think I can help you there," his dad said.

"That's okay," Harry said. "Do you want to go on an adventure after breakfast?"

"What sort of adventure?"

"Well," Harry said. "I got you a present for Christmas, of course." He pulled a parcel out of his pocket. "But I thought you might like an exceptionally rare potions ingredient also. I would have gotten it myself, but then you'd have figured I went and got it myself, and you probably wouldn't have liked that."
"What sort of rare potion ingredient are we talking about?"

"Basilisk venom," Harry said.

"You want to spend Christmas in the Chamber of Secrets?" his dad asked.

"Well, not too long," Harry said. "Maybe an hour or so. Do you have a broom?"

"Is it safe down there?" his dad asked.

"Sure," Harry said. "Also there's a giant statue of Salazar Slytherin. That's cool right?"

"Do you even know what sort of potions Basilisk venom goes into?" his dad asked.

"Well not all of them are horrible," Harry said. "I'm sorry, do you actually not want Basilisk venom?"

"No, I do want it," his dad said. "You have caught me off guard."

"Well, that's a feat," Harry said.

"You regularly catch me off guard," his dad said.

His dad would probably feel caught off guard if Harry ever told him he was gay. He hated the uncertainty, he hated the doubt, and he hated feeling like it was constantly hanging over his head. It wasn't that Harry wasn't comfortable keeping his dad at arms length, but the idea of getting everything out on the table and ending it all felt a bit like a weight would be taken off his back. At least then he'd know. Then again, maybe he could just keep it a secret forever. Maybe he'd never need to find out, and he could just keep everything at the status quo. The status quo was good. There was no need to disrupt it all.

He had told Ron everything, and Ron had been great, but there was only one Ron in the world and Harry had no idea how his dad would react. He didn't know if he would get the same acceptance or if he would get disgust. It had felt so good coming out to his friends, but that was because they had supported him. Thomas Miller had been outed to the school and kept himself aloof in the library. Sammy had been accepted by the school only to lose her home. Harry didn't care about the school, he had his friends. The question was, would he still have a father. With all of the uncertainty though, he felt that the secrets between him and his dad, his sexuality, his faults, his fears, they were all bubbling within him, and every kind word and assurance his dad gave him just stirred everything up.

"You're chewing on your lip," his dad said. "There is food in front of you."

"Just trying to remember everything that's down there," Harry said.

"Do we have everything we'll need?" his dad asked.

"Oh, I don't think we'll really need anything besides brooms," Harry said.

"Oh? And what have you learned about handling dangerous potions ingredients in class?"

"Keep an eye on the Slytherins," Harry said.

His dad raised an eyebrow.

"Dragon hide gloves and proper storage containers," Harry said. "I'm sure you have all that here."
"I do," his dad said.

"Cool," Harry said. "So do you want to go now?"

"Finish your breakfast," his dad said. "You have a full day ahead of you."

Harry scarfed down his food and took care of the dishes while his dad got his supplies.

The first obstacle they faced was that the entrance to the Chamber of Secrets was inside of a girls' bathroom.

"It's always empty," Harry said. "Moaning Myrtle haunts it."

"Homenum Revelio," his dad incanted. The room was empty.

"See?" Harry said. He opened the door.

The second obstacle was Moaning Myrtle.

"Who's there," the spirit demanded.

"It's just Harry," he said.

"You've come to visit me," she said, excited.

"Oh, well…" Harry said.

"It's been ages. But then, no one ever wants to see miserable Moaning Myrtle, do they?"

"A friend of yours?" his dad asked.

"Harry used to visit all the time," Myrtle told his dad.

"Um, how have you been?" Harry asked, not sure how to make small talk with the ghost.

"Horrible," Myrtle said.

"Well," Harry said. "Alright then… I'm just going to…" he motioned over to the tap and walked over to the sinks and hissed "open" in parseltongue, willing the entrance to open as fast as possible.

"Oh," Myrtle said. "You're going down there again."

"Yep," Harry said.

"You didn't even die the last time," Myrtle said accusingly.

"Nope," Harry said.

"Do you think you'll die this time?" she asked.

Harry glanced awkwardly at his dad who raised an eyebrow at him.

"Who knows," Harry said. He unshrunk his broom and hopped on. "See you down there," he told his dad.

Descending the pipe was a lot cleaner when he wasn't sliding down it. His dad was a minute behind him.
"You have an admirer," his dad said.

"She wants me to die," Harry said.

"Relationships can be complicated," his dad nodded sagely.

"I'm good staying single," Harry said.

"That's alright," his dad said. "Onward?"

They made their way through the tunnel until they came upon the area where the rockfall had occurred.

"Was this here two years ago?"

"This happened two years ago," Harry said. "Ron was stuck on this side and I was on the other, so I went to get Ginny while he cleared that bit up top."

"What happened here?"

Harry frowned. The spell had backfired on Lockheart, wiping his memories, but Harry had still been caught up in the backlash of the spell, had been thrown back by the force of it. His mind had felt seared and he had come to in the dark under a cascade of memories and thoughts a jumble in his brain and a splitting headache.

"That arse got his hands on Ron's broken wand and tried to curse us, but it backfired," Harry said, rubbing the back of his neck. "Blew the whole place up."

"Well, we should reinforce this before we try to go through," his dad said.

"Same spells we use in the cellar?" Harry asked.

"Indeed," his dad said.

"Alright," Harry said. At this point, it was an easy spell for him and it didn't take them long to make sure there wouldn't be any rockslides or falls when they climbed over the cave-in.

Eventually, they came upon the great iron door decorated with snakes. Harry didn't remember closing it when he had left, but it was locked once more.

"Open," Harry said again. The door unlocked and swung open.

"I should get you a pet snake," his dad said.

"I'm a Gryffindor," Harry said.

"What's the point of being a Parseltongue if you don't use it to talk to snakes?" his dad asked.

"Opening the Chamber of Secrets," Harry said. "And I did talk to a snake once, at the zoo."

"What did it have to say for itself?"

"Not much," Harry said. "It told me it had been born at the zoo and it thanked me when I accidentally vanished the glass over its enclosure."

They entered the great big chamber and his father took in a sharp breath. Light seemed to come
from nowhere and from everywhere.

"Huh," Harry said. "I remember it being bigger."

"The chamber or the basilisk?"

"Both I guess," Harry said.

"The basilisk is a great deal bigger than I expected," his dad said, eyeing the great skeleton.

"It was pretty old, I guess," Harry said.

"Indeed," his dad said. "How did you kill it?"

"With the sword of Gryffindor," Harry said. "I thought you all would have gossiped about it, Professor McGonagall was there when I told the Headmaster."

"I knew about the sword, but a beast this big?"

"Oh," Harry said. "I got it's brain, through the roof of its mouth; that's how I got bit. You can see the hole in it's skull right there." Even though it had been healed like it had never been there to begin with, he still rubbed at his arm where the fang had punctured him.

"I'm not even surprised at this point," his dad said. "Alright, go stand over there." He gestured over near the skull. "And don't touch it." He pulled out a camera from his robes.

Harry eyed the camera skeptically. "I didn't think you had a camera."

"I felt I had been remiss in not having any photos to commemorate our first vacation."

"Ron and Hermione commented on the lack of them too," Harry said. He felt awkward and unsure of himself under the lens of the camera.

"Smile," his dad said. Harry did his best.

"How are we going to harvest?" Harry asked.

"Severing charm," his dad said. "Put on your gloves."

There were a lot more fangs in the thing's mouth than they had room for, but they collected as many as they could in short order. Afterwards, Harry explored around the cavern for a bit. There were a number of small tunnels and offshoots, but it all seemed to be a start to something that was never finished. There was a small room with a number of books that had turned to dust a long time prior, another where it looked like someone had camped out for a bit. Considering that it was called the Chamber of Secrets, Harry didn't feel like there was much to discover down there.

"We should get back I guess," Harry said. "I've got a game of tag to play."

"Just a moment," his dad said. He held the camera out and tapped it with his wand. When he let go, the camera hovered in the air. It was pointing at the great big statue of Salazar Slytherin. "Family photo," he said.

"Ugh, if anyone ever sees this it'll ruin my Gryffindor street cred." Harry said.

"If I can root for Gryffindor at Quidditch, you can take a picture with the founder of my house."
"His pet snake tried to kill me," Harry pointed out.

"No one's perfect, Harry."

Harry joined his dad in front of the statue and got a hand on his shoulder as they faced the camera. He stared almost defiantly at the camera. The camera stared indifferently back at him. He almost flinched at the flash. He wondered if they would ever take a family portrait again.

"This one's going on the mantle," his dad said.

"You're getting very sentimental," Harry said.

"This is our second Christmas as a family," his dad said. "When I was putting your presents together, I realized that that was the only picture we had taken together in that time."

"We can do Christmas cards next year," Harry said. "Just with a different picture, okay?"

"Who do we have to send Christmas cards to?" his dad asked.

"Oh," Harry thought. "Professor Lupin."

"That's one person."

"Oliver," Harry said. "Now that he's graduated. And Ron's parents too. And the Grangers, why not."

"Why not, indeed. Come on," his dad said. "I think you have an appointment to play tag."

"Oh, yeah," Harry said. "I probably shouldn't be late."

They started the hike back.

"Harry," his dad said.

"Hmm?"

"I'm very glad you survived the basilisk," his dad said.

"Oh," Harry said. "Yeah."

They didn't really do much by way of terms of endearment, but Harry was rather heartened by the sentiment.

If Harry hadn't already known that Ron had feelings for Hermione, the look on his face when she walked down the stairs from the girls' dorm that evening would have told him everything he needed to know. The little gasp was also a bit telltale.

"H- Hermione," Ron said, taking a few steps forward to meet her. "You, um, you look good."

"Thank you," Hermione said awkwardly. "You look, um, handsome."

Even Harry, who often had to stop himself from staring at Ron, knew that this was a lie. Ron was freshly showered and he had combed his hair, but the truly abominable dress robes he was wearing were doing him a complete disservice.

"Okay," Hermione said. "Just let me…" She pulled out her wand and with a few spells had
unfreayed the hems of Ron's robes, changed their color, and made them fit properly."

"You didn't need to," Ron said, embarrassed.

"Ginny said you hated them," Hermione said.

"Oh, well I do," Ron said. "I mean, I did. Um, thanks. I didn't think you'd know any domestic spells."

"Oh, well that was just illusions," Hermione said, waving it off. "It should last the night at least. Did Harry even do anything to his hair?"

"I tried," Harry defended himself, trying to flatten it down with his hand.

"What did you do to your hair?" Ron asked her. Her usually bushy hair had been straightened and done up in a style that complimented her well.

"Potion," Hermione said dismissively. "It was a bit of a process, don't get used to it."

"It looks nice," Ron said. "Um, so, can I escort you to the ball?" He held out his arm blushing deeply as he did.

Hermione smiled. "Yes, you may," she said, she took his arm

They looked awkward, but they also looked happy. Harry felt a sick twist in his stomach.

The two walked off, out the door. Harry followed after. Once they arrived at the great hall, they had to split up. Ron and Hermione were sitting at the head table with the other champions and the teachers. Harry found a seat with Seamus and Dean and their dates. The long house tables had been removed and replaced with smaller round tables.

This was probably for the best. It felt bad to be so jealous. He didn't need to see Ron and Hermione being romantic. He just needed to enjoy himself. This was supposed to be a fun evening. He wasn't supposed to be miserably pining after a friend who could never return his feelings. He tried to be sociable throughout the meal. He sat with his back to the head table and he chatted. He avoided thinking about Ron. He got a pep talk from Seamus about asking girls to dance. Harry feigned interest.

That lasted throughout dinner. Unfortunately, after that was the opening dance of the ball. The tables magically moved out of the way and the music started playing and the champions and their dates moved out to the dance floor to dance the first dance. The students gathered around the edges of the hall, and there was Hermione, holding onto Ron, a look of concentration on her face, completely oblivious to the look in Ron's eyes as he gazed upon her and they danced.

Harry was saved eventually when the first song ended and the rest of the assembled students were welcomed out onto the dance floor. Harry didn't have a date to occupy his time, but at least now he didn't just have Ron and Hermione to look at, the hall was quickly filled up with dancing partners.

A sense told him someone was walking up behind him. "Do you want to dance with me?" a girl said next to him.

"Huh, oh, um…" He was supposed to say yes. "Sure."

There was a pause as they both looked at each other before the girl reached for his hand and placed it on her shoulder. Harry put his other hand above her opposite hip and they started dancing. It was
one of the dances that they had learned from Malfoy and it took Harry a moment to realize that he was dancing with one of the girls he had been paired with that day. He blushed, in part from embarrassment since he was pretty sure she noticed he hadn't recognized her at first.

"You're in Ravenclaw, right?" Harry asked, trying for small talk.

"Yes," she said. "I'm surprised you didn't get a date." She said, a clear question in her voice.

"Oh," Harry said. "Already had a date, didn't feel like asking anyone else out. What about you?"

"Damien got detention," she said.

"For the ball?" Harry asked.

"He got a lot of detentions," she said. "He got caught doing psychedelic potions."

"Oh," Harry said, not sure what he was supposed to say about that. "Sorry."

"It's his loss," she said. "There's a lot of foreign boys who don't have dates and I'm going to dance with all of them."

"Oh," Harry said.

"And then I'm going to tell Damien all about it," she said.

"You're not happy with Damien, are you?"

"No, I am not," she said. "So you're single, you're not just going to sit on the sidelines for the rest of the ball are you?"

"I thought I'd just see how things go," Harry said.

"You're pining, aren't you?"

"What?" Harry asked.

"The girl you like went with another boy, so you decided to go stag. You've got to try again."

"Right," Harry said. Why did everyone have an opinion about his lack of a date?

"Seriously," she said. "I'm not the only girl here who doesn't have a date. Find someone you want to spend some time with and ask them to dance."

He couldn't just go and dance with boys. He wasn't sure why so many people felt the need to give him a pep talk about the ball. They kept dancing until the song ended, Harry kept an eye out for Ron, even though he knew that he shouldn't. At the end, Harry was relieved for the dance to be over and glad that he had managed to not step on her feet.

"Thanks for the dance," Harry said.

"Go find someone," she said.

Harry went to the punchbowl. If he looked busy, he wouldn't look like he was awkwardly sitting on the sideline. Once he got his punch he sipped it for a bit and looked around. There was a dessert table on the other side of the room. That was something to do. He walked around the edges of the ball and wondered if this was going to be his life. Because what was he supposed to do? Everyone
expected him to get a girlfriend or something. Or, at least, act like he wanted one. Someday they were going to expect him to get married. To a woman. What happened if he never did? Were people just going to figure it out eventually? Was that just the inevitable end of this whole charade?

Sammy had never really tried to hide that she was a girl. It was everyone else trying to make her into someone she wasn't. Harry wondered if he would be someone else if he didn't hide himself from the world, if he was out. He'd heard jokes and stereotypes about how gay people acted, who they were, but none of that really meshed with the few gay people Harry actually knew; just like Sammy hadn't meshed with what little Harry had heard about transgender people before he had known that she wasn't really a boy. Would he present himself any differently if he was out? He couldn't really imagine asking a boy to dance anyways, so what would be different?

Harry briefly glanced around for Thomas Miller, wondering if the older boy was even at the dance or if he was off by himself reading a book. All in all, Harry wasn't sure that Miller would stand out from anyone else in Ravenclaw who was obsessed with their studies. The only reason anyone ever talked about the boy was because they knew he was gay, not because Miller acted any different from anyone else. Harry wondered if he would really be any different at all if he were straight. He might have one less thing to be anxious about at the very least. Besides the part where he liked boys instead of girls, was there anything that really set himself apart from the other boys? Harry supposed he didn't really have a good frame of reference to judge.

At least for now, while he was still figuring things out, maybe he should be putting on a show of interest towards girls. Maybe he should ask one to dance. If only so people wouldn't ask. Whoever he was underneath every layer he had covering himself, he was still very much against everyone knowing that he was gay. What was one dance?

He made it to the dessert table and spent a while picking through and sampling things. He would ask a girl to dance in a little while. It was alright to stall for a bit. It wasn't like dancing was fun to begin with. It was awkward dancing with girls. Harry was pretty sure it would be awkward dancing with a boy too, but that wasn't the point. The point was that dancing was stupid… He wasn't sure if it would be awkward dancing with Ron though. That might be nice. He blushed as he thought about holding Ron close on the dance floor. He wasn't supposed to be thinking about that at all. He should just go ask a girl to dance.

He turned around to look for anyone who didn't have a partner but found himself with an eye out for Ron against his will. He spotted Ron, of course, before he saw any unattended girls. Ron wasn't dancing though. He was standing in the middle of the dance floor with Hermione, and he didn't look like he was having a good time anymore. Ron was pale and staring at the ground. Hermione was standing close to him with her hand on his shoulder. She looked like she was saying something into his ear. Harry made his way through the crowd of dancing students.

He should have expected this. The first couple of songs had been slower, but the party was in full swing now and the music was louder and faster and there was shouting and laughing and the whole thing was just slightly organized chaos. The whole thing was exactly the last thing Ron needed these days. He had been doing better, but between the noise and the press of the assembled student body, it looked to be too much for Ron just then. Luckily, Harry was always ready to duck out of a scene.

He could hear that Ron was breathing raggedly when he got up to them. Harry pulled his invisibility cloak out from his pocket as he approached his two friends and threw it over the both of them. He put his hand on Ron's back and guided them out of the room. They exited into the entrance hall and from there they followed the fairy lights that had been set up to guide guests into the rose garden. The bushes had been charmed to bloom despite the snow that covered them and
the air felt pleasantly cool instead of frigid. Harry could hear Hermione whispering something to Ron as they walked. They didn't stop until they were well into the garden and Harry spotted a bench.

They all sat down, and Harry waited patiently as Hermione spoke gently to Ron. He tried not to listen. That was their thing. He looked up at the stars for a while. Some charm let their light shine through the orange glow of the torches that lit the garden. It was a while before Hermione pulled the invisibility cloak off of herself and Ron. It looked like he had calmed down, but now he just looked miserable. They sat in relative silence for a while longer.

"I'm sorry, Hermione," Ron said. "I didn't want to ruin the ball for you."

"Well it's not ruined," Hermione said. "I wasn't exactly comfortable in there either."

"The rose garden's nice," Harry said.

"Exactly," Hermione said. "Honestly, I did all the dancing I needed to do. It was just too loud in there."

"Really?" Ron asked.

"Of course," Hermione said.

"Same here," Harry said. "Dances are horrible, in my opinion. I'm not missing out on anything."

"Thanks for getting me out of there," Ron said. "The last thing I needed was everyone seeing that."

"No worries," Harry said. "Are you alright?"

"I'm doing better," Ron said.

"Have you been getting enough sleep lately?" Hermione asked.

"I'm getting more," Ron said.

"So that's a no?" Hermione asked.

"I'm not a zombie anymore," Ron said. "Honestly, I'm doing loads better, Hermione. I didn't freak out just now because I don't get enough sleep."

"Sleep's important," Hermione said.

"Sure," Ron said. "I'll get there. Eventually. If I can defeat a dragon, I can get a good night's sleep; someday."

"Still," Hermione said. "Maybe you should go back to trying to catch up on the weekends."

"Hermione, I'm..." Ron sounded frustrated. "Hermione, would you like to walk through the rose garden with me?"

"Oh," Hermione said, taken aback. "Well alright."

Ron looked at Harry. "Um, sorry mate, are you going to be alright?"

"Yeah," Harry lied. "You two have fun."
"Yeah, well you too," Ron said. "Try to have some fun in there."

"I'll have as much fun as a closeted gay guy can have at a school dance," Harry said.

"Yeah, well, at least keep an eye on Ginny," Ron said.

"She's with Neville," Harry said. "What do you think is going to happen?"

"You never know," Ron said. "Here's your cloak back. You should wear it back to the hall."

Harry took the cloak back. "You two will be alright out here?" he asked casually.

Ron took a deep breath. "I don't think we'll get kidnapped," Ron said, reading Harry's mind.

"Well yeah," Harry said. "Alright, I'll see you."

"Have fun," Hermione said.

"Yeah," Harry said, giving them a wave. "Make sure you stop and smell the roses."

Harry threw the cloak back on and made his way off to the ballroom. He cast an eye around for Ginny and saw her on the dance floor with Neville. They looked happy enough. He sighed to himself. He felt as though he could feel the eyes of others upon him. He felt like people around him were judging him, that they knew why he didn't have a date. At least his dad hadn't seemed suspicious that he didn't have one.

As was usual when he thought of his dad finding out about his sexuality, Harry felt a cold pit of dread pool in his stomach. Even before he had realized he was gay, Harry had always dreaded his dad getting to know him too well, that eventually, he would realize that Harry was no good. That he would hate him like the Dursley's had hated him, that he would want to hurt him like the Dursleys had hurt him.

As mortified as he had been, he had been somewhat reassured after his dad had been to see Aunt Petunia. His dad had seen how the Dursley's had hated him, how the Dursleys had seen him, and he still cared about him. Yet still, Harry worried. He worried that there were things that could change his dad's mind.

Harry thought of everything he had told Ron, of Ron's unwavering friendship. He thought too of how much effort Ron had put into getting better, how he had struggled just to go to class while he also tried whatever he could find to help himself, trying to face his fears so that he could go about day to day without being afraid. Harry knew there was one thing he could do to face his fears, but the threat of loss felt overwhelming. He thought of what Hermione had told him before he had come out to his friends. If he was so sure that his dad was going to figure it out eventually, then what was the point in keeping it a secret if he was just going to worry over it.

All of the professors were chaperoning that evening, it wasn't that hard to find his dad. He tugged at his dad's sleeve in lieu of trying to shout over the din of the party. He motioned towards the entry hall. The two of them reconvened moments later in the quieter room.

"Are you enjoying the dance?" his dad asked.

Harry shrugged. "It's pretty loud in there."

His dad nodded in agreement.
"Hey, dad, so, um, can I come over to your quarters tomorrow?"

His dad put his hand on Harry's shoulder and said very seriously, "Harry, you have a home wherever I have a home. You do not need permission to come to my quarters."

"Right," Harry said. "So, I'll see you, um, around ten, I guess."

"I will see you then," his dad said.

"Thanks," Harry said.

"Is everything all right?" his dad asked.

"Yeah," Harry said. "Um, I just wanted to talk about some stuff. Stuff you said I could talk to you about if I felt like it." Now he couldn't just decide not to have the conversation.

"I'm glad to hear that," his dad said.

"This is nice," Hermione commented after they had been strolling for a while.

"Yeah," Ron said. "You're, um, everything's pretty. Out here, I mean."

"The roses are lovely under the moonlight," Hermione said.

"The moon isn't weird for you?" Ron asked.

"No," Hermione said. "Is it weird for you?"

Ron nodded. "It reminds me of that night and stuff."

"What were you remembering back in the hall?"

Ron shrugged. "You'd think it was stupid," he said.

"You know I won't," Hermione said.

Ron chewed on that, because for all their talks about what had happened, she had always been understanding, even when she hadn't understood. They both knew that they'd left normal behind a long time ago.

"It was Hogsmeade, right before," Ron said. "It was crowded and it was loud, and everything was normal and then it wasn't. Most of the time I freak out, that's what I'm freaking out about. It's so stupid. You'd think it would be memories of him, but, I mean, that's usually at night, but during the day, in the regular, just, everything... the noise and the crowd reminds me of just before everything got fucked up and I feel like he's about to get us and... I don't know. I'm getting better, I just, sometimes I just can't help it."

"Well there's probably a charm for that," Hermione said.

"What?" Ron asked.

"For the noise," Hermione said. "Something that will block out the background noise but won't block out people talking to you."

"You don't need to start a whole 'nother research project just for me," Ron said.
"The noise is more than a bit stressful for me too," Hermione said. "And I try to avoid stress these days."

"Does it make you remember?" Ron asked.

"No," Hermione said. "It was meat for me."

"What?" Ron asked.

"It's all they ate," Hermione said. "Honestly, that had to be so bad for them, but I remember being hungry and wishing they would share, and afterwards, for a while, the sight of it would remind me."

"You know, it was weird," Ron said. "The whole time, I don't remember being hungry."

"You've never not been hungry," Hermione said.

Ron shrugged.

"It must have been the stress," Hermione said.

"Maybe," Ron said. "So what? You look at a pot roast and remember them?"

"For a while," Hermione. "Of course, right afterwards we were holed up away from the rest of the school and Harry was bringing us meals and he's all steak and potatoes."

"I remember you complaining about that," Ron said. "So how'd you get over it?"

"Well meat's hard to avoid, really," Hermione said. "But well, I made a point of eating meat whenever I was with people I was comfortable with."

"Well isn't that what I was doing?" Ron asked.

"No, you were doing everything you could to retraumatize yourself," Hermione said.

Ron blushed deep red. He didn't regret telling Hermione about his attempts to get over his fears, he was trying to be more open, but still. There were some things he didn't want her thinking about on their pseudo-date.

"So I should have tied myself up when I was with you or Harry?"

"Oh, I don't know," Hermione said. "I talked about it with my therapist at the time, we made a plan for how I'd deal with it."

"Hmm," Ron said. He wasn't going to get a therapist. "This isn't really a strolling through the garden sort of conversation is it?"

"No, it's fine," Hermione said. "I'm glad we can talk about it, and it's nice that we have the garden to ourselves for now. I don't think anyone else has tired of dancing yet."

"It is nice," Ron said. "Having the garden to ourselves. This is, um, really nice. I really like, um, I really like you, Hermione."

They stopped strolling.

"What, just because I changed my hair?"
"What, no," Ron said. "For a while, I've liked you for a while. Like, like like, you know?"

"Ron that's... well I mean this isn't exactly the time in my life for a boyfriend. We're... we're recovering. We went through a traumatic experience together, and it's probably normal for us to be taken with one another."

"Wait, does that mean you like me to?" Ron asked.

"Did you literally listen to nothing else I said?" Hermione asked.

"So what?" Ron asked. "Are you taken with Erstwhile too?"

"Erstwhile didn't spend three days doing everything he could to protect me," Hermione said.

"Well I don't feel like I like you just because we got kidnapped together," Ron said.

"That's not even the point," Hermione said. "I told you, I'm avoiding stress and Merlin knows that's hard enough without suddenly dating my best friend. Besides, Dr. Abbasi said I shouldn't be making big life decisions right now."

"I'm not asking you to marry me, Hermione."

"I'm not ready to date right now, Ron," Hermione said.

Ron swallowed. "Okay," he said. "Okay, but... I like you, and you like me, so, can't we be friends who like like each other but aren't dating yet."

Hermione thought about it for a while. "I think we've been doing that for a while," she said.

"Yeah, well, maybe now I don't have to pretend that I don't have, um, feelings for you."

"Well that's alright," Hermione said, and Ron was a bit surprised that she had readily agreed in the face of her previous reservations.

"So are we alright?" Ron asked.

"Yes," Hermione said.

"Okay," Ron said, figuring it was time to change the subject and not press his luck. "Umm, so the flowers are nice."

"Yes," Hermione said. "They're lovely."

"Oh," Ron said. He pulled out his wand and severed a rose and with a bit of concentration slivered off the thorns. "I think I can do this," he said. With a lot more concentration he transfigured the stem into a ribbon that was still attached to the rose. "Here," he said, holding it out. "This isn't a dating thing, a bloke's supposed to give a girl a flower if he asks her to a dance, I think."

"It's very sweet Ron," Hermione said. She held out her hand and Ron tied the ribbon around her wrist so the flower would be on top. "Very nicely done."

"Thanks," Ron said. "So, how 'bout I shove some cotton in my ears and we go back in there to get some dessert and then we can hit the library."

"You know me too well," Hermione said.
"Once you mentioned finding a charm I knew we'd end up there eventually," Ron said.

"Well come on then," Hermione said. "I want to see if they have that french custard again."

"The one with the shell?" Ron asked. "That was good. We should invite Beauxbatons every time we have a feast."

Hermione took his arm as they walked back to the castle.

"So you two were out for a long while," Harry said. The other boys in the dorm had gone to sleep and they were camped out on Ron's bed under some floating fairy lights.

"Well we went to the library eventually." Ron said. "Hermione found these weird charms for me so I can deal with a lot of noise and stuff."

"Oh, that's cool," Harry said.

"Yeah," Ron said. "Now, before that, we happened to bump into Krum and he decided to strike up a conversation with his top competition."

"Yeah?" Harry asked. "How'd it go? Did you ask him for his autograph?"

"No," Ron said. "But I did tell him if he's been missing a chance to play quidditch he should get to the pitch next Saturday."

"We're playing quidditch next Saturday?" Harry asked.

"Well after you tell Diggory you are," Ron said. "You're welcome by the way. Please beat him."

"Wait, so he said he'd come?" Harry asked.

"Yep," Ron said. "He said he missed the air, only he hoped there'd be someone who could keep up."

"Oh my god, I could fly against Krum," Harry said.

"Yeah," Ron said. "And he basically called out all of Hogwarts so you better beat him."

"Oh, sure," Harry said. "I'll just beat the best seeker in the world. Oh my god Ron. I might just fly against Viktror Krum. Thank you so much."

"Yeah well, when you're a champion in an international tournament you tend to be the sort of guy who can get thing's done," Ron said, flashing a grin. "Also I told Hermione that I like liked her."

"O-oh," Harry said, perhaps a bit bug-eyed. "What did she say to that?"

Ron shrugged. "She basically said that she liked me too but that she wasn't ready for a boyfriend."

"So is that, um, okay?" Harry asked.

"Well sure, but I don't really know where that leaves us," Ron said. "We sort of agreed that we wouldn't hide our feelings and stuff but we're also not going to act like we're dating, so... I dunno, and I dunno when she's gonna feel like she is ready to date or if she will feel like it someday but
"That's pretty rough," Harry said. "So if that wasn't what you were upset about, what are you upset about?"

"Oh," Ron said. He shrugged. "She brought up being in recovery. Like us being traumatized means we aren't supposed to move on with our lives, and, you know, that's not on her. If she's not ready she's not ready, and if she feels like our captivity had something to do with it, then it has something to do with it. But that's just the thing. It's like they keep taking stuff from me. It's like, here I am at a ball and I'm asking Hermione to be my girlfriend, and they come in rearing their ugly heads. Everything comes back to them, and I'm sick of it. They're dead, but they're still ruining my life, whether I'm panicking in the middle of the ball room or I'm getting turned down, they've got something to do with it."

Harry's first impulse was always to apologize, but he knew Ron didn't want apologies for what had happened to him because Greyback had wanted Harry. "Well you said it yourself, you're getting better, and you'll keep getting better," he said. "So what does that mean, being open about your feelings for each other but you're not dating?"

"I have no idea, and it was my idea to begin with. At least I told her. What about you?" Ron asked. "You can't even tell anyone you like them. What are you going to do when you find someone you're really into?"

"Oh," Harry said. "Well, it's not like I have anyone I'm dying to confess to. Although, um, I am telling my dad tomorrow."

"What, for real?" Ron asked.

Harry nodded.

"So you're telling him...?"

"Everything," Harry said.

"Like, everything everything?"

Harry nodded again.

"So that's big," Ron said.

"Yeah," Harry said. "I don't know if I should start off with the Dursleys or my sexuality or what."

"Do you want me to come with you?"

That was tempting. He'd already told Ron pretty much everything he thought he'd go over with his dad, but this also seemed like something that should just be father-son.

"Thanks, but I think I'll go this one alone."

"Well, just let me know if you need anything," Ron said.

"Do you think you can smuggle me out of the country on short notice?"

"Mate I smuggled a dragon out of the country on short notice, you just let me know where we're going."
"Wouldn't it have been crazy if Norbert had been the dragon you had to face?" Harry asked.

"Oh, sure," Ron said. "Give the bugger another chance to bite my hand off."

"I mean you never got a chance to say goodbye," Harry said. "He probably misses you."

"Misses my blood, more likely," Ron said.

"You could always send a liter to Romania," Harry said.

"Eww," Ron said. "That's it, I think we've stayed up too late; you're talking crazy."

"I should let you get some sleep," Harry said.

"Oh don't act like you get eight hours every night," Ron said.

"I'm alright," Harry said. "Are you going to sleep alright after...?"

Ron waved his arm dismissively. "That- episode at the ball feels like ages ago, I'm fine really. I'm sure I'll sleep as well as I usually do."

Harry raised an eyebrow at that.

"I'm doing alright, honest," Ron said.

"How much sleep do you get?"

Ron shrugged. "I don't know. It's mostly restless sleep so I'm, like, waking up a lot or drifting in between a lot. But I am getting by, so you don't need to worry about it."

"Okay," Harry said. "Just, let me know if you need me to keep watch or something."

"Good night Harry," Ron said.

"Good night," Harry said.

Harry got up to go to his bed. "Hey, Harry," Ron said.

"Yeah?"

"Everything you want to tell your dad; he'd be an idiot if he got upset with you for it, and you already know what I think."

"It's all in my head," Harry said.

"Its all in your head," Ron said.

"I'm still gay," Harry said.

"Yeah, well, like I said, he'd have to be an idiot."

Harry didn't sleep well that night. The thought of the next day's conversation kept running through his head. He would clear his mind only to have his thoughts racing again moments later. He thought up a hundred different ways to say everything. He imagined a hundred different ways for his dad to react. Mostly though, he worried. He worried about his dad hating him the way the Dursleys had hated him. He worried about his dad hurting him like the Dursleys had hurt him.
It had built and built. The closer he got to his dad the more he worried about losing everything. The closer his dad got to him, the more he worried that he would see in him what the Dursleys had seen in him. He found himself drifting off and waking up throughout the night, his mind back on track as soon as he gained cogency. He wondered if Ron was having a similar night.

"I don't know if I can do this," Harry said the next morning on his way to breakfast.

"Do what?" Hermione asked.

"Harry's telling his dad today," Ron said.

"Oh, good for you," Hermione said.

"No," Harry said. "What was I thinking, this is just... This is going to go horribly."

"Well maybe you can do it another day," Ron said. "If you're not ready, you're not ready."

"I told him we'd have a talk today," Harry said. "I told him we'd have, like, a serious talk today."

"Make something up," Ron said. "Tell him you don't want to take potions after OWLs."

"I'm trying to avoid getting disowned," Harry said.

"Well we can come up with something," Ron said.

"He wants to start occlumency practice again," Harry said. "If he thinks I've come clean with, whatever, then... you know? I've painted myself into a corner here."

"Harry," Hermione said. "Unless you hide this for the rest of his life, he's going to find out someday."

"Maybe if I didn't still need a place to stay over the summer, or, you know, a dad," Harry said.

"My parents would definitely adopt you," Ron said.

"I still need the blood protection," Harry said.

"Look," Hermione said. "There might be a lot of negative stereotypes about that sort of thing, and you shouldn't have to, but you can definitely show your dad that there's nothing wrong with you."

"You've got a lot more faith in me than I do," Harry said.

"It's either going to work out or it isn't," Hermione said. "But at this point, it looks like it's going to happen, so there's no point worrying about it."

This was phenomenally unhelpful. Ron and Hermione cajoled Harry to eat a bit at breakfast and then they tried to keep him focused in the library but eventually, it was time to go see his dad. His dad greeted him at the door when he got there. They made small talk for a bit, though both of them knew that this wasn't exactly a normal visit.

"You wanted to talk to me," his dad said.
"Yeah," Harry said. "Um, I guess we should sit down."

"Tea?" his dad asked.

"No," Harry said. "I just- I just need to say some stuff."

"Okay," his dad said.

Harry took the seat nearest the door and his dad sat down opposite him.

"So," Harry said, taking a shuddering breath, ready to start. No words came out though. He swallowed around the lump in his throat but still nothing happened. He had far too many scripts for this conversation in his head and none of them were making themselves useful. He hated himself so much. What was the point of it all if he couldn't even say anything when he needed to. Nothing was stopping him.

"Take a deep breath," his dad said, probably seeing despair written on Harry's face. "Perhaps you can start with the beginning."

"I don't know if this conversation has a beginning," Harry said, relieved that something had come out. "There's a bunch of different stuff. Um- I guess it starts with the Dursleys. Um- you know they hated me, so- um..."

"They were wrong to do so," his dad said.

"Yeah," Harry said. "I know they were wrong." He paused and gathered himself. "Except, for a long time I didn't know that, and sometimes I still don't. I mean, I know it's wrong to hurt a kid, but at the same time, they told me why. They hated me and they told me why. They said a lot of things and a lot of the time I know it isn't true but then a lot of the time, even when I know, I know it isn't, I still feel that it is."

"There's a lot of times when I'm scared that everyone else is going to realize how messed up I am. I've been worried that you were going to figure me out. I- maybe I was trying to sabotage things in the beginning. I told myself I was testing you, but I know it would have been a lot easier if you had just told me to get lost in the beginning. Even when I was telling you those things about me though, I never really dug too deep. There were some things I couldn't say. Some things they said to me that I didn't want to say out loud. Things I don't like to think about."

"I feel like if someone gets to know me too well they're going to start to hate me. They're going to want to hurt me. For a long time in first year, I thought Ron and Hermione were going to turn on me eventually but it was nice having friends, so I thought I'd ride it out as long as I could."

"Harry," his dad said. "The Dursleys lied. I know it must be difficult knowing something is a lie while feeling that it is true, but we can work on that. I'm glad you want to talk about this."

"It wasn't all lies though," Harry said. "Look, I don't want you to make promises."

"What do you mean?" his dad asked.

"Don't tell me everything's fine until I tell you everything. I just- I don't know what's going to be the thing you can't overlook so..."

"We started this conversation once before," his dad said. "I told you then that you did not owe it to me to tell me everything you thought I would not want in a son. I still believe that. You don't owe me an explanation, but I do want to understand you better and I want to help you to overcome these
perceptions you have of yourself."

"Don't tell me that before I've told you everything," Harry said.

"All right," his dad said. "Where do you want to start."

A coil of anticipation formed in his gut and he stopped breathing for a moment, because as soon as his chest started moving again he spoke. "I'm gay," he said. "Um, really, really gay."

"Yes, I suspected as much," his dad said.

"What?" Harry asked. When had he screwed up? Why hadn't his dad said anything? Had his dad heard right? What did gay sound like that his dad might have heard?

"You suspected that I was gay," Harry clarified, being sure to say 'gay' loudly and clearly.

"Yes," his dad said.

"Since when?" Harry asked.

"This summer," his dad said. "I thought, perhaps, that you felt a bit differently for Mr. Weasley than you did for Miss Granger."

Harry paled. "Is it obvious?!"

"You are not so guarded when you are recovering from the moon and Mr. Weasley makes a surprise visit. I am rather certain that he is oblivious."

"Wait, so you knew?"

"I had a minor hypothesis," his dad said. "Romance is certainly not my forte."

"You never said anything," Harry said.

"It was merely a suspicion, I did not want to force you to out yourself," his dad said.

"So..."

"You are my son and I love you," his dad said.

Harry looked at him in shock.

"Really?" he asked.

"Yes, really," his dad said.

"Oh," Harry said. "Um, okay. I'm really selfish."

"What?" his dad asked.

"Um, we're moving on," Harry said. "There's a lot."

"I see," his dad said. "I don't think this is a one-day conversation." He got up and grabbed a bit of parchment and a quill.

"What are you doing?" Harry asked.
"Making a list," his dad said. "So I may address each item in turn."

"Oh," Harry said.

"Are we going in any particular order?" his dad asked.

"No," Harry said. "I sort of figured I'd do all the big stuff first but then that just sort of popped out."

"Why did the Dursleys say you were selfish?" his dad asked.

"I was always super needy," Harry said. "And I still am, I make everything about me. I take up everyone's time."

His dad was writing things down.

"What else," he asked.

"I usually find a way to ruin things," Harry said.

"Hmm," his dad said, writing that down too. "Was that one of the big things?"

Harry shrugged. "Relatively speaking?" He bit his lip. "They made me feel like I ruined their family."

"Am I going to need more parchment?"

"Yeah," Harry said.

"Okay," his dad said. He got up. "Harry?"

Harry looked up at him. "No promises," he reminded him.

"You are my son and I still love you," his dad said. "And I'm not making any promises, but I'm going to make a prediction, that at the end of this evening I will say the same thing."

"This evening?" Harry asked.

"I suspect we will be talking for a while," his dad said.

"I still haven't got a proper start on my holiday homework," Harry said, the prospect of spending all day on this was daunting.

"For a good long while indeed," his dad said.

"You really don't care that I'm gay?" Harry asked.

"You're my son and I still love you," his dad said.

"That's not an answer," Harry said.

His dad sighed.

"There are many negative stereotypes surrounding homosexuality," his dad said. "Something I rather wish we had not imported from the muggle world. Harry, I can't think of anything bad that one might say about gay people that applies to you. Stereotypes have a rather bad habit of not being true. I will admit however that I do care about your sexuality because I care about your well-being. You have more than enough stacked up against you. I wish- I wish your sexuality was not
something that others would hold against you. I do not have an issue with homosexuality, I just do not want you to have to face any of the stigmas that people associate with it, just as I wish I could ensure you never have to deal with any stigma associated with your lycanthropy."

"I don't mean to make you worry," Harry said.

"That is my prerogative," his dad said. "Now, you are my son, and I still love you, so what's next on the list?"

Harry wasn't sure how to feel. A part of him had been so sure that today would be the end, but now he thought he might make it through. He took a deep breath and got ready for the long haul.

Chapter End Notes

Fic Recs- Tick Tock by Ididntsignupforthisshit (Oliver_Ravenwood) a Soulmate/moderdnd AU for Voltron. Foreign Scenes by bwyn, modernday AU also for Voltron. Both are Klance.

Thanks as always to my beta althor42 who is writing his own story The Horcrux Within.
“So what did you do to get Potter to come to dance lessons the other night?” Draco asked.

“I don’t think I will be telling you my son’s motivations,” Severus said. “Did you learn anything?”

“Well there weren’t many Gryffindors who actually showed up,” Draco said.

“And of those who did?” Severus asked.

“Well besides Potter and his lot, I guess I learned that people will overlook a lot if you have something they want.”

“Explain,” Severus said.

“Well none of them trusted me,” Draco said. “But they came because they wanted to learn to dance. Of course I knew that already, I’m not an idiot, but I sort of thought the Gryffindors would be more stubborn about everything.”

“They are full of surprises,” his dad said. “There were comments from the staff. They appreciated how many students felt comfortable on the dance floor.”

“Malfoys get stuff done,” Draco said. “Speaking of getting stuff done, I did that weird assignment you gave me.”

“Did you indeed?” Severus asked. “What did you learn?”

“Don’t you want to know what I did?”

“I told you you were not doing something so that you could brag about it, what matters is that you did it, so what did you learn?”

“I was hoping you were going to tell me, because I don’t see the point,” Draco said. “I didn’t gain anything, no one knows I did it, I got zero capital from it. What’s this random act of kindness bull supposed to do?”

“That is for you to find out,” Severus said. “You should try again.”

“I waited two weeks to find out, and you won’t tell me?”

“If it were a lesson learned by word of mouth I would not have assigned the exercise,” Severus said.
“I can’t just spend all of my time trying to figure out something nice to do,” Draco said.

“Then don’t,” Severus said. “Wait for the opportunity to present itself. Just, be on the look out. This is supposed to be a low stress assignment.”

“Can I get a hint?” Draco asked.

“You’ll figure it out,” Severus said.

“You’re about as infuriating as that Gryffindor son of yours sometimes,” Draco said.

“Am I really?” Severus asked.

“Almost,” Draco said.

“You do seem to manage to bring up Harry every time you are here,” Severus said.

“What? No I don’t,” Draco said. “I mean, not that much. I bet he talks about me all the time.”

Severus smirked. “Don’t worry about Harry. We’ve gotten off topic.”

“I’ve been working on an approach for Morrison in Ravenclaw,” Draco said. “If I play it right, I’ll have another future family head as an ally.”

“Good,” Severus said. “Describe Morrison’s archetype.”

They talked for a while longer. Draco played the game well, but he was still only playing it among his schoolmates. There was a long way for him to go before Draco would be operating on his father’s level.

Harry had gotten very little work done during the first week of vacation. Now that he was back in the castle and Christmas was over it was time to finish everything. Most of his time was spent in the library. Taking a break from homework basically meant cracking different books open to figure out how Ron was going to breathe under water. When he wasn’t with his friends, he was with his dad. With no classes to occupy his time, his training had been increased. He was drilled over and over again on curses and shields and counters, dodging and lunging and for some reason, which still no one had actually explained to him, he practiced wielding a dagger.

He’d had a lot of worries when he had gone to confess everything to his Dad the day after Christmas. At the very least, he had thought that things would be awkward between him and his Dad, but the reality seemed to be, at least for just then, that Harry didn’t have time for things to be awkward, because when he wasn’t doing homework, or research, or training, he was working with his Dad on Occlumency again.

It wasn’t really Occlumency though, not anymore. Occlumency was shielding you mind from intrusion. This was similar, it used a lot of the same mental disciplines, but this was something different. He had asked his dad if he could use the mental arts to change who he was. The answer had been no, but this was something that felt very similar in idea.

With Occlumency, Harry could control his thoughts, he could shield his memories or temporarily bury something he didn’t want someone else to see. With this new discipline, he wasn’t hiding
anything. He was confronting it, facing his past, challenging his thoughts, digging up what was buried. It was painful, it was draining; he wasn’t even sure it was helping, but it was a way forward.

His dad was there the whole time; sometimes he was there with him in his mind, others he was guiding him along by voice. But, he was there and even after everything, after every assurance, Harry was still surprised that the man wanted him around, that he wanted to help, that he wanted Harry in his life. He thought Legilimency was weird, but there were times he wished he could see into his Dad’s mind just so he could know it wasn’t all just something fleeting.

This new discipline was sort of like Occlumency, except it was also sort of cathartic, like late night talks with Ron; but one thing it wasn’t was fast. Harry was surprised sometimes by how much work went into getting what you want from magic. Even so, he was moving forward. He was becoming the person he wanted to be. That wasn’t the only thing moving forward though. Ron and Hermione might have said they weren’t dating or boyfriend-girlfriend, but there was something there that even a clueless first year could probably see. Of course, you didn’t really need to see anything. You just had to have Ron alone for a moment.

“That was really clever what Hermione said about Binn’s assignment, wasn’t it!” Ron exclaimed. This was the third time he had commented on it.

“Yep,” Harry said. “Hearing it almost made up for having to work on History of Magic.”

Ron seemed more and more fascinated by everything Hermione did these days. Harry wasn’t sure what he was going to do with him.

“And did you see her after all the confetti went off?” Ron asked, having jumped the conversation to New Year’s Eve. “It was all in her hair, it was the cutest thing I’ve ever seen.”

“The confetti was in everyone’s hair, Ron,” Harry pointed out.

“Yeah, but it was different with her,” Ron said. “Did you hear her New Year’s resolution?”

“Ron, I was right there with you,” Harry said. “I heard it just fine. Look, is it even crossing your mind right now that we’re playing quidditch with Viktor Krum tomorrow?”

“Wait, that’s tomorrow?” Ron asked. “I thought it was Saturday.”

“Well it’s technically Friday right now, so, yeah, Saturday’s tomorrow.” It was in fact past one o’clock in the morning on January first, and they really should have been asleep.

“Do you think Hermione will come?” Ron asked.

Harry was tempted to whack him with a pillow.

“I’m pretty sure she will if you ask her to,” Harry said.

“Oh, Merlin,” Ron said. “That’s too much pressure. What if I mess up really bad in front of her? I don’t have to play. I’m not even on the team.”

“Gryffindor doesn’t have a Keeper, Hermione won’t care if you aren’t perfect, and you’ll get to tell your grand-kids you played quidditch with a quidditch star.”

“Two quidditch stars,” Ron said.
Harry rolled his eyes. Fat chance he’d ever get that far. Even if he lived that long…

“No one’s going to want a gay quidditch star,” Harry said.

“Does that mean you’re going to tell people?” Ron asked.

“I sort of figure everyone’s going to figure it out someday,” Harry said. “I can’t just pretend marry someone.”

“Yeah, well, there’s rumors about a few players; no one really cares. Besides, it’s quidditch, the only thing that matters is if you can play, and you can play. Also, I’m pretty sure you could get through most of a quidditch career before anyone asked you why you were still a bachelor. Or! Or, screw being a bachelor. You just say, I’m the mother fucking Boy-Who-Lived, and I play quidditch better than all of you, and this is my boyfriend and if you don’t like it you can go eat a toad after I catch the snitch.”

“I might leave out the mother fucker part,” Harry said. “Also, I’m still not really sure about the whole boyfriend thing. It’s not like there’s a lot of options.”

“You’ll find someone,” Ron said. “And just you wait. You have no idea how, just, awesome it feels like to fall for someone. Horrifying too, but definitely awesome. Merlin, she kissed me on the cheek at midnight. I wish I could relive that over and over”

Harry had received a kiss on the cheek too, but he really doubted that Hermione had been blushing like she had when she had kissed Ron. It certainly hadn’t done anything for Harry like it had for Ron. Ron was head over heels smitten for Hermione, and she might not have been gushing about it to Harry, but Harry could tell she felt the same way.

Harry couldn’t tell Ron that he was wrong. It hadn’t been awesome to fall for someone. It just hurt. Ron was awesome, but pining for him was torture.

“So how long are you going to wait for her?” Harry asked.

“As long as she’ll wait with me,” Ron said.

Harry stared off into the dark for a bit. “You never said what your New Year’s resolution was,” he said.

“Oh,” Ron said. “Weird muggle thing, isn’t it… Why not? My resolution is that I’m going to win the bloody tournament.”

“That’s no resolution,” Harry said. “I already told you you can do it.”

“Ugh, fine, I’ll also get really good marks in Charms this term,” Ron said. “What about yours, what does making yourself ‘better’ mean?”

Harry shrugged. “I’m working on things.”

“With your dad?” Ron asked.

“Yeah,” Harry said. “My dad says it’s hard to lie to yourself when you’re fully occluded, but with me it was other people doing the lying so I need to go back and restructure how I think about my past and myself. It’s like we’re going through everything bad and examining it and putting it in perspective and stuff.”
“Is it working?” Ron asked.

Harry thought about it. “I think so?” he said. “It’s like, going through a specific thing, like something my Aunt said to me, I can see it for what it was, and like, know it wasn’t true, even believe it, but coming back into the moment I don’t know that I feel all that different. It’s not like we’ve had a lot of time to go through everything. It’s like drops in a bucket, but I feel like we’ll get there eventually… Assuming he doesn’t get sick of dealing with me.”

“I think at this point it’s a safe bet he’s not getting sick of you,” Ron said.

Harry shrugged. “Back in first year I kept waiting for you to get tired of me.”

“Wasn’t ever going to happen,” Ron said. “You don’t get tired of your best mate.”

“You should learn some Occlumency,” Harry said. “It could help you out.”

“I’m not letting your dad into my head,” Ron said. “I still don’t get how you do that.”

“You can learn a lot from the books,” Harry said. “Besides, he doesn’t go rooting around. The only time he saw something I didn’t want him to see was when we were trying a trickier technique and I was nervous. Of course, now I let him see everything that’s up in here,” he said tapping his temple.

“What?” Ron asked. “For real, everything?”

“Well I mean, not everything, everything,” Harry said, blushing. Somethings were still just… private.

"Wouldn't that be mortifying," Ron said.

"Yep," Harry said. "But I could teach you, you know. Just a bit.”

“I don’t know, would that help?” Ron asked.

Harry shrugged. "I don’t know, it’s worth a shot isn't it?"

"Don't we have enough to worry about," Ron said. "I'm doing enough studying as it is.”

"Something to think about,” Harry said.

"So what are you hoping for in the new year?" Ron asked.

Harry thought about it for a moment. Ideally, there's hoping that Ron would survive the tournament, but as far as Ron should be concerned, Harry had every faith that he would win the thing. “How about, just, no one tries to kill me.”

Though Harry suspected that Professor Dumbledore’s plan involved someone trying to kill him before the end of the school year.

"Well there’s always hoping," Ron said.

"What about you?” Harry asked.

"I want Hermione to become my girlfriend," Ron said. “Also I hope no one tries to kill you, too. Also, I hope I don't drown in the lake.”
"You can hold your breath, can't you?" Harry asked.

"Sure," Ron said, rolling his eyes. "Well enough. You're the one who can't even swim. Hey, since you never learned, I can teach you."

"Sure," Harry said. "Right after it warms up."

"Right," Ron said, with a yawn. "I think it's time to get to bed. I want to be well rested when I face Victor Krum."

"Which of us is facing Victor Krum?" Harry asked with a raised eyebrow.

"Well, I will in February," Ron said.

"Hmm, I guess it's not too early to rest up for that," Harry said.

"Night, Harry."

"Night, Ron."

Harry got off of Ron's bed and padded over to his own. He checked his watch, they probably shouldn't have stayed up until two.

"Okay, this is stupid," Ron said.

"This isn't stupid," Harry said. "This is Quidditch, and Quidditch isn't stupid."

"This is me about to look like a fool in front of the entire school," Ron said.

"It's not the whole school," Harry said.

"This many people don't usually show up to the pick up games," Ron said.

"So Krum has a few fans," Harry said.

"Krum has all the fans," Ron said, waving his arm at the crowd in the stands.

"Okay, yeah, there's a lot of people," Harry said, waving him off. "but there were a lot of people when you fought the dragon. You'd never fought a dragon before. You have played Quidditch before. You're going to be fine."

"Hey, who invited them?" Harry heard someone say. He turned around and saw Malfoy, Bletchley, and Montague approaching the pitch, all three were clearly there to play quidditch.

"Oh, great," Ron said.

Harry frowned. There wasn't exactly anyone in charge of the games. Harry started heading toward the three Slytherin players. He wasn't the only one.

"Fine weather for quidditch," Malfoy said when Harry approached.

"It's below freezing and we're supposed to get snow flurries," Harry said.
“We’ve all played in worse,” Malfoy said. “I heard spots were open, sounded like fun.”

Harry bit his lip. His first impulse was to tell Malfoy to get lost, but it wasn’t exactly his place and Malfoy hadn’t actually done anything terrible yet.

“We’re not playing teams,” Harry said.

“Good,” Malfoy said. “We’re a few short.”

“No teams at all really,” Harry said. “We just rotate through. Charm your robe red if you’re playing red team, and blue if you’re playing blue team. You go back and forth. We’re playing for fun.” He emphasized the word fun. They didn’t need the Slytherins playing like Slytherins.

“Fun,” Malfoy nodded. “Just like I said.”

Malfoy was acting like this wasn’t unusual, like it was normal for him and Harry to talk like this. Without hostility. Harry shifted uncomfortably.

“Hillcrest can tell you how the rotation works. I’ve got to get ready.” He turned and left Malfoy with the other players who had gathered.

“I did not want to play in front of him,” Ron said.

“I thought it was Hermione you were nervous to play in front of,” Harry said casually.

“Different reasons,” Ron said.

“You’re going to play just fine,” Harry told him.

“Krum’s here,” Ron said. Harry turned around to see the professional seeker approaching the pitch with a few of his Durmstrang schoolmates. Unlike with Malfoy though, no one seemed to want to approach him.

“You did invite him,” Harry said.

“Yep,” Ron said. “I should probably go talk to him.”

Ron approached Krum and guided him over to where Cedric was talking to the Ravenclaw team captain. Krum had been what could have been called fashionably late and with his arrival the first fourteen players were randomly selected from their various pools of chasers, beaters, keepers, and seekers and the game started.

Fine, was about the best Harry could say for how Ron did when he played. He wasn't bad, not at all really, but he had a long way to go before he would be ready for the quidditch team next year. Harry, on the other hand, did very well for himself. He didn’t win. There wasn’t really any winning with players being rotated through both teams in an unending game that went on for hours. It wasn’t really about the snitch either. They used the practice snitch, which, while still just as fast and maneuverable, emitted a faint glow and was a lot less difficult to find, so it was caught about a dozen times during the game.

Krum, of course caught the snitch the most, but Harry wasn’t far behind. He just wished he could have played against Krum more than he got to. With the random swapping in and out, he was mostly pitted against his own Hogwarts competitors. Still though, it was a lot of fun, in spite of Malfoy’s ‘fine weather.’ He couldn’t even really say that he had fun in spite of Malfoy being there. Malfoy was just, for whatever reason, pretending like he was just any other player. His two
Slytherin cronies didn’t cause problems either. Harry didn’t trust any of it.

There being five seekers and only two positions, Harry wound up sitting in the bleachers with Hermione for a lot of the game, sometimes with and sometimes without Ron. It was one of the times without Ron that things got awkward for a bit.

They had been chatting for a while about Harry’s trip to Australia when she asked him rather suddenly, “Do you like Ron?”

Harry didn’t need to ask for the distinction between like and like like. “What makes you ask that?” he asked, keeping his eyes on the pitch.

“Well you’re avoiding the question, for one,” Hermione said.

“Ron likes girls,” Harry said. “Ron likes you, you like him. There isn’t really anything to discuss.”

Hermione frowned. “We’ve been best friends for years and now we both have feelings for the same boy,” she said.

“Yeah, well, there’s no contest, so you don’t need to worry about anything,” Harry said, keeping the bitterness out of his voice. He didn’t want a boyfriend anyway.

“I’m worried you won’t be happy,” Hermione said.

Oh, of course. Hermione knew there was no contest. She wouldn’t be worried about Harry being competition.

“I’ll be fine,” Harry said. “It’s not like I can do anything about it.”

“You can talk about it,” Hermione said.

“You want me to talk about having a crush on your not-really-a-boyfriend?”

Hermione blushed at how Harry described Ron. “We’re still figuring things out,” she said.

Harry sighed. “It sucks,” he said. “But it’s all right. I’m in your camp. Dating can wait a bit longer. I’m sure when the time comes and my life isn’t a mess I’ll have someone else to crush on. Of course, they’ll probably be straight too.”

“Don’t be so pessimistic,” Hermione said.

Harry shrugged. Suddenly, he nudged Hermione and pointed at the pitch. The red team was approaching the blue teams goal posts where Ron was stationed as keeper. McLaughlin feinted for the right hoop before going for the left, Ron hadn’t been fooled though, he’d kept his spot until McLaughlin was committed and zipped over to intercept.

“Oh,” Hermione said with a smile. “He caught it!”

Ron did a celebratory barrel roll that he sort of fumbled, but he was still in high spirits, his face radiant. Harry grinned, feeling a swoop in his gut. Ron threw the quaffle back to one of the blue chasers, or rather, in the general vicinity of said blue chaser. They’d work on that.

“He’ll be a great keeper next year,” Harry said.

“That will make him happy,” Hermione said, nodding.
“He’s been pretty happy since the Yule Ball,” Harry said.

“Has he?” Hermione asked.

“Mmhmm,” Harry said.

“You boys must think I’m being silly,” Hermione said.

Harry frowned. “I get it,” Harry said. “Things are crazy, but we’ve got some nice things going on in our lives. Why throw a monkey wrench in it all?” He turned away from Hermione and focused his gaze on Ron. “You’d um- You’d be great together, I’m sure. But… there’s no rush.”

“Ron’s in a rush,” Hermione said.

Harry wasn’t sure if he was supposed to defend that or deny it. “He doesn’t want to rush you,” he said. “And it looks like he’s getting swapped out now.” Ron was flying over to their little corner of the bleachers.

“Ugh,” Ron said, pulling out his wand when he arrived. “You’ve let the heating charm dissipate. Aren’t you two cold?”

“We haven’t been dealing with wind chill,” Hermione said as Ron delimited a new area for her to apply a heating charm to.

“Did you see that save?” Ron asked. “I saw right through McLaughlin’s feint.”

“It was great,” Hermione said. “Harry tells me whenever I need to look up.”

Ron gave Harry a grateful grin, and here Harry was playing wingman for the boy he had a crush on.

“You’re doing really well,” Harry said. “Can’t wait to have you on the team next year.”

“I’m pretty sure I’m going to have to try out,” Ron said.

“We’ll practice a lot,” Harry said. “You’ll be a shoe in.”

“We can do our own quidditch summer camp,” Ron said.

“Yeah.” Harry didn’t like making promises that far out. Who knew when the headmaster’s plan was going to happen. He certainly wasn’t telling Harry.

“Oh,” Ron pointed. “Angelina’s waving you over, I think you’re on deck.”

“I think I should be up against Malfoy.” Harry grabbed his broom.

“Kick his butt,” Ron said.

Harry did. Malfoy didn’t look like he cared though. Harry told himself that that didn’t matter. The game was fun. There wasn’t any need to let Malfoy being there ruin anything. Really though, nothing was ruined, even with Malfoy there, the whole thing was just a lot of fun and Harry was disappointed when it was over.

“I was not expecting such challenge,” Krum said to Harry when they landed. As luck would have it, they were the last two seekers to play, and Harry was the last to catch the snitch. Not that Krum hadn’t bested him several times already during the day. “Of course I did not expect two opponents
on a Firebolts either.”

“I hope you had fun,” Harry said.

“I did,” Krum said. “It was nice to have such a… how do you say ah… casual, a casual game.”

“When there’s no score we can just focus on sport,” Cedric said, coming upon the two of them. “I’m glad you could join us today.”

“I would appreciate coming again,” Krum said.

“Then we’ll keep you in the loop,” Cedric stuck his hand out and the two of them shook hands. He turned to Harry. “I was hoping I could have a word.”

“Sure,” Harry said, allowing himself to be pulled aside.

“So thanks for warning me about the dragons,” Cedric said.

“You thanked me already,” Harry said.

“Well, I’m thanking you more now,” Cedric said. “The next task is under the lake.”

“Oh,” Harry said. “We know. Hermione did this weird sound modulation charm on the egg.”

Cedric raised his eyebrows. “I just took a bath with mine.”

“What?” Harry asked.

“I like to relax,” Cedric said. “Helps me think. Figured out it sounded different under water.”

“Huh. Well I don’t suppose you know how to breathe under water?” Harry asked.

Cedric paused for a moment looking torn. Eventually though he shrugged. “I’m going to use the bubblehead charm,” he said.

“That works underwater?” Harry asked. His dad had applied it to him while he was working on his potions project the year prior when he had been dealing with clouds of mercury.

“That’s what it’s for,” Cedric said.

Harry hadn’t even considered it for the lake; he couldn’t envision it, the idea seemed ridiculous. “Wouldn’t your head float though, with a big bubble of air?” he asked.

“It works,” Cedric said. “I’ve already tested it, but… It’s liable to be too advanced.”

“Ron’ll surprise you,” Harry said. “We’ll look into it.”

Cedric shook his head. “Your skill applying it determines how long it lasts. If it doesn’t hold, he won’t be able to reapply it under water. Not unless he could do it nonverbally and he’d need a breath of air to fill it with.”

Harry frowned. “He’ll surprise you,” he said firmly.

“He already has,” Cedric said. “But still… Alright, well, good luck.”

“Hey mate,” Ron said, having come down from the bleachers. “I don’t want to keep Hermione waiting so let’s hit the showers and go.”
“Oh,” Harry said feeling his face redden. He’d always been body conscious and rather uncomfortable with the group showers that the quidditch changing rooms offered but since the start of term, Harry hadn’t used them at all after their pick up quidditch games, opting instead to cart his sweaty self to the tower where the showers were separated from each other and had curtains. So far no one had commented on it. With so many players in their free-for-all games it was easy to slip away. He wasn’t sure what he’d do next year.

Since becoming aware of his sexuality, he had been very careful not to do anything that could be seen as improprious to anyone who might know that he was gay. Going into a room full of his naked classmates seemed exactly the thing to avoid. Especially since he wasn’t exactly incurious about what some of his classmates might look like.

“Sure,” Cedric said. “I’ve been meaning to ask you about some of the spells you used against the dragons.”

“Oh,” Harry said. “I forgot a change of clothes, I’ll wait out here with Hermione.”

“No worries,” Cedric said. “I know a charm that’ll freshen your robes. Just remind me when you get out of the shower.”

Right, Harry thought, just go up to Cedric whilst the both of them were in various states of undress. They’d just have a chat, why not.

Cedric and Ron turned and started walking to the changing room, and… Harry followed them, his heart pounding in his chest. Facing another basilisk would feel less terrifying. It wasn’t exactly like he could excuse himself. What was he supposed to say? ‘Sorry Cedric, you don’t want me in there ‘cause I’m gay?’ And what was with Ron? He knew. Sure, he always acted like it didn’t change anything; but this? Though it wasn’t like Ron had stopped changing out in the open dorm since Harry had told him he was gay.

Just don’t look at anyone, he told himself. Think about quidditch, or potions. Harry had a sudden horrifying thought that he should have definitely had long before he actually started walking towards the changing rooms with his friends. What if he got an erection? He was going to be naked too, there wasn’t going to be any hiding that. Shit, shit, shit. Should he fake an injury? What could he possibly do between here and the changing room? Everyone knew he’d prefer to walk off anything minor rather than go to Madam Pomfrey.

They walked through the communal team area towards the boys locker room. Harry felt like his entire body was blushing. He had been training to face Voldemort and Death Eaters for months, but he was going to be undone by a shower. His training though- of course, Occlumency. That would work perfectly, he hoped. Harry was in a hurry though and in a very rushed and hamfisted manner, he managed to clear his mind, for the most part. He focused on his breathing, and, oh, there was a butt… and there was a… well, he was in a locker room, but none of that mattered. Everything was all right. He was aware of his surroundings, he just wasn’t thinking about them. He focused on the sounds around him and the task at hand. He tuned into Ron’s conversation with Cedric, his body on autopilot. Everything was all right. They were just talking about charms and dragons. There might be changing guys all around him as Harry started getting out of his own clothes, but none of that mattered to Harry at the moment.

Using occlumency, Harry kept himself tangentially involved with the conversation about the first task. Using one of the more advanced techniques his dad had taught him, though, he created a walled off portion of his brain where he could think about everything. This process was difficult since he wasn’t exactly in a calm environment and he hadn’t exactly cleared his mind properly to begin with.
Harry himself had always been fairly self conscious, a byproduct of a childhood where he was regularly made to feel ashamed of himself and how he looked, he could see that a bit clearly now in this state, but he knew different people had different levels of comfort in that department.

Seamus and Ron were absolutely unabashed about anything in the dorm, Dean changed quickly, and Neville, like Harry, preferred to change behind his curtains. Everyone had their own level of comfort or discomfort and everyone respected that.

No one ever commented on how anyone else changed in the dorm, they just did their own thing, and Harry, Harry had always kept his eyes to himself. Even after he’d started being attracted to the other boys, it wasn’t like he ogled anyone. They wouldn’t like that whether they knew he was gay or not. It wasn’t like Harry was going to do that here. He had no problem keeping his eyes to himself but in this setting it wasn’t exactly something he could avoid.

He ruminated on these thoughts for a while as he showered quickly. The part of his brain that was controlling his body completely separated from his running thoughts. He liked guys. There wasn’t any getting away from that. Objectively though, there wasn’t anything he hadn’t seen before. As deeply occluded as he was at the moment he could more closely analyze his own thoughts and feelings. If he wasn’t occluding just then would he be able to keep himself from doing anything wrong? He analyzed his thoughts for a while. He stopped occluding.

His first thought was that he was naked and he felt exposed. He focused on drying himself off quickly so he could wrap himself up. He walked over to where he had left his robes, his robes that were still sweaty. He steeled himself and looked over to where Cedric was still drying himself off. Harry glanced back at his robes and waited for a moment. Glancing back, he saw that Cedric had started changing and was decent enough for Harry to approach. Holding his towel secure with one hand and his sodden clothes in the other he approached the older boy.

“Oh, right,” Cedric said. He performed a few charms and Harry thanked him before walking back to where he had been. Ron came back a moment later, still dripping wet and gripping the towel around his neck. Harry just focused on getting dressed.

“See you outside,” Harry said.

“Make sure Hermione’s alright,” Ron said, a hitch in his voice. Harry could have kicked himself. Ron wouldn’t have wanted to leave Hermione alone outside, and Harry could have probably used that as an excuse to get out of the whole showering ordeal in the first place.

“Sure,” Harry said.

All in all though, everything was all right. He was gay, there were a bunch of changing guys, but everything was all right. He walked towards the exit, eyes on the doorway. He’d been treating this like it was a big deal but, it just wasn’t. He was fully capable of handling himself properly without being a creep. Being naked in front of everyone was awkward, seeing everyone naked was awkward, but awkward was all right. Everything was all right.

He spotted Hermione outside rather quickly. She was leaning up against the outer doorway and reading a book.

“Sorry we made you sit in the bleachers all day,” Harry said.

“Oh, it was nice,” Hermione said. “I had a nice book and occasionally interesting things happened that involved brooms. Did you have fun?”

Harry blushed scarlet thinking for a brief moment that she was talking about the locker room, but
of course, she wasn’t.

“Yeah,” Harry said. “It was great playing against Krum.”

“I suppose you like a challenge,” Hermione said.

“Just because I almost always win doesn’t mean I’ve never been challenged before,” Harry said. “Though it was very nice to play against someone of his calibre.”

“You never talk about your future,” Hermione said. “Not past whatever is immediately in front of you.”

Harry shrugged, not sure where she was going.

“Harry,” Hermione said. “What do you want to be when you grow up?”

Alive, Harry thought. “A quidditch star,” he said. Because that was an easy answer. It was also mostly true. That would probably be nice. It would probably be really nice. But he could think of a few things that would be nice and he’d never really given it much thought. He couldn’t really say what he wanted to be. He shrugged again. “I’ll think about it.”

Ron came out then. He looked pale and his hair was still damp. Had he been pale when Harry had last seen him?

“Were you okay in there?” Hermione asked. “It must have been crowded.”

Harry hadn’t even thought of that. Shit. He was too busy thinking about his own problems to think about Ron’s. He was such a bad friend and… He cut that thought off and reminded himself that it was all right to worry about himself and that he and Ron had a strong friendship.

“It was,” Ron agreed. “I talked dragons with Diggory for a bit though and that kept my mind off of things for a bit. Sort of got a bit on edge and wound up rushing through changing; didn’t really dry myself off.”

“Well it’s cold enough, don’t you think,” Hermione said. She pulled out her wand and Ron had dry clothes and hair a moment later. Ron looked at her like she was the most amazing person in the world.

“Lets go warm up in the tower,” Harry said.

“The twins were going to get some hot chocolate from the kitchens,” Hermione said.

“That’ll be nice,” Ron said.

They started walking back to the tower.

“So Cedric wanted to thank me for telling him about the dragons,” Harry said. “Let’s talk about the Bubblehead charm.”

They discussed the pros and cons as they walked back, though until they could actually look it up, it was mostly speculation. They had time though, and Harry didn’t let thoughts of the second task ruin his mood. It had been a good day, even with the changing room, and Harry was going to enjoy the rest of it with his friends.
The last day of the break was spent mostly on homework, though they found the time to look up the Bubble Head charm. Cedric was right, it was advanced. It was a charm that basically encased the head in a bubble and then continuously transfigured carbon dioxide into oxygen. If you did it wrong, you could asphyxiate and not even realize it, also apparently too much oxygen was a thing. It required strong capabilities in both charms and transfiguration. Ron was going to start trying to learn it, but they were still looking for a better alternative.

That night though, with both their Arithmancy and Transfiguration homework due the following day, they focused on making sure it was all ready to go. All in all, it had been a very eventful holiday and Harry was happy for all of it, even the really difficult conversations he’d had with his dad.

The resumption of classes wasn’t the only eventful thing about Monday though. Once more, as he entered the great hall for breakfast, it seemed like all eyes turned upon him.

“Shit,” Ron said. Hermione did not correct him for his language. Harry fought the urge to turn around and go back to bed.

The great hall was a buzz of animated whispering. Harry started walking down the aisle towards their usual spots at the Gryffindor table. Whatever it was, he would take it in stride. He wondered what the Prophet had now. There were only so many great secrets he had left. Loath as he was to do it, he took Malfoy’s advice from long ago and held his head up high.

“We should get here earlier,” Ron said. “This is always awkward.”

“You boys are the ones taking forever to get ready,” Hermione said.

“I’m not exactly a morning person,” Ron commented.

“It’s fine,” Harry said, very unsure of his own proclamation. As long as it wasn’t his lycanthropy, he could survive whatever might have come out. However he handled things just then was probably the most important. He seized rough control of his mind as panic tried to set in. It was the best he could do at the moment. Fear was necessary, panic was useless. He stamped it down until it was just an angry buzz beneath his skin.

“Is it?” Ron asked.

“Sure,” Harry said, with some level of bravado.

“Faggot,” the word came from somewhere behind him amidst the jumbled rumbling of the student body.

Harry almost froze at the word. Ron turned around but Harry grabbed his sleeve and kept walking. It wasn’t as though he hadn’t sort of expected this to happen at some point. He had thought he had had more time though. He made eye contact with his dad at the Head Table as he walked down the aisle. He tried to put on a face that said he did not need paternal intervention.

Harry sat down at the table. Ever since Greyback, Ron and Hermione had always sat side by side at the table, so Harry was surprised when they both sat on either side of him. Opposite him, Seamus had a copy of Witch Weekly that he must have borrowed from someone, though it was folded up with its headline hidden. He was also avoiding looking at the three of them.

“Anything interesting in the paper this morning?” Harry asked, not exactly as casually as he was...
going for. He supposed he knew now what it likely held. At least it wasn’t his lycanthropy.

Seamus blushed. He looked at his plate. “Um…”

“Witch Weekly says you two are a couple,” Parvati says. She had just scooted a couple spots down the table and was looking with interest at Harry and Ron.

“What?” Harry asked, looking at Ron in surprise. “We’re not a couple.”

“Well there’s a picture, but it’s okay,” Parvati said, in a patronizingly reassuring tone. Lavender joined her. She also looked very interested.

“What picture could they possibly have?” Ron asked.

“The Quidditch World Cup,” Seamus said. “Parvati’s not explaining it well.” He handed the magazine to Harry, still not really looking at him.

“Well I definitely wasn’t dating anyone at the World Cup,” Harry said. “Come to think of it, I’m not dating anyone right now.” He nudged Ron with his elbow.

Ron hmmmed. “Are you sure we didn’t start dating?” he asked. “I mean, if it’s in Witch Weekly…”

“Well I’m pretty sure,” Harry said. “But then again, I’m sure… Oh, it’s Rita Skeeter, I’m sure Skeeter knows what she’s talking about.”

“Are you going to read the article?” Lavender asked.

“Well I suppose,” Harry said. “Let’s find out if we’re dating.”

He picked up the magazine and groaned at the title: ‘The Boy-Who-Lived in the Closet.’ Ron and Hermione read over his shoulders. As to Harry being gay, the article had two main pieces of evidence. The first was an anonymous source who reported hearing Harry talk about being gay during the Yule Ball in the rose garden. Harry sort of remembered making a flippant comment back then.

“That’s obviously made up,” Hermione commented. “There wasn’t anyone in the garden when we were out there.”

The second piece was a photograph taken at the Quidditch World Cup. It looked like it had been blown up from a larger photo, but it clearly showed Harry in the top box. The problem was that Harry could tell exactly when it was taken. It was taken when all of the guys in the top box were looking like fools because they were staring at the Veela on the pitch. All of the males, with the notable exception of Harry, who was looking around in confusion. All of the males, with the notable exception of Harry, who was looking around in confusion. Unfortunately for Ron, with the angle of the photo, Harry was actually blocking him, so no one could actually see that he was just as entranced as everyone else. Oh, wait, there was Charlie, with a smug look as he took in the spectacle. Oh, and something else he hadn't noticed at the time, there were a couple of women in the frame who also seemed to be entranced.

“Some boys start puberty later than other boys,” Hermione defended. “Harry just wouldn’t have been interested yet. That doesn’t mean anything.”

To support the romance angle with Ron the article only really had conjecture. Ron taking the tournament for Harry, Harry facing Greyback for Ron, (“and me,” Hermione supplied), as well as how all three of them disappeared from the Yule Ball early on. The article hinted that Ron had taken Hermione as a cover and that they’d left early so that Harry and Ron could spend time
together, mentioning that Harry had gone stag. Harry had the thought that it would be easier to deal with if it were all true. The article closed with comments from classmates about how close they were. It never actually said that they were boyfriends, but it came very close.

“Really,” Hermione said. “This article’s nothing but conjecture and one supposed overheard comment. I can’t believe they printed this.”

“But the picture,” Lavender said.

“The picture doesn’t mean anything,” Hermione said, throwing up her hands.

“I’m gay,” Harry said, more loudly than he really needed to, halting a lot of conversations around him.

“Oh,” Ron said. “Good on you mate.” He clapped Harry on the back like he’d just won Gryffindor a bunch of points.

“To be clear,” Harry said. “I’m gay, Ron’s not. We aren’t dating.”

“Oh, you think I don’t know you two sneak behind each others curtains at night?” Seamus said.

Parvati and Lavender both gasped before they started giggling behind their hands.

Ron rolled his eyes. “You know I have trouble sleeping, it’s not like that.”

“So you two are sleeping together?” Lavender asked. Why the hell did she look hopeful?

“No,” Ron said. “We chat for a bit before bed. That’s all. And I don’t seem to recall you having a problem with that before this article,” Ron threw at Seamus.

“Yeah, well I was willing to give you the benefit of the doubt,” Seamus said indignantly.

“I don’t need the benefit of your anything,” Ron said. “It’s no skin off my back if you think I’m gay or straight. What’s the matter Finnigan, you got a problem with all of this?”

“Yeah, well a bloke should know, shouldn’t he, if he’s sharing a dorm with a couple of queers.”

“That’s strange,” Ron said. “Because unless you want to fuck me I can’t see how my sexuality has anything to do with you.”

“Ronald!” Hermione said very indignantly while simultaneously a very angry Seamus called out, “it does when I’m sleeping next to you two.”

“Yeah, well, I’m pretty sure you don’t have to worry about anyone wanting to creep on you,” Ron said.

“What’s that supposed to mean?”

“Well I was trying to low key call you ugly, but if you need me to spell it out for you, I can also call you stupid,” Ron said.

“Ron,” Hermione chastised. “Let’s talk about this.”

“There’s nothing to talk about,” Seamus said. He pushed his plate away from himself as if he was too disgusted to eat and got up from the table to storm off. Harry might have hoped for there to be no drama in the dorm at least.
Dean, who’d been silent up until now, got up too. His face looked drawn and his eyes were upset. “I’ll go talk to him,” he said. “Um, he’ll come around. So, ah, good to know…. Harry. Um, see you in class.” He left hurriedly in the direction Seamus had gone.

“So tell us everything,” Parvati said.

“I’m gay,” Harry said. “That’s everything.”

“Is this going to be a thing?” Neville asked.

“A thing?” Harry asked.

“Like the werewolf thing, and the Slytherin thing, and the hundred fifty points in one night thing,” Neville said.

“Yeah,” Harry said. “It’s probably going to be a thing.”

Ron shrugged off his angry expression. “Nah,” he said. “Everyone knows you’re Snape’s kid now. They know not to cross him. Well- The first and second years don’t, but I’m not too worried about them hexing you in the halls.”

“Did he already know?” Neville asked.

Harry nodded. “He’s fine with it.”

“All right, what’ve we missed?” It was the twins, a bit late for breakfast. They took the seats previously occupied by Dean and Seamus.

“Harry’s out,” Ron said.

“Oh, so we can tease him in public now?” Fred asked.

“I didn’t realize you were restraining yourselves,” Hermione said.

“You have no idea,” George said.

“So judging by how many people are crowding around Witch Weekly I’m going to guess this wasn’t something you planned out,” said Fred.

Harry held up the magazine.

“Oh, front page,” George said. “Is this one going in the scrapbook?”

“No scrapbook,” Harry said.

“Are you really alright?” Hermione asked.

Harry hmmed. “I guess? I mean everyone I care about already knew and you’re all fine with it. I can deal with everyone else. I’d sort of figured it wasn’t something I could keep a secret forever. Seamus was a bit disappointing but not really a surprise.”

“Finnegan?” Fred asked.

“Oh, don’t you worry,” George said.

“I’m not worried,” Harry said. “You don’t need to do anything.”
“You’ve got honorary little brother status,” Fred said.

“And that means we get to make certain people’s lives interesting,” said George.

“I mean we’ve got a number of products to test out,” said Fred.

“No testing your products on other students,” Hermione said firmly. “Now are the three of us going to get some peace so we can actually eat our breakfast?”

“Now honestly, who else are we going to test our products on if we can’t test on students?” George asked.

“How about yourselves,” Hermione said.

“How about the first years?” Fred asked.

“Absolutely not,” Hermione said.

“Guess we’ll just have to do it in secret,” George said.

“Super secret,” said Fred.

Hermione opened her mouth to reply but Ron cut in. “Did you want some pineapple, Hermione? It’s almost all gone.”

“We’ll talk more about this later,” Hermione told the twins, taking the tray of fruit that Ron had pulled over.

They focused on eating breakfast then. Harry did his best to tune out the gossip happening all around him. The twins talked about their business, which was actually starting to sound like an actual business, and Ron and Hermione seemed to be keeping an eye out for anyone who might approach.

“I’m really sorry you got dragged into the whole thing,” Harry told Ron as they walked towards Transfiguration.

“I don’t care about that,” Ron said. “How would that be if I told you and Charlie that I don’t care that you’re gay but I freak out if someone thinks I am too.” He turned to Hermione. “Besides, the only girl that matters knows how I feel about her.”

Hermione reached out and grabbed Ron’s hand and the both of them started blushing. Harry moved his eyes forward.

“Well still, you don’t need to fight Seamus on my behalf.”

“It’s my behalf too,” Ron said. “If he’s got a problem with you he’s got a problem with my family, so I definitely have a problem with him.”

“Well he’s not going to come around just because you yell at him,” Hermione said.

Ron shrugged.

“Really, what we should be doing is educating people,” Hermione said. “I’m sure there are pamphlets we can get from somewhere.”

“Nah,” Ron said. “Harry, you just need to do the same thing you did when that article about the
Dursleys came out. Just tell everyone, ‘yeah, I’m gay, but you know what, that doesn’t change anything else you knew about me.’ You’re still you. Just remind them that being gay doesn’t mean anything besides you liking blokes.”

“I think that might be the part some people are taking issue to,” Harry said.

“Are you going to write a letter to the editor again?” Hermione asked.

“Maybe,” Harry said. He didn’t know what he’d write.

“You’re not going to skip classes again are you?” Hermione asked.

“No,” Harry said. “I think I’ll be alright. Besides, I’ve got too much to do to fall behind.”

“Just let us know if anyone gives you crap,” Ron said.

“I’m pretty sure someone’s going to give me crap and that I’m going to survive it,” Harry said. “But I’m not the only one in that article, if you’ll recall.”

“I told you I don’t care,” Ron said.

“Yeah, well I do,” Harry said.

“How about we just see how it goes,” Hermione said.

“I think I can do that,” Harry said.

“Good,” Hermione said. “And we’ll try not to get into any fights.”

“No promises,” Ron said.

They made their way to the classroom amidst stares and whispers, but so far no one seemed interested in making a scene.

Professor McGonagall, of course, did not tolerate gossiping or acting out in her classroom and Harry survived the class just fine. Ron and Hermione were back to sitting next to one another. Seamus seemed to go out of his way to sit as far from them as possible. He got a ‘Keep your chin up, Potter,’ from Professor McGonagall as he was leaving. It was in-between classes that Harry got some trouble.

“Hey, Potter, are you really gay?” some older Ravenclaw thought it was his business to ask loudly in the hallway.

“Yeah,” Harry said, just as loudly, “but I’m not dating Ron.”

Someone else took the opportunity of the suddenly hushed hall to make a rather crass suggestion of what Harry and Ron did in the dorms that got an indignant response from Hermione and a rather large blush from Harry. He wasn’t even sure if that was a thing people did together.

“Oy,” Ron said. “If you think you’ve got anything on basilisks, dragons, or mountain trolls, you can come up and say that to our faces.”

“I don’t need to get near your queer asses,” was the reply from the crowd.

“So that’s a no then?” Ron called back.
“Fuck you!”

“No thanks,” Ron said. “I’ve got better things to do.” With that, he started walking down the hall again.

“So that was sort of badass,” Harry said.

“That was a good way to start a fight,” Hermione said.

“I wasn’t starting anything,” Ron said.

“You weren’t stopping anything either,” Hermione said.

Ron frowned at Hermione, and Harry could tell he was resisting an argument.

“None of the prefects even said anything,” Hermione said.

Harry didn’t have anything to say to that, but in his experience, authority figures had a way of not seeing problems they didn’t want to deal with.

Herbology was nice, though fairly awkward. There was plenty of time to chat during class and the Hufflepuffs made overtures. Harry and Ron kept having to deny being a couple.

Fortunately, with Care of Magical Creatures following Herbology, Harry didn’t have to brave the halls again, but he now had to face the Slytherins. Since his father’s trial, Draco had stopped hanging out with many of his usual hangers on. Crabbe and Goyle seemed to have migrated towards Theodore Notte. The only people Draco seemed to hang out with now in his year was Daphne Greengrass, Tracy Davis, and Blaise Zabini.

Draco didn’t seem to care about the loss of his old friends. He didn't seem much affected by anything these days. That was what bothered Harry the most, Draco had used to be so transparent, but now, he was an enigma. His father was locked up, his friends had left him; everything Harry had thought Draco cared about, Draco had lost. Yet now, and indeed it seems every day, Draco was smiling affably, leading whatever conversation he was in without looking like he was holding court. Harry didn’t like not knowing what to expect from someone.

Trouble, though, didn’t come from Draco today, it came from Nott and Pansy. It came in the form sneers and laughter behind hands. It came in the form of comments and crude hand gestures when Hagrid’s back was turned.

Hagrid, for his part, didn't act as if anything were different, besides clapping Harry on the back when he first got to class. Harry wasn't sure what he had been expecting; Hagrid was one of the most accepting people he knew. Still though, he had been expecting some sort of scene. Harry stayed back after class ended, if only because he felt like he needed to confirm that Hagrid knew.

“Hi Hagrid,” Harry said, when it was just him and his friends left behind.

“Did you want to help me with the Occamys, Harry?” Hagrid asked.

“Sure,” Harry said. He grabbed one of the cages and brought it over. "Say, Hagrid, I just wanted to check… you see what was in the paper this morning?"

“They had no business printing that," Hagrid said, gently putting the weird lizard bird in it’s cage. “Weren’t their business at all.”
“I just didn’t know what you thought about that,” Harry said.

“Yer all right, Harry,” Hagrid said. “Don’t you worry about me. You just let me know if anyone’s giving you trouble fer anything.”

“Right, thanks Hagrid,” Harry said.

“Though I have been wondering if you’re ever going to tell me about the two of you.”

“Oh, we’re not,” Harry said. ”I mean I am, Ron's not.”

“Oh, well alright then,” Hagrid said. “Just don't you go paying too much mind to what other people say.”

"I won't," Harry said.

"We should get to lunch" Hermione said. "We'll stop by for tea tomorrow after classes."

“Oh that would be great,” Hagrid said. “I’ll see you then.”

Harry was tempted to skip lunch. Didn't want to deal with everything. He hadn't been ready to deal with all of this. He didn't like the stares, he didn't like the whispers, he just wanted to go out to the dorm and take a nap. But he wasn't allowed to skip meals and he at least knew that he couldn’t act ashamed.

They went into their usual spot. Seamus, for his part, didn't say or do anything. The general atmosphere of the hall made it rather clear that there's one thing everyone was talking about. Harry tuned it all out and ate his lunch, letting Hermione quiz him for the pop quiz they were probably going to have in Arithmancy.

Arithmancy was a difficult enough class that it usually took all of Harry’s concentration and with everything going on, he didn’t mind the two hour class after lunch. He did mind Stephen Cornfoot getting up out of his seat when Harry sat down next to him just to move over one. Harry did his best not to dwell on it during class. It wasn't like the other boy was a friend or anything. Ron and Hermione were back to sitting side-by-side by Arithmancy, so Harry spent the two hour class with an empty desk next to him.

Harry was pretty relieved when the day was finally over.

"I was going to go see my dad," Harry said.

"Do you want us to walk with you?” Hermione asked.

Yes, Harry thought. Though he couldn't keep using his friends as a security blanket.

"No," Harry said. "Will you be in the library?"

"Where else would we be?” Ron asked.

“Well, I'll see you before dinner,” Harry said.

"You're handling this pretty well," Hermione commented.

Harry shrugged. "I don't really have much of a choice, do I?"

"Stay safe," Ron said.
“You too,” Harry said.

Harry threw on his invisibility cloak and made his way downstairs.

Harry walked into his dad's office, standing by the door unsure of himself. His dad got up from his desk and crossed the room when he saw him.

"How are you holding up?” he asked, giving Harry a hug.

Harry actually stopped to think about it. He was supposed to be more introspective about his feelings, more honest too. "Sort of shitty," he said, returning the hug.

His dad held him out at arms length, looking him in the eye. "You are my son and I love you," he said very matter of factly.

Not a day had gone by since the Yule Ball that Harry hadn't heard that.

“Thanks," Harry said. He was never really sure what he was supposed to say after that. “I’m sorry if this has embarrassed you,” he said.

A stern look crosses his dad’s face.

“Harry,” he said seriously. “Anyone who thinks less of me for having a gay son can go to hell.”

“Oh,” Harry said. "So, um, has there been any gossip?"

"There's always gossip," his dad said.

"Anything I should hear about? Harry asked.

His dad hesitated. "There may be some concern about you and Mr. Weasley sharing a dorm," his dad said. "But the staff knows well enough not to take articles by Miss Skeeter too seriously. I have heard that you are telling people that you are gay."

"I have been," Harry said. “I didn’t see any point in fighting it.”

"Has there been any trouble?” His dad asked.

Harry shook his head. "Just words," he said.

"Words matter," his dad said.

"Sure," Harry said. "But it could be worse."

“The Dark Lord could have been worse," his dad said. "Let us not measure things by how much worse they could have been. Come, let’s not stand by the door all day."

They both went and sat down by his dad’s desk.

"Have you been occluding at all today?” his dad asked.

"Not really," Harry said. "Just clearing my mind now and then. I'll run through some exercises before bed tonight."

"Well perhaps I can cheer you up a bit by telling you that Miss Skeeter has been banned from the school premises,” his dad said.
"Oh, now she's banned?"

"Starting rumors about students love lives crossed the line," his dad said. "Of course she's crossed a line many times over the year."

"I still don't know how she heard us in the Rose Garden," Harry said. "I'm certain we were alone."

His dad gave him a look but didn't say anything.

"I know," Harry said. "You warned me."

"Even with her gone I will still urge caution," his dad said.

"Well," Harry said. "I think at this point I should just stop talking about things."

"I would not go that far," his dad said. "It is healthy to talk about certain things. If you feel the need, then I can ensure privacy."

Harry shrugged.

"Let's talk safety," his dad said.

"I'm already going everywhere with an escort or under my visibility cloak," Harry said. "What more do you want?"

"I want to stay proactive," his dad said.

"Right, let's just give detention to the bullies before they bully me," Harry said.

"Perhaps not that proactive," his dad said. "But this time I want to identify problems before they arise."

"How do we do that?" Harry asked.

"How did your dorm mates handle the news," his dad asked.

"You're not going to do anything to punish him are you?" Harry asked

"Has he done anything worth punishing?" his dad asked.

"No," Harry said. "Just a disagreement."

"What sort of disagreement?"

"Well, maybe some guys don't want to share a dorm with a gay guy," Harry said.

"Have you done anything to make him uncomfortable?"

"Well I haven't done anything, but..."

"Then it should be no concern of his," his dad said.

"Ron and I talk at night," Harry said. "After lights out. With the curtains closed. He thinks we're doing something."

His dad sighed. "That is still not his concern."
Harry shrugged. "Dean said he’d talk to him."

"To Mr. Finnigan?"

Harry shrugged.

"It would be best if rumors like that did not get around," his Dad said.

"Well he sort of made the accusation at the breakfast table this morning," Harry said. "While Parvati and Lavender were acting like I was the latest soap."

His dad raised an eyebrow.

"It's a sort of television program," Harry said dismissively. "It was weird, they were acting like they were very interested in everything."

His dad scowled. "Let us assume that that rumor has spread then."

"We really are just talking."

"I did not doubt you," his Dad said.

"Well that's the thing," Harry said."Everyone's going to doubt me."

"And if they do?" his Dad asked.

"Well, Ron shouldn't get dragged down in this."

"No," His Dad said. "He shouldn’t. Neither of you should. Now, what else happened today?"

Harry told him about the nameless boys in the halls and about the whispers and stares.

"Nothing big has happened," Harry said. "I got a hug from Sammy Eldrich. A bunch of Hufflepuffs were extra nice to me. I know not everyone is going to make a big deal out of this."

"But some people will," his Dad said.

"So what are we going to do? Harry asked.

"The matter would be simpler if there were no rumors of about Mr. Weasley," his Dad said. "It would be best not to make this a big deal. We will have the prefects address the rest of the school body."

"I was thinking of writing in again," Harry said.

"To say what?" His Dad asked.

"To set the record straight," Harry said. "You know, that I'm not but Ron is."

"Perhaps you should ask Mr. Weasley before you write to the papers about him," his Dad said.

"Sure," Harry said. "Do you want me to mention the part where you already knew?"

"I would be happy for everyone to know that I support my gay son."

"Thanks," Harry said. "Well, I don't want to fall behind on the first day of term. I should go get some homework done."
"Don't forget, we're back to your regular schedule. Come back after dinner for your lesson with Mrs. Nikiforov."

"I'll be here" Harry said heading for the door.

"Before you go," His Dad said. “I wanted to check with you. With everything that's going on, have you thought about hurting yourself?"

The question caught Harry off guard, though since telling his dad about the stupid idea he’d had when he had been eight his dad had checked in with him every time he felt that Harry was under a lot of stress. "No," Harry said. “I guess this has all been pretty sudden, but I’ve sort of been waiting for someone to figure it out and I’ve sort of gotten used to people getting into my life. And, um, you know, I haven’t thought of that stuff in a long time."

“Okay,” his dad said. “If things escalate, tell me.”

Harry nodded. “I will. I’ll see you after dinner.”

“Stay safe,” his dad said. “I love you.”

Harry froze hearing the words outside of their usual mantra. Words Harry wasn’t used to. Words he’d never used himself. He swallowed. “You too,” he said. He didn’t exactly flee the room, but he got out in a hurry, throwing his invisibility cloak around himself as he headed out into the halls.

No one bothered them while they did homework that afternoon, but there were still a lot of stares and whispers that followed them through the halls on the way to dinner. Harry did his best to not act as though anything were different. Fred and George and Ginny sat with them, the twins seeming to do their best to drown out the rest of the school body.

After dinner, Harry went back to the dungeons to practice with his dagger, a bit nonplussed about the activity. He still didn’t know what the whole point of the exercise was. When his dad taught him dueling, that made obvious sense. Half of what he practiced with Benjamin involved freeing himself from another wizard so that he could use magic, even if that involved taking someone else’s wand. Fighting with a dagger still seemed like it was useless. If he was going to keep a backup weapon then he might as well keep a backup wand.

It wasn't that he didn't enjoy lessons. They were challenging and somewhat fun, but Harry had a lot of other stuff on his plate and he just wished he knew what it was all for. Though tonight, Harry had other concerns. He didn't know if Victoria kept up with the news or if she would care if she did. People weren't exactly thrilled with everything, and Harry could deal with that, but regardless of how pointless he thought the lessons where, Dumbledore said he needed them so he didn't know what he would do if Victoria decided not to teach him anymore.

Victoria greeted him all the same when he walked in. Warm-ups too were just the same as usual. By the end of practice, Harry was certain she hadn't seen the news that morning. Yet it was all but a certainty that she would eventually come to find out, so Harry decided to come out on his own terms.

“Mrs. Nikiforov, I wanted to tell you something,” Harry said while they were doing their cool-down stretches.

"Victoria, I have told you,” she reminded him.

“Right, Victoria, um so I thought I should tell you that I was gay, and I just need to know if you’ll still train me.”
"You will not get out of training so easy," Victoria said.

"Oh," Harry rushed to say. "No, I wasn't trying to get out of training…"

"This is why I moved here with my Yuuri," Victoria said. We could not stay in Russia and to be together."

“Oh,” Harry said. “So Yuuri’s you're...?”

“My wife," Victoria said.

"Oh," Harry said. "And you moved here?"

"Compared to Russia…” Victoria said. "Here we are left alone. There are no laws to keep us apart. Perhaps there are places in the world that are better for us, but I already spoke some English and Yuuri had friends in Ireland. It was an easy choice."

"It doesn't feel like people leave you alone here," Harry said.

"Others know?"

"Everyone knows," Harry said.

"Did they leave you alone before?" Victoria asked.

"No," Harry said. "But this doesn't seem like it's going to blow over like other things have."

"You are boy of destiny," Victoria said. "You have done great things, you will do great things, perhaps is good it does not blow over. It is not fair to you, but perhaps we need more people out front, and who better…"

"Right, no pressure," Harry said.

"Exactly," Victoria said. "No pressure, just to be yourself."

"Myself?"

"Da," Victoria said. "Extra ordinary."

Harry blushed.

"If you hide who you are, people think you have something to hide, that something is wrong. Be yourself, be proud, show them who you are, show them that you are strong. Show them that being gay has not made you less."

"That isn't an option for everyone," Harry said, thinking of Sammy who’s choice had been between being who she was or keeping her father happy. That hadn't been anyone's choice but her own.

"Da," Victoria said. "And yet everyone knows, so the only thing to hide now is yourself."

"Hmm," Harry said.

"Think on it," Victoria said. "You are strong young man, do not let them think otherwise."

“Are you out to everyone?” Harry asked.
“If it comes up,” Victoria said. “I do not make thing of it, but I will not hide my Yuuri, nor will I call her anything but my wife.”

“So you’re married?”

“Legally? No, but we had beautiful ceremony. We are married in our hearts. It is not everything, but it is most important. So now tell me of your love life.”

“Oh,” Harry said, a bit flustered. “I don’t have one.”

“Do you wish for one?”

“Ummm, well, maybe some day,” Harry said. “Maybe after everyone stops trying to kill me.”

“Hmmm,” Victoria said. “Then best we show world soon that you are not man to be trifled with.”

Voldemort should take care of things soon, Harry thought, one way or another.

“Did you go to Durmstrang?” Harry asked to change the subject.

“Niet,” Victoria said. “Russia has her own school. These three schools like to think that they are secretive, but I cannot even say name of school I went to.”

That took Harry aback. “What was it like there?”

Victoria made the sealed lips gesture. “Best school in world, of course.”

“Hogwarts would still win if they were in the tournament,” Harry said assuredly.

She smiled but did not comment.

After practice Harry returned to the library to work on his runic trigger ward project with Ron and Hermione working on their own projects. The biggest obstacle Harry had just then was actually scribing runes. His handwriting was atrocious enough and carving runes was a bit like trying to do calligraphy. It didn’t help that Ron and Hermione kept distracting him with an odd sort of bickering. It was odd because they didn’t go back and forth for too long, just quick little quips, and also neither one of them seemed put out by any of it. It took Harry a bit longer, perhaps, than it should have to realize that they were flirting. He blushed deep red when he realized and accidentally took a hunk of wood out of the block he was carving into.

“Light touch, Harry,” Hermione absently chided across from him. They called it a night not too long after Ron fell asleep at the table. Hermione gently ruffled his hair to wake him up but in spite of that Ron woke with a start, looking around in alarm.

“You might be more comfortable not sleeping on top of chess pieces,” Hermione said.

Ron grumbled a bit, trying to rub the impression of a rook out of his cheek. He looked adorable. They were heading back to the dorms a bit sooner than Harry had planned. He had wanted to return just before curfew and just go to bed as quickly as possible. He didn’t want to deal with anyone but he also hadn’t wanted to seem like he was avoiding anyone.

Harry cleared his mind before he walked into the common room. He got looks walking through that he ignored. He and Ron bade Hermione good night and went up to the dorm which was empty. They both got ready for bed but it was still early, so while Ron went to bed Harry stayed up with one of the mystery books from the series that he and Ron had been swapping back and
forth. He purposefully left his curtains open; he wasn’t hiding.

Neville came up to the dorm about an hour later to get ready for bed. A short while later he came back from the bathroom. “Night Harry,” he said fairly awkwardly as he passed Harry’s bed.

“Night Neville,” Harry replied. He paused for a moment before saying, “Are you all right with everything?” he asked.

“Yes,” Neville said, turning back towards Harry, though he didn’t sound very sure of himself.

“It’s alright if you have questions or something,” Harry said. “I mean, not that Seamus was right or anything, but we do share a dorm, so if you had any concerns I’d want to talk about that.”

He didn’t really want to talk about anything, but openness seemed to be the order of the day. Neville didn’t say anything.

“I’m not going to hit on you or anything,” Harry hazarded.

“Oh, yeah, I know,” Neville said. “Um, I shouldn’t… It’s always been something we don’t talk about, except we do. Whenever there’s extended family over there’s always these veiled comments about, um, about my Great Uncle. He’s always been single, you know? Or, at least, if he ever wasn’t single he never told anyone about it. I sort of figured out what everyone wasn’t talking about a bit ago. I overheard one of my older cousins talking to my Gran about his place in the household; she wouldn’t say that Gran should remove my Great Uncle from the family for being gay, but she sort of did say that, its all doublespeak, if that makes sense. Gran won’t hear of it, of course, but…”

He paused, and there seemed to be a look in his eyes that seemed to want to understand something that he wasn’t saying outright.

“Are you okay with him?” Harry asked.

“Yeah,” Neville said. “I mean he’s a bit weird, but so’s everyone else in my family, so… It’s just, we never talk about it, we ignore it, and now here you are and I don’t know how I’m supposed to act about the whole thing when you’re, um, out.”

Harry thought about that. “Maybe act like you’d act if I wasn’t gay.”

“But you are,” Neville said. “And you’re telling everyone too, and everyone’s talking about it.”

“Yeah,” Harry said. “But… the thing is, um, there’s a lot more to people than if they like guys or girls. Me being gay doesn’t change anything else you knew about me.”

“I guess,” Neville said. “Yeah. Well, um, good night Harry.”

“Night,” Harry said. He went back to his book.

Seamus and Dean were the next ones to come in. Harry didn’t know whether or not Dean had ever talked to Seamus that day, but they weren’t talking when they walked in. Seamus very deliberately stalked past Harry’s bed without looking at him. He grabbed his shower stuff and stalked back towards the bathroom. Harry noticed he was carrying his night clothes. Seamus had always come back from the showers with a towel and changed by his bedside. The sudden modesty was very deliberately displayed.

“Hey Potter,” Seamus said, turning back to Harry right before he walked into the bathroom. “I’m
going to be showering in there so stay the fuck out.”

“I don’t have X-ray vision,” Harry said. “I’m sure the curtain will protect your virtue.”

“The hell is X-Ray vision?” Seamus asked.

“Muggle thing, never mind, I’m not going to peek on you.”

“Yeah, well you better not,” Seamus said. He turned back around and walked into the bathroom.

“Sorry about that,” Dean said. He was gathering his shower things too.

“You don’t need to apologize,” Harry said.

“He just doesn’t know what to think about the whole thing,” Dean said.

“Hmm,” was Harry’s noncommittal response. Harry was pretty sure that Seamus had made clear what he was thinking.

“Right, well, I’ll just…” he gestured to the bathroom and walked off.

Harry tried to focus on reading but he was preoccupied by the fight he had just had. Seamus came back into the dormitory some fifteen minutes later followed shortly thereafter by Dean. Seamus stormed past his bed again, not looking at Harry. Harry wound up going through some mental exercises before going to sleep not long after that.

Ron woke him up a bit after midnight that night, the telltale signs of a nightmare written on his face. Whatever it was about, he didn't discuss it. They talked about Quidditch for a bit before Ron brought up the question of whether or not Harry would write a letter to the editor again. Harry shrugged and got out a bit of parchment and they bandied about things to write for a while, some of it serious but most of it things that definitely wouldn't get into any final draft. It was sometime around one o'clock at night that Ron headed back to his bed. Now, if that had been the only distraction of Harry’s night, he would've been doing alright.

Unfortunately he was shaken awake at about five o'clock the following morning. He woke up to a face that didn't belong in his dorm. He had his wand out in a flash and pointed in the older boy's face.

"Merlin," the older boy stage whispered. "Put that away, we're not here to fight you."

"Who's we?" Harry asked, pushing himself up into an upright position with his non-dominant hand.

"Me, Kevin Lancet, and Alonzo Wakefield," the boy said, pulling a bit to the sides so Harry could see to other boys behind him. "We just wanted to talk."

Hey recognized them all as seventh years. Harry thought the speaker’s name was Devin Jeeter.

"What could you possibly want to talk about at five o'clock in the morning that couldn't have waited?" Harry asked.

"Just house stuff," Jeeter said.

"What house stuff? Harry asked.

"Can we talk about this in common room?" Jeeter asked.
"I'm not too keen on following strangers on my lonesome," Harry said.

"Merlin, seriously we just want to talk," Wakefield said.

"Yeah, well just remember I've fought Death Eaters, werewolves, and Voldemort and I'm pretty sure my dad has given you nightmares at some point in the past, so this had better just be a talk." He got out of bed opposite Jeeter and circled around, keeping a wary eye out. He gestured for the three boys to go first. He knew Ron would want him to wake him up but he went down to the common room alone.

"What's this about?" Harry asked.

"You need to stop telling everyone you're gay," Wakefield said. "Just tell everyone it was a joke."

"Excuse me?" Harry asked.

"Look," Lancet said. "I don't care what you and your boyfriend get up to, but you're sort of the face of our house."

"Ron’s not my boyfriend," Harry said. "I'm gay, he’s not."

"Great," Wakefield said. "We don’t need a gay Champion too. Now listen…"

"No, you listen," Harry interrupted. "I didn’t get to just come out to everybody. I got dragged out of the closet by a fucking magazine article. I was happy keeping things private; and that’s what it was, it was private, but you know what? I’m not going to lie about it. I don’t have anything to be ashamed of," he told them as much as he told himself. “So if everyone gives so much of a damn about my business then at the very least they can get the truth. I’m not hiding anymore. If you want to talk about the house, fine, courage and honor, that’s great, my sexuality doesn’t have anything to do with that. So the house can either be proud of my many accomplishments or you all can go suck it."

"Nobody wants their knight in shining armor to be a fucking fairy," Wakefield said.

"Or at the very least, he shouldn’t brag about it," Lancet said.

"Then it’s a good thing I never signed up to be anyone’s knight," Harry said, bristling. “And I’m not bragging. I’m just telling the truth, since everyone’s so damned interested. And I know I’m not the tallest kid in my year, but I’m pretty big to be a fairy so if you’re going to talk about me being gay you can just say gay.”

"Come on, let’s bring it down a notch," Jeeter said, stepping forward. He was brought up short when Harry again pointed his wand at him.

"Would you calm down?" Jeeter said in exasperation.

"How the hell am I supposed to be calm?" Harry asked. “I’ve been beaten in this school, I’ve been kidnapped from these dorms, and people keep coming really close to murdering me here; students have. So you tell me why I shouldn’t be on edge when a few upperclassmen who take issue with my sexuality drag me out of my bed in the middle of the night.”

"We just want to manage this," Jeeter said. "It’s as much for your benefit as everyone else’s. I’m not saying it’s your fault this article got printed, but we’ve got to get a handle on it. No one’s saying you haven’t done great things, but don’t you see how in spite of that everyone’s been giving you shite? You’re confusing people, they don’t associate that sort of thing with us.”
“Oh, so what? You don't want people to think Gryffindors can be gay,” Harry said. “Is that for other houses?”

“Yes, that's for other houses,” Wakefield said. ”Nancy boys in Hufflepuff, queers in Ravenclaw, deviants in Slytherin.”

"Sammy's not a nancy boy,” Harry said. "She's a girl, and that doesn't have anything to do with her being a Hufflepuff that's just who she is.”

"Fine, that's great, whatever” Lancet said. “We're not talking about them, we’re talking about you, in our house. This is about you getting turned on by other blokes.”

"Well jeez, I'm pretty sure most of the girls in the school are into other blokes, can all the girls stay in Gryffindor if they get a boyfriend?” Harry asked scathingly.

"Of course," Wakefield said, throwing his hands up in the air. “They’re not going against nature.”

"Oh, why don't you start talking about Natures Nobility next,” Harry said. “Isn't that what the Death Eaters talked about, going against nature?”

"Oh fuck you,” Wakefield said. "Just because those blood bigots bastardize the old wisdom doesn't mean it doesn't hold. Everything in nature serves a purpose. Two guys porking doesn't beget anything. It's unnatural, it's unbalanced, and it's just about sex. You need to stop having fun in your dorm room, and remember that Gryffindors have a nobler purpose in our society.”

"What purpose is that? Telling other people how to live their lives?” Harry asked. "And I will tell you again, nothing’s going on between me and Ron, but even if there were, any fun we were having in the dorms wouldn't be any of your business.”

"Of course it would be,” Wakefield said. "It's disgusting. I don't need any of that gay shit anywhere around me.”

“Dude, chill,” Jeeter said.

The word disgusting hit Harry pretty hard. He'd heard it plenty of times at the Dursley's; heard it directed at him. It wasn't that Harry cared anything for what these boys had to say about him, but he had aimed the word at himself plenty of times before he had come to terms with his sexuality. Not that he really had fully come to terms. Maybe the word did still resonate with him.

"We agreed we would be civil about this," Jeeter said.

"No you agreed on it," Wakefield said. “But there's no need to be a bleeding heart about it. It's disgusting, and if he doesn't have the grace to be ashamed of it then someone should put him in his place.” His hand went into the pocket of his robes

Harry's blood boiled. A flick of the wand and Harry sent Wakefield's feet out behind him. He landed face first on the floor.

"Like that?” Harry asked.

Lancit drew his wand but Harry disarmed him before he could bring it to bare. Harry leveled his wand at Jeeter who held his hands up placatingly.

“You sure you don’t want to pull your wand too?” Harry said.
“You broke my nose,” Wakefield said, pushing himself up off of the ground, a bloody hand clutching his face.

“Something to remember next time you think of threatening me,” Harry said.

“Look,” Lancit said. “Obviously you can see this is just going to get worse.”

“Obviously you can see that I can deal with it. I’ve dealt with worse. Stay away for me if you don’t want to see how much worse it can get.”

“What’s going on here?” It was Angelina, coming down from the girls dorm.

Wouldn’t this just be a perfect time to find out where his teammates fell on the matter.

“Our former seeker broke my nose,” Wakefield complained again.

Angelina look him over. “Former seeker? Harry's not going anywhere. And I'm pretty sure I just saw you trip and fall on your own face. Are you getting up early to go flying Harry? You can join me if you want.”

“The house doesn't want a gay seeker,” Lancit said.

“Why don't you take that up with the twins,” Angelina said.

“We're not the only ones who feel this way,” Jeeter said.

“I don't give a toad's spleen how everyone else feels,” Angelina glared. “It's me who will be captain next year. Anyone who takes issue with Harry being on the team can go eat sand.”

“It's irresponsible to put him in a position the first years will look up to,” Lancit said. “Do you want more queers?”

“Pretty sure that’s not how it works,” Angelina said. “Pretty sure neither of us need to listen to you talk either. We were just on our way to have a fly, weren’t we Harry.”

Harry nodded. That actually sounded nice.

“Come on,” Angelina said, motioning to the entryway. “And shouldn’t you take your clumsy friend there to the Hospital Wing?”

She didn’t wait for an answer, she just headed for the exit. Harry followed after.

“Hey, my wand,” Lancit said.

Harry tossed it over his shoulder as he walked out.

“Thanks,” Harry said. “Um, I don’t have my broom on me though.” He didn’t have anything on him, really, besides his wand. He wasn’t supposed to go anywhere without his potions, his cloak, and his broom. He felt exposed without it all. He didn’t want to go back and get them though.

“We can get out a school broom,” Angelina said. “That is, if you actually want to go flying.”

“I always want to fly,” Harry said. “You know, weather depending.” He didn’t know about using a school broom though, he hadn’t ridden one since first year.

“Just you wait,” Angelina said. “I’m going to outdo Ollie. We’ll train even harder when it’s
“Please don't. No one out Ollies Ollie,” Harry said.

“Well I’m going to try,” Angelina said. “We’ll find a great Keeper and we’ll win again for sure.”

“Ron’s going to try out,” Harry said. “We’re going to train him up and stuff.”

“Tell him to bring his A-game then,” Angelina said. “So did the twins give you The Talk?”

“What?!” Harry said. “No, my dad gave me the talk, and that is not something I need any more of.”

“No,” Angelina said. “Not that talk. The, ‘if you break our little brother’s heart, so help us…’ talk.”

Harry blushed. “Oh, no, Ron and I aren’t… Ron’s straight. Ignore all rumors.”

“Oh,” Angelina said. “Well I mean, I ship it.”

“What?” Harry asked.

“Never mind,” Angelina said. “Muggle thing. Well, you’ve got their protection too you know.”

“Who?” Harry asked.

“The twins,” Angelina said. “We’ll all look out for you. The team’s got your back.”

“I was sort of wondering back there what Ollie would have thought,” Harry said. There was a list of people who he still needed to figure out.

“Oh, I’m pretty sure he would have been all right with you,” Angelina said without elaborating. “Besides, what did he ever care about besides quidditch? Do you ever write him?”

“No,” Harry said. “I should though.” He remembered his first year when he had just joined the team, when his biggest worry had been convincing Oliver Wood that a first year had what it took to be on the team.

“I’m sure he’d like to hear from you,” Angelina said. “If he were here he’d be having the twins set the bludgers loose in the seventh year boy’s dorm right about now.”

“You don’t mind, I take it,” Harry said. “Me being gay.”

“I think I know you well enough to know I shouldn’t mind it at all,” Angelina said.

“I wish everyone else felt that way,” Harry said.

“I’m pretty sure most people aren’t quite as, um, vitriolic as that one guy was back there,” Angelina said. “Give it some time, most people will come around; and if they give you trouble, you tell us.”

“I think this is a battle I need to fight,” Harry said. If people were going to define him by his sexuality, then Harry supposed the Boy-Who-Lived would have to be someone who Remus and Victoria wouldn’t mind being the face of their sexuality. Which was no pressure whatsoever.

“Sure,” Angelina said. “But you fight with your friends at your side. Don’t forget we’re a team off
the pitch as much as we are on it.”

“Thanks,” Harry said. “Practicing to give pep talks?”

“I’ve got to work on it,” Angelina said. “I’m not used to speaking in front of a crowd.”

“The quidditch team’s not a crowd,” Harry said. “You’ll do fine.”

“Well, we’ll see how you do with a school broom,” Angelina said.

“Right,” Harry said. “Tell me why I didn’t just go back to bed at this ungodly hour?”

“Because you love to fly,” Angelina said.

“There’s nothing better,” Harry said. He needed a good many warming spells over his pajamas, but the world didn’t seem like it was pressing down on him when his feet were off the ground.

Harry made it back to the dorm in time to get ready for breakfast.

“How’d you two sleep,” Hermione asked as they made their way into the great hall. She normally only asked Ron. He wasn't sure she even knew how much trouble Harry had sleeping now and then.

“I cleared my mind pretty well before bed,” Harry said. “Didn’t have any trouble there.”

“I woke him up though,” Ron said. “Small nightmare, couldn’t get my brain to shut off afterwards.”

Judging by the look of him, Harry wasn’t sure that he’d gotten too much sleep after he’d gone back to bed. He must have been asleep when the seventh years had come to get Harry for their talk though. He hadn’t told Ron or Hermione about that.

The rumor that he and Ron had been doing a lot more than just dating had had a full day to go around and seemed to be everywhere as they made their way towards breakfast. Harry did his best to ignore it.

Seamus was sitting in his normal spot, with the rest of the fourth years, and Harry wasn’t sure if this was a hold-your-head-up-high moment where he should just go sit down like he normally would, or if he should go sit somewhere else. His feet took him to his seat and he pretended that Seamus wasn’t there. Seamus seemed to have the same idea. Lavender and Parvati were still paying him an extra bit of mind though, and Harry felt that there were fewer stares from around the room.

A small bit of chaos erupted when the mail arrived in a small swarm that mostly got directed at Ron. It gathered the attention of the assembled student body who were left staring at Ron when the swarm departed.

“What?” Ron asked loudly. “Never seen an owl before?”

“You didn’t get anything like this after the first task,” Hermione said. “Not even when your name came out of the goblet.”
“Well, I got some,” Ron said, a bit defensively. “This can’t be about the article yesterday can it?”

“Well, I don’t have any letters,” Harry said.

Hermione looked at him thoughtfully. “Have you ever gotten a letter from someone you don’t know while you were at school?”

Harry shook his head. Was his mail being stopped? Did he want a bunch of mail from strangers?

“Well aren’t you going to open it?” Lavender asked.

Ron shrugged, tearing open a random letter and scanning over it. “Huh,” he said, pulling out his wand.

“Evanesco,” Ron cleaned off a platter of bangers. “Sorry,” he said, in response to Tricia Laurel’s crestfallen face. He set the letter he’d just read on top of the empty tray and lit it on fire. “Pass some more bangers over here, please,” Ron said.

“What did it say?” Harry asked, morbidly curious.


“Well that’s not fair,” Harry said. “How do they know I’m not doing the corrupting?”

“Well surely you’re not suggesting that the Boy Who Lived could have just been gay to start off with,” Ron said.

“I might have been,” Harry said. “Surely I should get some credit here.”

Ron lit another letter on fire. “Nothing repeatable in there,” he said.

“You shouldn’t read those,” Hermione said.

“It’s not like I care what they have to say,” Ron said, his eyes on Seamus. “I just need to know who has a problem with me and mine.”

“Making a list?” Harry asked.

“Well sure,” Ron said. “If anyone would just sign their letters. Oh, here we go, this one’s signed. Oh, and it’s nice too. Funny how that goes. Wishing us all the luck in our relationship. Thank you Mr. Dunkirk.” This letter went into his book bag.

“What’s this?” George asked coming up upon them.

“Fan mail,” Ron said.

“Well, one so far,” Hermione said, indicating the ashes.

Ron lit another one on fire.

“You should get rid of the lot of it,” Fred said.

“You don’t know what could be in there,” George said.

“You can’t send cursed letters through the wards,” Ron said.

“We’ve gotten pretty creative,” said Fred.
“There aren’t even any Howlers,” Ron said.

Harry was very glad for that.

“Might be set to go off only after you’ve touched it,” Fred said.

“Yeah, well fine,” Ron said. “I’ll just yell louder.”

“Maybe we should check these out first,” George said.

“It’s fine,” Ron said. “Mrs. ‘Concerned Witch’ just needed to tell me that I’m a disgusting pervert. I’m pretty sure you’ve called me worse. Incendio.”

“You can just burn the lot of it,” Fred said.

“I will,” Ron said. “One at a time.”

“Well why don’t you put them away for now and we can eat our breakfast,” Hermione said.

“Sure,” Ron said. “Just as soon as I discover what this guy had to say. He used the good paper here, he must have something important to say. Nice seal too. This guy’s really going through some trouble to tell me off.”

It wasn’t a letter to tell Ron off though.

“Ow, shit,” Ron said as from the envelope spilled a green goop that didn’t look like it should have been able to come out of an envelope. It covered his hands which he held curled up in front of him.

“Evanesco,” Hermione said, cleaning his hands, which were already starting to blister.

“My robes too,” Ron said. “It’s seeping through, it’s seeping through!”

“Scourgify,” George said.

“Damnit Ron, I told you to leave it,” Fred said.

“Fine, yeah,” Ron said, trying to get up from the table without touching anything, his face screwed up in pain. “What was that shit, bubotuber puss?”

Harry grabbed his elbow to help him up.

“It looked like it,” Hermione said. “We should go to the Hospital Wing.”

“I can get there on my own,” Ron said. “I’ll be fine. You’ll miss class. I’ll see you in a bit.”

“Not up for discussion,” Harry said, grabbing Ron’s book bag. He saw Fred using his wand to stash the offending envelope in his own book bag. Hermione put an arm around Ron’s back and started guiding him out of the Great Hall. There weren’t anymore ‘I told you sos,’ as they walked.

“Does it hurt?” Hermione asked.

“I’ve had worse,” Ron said.

“Oh, well, I suppose if Greyback’s done worse to you this can’t be at all bad,” Hermione said testily.
“I’ve had worse falling off my training broom when I was five,” Ron said, his flippancy sounding forced. “It’s alright, it’s like a bad sunburn. It’s not a big deal.”

“Some stranger just decided to hurt you because of some stupid article in the paper,” Hermione said. “It is a big deal.”

“Well, Harry’s writing a letter to the editor again, that should clear things up,” Ron said.

“It’s going to be a very angry letter, now,” Harry said.

“I’ll help,” Ron said.

“Does your mom read Witch Weekly?” Hermione asked.

“Just for the recipes in the back,” Ron said.

“We made the front cover,” Harry said.

“I should probably write her,” Ron said. “You mind if I tell her everything? She won’t mind.”

“I’m pretty much just out, at this point,” Harry said. “You can tell anyone you want.”

“We should become official,” Hermione told Ron.

Ron’s eyebrows shot up. “What, like- as in…”

“As in boyfriend girlfriend,” Hermione said.

“Right,” Ron said. “Um, I thought you wanted to wait.”

“We did wait,” Hermione said.

“I’m not making you date me just so people will stop thinking I'm sleeping with Harry,” Ron said.

“You're not making me do anything,” Hermione said.

Ron frowned. “Maybe we should talk about this later,” he said, glancing at Harry.

“Oh, don't mind me,” Harry said. “This isn't awkward or anything.”

Ron rolled his eyes.

“What’s wrong with you now?” Madam Pomfrey asked when they walked in.

“Somebody sent me an envelope full of bubotuber puss,” Ron said.

Madam Pomfrey looked cross for a moment before she went and got a jar of ointment which she started applying to his hands.

“Anywhere else?” she asked.

“Um, my lap, a little bit,” Ron said, his ears going red.

Madam Pomfrey nodded and scooped a bit of the ointment onto a wooden tongue depressor and directed him behind a curtain.

“Are you alright?” Hermione asked when they left.
“As rain,” Ron said. His flippancy sounding more and more strained. He was silent the rest of the way to class. They were only a little late, and Professor Binns didn’t seem to notice them at all. He was silent between History and Transfiguration too and Harry thought he was just sulking. It wasn’t until later in the hall as they were about to split up so Harry could go to defense and they could go to Potions when Ron disappeared from their side. They found him pressed up against the wall in a corner, he had started hyperventilating in the crowded hall. The press of the student body had always seemed to be Ron’s worst trigger. Harry realized that he had likely been more affected by the mornings incident than his flippancy had indicated.

“Shh, it’s all right,” Hermione said. “I’m right here with you. We’re both safe now.”

Wherever Ron’s mind was, he was present enough to know he was having an episode in front of a lot of other students.

“Shit, shit,” he muttered as he tried to cover his face with one hand and grasped Hermione’s arm with the other.

“Let’s go somewhere quiet,” Hermione said to Ron.

“The fuck is wrong with Weasley?” someone asked out loud.

“You two queers fucking break up or something?” someone else asked.

“That’s enough of that,” someone authoritative said.

“Go,” Harry said. “I’ll take care of everything.”

Hermione took the hem of Ron’s sleeve and guided him away, still murmuring reassurances to him. Harry turned around to see if anyone was going to start anything, but whomever had been speaking earlier seemed to have moved on. He frowned but made his way to defense on his own.

They saw each other again later at lunch where Ron was still rather quiet. Harry knew well enough not to make a thing of it. It didn’t help matters when someone tripped Harry up with a jinx in the halls later. Harry, for his part had gotten good at not falling on his face in such situations, but Ron definitely noticed and seemed more stressed afterwards.

They ended the day with double Ancient Runes and then retired to a quiet corner of the castle to study. Harry and Ron wound up staying up late talking that night, they wrote out Harry’s letter to Witch Weekly (‘Dear Asshats,’ started the first draft which didn’t make it into the second) and Ron’s letter to his parents (‘I hope you won’t be too disappointed mum,’ Ron’s letter started, ‘but I’m not really dating Harry’). They ate chocolate, and talked about serious things and silly things; the whole while not caring what Seamus thought of them together behind closed curtains. They also talked about Hermione. Ron always brought her up in some fashion.

Ron and Hermione walked to breakfast the next morning holding hands and of course there were whispers and stares to accompany this. There were some more letters for Ron with their breakfast, which were all sorted through for anything from Ron’s family, (he got a letter from his mum), before everything else was vanished. Thursday morning too, this time there was a letter from Charlie Weasley among everything else. With Astronomy the night prior, it was only the fourth years in the Great Hall for breakfast while everyone else was in their first period. Ron read the letter from Charlie while he ate.

Harry was a bit nervous for it being Thursday, since Thursday was when he normally sparred with Benjamin after the defense study group met. He was getting better, though, about putting off
worrying about things. No point of thinking about it while he took notes in Runes. Defense was a
different story, since Benjamin was in the room with him. After dinner that night, Harry went to
the DADA classroom. He got an odd look from the girl he sat next to but the study session went
by like normal. Harry tried to not act any different when he approached Benjamin afterwards.
Benjamin was, as usual, next to Anna.

“Harry, hey,” Benjamin said when Harry walked up. He sounded awkward but not unkind. “Um,
so Anna was going to stay while we sparred tonight.”

“Yes,” Anna said, she looked slightly embarrassed but she smiled at Harry.

“Okay,” Harry said, not sure what was going on. He and Benjamin moved out to the matted area.

“I thought we’d work on strikes,” Benjamin said. “We’ve been focused on grappling for a while
now. Why don’t you show me if you can still make a proper fist.”

Harry nodded, his arms moving into the appropriate position. He was nervous. Benjamin had
always been nice to him, but he couldn’t help but wonder if this was going to turn into some excuse
for him to hit Harry.

“How’s this?” Harry asked.

“Elbows in,” Benjamin said. “You’re leaving yourself open.” He held up a couple of foam
paddles.

Their practice went on as it usually would. They practiced some moves but didn’t really spar.
Benjamin wasn’t using sparring as an excuse to hurt Harry and Harry couldn’t figure out why
things felt off. Had he not just recently been outed, he wouldn’t have thought anything of it if
Benjamin had decided to change up the routine, he wouldn’t have given Anna staying to watch a
second thought, but something just seemed off. Anna for her part gave little cheers or encouraging
comments throughout.

“Good work,” Benjamin said at the end, a smile on his face. He seemed genuine. “Um, I’m going
to walk Anna back to Ravenclaw,” he said. “You’ve got that cloak, right?”

“Yeah,” Harry said. “I’ll be fine walking by myself.”

“Great,” Benjamin said. “I’ll see you later.”

“Good night, Harry,” Anna said.

“Good night,” Harry said.

Harry told himself that he only felt lonely because he would normally be walking with Benjamin
and not because he’d been generally feeling like the world was turning against him again. Walking
around under his invisibility cloak as everyone else went about their business always had been an
odd mix of security and the feeling that he didn’t exist.

He ruminated on the walk back to the tower over the oddity of his interaction with Benjamin. He
was fairly certain it had something to do with his being outed, but it didn’t make sense. Benjamin
had been friendly and nice. If he was disgusted by Harry’s sexuality he didn’t show it. Why
suddenly move from grappling to striking? Of course, when he tried to think of things from
Benjamin’s perspective, the answer was obvious. What would he think of a gay boy who wanted
to spend time together doing an activity that involved a lot of touching.
Harry had the thought that he would have felt better if Benjamin had just told him to get lost. This more than anything over the past few days seemed to get to Harry; or maybe he had been letting too much sit beneath the surface. Angry tears welled up in his eyes and he ducked into the nearest secret passageway so he could rip off his invisibility cloak and slam his fist into the wall.

“Fuck,” he managed to bite out, feeling overwhelmed. He kicked the wall a couple of times. He thought that he should be clearing his mind but the anger felt so right just then that he didn’t even try. He sat back on his heels and grasped his head and rode out the feeling. Eventually his breathing evened out and he leaned back to rest against the wall. He stayed like that for a while feeling numb, focusing on the pain in his wrist.

With time he began clearing his mind and wiping his face. He left the quiet little passage way and went back on his way towards the tower. A flight of stairs away from the portrait of the fat lady he stopped. He wished he had punched the wall with his other hand so that he could at least cast an immobilization charm on his arm which was really smarting.

About five minutes later Benjamin arrived, having come back from walking Anna to Ravenclaw. “Harry, what… Did something happen?” He sounded concerned

Harry supposed he must look a bit of a mess.

“I never liked grappling,” Harry said.

“Okay?”

“It reminded me of times people have grabbed me, it reminded me of times people have hurt me,” Harry said.

“Well, yeah,” Benjamin said. “We can just do-“

“I did it because I wanted to make sure no one could ever hurt me like that again,” Harry said. “I didn’t care that some cute boy was touching me, I wasn’t excited by it, I was tense, I just wanted to get out of every hold so I could feel safe. I wasn’t trying to… to creep on you.”

“Yeah,” Benjamin said. “I know, I just… it looks bad.”

“So you had Anna stay behind so she could say we weren’t doing anything,” Harry said.

“Yeah,” Benjamin said.

“I wasn’t trying anything with you,” Harry said. “I really wasn’t.”

“I know,” Benjamin said.

”Then why?” Harry asked.

”Look, you can… You can ride this out.” Benjamin said. ”I don't have your name. Don't have a world renowned potions master for a father. The only thing I have in the wizarding world is myself. What happens to me if rumors like that start? I don't have anything to fall back on, I need to be able to get a job someday. Look what happened to your friend. You say there's nothing there, fine, I believe you. But one little article in a magazine and he's visiting the hospital wing.”

”You could've told me,” Harry said.

”There's no nice way to tell someone you're scared to be affiliated with them,” Benjamin said.
“Not very Griffindor, I suppose.”

Harry shrugged. “So you weren’t, like, disgusted to be touching me and stuff?”

"That wasn’t—" Benjamin said, he side rubbing his face with his hands. “Do you want a hug?”

Harry gave him an incredulous look. "Are you sure you don't want to go somewhere private first?"

Benjamin gave out a long exhale. "I wasn't disgusted harry."

"So do you want to stop practice?" Harry asked.

"No," Benjamin said. “I like practice. I like teaching you, but I have to be careful.”

Harry got being careful, but that didn’t mean this hadn’t hurt.

“I’ll see you later,” Harry said. “I need to… I have homework to finish.”

“Yeah,” Benjamin said, awkwardly. “I’ll see you.”

And they did. The same time the following Thursday, they met again after defense and they both acted like nothing was different. Anna stayed to watch. She’d started cheering them on when they actually sparred. They started doing more of mock fights. Harry wished he could say that it was all water under the bridge or even that he’d had time to think about it, but with everything else, it was just one more thing on the back burner.

Ron was spending a lot of time trying to learn the bubblehead charm while Harry and Hermione worked on finding some other way for Ron to breathe under water while keeping a watchful eye on Ron. He’d gotten the bubble part right after a few days of practice but hadn’t gotten the oxygen transfiguration part and it had taken him passing out for them to realize that he had slowly been asphyxiating.

The twins were on lake creature duty, figuring out what all was in the lake that could be dangerous. Ginny was working on spells that would be useful underwater. It was all a rather nice distraction on top of everything else. Word got around about what they were looking at and they got a few suggestions.

“What about scuba gear?” Dean asked.

“Thought about that,” Harry said. “Apparently, with as deep as the great lake is, it’d be more likely Ron’d accidentally make some sort of mistake that’d get him killed than that any of the lake creatures are going to get him.”

“Gee, thanks,” Ron said, not quite awake and still struggling to get ready for the day ahead.

“How’re things with Seamus?” Ron asked, changing the subject. He sounded like he was asking after an ill relative.

Dean’s face fell. “I’ve talked to him about it a couple of times,” he said. “He’s… I think he know’s he’s wrong, but you know how stubborn he is.”

Ron gave him a sympathetic look.

Seamus had stopped being antagonistic, Harry supposed, but he was still upset and he was still
distant, and the dorm was still awkward almost two weeks later.

“Anyway,” Dean said. “Have fun in Hogsmeade.”


"I've been worse," Ron said, rubbing a bit more sleep out of his eyes. “Rough knife.”

“It must have been,” Harry said. “You just said knife.”

“Night,” Ron amended.

“Did Dean seem off to you?” Harry asked.

“What do you mean?”

“I feel like he cares more about Seamus's reaction to this whole thing than I do," Harry said.

Ron paused. "Seamus is his best friend," he said. “I'd be pretty upset if I found out one of my
friends was a shitty bigot.”

Harry shrugged. Seamus wasn't the only one, of course, though it would be easier if he were. The
prefects had been given their marching orders though and had addressed matters as they’d arisen to
keep order. Harry getting jinxed or tripped up in the halls had only lasted a few days. The rumor
mill was still active though, as were the weird looks, the whispers, and the sneers. Harry knew only
a small part of the school was downright hostile, but more than enough people thought that it was
something gross, something that made him less than he once was. It was something to joke about,
something to feel superior over.

It wasn't all bad, that was for sure. It was something that Harry had to keep reminding himself of.
It was really easy to think about everyone who was against him, his brain had a harder time
remembering everyone who had shown support. His own house was split, not exactly in his favor,
but enough that Harry didn't feel completely pressed within the security of the common room.
Outside, things were different. Hufflepuff seemed pretty set behind him, though Harry wondered
how many people were keeping their opposition silent there. Ravenclaw was a mixed bag but
there was mostly an apathetic sense from the house on the matter. Slytherin mostly seemed to
think of it as something to laugh at, if only because it was something to poke fun at Harry for.

Though outside of his friends and some ardent supporters from Hufflepuff it was a small group of
Slytherins who seemed to be Harry's most ardent advocates. Or rather, not Harry's, but of people in
general? They had a common thread between them; that wizards, and witches, should be judged by
their impact on society and that their personal lives were personal. They weren't advocating for
Harry, rather they were using his situation to bring up their platform.

There were about 20 of them, ranging from second to sixth years, and while most of them were
Slytherin, a few of them were from Ravenclaw and Hufflepuff. If there was one thing in common
with them, it was a phrase, ‘Everyone Can Contribute,’ as in, everyone could contribute to society,
regardless of their differences. If there was one person behind them then it was definitely Malfoy,
though Harry was at a loss for why Malfoy would want to do anything that benefited Harry. If it
weren't for the tournament, Harry was sure he would have figured out Malfoy's plot already.

It was the other two schools where there didn’t seem to be any animosity at all, or at least, none
expressed. Students from Durmstrang seemed perplexed that it should even be an issue, but also
seemed largely indifferent to the whole affair. The students from Beauxbatons, on the other hand,
seemed to take homophobia as an affront and Harry seemed to have attained some level of
popularity among their students.

"You ready?" Harry asked.

"Yeah," Ron said, swinging his cloak around his shoulders.

They met up with Hermione downstairs and after breakfast they left the castle to go to Hogsmeade. A glance to the side on the way to horseless carriages showed a bit of a spectacle though. Out on the great lake, aboard his ship, Viktor Krum was dressed in shorts and a nicely formfitting T-shirt as he walked up to an honest to goodness gangplank. What happened next had Harry do a double take. Krum jumped off the plank and did a swan dive into the lake; the lake that had thin sheets of ice floating on it.

"Do you reckon they just do that for fun where he's from or do you think he's figured out the second task? Ron asked.

Harry was actually speechless, and a look over at Hermione’s red cheeks made Harry wonder if she was blushing for the same reason he was. Ron coughed.

"Oh, ah, yes," Hermione said. "We should definitely assume he has figured out the second task."

As close as they were to the full moon, Harry wondered what emotions he would be smelling off of his two best friends in that moment if the wind weren’t blowing in the wrong direction.

Ron took hold of her hand and they all continued walking towards the carriages. The entire morning they both seemed very coupley. They didn’t act at all like Harry was the third wheel, but he definitely felt like he was in the way. It was more than just that they stayed close to each other. Or rather, there was more to them staying close to each other than them being coupley. Harry could smell how much the both of them were on edge in the hustle and bustle of the town. They seemed to be enjoying themselves, but there was definitely some anxiety in the mix. They did their best to stay out of crowded areas and bustling streets throughout the morning.

With noon approaching Harry was relieved that it was time for him to go. The full moon was approaching and Harry was going to be disappearing for the evening.

“Did you want to come back to the castle with me?” Harry offered. He would feel better knowing that they were safe in the castle and they would probably feel better than they were just then to get out of the crowded village where they had been kidnapped.

“We’ve actually got a date,” Hermione said.

“Nothing but fine dining for my girl,” Ron said. Hermione elbowed him in the side.

“We’re going to Madame Pudifoot’s,” Hermione said.

“Oh,” Harry said. “Well, have fun then.” They were Gryffindors, a bit of anxiety wasn’t going to keep them out of Hogsmeade.

“Wear your cloak,” Ron said.

Harry patted his pocket where the invisibility cloak resided. They parted ways, Ron and Hermione heading off to lunch while Harry threw on his invisibility cloak and started walking back towards the castle.

He had to remind himself that there was no reason to worry about Ron and Hermione being alone
in the town together but he felt his anxiety spike. He wondered if Ron was worried too.

With his transformation coming that night, his senses heightened, and his instincts, it would have been difficult for him not to realize someone was walking a bit behind him as he left the town. Turning around he saw Draco Malfoy walking a few paces behind him. He took a couple steps to the side and waited for Malfoy to pass him. A few paces in front of him now though, Malfoy paused. He looked around.

“I know you're there, Potter,” Malfoy said. He was looking at the footprints Harry had left in the light dusting of snow on the ground.

Harry removed the silencing charm on his cloak. ”What's up with your lackeys?” he asked, side stepping so he could walk in the tracks left by the carriages.

“I don't have lackeys,” Malfoy said. "At least, not anymore. Are you going to take that off? I've gathered that you don't walk alone without it, but you're not alone right now are you.”

"I wear it when I don't have anyone to watch my back,” Harry said. He continued walking back up to the castle. Draco fell into step beside him.

"So what's up with the ‘Everyone Can Contribute,' people?” Harry asked.

"I'm sure I have no idea,” Draco said causing Harry to shift his glance to the side to look at him. That was the sort of thing his Dad would say. He rolled his eyes, a useless gesture. "I know you're behind it," he said.

“I’m flattered you think so,” Malfoy said.

“I’m surprised you wanted me to take off my cloak,” Harry said. “I wouldn’t think you would want to be seen walking alone with me.”

“Your know how you always assume that every single thing I do is part of some plot?”

“Yes,” Harry said. “I’m very familiar with that.”

“Someone sees me talking to you and they’ll just assume I’m up to something,” Draco said. “People see what they expect to see.”

“So why are you walking with me?” Harry asked. “Hogsmeade no fun today?”

“I’m a busy wizard,” Malfoy said. “I stocked up and now I’m off; back to work. The question is, I suppose, why are you leaving your friends alone in Hogsmeade? Need to go mope alone in the castle?”

“I haven’t been moping,” Harry said.

“No,” Malfoy agreed. “You’ve been good this time, haven’t you.”

Harry rolled his eyes and gave a long suffering sigh. “I don’t need your approval,” he said.

“So you’re leaving Hogsmeade early because?”

Harry huffed. “I’m giving my friends some space.”

“Are they really dating?” Draco asked. “Or is that just a ruse. Timing could have been better.”
“They’re really dating,” Harry said. “What’s it to you.”

“Oh, it’s nothing to me,” Draco said. “But it’s probably everything to you if people believe it or not. People, in general, are a bit slow to change. People might sooner come to terms with you being gay if they aren’t also thinking you’re canoodling with your best friend in the dorm.”

“Who says canoodle anymore?” Harry asked. “And it’s not anyone’s business”

“Sure it’s not anyone’s business,” Malfoy said. “But you can either stand on principal or you can bend a little bit and get a few more people on your side. There’s a lot you could be doing differently right now.”

"This isn't about politics, this is about what's right," Harry said.

Malfoy laughed.

“And I don’t need another pep talk from you,” Harry said.

“You took my advice last time,” Malfoy pointed out.

“You’re acting like you don’t care,” Harry said.

“What?” Draco asked. “That you’re gay? Don’t see what it has to do with me.”

“You didn’t exactly grow up with a live and let live attitude, though, did you?”

“You didn’t exactly grow up with a lot of magic, though, did you? You learned. Besides, homophobia doesn’t have anything to do with our heritage, muggleborns brought it into the wizarding world centuries ago.”

“Tell that to your friends in Slytherin,” Harry said.

“Not my friends,” Malfoy said. “Nott and Pansy just know it’s a way under your skin. Like I said, it doesn’t necessarily go hand in hand with blood purity. Of course there’s the sort of person who likes to feel superior to others and they’ll grasp at anything I suppose.”

“Yeah, well the wizarding world didn’t import bigotry,” Harry said. “I’m pretty sure that’s just everywhere.”

“Oh, for sure,” Malfoy said. “Interesting how the muggle world is changing now.”

“Oh, you’re an expert on the muggle world, are you?”

Malfoy shrugged. “I’ve been doing a lot of reading. Muggles have a lot more literature on personal identity, did you know that?”

“Mostly read story books when I was in the muggle world,” Harry said. “But since when do you read muggle books?”

Malfoy smelled of caution and he rather pointlessly threw a searching glance in Harry’s general direction. “They were recommended to me. But, you know, these muggle, um, scientists? Yeah, scientists, they think that being gay is just the way someone is. They used to think it was a choice, or something. They’ve done all sorts of studies on the way people are. It’s really very interesting, and they’ve done all these other studies, you know, breaking down human behavior so it’s predictable. Though, I doubt you’d be interested in that.”
“Don’t call me stupid.”

“I’m calling you a Gryffindor,” Malfoy said. “You all think understanding what makes people tick is machiavellian.”

“Well if machi-whatever is another word for Slytherin, then yeah,” Harry said. “Not that Slytherin’s bad,” he amended. “But you’re talking about manipulating people.”

“See, I knew you’d see it that way,” Malfoy said. “Of course, you probably understand human behavior better than most of our classmates, don’t you, growing up like that.”

“What are you talking about?” Harry asked darkly.

“You know how to read a room,” Draco said, and while he sounded like he was only a little interested in what he was talking about, he definitely smelled excited. “You lived with violent people, but you survived. You survived because you adapted and you learned what made them tick. I’m guessing you got good at managing them. What did you call that? Manipulation. Everyone does it. Getting good at it doesn’t make you bad, it just makes you smart.”

“So what, you're trying to convert me too now?” Harry asked.

Malfoy shook his head. “You have your role and I have mine. Besides isn't that what people accuse you of; converting people? Worry you'll turn the younger ones gay.”

“ ‘That's not how it works,” Harry said.

“ ‘Sure,” Malfoy said. “But it's all the same. You're not trying to convert anyone, I'm not trying to convert you. I don't need too many more of me running around.”

“So why tell me all that?” Harry asked.

Malfoy shrugged. “Just making conversation," he said.

“ ‘And why are you making conversation with me?” Harry asked.

“ ‘You're interesting to talk to,” Malfoy said.

“ ‘I don't understand you," Harry said, frustrated.

“ ‘That's because you keep trying to see what you expect to see," Malfoy said.

“ ‘I expect you're hiding something from me," Harry said.

“ ‘Ask me anything," Malfoy said.

“ ‘What's up with your lackeys," Harry asked.

” ‘They're not lackeys,” Malfoy said dismissively, though smelling guarded. “I just have some like minded acquaintances; perhaps there're like-minded because I convinced them to be. I had a winning argument. Do you have a problem with more tolerance?”

“ ‘It’s the first step to something bigger," Harry accused. “You're planning something.”

“ ‘Oh, it's hardly the first step," Malfoy said.

“ ‘What's your end goal?" Harry asked.
"To become a leader of the wizarding world," Malfoy said.

"What? You want to be the minister of magic?"

"Merlin no," Malfoy said for the laugh. “I’d never get anything done.”

"Oh, so minister’s not powerful enough? I guess you’d be the Dark Lord of magic."

"I’m pretty sure that’s the best way to have you come along and vanquish me someday," Malfoy said. “No, I’m not taking over the world Potter. I’m going to be the man people wish would.”

"You think people wants to be ruled over?" Harry asked.

"I think people don’t always want what’s good for them."

"Oh, so you’re being altruistic now?"

"No, I’m just being the best wizard I can be," Malfoy said. “Just like you. Greatness calls to us, but unlike you I’m willing to embrace it.”

"Did you just compliment me?" Harry asked.

"Stranger things have happened," Malfoy said. “I never thanked you for the chance to play against Krum.”

“I didn’t invite you," Harry said.

"You could’ve made a fuss," Malfoy said.

"It was just another opportunity to kick your butt,” Harry said.

"Well worth it to play the best Seeker in the world,” Malfoy said.

"He kicked your butt too.”

"He kicked both our butts,” Malfoy said. “Was that your first time seeing him play? Only, I don’t think you were paying much attention during the World Cup, not after your little gay crisis.”

“What are you talking about?” Harry asked.

“The Veela came out, made everyone go bananas except you. You don’t think I noticed you weren’t really into the game? I’ve never seen you less interested in Quidditch. What? Was that the first time you really knew?”

“You never said anything,” Harry said, ignoring the question.

“Well I had a bit much more on my mind after that night,” Malfoy said.

“You’re not angry with me for that night?” Harry asked, because Malfoy always blamed others for his misfortune.

“I was,” Malfoy said, and Harry didn’t need to smell the tension behind the words to know in that moment that the air of cool indifference that Draco effused was a thin mask. “But you weren’t the one who put that mask on father’s face. You’re not even the one who caught him.”

Harry didn’t know what to say. It wasn’t like he wasn’t glad Lucius Malfoy was paying for his
crimes. The man was a Death Eater. He’d beaten his house elf. He’d tried to kill Ginny when she was eleven.

“I’m sorry you’re missing him,” he said. It was the most truthful thing he could have politely said.

“We’ll have him back,” Malfoy said with certainty. “Malfoy’s are made of sterner stuff. He’ll make it through.”

Harry stayed silent after that.

“How’s the research coming?” Malfoy asked after the silence had stretched on long enough to be awkward.

“That’s classified,” Harry said.

Malfoy chuckled. “That propulsion spell Weasley used in the first task; he could use that underwater for quick bursts. He might even manage it nonverbally.” He sounded disinterested, like he was just making idle conversation.

Harry didn’t say anything.

Malfoy shrugged. “Or maybe not. Whatever you all are coming up with I’m sure will be fine.”

“Oh, you have faith in us now, do you?” Harry asked.

Malfoy grinned. “The past few years would seem to suggest….”

“Okay,” Harry said. “Maybe I could believe that you don’t have some horrible evil plot afoot, but why are you trying to make nice with me?”

Malfoy looked thoughtful. “Because you’re important.”


Malfoy shook his head. “Because you survived the Boy-Who-Lived thing?”

“Same difference,” Harry said.

“No, you became the Boy-Who-Lived by a fluke of magic—“

“It wasn’t a fluke. My mother died for me,” Harry said seriously.

Malfoy looked taken aback. He cleared his throat. “Well that rather shows my point. Becoming the Boy-Who-Lived was not something you did, surviving since then as the Boy-Who-Lived is.”

“That makes me important?” Harry asked.

“Perhaps,” Malfoy said. “At the least, you’re interesting.”

“You mean entertaining,” Harry said.

Malfoy hmmed.

“I’m not a shiny toy for you,” Harry said.

Malfoy seemed to think for a moment. “No, I suppose you’re not.”
“And I still think you’re hiding something,” Harry said.

“Aren’t we all,” Malfoy said. “I suppose you don’t have any more skeletons in your closets then.”

“Sure,” Harry said. “But now I have to wonder if you have actual skeletons in your closets.”

“You mean Malfoy Manor or the dorms? Because I’m actually not sure,” Malfoy said.

“About which one?” Harry asked.

“Wouldn’t you like to know,” Malfoy said.

“Probably not, actually,” Harry said.

“So what do you think of my lackeys who aren’t lackeys?” Draco asked.

“Why? Do you do quarterly performance evaluations?”

“What do you think of what they have to say?”

“You mean, what you’re saying through them?” Harry said.

Malfoy shrugged.

“I don’t like it,” Harry said.

“Oh, you’re just saying that,” Malfoy said.

“I really don’t,” Harry said.

“Why not?” Malfoy said. “I’d think you’d like ‘live and let live,’ especially with how everyone’s been treating you.”

“But that’s not the message,” Harry said.

“Oh, so what’s the message then?” Malfoy said challengingly. He smelled frustrated.

“The first part’s nice,” Harry said. “Don’t judge people for being different, that’s great and all, but you don’t stop there. Because that’s not really part of the message at all, is it? It’s the second part that’s really important. Judge people based on their worth. As If someone has to prove to you that they’re worthy of being treated nicely.”

“Don’t you want people to benefit society?” Draco asked.

Harry shrugged. “I’ll take people just not being a jerks. Besides, who’s doing the judging? You?”

“Society is.”

“Not everyone can invent another use for dragon’s blood,” Harry said.

“Sure,” Malfoy said. “But just about everyone can be useful.”

“You still sound like you want people to justify their existence,” Harry said.

“It’s not about justification,” Malfoy said.

“What’s it about then?” Harry asked.
“Its about forging a bright new future for the wizarding world, and everyone moving towards it together,” Malfoy said.

“I thought you wanted everything to stay the same,” Harry said. “Tradition and all that.”

“Tradition is important,” Malfoy said. “But so is progress. There’s no reason we can’t have both. Who better than me to guard the old ways while guiding us forwards.”

Harry shook his head. “What are you going to do when people don’t follow?” he asked.

“Lead the people they will follow,” Malfoy said.

“And what are you going to do about people who you don’t think have value?” Harry asked.

“It’s not about them, it’s about recognizing the people who do, it’s about recognizing that there are a lot of ways for people to have value.”

“Did I have value?” Harry asked. “Back when I was just a boy in a cupboard, back before Mountain Trolls and Basilisks, did I have value?”

“Well you sure showed that you did,” Malfoy said.

“So you can’t just decide that someone doesn’t have value, you can’t judge that, because I doubt anyone would have called me useful back then. You can’t just use hindsight.” It had taken him so much work and misery just to get to the point where he could look back on that boy and not feel some of the disgust his aunt had lavished him with. Knowing that his relatives had been wrong to treat him like they had had never stopped him from feeling like the worthless freak they had told him he was.

“So what do you suggest?” Malfoy asked.

Harry shrugged. “Just be nice? Don’t treat people like shit?”

Malfoy was silent for a while. “You helped out that kid last year,” he said.

“Yeah?” Harry said.

“Why?” Malfoy asked.

Harry looked at Malfoy askance. “Because she needed help,” he said.

“Sure,” Malfoy said. “But what did you get out of it?”

“I didn’t get anything out of it,” Harry said.

“So why take the time?” Malfoy asked.

“Cause she needed help,” Harry said. “And I didn’t think she needed to prove she had some worth before I could be nice to her.”

Malfoy was clearly frustrated. With a bit of a non-sequitur, Malfoy started talking quidditch. Somehow, their conversation stayed mostly non-hostile for the rest of the walk back to the castle.

“See you in Creatures,” Malfoy said as they arrived at the entryway.

“Mmhmm,” was Harry’s reply. ‘Ron’s never going to believe it,’ he thought. He thought it
terrible that he wasn’t going to remember the conversation after he woke up the next day. He decided to stop thinking about Malfoy. He reapplied his silencing charm and headed down to his dad’s quarters.

“How was Hogsmeade?” his dad asked, giving him a hug as he walked in.

“It’s a different experience when you go this close to moonrise,” Harry said. “The noise is a bit awful, but the smells are really something. I might have gone a bit crazy in Honeyduke’s.” He held up a rather full shopping bag.

“I hope you kept your appetite,” his Dad said.

“Oh, I did,” Harry said, he was actually starving.

“Then we shall make haste,” his Dad said.

They flooed to their cottage; for once Harry’s alibi for the month was actually going to be his actual location. January was the right month for planting a few different potions ingredients and the story for this full moon was that Harry was going to be helping plant his dad’s potions garden.

Lunch was carpaccio for Harry, the blood red meat looked like something that would have turned his stomach before he had become a werewolf, and so close to moonrise, a primal part of him loved the dish. Professor Lupin arrived a bit later and they warded the cellar before it was time for Harry to relax. He wrote about as much of his conversation with Malfoy into his log book as he could remember.

After a long bath and a pre-transformation snack, Harry and Remus were locked up together downstairs. It was going to be a very long wait for them this month. As always, they were down in the cellar a half an hour before the moon rose, but this month, the moon wouldn’t actually reach fullness until four hours after it had risen. Harry had come prepared though. Besides snacks, he had enough games and pre-thought out conversation starters written down to last for a while. He brought out some cards and they played for a while talking about Harry’s classes.

“So this is the first time I’ve seen you since that article came out,” Professor Lupin said.

“Aren’t I supposed to be avoiding stressful topics?” Harry asked.

“You haven’t seemed stressed out,” Professor Lupin said.

“I guess I’m handling things alright,” Harry said. “But I still wish that article hadn’t come out.”

“Did you write that response yourself?” Professor Lupin asked.

“Ron helped,” Harry said.

“You showed a great deal of restraint,” Professor Lupin said.

“There are a few versions of the letter we wrote just to vent a bit,” Harry said. “I might have used a few words I won’t repeat here.”

Professor Lupin smiled. “I’m glad you have your friends behind you,” he said.

“I have the best friends in the world,” Harry said.

Professor Lupin’s smile turned a bit sad and Harry was reminded that all of the man’s closest friends were dead. Though that wasn’t something to think about before the transformation.
“Do you date people?” Harry asked.

“Now and then,” Professor Lupin said. “Looking for advice?”

Harry shook his head. “My friends keep saying that I’ll find someone but there’s only one other gay guy at school and he’s older and not exactly friendly.”

“There’s only one other that you know of,” Professor Lupin said. “Statistically, there are probably a lot more.”

“Well statistics aren’t really helping,” Harry said before he frowned. “It’s not like I’m all that interested in dating someone to begin with.”

“Then why worry about it?” Professor Lupin asked.

“Cause all of a sudden everyone’s all interested in my love life, and what if I never have one,” Harry said. “I mean, I’m supposed to want one someday, aren’t I?”

“There’s no ‘supposed to’s’ here,” Professor Lupin said. “Look, let’s talk about this in the morning. There’s not too much point in keeping you calm with the moon the way it is tonight, but let’s at least keep things cheerful.”

“You’ll stay around tomorrow?” Harry asked.

“For a while,” Professor Lupin said.

“I just don’t really have anyone to talk to about this stuff,” Harry said. “I mean, I talk to my friends but they’re straight, and most of the time I ever spend with you I just forget the next day.”

“I’ll stick around tomorrow, Harry,” Professor Lupin said. “I promise.”

“I wasn’t trying to guilt trip you or anything,” Harry said. “You’re already stuck chatting with me for the next four hours.”

“I like chatting with you. Don’t worry about tomorrow. You’re a bit isolated,” Professor Lupin said. “Merlin knows I get it.”

“Do you know a lot of gay people?” Harry asked.

“A fair few,” Professor Lupin said. “Mostly muggles though.”


“It’s a bit easier to blend in with the muggle world,” Professor Lupin said. “Being a werewolf, they’ll never suspect. Work too, I’ve had better employment in the muggle world than I have in the wizarding world.”

“What do you do?” Harry asked.

“Well I’m working in a library right now,” Professor Lupin said. “I’m saving up a bit for my next trip to the continent.”

“Where are you going?”

“The Black Forrest,” Professor Lupin said. “For a while anyway and then I’m off to the night markets of Istanbul, though the magical locals still call it Constantinople.”
From there Professor Lupin regaled him with stories of his travels around the world and the creatures he came across, and the different magical arts, and libraries that contained books that couldn’t be copied or transcribed. As transfixed as Harry was by these stories, he was aware instantly as the moon began to rise. He perked up and looked over his shoulder to where he knew he would see it if he were outside.

“How do you feel?” Professor Lupin asked.

“Twitchy,” Harry said. He rose to his feet without really thinking about it. He felt a tingle between his shoulder blades and he started walking around. He felt like he was continually being pulled towards where the moon was. “How long will you be gone for?” he asked.

“A few weeks,” Professor Lupin said. “I’m never away from home during the full moon.”

Harry nodded. He went over to the small bag of supplies he’d brought. Perhaps it was still early, but he was already feeling incredibly restless. He pulled out his practice snitch and set it off. It wasn’t exactly catchable without a broom, but catching it wasn’t really the point. He gave chase.

“You can play too,” he told Professor Lupin who laughed.

“I think I’ll just watch,” he said.

Harry ran and leapt and pounced and stalked the snitch around the cellar as Professor Lupin kept up his tales.

“You could write a book,” Harry said about a half an hour later as he lay on the floor a bit out of breath; watching the golden snitch hover in the corner.

“You’ve said that before,” Professor Lupin said.

“Well it must be a good idea if I’ve had it twice,” Harry said.

“I could be the next Lockheart,” Professor Lupin said.

“Never,” Harry said. “That guy was a bastard!” He slapped a hand over his mouth and looked at Professor Lupin.

“Oh, don’t sensor yourself on my account,” Professor Lupin said. “I am no longer your professor, remember?”

“You’ll always be my professor,” Harry said earnestly.

Professor Lupin smiled at him fondly. “Didn’t get along with old Gilderoy did you?”

Harry shook his head. He didn’t really want to talk about the man.

“You know, I met him a few times during my travels, we kept bumping into each other actually. I have to say, I don’t want to speak ill of him, given the state he’s in now, but I wasn’t terribly surprised to hear about his accident. He never exactly seemed as competent as he portrayed himself in his books.”

“It wasn’t an accident,” Harry said darkly. “What he did to himself he was trying to do to me and Ron with Ron’s broken wand while we were trying to rescue Ginny from the Chamber of Secrets. We’d found out he was a fraud. He’d- he’d go around obliveating people of the cool stuff they’d done so he could take credit.”
“Oh, Merlin. Um, okay, bad topic,” Professor Lupin said. “Let’s talk quidditch.”

“He was going to do that to us and let Ginny die down there, she was all alone down there in the cold with Riddle. The prick also vanished all the bones in my arm after I broke it in quidditch,” Harry said angrily. “He was so fucking awful.” He knew he should stop talking about Lockhart, he wasn’t supposed to get himself worked up, but he suddenly felt that he had a bubbling miasma of disgust for the man that wanted to spew forth.

“Harry,” Professor Lupin said. “You’re completely right, he’s the worst, but we shouldn’t be focusing on this right now.”

“And then he’d be all like, ‘ah, I simply have too much fan mail to be taking care of by myself, I’ll take young Potter’s detention if you don’t mind, got to teach this young celebrity something,’” Harry said, putting on his best imitation of the fucking peacock with an angry sneer on his face. “He was so god damn full of himself. And then you know what he did?” Harry asked bitterly.

“I don’t know Harry,” Professor Lupin said. “But I know that if you don’t calm down right now you’re going to have a very dangerous transformation. You’ve been practicing occlumency haven’t you. Why don’t I conjure us some tea and we’ll relax for a bit.”

“I don’t want any fucking tea,” Harry yelled. “I don’t want to relax. What if I want to be angry?! I’m so sick of everything.”

Professor Lupin looked at his watch with a bit of frustration.

“What are you sick of Harry?”

“I don’t have any control of my life,” Harry said. And the pull of the moon that had felt so intoxicating moments before now seemed like a chain around his neck.

“I know,” Professor Lupin said. “The transformation takes a lot from you…”

“No,” Harry said. “I never had any control to begin with.”

“What do you want control of right now?” Professor Lupin asked bringing Harry up short.

“I- I want some god damn privacy,” he said. “And I want some sort of say in who I have a fucking crush on, and I want to be able to remember spending time with you, and I want to make out with my best friend, and you know what?”

“What?” Professor Lupin asked.

“I want to punch Lockhart in the fucking face,” Harry said. “He’s such an arrogant, smarmy, asshole, and oh, Malfoy, I haven’t even told you about Malfoy-“

“Harry, I’m going to make a deal with you,” Professor Lupin said.

“A deal so I can punch Lockhart?” Harry asked.

“You can be as angry as you want for another half an hour, you can yell and curse and scream and vent as much as you want, but after that we’re going to have three hours for you to calm down and get ready for the transformation, okay? The moon’s risen and you’re basically high as a kite right now and if you aren’t careful we are both going to have a very rough transformation tonight.”

Harry found a moment to feel guilty. He remembered the last time he had had a rough
transformation. He had ended up biting Professor Lupin. “I can curse as much as I want?” Harry asked.

“Well unless I’m mistaken, you already have,” Professor Lupin said. “But if there’s another level to it then by all means.”

A half an hour later, a very antsy Harry sat down trying to clear his mind while he tried to play checkers with Professor Lupin. It was a very awkward game after everything he’d just yelled about. At least it was for him; Professor Lupin was acting like everything was normal and Harry somewhat admired his ability to resist the pull of the moon. Harry couldn’t stop looking over his shoulder.

Professor Lupin let him win, Harry thought, and as he captured the last piece he gave a battle cry, leaping up to pounce on the snitch that was flying by. He spat it out a moment later, a bit more shocked that he’d actually caught it than that he had in fact shoved it in his mouth when he did.

“How do you feel?” Professor Lupin asked.

“I caught it,” Harry said holding it up.

“I can see that,” Professor Lupin said.

“Help me catch it again?” Harry asked.

“Maybe you’ll be helping me catch it,” Professor Lupin said.

Harry let go of the snitch.

A good while later, a thoroughly exhausted Harry sat down facing the wall. His robes shed and placed in the lockbox for the night, he was about as ready as he could be for the full moon.

“Are you going to tell me about everything I said tonight?” Harry asked.

“Do you want me to?” Professor Lupin asked.

“I don’t like that I forget everything,” Harry said.

“I will tell you then,” Professor Lupin said. “Among other things.”

“Like what?” Harry asked.

“Like that it’s perfectly alright if you aren’t ready for a boyfriend or even if you never want a boyfriend. That you don’t need to let other people’s definition of happy define your own.”

“I think I will want a boyfriend someday,” Harry said. “But I guess we can talk about that tomorrow.” It was sort of a question.

“We will talk about it tomorrow then,” Professor Lupin said.

Harry smiled briefly before the transformation drew a pained cry from his throat.
Harry was beyond hoarse as he screamed and bucked and cursed his way through the transformation. Flashes of rage and hunger ran through his mind. He was also beyond tired. He wasn’t a very good judge, but it seemed to take so much longer for the transformation to finish. When it finally did, he was left gasping for air and trying not to cry. He slowly lost consciousness as he felt something being draped over him and a hand carded through his hair.

“Was there anything else unusual last night?” Severus asked.

“He did fine,” Lupin said for the third time. “He ran around for a good bit, both before the transformation and after. He’s just exhausted. Madam Pomfrey gave him a clean bill of health.”

“He’s never passed out before,” Severus said.

“He’s never spent four hours under the moon pre-transformation before,” Lupin said. “It’s exhausting.”

Severus almost felt guilty for dragging the man off to interrogate him about the night prior. He’d done his bit giving him coffee but the man looked tired as hell.

Severus sighed. “Thank you for taking care of him,” he said.

“You’re welcome,” Lupin said. “I need to stay and talk to Harry.”

“You talked to him yesterday,” Severus said. “For hours, I presume. He’ll be sleeping for hours yet.”

“I spoke to him for hours, but as far as he’s concerned he rarely sees me except for just a bit after the full moon,” Lupin said. “I’m the only other gay wizard he ever talks to and he forgets most of our interactions. He has questions, I have advice. Besides which, I promised him I’d talk to him today.”

It went without saying that Harry would have forgotten any promises from the night before, but he wasn’t about to suggest that such a promise didn’t matter.

“I suppose you want breakfast,” Severus said, now resigned.

Lupin shrugged with an inclination of his head. “Somewhere to lie down wouldn’t be horrible either.”

Severus rubbed at the bridge of his nose. “Come on then,” he said. “Harry won’t be eating his breakfast anytime soon.” He gestured to the tray he had made up for Harry as he had waited for the moon to set. “Does he have concerns?” he asked.

“Of course he has concerns,” Lupin said. “No, I’m not telling you what we talk about.”

“Is he doing all right?” Severus asked.

Lupin hesitated. “He needs someone he can talk to about these things,” he said. “What he really needs are gay peers but, as I understand it, there’s only one and he’s an upperclassman.”

Severus frowned. “I’ll move Harry to his room,” he said. “You can take the couch. I’ll get you
when he wakes up."

"Thank you Severus," Lupin said.

Severus left to go get Harry tucked in, feeling a bit useless as a parent just then.

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Harry was a bit perplexed to wake up in his own bed rather than the couch down stairs. His dad liked to keep an eye on him post transformation. Oddly enough, though, he didn’t remember anything after he’d transformed back into a human, and that was pretty concerning. Had something gone wrong? He felt pretty dead to the world and was fairly certain that he would still be asleep if not for a very full bladder.

He got out of bed, wrapping his robes securely around himself and padded out of the room on very sore and wobbly legs. His bones feeling like they were rubbing together wrong. Moments later, staring at himself in the bathroom mirror, he shed his robe and looked himself all over for any injuries. Not finding any, he wasn’t sure if that should be a relief or if he should be more concerned by the fact that he had apparently passed out after the transformation for no reason. He looked over his shoulder real quick, as if someone would be there before looking back in the mirror, trying to see if there was anything different since the last time he’d really looked, he usually felt too self conscious when he was in the bathroom in the dorm. He thought he had a bit more muscle. He tried flexing a bit. Were his shoulders broader, or was he imagining things. Besides a bit more hair, there wasn’t anything that really looked different from the last time.

He wrapped himself up again and went back to his room to put on some underclothes and get a fresh set of robes on. Exiting back into the hall he was brought up short by his dad, who was waiting outside.

"Hey," Harry said.

"Good afternoon," his Dad said. "How do you feel?"

"Hungry," Harry said, knowing that his dad would be happy to hear it, and knowing also that saying that he was sore and woozy wouldn’t exactly be news.

"Then lets get some lunch into you," his Dad said. "Do you need help getting down stairs?"

Harry shook his head. "The hand rail will do fine," he said, turning towards the stairs. "Did something happen last night?" he asked over his shoulder. "Um, I think I sort of passed out."

"You did," his dad said. "Everything went fine though, you were just exhausted."

"I didn’t bite Professor Lupin again, did I?" Harry asked, keeping a firm hand on the handrail as he cautiously took the stairs down.

"You did not," his Dad said. "That was covered by my statement that everything went fine."

"Right," Harry said. "Professor Lupin’s still here," he observed when he got downstairs. The man was asleep on the couch. That would explain why he had woken up in his bed.

"He wanted to talk to you," his dad said. He walked over to the couch and pulled out his wand.
“Envervate.”

Professor Lupin woke up with a small gasp, his eyes wide. “Oh,” he said looking around. “Harry, good morning.”

“It’s the afternoon,” his Dad corrected.

“Ah,” Professor Lupin said.

“Come get your potions, Harry,” his Dad said.

“I don’t have to take the sleep one, do I?” Harry asked with trepidation.

“We’ll save that for tonight,” his Dad said, to which Harry frowned. He waved to Professor Lupin as he made his way into the kitchen.

Hungry as he was, his stomach curdled as he downed his potions. His Dad grabbed two plates of food off of the counter and walked with Harry back out into the sitting room. Once Harry was situated, his dad handed him a plate of fish and chips and removed the stasis charm that had been over it. The food promptly began steaming. Professor Lupin got a plate too.

“I’ll be in my lab,” his Dad said, leaving Harry and Professor Lupin to their meals.

“How do you feel?” Professor Lupin asked.

“Oh, you know,” Harry said, trying to deal with a mouthful of slightly too hot fish. “Pretty good all things considered. How about you?”

“Tired,” Professor Lupin said. “But I am still in one piece.”

“I was worried I’d bite you again,” Harry said.

“You didn’t,” Professor Lupin said. “The transformation went well.”

“My Dad said you wanted to talk to me,” Harry said.

“I did,” Professor Lupin said. “We had a lot of time to talk last night, and I rather thought that you might like to talk about some things when you’d remember having the conversation. You don’t really have any gay peers so I figured we’d just have a bit of a talk.”

“What did we talk about last night?” Harry asked.

“A fair bit,” Professor Lupin said. “You asked me about dating.”

“Huh,” Harry said. “People have been saying that I’ll find someone, but I sort of feel like if there’s anyone else in the school who’s gay they’ve got enough sense to stay in the closet.”

“Are you looking to find anyone?” Professor Lupin asked.

“No, but I sort of figure I’ll want to someday,” Harry said.

“I’ll tell you that you did ask me to tell you everything we talked about last night,” Professor Lupin said. “I hope you won’t regret telling me that you wanted to make out with your best friend.”

Harry covered his face. “Oh Merlin, full moon Harry has a big mouth.”
Professor Lupin barked a laugh and busied himself with his food for a moment.

“That’s all I said about that, right?” Harry said. “I didn’t talk about anything, um, else…”

“You might have gone on about his freckles,” Professor Lupin said very straight faced.

“Ugh,” Harry said.

“It sort of made me wonder if maybe you did feel that you wanted a relationship but were holding out for someone who wasn’t available; or if maybe you did feel that you wanted a relationship with someone but didn’t feel comfortable with the fact that that someone would ultimately be another boy.”

Harry had long ago figured out that having a mouthful of food was a good excuse not to talk. Eventually though he said, “Maybe it’s a combination of things,” while staring at his food.

“You look pretty unhappy saying that,” Professor Lupin said.

“Well it’s sort of an insult to everyone else who’s gay if I say I feel guilty for having feelings like that for other boys,” Harry said.

“Harry, with your upbringing it’s okay for you to still have some hang-ups around your sexuality.”

“How is that okay?” Harry asked.

“Because you’re on a journey,” Professor Lupin said. “You got dropped off in a bad spot and you’re making your way to somewhere better. You don’t need to feel guilty for being where you are.”

Harry thought about that for a bit. “You mentioned my upbringing,” Harry said. “I mean, you probably saw that article, but did I talk about that last night?”

“You did,” Professor Lupin said. “And since I’m supposed to tell you everything, we’ll go into that later, but for now I’ll say that I know that they made homophobic comments about you and that they espoused homophobic views when you were growing up.”

“Wasn’t I supposed to be relaxing last night?” Harry asked, it didn’t sound like he’d been relaxed while he’d waited for the full moon.

“I persuaded you to calm down after a while,” Professor Lupin said. “I wanted to tell you though, Harry, that there’s no hurry when it comes to dating. You’re ready whenever you’re ready, and if that never happens, that’s okay too. Some people don’t want relationships and there’s nothing wrong with that.”

“I don’t really know what I want right now,” Harry said. “Even if I did, I wouldn’t know how to go about finding anyone.”

“Most of my relationships have been with muggles,” Professor Lupin said. “It’s a lot easier to hide the fact that I’m a werewolf when my boyfriends don’t believe werewolves exist.”

“How about dating other werewolves?” Harry asked.

“I’ve dated a couple,” Professor Lupin said. “Gay werewolves are a bit of a small dating pool though.”

“So do you think I should date muggle boys?” Harry asked. “Some day.”
“I’m not going to tell you who you should date,” Professor Lupin said. “But something to think about is that under the Statute of Secrecy, the only time you can tell a muggle significant other about the wizarding world is when you marry, and gay marriage is not recognized by the Ministry of Magic. Big secrets can put a big hamper on any relationship.”

“You’re not really selling me on this whole thing,” Harry said.

“I wasn’t trying to sell you on anything,” Professor Lupin said. “Though I should say that I’ve had some wonderful relationships in my life. I’m not going to tell you that you’re going to find the one, but I will say that there’s no reason you can’t.”

“Hmm,” Harry said.

“And lastly,” Professor Lupin said. “I said this last night, but if you ever feel like you’re the only gay kid in school, well, statistically speaking there’re a fair few more.”

“Yeah, well they aren’t all clamoring to introduce themselves,” Harry said. “Of course, I didn’t exactly have any plans to go and come out to Miller.”

“Thomas Miller?” Professor Lupin asked.

“Yeah,” Harry said. “He got outed at the end of last year. He just keeps to himself though.”

“Have you talked to him since you were outed?” Professor Lupin asked.

Harry shook his head. “Maybe I should,” he said. “It’s just, the last time I talked to him he basically told me to brush off, so… I dunno. What else did we talk about? You said I brought up the Dursleys?”

“I should have made a list,” Professor Lupin said. “All right, you said you wanted everything, so let’s start at the beginning. We started talking about your classes.”

“Oh,” Harry said. “Well, maybe not everything.”

“Add that one to the list,” Hermione said.

“That’s a sixth year spell,” Ron said.

“You can learn it,” Hermione said.

Ron seemed to preen a bit even as he quipped about not needing to be able to light a fire underwater. Harry tuned them out and went back to skimming through the scroll he was working on. The hairs on the back of his neck prickled as he noticed someone walk up from behind him.

“Ron,” a voice greeted.

“Oh, hey Kevin,” Ron said. Harry turned around.

“Potter,” Kevin Erstwhile nodded at him before turning to Hermione. “Granger.”

“Hello,” Hermione said, seeming a bit wary.
“I’ve got something for you,” Erstwhile said sitting down next to Harry. The Slytherin boy pulled an item out of his pocket that was wrapped in an oiled cloth, which he proffered towards Ron. Whatever it was it had a pungent earthy smell to it.

“What is it?” Ron asked, taking it into his hands and unwrapping it. He made a face at the sight of what looked like a balled up mass of writhing worms.

“Gillyweed,” Erstwhile said. “You’ll need it to breath under the lake.”

“How do you know about that?” Hermione asked.

“You lot and Diggory have been the talk of the dungeons,” Erstwhile said. “There’s been speculation on what you all will use. There’s a good many wagers going on right now.”

“What are my odds?” Ron asked.

“Not the greatest,” Erstwhile said unapologetically.

Ron shrugged. “And what exactly do I do with this stuff?” Ron asked.

“Shove it in your mouth,” Erstwhile said. “You’ll grow gills and your hands and feet’ll grow webs. It lasts for a bit over an hour.”

“How much do I owe you?” Ron asked. “I don’t even know if I need it, I’m learning the Bubble-Head Charm.”

“Greengrass saw you pass out practicing that charm,” Erstwhile said. “Look, like I’ve said, people have been talking. Maybe you’ll be able to cast the charm and it’ll last you the entire time. Consider this a back-up. If the charm wears off underwater, you probably won’t be able to reapply it. The only downside is you won’t be able to talk while you use this stuff, so only silent spell casting.”

“Huh,” Ron said. “And, um…”

“You don’t owe me anything,” Erstwhile said. “Consider it a bit of a repayment.”

“For what?” Ron asked. “Our happy days in hell together?”

“Not a repayment to you,” Erstwhile said to Ron. He jerked his head towards Harry. “This one saved my life, and I figure he seems rather invested in you not drowning in February.”

“When did that happen, exactly?” Harry asked, very confused.

“When you stunned me in the hall,” Erstwhile said, turning towards Harry. “I never finished my instructions. He had me imperiused so I’d go give you that message, but the message wasn’t complete. He wanted to impress upon you how serious he was by having me slit my own throat. I’d had the knife ready in my pocket.

Harry didn't think he had even noticed. “Oh,” was all he could think to say to that.

“Holy hell,” Ron said.


“Who are you rooting for?” Ron asked.
“Good luck,” was all Erstwhile said before he left.

“Well,” Ron said, looking at the writhing mass in his hands. “Let’s hope I don’t have to shove this thing in my mouth.”

Ron continued working on the bubblehead charm. They all had things they were looking into in preparation for the second task which was a bit over a month away. A couple of weeks later saw them all at the lake with Ron’s siblings. It was time for Ron to really start practicing the spells he would be using during the second task.

“Nope, still freezing,” Ron said miserably, his teeth chattering as he stood naval deep in the water at the shore of the lake in sodden robes.

“All right, come on out,” Ginny said. She dried Ron off while Hermione applied a heating charm.

“This whole thing is going to be over pretty quick if you turn into a popsicle,” Fred said.

“It’s all about your focus,” Hermione said. “You need to focus on the heat radiating from your core.”

“That would be a lot easier if I could cast it while I’m still on dry land,” Ron said. “Why do I have to already be in the water? And what’s up with all these guttural consonants, what’s wrong with latin based spells.”

“This is the only thing I’ve found that is strong enough to keep you warm in the lake,” Ginny said. She had proven to be very good at research, and had found a lot of the more obscure items on the list os spells that Ron had to learn.

“We could look into custom charmed clothes for you to wear,” Hermione said.

“That sounds expensive,” Ron said.

“I could handle that,” Harry said.

Ron shook his head. “I’ll learn the spell.”

“George, could you conjure some hot tea?” Harry asked.

The twins had succeeded in casting the spell on themselves and were standing in the lake. George pulled out his wand and sent a hot cup of tea over to Harry which he handed to Ron.

“Drink this as fast as you can and go stand back in the lake. Focus on the heat from the tea in your belly.”

Ron gulped down the too hot tea with a grimace and then went and waded back out into the lake gasping from the cold of it as he went.

“Gerkshtkulkgracht Ektkoro,” Ron incanted over himself when he was once more submerged up to his naval. He took in a sharp inhale. “Oh, that’s nice,” he said. “Oh, that’s so much better.”

“Finally,” George said.

“Well, now that the princess is comfortable we can get to work,” said Fred.

“Come here,” George said. Ron waded over to him. “Lumolilion,” George said, placing a charm on Ron’s skin causing him to glow.
“What’s this for?” Ron asked.

“It’s so if you drown we can find your body,” Fred said.

“We’re going to be with you,” George said. “If something happens to your bubblehead charm or whatever, shoot out sparks and we’ll come get you.”

Ron nodded. “What’ve you got for me down there?”

“That’s a surprise,” said Fred.

Ron sighed, applied the bubblehead charm on himself and dove in.

They still had more than enough school and project work, but the following couple of weeks were filled with a number of trips out to a secluded part of the lake where Ron could dive in with the twins and face grindylows and hinkypunks and anything else the twins could catch to throw at him. Harry, Hermione, and Ginny were left on the shore for longer and longer periods of time. Ron was having trouble maintaining the bubblehead charm for long enough, but he was getting better.

Ron was going to bed fairly exhausted every night, and Harry was fairly certain it was the best thing for him. Keeping so busy seemed to keep him in a good state of mind. There were a few nights though were Harry would stay up with him or Ron would wake him up for a chat. If Seamus noticed or had any opinion on the matter, he kept it to himself.

February saw another full moon. It went about as routinely as it could go. Harry left right after classes let out on Monday and headed down to floo out from his dad’s quarters. He was actually looking forward to missing History of Magic the following morning. His dad actually left him in Professor Lupin’s care that day so he could take care of his classes while Ron faked sick and went about impersonating Harry under Polyjuice. Harry got to talk to Professor Lupin for a while before he was able to return to school that evening and had no problem impersonating a still slightly sick Ron. They both sat up late that night waiting for the Polyjuice to wear off as Ron caught Harry up on what he missed in his classes. Harry was caught in that limbo of being very tired but not feeling like he could sleep since he had been sleeping most of the day.

“So wait,” Harry said. “Does that mean if you flip the diagram it becomes an eldritch pendant?”

Ron stared at his runes book for a bit before shutting it with a bit of a snap. “That sounds like a good question for Hermione tomorrow,” he said, rubbing at his eyes.

“You don’t need to keep me company,” Harry said. “You look pretty tired.”

“I’m just going to go over the second task in my head if I try to go to sleep right now,” he said.

“You don’t need to worry,” Harry said. “You’re doing great.”

“Sure, as long as I can get out of the lake before my bubblehead charm wears off,” Ron said.

“You’ve got a back up,” Harry said.

Ron shook his head. “I can hardly do any spells nonverbally,” he said. “I need to be finished before I need to worry about that.”

“You’re going to do fine,” Harry said again. “I should have taught you how to clear your mind.”
“I’ve got enough to learn,” he said. “Come on now, we’ve done nothing but worry about me for a while. How are you doing?”

“A lot better than I might have thought I would have been now that I’m out,” Harry said.

“Is that a lot better like you’re doing good or a lot better as in things suck but it could be worse?”

Harry shrugged. “It’s not like I’m not used to being a bit of an outcast,” he said. “I’ve got the people who matter with me.”

Ron smiled at him. “Well we’re not going anywhere,” he said. “I’ve been meaning to talk to you about something though.” He looked nervous.

Harry frowned. “I haven’t been giving you two enough time alone together,” he said. “You’re dating, I get it.”

“No,” Ron said. “That’s not…” He bit his lip. “There’s just something I should have told you a long while ago, but I wasn’t sure, and I didn’t want…. Um, it’s not bad. At all. I just… Okay, so I really like Hermione, you know?”

“Yeah,” Harry said.

“And I started noticing girls in a big way summer before third year, and um, I just sort of didn’t really pay attention to other stuff.”

“Other stuff?” Harry asked.

“Yeah, so,” Ron said. “Like, I’d notice a good looking guy and I’d just, I’d sort of just think to myself that I was just, um, admiring someone who was older, like, you know, ‘hope I look like that when I’m big,’ and stuff. I mean, I knew that people were bi, but I just didn’t really think that I was for a long time.”

“Wait, so you’re…” To say that Harry was shocked was an understatement.

“Bisexual,” Ron said. “I don’t know, I was just sort of used to passing off feelings like that as something else I just didn’t really consider it and then when I sort of realized maybe I did like guys, you know, the same way I like girls, I just sort of wondered if I was mistaken or if I was confused, and after you came out to me I thought I should talk to you about it, but I was sort of worried about, like, what if I was wrong, and I came out to you and then I realized later that I was just straight, and- I’m sorry I didn’t tell you sooner.”

Harry found himself speechless.

“I, um, I told Hermione a few days ago,” Ron said, looking down at his hands in his lap. “I just wanted to make sure she knew that, um, I was happy with her, and just ‘cause I also like blokes doesn’t mean I’m going to cheat on her with one. Um, and I also wrote Charlie about it.” He looked back up at Harry. “I just didn’t feel like I was sure at first and then I felt guilty for not having talked to you about it sooner and then I just kept putting off telling you.”

“Huh,” was all Harry could manage.

“Are you mad at me?” Ron asked.

“What?” Harry asked. “No, I just, um, wasn’t expecting this. Um, I get being nervous to tell someone.”
“I shouldn’t have been,” Ron said.

Harry shrugged. The silence feeling awkward between them. “So does that mean we can talk boys with each other?”

“Viktor Krum jumping into the lake in that little swimming outfit,” Ron said. “I almost outed myself right there. Those robes he wears do not do him justice.”

Harry blushed furiously, hiding his face in his hands. “Oh my god, I know, right?”

Ron grinned at him.

The next day, Ron told the twins and Ginny about his sexuality while they went out to the lake for practice. The twins teased him, but not in a mean way. No one acted like it was shocking news. Harry thought that he himself had probably been the most surprised. He had to tell himself that it didn’t change anything. Ron was just as unavailable, he was still madly head over heels for Hermione and even if he wasn’t, it was one thing to want to be Harry’s friend, it was quite another to want to be his boyfriend. Ron didn’t need that much more mess in his life.

Over the next week, Ron spent most of his free time practicing in the lake. If any of the other champions were doing the same, they must have found their own secluded spots to do so, since they never saw any of them by the lake while they were out.

The evening before the second task a bit of a calm dogged them as they made their way back to the castle from the lake. They were calling it a bit earlier than they had over the past week, in part because Ron had learned about as much as he was going to learn and also because there was no point in Ron overworking himself the night before.

“Someone should stay up tonight and make sure Ron gets enough sleep,” Hermione said matter of factly as they approached the castle.

“I’m doing a lot better,” Ron said.

“I know,” Hermione said. “We’ll just make sure.”

“I’ll stay up,” Harry volunteered.

“We’ll drill you on spells tomorrow morning,” Ginny said. “No more work tonight, let’s do gobstones or something.”

“Nothing’s more relaxing than pranking the school,” George said.

“What do you say, Ron? Want to turn the stairs into the entrance hall into a waterslide?”

Ron glanced at Hermione. “Gobstones should be fine,” he said.

They all ate together that night, but they never got to play gobstones. They were stopped by Professor McGonagall as they were leaving the Great Hall.

“Mr. Potter, Miss Weasley, and Miss Granger, you are all needed in the headmaster’s office.” She looked grim.
“…Are we in trouble?” Harry asked.

“No,” Professor McGonagall said. “But we will discuss the matter in the headmaster’s office.”

“Get back soon,” Ron said. He looked anxious.

The three of them followed Professor McGonagall all the way up to the top of the tower that housed the headmaster. Professor McGonagall had said that they weren’t in trouble, but Harry couldn’t help but think that this had something to do with all the help they had been giving Ron against the rules. Though if that were the case, Ron and the twins would be with them, wouldn’t they?

The office was very full when they arrived. Besides the headmaster, Karkaroff and Madame Maxime were stood looking fairly judgingly at the three arriving students from the right of the headmaster while to his left Ms. Cooper and Bagman stood looking a lot more pleasant. Additionally, seated around the room were Cho Chang, a Durmstrang student Harry was pretty sure had been Krum’s date to the Yule Ball, and a young girl, younger than a first year, who bore a strong resemblance to Fleur Delacour.

“Are we supposed to be what Ron’s going to miss, professor?” Ginny asked.

“See?” Karkaroff said. “He has told them the clue.”

“There was no stipulation that he keep the clue to himself,” Ms. Cooper said. “He was welcome to shout it out in the Great Hall.”

“But he told them so they could help him,” Karkaroff accused. “He has been receiving help.”

“Surely you are not concerned zat a fourth year will defeat your champion,” Madame Maxime said a bit scornfully, though she had her shrewd eyes on the three of them.

“This is not what we have gathered everyone for,” the Headmaster said. “Yes, Miss Weasley, we are here to decide which one of you will be participating in the second task.”

Harry was instantly curious to know why there were three of them there for Ron but only one person for each of the other champions, and why did Professor McGonagall and the headmaster look worried.

“Your names were brought forward as students Mr. Weasley would miss the most,” Bagman said.

“Though Professor McGonagall had concerns with the nature of your participation in the second task,” Ms. Cooper said. “Which is why it was decided to consult with the three of you before making a decision.”

Harry thought that was far more ominous and non-detailed than was necessary. For once though, it was the Headmaster who was handing out all of the answers.

“For the second task, each champion must swim to the bottom of the lake and retrieve the person that they will ‘miss the most.’ That person will be in a magically induced sleep and bound to a post in the middle of the merfolk village.”

“He has to fight merfolk?” Hermione asked. They’d studied the magical humanoids, but had no way to really practice how to face one.

“No,” the headmaster said. “He does not. Right now, however, we are not concerned with Mr.
Weasley. All three of you are being considered, and yet, all three of you have a history of being rendered unconscious and abducted. There was concern that such a scenario might become distressing."

“I’ll do it,” Harry said.

“No,” Hermione said. “Ron volunteered so you’d stay out of it.”

“Which derailed any plans to off me,” Harry said. “I’ll be fine.”

“No, I’ll be fine,” Hermione said. “I’ll be in a magical sleep, I won’t even notice that I’m being held captive.”

“Well how’s Ron going to do seeing you tied up like that?” Harry asked.

“Well what about you?” Hermione asked.

“Not quite as on the nose, don’t you think?” Harry asked.

“You’re both missing the obvious answer,” Ginny said. “Which is that I should do it.”

“Same reaction,” Harry said. “He’s very protective of you.”

“Same as you,” Ginny said.

“It’s not the same,” Harry said.

“Why?” Ginny asked. “Because I’m a girl?”

“Because you’re his little… sibling,” Harry said. “Look the sight of either of you tied up and dead to the world is going to freak him out, and he doesn’t need to have a panic attack at the bottom of the lake.” He sorely wished they weren’t having this conversation in front of everyone.

“You’re right,” Hermione said. “But you can’t swim.”

That brought Harry up short. “Will I need to be able to swim, Sir?” He asked, turning towards the headmaster.

“It would be ideal, though not strictly necessary,” Bagman said.

“I vote for Ginny,” Hermione said.

“That’s two for me,” Ginny said.

Harry turned once more towards the Headmaster but he didn’t look like he was about to overrule them.

“It is decided, no?” asked Madame Maxime.

“It is decided,” the Headmaster nodded.

Harry sighed in defeat. He turned to Ginny. “Are you going to be alright?” he asked.

Ginny ran a hand through her hair. “Sure,” she said brazenly. “No problem. I’ll just be asleep.”

Harry remembered finding Ginny in the Chamber of Secrets, looking very dead while he told himself over and over that she was just asleep.
“I guess that’s that, then,” Bagman said, frowning at Ginny. “The two of you can get back to your dormitories.”

“They cannot go,” Karkaroff said indignantly. “They know too much now. They will tell your champion. They must stay under supervision until the task starts.”

Harry looked to Hermione. He wasn’t sure if they would be telling Ron. What would giving him more time to worry do for him.

“We can’t just disappear, Sir,” Hermione said to the headmaster. “Ron’s going to think something horrible has happened.”

“He is supposed to be worried,” Madame Maxime said with a bit of scorn. “Ze point is to see ‘ow ze champions do under pressure.”

“This isn’t pressure,” Hermione said. “You’re dealing with a boy who has post traumatic stress disorder after being kidnapped by two exceptionally violent people. The three of us disappearing without explanation is definitely going to cause him to panic. You would be putting him at an exceptional disadvantage.”

“Surely he’s seen a mind-healer,” Bagman said.

Hermione hesitated. “He has chosen to receive alternative treatment,” she said, delicately.

“That is not our problem,” Karkaroff said.

“It’s his choice if he wants someone else poking around in his head or not,” Harry defended, though he did wish Ron could get better treatment. He felt guilty knowing that Ron wasn’t seeing a mind healer because he was trying to protect Harry’s secrets. “It also doesn’t matter, the fact remains that hiding us from him the night before the task is going to unfairly sabotage his chances, and unless I’m missing something, it’s still entirely possible that a mistake down there could easily lead to one of the champions drowning, so if you think I’m going to stand for that then you can-”

he was cut off when Ginny elbowed him in the side.

“Perhaps if he is so delicate we can just memory charm the both of you so you can be on your way to tuck him into bed,” Karkaroff said snidely.

Harry all but snarled as his hand dove for his wand in his pocket. He was brought up short by the Headmaster holding up his hand to forestall him. “Perhaps another solution can be found,” he said. “Mr. Weasley will not have cause to worry over the three of you if he is the one who is isolated tonight.”

Bagman shook her head. “We couldn’t just segregate one champion,” he said. “All of them would have to be pulled for the evening.”

“Well the entire purpose of this tournament is to foster international relations,” Ms. Cooper said. “How about the champions have a sleepover, it would be good for them all to interact with one another.”

“Miss Delacour is a young lady,” Bagman said, looking a bit upset.

“Chaperoned,” Ms. Cooper said. “Of course. Professor McGonagall, I would hate to impose.”

“I will see to it,” Professor McGonagall said.
“If it means being done with zis nonsense, zen I agree,” Madame Maxime said, though she had a very disapproving look to her.

“What do you say?” Bagman asked, looking at Karkaroff, he looked almost imploring.

Karkaroff scoffed and rolled his eyes. “Since we must coddle these Hogwarts students, it seems I have little choice.”

“Then it’s settled,” Bagman said, though he looked disappointed. “Now if you’ll excuse us, Diane and I will just escort our hostages to the lake.”

They took a moment to collect everyone, Bagman acting, very charming towards the younger girl, as though she were one of his old fans. When they left, it seemed everyone turned to look at Harry and Hermione. Harry felt very self conscious as he stared back defiantly towards the two foreign school heads.

“Mr. Potter, Miss Granger, you can wait in here while we collect the champions,” the Headmaster said.

“Will you tell him that we’re alright?” Hermione asked.

“Of course,” the Headmaster said.

Before long they were left alone in the Headmaster’s office. Harry glanced around at the sleeping portraits of all of the previous school heads.

“Well this sucks,” Harry said.

“It could be worse,” Hermione said, though she looked worried.

Harry took a deep breath. Everything was out of their hands now. They couldn’t go over spells with Ron, neither of them could stay up with him to make sure he got sleep. At this point, all they would be were spectators. “You got him ready,” he said. “That’s enough.”

“We all did,” Hermione said. “I’m just worried he’s going to have an attack when he’s down there.”

“I still think I should have gone,” Harry said.

“You’re acting like he doesn’t care about you as much as he cares about me and Ginny,” Hermione said.

“Yeah, well, you’re his girlfriend, and Ginny’s his sister,” Harry said.

“You’re his best friend,” Hermione said. “He worries about you a lot.”

“He shouldn’t worry about me,” Harry said, the prophesy hanging over his head.

“That’s quite something, coming from you,” Hermione said.

Harry huffed and thought of a world without Voldemort or his Death Eaters where he didn’t have to worry about his friends getting caught up in the madness of his life. He looked around the room. “Want to play ‘guess what that is’?” he asked Hermione, gesturing to the plethora of strange magical devices littered around the room.

Hermione seemed to perk up. “No touching,” she said sternly as she walked over to a spindly
device that seemed to not be entirely corporeal.

Waking up in the Transfiguration classroom was very surreal. For a moment, Ron forgot that his night had been hijacked by Professor McGonagall so that ‘no undue influence could befall any of the champions.’ As anxious as he had been about the prospect of a sleepover with the older students, it had actually gone well. Diggory proved himself to be exceptionally personable and had made sure everyone had gotten on well enough. They had talked about their home countries and their schools. Diggory had wound up goading Ron into talking about some of his adventures at school and, with a couple of glances at Professor McGonagall, Ron had expounded to the lot of them on tales of rule breaking that he was pretty sure he couldn’t get in trouble for anymore.

They chatted amicably while they ate breakfast, which had been provided for them in the room. Ron didn’t actually eat very much, finding himself the unfortunate new owner of a nervous stomach. Ron was a bit perturbed that he wasn’t being allowed to see his friends and dearly hoped that he would be able to see them before the event started. Just in case; he didn’t want his last conversation with them to be something ordinary. He definitely wouldn’t mind getting a kiss good luck from Hermione.

He didn’t really think that he would die in the lake. Or rather, he didn’t think it was more likely than unlikely. He thought he had decent odds. The possibility of not coming back though had been at the back of his mind since he had discovered that he would have to venture deep down to the bottom of the lake. Not for the first time he wondered what it was like to drown to death. It wasn’t exactly difficult to imagine, since he’d had more than a few accidents while training over the past weeks. The biggest difference now was that he wasn’t going to have anyone there to help him if something went wrong during the task.

He tried to think of other things, but more and more as they made their way out to the lake, the thought of being cold and alone in the dark depths of the lake as painfully cold water poured down his throat plagued his mind as he and the rest of the champions made their way to the shore. Whatever the other champions were thinking, they were silent too. Once there though, his eyes were drawn away from the murky waters to the crowd gathering to watch the spectacle.

It only took him a moment to spot the small gathering of redheads. There was mum and dad, Percy too, and next to them were Harry and Hermione. He waved at them, summoning as much enthusiasm as he could. His mum would want to see him looking confident. They all waved back. Mum looked worried. He hoped that wherever the twins and Ginny were that they’d get there soon. He wanted to at least see them before the start.

The champions were all gathered together at the shore of the lake where the three headmasters and the ministry big shots were clustered. He got an oddly guilty look from Ludo Bagman and wondered if the man thought there was no way that Ron was going to survive. Percy’s boss smiled at him and he thought he got a disdainful look from the former Death Eater. A hand on his shoulder had him turning around to face a solemn looking Professor McGonagall.

“I’ll do Gryffindor proud, Professor,” Ron said.

“You already have,” Professor McGonagall said. “All you need to do today is to come back.”

Ron grinned, “Why professor, I still plan on coming back in first place.” There was a bit more
bravado there than was warranted, he thought, but this was definitely the time to fake it till he made it.

“See that you do,” Professor McGonagall said, showing a hint of a smile.

From behind him, Ludo Bagman cleared his throat. “Time to get started, I dare say,” he said.

Everyone gathered around.

Percy’s boss took up the introduction. “I hope this doesn’t come as a surprise to any of you, but your task is to go to the bottom of this lake and find a certain something that has been taken from each of you. I dare say, you will know it when you see it. To accomplish this task, you may use any item that you have brought with you today, or that you can transfigure, conjure, or summon, assuming that you do so have the right to summon it. You have one hour to complete this task, so it will be necessary to be able to breathe under water for an extended period of time. Another thing to keep in mind is the cold. If you do not have a means of dealing with the frigid waters, you will quickly find yourself lacking the dexterity to use your wand and you will most likely lose consciousness long before you complete the task.”

“Now,” she continued. “There are a multitude of magical creatures in the lake that may attempt to waylay you. This is a very dangerous task and you may take whatever measures necessary to protect yourself. However, take note that the merfolk who inhabit this lake will also be participating in this task. They will not attack you, so any attack on them will be a violation of the 1873 Statute for Sentient Creature Protection. Outside of obeying common law, there are no other rules. Mr. Bagman will now explain how you will be judged.”

“Yes,” Ludo Bagman said with a grin. “Here is where Magical Games and Sports comes in. You will be graded based on these factors weighted in this order: speed and efficiency, display of magical proficiency, and your demonstrated knowledge of the magical creatures that will most likely attack you. There is also room in there to judge for sportsmanship, bravery, and flashiness, so do be sure to put on a show. Now, speaking of a show, you may be wondering how we’ll be keeping tabs on you while you’re below the dark depths of the lake.”

Ludo Bagman pulled a sleek dart like object, the size of his hand, out of his robes. “This is a scrying focus. Each one of you will be followed by one of these guys through the water. They connect to four scrying screens that you can see over there in front of our audience and the judges table. It would be most unfortunate if any stray spells knocked your focus out of commission. We want you to get all of the points you deserve. Any questions?”

“Will there be tea when we come back?” Ron asked.

“You may drink tea until you burst upon your return,” Dumbledore said.

“Anything else?” Madame Maxime asked.

The four of them shook their heads.

“Then we’ll be off,” Ludo Bagman said. “We will start as soon as we’re settled at the judges table. You can take the time until then to prepare anything you want, though you may not get into the water until the event starts.”

That was good, Ron thought as the judges walked away. Transfiguration took him forever and if he could get a bit of a head start, that would be for the best.

“Accio wooden board,” Ron hollered.
“And here’s a picture from right before the ball,” Hermione said, handing another picture to Mrs. Weasley.

“Oh, look at them Arthur,” Mrs. Weasley said, showing the picture to her husband. “Our baby looks so grown up. And you look lovely dear. I don’t suppose you have any pictures of you two dancing?”

“Oh,” Hermione said a bit flushed. “They weren’t any good.”

“And where’s Harry?” Mrs. Weasley asked. “I’m sure you looked very smart in your dress robes, dear.”

“No pictures,” Harry said, not at all sorry to be lacking any reminders of that awkward night. “Um, I guess my dad has some of the time we went back down to the Chamber of Secrets together.”

“Why on Earth would you go there?” Mrs. Weasley asked, sounding strangled.

“Potions ingredients,” Harry said, a bit shamefaced. The point had been to help Mrs. Weasley calm down, not to bring up places her children had almost died. She was resigned enough about Ron participating in the second task, she had been fairly upset to find out that Ginny would also be below the surface of the lake.

“They’re doing something,” Hermione said.

Down below on the lake shore, Ron and the other champions looked like they were getting ready to begin. Ron had summoned his plank of wood and had started transfiguring it. Meanwhile the four large blank screens had lit up, each one focused on one of the champions. The perspectives all looked like something was looking up at them from the water.

“What’s he doing?” Mrs. Weasley asked.

“He’ll need that for the task,” Harry said.

“Everything’s planned out,” Hermione said. “You really don’t need to worry. Ron will do very well.”

“Well he’s going to catch his death of cold if he has to go into that lake,” Mrs. Weasley said.

“Well I’ve got my money on the kappas,” said Fred.

“Oh, stop it,” Mrs. Weasley said.

“He’s going to be fine, mum,” George said. “We made sure of it.”

“Spent more time in that lake than I have on my homework,” Fred added.

Suddenly, Bagman’s booming voice swept over the crowd. “Ladies and Gentlemen,” he cried out. “Are you ready to see a most excellent show of bravery and talent?”

There was a general roar from the crowd. Harry saw Mrs. Weasley clutch her husband’s hand and
he wondered if Hermione would use his arm like a squeeze toy again this time.

“Well here we are again, ready to watch as the finest students in Europe compete to bring glory and fame to their respective schools. To our listeners at home, I will be your eyes and ears today. Already during this tournament we have seen spectacular performances from all of our champions. Today, our champions will be venturing to the bottom of Hogwarts’ lake to find something near and dear to them that has been taken. Our champions will have to face the cold and the dark while they dive deep underwater to face off against a host of magical creatures that haunt these murky depths.

“And now, without any more from me, I hereby start the second task of the Triwizard Tournament.” A loud chime went off. “Yes, I can see already, two of our champions have already applied bubblehead charms. Mr. Diggory and Miss Delacour won’t have any trouble breathing underwater. Oh, and Mr. Diggory has dived in already. I didn’t see him apply any heating charms, so let’s hope he’s already done what he needed to to keep warm. Miss Delacour is charming her robes, time will tell if she’s done her research. Oh, now that’s not the look that will get you on the cover of Quidditch Weekly, Mr. Krum. Our Durmstrang champion has dived in after partially transfiguring himself. We have a shark headed champion everyone. And now Miss Delacour is in the water also. Our only champion still on the shore is Hogwarts second champion, Mr. Weasley. He has been transfiguring what appears to be a plank of wood since the beginning and whatever he’s making, I think he’s almost done. Oh, yes, he’s getting into the water now. Our other champions dived in but Mr. Weasley is wading out with what appears to be some manner of floatation board. The objective is indeed to not float; I do hope he understood the instructions properly.” He sounded a bit put off.

“What’s he doing?” Mrs. Weasley asked.

“He’s going to take a shortcut,” Hermione said. “It was his idea too, most of the creatures down there won’t go too near the surface.”

“We were pretty sure he was going to have to go somewhere near the center of the lake,” George said.

“So he’ll go to the center above water and then dive down,” said Fred.

“There’s really no need to dive under right at the shore,” Hermione said.

Ron was up to his naval in the water and looking distinctly cold. He cast his warming charm though and resolutely started walking out into the water. A few more steps in and he pushed himself forwards and started resting his torso against what was essentially a boogie board. With one arm wrapped around it, he pointed his wand to the opposite shore and cast a tether charm. A quick jab of his wand towards the board linked the board to the far shore and one more gesture contracted the tether, thereby pulling the board and Ron across the water.

“Well whatever our youngest champion is doing, he seems to have a plan,” Bagman said. “Oh look, it seems Mr. Diggory has run into a Nagala, which is quite unlucky, considering that there is only one of them, we believe, in the entirety of this lake.”

Harry watched the screen where Cedric had been grabbed from behind by the oddly humanoid serpentine creature which quickly wrapped him up. There were gasps from the crowd. Out on the surface, Harry could see Ron staring back towards the screens. He wondered if Ron could make out what was happening from the other side. Hermione gasped as one of the Nagala’s snakelike appendages wrapped around Cedric’s chest.
It was over a moment later. Cedric’s wand arm was just barely mobile enough for him to tap his wand to the lake creature’s skin. The Nagala started thrashing and pushed Cedric away. Cedric turned towards it, brandishing his wand. A rather large blasting hex sent the creature away. Bagman was reporting all of it excitedly from the judges’ booth.

The action over, Ron turned his head back towards where he was going. The spell he was using wasn’t terribly quick, but it was faster than swimming. Ron would likely get to the bottom of the lake before anyone else did, Harry hoped. According to ‘Hogwarts, a History,’ Hermione had told them, the lake was roughly five kilometers across and ninety meters deep, and even the authority on all things Hogwarts wasn’t confident that it knew each and every magical creature that inhabited it. Ron was actually a pretty good swimmer, but it was probably for the best that he wasn’t going to be tiring himself out swimming all the way.

“And would you look at that Ladies and Gentlemen, that Hinkypunk took one look at Victor Krum and left in the opposite direction. We’ll just have to see if our shark headed champion gets any action today. This may be why Mr. Krum is the only one who has felt he could get away with lighting his wand under water; he doesn’t care what sees him.”

Suddenly there was a flash of light in the water not far from where Ron was, and clearly drawing his attention.

“Well it seems our champions can’t get a reprieve,” Bagman said excitedly. "Miss Delacour has been set upon by a grindylow. Looks like she took care of that one. Let’s hope she remembers that they travel in pods.”

Ron was back to looking at the screens behind him as the charm pulled him towards the center of the lake. Another two grindylows snuck up from behind Fleur and grabbed her by the hair and wrists. A third grabbed one of her legs.

“Things are not looking good for our Beauxbatons champion,” Bagman said. “Though she’s lucky they cannot pierce her bubblehead charm or else that one would likely be biting her neck instead of her shoulder.”

Fleur Delacour was trying to get her wand pointed at any of the grindylows but she didn’t have any range of movement, restrained as she was. She was casting as many spells as she could that didn’t require wand movement, trying to chase off the creatures that had grabbed her. The flashes of light from her spell filtered up through the water and were visible on the surface.

“What’s he doing?” Fred asked.

Ron had redirected his spell, he was heading straight for her.

Bagman was almost ecstatic in his description of the events. There was a small roar from the crowd as everyone watched the events unfold. Ron stopped above where everything was happening and cast the bubblehead charm on himself. He let go of his board and dove down into the water.

It was hard to tell but, by how long it took, Harry thought they were ten meters down below the surface. It was over pretty soon after Ron arrived. The grindylows weren’t in a position to defend themselves and once Ron dispatched the two that had grabbed Fleur Delacour’s wrists she blasted off the one that was on her leg. There was a brief moment where the two champions just looked at each other.

Harry was worried though, not because of the threat of another attack, but rather for how Ron
looked. The subtle signs that Harry was used to looking for were there. The ones that said that Ron was getting closer to a panic. He seemed to steel himself though, taking a big breath in and out.

Ron flashed the thumbs up with a questioning look on his face. Delacour took a moment to assess herself, poking at the bite marks that were bleeding out into the water in a cloudy red. She pulled a couple of square patches out of her robes and slapped them on her shoulders before using a charm to sever a strip from the hem of her robes which she used to quickly bind her leg. She flashed Ron the thumbs up. Ron nodded and pointed his wand downwards. Casting the propulsion spell a few times he made his way back up to the surface where he shook himself off a bit. Ron had told Harry that using the propulsion charm under water was very disjointing, the high speed of the charm fighting proportionately with the resistance of the water. He couldn’t go nearly as far as he could on dry land. He canceled the bubblehead charm and summoned his board back to him.

Gripping the board and floating on the surface, Ron took a moment to close his eyes and rest his head forward. Harry thought he might be holding his breath for a bit. Moments later, he was under way again.

Bagman was going on about sportsmanship and Gryffindors, sounding fairly disbelieving of what had just happened. There was a lot of cheering from the assembled students. Harry yelled out his adulations with Hermione and the Weasley’s while he eyed the distance to the center of the lake and how much time Ron had before he would go down below again.

“Not a dull moment here, ladies and gentlemen, not a dull moment,” Bagman said.

Of course, after that there was just a bunch of watching the four champions moving through the water. Bagman filled the time with commentary on the magical creatures in the lake and talking about some facts about the different champions.

Eventually, Ron got to the approximate center of the lake and he brought himself to a stop. The Weasley’s senior seemed to draw in a collective breath that they held as Ron got ready to dive below. Ron cast another bubblehead charm on himself. Flipping himself around in the water, he placed his feet up on the board he’d been floating on and performed a charm on both of his shoes. Pulling himself off of his board he quickly slipped under the water and started to sink like a stone.

“Weight charm on his shoes,” Hermione said. “The sooner he gets there the sooner he can come back.”

It would be for the best. Ron had never consistently gotten the bubblehead charm to last for very long.

The darkness was all encroaching as Ron sunk down through the water. The deeper he went there was a mounting pressure all around him. His descent took him into a forest of kelp, rising from the lakebed. It drowned out the light, and left him certain that something was hiding and waiting for him. He wanted to light his wand but he knew that would only draw unwanted attention. He kept thinking something in the darkness was moving, and the thought that something was swimming around him, following him, watching him started to cloud his mind. He started to breathe in and out very deliberately. He wanted to calm down, but how could he? He needed to be alert. The urge to just go back up was strong. It suddenly seemed so stupid, everything he was doing. He didn’t need
to win. He didn’t need to get back whatever stupid thing had been taken. They could keep his broom if they wanted. What was he even doing deep down below? He was just waiting for something to grab him, for a hand to cover his mouth, and even though he knew it was ridiculous, he kept waiting to hear Greyback’s gruff chuckle before he cast the cruciatus curse, or for Steven to wrap his hands around his neck, or something worse.

His right hand, gripping his wand tight, was starting to hurt and his left was tugging at his collar. He started to turn around, again and again, looking for whatever was behind him, certain that something was there. He was so close to a panic and he had no idea what it was that was keeping him from just going back. He could do it. It would only take a moment; cancel the spells on his shoes, start his ascent.

It had only been moments. He knew that, really. With his weighted shoes, he knew it would take less than a minute to get to the bottom of the lake, but it felt like he had left the sky behind so long ago. He felt like he was looking for something. Not for the stupid task. He knew what he was looking for. He was looking for Hermione. There was some part of him that felt certain that she was in trouble. That he had to protect her, that she was down there with him. He knew she was with Harry and his parents and everyone else, but feelings were so much more powerful than knowledge. He kept sinking down.

When he saw the glow off to his side, he let himself focus on it. He hadn’t been too far off of his mark. His feet touched the bottom of the lake soon after and he hastily bent down to remove the charm on his shoes. No need to let them get stuck in the muck. He turned towards the glow and saw off in the distance, about thirty meters ahead of him, was something or other on the lakebed. He checked over his shoulder again, doing a full three-sixty before he looked back to what was most likely the merfolk village that he was supposed to be looking for. He started swimming.

As horrible a thought as it was, he wished that Harry was there with him. It felt wrong to be off doing something dangerous without Harry and Hermione with him to make sure he didn’t bollocks it up. He focused on breathing in and out as he swam, regularly stopping to look behind him, always certain that some monster would be there. He was also regularly feeling the bubble around his head as if he needed to check to make sure it was still there. Of course, he couldn’t be sure how much longer it would be there. The feeling that he wasn’t getting enough air to breath was pervasive and he thought that things had been so much better when the twins had been with him in the water. He tried to focus on the glow ahead of him, imagining that it was the sun and that he was really approaching the surface.

When he got to the merfolk village it was almost surreal. It looked cheery. It looked like an actual village. There were homes, there were gardens of sorts, there was even a hinkypunk chained up in someone’s yard like it was a pet dog. Of course there were also the merfolk. He kept reminding himself that they weren’t there to attack him. He kept reminding himself that probably whatever other creatures lived in the lake, they probably knew better than to get too close to the village. He was probably safest here than anywhere else in the lake, but swimming into the village felt like walking into a trap and he felt shaky and he could feel his heart thudding in his chest as he made his way deeper and deeper into the village.

No one tried to stop him. Every one of them that he could see, though, were staring at him. Some waved, some smiled, and some looked at him as though he was as odd looking to them as they were to him. He wished he were invisible. He kept his distance and kept moving forward. Some part of him knew to keep swimming to the center of the village.

Disbelief was the first thing that occurred when he got to what amounted to a town square. Abject denial that what he was seeing was real. He was so certain that it was all a figment of his
imagination in the creepy depths of the lake that for a moment he was calm when he saw his sister floating, lifeless, and tied to a post surrounded by three others in similar states. That was replaced by rage a moment later.

He gave an inarticulate cry and started swimming forward furiously, looking around for anyone who might try to stop him. The merfolk just watched. Coming up on his sister, he stopped, grasping her by the shoulders, feeling the reality of her being, and trying to shake her awake. She just hung there, held in place only by a rope around her middle. He cleared the floating tendrils of her hair away from her face, smoothing it back, looking for some sign of life. He tried to put his fingers against her throat, looking for a pulse, but he had no idea what he was doing. He needed the denial back. He needed this to all be unreal, because for all intents and purposes he was looking at his sisters corpse and he didn’t know what to do.

He was shaking with quiet tears as he searched for any sign of life. She clearly wasn’t breathing, there was nothing for her to breath, no bubblehead charm, no gills. She was dead, he knew, and a contracting pit of despair coiled in his gut as a mournful keening noise made it’s way from his throat.

While being held captive, his biggest fear every day was that he would watch his best friend die. That he would live long enough to fail her and see her lifeless body as he waited to die next to her. Floating there staring at his sister’s lifeless body, her pale face, and limp limbs he was so certain that it was over. He stopped functioning. He felt locked away in his own hell. Memories of his time in captivity assailing him, memories of his dark fantasies as he had waited for the full moon and the ripping of flesh.

He couldn’t imagine returning to the surface to face his family. He couldn’t imagine going home without her. The coldness of reality seeped into his spirit and he lost sense of time as he hung there, staring at Ginny, and feeling utterly lost.

He was broken out of it by a rough shake of his shoulder. He turned, numb, not caring what he would face. It was Cedric Diggory, he had Cho Chang in his arms. Diggory pantomimed sleep and pointed to Ginny. Ron’s head swung back and forth between looking at Diggory and Ginny. This was the second task of the Tri-Wizard Tournament. He was at school. Ginny wasn’t dead. It was just some stupid theatrics for a stupid competition, and he had been freaking out for the entire school to watch. Ginny was alright. Ginny was alright. Ginny was alright. He told himself over and over.

He found some semblance in himself to nod his head for Diggory’s sake. He swam around to untie Ginny. His fingers were useless and he wound up just using a severing charm. He watched Cedric start his ascent, not really caring that the older boy was going to beat him.

He cast a glance at the two people still tied up. He hadn’t even really looked at them when he’d gotten there. All he had seen was Ginny. There was an older girl who was probably there for Krum and a girl who looked a few years younger than a first year and who was definitely related to Delacour. It was just a game, he reminded himself. He started swimming up, kicking with his legs as he held on tight to Ginny.

It was as he was leaving the twilight of the luminescent dome that seemed to envelope the village that he noticed a change. Later he would be certain that a magical trigger had gone off, but in the moment all he knew was that some sort of pulse went out through the water from where the two of them were, and also, Ginny suddenly felt like she weighed a ton. Suddenly, they weren’t slowly making their ascent, they were sinking back down. He started kicking harder but he knew it wasn’t going to do any good.
He pointed his wand downward and cast the propulsion charm, Ginny becoming a great weight in his free arm as the water dragged at them. It didn’t feel like they’d really gone far at all. He started casting the propulsion charm over and over, the arm carrying Ginny quickly starting to ache. He looked up, unable to see the light from above.

They kept sinking, why were they sinking? Why had Ginny become so heavy? Of course, it was obvious. How had Ron sunk to the bottom of the lake? He had used a weight charm. He cast the counter on Ginny and suddenly she was just floating there with him. He took a big sigh of relief. He let the two of them just float for a moment as he gathered himself. The panic was threatening to return. He needed to get out of there, but he had just exhausted himself fighting a useless battle. He took a few deep breaths. That was when the Nagala attacked, grabbing Ginny with it’s snake like arms and trying to pull her out of his grasp.

Ron yelled, holding on tight. One of it’s limbs shot out and struck him in the gut and he was very glad he hadn’t had much of an appetite for breakfast because there wasn’t anything to come up as he reeled from the blow. Ginny left his grasp. It was only a moment, because in the next he had scrambled forward and grabbed on with one hand while he sent a slashing hex at the Nagala. It flinched as a long wound appeared on it’s torso. That was when the hinkypunk grabbed the hood of his robes. It pulled back and for a moment his collar pulled at his neck. He struggled to keep a hold on Ginny as he turned to blast the hinkypunk away. Then he saw four grindylows swimming towards them and he knew he was in trouble.

Ron pulled himself close to Ginny and also the Nagala and jabbed his wand into the long wound he had made. Nagala skin was resistant to some spells, so he hoped to bypass that, though he had to hope that the Nagala was humanoid enough to count for this spell. “Petrificus Totalus,” he incanted. The Nagala suddenly went ramrod straight and Ron pointed his wand down, ready to propel them away when he was grabbed by one of the grindylows that immediately started biting his wand arm. He had to let go of Ginny to wrench it’s hand off of him and kick it away. Another one grabbed Ginny and he snatched her back, sending a blasting hex at the little monster. Even as he blasted a second one away, he could see a kappa approaching and something else that he didn’t even recognize.

It was then that Ron realized that he was surrounded and veritably screwed. He cast the propulsion spell, darting through the water, but they easily followed, gliding through the water like he couldn’t. One of the kappas grabbed on to Ginny and bit into her leg. She didn’t even flinch. Ron snarled and kicked at it, pulling Ginny away so he could blast it, wishing that he knew some nasty curse that would really teach it to stay away from his sister. More hands grabbed him, more hands grabbed Ginny. Something bit his shoulder. He screamed in frustration and fear. He knew he was going to watch Ginny die. He knew he couldn’t save her. He held her close as he twisted and turned and tried to blast everything away, but they just kept coming. He was constantly moving, turning his head every which way to find the most immediate threat. There were more now, like everything in the lake had decided to come after them.

He couldn’t protect Ginny, not when she was dead weight, not when he had to keep one arm around her. He blasted another hinkypunk, and kicked at something that was reaching for Ginny and reached into his robes even as the unknown lake creature tore into his leg. He let himself scream. He pulled out the gillyweed. He awkwardly forced Ginny’s mouth open and shoved the mass inside.

“Enervate,” he cast. Ginny’s eyes flew open and she immediately started thrashing. With the arm he was keeping around her, he held his hand over her mouth as he returned to blasting the damned monsters that were swarming them, struggling to keep Ginny from breaking free and getting away from him or spitting out the gillyweed. Eventually she stopped thrashing about and he chanced a
glance at her in between hexes. She had gills. He gave her perhaps the only smile he had made since the task had started. He let go of her and desperately hoped she had her wand, or that she’d have anything to cast without being able to speak. At the very least, he knew that she could throw a punch.

Ron was very surprised when a flash of red took out two grindylows, which started bleeding out instantly. He didn’t question it. His free hand grasped the back of her robes and he turned his back to her back and just did his best to keep everything on his side at bay. He was definitely feeling the exhaustion starting to set in, both magical and physical. His chest burned as he struggled to breath fast enough to keep up. He knew that the red tint to the water was at least partly his own blood. He knew he couldn’t last too much longer. He desperately wished Hermione were there with them, she’d know just what spell to use. Harry would know just what to do. He tried not to despair when off in the distance, he saw more dark shapes approaching.

Ron got no warning before the bubblehead charm wore of. One minute he was raggedly drawing in air, the next he was choking on water. It was only a moment and then he felt something constrict in his throat and then, as much as his chest spasmed, it seemed nothing could get in or out of his lungs. He started to flail, grasping uselessly at his throat with one hand while the other kept a desperate hold on Ginny. Hands started grasping him and something bit into his arm. He couldn’t even scream now. The impulse to breath was mounting, it screamed in his chest and in his head. It overrode the need to fight whatever had grabbed him and in the last moments before his vision started darkening around the edges and his wild thrashing slowed, whatever had blocked up his throat relaxed and water poured in.

As horrifying as it was, she felt so free, suspended in the water, her wand in her hand, as she cast another concussive hex at the Helioshark that had tried to dart up on her from below. She hadn’t used magic this freely in a long time, she never had. There always had to be restraint. The spells that always came to mind were inappropriate for a witch her age. They were horrifying to the girl that was still her. Down here though, there was no choice but to fight.

The hand gripping the back of her robes, the hand keeping them together went slack, and she blasted another Hinkypunk before turning around to look at her brother. The bubble of air around his head was gone.

‘Of course he’d screwed it up.’ The uncharitable thought was hers, though it came from someone else, thought in another voice, but it was just her in her own head these days, so it was her thought. She grabbed Ron’s sleeve, and pulled him closer so she could more accurately aim at the Grindylow that was going for his now unprotected neck. The part of her that was furious at this creature, this creature that was trying to take from her what was hers, cast the Curse of Living Rot even as another part of her wanted to throw up as she held onto Ron and watched the creature start to decay and slough, even as it tried to swim away.

She needed to get Ron to the surface. He didn’t have much time at all. There was an easy solution, but she couldn’t do anything while she was dealing with these creatures. It would be easier if she could speak. As unchained as she was down here, she had limited options. Green flames shot out of her wand, a spell she’d never even heard of or seen, creating a lash that whipped out and struck two Kappas sending them reeling but not away. A thought occurred to her that she knew exactly what a Kappa looked like if you skinned it, even though she had never actually seen such a thing herself. ‘Not now Tom,’ she said to the voice that was no longer there. It was just her
in her own head these days, and she reminded herself that that wasn’t anything to feel lonely about. She had to deal with the problem at hand.

Nothing made sense; all of these creatures should have given up by now. They shouldn’t have been swarming like this. Only the Grindylows hunted cooperatively. More were coming, she could see them in the distance. It was like everything in the lake was homing in on the two of them.

Suddenly, there was another person in the water with her, casting blasting hexes at the creatures. There was Fleur Delacour, somehow still looking pretty as you please, holding an unconscious girl in one arm as she took aim, keeping her distance from the two red heads who were obviously the focus of the frenzy. Ginny turned her back to the older girl and focused her attention on the creatures in front of her.

A Hinkypunk reached out to grab her, but suddenly, out of nowhere a monstrous shark headed man, which was most likely Viktor Krum, barreled into it, gnashing at it with rows of razor sharp teeth. Seeing a momentary lapse in the swarm, Ginny pointed her wand towards Ron and focused her will into a powerful banishing charm. They were being watched, she knew that, so she would just have to have faith that someone could get him at the surface. Ron’s body shot upwards. *Ron* shot upwards, she reminded herself, he wasn’t dead. ‘You could bring him back if he were, the secrets are out there,’ she thought. ‘No I couldn’t, Tom,’ she thought to the voice that was her own.

She watched expectantly, ready to take out anything that tried to follow, but nothing did. Everything seemed to be focused on her, which was good. She had some time to kill with these gillls.

Everything felt dampened when he woke up. His vision was blurry, everything sounded far off, and his body even felt like nothing was actually working. This feeling lasted for only the briefest of moments before an intense pain started in his chest and Ron’s mouth was forced open as way too much lake water was expelled from his chest. He started coughing, great hacking chest spasms that tore at his burning throat. He tried to curl over but hands held him down. Panic flared and a yell mixed into the coughing and he tried to wrench himself free.

“Ronnie, it’s okay baby, I’m right here, you’re all right.”

He was still struggling, still coughing but he managed to croak out a “Mum?”

“It’s all right,” Mum said, and the hands holding him left and he found himself looking up at his mother. She’d been crying. What the fuck had happened.

“Ginny?” he gasped out.

Mum frowned and looked over her shoulder.

“She’s kicking ass,” one of the twins erupted besides him.

“They’re probably going to make her the champion now,” the other one said.

“Gotta get her,” Ron slurred out as he tried to roll over to his side so he could push himself up.
Unfortunately, his limbs were mostly useless.

“Dumbledore went down there,” Hermione said, and Ron was suddenly reminded of the great need to hug her close.

“Mione,” he said. It sounded like a wine, even to his own ears. One arm trying to uselessly reach out.

Hermione’s hand grabbed his.

“I thought he’d taken you again,” he mumbled out.

“I’m fine,” Hermione said. “I’m right here.”

“Make way,” he heard, called out.

“Madam Pomfrey’s back,” Hermione said. “You’ve got potions.”

Ron moaned and groaned through the ordeal. He threw up the first one, along with a good deal of lake water that he didn’t remember swallowing. He really wished Hermione hadn’t seen that. He held down take two and they really did make him feel better. He stood up with a bit of help when Madam Pomfrey was done with the potions. Mum held on to him as though she was worried he was going to disappear while Madam Pomfrey started taking care of a number of bites and scratches that had been temporarily sealed. There were a couple of actual chunks of flesh missing from his arm and his leg. His dad and Percy were hovering nervously by the shore, keeping an eye out on the lake with the occasional glance back towards Ron.

“What’s Harry doing?” Ron asked.

“Waiting for Ginny,” Fred commented.

Harry was on his broom, flying a pattern over the center of the lake.

“Dumbledore’s down there?” Ron asked.

“Yes,” said George.

Ron nodded. He looked over at the screens. Two of them were blank. One of them was following Delacour and the other was following Krum with his grotesque shark head. They both looked like they were swimming to the surface. He wished one of those doohickeys were following Ginny.

“Kicking ass you said?” Ron asked.

“She’s been holding out on us,” said George.

“And Miss Delacour has reached the surface,” Ludo Bagman said, sounding much less enthusiastic than when Ron had last heard him.

“Diggory came back alright?” Ron asked.

“He tried to go back when he saw what was going on, but they were stopping people from going to the shore at that point. Harry had his broom of course,” Hermione said. “He pulled you out when you got to the surface. I’m pretty sure he took one of his potions.”

“Oh great, so he’s going to fall off his broom and drown in the lake any moment now,” Ron said.
“He has time,” Hermione said.

“How did I get to the surface?” Ron asked.

“Gin-Gin banished you,” George said.

“From the family, mind you,” Fred added.

“Viktor Krum and Fleur Delacour were helping at that point,” Hermione said.

“Bagman couldn’t believe it,” George said.

“There’s Krum,” Fred commented, quickly echoed by Ludo Bagman.

They all kept watch on the lake, waiting for Ginny, until suddenly there she was, rising out of the water next to Dumbledore. Ron let out a big sigh, feeling a lot of tension leaving him then. Dumbledore of course was one for theatrics and some fancy spell had him and Ginny walking back from the center of the lake on top of the water. Ginny had what looked like a bubble of water floating around her neck, covering her gills.

“Who’s got a camera?” Fred asked. “This one’s going on the icebox. Ginny’s got gills.”

“You leave your sister be when she comes back,” mum said.

“Relax mum, we’ll let her be,” said George.

“Yeah, apparently she can kick our asses,” Fred commented.

Harry landed next to them.

“You all right?” Harry asked, looking at Ron a bit wide eyed and clearly searching for some sign that Ron was on death’s door.

Ron had no idea how to answer that. “Ask me again in a few minutes?”

“You know, you did really well down there,” Harry said. “Even though everything got messed up, you did really well.”

“Did the camera get a good angle of me having a break down down there?” Ron muttered.

“It got a good angle of you fighting a ton of lake monsters all at once,” Harry said.

“It balances out,” George said.

Madam Pomfrey tried to get him to go over to the healers tent that had been set up behind the stands, but Ron wasn’t going anywhere until Ginny was back on dry land.

Fleur got back to shore first, and there was an older witch and wizard there to hug her and the younger girl she had had to rescue.

“Don’t go anywhere,” Madame Pomfrey said, slapping a salve onto one of the bites on his arm. “You’re stable enough, but I’ll have you back in the hospital wing when this is all over to run some tests.” She went off to check over Fleur and her sister.

Viktor Krum came back to shore just a bit later, fully human. An older woman was there to dry him and his rescuee off with a flick of a wand before reaching up to give him a hug. Afterward, it
looked like he was introducing the girl he had rescued to the older woman.

Finally, Ginny made it back with Dumbledore and Ron was finally free of mum’s protective arms as she joined Dad and Percy at the shore to check over Ginny. Ron tried to take a step forward but besides the fact that his legs didn’t really feel up to walking, Hermione was keeping a tight grasp on him and he didn’t think she’d let him disobey his orders to stay put. Ron decided to sit down.

Under the care of Madam Pomfrey, Ginny had her gills vanished and her wounds patched up while Dumbledore went and rejoined the rest of the judges.

“Are you going to be okay?” Ron asked Harry.

“Me?” Harry asked.

“What’d you take?”

“Oh, Hercules Blood,” Harry said, his eyes still blown open wide. “I’m super strong now. You didn’t weigh anything when I was carrying you back here.” He was speaking a bit rapidly.

“How long will it last?” Hermione asked.

“Um, ah, how long has it been?” Harry asked.

“Almost half an hour,” Hermione said.

“How much longer, I guess.”

“So are you going to be okay?” Ron asked.

“Yeah,” Harry said. “I didn’t exactly do much with it. It’s not like I pushed a boulder up a hill or anything, I’ll just be a bit sore when it wears off. This will not be a repeat of the Quidditch World Cup. That sucked.”

“Good,” Ron said.

Finally, Madam Pomfrey was done with Ginny, who came over with Mum, Dad, and Percy while Madam Pomfrey went over to finish taking care of Fleur.

Ginny didn’t say anything, but she squeezed herself between Ron and Harry and threw an arm over his shoulder.

“Well we promised you a show, but I think that was a bit more excitement than we were all expecting,” Ludo Bagman’s booming voice echoed out over the crowd. “We have found ourselves debating just how to score our champions, all things considered.”

Ron found himself not caring at all.

“You okay?” he asked Ginny over the din of Ludo Bagman’s orating, speaking to her for the first time since the day before.

Ginny nodded her head, clutching him tighter. He heard a great cheer that he tuned out.

“You saved my butt down there,” he said. “I’m pretty sure I was supposed to be saving you.”

Ginny shook a bit and Ron realized she was crying.
“Hey,” he said. “It’s okay, I’m alright, you’re alright, everyone’s alright.”

Ginny stayed silent.

“Well, I’m really glad we both came out of that in one piece,” Ron said, feeling awkward having a one sided conversation.

Hermione started patting him on the back. “That’s great, Ron,” she said.

Ron looked around. They must have given his scores.

“Alright, Mister Weasley, off to the hospital wing with you,” Madam Pomfrey said.

Percy was there to give him a hand up, and his dad was there to support him.

Harry started to get up and started groaning. “It’s worn off,” he said. “Okay, potion’s worn off.”

“Are you all right,” Mrs. Weasley asked.

Harry nodded. “Just sore,” he said, standing on uncertain legs.

“Time will take care of that, Mr. Potter,” Madam Pomfrey said.

Ron turned to look at Ginny, who was still sitting on the grass. “You coming Gin?”

Ginny shook her head.

“Right,” Ron said. “Um, mate?” He said, looking at Harry.

“Oh, yeah, um, I think I’ll stay here for now,” Harry said, hobbling over to Ginny and settling down.

A tall and thin man suddenly walked up to them. “Mr. Weasley, Dan Nellis with Witch Weekly, any comments you want to make about the second task?”

“Um,” Ron said, feeling put on the spot. “I’m glad no one died?”

“Great, great,” the reporter said. “Now Mr. Diggory and Mr. Krum both were tasked with retrieving their dates from the Yule Ball during this task while your date stayed on dry land. Any comment about the rumors that you’re secretly seeing the Boy Who Lived?”

Ron felt a bit of a swoop in his stomach when he realized what his answer was going to be.

“That’s really enough,” Mum said. “Ronald needs to go to the hospital wing now. This isn’t the time for your gossip column.”

“It’s okay, Mum,” Ron said. He turned back to the reporter. “Um, I’m very happy to be dating my girlfriend, Hermione, who’s super amazing,” he said. “It’s like, just ‘cause I’m bisexual doesn’t mean I’m going to cheat on her with a bloke. Harry and I are friends. Best friends, but you know, we’re not together. Oh, um, Madam Pomfrey looks a little impatient so I’ll do you a favor and stop her from taking your head off for waylaying a patient.” He started walking with his arm around his Dad’s shoulders to make sure he stayed upright.

“Hey, Mr. Nellis, we’ve got some comments for you,” George said. Standing in the reporters path to make sure he didn’t follow.
“Have you ever thought of doing a piece on entrepreneurship at Hogwarts?” Fred asked. “We’ve got some products you might find interesting.”

Percy ruffled his hair. “Were you planning on coming out to the whole world today?” he asked.

“Spur of the moment thing,” Ron said. “I was actually planning to tell the rest of the family first before I told the whole world about it.”

“Well talk to a prefect if anyone gives you trouble,” Percy said.

“Sure Perce,” Ron said. “I mean, apparently I can just set my little sister on them.”

Percy frowned at that, but didn’t say anything.

“You worried me to death, today,” Mum said.

“Sorry, Mum,” Ron said.

“I was very proud of you,” Mum said.

“Was?” Ron asked.

“Am,” mum said. “You’ve made me so proud. Just be a good son and come home to me at the end of the school year.”

“Well, Mum, now that you mention it, I have been thinking of running away to join the circus,” Ron said.

“Are you going to be a griffin tamer?” Hermione asked.

“Maybe a clown,” Dad said.

“Hey!” Ron said.

So the Weasley boy was queer, Rita Skeeter thought. She could probably get another article out of that. She could twist up the trio’s relationship easily enough. She was tempted to follow the boy and see if he just spontaneously decided to reveal anything else, but Potter and the Weasley girl were staying by the lake shore and articles about Potter sold like belladonna had when Greyback had been on the loose. Plus there was definitely some dark secret behind the girl. Anyone could tell that she had been throwing around curses no third year witch should have known.

Rita carefully got closer to Potter. The tall grass around the lake shore was perfect for her animagus form. She waited in relative silence though as the two teens just sat there. She was rewarded for her patience, though, when the area was finally, for the most part, cleared of all of the students.

“I know your secret,” Weasley said without preamble. “It’s sort of obvious, when you think about it. I guess that’s why no one else has figured it out.”

The Potter boy froze and Rita knew there was some horrible secret behind that reaction. Her antennae twitched as she waited eagerly for whatever would be said next.
“Is that, um, okay?” Potter asked.

“Who am I to judge,” Weasley said.

“You were amazing down there,” Potter said.

“Do you ever feel like there’s two of you in there?” Weasley asked, instead of reacting to the praise.

Potter frowned and shifted around a bit with a wince.

“Sometimes,” Potter said. “Its mostly just flashes. Like vague memories of feelings and stuff…Do you?”

“He’s gone,” Weasley said. “But he left stuff behind.”

Potter paused for a while. “Well, you saved Ron’s life today. You saved your life today. That matters, doesn’t it?”

Weasley shrugged. “How do you not think about it?” she asked.

“Occlumency,” Potter said firmly. “Having people who know and don’t treat me different helps too. That helps with all sorts of things.”

“I feel like I won’t ever be free of him,” Weasley said, and Rita wished dearly the two of them would talk plainly. Were they speaking about possession? The Potter boy seemed to be struggling to find something to say.

“That’s all right,” Potter said. “It’s okay to feel how you feel. Um…” he seemed to be trying to remember something. “Just because you are free of him doesn’t mean you can’t feel the way you do.”

“Do you ever feel like that?” Weasley asked.

Potter shrugged. “Well, I can make things better for myself but I guess I’ll never really be free of it.”

She could sense footsteps approaching. Shit, just spit it out, she mentally urged the two teenagers.

“Is it messed up that…?” Weasley froze up and looked over her shoulder. Damn.

“I hope you two are well,” the damned Headmaster said.

“Oh, yeah, we’re all right, Professor,” Potter said.

“Excellent,” the Headmaster said. “Well then, just know that the faculty will be in the area vanishing the arena should either of you need anything.”

“Oh, thanks, Professor,” Potter said.

“Of course,” the Headmaster said. “Oh, would you look at that. I don’t think that that species of beetle is native to this area.”

Shit. She took flight, only to find herself inexorably drawn backwards. A hand caught her.

“Professor?” Potter asked.
“It’s wonderful, of course, when we have visitors from all over, but we do need to be sure that we protect our local environment from any potentially invasive species. I have an entomologist friend on the continent. I shall have to put this in a stasis jar and remember to send it to her. Do be on the look out for any others.”

“Er, all right Professor,” Potter responded.

“You two enjoy the rest of your day,” the headmaster said as he turned to walk away, and then to Rita, clutching in his fist, he said quietly, “I certainly do hope I remember to send you off. I have had so much on my mind of late, and it would be a shame if you spent the rest of term in a stasis jar.”

Shit.

Chapter End Notes

Sorry this took so long. A lot of time has been going into making cosplay armor for ComicCon and also I’ve started grad school. I hope you enjoyed this extra long chapter, over 40K. I had all these plot ideas, and they were all following the theme of the chapter so I just kept writing. It's funny how some things develop as you're writing. Everything at the end with Ginny was unplanned and written on the fly. It all sort of came from a head cannon I’ve had about her that I’ve never really intended to put in the fic. Shouldn’t be too much more before the end of this fic. While you wait, you might like reading Homesick at Spacecamp, a Klance fic by K0bot on AO3 and To the Bottom of the River by savrenim, a Yurri!!! On Ice fic best summed up by this tagline by the author, ‘the slow but inexorable tale about how Yuri Plisetsky got adopted by pretty much everyone.’ Also there are demons. Hope you enjoy them. If you enjoyed this chapter, please take a moment to leave a review.
“What happened with the wormwood?” the Dark Lord asked. His high pitched voice scraped against the insides of Augustus’ skull. He had been dreading the question.

Bellatrix turned a murderous look on Dolohov. Augustus for his own part was happy enough not to be the one to answer that question.

“It- It may not have been stored properly, my lord,” Dolohov said hoarsely. “We discovered that it has been taken by rot.”

“Bellatrix,” was all the Dark Lord said.

“Crucio,” Bellatrix spat. Dolohov writhed on the ground, a faint gasp of air the only indication that he was screaming. It didn’t last long.

It wasn’t specifically Dolohov’s fault. They had all worked on harvesting the wormwood, on acquiring enough for the ritual. But fault didn’t always matter with the Dark Lord.

“Muggles use wormwood, my lord,” Augustus said cautiously, it was always best to be the one who arrived with a solution, but he would tread lightly suggesting a muggle solution.

“Do they harvest it under the light of a moonless night?” Bellatrix asked scathingly.

“They harvest it under daylight, of course,” Augustus said. “They’ll grow it in fields though, we could harvest all we need in one night instead of scavenging in the dark for months.”

The Dark Lord nodded. “What’s next?” he asked.

“Someone tried to kill the Weasley boy,” Dolohov said, glassy eyed. Dolohov after the Cruciatus wasn’t all that different from Dolohov before the Cruciatus. “He was supposed to retrieve his sister from the bottom of the lake for the second task, but someone had charmed her to attract all of the creatures in the lake after he got her. The Prophet reports that there aren’t any leads.”

“He should die,” Bellatrix said. “Blood traitor filth that interfered with our plans.”

“We don’t need investigators poking around Hogwarts,” Augustus said.

“Has Crouch sent a message?” the Dark Lord asked.

“He has not, my Lord,” Augustus said. “Of course, there is always the possibility that he was the
one who attempted to kill the boy.”

“He knows better than to endanger the mission,” the Dark Lord said. “Determine where their investigation is the next time you question your Auror friend.”

“Yes, my Lord,” Augustus said, a bit reserved at the reminder of that task.

“Why do you hesitate?” the Dark Lord asked.

Augustus paused, it was always best to not bring problems before the Dark Lord. “My memory charms are, of course, perfect, my Lord,” he said. “But every time I set my trap, it seems as though he begins to anticipate it. I have had to change my setup multiple times to consistently ensnare him for my interrogation.”

“The memory charm does not erase trauma,” the Dark Lord said with a smile that threatened to scramble Augustus’s brain. “Associations form, even if he does not remember why. Reduce the stress of the encounter and he will become less likely to anticipate anything.”

“Thank you for your wisdom my Lord,” Augustus said. Of course, winding up Norman during his visit was the highlight of his week. He supposed there was nothing for it, though. It wouldn’t do to be caught just because Norman was waiting for something to happen.

“What’s next?” the Dark Lord asked.

“There was another article about Potter in Witch Weekly,” Bellatrix said.

Augustus sighed quietly. If they were getting into gossip, then the meeting would be over soon. Afterwards would be another trip to question Norman just to find out once more that the Ministry still wasn’t anywhere near catching them.

Not that they hadn’t already been a major topic of conversation among the student body before the second task, but three days later and they were still getting comments from students from all walks of the castle. There were people who wanted to congratulate Ron for his score and the show he had put on, there were people who wanted to comment on the fact that Hermione hadn’t been Ron’s hostage, and there were of course people who wanted to talk about the Witch Weekly article that had come out the following day to announce the Hogwarts Champion’s coming out, but what most people wanted to talk about was the fact that someone had clearly been trying to kill either Ginny or Ron.

People who had never even talked to them before seemed comfortable walking up and asking about what had happened, asking questions as though they had answers and had just been keeping them to themselves until just the right person asked. The thing was, though it was very clear that someone had tried to sabotage the second task, there was no clear motive; or at least, nothing the adults had passed on. Harry, of course, wanted to know who had almost killed his best friend.

Harry remembered the weeks after Ron and Hermione had been kidnapped and he had felt anxiety every time they were apart, as though something horrible would happen while he was away. That feeling had never really gone away, only lessened. So now, as school life returned to normal and Harry had classes without his friends and had all of the myriad of trainings and study sessions away from them, the feeling was back with a vengeance and Harry found himself coming close to a panic
now and then with the thought that something terrible could be happening just that moment. It was a thought just like that that sent Harry running back to the dorm after another lesson with Victoria, a mental image of Ron dying, writhing on the floor just like Greyback had died, in his mind’s eye.

“Why are you out of breath?” Ron asked, when Harry came in.

“Just, um,” Harry panted. He really was out of breath; there were too many stairs in the castle. “Just wanted to get back to work on my project.”

Ron gave him a skeptical look. Harry shrugged. “I just wanted to check in on you.”

Ron nodded. “I figured,” he said. “I haven’t worked on my project in a while, come to think about it.”

“Wanna play chess and call it work?” Harry asked.

“Sure,” Ron said. The board was pulled out and the chess pieces set up with a bit of fanfare from one of the bishops and a couple of pawns.

“Where are you in your project?” Harry asked, as Ron quieted his pieces.

“I’ve managed to make a Knight that moves properly,” Ron said, starting the game. “But I can only get one piece tied to the board at a time, and then I have to delimit every square every time I want to try something new.”

“What’s the next step?” Harry asked.

Ron shrugged. “It’s not a straight line. There’s like a hundred different next steps. I can’t even keep track of it all.”

“It probably feels a bit overwhelming,” Harry said.

“Yeah,” Ron said. “But, luckily, I’ve got better things to worry about. So how are you doing?”

“My project’s doing alright. I don’t know if I’ll finish it by the end of the year, but it’s moving along.”

“I meant more about everything else,” Ron said. “You know, the whole running all the way to the dorms thing.”

“Oh,” Harry said. “Yeah, I might be a bit worried about things.”

Ron leaned closer and put his hand on Harry’s knee. “I’m right here mate, and I’m not going anywhere.”

In spite of the topic of conversation, Harry melted just a bit, Ron’s hand feeling like fire. He had the sudden urge to lean forward and wrap his arms around Ron and never let go.

“Can’t you do, like, your mental stuff and make it go away?” Ron asked.

Harry would need to occlude every time he was around Ron, but that wasn’t what Ron was talking about.

“I could mask it, I couldn’t just get rid of it,” Harry said. “Besides, someone tried to kill you. This isn’t some irrational fear. If you get rid of every worry you’re just going to find yourself forgetting
to be afraid of things that’ll actually kill you.”

“Someone maybe tried to kill me,” Ron said.

“There wasn’t much ambiguity there,” Harry said.

“Does your Dad tell you stuff?” Ron asked.

“They don’t know anything,” Harry said, frustrated.

“I bet Snape did it,” Ron said with a conspiratorial whisper.

“Are we seriously joking about this right now?” Harry asked.

“There’s nothing else to do about it,” Ron said. “Besides, someone has to.”

“Let’s leave that to the twins,” Harry said.

“Oh, Fred told me today that they were planning my last birthday party,” Ron said. “I mean, I hope that was a joke.” His birthday was in two days.

“Why aren’t you more upset about this?” Harry asked.

“Oh, I am,” Ron said. “Whoever they were trying to kill, they almost killed Ginny. So if we find whoever it was, I get first dibs, yeah? But there’s, like, at least thirty suspects, and you know, we’ve got actual Aurors investigating this time around, so right now I’m worried about you losing sleep worrying about me when I’m still here.”

“For all I know you won’t be when I open my eyes,” Harry said.

“My bed’s warded,” Ron said. “No one’s touching me while I sleep.” He spoke with a lot more confidence than he normally seemed to have since Greyback.

“I was sort of expecting you to be more…”

“More of a mess?” Ron asked.

Harry shrugged. While he hadn’t exactly been doing great in the aftermath of the second task, Harry had rather been expecting him to act somewhat the way he had after he had first been rescued last year.

“It was pretty terrible,” Ron said. “But I had my wand, and I… I protected Ginny until she was able to protect herself. That mattered. Checkmate, by the way.”

“Already?” Harry asked, looking at the board.

“You played better in first year,” Ron said.

“That mattered?” Harry prompted.

“Yeah,” Ron said. “I wasn’t… I wasn’t the victim, I wasn’t watching from the sidelines, I did something. I accomplished something. If I’d died down there, I would have died saving my sister, not uselessly trying to protect someone when I was powerless to do anything.”

“Hermione says you protected her,” Harry said.
“Not as far as I’m concerned,” Ron said a bit darkly.

“Hm,” was Harry’s response. “Do you think…”

“What?” Ron asked.

“Do you think this has all been good for you?” Harry asked. “Like, competing in the tournament.”

“You mean besides almost dying?” Ron asked.

“Maybe, because you almost died and you showed death who’s boss,” Harry said.

Ron shrugged. “Maybe. I guess… After the dragon I really felt like I’d done something, you know? Before, I’d really felt like I was never really going to come back from… You know?”


“She’s….” A bit of a ruckus at the door cut him off. Seamus and Dean came in, roughhousing a bit. Seamus had Dean in a headlock while Dean was laughing and shouting out, “not taking it back, not taking it back.” That stopped when Seamus saw them glancing their way, he let go of Dean, straightening up with a bit of a scowl appeared on his face as he walked forward and passed Ron’s bed, refusing to look at the both of them. Dean was left standing in the doorway, watching his best friend’s change in demeanor with a pained look on his face.

“Hey,” Dean said awkwardly.

“Not taking it back?” Ron asked.

“The snitch doesn’t make sense,” Dean said. “Totally ruins the game,” he called it out, like he was hoping Seamus would rise to the bait.

“It’s the best part of the game,” Harry said.

“Sure,” Dean said. “If you’re the Seeker.”

“Did you want to work on Divination?” Seamus asked.

“Oh,” Dean said, looking a bit deflated. “Yeah, just a minute.”

Ron rolled his eyes. Dean grimaced. Harry frowned.

Lately, things had seemed less hostile and mostly just awkward, with Seamus largely just ignoring the two of them. He hadn’t even commented on Ron’s coming out.

“Talk to you guys later,” Dean said, stopping by his bed to get his Divination book out along with a quill.

“Do you have to?” Harry heard Seamus mutter when Dean settled down for homework.

Dean shrugged. Harry turned his attention back to Ron who was looking at Dean with a concerned look on his face.

“I’m getting ready for bed,” Harry said. Getting out of the awkward air of the dorm seemed good.
“Yeah, me too,” Ron said.

They grabbed their shower things and headed to the bathroom. Out of habit, Harry peeked under his robes at his shoulder before he pulled them off. He’d need to reapply the Second Skin potion the next evening, but just then all he saw was smooth skin, no indication of the pitted scaring left behind by Greyback.

“Okay,” Ron said. “Honest opinion. How am I doing here?” He was standing there in front of one of the shower stalls in just his pants with his right arm flexed.

“Um, a bit bigger,” Harry said; a white lie. He felt a bit awkward, though not because he minded the invitation to look.

Ron frowned. “Charlie and Bill put on a lot of muscle when they were in fourth year,” he said.

“It’s not a race,” Harry said, glancing behind him at the mirror where he could see his own frame, which, while more toned than Ron’s, was even scrannier.

“Spring’s just around the corner,” Ron muttered, stepping into the shower a moment later.

Ron had previously promised to teach Harry to swim once the weather warmed up enough, and with a bit of a deadline on the horizon he had just one worry over the whole thing.

“You know, you could just wear a shirt,” Harry said.

“Yeah,” Ron said. “Then she’s going to know there’s nothing to look at.”

Harry would disagree, but even though they were both out, Harry wasn’t about to say that. Harry finished getting undressed and quickly stepped into the adjacent shower stall, taking a moment to fiddle with the curtain. He turned the water on and enjoyed the magical plumbing that made sure that the water never needed time to heat up.

“I don’t think Hermione’s going to care,” Harry said.

“I want her to care,” Ron said.

“I mean, I think Hermione’s dating you for reason’s other than your physique,” Harry said. “Not that there’s anything wrong with your… I mean, you know. Don’t worry about it.”

He decided it was about time to try and work some knots out of his hair that had been accumulating, and started working some soap into them. There was probably a spell for that. To be honest, he was thinking of getting it cut. He’d always gone the school year without, and the first thing Petunia would do when he got home for the summer was to shear it off. Haircuts were a Dursley thing and living with his Dad the previous summer he’d just let it keep growing. It was getting difficult to manage now, though.

There was a bit of silence between the two of them before Ron changed the subject. “You know I think Anderson was checking you out when you were flying earlier,” he said.

“People stare at me all the time,” Harry said.

“Yeah, but maybe this was different,” Ron said.

“Anderson from Slytherin?” Harry asked.

“What? No,” Ron said. “His cousin, in Ravenclaw. He’s a fifth year.”
“With the blue streak in his hair?” Harry asked.

“Yeah,” Ron said. “That’s him.”

“Well, I’m pretty sure he’s not into me.”

“He broke up with his girlfriend a couple weeks ago,” Ron said. “Maybe he’s looking for a rebound.”

“I don’t want to be… Wait, how do you even know he just broke up?”

“You know,” Ron said. “People talk.”

“George was telling me all about Phil Whitaker earlier, and Hermione kept trying to get me to talk to Damien what’s-his-face in study hall.”

“Um…”

“Is there some sort of plot to get me a boyfriend?” Harry asked.

“Well I wouldn’t call it a plot,” Ron said.

Harry rolled his eyes. “I’m out of the closet. Besides you and Miller, every other gay boy… and bi boy, is in the closet. The ball’s sort of in their court at this point.”

“Talking to people can’t hurt,” Ron said.

“I don’t need a boyfriend right now,” Harry said.

“Sure,” Ron said. “But some day.”

“Some day,” Harry agreed. Some day he could settle for someone who wasn’t Ron.

“What makes you think they’d be interested in a guy in the first place?” Harry asked.

“Oh, nothing really. You just never know, do you? Really, the only criteria is that they’re good enough for you.”

“Good enough for me?” Harry asked.

“Sure,” Ron said. “ Wouldn’t try to set you up with just any bloke now would I?”

“So, Anderson?” Harry asked.

“Friendly; outgoing; cute,” Ron said, and Harry could imagine him counting things off on his fingers. “Tutors third years in Arithmancy.”

“Huh,” Harry said. “I don’t know, what if they want to kiss me or something?”

“I think that’s like, half the point,” Ron said. “Do you not want to kiss anyone?”

Harry thought about it. “I don’t know,” he said truthfully. “I mean, sure I think about it, a lot, but it’s also pretty gross, don’t you think?”

“Gross?” Ron prompted.

“You know,” Harry said. “Faces smashed together, swapping spit, can’t breathe properly.”
“I think you’re just going to have to give it a chance, mate,” Ron said.

“So what about you,” Harry said. “What’s kissing like for you?”

“Who says I’ve kissed anyone,” Ron said, his voice a bit high.

“You’re dating Hermione,” Harry said, and at that point he was morbidly curious to know about the boy he was into making out with their best friend.

“I can’t tell you about that!” Ron said, scandalized.

“You have no problem telling me you wank but you can’t tell me about kissing a girl?” Harry asked.

“A gentlemen doesn’t kiss and tell,” Ron said.

“Oh, so you’re a gentleman now, huh?” Harry asked.

“That’s right,” Ron said. “So if you need any advice on gentlemanly behavior, I’m your guy.”

After that they wound up talking boys for a bit until the door opened and they weren’t alone. They both finished their showers in silence after that, even after whoever it was finished up and left.

“You going to sleep alright?” Ron asked later as they stood in front of the sinks.

Harry rinsed the toothpaste out of his mouth. “I should be asking you that.”

Ron shrugged. “Same old. You’re the one who ran all the way to the tower.

“Yeah, well, you’re alright, so I’m alright,” Harry said.


“Oh yeah?” Harry asked. “So where should I set the bar?”

Ron made a show of thinking about it.

“How about, somewhere between not currently in mortal peril and not currently having a flashback in the middle of the hallway?”

“Well, if you want to set the bar that low, I guess we’re doing all right,” Harry said. “Assuming you’re not currently in mortal peril now.”

Ron shrugged. “We’ll see what the twins have planned for my birthday.”

It was still pretty early, they stayed up for a bit after that with a book of mystery riddles Charlie had sent Ron from Romania. When he tried to go to sleep that night, though, there was only one mystery that was left on his mind, but it held far greater stakes than the riddles from the book. Whoever had tried to kill Ron was still out there, and Harry wouldn’t sleep easy until that was taken care of. It took him a long while to fall asleep, and he resisted the urge to go see if Ron was still awake.

When he dreamed that night, he dreamed that he was a detective, hunting down a jewel thief that always left behind a clue. When he finally caught the culprit, it was Malfoy, wearing a ridiculous green outfit.
“I got you this time,” Harry told dream Malfoy, but he only smiled.

“You’re missing the obvious here, Potter,” he said. “You’re just seeing what you expected to see.”

“So what am I missing?” Harry asked.

“Well there’s this, for one,” dream Malfoy said, and suddenly Harry was on his back with Malfoy pressed on top of him, their arms tangled together as Malfoy’s grey eyes looked into his as his face lowered. Harry felt warm breath on his lips before he woke up very suddenly with a gasp.

“What the fuck?” Harry uttered. He let his head flop back to his pillow as he waited for his racing heart to slow down. He took a few deep breaths as he felt around real quick to make sure that his dream hadn’t left a mess in his pants. That was what he got for staring at Ron’s naked torso and talking about boys and kissing right before bed.

“Bloody Malfoy,” he muttered to himself as he turned over onto his side and tried to get back to sleep while his lips still felt like they were tingling.

Though it certainly hadn’t been the most graphic dream he had ever had, the memory of Malfoy’s lips on his own stayed with him the next couple of days. Ron’s birthday party after classes on Monday was a welcome distraction. The other three champions showed up and it didn’t take much for Ron to talk Cedric into organizing another quidditch game the following weekend. Harry would later blame the dream for his sudden fantasy of making out with Cedric. He distracted himself by playing the game of noticing who wasn’t there and wondering if they were absent because Ron had come out. He didn’t have too long to wonder, though, because there were party games, and plenty of sweets, that were mostly harmless.

It took him a while to notice that Ginny had, for the most part, been staying to the background of the party. Ron had been spending more time with his sister since the second task and Harry knew that he was worried about her. Harry hadn’t told him about anything she had said on the shore of the lake.

“Hey,” Harry said.

“Hey,” Ginny said.

“How’s, um, everything?” he asked.

“How’s having some memories of the worlds most evil wizard left over in my head?” Ginny asked.

Harry looked around to make sure there wasn’t anyone else who could hear and set up a quick privacy ward.

“Something like that,” Harry said.

“I’d seen a mind healer for a bit, after first year,” Ginny said. “She helped me come to terms with everything that had happened, but there wasn’t anything to get rid of the remnants Tom left behind. It wasn’t anything to heal, so she just tried her best to help me deal with it, you know? I’m not supposed to ignore the things that come from Tom, but by acknowledging them when they come up I can contextualize them and put them to the side.”
“Should you go back to see her?” Harry asked.

Ginny shook her head. “It’s just going to be the same advice. This whole thing just brought everything up to the surface. I just need to work on taking care of myself.”

“So why did you volunteer?” Harry asked.

“Well ideally, nothing was supposed to go wrong.” Ginny said. “Besides, Hermione’s trauma was more recent, and someone is probably still trying to kill you, so I didn’t think it would be best to send you down there.”

“But then someone tried to kill you two,” Harry said.

“Can’t even say which one of us they were after,” Ginny said. “I’ve wondered before if he knows about what happened to his diary, or if he knows what got left behind.”

Harry hadn’t even considered that. Harry’s leading theory was that someone was trying to get to him by going after his friends.

“The question is, who would he be working through,” Harry said.

“Someone from the ministry is my bet,” Ginny said. “Either that or Professor Moody.”

“He’s an Auror,” Harry protested.

“From the ministry,” Ginny said.

“He lost limbs fighting against Death Eaters,” Harry said.

Ginny shrugged. “I wonder what he’d do with someone who’s mind has been tainted by You-Know-Who.”

“Your mind hasn’t been tainted,” Harry said, forcefully.

“That’s nice of you to say,” Ginny said. “It’s not true, but it’s nice to hear.”

“Do you think I’ve been tainted?” Harry questioned her.

“Of course you have been,” Ginny said, sort of shocking Harry. “It doesn’t make you a bad person, but do you think you’re the same person you would have been if you didn’t carry a part of him?”

“Changed doesn’t mean tainted,” Harry said, a bit put off at the description of his lycanthropy as carrying a part of Greyback.

“All right then,” Ginny said. “You’ve been changed. Let’s say I took it all away. Would you take it back if you could?”

“Of course not,” Harry said. “But just because you were changed, just because you wish it never happened, that doesn’t mean you’ve been ruined or something. Everything changes you. But you’re still you. You didn’t let him turn you into a bad person. You’re not ruined, and neither am I. I’m still me, even if I’ve been changed.”

“I know you’re not ruined,” Ginny said. “But we both carry evil with us. We didn’t choose it, we didn’t want it, he left us with it and we can’t just get rid of it, so I can’t think of a better word to describe it. Now, who’s been giving Ron trouble since he came out?”
Harry frowned, but not knowing what else to say to her, he let her change the subject.

“Just some snide comments here and there. Why, are you going to beat them up?”

“I could do it,” Ginny said.

“I know you could,” Harry said. “But I think Ron gets something out of feeling like he’s dealing with it himself.”

“You know he’d do something if someone was giving me a hard time,” Ginny said.

“Big brother’s prerogative?” Harry suggested. “Is anyone giving you any trouble?”

“Some questions about curses I shouldn’t know,” Ginny said. “I think I gave too much of a terrifying performance for anyone to try and start anything. Tom likes it when… Tom would have liked people being afraid of him, but I’d rather my classmates weren’t afraid of me.”

“I think it’s helped, since I came out, having more people who I’ve gotten to know, or who’ve gotten to know me.”

“Not sure how many people want to get chummy right now,” Ginny said.

“What about your dorm mates? Harry asked.

Ginny shrugged. “We’ve never clicked,” she said. “I’m going to be alright, Harry. Just keep me in the loop with the whole investigation.”

“There hasn’t been any progress as far as I can tell,” Harry said.

“What about Malfoy?” Ginny asked.

Harry thought about it, even though he had been trying not to think about Malfoy for the past couple of days. “I actually don’t think he’s behind it this time.”

Ginny shook her head. “He’s got connections. I doubt he’d tell you lightly, but your Dad’s not the only one with a Slytherin perspective on things.”

Harry actually thought it wouldn’t be too hard to get Malfoy to talk to him.

“Can’t hurt to try, I guess,” Harry said.

“That’s not true,” Ginny said. “Just keep me in the loop. Come on, Butterbeer pong looks like fun.”

“It sort of looks gross, but okay,” Harry said.

The party was nice, though Harry supposed that compared to the chaotic events of recent past, any sort of party would have made a nice change of pace. It being Monday evening, it didn’t last too long and before long Harry, Ron, and Hermione were studying in the common room. Both Ron and Hermione seemed to be in good spirits, so the party was a success in Harry’s mind, and even Hermione was praising the twins for having planned it.
“Maybe they can go into party planning if the whole joke shop doesn’t work out,” Hermione said.

Harry resisted the urge to remind her of the time the twins had planned him a party that had ended with him almost being murdered.

“I think they should stick to jokes,” Ron said. “They can never resist the urge to turn everything into one. Though they managed not to have any surprises tonight.”

Ron should have remembered not to test fate, though the twins’ joke didn’t strike until later that night when they went to bed.

Harry received quite a shock when Ron got blasted back away from his bed that night and fell to the floor, petrified. Harry had already reached for his wand, the thought that Ron had been replaced with an assassin in his head, when he remembered exactly what the twins’ age line was supposed to do. Ron had turned fifteen that day, and he could no longer cross the ward surrounding his bed.

Harry groaned and removed the curse.

“What the bloody fucking hell,” Ron exclaimed the moment he was able to move again.

“Are you all right?” Harry asked.

“Yeah, I’m alright,” Ron said. “Now I just need to go murder my brothers.”

“Maybe we give them a chance to fix it before we murder them?” Harry asked.

“We give them a chance to fix it,” Ron said. “And after they do, then we murder them.”

“Alright,” Harry said.

Unfortunately, the twins weren’t in their dorm.

“So I know a thing or two about wards,” Harry said.

“You think you can fix it?” Ron asked.

Harry shrugged. “Maybe with a bit of study,” he said. “But I know enough that it isn’t something we’re going to fix tonight.”

Ron worried at the hem of one of his sleeves.

“Maybe we could switch beds?” Harry said. “I don’t turn fifteen till the summer.”

Ron nodded, though he looked pensive. “I haven’t slept without that ward for a while,” he said. “And now someone might actually be trying to murder me.”

Harry nodded. “I could keep watch,” he suggested.

Ron shook his head. “I should be done with people keeping watch over me while I sleep,” he said.

“There’s no ‘should be,’ here,” Harry said.

“I’ll take your bed,” Ron said. “You’ll take mine. I’ll deal with it.”

“Well wake me up if you can’t sleep,” Harry said. “Or, no, you can’t, can you. Huh.”
“I’ll be fine, Harry,” Ron said.

Harry hoped he would be.

Ron didn’t have a chance to yell at the twins until later the next day. The twins, as it turned out, had been trying to play wingman, back when they’d initially drawn the age line.

“What the fuck?” Ron asked.

Fred was struggling to keep in his laughter, so George answered.

“Well, we thought you two were into each other back then,” he said. “So when you guys started fighting, we figured if it took you both too long to make up, well here would be an excuse for you two to have to share a bed or something.”

Harry’s jaw dropped.

“Of all the asinine… We just switched beds you bloody gits. We didn’t sleep together. I mean it might have made sense if Harry were older than me, but then I could have just switched with Dean or Neville.”

“We might have also thought that you can’t hide behind an age line forever,” Fred said.

“Someone literally just tried to murder me,” Ron said.

“Yeah, well that was a week ago and we drew up that ward back in November,” said George.

“Also, we might have actually forgotten about this one,” Fred said with a shrug.

“Complete accident,” said George.

“I mean we straight up told you no one older than fifteen could cross that line, I think this is really on you here,” said Fred.

“Can you bloody well fix it?” Ron asked.

“Sure,” said George. “It’ll just take a bit.”

Ron groaned.

“Did you sleep at all?” George asked.

“Just fix it,” Ron said, storming off. Harry waved to the twins before following after.

“So did you get any sleep?” he asked, though he didn’t really need to, for the look of how Ron was doing.

“A bit,” Ron said. “Don’t worry about it. The twins’ll fix things and then I’ll be fine.”

“Do you want to try and get a bit of sleep now?” Harry asked.

Ron hesitated.
“I could read you a bedtime story,” Harry suggested.

“Make it your Transfiguration notes,” Ron said. “I couldn’t pay attention and they’ll put me to sleep besides.”

“I’ll read them in my most boring Bins voice,” Harry said.

“How’ve you been sleeping lately?” Ron asked.

“Pretty good lately,” Harry said. “I clear my mind before I go to sleep and that helps a lot.” He’d actually had a pretty horrendous dream the night before but he didn’t need Ron worrying about it. He’d gotten enough sleep and it wasn’t something they hadn’t already talked about during some late night chat months ago.

They went up to the dorm and Ron settled on Harry’s bed.

“So you’ll stick around?” Ron asked.

“Definitely,” Harry said.

“Okay,” Ron said. “I was spacing out all day, so start from the beginning.”

Harry tried his best to lecture from his notes in a constructive fashion, but he doubted Ron got any more than he’d gotten in class that day. He fell asleep about a quarter of an hour after Harry started reading. Gingerly, Harry got off the bed and drew the curtains, casting a silencing charm on them to make sure Ron didn’t get woken up. He settled on Ron’s bed to do some homework of his own.

Dean came up alone, not too long after that.

“Hey,” Harry said.

“Hey,” Dean said, looking around. “I thought I’d find Seamus up here; not sure where he’s gotten to.”

“Right,” Harry said.

“But you don’t care about that,” Dean said, a bit sadly. He went over to his trunk and pulled out some of his drawing things before settling on his bed. It seemed he was done looking for Seamus.

“What are you doing up here all alone?” Dean asked.

“Ron’s taking a nap,” Harry said, gesturing to the other bed.

Dean did a double take between Harry’s bed with it’s curtains drawn and Ron’s bed with Harry sat on top of it.

“Didn’t the twins ward it with an age line against anyone over fifteen?” Dean asked.

“That would be the sum of it,” Harry said.

“Huh,” Dean said.

Harry shrugged.

“Should we be whispering?” Dean asked.
“Silencing charm,” he said. “So I’ve been meaning to, um… I haven’t said thank you, for, um, for trying to get Seamus to come around. I don’t need everyone’s approval, you know. If he doesn’t like me anymore, then he doesn’t like me, but still, it’s nice that you’d go to the trouble.”

“It’s not just for your sake though, is it?” Dean said, sounding a bit morose.

There was a silence between them then as Dean made sketch marks on his paper.

“Do you, um, do you like Seamus?” Harry asked.

Dean snorted, but nodded his head.

“Oh Merlin, that sucks so much,” Harry said.

“You would know, wouldn’t you,” Dean said. “It’s sort of obvious you like Ron.”

“Obvious?” Harry said, in a bit of a panic, glancing at the other bed that he was doubly glad was silenced.

“Obvious to someone else who’s pining after their best friend,” Dean said. “Also, for all that Ron figured me out ages ago, he is pretty clueless.”

“Hey,” Harry defended. “Wait, he figured you out? Oh, hey, yeah, he keeps giving you sad looks ever since this whole thing started.”

“He figured out back in October, or at least, that was when he asked me about it,” Dean said.

“I had no idea,” Harry said, surprised that Ron had known that Dean was gay before he had known that Harry was.

Dean smiled. “I asked him not to tell anyone. So how are you doing crushing on your best friend?”

Harry sighed, even though it was nice that he had someone to talk to who got it. “I kept feeling hopeless, having a crush on someone who’s very clearly into someone else, but Seamus? He’s so homophobic.”

“He gets that from his mum,” Dean said, looking down. “I think he’s coming around.”

“Still,” Harry said. “I mean, you’re… gay?” He didn’t want to make assumptions.

Dean nodded. “Super gay,” he confirmed.

“And you have to listen to him say bad stuff about you,” Harry said.

“We mostly don’t talk about it,” Dean said. “I mean, it’s not like he knows I’m gay. Most of the time we just hang out like normal.”

“Still,” Harry said. “It’s got to feel like shit when he says homophobic stuff.”

Dean nodded. “He’s still my friend,” he said, his voice sounding fragile. “And maybe he’d change his mind if he knew.”

“Who does know?” Harry asked.

“You, Ron, and my family,” Dean said.
“You told them?” Harry asked, because his Dad was the last person he had told.

“Oh, I wasn’t careful on the computer,” Dean said. “My sister’s a few years younger than me, so, when my mum saw that someone had been looking at, um, naked pictures of guys online, she sort of figured it was me?”

Harry blushed at Dean’s admission. He’d never used a computer outside of some typing lessons from primary, but he had a basic understanding of some of the stuff that could be found on the internet. “How’d that go?” he asked.

“My mom’s a civil rights lawyer,” Dean said. “And well, she wasn’t too psyched about the porn, but she’d been on board with the whole gay rights movement since before I was born. My Dad though? He took a bit. But he’s a biologist, so he went out and pulled just about every study ever written on homosexuality.”

“So he came to the conclusion that we aren’t hellspawn bent on the collapse of civil society?” Harry asked.

“I don’t think he ever thought that,” Dean said. “But basically, yeah.” He considered Harry. “So, I know you grew up muggle, but you can never be sure, do you know what genes are?”

“The clothes?”

“No, like DNA and stuff,” Dean said.

“Oh, yeah,” Harry said. “I mean, I never got that far in muggle school, but I think I’ve got the gist of it. It’s like the instruction manual for a person.”

“Basically,” Dean said. “So, a lot of scientific studies focus on men, and my mom has a few things to say about that, but anyway, most of the studies they’ve done on being gay’s been centered on gay men, but they think they’ve found a gene that makes a guy more likely to be gay.”

“Doesn’t that stuff get passed on?” Harry asked. “If most gay guys don’t have kids, doesn’t that mean it’ll just disappear over time?”

“Well that’s the cool thing, because it also turns out that women who get the same gene tend to have more children,” Dean said. “But also, it’s one of these special sorts of genes that, like, have an on and off switch, which, I forget what that’s called. But, so, you’ve got a bunch of genes, and sometimes they’re on and sometimes they’re not, but some of them either get switched on or off when you’re in the womb and then they stay that way, and they think this is one of those genes.

“So then there’s this idea that this popped up in nature as a way to make dudes who would be able to focus on helping the extended family instead of having their own children, because like, from an evolutionary stand point, you’re just as successful if you help a couple of nieces or nephews survive as if you’d had one kid of your own.”

Harry looked at him blankly. “How exactly?”

“Well like, it’s not about if you have kids. It’s all about the DNA getting passed down. So, one way to do that is to have kids. But your siblings have half your DNA, so keeping your brother’s and sister’s kids alive works out the same.”

“Huh,” Harry said. He thought he understood the gist of that. “So what turns them on?” he asked. “The genes, I mean.”
“That’s what I’m getting at,” Dean said. “So a lot of the theorizing goes back to this being something that was helpful when we were like, cavemen, and it’s more about probability than a definite cause and effect, but it looks like it comes down to two things. One is the… fraternal birth order theory, which says that the more sons a woman has, the more likely that their next son is going to be gay. And then there’s like this stress theory, where if the mom’s under a lot of stress, like physical stress, during the pregnancy, the baby’s more likely to turn out gay. So there’s this idea that it’s a survival adaptation where the gay son can help the tribe survive without adding to the number of mouths to feed and if that means a bunch of his nieces and nephews survive, then he’s basically passed on his own genes. Of course, society’s different now, and it isn’t really survival of the fittest anymore, but it really just shows that we’re exactly what nature intended for us to be. Even if we can still wind up having kids of our own now.”

Harry thought about it all, or rather, the parts he understood. “I don’t think we need an excuse to exist though,” he said. He rather didn’t think that the bigots were going to sit down through a lecture to hear it either.

“Sure,” Dean said. “But science doesn’t look for excuses, it looks for reasons. This is just a reason.”

Harry thought about himself. He didn’t have any big brothers, but his mum had almost died when she had been carrying him, not to mention the whole years in stasis part.

“What about you?” he asked. “You’ve never mentioned having older brothers.”

“Well, again, it’s all about probability,” Dean said. “Fraternal birth order, and maternal stress just increase the odds, and their absence just decreases the odds. Either way, there’s still some probability that the switch gets turned on or off. But me? My mom went through chemo when she was pregnant with me.”

“Your mom had cancer?” Harry asked, alarmed, for all that he knew that Dean’s mom was alive all these years later.

“Yeah,” Dean said. “But she kicked it’s ass.”

“So, what?” Harry asked. “Did your Dad make you read all these studies?”

“Oh, no, he just excitedly told us all about it at the dinner table,” Dean said. “I think it was his way of saying sorry for taking time to come to terms with it. But yeah, I totally have to read all sorts of stuff over the summer. My parents aren’t exactly thrilled with our curriculum, so I’ve got to keep up on science and math and literature. I get a crash course in what I’ve missed every summer. I just count myself lucky that they don’t mail me homework when I’m here.”

“That’s rough,” Harry said. He thought he remembered Dean mentioning something like that before.

“It is what it is,” Dean said. “Makes me more well rounded or something. So I’ve actually got this theory about the war.”

“Yeah?” Harry asked.

“I sort of figure that with all the shit that was going on, there was probably a lot of stress and whatnot, so maybe the proportion of gay students at Hogwarts is higher for our year and up, since we were all born during the war.”

“You think so?” Harry asked.
“Well, no good way to find out,” Dean said. “Unless you have a lot of veritaserum and no compunctions about using it liberally.”

“Let’s not,” Harry said. “So what are you going to do about Seamus?”

Dean frowned. “Keep working on him, I suppose.”

“Just because he stops being homophobic doesn’t mean he’s going to suddenly be into dudes,” Harry said.

“I know,” Dean said. “But look at you, your guy is into dudes, what are you going to do?”

“He’s dating our best friend,” Harry said.

Dean shrugged. “Sometimes there isn’t anything to do but enjoy the misery,” Deans said.

Harry laughed at that.

“Okay,” Dean said. “I’ve been dying to ask.”

“What?” Harry asked.

“I mean, I’m not trying to be accusatory or anything, if you say you’re just hanging out, I believe you, but before Ron started dating Hermione… All that time you two spent alone together on each other’s beds, behind closed curtains, you never made out or fooled around or anything?” Dean asked.

Harry blushed. “I didn’t even know he liked blokes back then,” Harry said, trying to keep the sense of a missed opportunity out of his voice. “Erm, besides, I’m pretty sure I would have freaked out if anything like that had ever actually been on the table.”

“That’s too bad,” Dean said, and he actually looked like he was sorry for Harry.

“So what,” Harry said. “If Seamus came in here and was all…” Harry wasn’t sure how to finish that sentence or if he could if he did.

Dean put on his best Seamus impression, “Hey, Dean, let’s have a spot of fun.”

“Yeah,” Harry said, blushing furiously. “That. You’re saying you’d just… you know.”

“Yeah,” Dean said. “I probably would.”

Harry looked at him, a bit surprised by the admission.

“I’m not going to apologize for knowing what I want,” Dean said.

“I wasn’t trying to, like, shame you or anything,” Harry said.

“I know,” Dean said. “And I guess I shouldn’t act like there’s something wrong with not being ready for that either.”

Harry shrugged. “It’s fine,” he said.

“I shouldn’t think about doing stuff like that with Seamus,” Dean said. “It’s just going to lead to frustration. I need a distraction.”
That made Harry’s heart skip a beat as he thought about what sort of distraction Dean could want to keep his mind off of Seamus. His lips tingled as remnants of his dream of kissing Malfoy surfaced.

“Want to look at what I’ve been drawing?” Dean asked.

“Oh,” Harry said. Simultaneously relieved and disappointed that Dean wasn’t suggesting some other manner of distraction from thinking about their crushes. “Sure,” he said. “What’ve you got?”

“Well I’ve been trying to get shark headed Krum just right,” Dean said, holding up his sketchpad.

“Well you’ve got those abs right,” Harry commented.

Harry himself had a bit of trouble sleeping that night, not because of bad dreams though, but rather because of thoughts of his conversation with Dean running through his head. Fantasies ran wild though his brain for a good long while before he reminded himself that he needed to get some sleep, so he cleared his mind and calmed himself down and drifted off. The next morning though, it was back in his head and he found himself debating the prospect of just walking up to Dean and asking him if he wanted to go somewhere and make out. At lunch, he made a mental list.

Pro, Harry thought, it’s supposed to be a lot of fun.

Con, Harry was pretty convinced that it was gross.

Pro, at least Harry would figure out which one it was.

Con, Dean is not Ron.

Pro, maybe if he makes out with Dean, he’ll get over Ron.

Con, what if Dean wanted to do more than just make out?

Did Harry want to do more than make out? Bad question. Was he ready to do more? He bit his lip as he tried to answer that question for himself but had no idea how to go about it.

Pro, Dean’s actually pretty cool and maybe there could be more to them than just being dorm mates who occasionally made out.

Con, Harry could very easily die some time soon and that wouldn’t be very fair to Dean.

Pro, Harry could very easily die some time soon and maybe it’d be nice to do more than just think about these things.

Consideration: he’d literally told Ron a few days prior that he didn’t need a boyfriend and then one steamy dream and a suggestive conversation had him contemplating hooking up with his dorm mate.

Pro, maybe if he got it out of his system, he wouldn’t need to occlude just to pay attention in class.

Con, all of it was a distraction from figuring out who had tried to kill his best friend.
He closed the book on his mental list and did his best to deal with the frustration while he tuned back into the conversation Ron and Hermione were having about Arithmancy.

“I’m thinking of tailing Karkaroff around for a bit,” Harry said.

“I really don’t think he’s the culprit,” Hermione said.

“Most everyone else who could have done it is back at the ministry,” Harry said. “So he’s about the best bet we’ve got.”

“Best bet for you being alone with a Death Eater,” Ron said.

“I’m not alone with him if he doesn’t know I’m there,” Harry said.

“Sure,” Ron said. “Malfoy catches you when you’re invisible. Karkaroff’s the headmaster of Durmstrang and a Death Eater, I don’t like your odds there.”

“Ludo Bagman’s the one who took Ginny down to the lake,” Hermione said. “He had the most access.”

“But anyone could have gone down there afterwards,” Harry said. “Anyone who knew what the second task was and where the hostages were going to be. That’s a short list, and Karkaroff’s still on it, and also, yeah, he is a Death Eater.”

“But what’s his motive,” Hermione said. “He sold out other Death Eaters, he’s not going to get back into Voldemort’s good graces by killing Ron.”

“What?” Ron asked. “You don’t think I’m worth killing?”

Hermione rolled her eyes. “It just doesn’t make sense. He might try killing Harry; he could think that that could save him from being killed if Voldemort ever came back, but Ron?”

“Well what’s Bagman’s motive?” Harry asked. “He seemed excited in the beginning, like it was all some lark that there was going to be a fourth competitor. He’s friends with Ron’s Dad even. Why kill either of them?”

“I don’t know his motive,” Hermione said. “I’m not even saying it’s likely him, I’m just saying he would have had the easiest time laying a trap like that.”

“Also, he was a pro-Quidditch player who went into the ministry for sports,” Harry said. “Do you think he could have pulled off a powerful beast summoning tied into a delayed depth trigger?”

“He got an outstanding NEWT in Charms,” Hermione said. “It was in his team bio.”

“You’re reading old quidditch books?” Ron asked.

“I’m doing my research,” Hermione said. “Besides, you could easily become a pro quidditch player and you do well enough in class, so don’t make assumptions.”

Harry shrugged.

“Besides which, he’s one of the few people who knew what the task was going to be well enough in advance to plan something like this,” Hermione concluded.

“I still think Karkaroff is more likely,” Harry said.
“And I think Dumbledore’s probably got his eye on the guy,” Ron said.

“He lives in a boat on the lake where you almost died,” Harry said.

Hermione sighed. “I get to check your silencing charms before you leave,” she said.

“That’s fine,” Harry said.

“Would your Dad tell you if he knew?” Ron asked.

Harry thought about it. “Sometimes I get the idea that if my Dad found out about some sort of threat out there, it would just quietly disappear.”

“Good to know,” Ron said.

“Maybe you should run this by him,” Hermione said.

“He’d just try and stop me,” Harry said, though he figured that was why Hermione had suggested it in the first place. “I’ll be careful, he won’t catch me.”

He got caught. Instead of a murder attempt though, it just lead to a trip to Professor McGonagall’s office, a detention, and being in a bit of hot water with his Dad. He did learn that Karkaroff was heavily paranoid and was concerned about the Dark Mark on his arm. Harry would probably have an awkward conversation with his Dad about that in the future.

Time went on, their investigation, such as it was, went nowhere, and he struggled with the idea that there was a clock ticking down until there would be another attempt and he didn’t know how much time was on it. The twins fixed the ward around Ron’s bed and a lot of things went back to normal. Classes were attended, they avoided nosy classmates, he crushed on Ron; the whole while he felt like he was in limbo. The only time he felt like he was moving forward was when he trained with his Dad. Stopping Voldemort would stop everything, Harry told himself. Ron would be safe when Voldemort was gone. Harry just had to be ready.

Quidditch was a welcome distraction. The weather was decent considering that it was winter, and Harry managed to beat Victor Krum to the snitch one of the times they actually got paired up. He almost wished it had been caught on camera. Ron also was doing a bit better than he had the last time they had played, and Harry was happy to cheer him on when he was sitting out on the sidelines. He still had a ways to go before he’d be ready for the team the next year, but Harry was confident. It was when the game was over that some of the realities of the recent past came back to get in the way.

Harry had been planning on just showering back at the dorms, but Ron just headed for the locker room when everything was done and Harry wasn’t going to let him walk in there alone. Except they weren’t alone, of course. There were fifteen other boys in there with them and Harry kept waiting for someone to say something. Ron kept up his usual chatter, speculating with Cedric about the next task, and Harry tried to focus on that. He understood Ron’s perspective, that they shouldn’t have to trek back to the tower in their sweaty robes when there were showers right there, but Harry would have rather not had to worry about their fellow players.

He grabbed a towel from the bin and disrobed and wrapped up quickly. He was definitely getting looks and Harry felt especially self conscious and unaccountably guilty. He stayed close to Ron and made a point of not looking at anyone else. Ron was still talking to Cedric, who didn’t seem to be bothered by their presence, but Harry just wished he’d hurry up. Finally, Ron was ready and they headed to the showers.
Harry definitely favored the sectioned showers that were in the dorms to the group showers in the locker room. He chose a spigot that let him face the corner and cleaned himself up as quickly as he could, feeling the eyes of others on his back. The twins, like Ron, didn’t seem to think that group showers were a time for awkward silence and kept up their own banter. He knew none of the Weasleys were capable of a very quick shower so Harry abandoned Ron in favor of getting back into some clothes, knowing that at least Ron would have his brother’s for backup.

It wasn’t until Harry went back towards the lockers that he realized that a good portion of the other boys appeared to be waiting to start changing. He felt his cheeks warm and focused on trying to remember how to do the freshening charm that Cedric had done on his robes for him the last time they’d all done quidditch. It felt awkward trying over and over to get the spell right while he stood there naked with a towel around his waist and the hostile eyes of everyone who had decided they weren’t going to change in front of the gay boy on his back.

He really wished that he’d actually planned on showering after the game and had just brought something to change into. He did manage the charm eventually though, and he tossed on his shirt and robes before he ditched the towel and finished getting dressed. Still unwilling to leave Ron in such a hostile environment though, Harry just kept facing his locker and went through the motions of doing broom maintenance.

Ron finished up eventually and, completely ignoring everyone else, got dressed as if he wasn’t catching glares.

“You know that that was awkward, right?” Harry asked as they left.

Ron shrugged. “Let them just sit there in their sweaty robes,” he said. “We’re not second class students, we get to shower just like everyone else.”

“I figured,” Harry said.

“Besides,” Ron said. “It’s a good way to know who’s on your side and who isn’t.”

Harry was glad he wasn’t the only one who was keeping track. Interesting enough, Malfoy had not been among those who had waited for Harry and Ron to leave before he started changing.

March’s full moon came in on a Wednesday and Harry missed astronomy while his Dad returned to the castle to impersonate him, leaving him in Professor Lupin’s care. He enjoyed his time the following day when he had Professor Lupin to himself and he could talk to him about his boy troubles.

Malfoy, unfortunately, often worked his way into Harry’s mind as March became April. His odd acolytes had grown in numbers by a few and, oddity of oddities, Malfoy had added some of Harry’s criticisms to the whole ideology. Harry told himself he had more important things to think about than Malfoy, but still felt like he was a second year and had to brew Polyjuice potion to uncover his plot. The thing was, was that Malfoy was getting more and more popular in the school. He seemed to be all over the place, talking politics here, organizing a study group there, working out problems that never involved him in the first place.

“He’s going for Prefect,” Hermione said, when Harry brought it up, but Harry was certain Malfoy had had Prefect in the bag a long time ago.

“Maybe he fell down the stairs and got the evil knocked out of him,” Ron said.

Whatever Malfoy was up to, Harry didn’t have time to worry about it. He remembered though,
Ginny’s suggestion that he ask Malfoy. It wasn’t as though Malfoy would really have anything useful to add, or that he’d tell Harry if he did. Harry tried to keep an eye on him, but with everything else, it wasn’t very high up on his list of priorities.

By the time April’s full moon arrived, it had been more than eight weeks since the second task and with no one seeming to have attempted to kill Ron or Ginny since, and without any progress in the case, Harry was starting to feel like it was all a waiting game until the third task.

“I’m just worried we’re going to go into the third task without anyone having been caught and then I’ll just be sitting there waiting to find out if someone’s going to try and kill Ron again,” Harry told Professor Lupin the afternoon after the full moon. Professor Lupin was once more keeping an eye on Harry while his Dad returned to the castle to teach his classes.

“There’s going to be a lot more security for the third task,” Professor Lupin said.

“That’s what my Dad said, but we’re sort of working under the idea that what happened with the second task was an inside job, so who knows.”

“I suppose you’ve been trying to solve the mystery,” Professor Lupin said.

“Well yeah,” Harry said. “But we’re not getting anywhere.”

“That must be frustrating,” Professor Lupin said. “I’m sure you’re very worried about Ron.”

“Well, yeah,” Harry said.

“Come on,” Professor Lupin said. “Today’s a recovery day. Nothing to do right now, let’s talk about something less stressful.”

“What else did we talk about last night?” Harry asked. Ever since Professor Lupin had started staying over after the full moon, Harry had asked him to tell him everything he had forgotten from the time before their transformation.

“You did bring up Mr. Malfoy,” Professor Lupin said.

Harry nodded. “My usual complaints?” he asked.

“Well yes,” Professor Lupin said. “Though you might have mentioned that he was ridiculously good looking.”

Harry groaned. “He is though,” he said. “And it’s not fair. He can actually be charming, you know, and he’s playing this whole reformed act, like everyone’s going to forget that he’s an evil little snake. Except a bunch of people have forgotten that he’s an evil little snake.”

“So he’s good looking and charming,” Professor Lupin said. “Do you have a crush on the Slytherin bad boy?”

“What? No!” Harry said. “He’s horrible. Besides, I still have a crush on Ron. I was even considering making out with one of my classmates to see if that would help me get over him. Oh, did I tell you one of my classmates came out to me?”

“You told me last month,” Professor Lupin said. “I take it you decided against it?”

Harry shrugged. “I figured I didn’t need the distraction while someone’s trying to kill my best friend.”
“Harry, even at the height of the war we took time for ourselves,” Professor Lupin said.

“So you think I should see if he want’s to make out?” Harry asked.

“No, I think you shouldn’t let what happened during the second task affect your decision.”

Harry thought about that for a bit. “So what if I might also be worried that he’d want to do more than just make out?” he asked.

“Well do you want to do more than make out?” Professor Lupin said.

“Well sure,” Harry said. “I just don’t know if I should.”

“Because you’re not ready?” Professor Lupin prompted.

“Because… because a lot of things,” Harry said. “Which probably mean’s I’m not ready?” He cast a curious glance at Professor Lupin.

“Well I can’t tell you if you’re ready or not,” Professor Lupin said. “This is really something you need to decide for yourself. Trust your instincts.”

“My instincts are telling me two different things,” Harry said.

“So does that sound like you’re ready?” Professor Lupin asked.

Harry frowned. “No,” he said, disappointment and relief in his voice. “But it’s really frustrating.”

“I’m sure it is,” Professor Lupin said. “Just remember that it’s not a race. There’s no rush.”

“See, I know that,” Harry said. “But I feel like there is.” It wasn’t just the rush of hormones and the sense of lingering possibility, it was the thought that there could very well be a limited window of opportunity to enjoy any of the thrills of puberty before he had to face Voldemort and maybe never have an opportunity after that.

“There’s plenty of time,” Professor Lupin said, though he looked down, sadly, and Harry knew he didn’t need to ask how much time everyone else he had grown up with had gotten.

“I also feel like everything would be better if I stopped having a crush on Ron,” Harry said.

“And what makes you think that making out with another boy will solve that?” Professor Lupin asked.

Harry shrugged. “You don’t think it will?”

“It sounds like it would be a temporary distraction,” Professor Lupin said. “Unless you’re looking for a deeper relationship with this other boy.”

“I mean, he’s nice and all,” Harry said. “I don’t know. Having a boyfriend really would be more of a distraction than I need right now.”

“Well even if it isn’t making out with some boy, I hope you’re finding some form of distraction,” Professor Lupin said. “You should have more in your life than just school work, transformations, and worrying about murder plots.”

“What about you?” Harry asked. “Any distractions lately?”
“I’ve been writing,” Professor Lupin said.

“What, about your travels?” Harry asked.

“Someone thought it would be a good idea,” Professor Lupin said. “Of course I’m really just writing it down for myself. I don’t think the market’s ready for Travels of a Werewolf.”

“Well you don’t need to tell them about that,” Harry said. “I think it could really sell. What else? When’s your next trip.”

“July,” Professor Lupin said. “There’s some rather interesting areas in Madagascar I’d like to see for myself.”

“Any guys?”

“Oh, I met a nice muggle man at the library last week,” Professor Lupin said. “Though he seemed put off when I told him I didn’t have a cell phone.”

“Middle-school’s when a lot of kids get theirs, and I was sooo worried I was going to be the only one who didn’t have one,” Harry said. “Not that I had anyone to call, but you know…”

“You didn’t like sticking out,” Professor Lupin said.

“Of course sticking out’s all I’ve ever done,” Harry said. “Did he ask you for your number?”

“He did,” Professor Lupin said. “Still though, I’ve got a date on Saturday.”

“That’s cool,” Harry said.

When he returned to school later that evening he wound up glancing at Dean out of the corner of his eye, wondering what it would be like to go out on a date with him. It was Ron, of course, who held most of his attention.

“So can you tell me what the third task is?” Harry asked his Dad. It was a Saturday night, and Harry had spent the majority of the afternoon dueling with his Dad. Now, covered with perspiration and out of breath, Harry was ready to call it quits and head back to the tower.

“Well,” his Dad said. “While I can’t tell you what the task is, I can tell you that Hagrid has been busy procuring more magical creatures than one would anticipate he would need for the last two months of term.”

“Multiple magical creatures?” Harry asked.

His Dad shrugged. Harry’s frustration with the lack of progress into the case surrounding the second task had been growing and, with the start of May, Harry felt like time was running out to try and figure out who had sabotaged things and almost killed Ron. He was very worried that the third task would start and he’d still be worried that there was someone waiting for a second chance. If they couldn’t figure out who had been behind it, then at least they could make sure he got through the third task as quickly as possible.

“Security will be a lot tighter for the third task,” his Dad said. “Chances are, there won’t be any
opportunity.” His Dad didn’t need to ask what Harry’s biggest worry was.

“Well, no one needed to sabotage anything for that dragon to almost kill Ron in the first task,” Harry said. “Besides, all the security in the world might not help if it’s an inside job.”

His Dad gave him a hug, which was awkward since Harry was definitely too gross to hug at the moment. Harry thought that this was the part where most parents would say that Harry had nothing to worry about, but his Dad wasn’t most parents.

“We cannot completely eradicate the possibility that some tragedy will occur during the third task,” his Dad said. “But we will do everything we can, as will you, and Miss Granger, and Mr. Weasley’s own siblings. Mr. Weasley himself, I am sure, is going to do everything he can to make it out in one piece.”

“I just don’t know what I’d do if he doesn’t,” Harry said. His world wouldn’t make sense without Ron in it.

“It is a terrible pain,” his Dad said. “To lose someone you love. But you would have me, and Miss Granger and many others. You would not be alone in it. Yet still, there is a very good chance that he will survive the third task with no serious injuries. You would do better now to focus on preparing Mr. Weasley, than you will worrying about his demise.”

Harry nodded. He tightened his arms around his Dad briefly before stepping back. “Is it alright if I cancel dinner tonight?” he asked.

“Yes,” his Dad said. “Go spend time with your friends.”

‘While you still can,’ Harry added in his head.

“See you tomorrow,” Harry said.

“Enjoy Hogsmeade tomorrow, stay safe,” his Dad said. “I love you.”

”Love you too,” Harry said walking out.

Now, out of the halls of the dungeon Harry started walking towards the Great Hall where he would have dinner with friends. It was where the corridor that led to his fathers quarters intersected with the path that led to the Slytherin dorms that he crossed paths with Malfoy. Of course, he wasn't alone; he never was these days. Daphne Greengrass, Tracy Davis, and Blaise Zabini where the only Slytherins from his year that still hung out with Malfoy, but there were a number of students from the other years and a few from other houses who seemed to have gravitated towards him. There was a group of about 10 of them walking with Malfoy just then, and Harry had the distinct feeling that he was out numbered, even though he was wearing his invisibility cloak.

“Now make sure you don't forget about the younger years,” Malfoy said. “Moraga’s got his OWL’s to worry about, but the rest of you could really earn us a few more points by helping out. Slytherin’s got the cup in the bag this year.”

“Assuming Potter doesn’t snipe it away from us again,” someone from the group said.

"There's no predicting Potter," Malfoy said. "So don't worry about him.”

“That's rich, coming from you,” Daphne said.

Malfoy laughed along with everyone else.
"Well I suppose we just have to find a basilisk to slay and we’ll be shoe-ins,” Malfoy said.

There was more laughter.

"Oh hey, I left the potion going," Malfoy said. “You run ahead, I'll catch up in a bit.”

"How much are you selling that for?" Someone asked.

Malfoy grinned. “Enough. I'll see you.”

Harry debated with himself on whether he should go or if he should stay. There were no leads, and Harry was getting desperate. Desperate enough to talk to Malfoy about it. The rest of the Slytherins walked away, leaving an invisible Harry alone with Malfoy. Malfoy wasn't moving anywhere, so Harry was pretty sure the other boy knew he was there.

"Come on, Potter," Malfoy said.

Harry pulled the invisibility cloak off. “I was completely silenced,” he said.

“Have you been working out or something?” Malfoy asked, with a smirk.

Harry discretely smelled himself. “Or something,” Harry agreed, he would need to take a quick shower before he joined his friends for dinner.

“Following me around again?” Malfoy asked.

“No,” Harry said. “I was just visiting my Dad.”

“Fair enough,” Malfoy said. “Are you heading to dinner?”

“Eventually,” Harry said. There was a brief moment where they just stared at one another.

“Come on then,” Malfoy said.

They walked in silence for a while, until Malfoy brought up the Harpies latest game. That carried them for a while until Harry had to ask. “Do you know anything about the second task?” he asked.

Malfoy stopped walking. “I didn’t have anything to do with it, if that’s what you’re asking.”

“You’ve got a lot of contacts,” Harry said. “I thought maybe you might have heard something.”

“Well, I haven’t,” Malfoy said. “And if by contacts you mean Death Eaters, I don’t exactly keep in touch. Though it wouldn’t really make any sense for it to be any of them. The Dark Lord wants you dead. If he wanted to torment you by killing off your friends, it wouldn’t be anonymous, it would be very obvious and very personal.”

“Right,” Harry said. He’d known that asking Malfoy would be a long shot.

“Of course it’s probably something much more pedestrian,” Malfoy said, looking thoughtful.

Harry shot him a look. “What do you mean?”

“Revenge, anger, jealousy, greed, fear,” Malfoy said. “There are plenty of reasons for people to kill people. So why would anyone have motive to kill a Weasley? Now, after the first task, there were plenty who might have worried that he could actually win, but sabotaging him to lose would have been a lot easier than the stunt that got pulled, a lot less obvious, and a lot less likely to bring
in an investigation from the ministry. Revenge? Well I couldn’t think of anything there. Plenty of people still consider the Weasleys to be blood traitors, so it’s a toss up, but there are plenty of better targets if anyone’s trying to make a statement. Again, the lake was very impersonal, very cold blooded. Makes me think of greed.”

“What could anyone get from killing Ron?” Harry asked.

“There are, of course, a number of bets going on over the outcome of the games,” Malfoy said.

“What, so someone bet on Ron loosing and decided to make sure it happened?” Harry asked.

“Maybe,” Malfoy said. “But like I said, easier to sabotage him than to kill him. Avoids a heated investigation into the death of a couple of students. You ever hear of a dead pool, though?”

“People bet on who’s going to die?” Harry asked, aghast.

Malfoy shrugged. “It’s illegal, of course, but it does happen. I’d imagine someone thought it a rather sure thing, that a fourth year facing a dragon probably wouldn’t make it, but then he got the highest score. If it was a sizable bet, of course, that could be all the motive in the world.”

“So they’d definitely try again,” Harry said.

Malfoy shrugged. “Sure, if the reward outweighed the risk, and it’s a lot riskier now that they’ve failed once.”

“So how do I find out if someone bet on Ron?” Harry asked.

“You, don’t,” Malfoy said. “No one’s going to tell the Boy-Who-Lived about their dead pool. Definitely no bookie is going to talk to you.”

“So what do I do?” Harry asked.

“What would you do for the information you’re looking for?” Malfoy asked.

Harry gave him a look. “I’ve got money, if that’s what your looking for.”

Malfoy shook his head. “You might have to get your hands dirty,” he said. “Though money would help too.”

“I’ve gotten my hands dirty before,” Harry said.

“Good,” Malfoy said. “Do you have a disguise?”

“Polyjuice,” Harry said.

“I’ll take that,” Malfoy said. “You keep the cloak. The only thing I need now is for you to trust me,” he said, holding out his hand.

Harry glared at it before he took it for a perfunctory shake.

“I take it we’re leaving the castle,” he said.

“Well the answers you’re looking for aren’t here,” Malfoy said. “Of course there’s no guarantee that we’re even on the right track, but I think it’s the best bet.” He grinned like he’d made a joke and Harry rolled his eyes.
“How are we getting out of the school?” Harry asked. He’d rather not give up a secret tunnel if he didn’t need to.

“We’re not going now,” Malfoy said like Harry was daft. “We get to go into Hogsmeade tomorrow; there’s no need for some escape.”

“Right,” Harry said. He definitely wanted to go now.

“Come on, then,” Malfoy said. “My friends are going to wonder what’s taking me so long.”

They walked the rest of the way to the Great Hall, agreeing to meet the next day outside of the Shrieking Shack. Harry threw on his invisibility cloak before they got to dinner so no one would see them appearing together.

Hermione called the little curio shop in Hogsmeade the personification of a snake oil salesman. Though she would amend that snake oil actually did serve a purpose in several potions. It seemed odd, to Harry, that even in the wizarding world, that there were things that were considered to be impossible and that there were people willing to sell you the impossible. They sold potions that were supposed to make you smarter, or a charm that was said to bend odds in your favor. Harry usually liked stopping at the curio shop, if only for a bit of amusement; he wasn’t expecting to have to drag Ron out.

“Piece of shit,” Ron yelled over his shoulder. They got a few looks from students passing by.

Hermione looked more worried than angry. “Are you alright?”

“I don’t need to be fixed,” Ron said.

“Well I know that,” Hermione said.

Harry hadn’t known what to say when the proprietor had offered up a potion that was promised to make him straight. Ron hadn’t been speechless though.

“Stuff like that makes me so angry,” Ron said.

“He’s just a conman,” Harry said. “Come on, let’s stock up on chocolate.”

“Why aren’t you angry?” Ron demanded.

Harry frowned.

“Harry doesn’t owe you anger,” Hermione said.

“No,” Ron said. “But he can be angry for his own right.”

“This isn’t new, Ron,” Harry said. “People say shit to us all the time. At least this guy wasn’t calling me a fairy.”

“No,” Ron said. “He was just offering up some bullshit cure like we’re diseased; trying to profit off of bigotry.”
“He’s a despicable person,” Hermione agreed. “Are you alright?”

Ron seemed to notice for the first time that he was shaking. Harry noticed how worried Hermione sounded, how she wasn’t quite standing too close to Ron.

“Yes, Hermione, I’m alright,” Ron said quietly. “I’m fine really. Sorry…”

“You don’t need to apologize for being angry,” Hermione said.

“Doesn’t mean I need to yell,” Ron mumbled. He was still shaking.

Hermione stepped forward and embraced Ron.

“You’re fine just the way you are,” she said.

“Mmm, you’re perfect,” Ron said.

“Okay,” Harry said, taking the opportunity. “So I think it’s lunch time, so, why don’t you two have a date or something. We’ll catch up later tonight.”

“You don’t have to go,” Ron said.

“I should though,” Harry said. “You two have couple time.”

“Are you alright, mate?” Ron asked.

“Yeah,” Harry said. “Just, you know. I sort of expect people to be dicks, you know?”

“Well go find the twins or Ginny or someone,” Ron said.

“Wear your cloak,” Hermione said. Harry was already pulling it out.

“Have fun,” Harry said, wishing that he didn’t have to do this during a Hogsmeade weekend while his friends were out without him to watch their backs.

He hadn’t told them that he was going to have an excursion with Malfoy, they would have definitely tried to talk him out of it, or tried to come along. Harry did some spellwork to make sure he was silent and odorless and wouldn’t leave any footprints and set off to the Shrieking Shack. On the way he mentally catalogued everything he had brought with him. Potions bandolier? Check. Zonkos products for a distraction? Check. Shrunken broom? Check. The twins invention for going through walls? …Check. He had debated bringing the patches. It wasn’t that they weren’t useful. But he had killed someone with the thing, and he hadn’t used it since. Still though, better safe than sorry. He was ready for whatever this mission would entail.

It was worth getting hexed to prove that he could sneak up on Malfoy.

“Well that was stupid,” Malfoy said, as Harry cleared up the Tonge Lock hex Malfoy had gotten him with.

“You had no clue I was there,” Harry said. Was he slurring?

“Yes, yes, very good,” Malfoy said. “I still hexed you when you were invisible. Do you have your broom?”

Harry nodded and pulled it out of his pocket, removing the shrinking sticker.
“Where are we going exactly?” he asked.

“Knockturn Alley,” Malfoy said. “Though we’re just flying to a cottage nearby that my family owns. We’ll flu from there.”

“No one’s going to be there?” Harry asked.

Malfoy shrugged. “It should be empty. It’s more of a summer country getaway,” he said. “I guess if mother’s there I’ll get in a right bit of trouble. Come on then.”

“Where’s your broom?”

“Didn’t bring it,” Malfoy said. “We’re flying tandem.”

“Why on earth would you want to fly tandem?” Harry asked.

“Well your invisibility cloak isn’t going to cover the both of us if we’re on different brooms.”

“Oh, and here you’d been acting like you could do a proper disillusionment charm,” Harry said.

“I can,” Malfoy said, defensively. “Enough to fool a muggle at least.”

Harry rolled his eyes and mounted his broom. “Well get on then,” he said.

‘This is awkward,’ Harry thought as he positioned the cloak over the both of them. It felt even more awkward when Malfoy wrapped his arms around Harry’s middle. He was glad Malfoy couldn’t see him blush.

“Head East for now,” Malfoy said, and Harry kicked off, feeling Malfoy’s arms tighten around him as they accelerated. Harry caught himself wondering what it would be like to sit behind Malfoy and press up against him like that. He got rid of that thought and thought about riding tandem with Ron instead.

Malfoy’s directions became more specific the further they went and eventually Malfoy was directing Harry down below the tree line and they passed through an illusory veil to reveal their destination. What Malfoy had called a cottage, Harry was pretty sure was more like a country manor. Malfoy did a double take when they walked in though.


“How can Fifi be serving Master Draco?” Fifi asked.

“You can tell me where everything’s gone,” Malfoy said.

“Mistress has put it all in the manor, Master Draco,” Fifi said. “The cottage is to be sold.”

Malfoy cast an embarrassed look at Harry. “I see,” he said. “Is anyone coming here today?”

Fifi wrung her hands. “Fifi is not knowing, Master Draco. I can be finding out if you would be liking.”

“No,” Malfoy said quickly. “No, that’s fine. Do you have instructions to tell mother if I come here?”

“No, Master Draco, Fifi has no such instructions.”
“Good,” Malfoy said. “Do not tell her or anyone that we stopped by.”

“Yes, Master Draco.”

Malfoy started walking out of the entryway.

“Can Fifi be making lunch for Master Draco and his guest?”

“No,” Malfoy said. “We’re in a hurry. Though maybe a snack for when we return.”

“Oh, yes, Fifi will be making all of your favorites, Master Draco.”

“Good,” Malfoy said. “Come on Potter.”

There was a fireplace a few rooms in and Malfoy lit a fire.

“Don’t you dare try setting her free, you hear?” Malfoy said.

“Fifi’s a lot different than Dobby,” Harry commented, making no promises.

“Dobby’s an anomaly,” Malfoy said.

“I meant she doesn’t look chewed up and bedraggled,” Harry said.

“Never knew why father didn’t make him a kitchen elf. Dobby wasn’t really suited to be his valet. It doesn’t matter. Fifi was my minder when I was much younger. She's never really interacted with father.”

“How do you mind someone who you have to obey?” Harry asked.

“She obeyed mother over me,” Malfoy said, shrugging. “And mother gave her very careful instructions. She doesn’t need saving Potter.”

“Have you ever asked her?” Harry asked.

Malfoy shook his head and grabbed the floo power off the mantle.

“Time to put your cloak on, Potter.”

Harry threw his cloak on again and cast all of his masking spells.

“Grab onto my arm,” Malfoy said, holding his arm out like a falcon was supposed to land on it. Harry grabbed on. Malfoy threw the powder into the fireplace and they stepped in as green flames roared to life around them.

“Knockturn Alley,” Malfoy said and the two of them were pulled off into the strange world of in-betweens that looked in on flashes of fireplaces throughout Britain. Harry managed to land on his feet as they were expelled from the fireplace, but only because he had a tight grip on Malfoy’s arm, which he dropped suddenly like it was a hot poker.

They were in Borgin and Burkes, the same shop Harry had come out of on his first misadventure with floo powder. Harry looked around at the creepy artifacts that sat on cushions or behind glass cabinets.

“Young Mr. Malfoy,” the shops proprietor, Mr. Borgin, said, coming out from behind the counter. “I did not expect to see you any time soon. Certainly not in the middle of the school year.”
“I had some business I needed to attend to,” Malfoy said. “It’s a bit time sensitive, so I’m here now.”

“We were of course terribly upset to hear about what the Ministry did to your father,” Mr. Borgin said. “I suppose you’re here to dispose of some more items, then?”

“I’m not here to sell anything,” Malfoy said. “I’m here to spend some actually.”

“And how can I be of service to the noble house of Malfoy?” Mr. Borgin asked.

“I’m looking to place a wager,” Malfoy said. “I thought you might point me in the right direction.”

“There are certainly plenty of bookies in the alley,” Mr. Borgin said. “But then I suppose you’re looking for something more.”

Malfoy smiled. “Weasley’s doing well in the tournament, but a blood traitor relying on a halfblood and a mudblood to keep himself afloat won’t last. In fact, I suspect he won’t survive at all.”

Mr. Borgin sported a sly smile at this. “Most bookies wouldn’t take a bet like that,” he said. “A bit more than a slap on the wrist if you’re caught making such a wager.”

“Yet surely a knowledgable man such as yourself would know where I can find what I am looking for,” Malfoy said.

“Perhaps,” Mr. Borgin said. “But information costs money.”

Malfoy’s face tightened, and Harry wondered if he had been banking on using his name to get what he wanted.

“Oh course,” Malfoy said, reaching into his cloak. “I trust this will handle matters.”

Mr. Borgin eyed the gold shrewdly. “You must be fairly certain of the Weasley boy’s fate,” he said.

“Come now,” Malfoy said. “This is a business transaction after all. You can’t expect me to give anything away.”

Mr. Borgin scooped up the money and it was gone from sight in a moment.

"Kurstif runs a wares stand next to Merkins Potions. Most of it’s junk, but I think she might have something that would interest you.”

Some more gold was pressed onto the counter, and this time there was considerably more of it. “I was never here,” Malfoy said.

“I certainly didn’t send you anywhere,” Mr. Borgin said. “Tell her Marvin sent you, one of her business associates.”

Malfoy nodded and headed to the door. He opened it and made a bit of a show of throwing the hood of his cloak over his head while Harry slipped out. Once outside Malfoy sat on a bench a couple of storefronts down. Harry sat down next to him.

“Polyjuice potion,” Malfoy muttered.

Harry pulled it out and handed it to him under the cloak. Malfoy handed him a very small camera, about the size of his palm.
"When the book comes out, start taking pictures and don’t stop until it’s closed,” Malfoy said. “And don’t worry about the gold. You can pay me back later.”

Harry didn’t bother responding. Malfoy couldn’t see or hear him. Malfoy downed the potion and kept his head down as his face morphed behind the hood of his cloak. They got up and started moving down the alley; Harry keeping behind Malfoy to reduce the risk of having someone run into him. Malfoy was taller now, and now looked rather plain.

Kurstif turned out to be a goblin and her wares stand was situated in a narrow space in-between two storefronts.

“What do you want?” Kurstif said.

“Marvin said I could place a bet here,” Malfoy said.

Harry moved around the low counter so he’d be positioned to take pictures.

“And what did you want to put money on?” Kurstif asked. Here she tapped a trinket with one of her fingers and Harry felt some sort of ward go up. Probably a privacy enchantment. Harry looked around for a book. That was when he saw the cat.


The cat was big and orange, and it was looking right at Harry.

“Three to one,” Kurstif said.

“It’s a longer shot than that,” Malfoy said.

“Sure, but I have to factor for the risk,” Kurstif said. “Wagers on muggle politics are illegal.”

The cat had that look where it was crouched down with its tail wagging back and forth.

“Seven to two,” Malfoy suggested.

“Three to one, take it or leave it,” Kurstif said.

Malfoy shrugged, and dropped the gold onto the counter. Kurstif bent down and pulled a book out from underneath. The cat’s haunches started wiggling.

The book was placed on the table and Harry tore his eyes off the cat and started to get the camera ready. Kurstif drew one pointy finger down the front of the book and then turned over the cover.

“What name do you want this under?” Kurstif asked.

Harry was just about to start taking pictures when suddenly the cat was on his back and there was a loud yowl.

Kurstif gave out a squawk, turning around to see what the commotion was. Malfoy grabbed the book. “Run!” he yelled.

Harry didn’t need to be told twice. He knocked over the stand getting out while trying to get the damned cat off of him. On instinct, he threw up a shield. A bolt of light splashed against it a moment later. The alley was narrow, but Harry was used to running away.

Finally, the cat gave up and Harry didn’t have to worry about being the obvious invisible guy with
a cat clinging to him. He caught up to Malfoy quickly and grabbed his arm, dragging him into a store. He ignored the proprietor behind the counter and threw the cloak over Malfoy. He quickly dipped the toe of his shoe into the floor.

“Hug me tight,” he told Malfoy.

Malfoy thankfully didn’t argue and did what Harry said. Harry put one foot on either side of Malfoy’s”

“We’re going to fall now,” Harry said. He activated the patches in his shoes, one hand fisting into his cloak to make sure it came with them and the other making sure Malfoy’s head was tucked close to him. They fell through the floor and landed in a heap in a dimly lit basement. Malfoy pushed Harry off of him.

“What the hell was that?!” He sounded panicked.

“No time,” Harry said. The cloak had fallen off when they fell. Harry got up and pulled Malfoy to him and threw the cloak back over the two of them. He could feel that the silencing spell had broken when the cloak had gotten thrown off, he reapplied it quickly. A moment later, a door at the top of the stairs opened. It was the proprietor from behind the counter. He looked around, cautiously walking down the stairs with his wand drawn. Malfoy pulled Harry towards the wall. The proprietor started searching around when he got down the stairs.

Harry pointed his wand at the stairs and silenced them. As soon as the spell left his wand, Malfoy was dragging him up the stairs. There was a crowd outside the door to the shop. Once again, Malfoy dragged Harry over to a wall and they laid up flat against it.

A few moments later, the proprietor was back upstairs looking confused.

“Alright, Everett?” someone from the crowd outside asked.

“I think ‘e must ‘av left,” Everett said.

“Well keep an eye out.”

The crowd outside seemed disappointed, but they all meandered off. The door was still open. Malfoy squeezed his arm and they started walking out.

Harry saw Kurstif searching the alley when they walked out, but luckily there was no sign of the cat. Carefully and slowly, the two of them walked out of Knockturn Alley and into Diagon Alley.

“What’s the plan?” Harry asked.

“We’ll stay under here until the Polyjuice wears off,” Malfoy said. “I’m definitely not showing this face off anywhere anytime soon.”

“What about Mr. Borgin?” Harry asked.

“He’ll keep his mouth shut,” Malfoy said. “He won’t want that goblin knowing it was him who sent us her way. Though, I don’t think he’ll want to see me in his shop anytime soon.”

“So how do we get back?” Harry asked. “I don’t really want to fly from here to Scotland.”

“Same way we got here,” Malfoy said. “We’ll just use the Leaky Cauldron’s Floo. Are you any good with glamours?”
“Enough so you won’t look like a Malfoy,” Harry said.

“Good,” Malfoy said. “Let’s just find somewhere to wait out this potion.”

They started looking around, careful to stay practically glued together. Fitting multiple people under the cloak wasn’t as easy as it had been when he was eleven.

“Merlins beard,” Malfoy said. “When that kneazle jumped you I thought we were dead. How do you do this sort of thing on a regular basis?”

“It just sort of happens,” Harry said. “You can either deal with it or you can get cursed by a goblin in an alley.”

“I’m pretty sure at this point you can’t just say that these things just happen to you,” Malfoy said.

“You shouldn’t hold that book like that,” Harry said by way of response. Malfoy was holding it splayed open by one cover.

Malfoy shook his head. “Did you see how she opened it?” he asked. “I don’t think we’ll get it open again if we close it.”

There was a space in between the ice cream shop and the pet shop and they camped out there, sitting on an empty crate, huddled together under the cloak. Now that they were out of danger and cooling off, Harry found himself once again distracted to be pressed up against the other boy.

“Quidditch,” Harry said suddenly.

“What?” Malfoy asked.

“We should talk about quidditch, or something,” Harry said.

Malfoy laughed.

“So have you figured out what the third task is yet?” he asked.

“No,” Harry said. “Why? Have you?”

“Haven’t heard a word,” Malfoy said. “But you have a way of figuring out things you aren’t supposed to have.”

“Oh,” Harry said. “No, though if I had the opportunity to figure it out, I’d definitely take it. We’ll need all the time we can get to prepare.”

“I wonder if Diggory has a team like your Weasley does,” Malfoy asked.

“Hufflepuffs stick together,” Harry said with a shrug. Cedric was a seventh year. Harry was sure he would be fine.

“You have to wonder,” Malfoy said. “What sort of stunt are they going to pull if they’ve already had dragons and underwater battles?”

Harry groaned.

“Ron joked about a nundu,” Harry said. “And I’m sure they wouldn’t, but who knows.”

“I’ve always wanted to see one,” Malfoy said. “Maybe I’ll get my wish.” He sounded hopeful.
Harry elbowed him in the tight confines of the cloak and he chuckled.

“Okay, so let’s talk quidditch.”

It didn’t seem like an hour had passed when Malfoy started shrinking and his face went back to normal. He pinched a lock of his hair and pulled it down so he could look at it with his eyes rolled up.

“Back to platinum,” he said with a somewhat relieved smile. “Come on now, let’s see how good your glamours are. Now don’t make me a hag or I’ll hex you again.”

“I’ll glamour your face,” Harry said. “But you never know if someone will be able to see through it, so I’m going to transfigure your hair, and you’re going to wear my glasses, just in case.”

Malfoy nodded, though he looked wary of letting Harry use transfiguration on him.

Harry gave him short red hair and freckles and hoped he didn’t blush for it. He also glamored him wider lips and gave him a broader chin and jaw.

“Do you have a mirror?” Malfoy asked.

Harry shook his head.

“Alright,” he said. “I’m trusting you here.” He handed Harry the book, still splayed open and used a couple of charms to change the color of his robes and get rid of the trim.

Malfoy ducked out from under the cloak and left the alleyway without a backwards glance for Harry. At this point, Harry would be following his lead. Not that either of them should be leading the other. Without his glasses, Harry was having a lot of trouble, and wearing Harry's glasses, Draco was also surely having trouble.

No one tried to stop them as they made their way out of the alley and Harry felt a wave of palpable relief when they crossed into Diagon Alley. Malfoy didn’t waste any time and went directly to the Leaky Cauldron. Once inside, he paused by the fireplace and Harry grabbed his arm. Putting a sickle in the box by the fireplace, Malfoy grabbed a handful of floo powder and the both of them entered the flames. Much like Harry’s own home, Malfoy’s cottage didn’t have a name, but rather an alpha numeric code.

“You made me a fucking Weasley!” Malfoy accused. There was a mirror over the fireplace.

Harry pulled off the cloak. “I figured no one would suspect a Malfoy would disguise himself with red hair and freckles.” He tried his best to sound earnest.

Malfoy rolled his eyes and pulled out his wand. The glamours removed and the transfiguration undone, he carefully examined himself once more in the mirror.

“I didn’t make you look like a hag,” Harry said.

“Yeah, is that what you’re into? A strong jawline?”

Harry flushed. “What? No,” he said. “I guess we should…” He gestured towards the door.

“Hold on,” Malfoy said. “Fifi.”

Fifi appeared in the room with a soft pop. “How can Fifi be helping Master Draco?” she asked with an obsequious bow.
“The dagger that’s on the mantle in my room,” Malfoy said. “Go ahead and get that for me.”

“Right away Master Malfoy.”

“Dagger?” Harry asked askance.

“It’s magical,” Malfoy said. “Goblin made, should slice that book’s cover right off. I don’t want to have to worry about it closing on us.”

“Right,” Harry said. “Shouldn’t we just read it.”

“First thing’s first,” Malfoy said.

Fifi reappeared before Malfoy and bowed while simultaneously holding up the dagger in front of her. Harry was surprised she didn’t overbalance.

“Excellent,” Malfoy said, taking up the dagger. He held out his hand for the book.

Harry passed it over and watched as Malfoy sliced off the bindings. The dagger was razor sharp and didn’t meet any resistance.

“Nice dagger,” Harry said, as though his training made him any sort of authority on the matter.

Malfoy smirked and sheathed it before handing it over to Harry.

“What makes it special,” Harry asked.

Malfoy shrugged. "A bunch of enchantments they won’t tell you about, probably some sort of gold, silver, steel alloy to handle all the charm work.”

Harry almost dropped it when Malfoy said silver, but of course, he didn’t need to worry about that when he had the second skin around his hands. He unsheathed it and tried out it’s heft and balance, flipping it in his hand to feel the weight of it smack his palm as he switched for a reverse grip.

“Showing off?” Malfoy asked.

Harry blushed.

“Just testing it,” Harry said.

“It’s not for fighting,” Malfoy said. “It’s for rituals.”

“You do rituals with this?” Harry asked scandalized, suddenly feeling as though the silver was indeed burning him. He glanced at the blade as though he were going to find blood.

“Well, no,” Malfoy said. “But I could. It’s been in the family for generations. Got any goats? I could show you.”

Harry looked at him in horror.

“Oh, don’t act like you’ve never helped that… Hagrid… feed his carnivores.”

“Yeah, the stuff’s already dead,” Harry said, sheathing the dagger.

Malfoy gave him a supercilious look. “Well, relax, I was teasing. I don’t like to get my hands dirty. I doubt this thing’s even been used in the past century.”
Harry wouldn’t bet on it.

“Fifi, send this to the incinerator,” Malfoy said.

A snap of Fifi’s fingers vanished the book cover.

“I suppose we should go,” Malfoy said.

“Oh, Master Draco, I is making a late lunch for you already,” Fifi said. “I is making your favorites.”

“I thought we agreed on a snack,” Malfoy said.

“Master Draco is a growing boy,” Fifi said. “Mistress is telling Fifi to take good care of Master Draco when he is in my care.”

Malfoy blushed, the color stark on his pale skin. “Fifi there isn’t even any furniture here to eat lunch on.”

“There are being blankets,” Fifi said. “And the grounds are being charmed for the weather.”

Malfoy hesitated before shrugging. “Yeah, why not, we’ve got time,” he said. “Who wants to fly on an empty stomach.”

“Are we having a picnic?” Harry asked. He’d been very aware the entire time they had been gone that he had left Ron and Hermione back in Hogsmeade and he didn’t really want to have another distraction.

“Yes we are,” Malfoy said.

“I thought today wouldn’t get any weirder,” Harry said. He wasn’t going to tell Malfoy that he wanted to go back to check up on his friends.

“Put the dagger back, Fifi,” Malfoy said. “We’ll set up lakeside.”

Harry didn’t think when Malfoy said lake that he would be staring at a massive lake in the ‘cottage’s’ back yard. He also didn’t expect said cottage to be the only home in sight.

“Does your family own a lake?” Harry asked.

“For now,” Malfoy said with a bit of a grimace. “I guess we should enjoy it while we’ve got it.”

“An entire lake,” Harry said. “This huge ginormous lake.”

“Well it isn’t as big as the one at the manor,” Malfoy said.

“Two lakes,” Harry said. “Your family owns two lakes.”

Malfoy shrugged.

“It’s completely covered in wards, isn’t it,” Harry said. “No one else can even get close to it.”

“Well we can’t just have muggle hikers showing up, now can we,” Malfoy said. “I wouldn’t be able to fly. Besides, I bet Professor Snape’s got your place warded just the same.”

“We didn’t gobble up an entire lake,” Harry said. “Two lakes.”
Malfoy just laughed.

There was already a blanket set out with way more food than the two of them could possibly eat.

“Well let’s see what your favorites are,” Harry said turning his attention to the food. Malfoy wasn’t the only one who was starving.

The answer it turned out, was ridiculous rich person food. There was caviar and sea urchin, gold leaf topped pastries, and Kobe beef carpaccio, among other things. Harry found himself drawn to the blood red meat. The full moon was less than a week away.

The weather on the grounds really was pleasant and Harry followed suit when Malfoy shed his robes and undid his collar. Harry wasn’t really sure how to picnic but just copied Malfoy when he lounged down on his side and started picking at the finger food.

“Should we read the book?” Harry asked.

“Potter, you’re probably eating the best food of your life right now, how about you enjoy it,” Malfoy said.

“You’re making some assumptions,” Harry said. “You’ve never eaten Mrs. Weasley’s meat pies.”

Malfoy laughed. “Are you serious?” he asked. “Try the caviar, it’s beluga. The black garlic takes it to another level.”

Harry tried it, and yeah, it was ridiculously good for fish eggs, but, “Nope, meat pies,” Harry said. “This is good though.” He went back to the carpaccio.

“What am I going to do with you?”

Harry shrugged. “Something that doesn’t involve dungeons or poison, I hope,” he said. “Or ritual daggers.”

“Well you’re no fun,” Malfoy said. He lay back then and seemed to just enjoy the sun. With the air charmed to be warm, it really was very pleasant to be outside. When the beef was gone and he had sampled everything else, Harry lay back too and tried to just enjoy it. Let himself be convinced for a moment that everything they were looking for was in that book and that Ron would win the tournament hands down and they’d all get to go home safe for the summer, and they’d see each other whenever they wanted and everything would be perfect. It was a nice daydream.

“So how was your first adventure?” Harry asked.

“Excuse you?” Malfoy said. “The forbidden forest in first year was my first adventure, though this was about as nerve wrecking.” Both hands came up to cover his face. “Seriously, that was horrible.”

“Well when you get back to the castle you can curl up by the fireplace with a hot coco and destress,” Harry said.

Malfoy hummed. “Fancy a swim?” he asked.

Harry’s eyes popped open.

“The lake’s not charmed, is it?” Harry asked.
Malfoy laughed. “No, I can guarantee you that unlike the air, the water is definitely freezing this time of year. After today though, I could use a bit of a jolt.”

“That’s what coffee’s for,” Harry said. “No more jolts, there’ve been too many jolts today.”

Malfoy was already taking off his shirt.

“You’re serious,” Harry said.

“Always,” Malfoy said.

“You don’t have a swimsuit,” Harry said.

“There’s no one else around,” Malfoy said.

Harry blushed.

“Bashful?” Malfoy asked. “I can have Fifi bring you some trunks.”

“The water’s freezing,” Harry said, and suddenly Malfoy didn’t have a shirt on and Harry thought suddenly that cooling down might do him some good.

“Well if you don’t think you can handle it,” Malfoy said, a bit of challenge in his voice as he undid the laces on his shoes.

“I can totally handle it,” Harry said, indignantly.

“Well?” Malfoy asked, shucking his trousers.

“I can’t swim,” Harry said.

“Oh, I can teach you,” Malfoy said.

“Ron’s going to teach me,” Harry said. “When the lake’s a sane temperature. Also, that would take forever, and I’m not spending forever in that lake.” Definitely not naked while Malfoy helped him paddle or whatever.

“It’s shallow enough near the shore,” Malfoy said. He turned around and dropped his pants before calmly walking towards the water. Harry was sure that he tried to wade into the water in a dignified manner, but by the time he was up to his knees he started tensing up and he wound up just diving forward. He came back up a moment later with a gasping ‘whoop,’ now standing with the water up to his chest. “Merlin, it is in fact freezing. It’s great. And see?” he said, gesturing around him. “No swimming required.” There was a challenge in his eyes and a smirk on his lips.

Harry found himself heavily conflicted. ‘You only live once,’ he reminded himself. He ignored the fact that Malfoy was watching him about as well as he ignored the water dripping from the other boy’s hair. With his heart pounding in his chest, and feeling a good deal bit warmer than the weather should allow, Harry started taking off his shirt. For all the bravado he was feigning, Harry was really wishing he’d gone first; Malfoy had gotten to turn around before shucking his pants, but Harry wasn’t about to walk backwards into the water.

Harry wondered if occluding would allow him to manage the calm walk into the water that Malfoy had failed. The answer was that he could, up to a certain point just below his waist when an involuntary yelp escaped his mouth.
The ride back was all the more awkward with Malfoy holding on to him after he’d just seen the boy naked, but Harry managed to make it back to Hogsmeade without having a heart attack.

Finally, when they were back they had a look inside of the book. Harry wasn’t completely surprised by what was inside. Malfoy did some weird charm on the book and Harry left to give it to the Headmaster, who wasn’t terribly surprised that Harry had gone on a field trip. At Malfoy’s request, he didn’t mention the other boy at all in the retelling of the story.

It was Ginny and the twins he ran into first as she made her way back to the tower with a bag from Honeydukes in hand.

“You let Ron and Hermione have a date?” she asked.

“Yeah,” Harry said.

“Don’t worry,” said Fred. “We teased them.”

“I wasn’t worried,” Harry said. “Um, so, I told you I’d tell you if anything developed,” he said to Ginny.

Ginny was suddenly serious.

“Who?” she asked.

“Ludo Bagman,” Harry said. “I mean, I don’t know he did it, but I know he placed a two thousand galleon bet with a shady booke that Ron would die in the tournament.”

“Has he been arrested?” George asked.

Harry shrugged. “I don’t know,” he said.

“What do you know?” Fred asked.

“Literally everything I just told you,” Harry said.

“How did you find out?” Ginny asked.

“I just saw Dumbledore,” Harry said. “I’d gone to badger him about it actually. Have you seen Ron and Hermione?”

“They were ahead of us,” Ginny said.

“Cool,” Harry said. “I’ll see you.”

“Perhaps a bit later than expected.” That was his Dad. Harry turned around and it only took one look to know that his Dad knew exactly what he’d been up to that day.

“Hey, Dad, I was, um, planning to talk to you later,” Harry said.

“Were you indeed?” his Dad said. “Well I suppose now is as good a time as any. It is almost time for dinner.

Harry turned back to the Weasleys. “We’ll let them know you’re indisposed,” Ginny said.
“See you,” Harry said, trying not to sound like he knew he was in trouble.

“Am I in trouble?” Harry asked, when they were down the hall and out of earshot.

“What do you think?” his Dad asked.

Harry sighed. He’d known that if they’d found something that it would have wound up in front of some authority, but after leaving the Headmaster’s office without so much as a slap on the wrist, Harry had been hopeful. He supposed that the Headmaster had just decided to leave it to Harry’s Dad.

“To be honest I don’t think there’s any point,” his Dad said.

“What?” Harry asked.

“Detention, essays; they’re not going to change your behavior,” his Dad said.

Harry kept his eyes forward. “So you’re going to try something else?”

His Dad frowned and stopped walking, waiting until Harry looked up at him.

“My promise to never use physical punishment has not changed,” he said. “It’s never going to change.”

“Right,” Harry said. “Yeah. Sorry.”

“You don’t need to apologize for being worried,” his Dad said, putting a hand on his shoulder.

“Right,” Harry nodded. “Thanks, for um, yeah, okay, so about punishment.”

His Dad gestured down the hall and they continued down the hall, his hand still on Harry’s shoulder as they walked. “What I meant, was that the consequences of last year haven’t changed your behavior, and I don’t expect anything really will. If you were frivolously endangering yourself, I believe I could correct it, but when you think someone needs saving, when Mr. Weasley needs saving, I’m very certain that there isn’t any real way to discourage you.”

“So why’d you look upset when you found me just now?” Harry asked.

“Harry, my son just went in secret to Knockturn Alley and stole from a goblin,” his Dad said. “Just because I am resigned doesn’t mean I can’t be worried or upset.”

“Sorry.”

“Did it occur to you to bring your hypothesis to Dumbledore?” his Dad asked. “There are Aurors investigating the case.”

“Sure,” Harry said. “But they have to follow rules. They can’t just go up and steal something.”

His Dad gave him a look with a raised eyebrow.

“Well yeah, I should follow rules too, and not steal stuff, but if she’s taking bets on Ron dying I think I’m in the right,” Harry said.

“Merlin preserve me,” his Dad said. “Come on then. You can tell me all about it over dinner, and then you can run wand drills until you’re good and exhausted.”
“I thought you weren’t going to punish me,” Harry said indignantly.

“I should hope that you don’t see my training you to survive as a punishment,” his Dad said. "If you are going to continue to run headfirst into danger, I will have to make sure you are ready for it.”

Harry sighed, a bit petulantly. Then he said, “There is something I won’t tell you about today.” Much as he hated to admit it, he did owe Malfoy, and he wasn’t about to get him in trouble.

“Be assured,” his Dad said. “I already know of your involvement of an unusual ally.”

Harry groaned.

Harry got back up to the tower right before the fifth year curfew, when he was good and exhausted. Not for the first time, Harry wished that his dorm and his Dad’s quarters weren’t about as far apart as you could get in the castle.

He found Ron sitting on his bed with a mystery novel Bill had sent him from Egypt. He looked distracted though, and when he saw Harry, the first thing out of his mouth was “Ludo Fucking Bagman.”

“Yeah,” Harry said, kicking off his shoes, and climbing onto Ron’s bed.

“I’ve had tea with the guy,” Ron said.

“Yeah,” Harry said.

“He’s friends with my Dad,” Ron said.

“That really sucks,” Harry nodded and Ron sighed and rubbed vigorously at his face.

“At least it’s over now,” he said. “At the very least, I can tell myself I don’t have to keep looking over my shoulder. I mean, I’m still going to do it, but now I can tell myself I’m being stupid.”

“You’re not stupid,” Harry said.

Ron gave him a half smile.

“It’s over now,” Ron said. “I just have to survive the third task, and hopefully no one will be trying to kill me. Hey, do you think maybe he was the one who put your name in in the first place? Maybe he was going to bet on you or something.”

Harry shrugged. Wouldn’t that be a nice wrap-up to it all. “How was your date?” he asked.

“The twins found us,” Ron said.

“I heard,” Harry said. “They didn’t ruin it did they?”

“Well, no,” Ron said. “It was nice actually. It was really nice. We held hands all day.”

“Held hands did you?” Harry asked waggling his eyebrows.
“Yeah,” Ron said, making no further comment on it. “So what did you do for the rest of the day, besides badgering Dumbledore about my would be murderer?”

Since Malfoy had made him promise not to tell anyone about his involvement in the day’s caper, Harry had found himself having to decide which part he wanted to tell Ron about. Because if he told him that he’d gone out to Knockturn Alley and stolen the book, he wouldn’t be able to tell Ron…

“I went skinny dipping with a cute boy from our year,” Harry said.

Because if he told Ron both of those things, then Ron might put two and two together. Also, Harry didn’t want to give Ron another reason to feel beholden to him, so really, his skinny dipping adventure was all he really felt like talking about.

“You did not,” Ron said, a look of absolute disbelief on his face.

“I did,” Harry said. “I really really did.”

“For real?,” Ron said.

“For real,” Harry said.

“Naked?” Ron asked.

“Naked,” Harry agreed.

“Where?” Ron asked.

“Lake,” Harry said, not specifying which one. “A secluded bit, of course.”

“You can’t swim,” Ron said.

“Just waded in a bit,” Harry said.

“It’s fucking freezing though,” Ron said.

“Yes it fucking was,” Harry said. “Which is why it was more of a dare than anything else.”

“You went skinny dipping in the lake on a dare,” Ron said.

“An implicit dare,” Harry said.

“It just doesn’t seem like you,” Ron said.

Harry frowned. “You don’t think I should have done it?” Harry asked.

“What? No,” Ron said. “I mean it’s great, you went out and had fun and stuff, you know, freezing your nuts off, I’m just… pleasantly surprised.”

“Me too, actually,” Harry said with a bit of a shy smile. “I mean, I do adventurous stuff now and then, but this was like, socially adventurous. A bit mortifying, but it was fun. Even though, yeah, I totally froze my nuts off.”

“So, you do anything besides skinny dipping?” Ron asked, taking his turn at wriggling his eyebrows.
Harry sputtered. “What, no, nothing like that. We just had a picnic, I guess.”

“Oh, a picnic huh,” Ron said. “Sounds like a nice date. Are you going to see him again?”

“What?” Harry asked. “Date? No, it wasn’t a date. Like at all. It just sort of happened.”

Ron looked at him skeptically. “You went on a picnic at a secluded part of the lake and went skinny dipping alone with just another guy and it just sort of happened.”

“Well, I mean, when you put it like that, you could make anything sound like a date,” Harry said.

“I just told you exactly what you told me!” Ron said.

“Okay, well, it really did just sort of happen,” Harry said. “It definitely wasn’t a date.”

“Are you sure he didn’t think it was a date?” Ron asked.

“Definitely,” Harry said. “I don’t even know if he likes guys.”

Ron gave him a look. “So do I get to find out who this mystery guy is or is it a secret?”

Harry bit his lip. “You can’t tell anyone,” he said.

“Lips are sealed,” Ron said.

“Promise,” Harry said.

“Absolutely,” Ron said.

“Not even Hermione,” Harry said.

“I will take it to my grave,” Ron said.

“You absolutely can’t tell anyone,” Harry said.

“Harry, I promise I won’t tell anyone who you went skinny dipping with,” Ron said.

“Okay,” Harry said, drawing the curtains and then his wand for some privacy charms. Rita Skeeter seemed to have disappeared off the face of the earth, and Harry couldn’t really be bothered to care, but just in case, he still took precautions.

Ron looked at him expectantly.

“Are you ready for this?” Harry asked.

“I think I’m good,” Ron said patronizingly.

Harry bit his lip.

“Draco Malfoy,” he said.

Ron gasped. “No freaking way,” he said.

“Yes,” was all Harry said.

“Just by random happenstance you had a romantic picnic with Malfoy,” Ron said.
“It was not romantic,” Harry said, though now he wasn’t so sure.

“And then the two of you got naked,” Ron continued.

“You are taking that way out of context,” Harry said.

“And splashed around in the lake,” Ron said.

“We were splashing each other to be jerks, Ron,” Harry said. “It was freezing, we were splashing each other with freezing cold water. It was not romantic.”

“Uh huh,” Ron said.

“You sound like you want there to be something between me and Malfoy,” Harry accused.

“No, no,” Ron said. “I mean you could do better, but hey, he is good looking, and you’re not going to go make house with him or anything, so why not.”

“You’ve got to be kidding,” Harry said.

Ron shrugged. “I mean, he hasn’t done anything evil for a while.”

“You were literally just saying last week that he’s up to something,” Harry accused.

“Well sure,” Ron said. “Like normal rich pureblood stuff, they’re always up to something. Not necessarily evil take over the world something, but you know, something.”

“I feel like I’ve jumped into an alternate reality,” Harry said.

“I mean you can totally do better,” Ron said.

“But you’re really just saying that to be nice, and you really think Malfoy’s my only hope for romance here.”

“No,” Ron said. “Not at all. Just… I don’t know. Did you have fun?”

Harry thought about the day he’d just had. Besides all the terror and sitting around in a dirty alley… “Yes,” he said.

“Well there you go then,” Ron said. "Make out, go on some dates, figure out what his wicked plans are and voila, you've had your first boyfriend and your first breakup."

Harry rolled his eyes. “It still wasn’t a date,” he said, now wishing he could tell Ron the whole story so he’d get that it totally wasn’t a date.

“You keep telling yourself that,” Ron said.

“And you can’t tell anyone,” Harry said.

“Yeah, I’m really regretting that one now,” Ron said. “Not that I’d out anyone, but I really really want to tell everyone that Malfoy took you out on a date and you didn’t realize it.”

“You suck,” Harry said.

“I suck?” Ron protested. “You’re the one who told me the juiciest story I’ve heard in a long time and made me promise not to tell anyone.”
“The sacrifices we make for friends,” Harry said sagely.

“Invite me to the wedding,” Ron said, though Harry was certain Ron would not be so cheeky if something actually serious developed between him and Malfoy.

Harry snorted. “Absolutely nothing romantic happened.”

“I’m sure Malfoy would be crushed to hear that,” Ron laughed.

Harry threw himself back onto Ron’s pillow and covered his face with his hands. “I shouldn’t tell you these things.”

“Mate you can tell me anything,” Ron said. “Just, you know, don’t tell me how good Malfoy is at making out, I really don’t need to hear that.”

Harry threw the pillow at Ron’s head.

“My pillow,” Ron cried out.

Harry got teased a fair bit more before they decided to start a project for Transfiguration together. The curtains were opened and the both of them got their books out. Neville waved at them from his bed, having arrived some time when they had been cloistered.

“We’re doing transfiguration,” Harry said.

“I finished with Hannah earlier,” Neville said. “Though if you want to look at it when your done with yours that would be nice.”

“Sure,” Harry said.

They didn’t get far when Dean and Seamus walked in. Dean was clearly teasing Seamus about something, but Seamus elbowed him when he spotted Harry and Ron looking their way. Seamus walked silently into the room towards his bed while Dean was halted in the doorway.

“It’s been months,” Dean said.

“What?” Seamus asked.

“It’s been months,” Dean said again. “Why are we still doing this?”

“Exactly,” Seamus said. “Just drop it.”

“No,” Dean said. “I can’t just drop it. You’re being a dick. I know you know you’re being a dick. You know there’s nothing wrong with them. So why can’t you just apologize and we can stop being all awkward around each other.”

“You seem to think you know an awful lot about what’s going on in my head,” Seamus said angrily. “You don’t know anything.”

“I know you can’t keep hiding behind shit your mum says,” Dean said

“Don’t talk about my mum,” Dean said.

“Why not?” Dean said. “She seems happy talking trash about your friends.”

“They’re not my friends,” Seamus said.
“I’m your friend,” Dean yelled. “You’re my best friend and I couldn’t just tell you I was gay because I had to worry about whether or not you’d still be my friend if you knew.”

“What? No. Fuck off, don’t even…” Seamus said. “I know you’re not fucking gay. That’s a stupid way to win an argument.”

“Yes,” Dean said. “I am, Seamus. I’m gay. I’ve known I was gay since I was twelve, and I’ve listened to you make jokes about… about me as long as I’ve known you.”

“Fuck off,” Seamus said, angrily. “Look, Weasley can go ahead and date girls and be straight and just decide to jump on the gay bandwagon because he thinks it’s cool, but if you expect me to believe you’ve been gay this whole time, you’re a nutter.”

“Gay what now?” Ron asked in anger.

Dean, however didn’t have anything else to say. He stormed over to his trunk and dug down deep, pulling out one of his sketchpads. He shoved it into Seamus’s hands and started walking out of the room. “Yeah, I’m fucking straight,” he said. “Why don’t you look in there and see how straight I am.” He stormed out.

Harry, Ron, and Neville were left staring at Seamus who seemed frozen for a moment before he looked down at the sketchpad in his hand. Flipping through it, his hands started shaking before he stopped on one page, staring at it dead eyed.

“Fuck,” was all Seamus had to say.

“Yeah, fuck,” Ron said. “Good fucking job, you fucking asshole. Now I don’t know about you, but I’ve got a gay friend I need to talk to right now.”

Seamus didn’t say anything as Ron walked out, Harry right behind him. When they got to the bottom of the stairs, Harry realized that Neville had followed them also. Luckily, Dean wasn’t exactly hiding, he was in the back corner of the common room on one of the couches as Elanor Doogle, a seventh year prefect, was checking up on him.

“You’re sure you’re all right?” she was asking. “You looked pretty upset.”

“Yeah, um, I’m good, really,” said Dean, who looked decidedly not good.

“Hey, we’ve got this,” Ron said.

Elanor gave them a suspicious look, but Dean nodded and she turned back to him.

“I’ll be studying over there if you need anything,” she said.

“Thanks,” Dean said.

They all sat around him, trying to gauge how he was doing.

“Did he say anything after I left?” Dean asked.

“He said ‘fuck,’” Neville supplied. Harry wondered if he had missed the part where Neville was cursing now.

“Like, ‘fuck’ as in…?” Dean prompted.

“I don’t know,” Ron said. “I could tell you it was a ‘fuck, I’ve been a bastard,’ but it could just as
easily been a ‘fuck, those gays are everywhere.’ I don’t want to get your hopes up that you’re going to go back up there and he’s not going to be a, you know, a bastard.”

“I shouldn’t have told him,” Dean said. “I really shouldn’t have shown him those sketches… did he look at them?”

“Yeah, that’s where the ‘fuck’ came from,” Harry said. “But, you know, whether he accepts you or not, I don’t think it was a mistake, telling him. And if you want to, you can hang out with us, if you can’t hang out with Seamus anymore. We talk about boys all the time, it’s fun.”

“Me too,” Neville said. “I mean, the hanging out bit, I don’t know that I really have anything to contribute to the boy talk.”

“Thanks,” Dean said. “That means a lot, all of you.”

“Yeah,” Neville said. “Um, actually, I really do need to finish my divination homework before tomorrow, so I’ll…”

“Night, Neville,” Dean said.

“Thanks for coming with us,” Ron said.

“Yeah,” Harry added.

“Night,” Neville said.

“Just make a bunch of stuff up,” Dean said. “It always works.”

“Make stuff up?” Ron asked.

“She eats it all up,” Dean said. “Neville spends so much time trying to get his star charts right.”

“So…” Ron said. “What was in the sketchpad you showed him?”

Dean groaned. “It’s embarrassing.”

“Can’t be as embarrassing as Harry here going out on a date and not realizing it,” Ron said.

“You promised,” Harry said, scandalized.

“No, I promised I wouldn’t tell who you went out on a date with,” Ron said. “Plus, we’re cheering up Dean now.

“Yeah,” Harry said, now resigned. It was for a good cause.

“So how’d you not know it was a date?” Dean asked.

“It really wasn’t,” Harry said.

“Well according to Harry, ‘it just sort of happened,’” Ron said. “But get this-“

Harry groaned. Ron looked at him expectantly.

“Well there was a picnic,” Harry said.

“A secluded lakeside picnic,” Ron added.
“Very romantic,” Dean said.

“Followed by, wait for it…”

Harry covered his face with his hands. “Skinny dipping in the lake,” he mumbled through them.

Dean gave a surprised laugh.

“It was a dare,” Harry said quickly. “Because of how cold it was.”

“Yeah,” Dean said. “But you’re the guy who’s always changed behind his curtains. You’re telling me you went skinny dipping in broad daylight?”

“We didn’t have trunks,” Harry defended, not mentioning the fact that they’d been offered.

“I’m pretty sure you can do a drying charm on your pants,” Dean said.

“It just sort of happened,” Harry said. “And it was a dare.”

“Well if you go out on a second date, Harry, you’re really going to have to up your game, because this guy’s smooth.”

“And good looking,” Ron said.

“No second date,” Harry said. “There was no first date, everything’s just way out of context.”

“Yeah yeah,” Ron said. “Okay, so Harry got embarrassed, so spill about the sketchpad.”

“Woah, woah, woah,” Harry said. “I think if we’re all sharing embarrassing stories, you should share first if you want Dean to spill. I mean, I’ve got a few suggestions if you can’t think about anything.”

“Oh Merlin,” Ron said. “I guess I walked right into this one… Okay, so you know how I went on a date today with Hermione, and how both of us totally knew we were on a date?”

“Yes,” Harry said. “I do recall.”

“Well, what I didn’t tell you was that I was leaning in to kiss Hermione at the end, when some pillock set off a Zonkos firecracker. So I turn my head to see what the commotion is, meanwhile I’m still leaning forward, and I end up mashing the side of my face into Hermione. Like, her nose was in my ear.”

“For real?” Dean asked.

“For real,” Ron said.

“And here I thought you didn’t kiss and tell,” Harry accused.

“Well there wasn’t any kissing after that, now was there,” Ron said.

“I don’t know, Ron,” Harry said. “That wasn’t exactly the most embarrassing thing in the world.”

“Oh, I didn’t think we were going for the most embarrassing thing in the world,” Ron said. “What did you have in mind?”

“That thing you told me about, um,” Harry suddenly blushed, feeling second hand embarrassment. 
“You know, that thing that happened a few summers ago, when you thought you were home alone.”

“What? That?” Ron asked with a laugh. He turned to Dean. “My mum caught me wanking. Thought she’d be in the garden all morning, next thing I know she’s asking me if I want to help her make preserves. We got a pretty solid door knocking policy after that.”

“How is that not more embarrassing?” Harry asked.

“Well it was embarrassing in the moment,” Ron said. “But everybody does it. Now striking out with my girlfriend? That’s embarrassing.”

“I’m pretty sure everybody strikes out at some point,” Dean said.

“Yeah, I guess,” Ron said. “Now, not realizing you’re on a date? Pretty sure that’s just Harry.”

“Was not a date,” Harry said.

“Sure Harry,” Ron said patronizingly.

“So are you going to be alright?” Harry asked Dean.

“Yeah,” Dean said. “This has sort of been coming for a while, I guess. I’ll probably come out to the school later this week or something. Seamus was the main reason I haven’t up till now. Assuming he doesn’t just tell everyone tomorrow over breakfast.”

“He better not,” Ron said darkly.

Dean shrugged. “So, sketchpad,” he said.

“Anything risqué?” Ron asked.

Dean wiggled his hand in the ‘so-so’ gesture. “Remember that Witch Broomstick article about Dereck Bittle from the Eagles?”


“I drew that,” Dean said. “And a bunch of other stuff. A lot of my favorite football players. But, the worst is probably the one’s I drew of Seamus.”

“You’ve got dirty sketches of Seamus in there?” Ron asked.

“Not dirty,” Dean defended. “Just… cute. Like, drawings of him and me being… together. It was stupid.”

“It’s not stupid,” Harry said.

“Yeah,” Ron said.

“Showing him was stupid,” Dean said.

“He’s the one who’s being stupid,” Ron said.

“Yeah,” Harry said.

“Well you’re the one who goes for the smart ones,” Dean said.
“I sure do,” Ron said.

“So are you going to talk to him?” Harry asked.

Dean shook his head. “I’ve said what I’ve got to say, the sketchpad says the rest. If he wants to talk- well, the ball’s in his court.”

“Well I have to say, you’re handling this a lot better than I did when Ron and I were fighting.”

“Just come hang out with us if you want to,” Ron said. “Hermione doesn’t bite, but she might make you study.”

“Are you going to go up, or are you going to stay down here for a while?” Harry asked.

“I’ll stay down here for a bit,” Dean said.

“Cool,” Harry said. “I’ll just go get some school stuff.”

“It’s late,” Dean said. “You don’t need to stay up with me.”

Harry shrugged. “When Professor McGonagall asks us how our projects are going tomorrow, I want to at least have made a bit of headway.” He went up stairs real quick. Seamus’s bed curtains were drawn, and Harry could see the sketchbook placed on top of Dean’s trunk. He gathered up his school stuff and went back down stairs.

Harry was pretty sure Dean and Seamus didn’t talk the next day, and he wasn’t surprised when Dean joined them for homework after class. Dean did wind up coming out later that week; Seamus hadn’t said anything. There were some comments about it being catching or that the twins were testing their experiments on the underclassmen in the dorm, but besides that it was largely a nonevent.

Having Dean hanging out with them might have added just a bit more to the difficulty later that week when Harry ducked out for the full moon. Luckily though, it was a Friday, and he could use the excuse of a weekend away with his Dad. It was also a good opportunity to talk to Remus about all the drama that had sprung up in his life. He told him about the date that wasn’t a date, but this time with the context of the mystery boy who had helped him pull off a caper in Knockturn Alley. Even still though, Remus thought it sort of sounded like a date. Which it totally wasn’t. Harry’d been finding himself eyeballing Malfoy from time to time.

The news broke over the weekend about Bagman’s arrest, the whole sordid tale of debt and gambling and attempted murder coming out in the Sunday edition of the Prophet. Much like Ron had said, it did feel like the danger was passed, even though there was still the third task, and no one had told him if they thought that it was Bagman who’d put Harry’s name into the cup in the first place. Harry still wasn’t sure if that had been some sort of plot of the Headmaster’s that involved Voldemort somehow.

Voldemort was definitely still after him. Maybe he had paid Bagman to enter him into the contest or something. It didn’t matter really. What mattered was that no one was actively trying to murder Ron. They just had to get him ready for the third task and everything would be fine.
Of course, there was still whatever was going on with the Headmaster’s plan. All the way back in October, the headmaster had told Harry that he would have to face Voldemort within a year. Of course that could extend all the way to the first term of the next school year. Harry could easily have another summer to get ready. But somehow he doubted that whatever was going to happen was going to wait that long.

At some point during the following week, Dean stopped hanging out with them and he and Seamus were often not to be found at about the same time. Harry didn’t think too much of it. He was glad the two were still friends, and if Seamus wanted to avoid him because he felt like an ass, that was fine with Harry. He shouldn’t have needed his best friend to come out to realize it. Tensions in the dorm at least seemed to go down, and it wasn’t exactly like it had been before Skeeter’s article had come out, how could it, but it was better. Harry and Dean were better friends now, and Dean had thanked them for being there when he needed them but he wasn’t saying anything about Seamus. A week later, when Harry walked in on the two of them making out, pressed up against the wall by Dean’s bed, all he did was think to himself ‘oh,’ and walk back out. They didn’t see him.

He felt numb to it for a few moments before he really started to think about it. Was that what it had all been about? Harry wondered. Was Harry just supposed to ignore everything that had happened before now? He had had his own self recriminations when he had first realized he was gay. He’d had his own baggage and misconceptions from the Dursleys, but he hadn’t made that anyone else’s problem. For whatever reason, the thought of Seamus upstairs happily making out with Dean really bothered him. He hadn’t even ever apologized to Harry or Ron for all the stuff he’d said about their sexualities and now he had a boyfriend or something? He wondered when exactly he’d started thinking that someone might owe him an apology for anything. Harry didn’t tell Ron about it.

Harry’s own love life was even more confusing. There were a couple of times he interacted with Draco since the caper, and Draco was friendly, but he definitely wasn’t acting like they’d gone on a date or anything. It was just this little smirk of a smile that he flashed Harry now and then that left his mind wondering. Ron was getting into his head. He definitely wasn’t into Draco anyways, so it didn’t matter.

At the end of the month Ms. Cooper came and pulled all the champions away to explain the final task: a maze with a bunch of obstacles, magical beasts and charms and curses. They’d already been studying as much as they could to get Ron ready, and knowing this didn’t help much. There was still such a broad area of knowledge that Ron would need, but they added a couple of spells they thought would help deal with the maze to the list of things Ron had to learn. There was less than a month left.

“You look good, Norman,” Carole said as Norman walked into the office. “You been sleeping more?”


“Nothing much,” Carole said. “You ready for this meeting?”

“Oh, I love starting my day off with this cloak and dagger stuff,” Norman said. “Even Bagsworth doesn’t know what this is about. Bones hasn’t called a meeting like this since the war, I don’t think.”
“Well lets hope we’re just throwing a surprise party for Jenkins,” Carole said. “It’s his birthday next week.”

The look on Bones’ face when they walked into the briefing room told them that this wasn’t a surprise party. There were only a dozen of them in there. Bones activated the security charms on the room and then added a good dozen of her own.

“I have summoned you all here because you are my most trusted Aurors,” she began. “Besides those of us in this room, the only other person who knows about this meeting is Chief Mugwump Dumbledore. This is beyond secret. Not even the Minister for Magic will know of this mission until it is being carried out. Anyone who would like to can leave now with a memory charm. Everyone who stays will be checked with veritaserum before they leave after the briefing.”

She paused. There were no takers.

“We are preparing for a mission that will take place June twenty-fourth. Our two objectives will be rescuing Harry Potter, and killing Voldemort. Please hold all questions until the end.”

The dungeons were usually where Harry ran into Draco, and this time was no exception. Of course Harry usually had his invisibility cloak and Draco usually had a posse. Harry was good enough now at silencing everything that Draco no longer knew when Harry was walking by, but sometimes, he’d tap him on the shoulder.

“Actually,” Draco was saying to the older Slytherins he was walking with. “I’ve got a project going in the potions lab, I’ll catch up to you in a bit.”

“How many projects do you have going?” one of them asked.

“Too many,” Draco said.

They waited until everyone else was out of earshot.

“I actually should go to the potions lab,” Draco said.

Harry pulled off his cloak and started shoving it into his pocket.

“What are you working on?” Harry asked as they started down a different corridor.

“Trying to see if you can replace bot fly larvae with dragon scales in a hiccup relief potion.”

“You know what?” Harry said. “After seeing what you like to eat? Sure, why not replace a common ingredient with a super expensive ingredient in a potion that should only cost you a sickle.”

“It’s a proof of concept,” Draco said.

“Are you proving it?” Harry asked.

“I’m getting there,” Draco said.

There were a few different potions left to simmer in the potions lab. Draco went over to one in the
far corner and looked at an hourglass that had been left next to his cauldron.

“That’s about right,” Draco said and added a pinch of something to the potion before resetting the hourglass.

“So I don’t know if you heard,” Harry said. “But Bagman got, like, sentenced today, so, well, thanks for, you know.”

“You’re welcome,” Draco said. “It was a nice adventure, wasn’t it?”

“Uh, sure,” Harry said, and here now was the place to ask what he’d been wanting to ask for a while. “Was that why you did it?”

Draco shook his head. “I told you, I see problems, I fix them.”

“But why though?” Harry asked. He didn’t even know what he’d do if it somehow actually turned out that Draco had plotted out some covert date.

“Now that’s the question, now isn’t it,” Draco said. “Have you ever heard of the social contract?”

“No?” Harry said, very confused and unsure of how to feel about the lack of confirmation.

“It’s this old idea that tries to explain why societies form and stuff. It’s all mostly about government and whatnot, but I’ve been reading and I think there’s just this truth that they gloss over.”

“What’s that?” Harry asked.

“That a strong just society is a benefit to everyone in it,” Draco said.

“This is you talking?” Harry asked.

“You can see it as a selfish viewpoint if you want,” Draco said.

“Okay, so your goal is to what? Make society as good as it can be?” Harry asked.

“Essentially, yes,” Draco said.

“When did you become a completely different person?” Harry asked.

“It’s hard to say,” Draco said. “Some time last year, I suppose.”


“I get what I want,” Draco said.

“Which is?” Harry asked.

“A legacy,” Draco said.

“You want to be remembered?” Harry asked.

“Like Merlin,” Draco said.

Harry shot him a skeptical look.

“When I die, I want to be remembered as the most important wizard of the millennia, the wizard
who brought our world into a new golden age and ushered in a new era of prosperity and equity.”

“What, like new world order?” Harry asked.

“No no no,” Draco said. “This isn’t some coup or war, or anything like that. It’s more like the renaissance. I want to change the way people think, the way things get done. That’s what I’ve been doing around school.”

“So you want to be remembered, by improving society, by changing the way people think,” Harry said.

“Something like that,” Draco said.

“So with Bagman,” Harry prompted.

“Well that was a bit more of a direct action, but come on. Corrupt politician trying to kill people,” Draco gave a thumbs down. “He’s not exactly what I’m going for.”

“So this little philosophy you’re spreading around is supposed to change the world?” Harry asked.

“It’s a start,” Draco said. “There’s way more to it. This is like, a life’s work, you know.”

“Just so you can be remembered?” Harry asked.

Draco shrugged.

“So like, someday, instead of people saying ‘oh Merlin,’ you want it to be ‘oh Malfoy.’”

“That would be nice,” Draco said with a coy smile.

“You realize if that happens then someday there’s going to be Hogwarts students using ‘Malfoy’s sagging balls,’ as an expletive.”

“Still worth it,” Draco said.

“And you don’t want to purge a bunch of people or anything?” Harry asked.

“Net loss of human capital to society,” Draco said.

“Huh,” Harry said. “So Sunday in Knockturn Alley was all just part of this broader plan?”

“Sort of,” Draco said. “Like I said. Corrupt politicians are bad, killing people for greed is bad, I saw an opportunity in front of me and I took it.”

“But you didn’t want credit for it,” Harry said. “Wasn’t that the point? And also, why are you telling me all of this?” he asked. “Aren’t you worried I’m going to sabotage you or spill your secrets or something?”

“Well to answer your first question, I got the credit with the person I wanted credit from, now didn’t I. I don’t need Ministry scrutiny right now. As to you telling? You won’t,” Draco said. “We aren’t competitors. I’m also pretty sure you’re going to like the world I have in mind.”

“We’re not competitors?” Harry asked.

“You’re probably going to kill the Dark Lord someday, right?”
“Um…” was all Harry could say.

“Great service to society, to be sure, you’ll do it because it’s the right thing to do, but what do you think you’ll do afterwards?”

“Assuming I’m not dead?”

“Assuming that, yes,” Draco said.

“I don’t know,” Harry said. “Potions, Quidditch, something like that.”

“You going in for some global leadership role?”

“God no,” Harry said.

“No competition,” Draco said. “And like I said, stopping You-Know-Who, great service to society, I’m all for it. He’s definitely the worst thing to happen around here for a long time, and of course it’s personal for you, you’ll go down in History books for sure, but then, so do lots of people. There’s only one Merlin, Potter. No competition.”

“No,” Harry agreed. “You’re only competing against Merlin himself.”

“What can I say,” Draco said. “I’m ambitious.”

“So what about after Knockturn Alley?” Harry asked, finally asking what he actually brought Draco aside to ask him. “Was that part of some plan?”

“After Knockturn Alley?” Draco asked.

“I mean,” Harry said. “Well, it all seemed so spur of the moment and all, but then I thought afterwards, you know, Malfoy’s got plots within plots. Maybe it wasn’t all so spur of the moment.”

“I’m confused,” Draco said.

“Was it supposed to be a date?” Harry asked.

“The picnic?” Draco asked.

“And the flying tandem part,” Harry said, blushing. “And the, um… and the skinny dipping.”

“Huh. Well it wasn’t planned,” Draco said, the tops of his cheeks now a bit red. “Fifi’s just like that.”

“Okay,” Harry said.

“Did you want it to be a date?” Draco said. “I suppose it would have been a nice one, wouldn’t it have been?”

“Um,” was Harry’s response.

“I could have planned a better one though, if I’d been trying,” Draco said, pushing himself up from his position of leaning against the lab table.

“Really?” Harry asked. “I mean it was pretty nice, wasn’t it. Did you, um, did you want it to be a date?” Draco was crossing the room towards him.
“I asked first,” Draco said, standing in front of Harry with a smirk on his face.

“Well,” Harry said, now not really sure what he was expecting to happen after he’d asked. “I mean, I don’t even know if you like guys or not.”

Suddenly, Draco was leaning into his personal space and Harry found himself leaning back just a bit against one of the lab tables.

“Was that a question you wanted me to answer?” Draco asked, his eyes cast down just a bit, and Harry might have laughed at the way Draco had tried to deepen his voice when he said that only to have it crack midway, if not for the fact that Harry’s heart was beating rapidly in his chest and he wasn’t sure he could even form words just then.

Harry nodded.

He was pretty sure you were supposed to close your eyes when someone kissed you; Draco’s eyes were closed, Harry’s own eyes were wide open, and he was trying to unfreeze his brain enough to figure out what to do with his lips or his hands, which were still pressed down on the table behind him. Before he could figure it out, it was over, and Draco was pulling back with a sort of wide eyed, somewhat panicked look on his face.

“Um,” was all he had to say, and Harry thought it was the only time he had ever seen the other boy look like he wasn’t far too sure of himself. If the kiss had been as awkward for Draco as it had been for Harry, then he definitely understood his sudden apprehension. This definitely didn’t do anything to dispel his idea that kissing was probably gross, but he didn’t really think they’d done it right, and he had come for some answers.

“Well, your answer wasn’t very clear,” Harry said. “Um, maybe you should try again.”

He’d figure it out this time.

Augustus had almost forgotten to sweep Norman’s apartment for evidence of his regular interrogations that night as he’d rushed to get back to the Dark Lord. It was no good. So many months of planning, and they knew.

Returning to the decrepit manor house, he made his way straight upstairs to his master’s chambers. Bella was outside. He would have to hope that she wouldn’t be ordered to punish him for delivering bad news.

Bella didn’t ask any questions when she saw him. She knew where he had just been, and if the look on his face communicated any of the dismay he felt just then it would be obvious something was up.

He knocked on the Dark Lord’s chambers and tried to collect himself in the long moment that passed before his master’s voice bade him to enter.

“My lord,” he said, kneeling in front of the chair in which the Dark Lord sat in his diminutive state. It was never good to bring bad news before the Dark Lord, but keeping secrets could be death.
“Tell me,” the Dark Lord commanded.

“The Aurors know everything,” Augustus said. “Crouch must have been discovered. There is a plan for the Aurors to kill you.”

Bela let out a shriek, but it was the “No,” that the Dark Lord intoned that shook Augustus to his core.

“I have come too far for those damned fools to ruin everything,” the Dark Lord said.

“My lord,” Augustus said. “They believe they have a weapon that can kill you.”

“Kill me? They do not even know what I am,” the Dark Lord said and Augustus felt a chill travel down his spine.

“They know about the ritual,” Augustus said. “And they believe they have found a way to kill you after you have been reborn.”

There was a pause.

“After I have been reborn?” the Dark Lord asked, his tone now soft.

“Yes, there’s…” and here Augustus paused, for surely if he were wrong…

“Tell me,” the dark lord commanded.

“Their mission is to kill you, my lord, on the night of the third task, and to rescue the Potter boy.”

There was a moment where his words settled upon the room. Then the Dark Lord began to laugh.

Chapter End Notes

Hey, so Draco, huh? Dean and Seamus has been coming for a while, but Draco was a bit of a recent thought. That stuff Dean was talking about, with the DNA, that’s from a great Ted talk titled Homosexuality: It's about survival - not sex by James O'Keefe. You can check it out on youtube if you want. So this chapter's been on the back burner for a while. Sorry about that, I’ve been in Grad School and I did not get nearly as much done over winter break as I wanted. The end, however, is in sight. You may have noticed that I replaced the ? for number of chapters with the number 28. Two more chapters to go. This last one has been largely plotted out for a long while now, so I'm hoping it will go a bit more quickly. Also, I'll try super hard to get stuff done over spring break. We'll see. As always, please leave a review if you have any comments.
Better

Chapter Notes

Hey, so this quarter isn’t as horrible as the last couple, so I was able to get this out a bit faster.

See the end of the chapter for more notes

Kissing, Harry had decided, was alright. As often as they seemed to do it right though, they managed to be awkward and there were far too many instances of clinking teeth and smooshed noses, and the less said about the shriek Harry had made the first time Draco had swept his tongue against Harry’s lips the better. But it was still fun, for all the tingly urgency and thrill that pumped through his veins.

Kissing was alright, great even, but sometimes it distinctly wasn’t.

Harry tensed up, and as soon as he did, Draco was pulling his head away, still largely pressed bodily on top of him. Harry tried to look anywhere but his eyes, even though they were very close in proximity.

“Seriously,” Draco huffed. “What’s wrong?”

Harry took a moment to collect himself, which rather belied the lie he was about to tell. “Nothing’s wrong,” he said. He should be occluding, but he doubted kissing would be much fun at all if he was.

Draco rolled his eyes. “If nothing were wrong we’d still be making out and the only thing I’d be worried about would be checking for hickeys before we left.”

“It’s not your fault,” Harry said.

Draco looked at him piercingly, now pulling back more and sitting up straight on the little couch he’d transfigured for them. Harry tried not to show the relief he felt to get just a bit of personal space back.

“Not my fault because it has nothing to do with me, or not my fault because I don’t know I’m doing something that’s bothering you?” Draco asked.

Harry bit his lip and Draco’s gaze darted to his mouth briefly before his questioning look went back up to stare him in the eyes.

“Because if it’s the latter, I’d much rather know so I can stop doing whatever I’m doing. We’ve only got so much time together during the week and I’d rather not waste it.”

“You mean it?” Harry asked.

“Well yeah,” Draco said. “Why, is it too much time for you?”

“No,” Harry said. “I mean, you’d stop?”
Draco looked at him like he didn’t know him. “Yeah,” he said. “If it’s making you uncomfortable. It’s not the tongue is it, because you said that was alright.”

“No that’s alright,” Harry said. “A little bit of tongue,” he clarified.

“Right,” Draco said. “So what is it?”

Harry took a deep breath and readied himself, but all that came out at first was, “You, um…”

Draco’s silence in that moment was comforting as he just looked at Harry to continue.

“You grab me, sometimes,” Harry said.

Draco shook his head. “My hands were completely above the waist,” he protested.

“No, yeah,” Harry said. “They were, that’s not… um, like my arm, or… or, um, the back of my head, or whatever.” He huffed. “I don’t like being grabbed,” he said, feeling utterly embarrassed.

“Oh,” was all Draco said for a moment. “I’m hurting you?”

“No,” Harry was quick to say. “Not like that. Just, like, at all. I don’t like being grabbed at all.”

“Oh,” Draco said again, and then very awkwardly. “Is that… your relatives?”

“Or Greyback,” Harry deflected. “Or other random death eaters, or you know, it’s just, um, it’s not your fault, or anything. I just don’t like it.”

It wasn’t just that he didn’t like it though, it transported him somewhere else, a different time, and he felt as though he should be over it, that with so much progress he’d made that this one little thing shouldn’t be getting in the way of him making out with Draco.

“Right,” Draco said. “No, yeah, I get it.”

That was about as much as he said about it. They never talked about troubling things. They didn’t talk about abuse or kidnappings or trauma. Spending time with Draco was fun, and that was all Harry was looking for. He couldn’t help it, though, to compare things with Draco to things with Ron. Ron would want to talk about it, to reassure Harry that it was alright to feel however he felt and then he’d probably share something he was going through. Harry wanted to know if his weird request was alright with Draco though or if it was just something he was willing to put up with because Harry was about the only boy in the school he could make out with.

“Thanks,” Harry said. “And sorry, um, but you know,” he had a sudden thought about how he could make it up to Draco for being weird. “I mean, if you did want your hands to go below the waist, that would be- I mean, not the front or anything, I mean…” he couldn’t keep talking anymore because he was pretty sure his face was melting off.

“You mean your butt?” Draco asked with a bit of a smirk, but that didn’t last and he was back to
giving Harry a piercing look.

Harry just nodded.

“Well you do have a rather nice one,” Draco commented, apparently letting go of whatever he was thinking.

“I do not,” Harry sputtered.

Draco shrugged. “To each their own,” he said. “So we’re good?”

“Yeah,” Harry said grinning, feeling a bit relieved that Draco wasn't horribly put off by Harry making things weird.

Draco looked at his watch. “Well we’ve got a bit more time,” he said.

Harry didn’t need any more prompting and he was soon leaning back and tugging on the sleeve of Draco’s shirt. They made out for a while more, Draco’s hands sliding up and down Harry’s back and along the sides of his face, the whole while seemingly conscious of keeping his hands open. They didn’t go below his belt line either though so Harry was left a bit preoccupied worrying about whether that meant anything or not.

Draco pulled back one last time and looked a bit disappointedly at his watch. “Got a meeting,” was all he said.

“Time to take over the world,” Harry said, nodding.

Draco smirked. He stood up and started tucking his shirt back into his trousers. “That was good right?” He asked.

“Very good,” Harry said, deciding against bringing up his butt.

“Just let me know, if something needs to be different,” Draco said.


Draco sat on the couch next to him again and Harry straightened his tie.

“Gently this time,” Draco chided. “Last time it felt like my lips were going to be ripped off.”

“You were rushing me last time,” Harry said, pulling out his wand. A very basic healing spell took care of Draco’s bruised lips and Harry ran his fingers through the other boy’s hair to make it look less mussed. Somehow this moment felt more intimate than just a few moments prior.

Draco returned the favor with the charm, but that was it. No one was going to notice if Harry’s hair was mussed or his tie wasn’t ever exactly straight. Harry stood up and Draco turned the couch back into a chair. He gave Harry a quick kiss on the lips before very deliberately ruffling his hair and leaving without another word. They never left together.

Harry took a moment to get himself straightened out before he threw on his invisibility cloak and left, trekking from one unused classroom to another. Ron, Hermione, the twins, and Ginny were already there when he arrived. The twins were very casually lobbing spells at Ron, which Ron was supposed to be blocking, meanwhile, Hermione and Ginny had index cards and were shouting out different obstacles Ron might face.

“Mirror ward,” Hermione said.
“Walk backwards,” Ron said after a moment’s thought, which allowed a spell through that turned his freckles green.

“Boggart,” Ginny said.

“Riddikulus,” Ron said, fending off a stinging hex. “And laughter.”

“Locked door,” Hermione said.

“Alohamora,” Ron said.

“Three-tailed jackal,” Ginny said.

“Um, conjunctivitis on its nose,” Ron said.

“Sand trap,” Hermione said.

“Propulsion spell,” Ron yelled out after George managed to vanish one of his shoes.

“Grease jinx,” Harry called out.

Fred took that as his cue and suddenly the floor beneath Ron’s feet turned slick with the magical substance and Ron’s feet shot out from under him.

“Silicum Finitae,” Ron said, a bit put out before pulling himself back up to his feet.

“Hypnotoad,” Ginny shot out.

“Plug my ears and run past”

“Wall of fire,” Hermione said.

“Flame freeze spell,” Ron said.

“What’s the incantation?” Harry asked.

Ron dodged something that Fred had seemed a bit too pleased to cast and said, “Pyratus Cyrotatis.”

This went on for another five minutes before Ron collapsed out of breath.

“Well that was very good,” Hermione said; Ron gave her a look. “Of course, you need to do a better job adjusting your wand grip when you do counter-jinxes. Oh, and you got the steps for dealing with a tree spirit completely out of order, and we really need to work on trap curses because I’m pretty sure you made half of that up on the spot.”

“But other than that you’re doing great,” Fred said.

Ron rolled his eyes.

“It really was a lot better,” Harry said. A couple of weeks ago had been a bit of a disaster.

“I don’t need to be better, I need to be good,” Ron said.

“Well, we’re getting there,” Ginny said. “Why don’t you go work on spells with Harry while we make some notes on what we need to work on.”

“Yeah, okay,” Ron said. Harry helped him up and pretended that the brief contact didn’t feel more
exhilarating than making out with Draco had.

They worked on some more spells from the list Ron was supposed to have down before the third task while Harry tried not to look worriedly at the list now and then. It wasn’t that Ron was learning them slowly, it was more that there were just so many to learn, and so many more they had decided not to bother with because of difficulty level. At the end of the day, though, they didn’t know what he would be facing in the maze and there were only so many bases they could cover. Harry could tell that Ron was frustrated as well.

After a while they reconvened and Hermione went over everyone’s notes and corrections and they started the whole thing over again. They made it back to the tower just before curfew and the trio focused on homework for a while. It was late by the time they started packing up.

“You know,” Ron said. “I reckon I’ll be ready for a couple of OWL exams by the end of the year.”

“Actually,” Hermione said, “you’re really only learning spells for very specific situations, you haven’t learned an ounce of theory so, really, you’d have all sorts of trouble. Even on the practical. I mean if you don’t know the theory, it doesn’t matter if you know how to turn a porcupine into a teacup. If they ask you to turn it into a chalice you wouldn’t know how to modify the spell now would you, not unless you’d also specifically learned that spell as well. Theory’s very important Ron.”

Ron nodded along. Hermione always seemed to forget that they both knew the importance of learning theory, and they would get a similar lecture every time they bemoaned having to learn anything besides an incantation.

“So how’s your secret boyfriend?” Ron interrupted when Hermione’s lecture became particularly derivative. Hermione was suitably distracted though and looked at Harry expectantly.

“Um,” Harry said. “I don’t think we’re calling each other boyfriends.”

“Okay,” Ron said. “How’s your make out buddy?”

Harry was glad for the privacy charms that were just routine at this point when they all sat down, just the three of them.

“Well we were talking about maybe doing lunch on Sunday,” Harry said.

“So a date,” Ron said.

“Lunch,” Harry said.

“With skinny dipping?” Ron asked, ribbing Harry.

Hermione blushed, but she smiled.

“He said it’s a surprise,” Harry said. “So I don’t know what we’ll be doing.”

“I still can’t believe you did that,” Hermione said.

“Neither can I,” Harry assured her. “Though I don’t know, if you and Ron are looking for any ideas, it was actually…”

Ron threw a hand over Harry’s mouth. He was blushing more than Hermione was now, his
“Well, it’s getting late,” Ron said. “Night ‘Mione”

“You boys,” Hermione said, shaking her head. She gave Ron a kiss on the cheek and walked rather briskly towards the stairs.

“See,” Ron said. “Somehow I got lumped up into that. What did I do?”

“You brought up skinny dipping in the first place,” Harry said, with a bit of a playful glare.

“So things with Malfoy are good?” Only Ron knew that the boy Harry had gone skinny dipping with was Draco.

“What?” Harry asked. “I never said my make out buddy was Draco.”

He’d told Draco he wouldn’t tell anyone about whatever it was they were doing, but Ron had put together who Harry’s mystery guy was quickly enough.

“You call him Draco now,” Ron said, grinning.

“Malfoy,” Harry said, as if he could erase his slip up. He didn’t know why he bothered. Ron already as good as knew.

Ron gave him an expectant look.

“Things are going good,” Harry said. “I’ll tell you more after we get ready for bed.”

They dispelled the privacy spells and went upstairs. The other boys were already asleep, they really had spent too long working on their homework. They were rather silent as they got their shower things and headed to the bathroom. It was close to eleven when they wound up camped out on top of Ron’s bed.

“So,” Ron prompted.

“Okay so I don’t know what to make of this,” Harry said.

“Yeah?”

“So I told him he could touch my butt,” Harry said.

“Damn,” Ron said. “Getting felt up now, huh, how’s that?”

“Well that’s just it,” Harry said. “He didn’t.”

“He didn’t go for it?” Ron asked.

Harry shook his head, a question in his eyes.

“Well that’s on him,” Ron said. “You’ve got a perfectly nice bum mate.”

Harry blushed scarlet. “So did I mess up saying anything in the first place?” Harry asked.

Ron frowned, thinking about it. “I don’t think so. It’s alright to tell him what you like, and it’s alright for him to have boundaries. I mean, if I were in his position, I’d have gone for it.” Harry died a little inside for how casually Ron said that. “But maybe he’s just not ready to cop a feel.
I’m more surprised by you, mate. Two days ago you said you were happy just making out.”

“Oh,” Harry said. “Well I’d just asked him not to, like, grab onto me when we were making out, so I thought maybe he’d like to do that instead.”

“What do you mean grab onto you?” Ron asked, frowning.

“Oh,” Harry said. “You know, like…” he pantomimed a bit.

“So you had to tell him he could feel you up so that he’d stop grabbing you?” Ron asked.

“What? No,” Harry said. “I mean he said he’d stop as soon as I told him it was bothering me. I just figured he probably thought it was weird, so…”

“So… you’re using sex to appease him?” Ron asked.

“It’s not sex,” Harry hissed suddenly worried that someone would hear him through their wards.

Ron waved Harry’s objection away.

“Do you want him touching your bum?” Ron asked.

“Uh, yeah,” Harry said.

“Like, you’d enjoy it, not like you want to make him happy so you’ll do whatever he wants to do.”

“Well, apparently he doesn’t want to,” Harry said.

“Harry,” Ron said.

“I’d like it,” Harry said. “I mean, I don’t exactly have any experience with that, but, I figure it would be nice.”

“Huh,” Ron said. He ducked out of the curtains real quick and came back a moment later with the muggle psychology workbook for teens who had gone through trauma that Hermione had gotten for him over the summer. “You know there’s stuff in here about relationships, right, and about boundaries.” He started thumbing through the book.

“Ron it’s fine,” Harry said. “He’s respecting my boundaries. He’s the one who asked in the first place if something was wrong.”

“Because you weren’t letting him know about your boundaries,” Ron said. “Here, read this bit here. Just the print, mind, not the stuff I wrote in after.”

“Ron, its fine really,” Harry said.

“I’m just worried, you know,” Ron said. “I want to make sure you’re taking care of yourself.”

“I am,” Harry said. “Really. I’ll read up before I go to sleep, promise.”

Ron nodded. “So grabbing, huh? Same with Benjamin last year, right?” He asked, referring to the panic attack Harry had had during one of their self-defense lessons.

“Yeah,” Harry said. “I should be over it.”

“There’s no should be’s,” Ron said. “You’re doing fine.”
Harry smiled.

“So which asshole was it?” Ron asked. “Or was it more than one?”

“More than one,” Harry said. There were plenty of times in his short life when someone had grabbed him and things had not gone well.

“Want to vent about it?” Ron asked. “Or do you want a distraction?”

Harry thought about it. “I honestly felt for a moment he was going to slap me,” Harry said. “Like a week ago, he grabbed my arm to pull me closer and all I could think of was…”

“Your aunt?” Ron asked.

Harry nodded. “That’s fucked up,” he said.

“That’s normal,” Ron said.

“I don’t want to think about my aunt when I’m making out with my…”

“Boyfriend?” Ron asked.

“Make out buddy,” Harry said.

Ron rolled his eyes. “Well I’m glad you talked to him about it,” Ron said.

Ron let him vent a bit more, and it was the conversation he hadn’t been able to have with Draco, and Harry knew that if he was as close with Draco as he was with Ron he would have told him weeks ago how he had felt and it would have never been an issue to begin with. He wouldn’t have ever worried about telling Ron that being grabbed messed with his head because Ron would understand. Ron would always understand.

He went to bed that night thinking about both boys, but wound up dreaming of a revolving door of greatest hits, like Greyback and Ms. Adler, or his Uncle, and it was far too early in the morning when he decided to get up and get a start on the day.

Harry never felt like he was ready when he dueled with his dad. He wasn’t sure he was ever supposed to feel like he was ready, though. What was he really expecting? He didn’t actually think that he was going to be on par with Voldemort by the end of term; not even on par with the Death Eaters. He was getting better, but better wasn’t exactly the goal when it came down to it.

“Do you intend to stay down there all evening?” his dad asked.

Harry lay on the floor, still breathing pretty hard. “I thought we were done,” he said.

“Yes,” his dad said. “Did you want to take your dinner on the floor?”

“Let me think about it for a minute,” Harry said. “I’ll get back to you.”

“You do that,” his Dad said. “Perhaps while you are down there you can think up some ideas for where you would like to go on holiday.”
“Holiday?” Harry asked.

“Summer break is nigh upon us,” his Dad said.

“Huh,” Harry said staring up at the ceiling. “I guess I haven’t put much thought into it. Other things I’m worrying about.”

“Like your defense OWL,” his Dad said.

Harry covered his face with his hands. “Ugh, don’t remind me. I have too much to do.”

“I would imagine preparing Mr. Weasley for the third task is good practice for the exam.”

“It is,” Harry said. “The full moon’s the night before, though.” This wasn’t news, of course; he was just venting. They’d discussed it a couple of times before.

“You can always take the exam next year,” his Dad said. “I’ve already checked the charts, the full moon will be a full week before exams start.”

Harry shook his head. He might as well get it done with and have one less thing to worry about. “I’ve told you I’m doing a lot better after the full moon,” he said.

“After you’ve slept a full eight hours,” his Dad said.

“I’ll take a Pepper-Up Potion,” Harry said. “What’s for dinner?” His dad had just put dinner out.

“Pork Chops.”

“Hmm.” Harry decided it was time to get up.

“So, you want to go abroad?” Harry asked.

“I have little preference in the matter,” his Dad said.

“What would you do if you didn’t have me to look after?” Harry asked.

“Harry I was a very unhealthy person before you came into my life,” his Dad said. “I don’t expect that either of us would do well to cloister ourselves in the dungeons and brew esoteric poisons all summer.”

“Probably not,” Harry agreed.

He thought about vacation while he ate.

“Hermione’s parents are taking her to Germany over break,” Harry said.

“Did you want to join her?” His dad asked.

“Well, I don’t want to crash her vacation or anything,” Harry said. “But maybe we could see her now and then. Germany’s nice.”

“Ah,” his dad said. “And how long is Miss Granger going to be out of the country.”

“A whole month,” Harry said. He’d gotten very used to having his friends around all the time. Even the previous summer they’d never gone too long without seeing one another.

“And Mr. Weasley?” his dad asked.
“Maybe he could come with us?” Harry suggested hopefully. “I don’t think they have any vacation plans.”

“We’d have to talk to their parents,” his dad said.

“But you’d be okay with that?” Harry asked.

“Dealing with three children cannot be that much more difficult than dealing with one,” his dad said, then he narrowed his eyes. “Do Miss Granger’s parents know that she is romantically engaged with Mr. Weasley?”

“The kids call it dating these days, Dad,” Harry said. He got a raised eyebrow. “Actually I don’t know. She’s very careful about what she writes home, they don’t know about anything, really. You don’t think they’d be upset about it do you?”

“Some parents might think that fifteen is too young to start dating.”

Harry blushed. He was only fourteen. “You’re one to talk,” he said.

“I said some parents,” his Dad said. “Though I think my case is exactly why some parents think that fifteen is too young to be dating.”

“Huh,” Harry said. “What about the moon?”

His Dad looked thoughtful. “Find out when Miss Granger will be out of the country. Although, there is a protected section of the Black Forest that is designed for werewolves to transform in.” He stopped talking and shook his head. “Of course no one else can know that you are a werewolf, so it’s a moot point I suppose. We’ll plan around it, Harry.”

“What, so they transform outside?” Harry asked, stepping around the fact that he couldn’t go.

His Dad nodded.

“For real?”

“Indeed.”

“Why doesn’t Britain have anything like that?”

His Dad shrugged. “Bigotry.”

Harry huffed.

“So people can just go in there to transform and not have to worry about… stuff?”

“I only know of it in passing,” his Dad said. “Start talking to your friends, and have them start writing to their parents.”

Harry smiled. It was nice to plan for a summer after the third task.

“What will you want to do in Germany?” his Dad asked.

“Oh,” Harry said. He rather didn’t know what there was to do in the other country. “Well there’s the Black Forest,” he said.

“That’s not an option,” his dad said.
“Actually, Remus mentioned a bunch of things there, he visited a bit ago, he didn’t mention anything for werewolves though,” Harry said.

“We’ll look into it,” his Dad said.

Harry smiled, allowing himself to fantasize about a summer vacation with no worries about tournaments or Voldemort.

Hermione and Ron both liked the idea of a joint vacation and both agreed to write letters to their parents to broach the possibility. Hermione mentioned that she had definitely told her parents about the infamous potions master before any of them had known that he was Harry’s Dad, and there might be concerns about Hogwarts’ most hated teacher joining them on Holiday, and Harry too wondered what Ron’s parents thought about the whole thing. Harry being Professor Snape’s son hadn’t come up much when he’d seen Ron’s parents during the tournament tasks.

“Do your parents know I’m gay?” Harry asked.

Hermione frowned. “Well, you weren’t outed by choice; I didn’t really think it was my place to tell people who still don’t know.”

“No, yeah,” Harry said. “That’s cool. Um, I mean, would that be an issue?”

“I don’t think so,” Hermione said.

“Well I’m not going to hide it,” Harry said. “So If I’m going to see them a bunch over the summer, they’ll probably figure it out. It might be best to just tell them now. I don’t want to ruin your vacation.”

“If them finding out you were gay ruined our vacation it wouldn’t be your fault, Harry,” Hermione said. “I’m sure it’ll be fine.”

“More importantly,” Ron said. “Do they know we’re dating?”

“Well,” Hermione said. “No.”

“Is that going to be a problem?” Ron asked. “Do we have to pretend you’re single all summer?”

Hermione looked pensive.

“You weren’t planning on actually being single this summer, were you?” Ron asked in a way that was supposed to sound like a joke, but Harry could hear the worry in his voice.

“No, of course not,” Hermione said. “We’re fifteen though, they’ll want me to be focused on my studies.”

“Hermione,” Ron said. “I don’t think your parents will ever be worried that you weren’t focused on your studies.”

“You write your parents every week,” Harry said. “If you hide everything interesting that actually happens, what do you have to talk about?”
“Oh, you’re one to talk about keeping secrets?” Hermione said.

“I wasn’t complaining,” Harry said. “I’m just actually curious. Besides, these days, I don’t have a single major secret that I haven’t told at least one person… or had splashed on the front cover of the Daily Prophet.”

Hermione huffed. “Well I tell them about classes of course, and I tell them a bit about the antics you two get up to, and the progress we all make on our projects, and I pass on a piece or two of gossip I hear from Parvati or Lavender just so Mum doesn’t worry I’m not friends with any girls. Besides, I’ve been telling them that you’re competing in the tournament, I’ve just been editing some minor details.”

“Oh, so did I even face a dragon?” Ron asked.

“No,” Hermione said. “I made up that the first task was an obstacle course, I’ll make sure you have the details, and I mostly left the second task the same, just without the imminent threat of drowning or the dangerous magical creatures that tried to eat you.”

“Just some minor details,” Ron said.

“There’s no point worrying them,” Hermione said.

If he got killed by Voldemort, Harry wondered, would Hermione just tell her parents he’d been transferred to another school?

“You should tell them something,” Harry said. “It’s… Well it’s nice, even if they can’t fix anything, it’s…” he blushed. “I don’t know, I tell my dad stuff and then he gives me a hug and…” He was mumbling horribly at the end. He cleared his throat. “And hey, remember the time turner thing, at the Leaky Cauldron?”

“You mean when we had an elaborate ruse to trick her parents?” Ron asked.

“Yeah,” Harry said. “That. You realized they were worried about you, and giving them something to, like, parent you over, it made them feel better. Parents like to parent, I think.”

“So what, I should throw them a bone?” Hermione asked. “That would be even more patronizing than just keeping things from them.”

“So make it something real,” Harry said. “They seem like they care about you. A lot. I don’t know. I wouldn’t waste that.”

Hermione’s breath hitched and Harry was worried he’d said something wrong. Suddenly Hermione was hugging him. He looked over her shoulder to an equally confused Ron. He patted her on the back.

“I won’t,” Hermione said. She pulled back. “Okay, I guess this will be a bit of a long letter.”

“What are you going to tell them?” Ron asked.

Hermione got a fresh sheet of parchment and started making a list.

“Harry’s gay,” she said. “And Professor Snape is his dad, and also I’m dating Ron.”

“Who’s bi,” Ron said proudly.

“Who’s bisexual,” Hermione said, nodding. “And we were hoping we could cross paths with each
other from time to time during our vacation to Germany, and…”

“Something you’ve been keeping from them.”

“Something I’ve been keeping from them,” Hermione said thoughtfully. She wrote something down on her list before frowning down at it and crossing it out. “I’ll think of something.”

“You always do,” Ron said.

“You should be writing home too,” Harry said.

“What?” Ron asked. “I mean they already know a ton of stuff they have to worry about. Mum gets to write me all the time and tell me she loves me and that she’s rooting for me. I mean I know what you mean about them liking to be able to ‘parent,’ like when I told her over the summer it was a help just to have her do her knitting while I took a nap in the parlor, she seemed so relieved she could do something to help me.”

“Well, I meant about the vacation,” Harry said. “But you can tell a deep dark secret too if you want to.”

“You realize once she gets me home for the summer she’s never going to want to let me go anywhere ever again,” Ron said.

“Yeah, I can see that,” Harry said, remembering how haggard Ron’s parents had been after the second task.

“Well, I’ll try to swing it,” Ron said. “It’s nice to plan for something after this damned tournament.”

Harry grinned at him.

“First though,” Ron said. “Harry gets to tell us about his mystery date.”

“Oh yes,” Hermione said. “I suppose that must come first.”

Harry blushed. “It might have involved another lakeside picnic,” Harry said.

“I thought this was supposed to be a surprise,” Ron said. “This wasn’t just a repeat of last time was it?” He ribbed Harry and Harry knew exactly what he was thinking about.

“The romantic surprise, as it turned out was poetry,” Harry said.

“No,” Ron said.

“Oh,” Hermione all but cooed. She, at least, had no idea that his date had been with Draco.

“Romantic poetry,” Harry nodded.

“Shakespear?” Hermione asked.

“I wouldn’t know,” Harry said.

“Well?” Hermione asked.

“It was nice I guess,” Harry said. A bit awkward, really. Not as awkward as kissing could be, at times, but it definitely lacked the thrill of kissing. The kissing that had come afterwards hadn’t
been awkward though. Draco had definitely listened when Harry had asked him to mind how he touched him. Harry wasn’t sure why Hermione thought poetry sounded so great, but he hoped Ron was taking notes.

“Swimming,” Ron said suddenly.

There had been a bit of wading in the lake, but Harry hadn’t been going to mention that.

“It’s definitely warmed up enough,” Ron said. “I told you I’d teach you to swim.”

Harry grinned at him.

“Are you sure you want to get back in the lake?” Hermione asked.

“It’s just the shallows,” Ron said.

Hermione frowned. “Well, I’ll just tag along.”

Harry wondered if Hermione was worried that Ron was going to have a flashback at the lake, or if the thought of him being back in the lake worried her.

“Sure,” Ron said. “Wait, do you know how to swim? I can teach you too.”

“I know how to swim, Ron,” Hermione said. Her parents probably hadn’t told the school she was allergic to chlorine to keep her out.

“Cool,” Ron said.

Cool, Harry thought, he definitely wasn’t very nervous about the prospect.

“Okay,” Ron said. “I’m just going to have my hands under your shoulders, you just focus on kicking.”

Harry hadn’t expected there to be so much touching involved in learning how to swim. The lake water was still fairly cold, and he was glad for it in that moment.

Helping Ron practice for the third task really was a big help for Harry, who would be taking his defense OWL on Monday. Of course, Professor Moody was also driving them pretty hard in the last week before the exam, and Harry was glad it was the only OWL he was taking that year. He didn’t want to imagine what next year would be like. With any luck, he wouldn’t suddenly find himself with some extracurricular that kept him from his studies. No tournament, no combat training, no blade master lessons. Of course, if those last two were out of the way, that would mean Harry had faced Voldemort, and Harry still didn’t feel ready for that.

When Sunday came, and it was time for Harry to quietly slip away from everyone else and floo home from his dad’s quarters, Harry did at least feel ready for the test. His dad would be joining
them just before moonrise, he was holding study sessions with his OWL and NEWT students. Harry and Remus prepared the cellar together before going upstairs to cook dinner.

“So you know I’ll be going right back to school tomorrow, right?” Harry asked.

“Your dad mentioned,” Remus said. “I am sorry about that, last year the defense OWL was held on Wednesday.”

Harry shrugged. “Well, I’ve come this far. I think I’ll manage. If anyone thinks I look dead to the world I’ll just tell them I’ve been pulling all-nighters.”

“You’re going to crash pretty hard sometime tomorrow,” Remus said.

Harry grinned. “I’ll live,” he said. “About our conversations though…”

“I’ll make notes and we can go over them when you start vacation,” Remus said.

“Thanks,” Harry said. A half hour later, his dad arrived and they sat down together for some rather rare steaks.

“So it looks like we’ll be visiting Germany this summer,” Harry said.

“Oh, I have some recommendations,” Remus said. “I’ll write you a list.”

“So have you ever been to the werewolf section in the Black Forest?” Harry asked.

“Oh, heard about that have you?” Remus asked. “Not for a long while, it’s not terribly expensive, but it is a bit out of my budget, particularly when I’m already spending on travel.”

“They charge people?” Harry asked.

“It’s a bit like a resort, actually,” Remus said. “Very communal.”

“Is it much different?” Harry asked. “Being able to transform outside.”

“Oh, very different,” Remus said. “If only because you have an unobstructed view of the full moon and can run around.”

“How private is it?” Harry’s dad asked.

“Well everyone agrees going in not to reveal who else attends,” Remus said. “But with Harry’s celebrity, you might not want to chance it.”

His dad nodded.

“You know it’s a nudist colony, right?” Remus asked.

Harry was pretty sure he had timed that for when Harry was drinking his water.

“What?” Harry asked sputtering a bit.

“Well, everyone’s going to disrobe and keep their belongings in lockers before moonrise anyway,” Remus said. “And Germany’s the birthplace of the whole nudist ideology to begin with. Somewhere along the way, I suppose, the werewolves there embraced the naturist lifestyle.”

Harry looked to his dad to see if he had known that, but all he got was a shrug.
“Huh,” Harry said. “Well, I probably won’t have to worry about if I want to do that or not anytime soon.”

“I suppose not,” Remus said.

After dinner, Harry wrote in his journal before heading upstairs to take a hot bath to relax. He wondered if the chamomile tea leaves in the water actually did anything.

With half an hour left before moonrise, Harry and Remus were locked up downstairs, and Harry found himself telling Remus all about whatever it was he had with Draco. Though he didn’t mention him by name, of course.

“That’s great,” Remus said. “I’m glad that’s working out for you. Oh, I suppose I should make sure you know you’re still supposed to use protection for—"

“I know,” Harry was quick to say. “Hasn’t come up, but um, I definitely know. Had that talk with my dad, definitely know everything there is to know about that.”

“Good,” Remus said. “Well, I won’t torment you with that before the full moon. Why don’t I tell you a bit more about Germany.”

Harry smiled. That was definitely a better topic.

The transformation went about as smoothly as it ever went now that Harry had mostly acclimated to it. A few pulled muscles, but nothing Madam Pomfrey couldn’t cure in a couple of moments. He was still exhausted though, and was suddenly feeling very much like taking an OWL in a couple of hours was about the stupidest idea he’d ever had, perhaps only being overshadowed by the decision to fly a car to school. He wasn’t backing down though, no matter how much he wanted to curl up on the couch in a nest of blankets and sleep through the morning. Madam Pomfrey gave Harry a very disapproving look though as she handed him the pepper up potion.

“I’ll expect you to head straight to bed once your exam is finished,” she said.

Harry smiled and agreed, though they both knew it was a full day of test taking. He downed the potion and waited for the smoke to stop pouring from his ears. He was left with an odd mix of alertness and fatigue, energy and weariness, and muscles that still felt very sore to him. He hugged his dad, waved goodbye to Remus and flooed back to the infirmary with Madam Pomfrey.

“Now you be sure to eat a big breakfast,” she all but scolded him.

“I will,” Harry said. “Thanks, Madam Pomfrey.” He looked at his watch. Breakfast was just about to be served. For the most part, it was fifth and seventh years who were at the tables when Harry got there. All of them getting an early start for exams. Harry sat next to Benjamin who took one look at Harry and passed him some coffee.

“You know, you do better with a good night’s sleep than an all-nighter,” he said.

“Too stressed out to sleep,” Harry said. “Might as well get some work done.” It was an easy lie. Really, everyone who looked at him would just assume he just hadn’t been sleeping as the exam approached. Harry wasn’t exactly known for his healthy sleep habits.
“You look wrecked mate,” Ron said approaching the table. “You know Madam Pomfrey says you’re supposed to sleep before exams, right?”

Harry mock glared at him and got a cheeky smile in return. Hermione, of course, went on about a proper study schedule. He knew his secrets were safe as long as his friends helped guard them.

“You want a piggyback ride to the classroom?” Benjamin asked. “You can sleep on the way there.”

“I don’t think I’ll be able to wake up if I fall asleep,” Harry said. Things were still a bit off with Benjamin, but they were friends for the most part.

The written exam was very draining, and there were several times where Harry found himself having to go back and reread questions. He finished it though. Hermione helped keep him awake during lunch by quizzing him. Harry was very glad that the written test had been in the morning though, since he was pretty sure he would have fallen asleep if it had been in the afternoon. He was fairly dead on his feet, but the important thing was that he was on his feet, and moving about for the practical portion of the test, and that was the only thing keeping him awake.

“Now your instructor tells me you’ve mastered the Patronus Charm,” his examiner said after Harry had finally finished the practical.

“Oh,” Harry said. “Yeah, I learned last year with all the dementors flying around.”

“In all my years,” the examiner said. “Plenty of NEWT students struggle with that. Would you like to try for some extra credit?”

Harry was pretty sure that the ‘try’ was because the examiner was about as aware of Harry’s exhaustion as Harry was.

Harry grinned, holding his wand up and casting about for a happy memory. He thought back to just before the first task, when he had told Ron and Hermione that he was gay, when Ron had thrown his full support behind him, how good it had felt to have that weight off his chest and know that his friends still loved him. He folded that memory into the feeling of his mother’s love that protected him, the feeling of a hug from his dad.

“Expecto Patronum,” Harry said.

A great spectral doe came out of his wand and started canting around the room and Harry felt very peaceful at the sight of it. He saw a number of heads turning and suddenly felt a bit bad for distracting them from their own tests. He let the doe approach him and nuzzle up against his side. He put his arm around her neck and closed his eyes for just a moment.

When he opened his eyes again he was staring up at the ceiling of the hospital wing.

‘It’s been a while,’ was the first thing in his head.

He looked around, it was the middle of the night, but there was his dad, sitting beside his bed with a book.

“What happened?” Harry asked.

His dad glanced over at him before raising one eyebrow. “It seems that after a magically and physically exhausting practical exam, you decided to cast a NEWT level spell and passed out.”
“Oh,” Harry said. “Well, I did promise Madam Pomfrey that I’d go straight to bed as soon as the exam was over.”

“Cheeky brat,” his dad said.

Harry smiled at him. “I survived.” And at the very least, he was far from the first student to ever pass out during exams week.

“That you did,” his dad said, closing his book and getting up. Harry sat up in bed, and checked his watch. Five o’clock in the morning. He swung his feet over the side of the bed. If anything, he felt sorer now than he had the previous morning. The OWL was over though. His dad walked him back to the dormitory with an arm around his shoulder, asking him questions about how the exam had gone. They stopped outside the portrait hole.

His dad suddenly gave him a hug before holding him out at arm’s length.

“I’m proud of you, you know,” he said.

“Yeah?”

“Very proud,” he said, and Harry got another hug. “Your mother would have been proud too.”

Harry frowned. “Even with everything else?”

“Everything you have been through, you have survived, and you made sure your friends survived too. You are a remarkable young man and she would be fiercely proud of you. I can’t prove that to you, but I know it’s true, so if you can have any faith in me, have faith in that.”

Suddenly it was Harry who was hugging his dad. They stayed like that for a while.

“Of course, I’m sure Potter would have bragged about you to anyone who would stop to listen for half a moment.”

Harry laughed at that.

“They would have both loved you very much,” his dad said. “Just as I love you.”

“I love you too,” Harry said, his voice a bit warbly.

“Alright,” his dad said. “Now no strenuous activity today, I’ve already sent a note to Miss Granger to make sure you behave today.”

Harry laughed. “Take it easy,” his dad said.

“I will,” Harry said. “And you too, don’t think I don’t know you stayed up all night.”

His dad smiled and ruffled his hair.

Harry got up to the dorm in time to hear a bit of tossing and turning from behind Ron’s curtains. He woke Ron up from a nightmare and got a bar of chocolate and they shared it together as the sun started to come up over the mountains. “Slept most of the night anyway,” Ron said.

“You’ve gotten a lot better,” Harry agreed, smiling at him.
With the defense OWL out of the way, Harry really felt like time was counting down until the third task. There was little more than a week to go. They had an odd mix of working on their homework, their projects, and preparations for the third task, all while still trying to find time to stay sane.

Ron and Hermione had just gone off for a bit of sanity time, and Harry was looking around to see if he could snag Draco when he got pulled aside by Dean and Seamus. He didn’t really need to wonder what they wanted to talk to him about, but he decided to let them do the talking. He looked at Seamus expectantly. It seemed, however, that Seamus didn’t know where to start.

“I saw you two making out a while ago,” Harry said eventually, deciding to get the ball rolling.

Dean looked a bit bashful, while Seamus went a bit green, but suddenly Dean took Seamus’ hand in his own.

“You didn’t say anything,” Seamus said.

“It really wasn’t my business to say anything,” Harry said, with a bit of an emphasis.

Seamus looked down, a bit shamefaced.

“I’m sorry,” he said. “I was an ass, and- I was. Look, I was upset because, I thought it was a choice.”

“And it would be a perfectly fine choice if it were,” Harry said. It didn’t sound like a major declaration when he said it, but it had taken him some time to realize that. The thought now that people should accept him because being gay was what he was stuck with just made him mad. Being gay wasn’t easy, but he didn’t owe it to anyone to be straight and he didn’t owe anyone an explanation. He wasn’t going to apologize for how he felt about Ron.

Seamus nodded, and Dean squeezed his hand. “I’m gay,” Seamus said. “And I- I grew up hearing a lot of things about that, and I didn’t have any reason to think about it, until I started to have feelings like that and, well, I thought I just had to commit to being straight or something. When you came out- or I guess, when you gotouted, I got so angry that you could act like it was fine, and I felt like you were attacking my own attempts to be straight and I…”

“I tried to be straight too,” Harry said. “I learned, like, advanced mental magic trying to make myself straight. I get it. It still sucked though.”

“I’m sorry,” Seamus said.

“Are you going to be alright with your mum?” Harry asked.

Seamus shrugged. “I wasn’t planning on telling her,” he said.

“This summer, or ever?” Harry asked.

Seamus shrugged.


“Thank you,” Seamus said.

“You know you’ve got to talk to Ron too, right?” Harry asked.
“Yeah,” Seamus said. “I just- I thought you should hear it first.”

Ron was a good sport about it later that night in the dorm. It was the four of them; Neville was off with Hannah Abbot working on an Herbology project together. Of course, Ron was much more comfortable with embarrassing Seamus.

“Now,” Ron said, after apologies had been made and accepted. “I bet no one’s had the gay sex talk with you yet. You know you’re supposed to use contraception right? Don’t worry, I can tell you everything you need to know about.”

Seamus was still blushing the following morning.

“Why do you blush?” Victoria asked. The blade master was very nosy, and had just asked Harry about his love life. “So you are seeing someone?” she asked.

“Something like that,” Harry said.

“A boyfriend?”

“Umm, I don’t think we’re putting a label on anything,” Harry said.

“Young people today never do,” Victoria said.

“My friends are boyfriend-girlfriend,” Harry said, defending his generation.

Victoria smiled. “Are you with nice boy?” she asked.

“Um,” Harry thought about it. “He wasn’t always, but yeah, I guess he is a nice boy. Oh by the way,” he said, by way of getting the topic off of Draco. “Like three of my classmates have come out to me since I got outed.”

“It makes people feel safer to know that there are others,” Victoria said. “I saw the article about your friend after the second task. My Yuuri and I have been rooting for him. It was good of him to come out as he did. Both you and him challenge society’s view of us.”

That made Harry feel a bit bashful.

“All I ever do is survive whatever life throws at me,” he said.

“You do more than that,” Victoria said. “Come on, we will practice more how you will survive.” She picked up a practice dagger and Harry sighed, picking up his own. He was getting pretty good with the thing, but practicing stabbing and slashing people felt really different from practicing hexes and shields.

“Concussive spell,” Ron said.

“Hermione,” Harry said. “What did we say?”

“We said we’d relax right before the tournament,” Hermione said with a sigh.

They were on their way downstairs where Ron’s family was waiting for them. All of the families of the champions were allowed to arrive early to spend time with their loved ones. Harry tried not to think of a morbid reason why they would do that.

“Okay,” Ron said. “So there’s this museum in Bonn I want to go to.”

“You want to go to a museum?” Hermione asked.

“Well, it’s a racing broom museum,” Ron said. “So, yes.”

“That sounds like fun,” Harry said.

“Well, I want to show my parents some of the magical historic sights. Dad loves history,” Hermione said.

“ Weird,” Ron said. Hermione smacked his arm.

Hermione had gotten her parents blessing for the three of them to meet up over holiday. An invitation really, for them to spend as much time as they wanted. Harry still didn’t know what Hermione had told her parents, but he was sure he would get some sort of briefing before they crossed paths. He knew at least that her parents were fine with him being gay, though they had some reservations about Hermione having a boyfriend. Harry didn’t envy Ron for however that meeting was going to go. He spared a moment to wonder if he would be seeing Draco at all over the summer. He still wasn’t sure if there was anything more between them other than the physical. He might be getting attached, but he didn’t feel for Draco what he felt for Ron. Thinking about that didn’t hurt so much anymore at least. Seeing Ron and Hermione together wasn’t quite so bittersweet anymore. He wondered what Draco thought of the arrangement between the two of them.

The twins and Ginny were already in the Great Hall with their parents when they arrived. Bill had come as well, and apparently Percy was with his boss somewhere making final arrangements. Harry, Ron, and Hermione all got great big hugs from Mrs. Weasley, and there was a lot of small talk to be made, and the twins largely took over talking about all the ways everyone had been helping Ron get ready. Eventually, it was time to mingle, and Ron took his family around to introduce them to the other champions and to meet their families. That was nice, though Mr. Diggory had a bit of a forced friendliness to him. Fleur’s parents were really friendly though; they definitely remembered Ron coming to their daughter’s aid and vice-versa. Victor Krum told his mum all about playing Quidditch with them.

All too soon, though, Professor McGonagall came to collect Ron.

“The spectators will be arriving soon,” she said. “And you need your final instructions.”

There were more hugs, and if Harry held on just a bit longer than necessary, no one commented on it.

“You’ve got this,” was the last thing Harry said to him before he left.

Ron gave a big wave, putting on a bit of a show of bravado for his family.
“Well, why don’t you children show me around the school,” Mrs. Weasley said. “It’s been too long since I’ve gotten to stroll around.”

Harry didn’t get to do that, however, because Professor Moody came up to them soon after Ron was taken away.

“I’ve got bad news and worse news Potter,” Professor Moody said.

“Oh,” Harry said. “Um…”

“There’s a lot more outsiders popping up for the third task,” Professor Moody said. “Decision’s been made that you’ll be safer sitting with your father in the teacher’s box.”

Harry could tell from the tone of his voice what Professor Moody thought of his dad.

“And the worse news?” Harry asked.

“Some bureaucrat from the testing administration is throwing a fit about a fourth year taking the OWL, I think it’s because you scored higher than they expected you to, but there’s a bit of a disagreement up in the Headmaster’s office right now and they want to talk to you.”

“Now?” Mr. Weasley asked.

“They’re supposed to submit scores tonight,” Professor Moody said. “Damned bureaucrats the lot of them.”

Harry sighed. “I guess I’ll see you all after the task is over.”

“After we’ve gotten rid of all these spectators,” Professor Moody corrected. “Come on Potter. The Headmaster shouldn’t be dealing with this with the third task about to start.”

Harry walked with Professor Moody up towards the headmaster’s office, a pit of dread growing in his stomach. When they arrived and the only bureaucrat there was Madam Bones, Harry knew that the time had come.

“Come in, Harry,” Professor Dumbledore said.

“Tonight?” Harry asked, and he didn’t care that his voice broke. “I won’t know if Ron’s alright.”

“I’m very sorry Harry,” Professor Dumbledore said. “Prophecies are a tricky business; I knew to be on alert this year, and because of that, I realized that our defense professor had been replaced with an escaped death eater. When I learned of his plan, I knew that it was a part of the Prophesy that still must happen. I couldn’t leave a Death Eater running around my school, of course, so Professor Moody has been impersonating a Death Eater instead for most of the year. As far as Voldemort will be concerned, his loyal servant will be delivering you to him tonight. I gave you a choice at the beginning of the year, Harry. A choice to be a part of our plan to destroy Voldemort once and for all. You still have that choice. There is a good chance that you will die tonight, but Voldemort will be gone forever. Should he find some other means to return, we will have no way forward.”

Harry shook his head. He thought of his dad, who would be marked for death should Voldemort ever return. He thought of Hermione who had no place in Voldemort’s future. He thought of everyone who had stood by him and helped him.

“I couldn’t choose anything else,” he said, upset. There had never been a choice. “What do I have
“I very much hate to say it,” the headmaster said. “But I cannot tell you how Voldemort will be destroyed tonight. What is most important, is that he not know that we know of his plans. He is a Legilimens, so you must occlude as long as possible. Also, Harry. When you arrive, I want you to struggle, but in the end, you must be captured. As far as they are concerned, you will be delivered to them without your wand.”

Harry nodded grimly.

“Buck up,” Professor Moody said. “You aren’t dead yet.”

“Alastor,” Madam Bones scolded. “It is alright to be scarred Potter, more than alright. You’ll have plenty to be scared of before the night is through. Now come here, you’ll need this.”

“What’s is it?” Harry asked.

“A pocket bracelet,” she said.

Harry looked at the headmaster for explanation.

“We do not want them to find your dagger or your wand when they search you,” the headmaster said.

Harry held out his wrist and Madam Bones tied the leather bracelet to it. It was light weight, but Harry had the absurd thought that it felt like a manacle.

“Even I can feel the magic in this thing,” Harry said. “I don’t think it’ll get past them.”

“Not when I am done,” the headmaster said. He picked up a silvery dagger from his desk.

“I had this commissioned for you, Harry,” he said. ‘Goblin forged, much like the sword of Gryffindor which you are already familiar with. It is coated with a most deadly poison. You must make sure that you do not cut yourself with it.”

Harry nodded. Damn bloody prophesy.

“Hold it in your hand, and will it away,” the headmaster said. “When you summon it, it will reappear in your hand exactly as it was when you sent it away.

Harry did so, and he could feel the dagger’s presence inside of the bracelet, though he could not put into words how.

“Your wand as well,” the headmaster said.

Harry frowned, but put it away.

“Unfortunately, we must economize on space,” the headmaster said. That is about the limit of what we can send you with.”

The headmaster sat down and invited Harry to sit down opposite of him. Harry held out his wrist and the headmaster began a very complicated incantation.

A few days prior, Harry had been thinking that he wasn’t ready to face Voldemort. He’d been thinking of his skill with a wand or with a dagger. He wasn’t ready to face him off in a duel. But he had thought that he was ready to face his destiny. He had thought that it would be easy to just
go along with the headmaster’s plan. Some time ago, when Harry had first learned that the prophecy wasn’t over, and that he still had to face Voldemort, he had taken it as fate. Like it was something he had known for a long time, and only then had someone actually said it out loud. As absurd as it seemed, after second year, Harry had just started assuming that he would keep coming face to face with Voldemort until one of them didn’t come away from the encounter. He’d never assumed that he would win, by any means, and he hadn’t lived in fear of the next encounter, he’d just allowed the thought to exist in the back of his mind.

When he had heard that it was fate, that he must somehow be a part of Voldemort’s final downfall, Harry had just rescued his friends from Greyback and become a werewolf. It had made sense to him then that his life was effectively over. He’d been far from the thought that any of his relationships were permanent. He’d been sure he would rejected by his dad, his friends would either fear him or realize that their lives would be better off if they weren’t around someone who’s life was so dangerous. He’d been sure that it was over, but the thought that he could do one last thing to make sure Voldemort could never come after the people he loved. That, at least had felt right.

He wasn’t sure when it was exactly that he’d begun to see a future for himself with his friends and his dad. He wasn’t sure when he’d begun to accept that he could have a life surrounded by people who cared about him, but sitting there as the headmaster incanted, Harry realized that the thought, that facing Voldemort might mean that he would never have to face a day when the people he cared about no longer cared about him, was no longer a distant comfort in the back of his mind. It was just gone. Now, facing Voldemort might mean not growing up with his friends; it might mean never hearing his dad say he loved him ever again. Harry realized that he didn’t want to miss out on any part of growing up with the people he loved.

Eventually, the bracelet seemed to sink into his skin, and Harry couldn’t feel it anymore. The headmaster then cast another spell twice, once on each of his arms. He then tapped Harry’s wrist and a pocket watch on his desk. He picked up the watch and placed it on his belt. It felt like a finality. Harry took a deep breath pressed his palms into his watery eyes for a moment. He still didn’t have any choice. He lifted his head up to look at the headmaster. Everything he wanted for his future would disappear if Voldemort ever came back. Everyone he cared about.

“You will know when it is time to use it,” the headmaster said. “When that time comes, your only priority should be to escape. Should you cross paths with Voldemort as you do so, you should use the dagger. Anyone else, and it is up to you if the dagger or your wand is your best tool. Do you understand?”

Harry understood the words that were being said, but the actual meaning, he was sure, would come with time. He nodded, and took a deep breath through his nose, sniffling a bit. It wasn’t time for tears.

“If I don’t come back, um, there’s some letters in my trunk,” Harry said heavily. The headmaster nodded at him sadly.

“Anything else?” Harry asked.

“I need you to take off your anti-portkey charm and your potions bandoleer,” the Headmaster said. “Your broom and cloak as well.”

Harry was shaking a bit as he did so; he felt bare. The headmaster performed a diagnostic charm on Harry before nodding to himself, he stood up, so Harry did as well. Madam Bone walked up and shook his hand.
“I think you have what it takes,” she said.

“I thought all I had to do was let myself get captured,” Harry said.

“I think you have what it takes to survive,” she said.

“It’s time Potter,” Professor Moody said, his gruff voice about as soft as Harry had ever heard it. Harry nodded.

“Words cannot describe how proud I am of you right now,” the headmaster said.

The words didn’t have the same effect as when his father had said them. Harry just smiled a little hollowly.

“Start occluding now, Harry. Professor Moody just forced you to remove your anti-portkey charm by threatening your friends, and you are being kidnapped,” Professor Dumbledore said.

Not too far from the truth, Harry thought.

“Hold this in the palm of your hand,” Professor Moody said, handing Harry a pewter medallion.

Harry swallowed and took it and held it out in his open hand. He let the fear and anger he was supposed to feel rise up and he stared at the object in his hand with trepidation and resolve. The headmaster tapped it with his wand and Harry felt a sharp tug behind his navel and the office around him disappeared.

When he landed hard upon the earthy ground he had pushed his fear to the back of his mind. There wasn’t room for fear, not when he’d just been kidnapped. Not when Moody had betrayed them and threatened his friends. He started running as soon as he could get up. A hand quickly grabbed his arm, he spat a curse that was pointless without his wand and twisted around and saw Augustus Rookwood, one of the escaped Death Eaters grabbing him. Harry snarled wordlessly and broke the grip easily, putting the man in a wrist lock and throwing him to the ground.

“Stupefy,” someone he couldn’t see incanted and Harry dove out of the way before getting up and promptly tripping over a low tombstone. He was in a graveyard. He tried to pick himself up but the next spell he heard had him throwing himself into a roll. He managed to get his feet back under him.

“Crucio,” the spell was screamed out, and Harry fell to the cold ground writhing and screaming as it felt like he’d been dumped into a vat of fry oil. The pain of the transformation was nothing compared to what he felt then. He screamed and screamed and screamed until he couldn’t scream anymore, and still it didn’t stop. It felt like it went on forever but then suddenly, he felt his mother’s protection envelop him and he was left limp and panting on the ground as he struggled to hold on to the feeling. Somewhere along the way, his arms had been bound behind his back. He tried to struggle, but he couldn’t. He tried to occlude but he couldn’t. That was okay. He didn’t need to. He focused on the pain, and the fear that it would come again. That’s all anyone would see if they looked into his head.

Someone was incanting over him.

“It’s him,” someone said. “It’s really him.”

“Is he clean?”
“Yes. Those fools; they actually gave him to us. You probably think someone will come for you Potter, but they’ll find this graveyard empty when they do.”

Someone grabbed him roughly and he felt another tug behind his naval as he was portkeyed away once more. He landed roughly, unable to brace himself for the fall. Immediately his scar began to hurt. It was hardly worth noting though, it was nothing to the pain he had just endured, it was nothing to the knowledge that he was now in Voldemort’s presence.

“Prepare him,” a voice said. Voldemort’s voice.

“Hominum Pupatium,” a lazy droll incanted and Harry felt as if a number of strings started tugging at his body, lifting him up and dragging him to a tall stake in the ground.

“Incarcerous,” ropes wrapped around him, tying him to the stake.

He struggled against the bindings, feeling panic growing in him, he grabbed what meager mental strength he had and tamped it down. He started desperately putting his mind in order. The pain helped. It was something he could focus on. Something Voldemort would expect him to focus on. He managed to throw up a mental screen before Voldemort started talking.

“It has been some time, Harry Potter,” Voldemort said. “We’ve both come a long way since last we crossed paths, though tonight is the night your path ends, and I start a new path of my own.”

Harry’s eyes sought out the voice and he was disgusted to see what looked like a grey disfigured baby in the arms of none other than Bellatrix Lestrange. He also saw Antonin Dolohov and Augustus Rookwood starting some sort of complex incantation. It looked like a ward. They were in a deep narrow gulley, and Harry had a feeling that there was no one around for miles.

“How are the Aurors planning to kill me?” Voldemort asked.

“What?” Harry asked, confused, his voice barely a scratchy wisp in his raw and painful throat. “I don’t know. A bucket looks like it might do the trick.”

“Crucio,” Bellatrix Lestrange spat out.

The all encompassing pain came again and an eternity later he felt his mother's love, but then it was cast again, and again, and again. When Harry became aware of his surroundings once more, gasping for breath and in a panic, he realized that everyone else had moved on from the questioning. He struggled so hard to overcome his emotions and to push away the pain so that he could focus. He needed to focus. It was all he could do to stay in the present and not find himself fearing another dose of the Crucius Curse. Eventually, he was able to take stock of his situation. He didn’t know if he had really tricked Voldemort or if they’d just figured no one would have told Harry anything. It was starting to sink in that whatever the Headmaster’s plan had been, Voldemort had known and now Harry was in a scenario that had never been planned for. Did that mean he should escape? He focused on the bracelet in his wrist, but he still couldn’t feel it. He tried to move around in his bindings. Maybe he could slip out. Everything was too tight though, and he tried harder and harder, not caring that they could see his obvious struggle.

He pushed the panic down once more and in that moment his feeble control over his own mind slipped and suddenly he was left with his own despair and fear and helplessness. He started thrashing at the bindings. He felt as if he had no strength left, and his muscles screamed with pain as he moved, but he had trained past exhaustion before and he wasn’t going to let that stop him. He couldn’t move though, and soon enough that became the overriding feeling as panic built and built. He couldn’t move.
He couldn’t move.
He couldn’t move.

“Cornelius,” Amelia greeted the Minister for Magic, who looked all ready to enjoy the third task of the tournament.

“Madam Bones,” Fudge said. “So good you could come for the show, you know Antiquitus has been complaining about the amount of overtime you’ve had your department pulling this past couple of weeks.”

“We’ve found He-Who-Must-Not-Be-Named and we strike tonight,” Amelia said.

“Now that’s hardly something to joke about, my dear,” Fudge said, nervously.

“When the dust settles, it will be entirely up to you if you want to claim credit for authorizing the operation.”

“Now hold on just one moment,” Fudge said indignantly. “Why wasn’t I told about this sooner?”

She just gave him a rueful look. “I have some last minute preparations to see to. Enjoy the tournament, Cornelius.” She reached into her robes and grabbed a portkey back to the ministry.

It took a while, but his mother’s protection sprung up around him once more and his panic quieted and he just let himself feel her love and comfort. He pretended that it was real.

“I will eat you when you die,” a susurrative voice said, jarring Harry out of his moment of peace.

“What?” Harry asked. He looked around himself. It took him a moment to remember where he was, and he took in the deep and narrow gulley; a great chasm in the earth. The terrain was rocky and dusk just barely clung to the sky. He saw a massive cauldron over a roaring fire, and the three death eaters were moving about, he didn’t see Voldemort. He looked down and found the source of the bizarre comment. He took a few calming breaths, struggling to get his nerves together.

“I bet that guy over there’s tastier,” Harry said in parseltongue to the enormous snake slithering around on the ground below him. It was a lot easier to talk in parseltongue just at that moment; his throat felt raw and parseltongue mostly relied on sounds made with the tongue. A different hissing voice answered him though.

“Nagini will not betray me,” Voldemort said. Harry still couldn’t see where Voldemort was and that was about as disquieting as the actual sight of him. He took a few more calming breaths.

“Are you sure you want to go through all this again?” Harry asked. “There’s a lot of babies out there. You’d live your entire second life worried one of them was going to turn you back into vapor that needs to leech off the bodies of others.”
Voldemort’s amused chuckle sent a shiver down Harry’s spine.

“Your mother’s protection was a surprise, that’s true, but that is a mistake I won’t make again. You won’t get to see the world I will build. Much as Bella would love to keep you as a plaything, I will not make the mistake of allowing you to live once I have been reborn. There are a number of people I will not suffer to live once I have been reborn. I think you know a number of them.”

“They’ll stop you,” Harry said, in English this time, his voice raspy.

“They will cower before me,” Voldemort said. “I wish you could see it for yourself, but you will have long since been Nagini’s dinner.”

“We are ready, master,” Rookwood said.

“As am I,” Voldemort said.

Harry watched, as Dolohov moved around and picked Voldemort up from off to the side where Harry couldn’t turn his head. He watched in confusion as Dolohov approached the cauldron, sparks jumping off of the potion within and placed Voldemort inside. The potion started glowing white and no time was wasted after that.

Rookwood levitated what looked like a human femur over the cauldron.

“Bone of the father, unknowingly given, you will renew your son,” Rookwood said.

The bone crumpled into dust and settled over the cauldron which sent sparks dancing all over and the potion turned a pale sickly blue. Harry hoped that somehow, everything was still going according to the headmaster’s plan. He knew it wasn’t, but he still hoped.

“Flesh of the servant, willingly sacrificed, you will revive your master,” Dolohov said, holding a hand over the cauldron, his other hand holding a great knife up high.

Harry had a moment of realization before it happened and closed his eyes before he heard the plop of the flesh landing in the potion within. When he opened his eyes again, the potion was glowing red and Bellatrix Lestrange was walking towards him, a fierce look in her eyes. She had a dagger of her own.

“Blood of the enemy,” she said with a snarl. “Forcibly taken.” The dagger went into his upper arm and Harry hissed in pain as he watched her press a vial up to the wound to collect the rivulets that poured forth. “You will resurrect your foe!” She tipped the vial over the cauldron, and the potion within shined white once more, and brighter than ever.

Harry hoped desperately that Voldemort had just drowned in the potion. Suddenly though, he yelled out as it felt like his scar had exploded. He felt a searing pain in his head and blood poured down his face and into his eyes. Through the haze obscuring his vision, he could see a black miasma of smoke rising from the cauldron and the three Death Eaters had collapsed to the ground and seemed to themselves be in pain. The pain intensified, but suddenly he felt his mother’s protection enveloping him once more. There was a warring in his head and he felt as if his very being was being ripped apart before suddenly it cleared and he felt a lightness to himself that was very inappropriate for the situation he had found himself in. That was when he noticed that there was a bracelet around his wrist once more. He willed his wand into his hand at the very same moment that something emerged from the liquid. Suddenly, the headmaster’s plan made sense; a great abomination, a monstrous lupine monster rose from the cauldron and howled just as Harry’s own breath caught in his throat, a phantom memory of the wolf inside himself wanting to
Severus would be very happy when the whole damned tournament was over, and Harry wouldn’t have to constantly worry about Ronald’s survival. At the very least Bagman was out of the equation, and at this point, Severus actually had faith that Hogwart’s second champion would survive. At the end of the day, though, the whole thing had been one massive distraction for Harry, who needed to be preparing to face the Dark Lord.

He became alert when Albus entered the teacher’s box. The Headmaster should be with the other judges, the tournament was supposed to start soon. Severus rose to intercept him. Albus was looking at a pocket watch and held up a staying hand when Severus walked up to him. Severus waited as the headmaster consulted the watch. Severus looked at the watch and saw a face split in two. One side had words in black that said ‘too soon,’ and ‘almost,’ and ‘now,’ while the other side just said in red letters ‘intact,’ and ‘bleeding’. One hand was pointing to the words ‘too soon’, and another pointed to the word ‘intact.’

Severus watched as both hands started to move, one hand moving to the word ‘almost,’ while the other moved to the word ‘bleeding.’

“I told you that you would be there when Harry faced Voldemort,” Albus said. “The time is now. Your only task is to evacuate Harry.”

Severus paled, the hand moved from ‘almost,’ to ‘now,’ and Albus drew his wand. Severus did the same as Albus clasped Severus’s shoulder and tapped a pewter ring on his finger. The portkey activated and Severus felt the tug behind his naval as he was pulled away from Hogwarts.

They landed in a graveyard, and they weren’t alone. Severus turned around, searching, his eyes scanning the dark shadows. There were a dozen Aurors, Mad-Eye Moody, and Madam Bones, but there was no Harry and there was no Voldemort. He heard Albus gasp, and that sound sent a dagger through his heart.

“Where is he,” Severus ground out.

There was no time for a response, he let out a sharp gasp and fell to his knees as his arm burst into agony. He pulled up his sleeve and saw for the first time in thirteen years the dark mark emblazoned on his arm. It burned as it had never burned before, smoke seeping from his skin and the flesh around it turning an angry red. It didn’t matter. He knew where to go. He stood up, and gritted his teeth.

“Wait,” Albus said. He pulled the ring off of his finger, and placed it on the ground next to a rock he pulled up from the ground.

“Malus Navis Portalis Majoritatum,” he cast before picking up the rock and shoving it into Severus’ hand.

Severus didn’t waste another moment. He apparated away and felt the jarring sensation of hitting an anti-apparition ward. It didn’t matter, the Dark Mark would pull him through, but he doubted he would be seeing Albus any time soon.
Harry wasn’t sure who was the most surprised by the giant scaly wolf monster that came out of the cauldron that Voldemort had been supposed to be reborn from. It could have been Dolohov, whose throat was ripped out by the lunging, gangly beast. It could have been Belatix Lestrange who was splashed with his blood. Rookwood had the sense to start flinging spells at it. Harry himself was too busy trying to escape his bonds. The problem was that he was bound fairly tight and he was having trouble casting any sort of spell with his wrists so immobile.

Bellatrix Lestrange had at this point joined Rookwood in flinging spells at the monster. Harry sent his wand back into the bracelet and very carefully summoned the dagger, being very aware of it’s poisoned blade. Wolfsbane, he was guessing. The goblin made dagger sliced through the rope like it was string and Harry was able to wriggle out of the rest of it. He put the dagger into his off hand and assumed a reverse grip before summoning his wand again. Harry had been a bit confused when the Headmaster had told him that his only job at this point would be to escape, but he understood now why combating Voldemort wasn’t Harry’s task at all.

He was about to run away when someone apparated into the narrow gulley. They wore a black hooded cloak and a skull mask and they took one look at the spectacle before them and they turned in on themselves to apparate away, only to reappear a fraction of a second later. Harry didn’t wait to see what they would do next. He was supposed to be escaping. It shouldn’t have been so surprising that his legs were no good for running. He’d hobbled a couple of feet away from the mayhem along the uneven rocky terrain when another death eater apparated directly in his path.

“Expelliarmus,” Harry cried out as a scream rent the air behind him and caused him to flinch. The spell went and missed by a large margin. His limbs were still quaking in the aftermath of the cruciatus curse.

The element of surprise gone, Harry found himself in a very one-sided duel. He struggled to stay upright as a blasting curse slipped past his feeble shield and impacted his side. He was saved, perhaps, as his left leg suddenly felt like all of the muscles seized up and he fell to the ground, just as another curse was barreling towards his head. That was when the monster decided to come their way.

“Accio Harry,” and Harry suddenly found himself flying through the air.

“Dad!” he cried out. As relieved as he felt, he didn’t want his Dad anywhere near the chaos. He wanted very badly to hug him, but it wasn’t exactly an option at the moment.

“We can’t apparate away,” was the first thing he thought to say.

“I know,” his dad said. “Can you walk?”

Harry shook his head. “N-not well; Cruciatus Curse.”

Another scream echoed through the gulley and Harry heard two more cracks of apparition. His dad wasted no time in picking him up and starting to run a short distance to the other side of an outcropping of rock where he placed Harry onto the ground. He quickly reached for his belt and pulled out a potion that he handed to Harry. Harry didn’t question it and downed it quickly. Some of the pain ebbed away, the muscles in his leg unclenched, and his quivering stilled a bit. His dad cast a spell that quickly bound his bleeding arm. He heard several more cracks of apparition and at that point, he was losing track.
“Is that the Dark Lord?” his dad asked.

“It was,” Harry said.

“Come on,” his dad said, pulling him to his feet. “Stay in front of me.”

There was only one direction to go and they ran as well as they could through the narrow gully over the dark terrain. Harry at least had a bit of an advantage, his eyes saw better in the dark than the average wizard. His ears too, and Harry could easily make out the carnage that was happening behind him. He wished he could plug his ears.

They didn’t have too far to run before they were faced with a number of boulders that blocked their path. Harry turned around, he couldn’t see any other way out of the narrow gulley. His dad grabbed him tight and tried to apparate them away, but they were still within the bounds of the ward.

“Do you have your broom?” his dad asked.

“No,” Harry said. “I think I could climb, though.”

“I’ll levitate you,” his dad said.

They were, unfortunately, not the only ones who had decided to run away from the lupine abomination.

“You!” a Death Eater accused. Harry wasn’t sure which of them he was referring to. There were two more Death Eaters running up behind them.

“Confringo,” his dad wasted no time before he started slinging curses, and Harry quickly followed suit.

The problem with the gulley was that there were only two directions to travel in, and trapped as they were, they were basically doomed to have a good number of Death Eaters funneled their way.

Harry cast a banishing charm on a rock about the size of his head and watched as it struck a Death Eater in the chest. He told himself that he had imagined the crunch of bones.

“Engorgio,” Harry cast on a number of small boulders, giving him and his dad a bit of cover.

“Reducto,” his Dad cast at the side of the gulley causing a shower of rocks that knocked two Death Eaters off their feet. If Harry had had the time, he would have stopped to marvel at the spectacle. His Dad had never exactly gone easy on him in training, but watching him fight now, with a fierceness and a skill Harry had never imagined, Harry realized that there were levels of skill that he himself had yet to even approach. Yet still more Death Eaters were showing up, and it was only a matter of time before they were too outnumbered. No one had told him that all of these Death Eaters would be summoned somehow, or that his dad would be summoned with them. What was the point of all of this if the people he cared about were still in danger? He’d done this so he would never have to worry about Voldemort killing his Dad for being his Dad.

“Aguamenti Maxima,” a Death Eater incanted, and a ridiculously large jet of water arched over their heads against the gulley walls behind them. The water crashed back down and a torrent swept Harry’s feet out from underneath him and he found himself carried out by the brief river that had formed in the gulley. The spell didn’t last very long, luckily, but it did leave Harry separated from his dad and a bit surrounded.
Harry slashed out with his dagger at the leg of the nearest Death Eater as he got his feet underneath him once more. The Death Eater fell with a scream, the blade had cut through the bone easily. Harry made a mad dash for another outcropping of rocks, while his dad kept the other Death Eaters busy. Another scream was heard in the distance that was rather abruptly cut off. A moment later a demonic howl echoed against the walls of the gulley and there was the briefest lull in the fight. It was getting closer. Harry could hear the click of it’s claws on the rocky ground.

Werewolves had far superior night vision, compared to humans, and Harry had to assume that whatever Voldemort had turned into, that he could see in the dark gulley a lot better than they could, and Harry had no desire to allow the beast any sort of advantage.

“Lumos Solaris,” Harry cast, and a great sphere of light shot out of his wand and hovered high overhead, he’d kept one eye closed when he cast it, and now he squinted through his eyelids, and took in the area around him.

“Stupefy,” he cast at a nearby Death Eater who had shielded his eyes against the bright light. He heard a scrambling off to his left and looked over to see the monster prowl into sight. Harry chanced a glance over at his dad. They were trapped now, not just with the Death Eaters, but with a monster that had already killed several dark wizards. He had no idea how he was supposed to make sure his Dad got out.

The beast gave out a low guttural growl and several Death Eater’s turned to face the creature at their backs, wasting no time in throwing spells against it ineffectually. For all that had been flung at it, it only seemed to have some minor cuts and burns on its pelt. One of the death eaters took a page from Harry’s dad’s book and tried to bring the wall of the gulley down on the beast, but it scampered away from the rockslide and leapt on the nearest Death Eater, a swipe of a massive paw rending robes and flesh. Harry supposed that this was the point where he was supposed to use the dagger, though he had little desire to get anywhere close to it. Getting close, however, would likely happen sooner, rather than later.

A werewolf wasn’t like a regular wolf. A wolf would take down an individual animal and feast upon it, ignoring the other prey animals in the area. The werewolf wouldn’t feast until every human around it had been taken down. No sooner was one Death Eater struck down, then another was pounced upon. Harry thought his best chance for survival would be to go on the offensive. He came up with a plan and figured that it had worked once to save Ron, and he wasn’t exactly all that concerned with getting bitten again.

Harry pointed his wand at the ground behind him and looked at the movement of the monster in front of him. This wasn’t very much an exact science. He cast the same propulsion spell Ron had used in the first task, and he rocketed in a haphazard arc towards the thing that was once Voldemort. It turned as he flew at it and a swipe of its paw knocked him out of the air and tore open his leg. Harry gasped in pain and heard his Dad call out his name as the beast sat back on its haunches, getting ready to pounce. Suddenly though, a large boulder flew at it, and Harry knew that his dad still had his back.

“Incarcerous,” Harry cast on his own leg, and rope wrapped tightly around it, cutting off the flow of blood. Harry did his best to stand, though he knew he wouldn’t be able to walk, much less run about. He supposed he would be a bit of a one-trick pony. His dad was still flinging rocks at the monster, and now he had garnered the thing’s attention.

“Get out of the way,” Harry yelled as the beast snarled and started running toward’s his Dad. Harry felt his heart leap into his throat and didn’t waste any more time. He cast the propulsion spell once more and launched himself towards the back of the monster, his dagger outstretched and
giving his best approximation of a battle cry, hoping at least to get the thing’s attention. He didn’t care about how he landed, so long as he managed to hit the thing. He watched it leap at his dad just as he himself fell upon it, and he plunged the dagger down hard into the beast’s side, and held on tight.

An enraged howl cut through the air, and Harry was suddenly thrown off to the side, landing roughly on the rocks. The dagger was left inside of the monster, and Harry was glad for it, since he didn’t want to chance another tumble with the thing still clutched in his hand. The beast was still thrashing about, and much too close to Harry’s dad for his liking. He almost jumped on it again when he noticed the pool of water the thing was in.

“Glacius,” Harry incanted, freezing the water and managing to trap one of the beast’s paws in the ice. The beast continued to struggle, though it was growing weaker, and everyone around it was casting curses upon it. It didn’t take too long for the poison to take its course though, and eventually, it fell still. That was when Harry realized that he was still sprawled out on the ground, surrounded by the remaining Death Eaters, and with a bad leg besides.

The temporary alliance, if it could be called that, broke down quickly after that, and Harry was forced to deflect several curses before his dad sent out a rather large wave of flames. They weren’t particularly damaging; they were rather more of a distraction. As everyone turned to shield themselves, Harry was once more summoned to his father’s side. Not that he was complaining, but he was rather getting tired of being thrown about like a rag doll.

The battle was beginning to pick up once more, and Harry was starting to realize that they wouldn’t be able to hold out forever. But that was when a trio of red-robed Aurors flew into the gulley on brooms. They started flinging spells at the Death Eaters while one of them sent off a flare into the sky. Talking to his friends later, Harry would tell them that the most surreal thing he had ever seen, was the headmaster, flying down soon after, moving about and flinging spells in a fashion that belied the fact that he was well over a hundred years old, and looked older besides. The battle was basically over after that, and Harry allowed himself to be flown away to the boundary of the anti-apparition wards.

He wound up at the Ministry of Magic, where he barely noticed being healed and reunited with his dad. He felt like he was separate from everything happening around him. It took him a moment to notice that his Dad was talking to him.

“Do you know what happened with the tournament?” Harry asked, interrupting his dad.

“I left rather abruptly before it started,” his dad said. “Harry, are you okay?”

“So maybe it got canceled?” Harry asked.

“I don’t know,” his Dad said. “I doubt it.”

He asked around, but no one could tell him what was happening with the third task. An Auror wanted to take a statement from Harry, but Madam Bones arrived with a portkey back to school. Harry figured he’d get an official story to tell later.

“I have to see how Ron did,” Harry said. They’d reappeared in the Headmaster’s office, alone. He tried to stop his shaking. His dad wouldn’t let him walk down to the grounds if he saw that the
potion he’d been given earlier had worn off.

“Harry,” his dad said. “Even if they started the third task without the Headmaster, I doubt it’s over yet. It was supposed to start only half an hour ago.”

“Half an hour?” Harry asked. “That can’t…” He thought about it. It hadn’t been that short of a time, had it? “Well, I’ve got to see how he does.”

“Harry, we’re going to stay here until we know that it’s safe,” his dad said.

Harry huffed. He wanted to say that Voldemort was gone and all the Death Eaters were either dead or captured, but he didn’t actually know that, so he sat down and bounced his leg while he waited for the Headmaster to come back.

“How do you feel?” his dad asked.

Harry shrugged. The after effects of the Cruciatus Curse still lingered, and literally everything hurt, but he was mostly all healed up, and as exhausted as he was, the pain was keeping him alert. If he could just stop trembling, he felt like he would be able to give his dad a hug without letting on the fact that he should probably spend the night in the hospital wing.

“How were you captured?”

Harry shook his head, standing up, unable to keep sitting anymore. “I wasn’t,” he said distractedly as he started bouncing on his heels. His dad had sat down but Harry didn’t think that he could sit down with out immediately jumping up again and pacing. “This was the plan. Pretty much everything went according to plan. Voldemort wanted to use my blood for his, like, rebirth potion, but he didn’t know I was a werewolf. I think we were supposed to stay in the graveyard though. I think they knew we had a plan of our own. It worked out, though, I guess.”

“This was the plan?” his dad asked.

“It worked,” Harry said. He started rubbing against the spot where the knife had sliced into his arm. There hadn’t even been a mark left behind to show that it had happened. Harry didn’t feel like any of it had happened. There were three parallel scars on his leg now, he knew, curse scars that would never go away, but even though he had seen them with his own eye it felt like he had seen someone else’s leg. Even the pain and tremors throughout his own body were starting to feel inconsequential.

His dad had nothing but a cold glare for the Headmaster when he finally arrived.

“What’s happening with the tournament?” Harry asked.

“This was the plan?!?” his Dad asked.

“The tournament is still ongoing,” the Headmaster said to Harry; and to his dad, “Yes, Severus, this was the plan.”

“And the prophecy has been fulfilled then?” His Dad asked on top of Harry’s, “So is it safe for me to go watch?”

The Headmaster held up a steadying hand. He walked over to his desk and pulled out what looked like some sort of tiara. He did a complicated incantation upon it before smiling.

“Yes,” he said. “The prophecy has been fulfilled and you may both move on with your lives
“And move on to the tournament,” Harry prompted. Harry was sure he would have questions later, he was sure he would care later, but just then there was only one thing he wanted.

“Yes, Harry,” the Headmaster said. “I suppose I should return to my other duties, myself.”

“That’s it then,” his dad said.

“That is it,” the headmaster said. “There will be questions later, for the record, but I will talk to you about that later when Harry can give us his entire attention.”

“It was a plan, and I agreed to it,” Harry said. He hadn’t planned on saying that. He didn’t have a plan in the first place, but he realized that that was important, so he said it before he even considered it. It didn’t feel like something he would say. He didn’t feel like himself.

Both adults looked at him.

“The story,” Harry said. “I wasn’t kidnapped.”

The headmaster nodded, though he gazed at Harry appraisingly. Another drawer was opened and Harry was handed back all of his confiscated items, and the three of them made their way to the grounds.

Harry felt oddly as if the night’s events hadn’t happened to him, as if he had just been told about them. The lingering pain throughout his body told him otherwise, but it all just didn’t seem real. The pain and fatigue mounted as they walked, piercing through the odd intangibility Harry felt. He sidled up next to his Dad, who put his arm around Harry’s shoulder, gripping him tight as they walked, but even that didn’t feel real.

“They told me you’d been healed,” his Dad said.

“I was,” Harry said. “I’m alright, really. Just a bit shaken up.”

The arm around his shoulders moved up and down a bit in an approximation of comfort. They arrived too late. And though Harry was relieved to see Ron outside of the maze, surrounded by his family, a part of him was disappointed that he hadn’t seen any of it happen. No part of his night seemed like it had really happened. It didn’t take long to discover the outcome.

“A tie?” his dad sounded a bit incredulous.

The headmaster chuckled.

Their arrival caused a bit of a stir. The headmaster’s absence from the proceedings had been noticed, and his arrival now with a slightly bedraggled looking Harry and a stressed out professor drew the attention of the paparazzi away from the champions.

The headmaster quieted their shouted questions. “I wanted to congratulate all of the champions. There is much to rejoice for tonight, not least of which is that all four of our champions made it through the three tasks whole and hale. There is more that happened tonight, but I’m afraid that you shall have to wait until tomorrow morning. I’m sure there will be a briefing at the ministry. For tonight though, we celebrate the remarkable achievements of our students. Now I believe I did abdicate my duties to my deputy headmistress, so perhaps if she is ready, it is time for the cup to be given to our champions.
Harry wasn’t surprised when it was Ron and Cedric who climbed up onto the pedestal. Everything still felt incredibly surreal. He was trying to make his way towards Ron and his family when it happened. He’d been very close, and the frustration he felt just then was perhaps the most real thing he’d felt since he had left the gulley. Madam Pomfrey, having already checked over the champions, stormed up to Harry and took one look at him before pulling out her wand and casting a diagnostic charm.

She sent a glare towards the Headmaster. “Just letting you walk around in your state,” she said. “Come on now, to the hospital wing with you.”

“But Ron,” Harry said.

“But nothing,” Madam Pomfrey said.

Harry sighed, resigned to his fate. Perhaps winding up in the Hospital Wing would make everything feel real. Though he thought the detached feeling might be for the best just then.

Chapter End Notes

Well, so that happened. I hope you've been finding a lot of good fic. If any of you are looking for non-fanfiction, I'd like to recommend the Gives Light series by Rose Christo, it has gay main characters and is very cheap on Amazon Kindle. One chapter to go.
Oh my gosh, the last chapter. After all this time. It's been a wild ride. I hope you all enjoy it. I did a reread of the entire fic, which took a long time, OMG how did it get this long. Made some minor changes, cleaned some things up, added the Imperius Curse scene in Defense Class scene. If you've been reading from update to update for a while now, today is a great day to go back and start from the beginning, if you'd like. Hope you all enjoy. In other news, I visited my sister and her family in Vegas over the holiday. Didn't do much besides hang out though she did take me out to see a Zombie Burlesque show that was very funny (Also had a really lovely ballet scene to a string version of Zombie by the Cranberries and perhaps the best juggling act I've ever seen.)

See the end of the chapter for more notes

"Now, I should have known!" said Ron dramatically. "I should have known, with an answer like that, but I just thought it was a creepy riddle. So, I'm past the sphinx, unsuspecting, and I'm thinking, I've probably got to be pretty close, I mean, they're not going to have it guarding a dead end are they?"

Madam Pomfrey would murder them if she found them, but she'd dosed Harry with a Dreamless Sleep potion at about seven, and no one had been allowed inside, besides his Dad, so Ron had decided to sneak in in the dead of night. Harry could have probably kept on sleeping, but once the potion had worn off, he'd been left to his dreams and he'd had to claw his way to wakefulness to escape the nightmare. He'd felt a tangible feeling of relief to turn his head and see Ron engrossed in a book at his bedside.

Harry had opened his mouth to get Ron's attention, but no words had come out. He tried again… nothing. It wasn't like he'd lost his voice, it wasn't his vocal chords; it was that no part of him was actually going through the motions of speech. He knew what he wanted to say, but it was like his brain just didn't have a clue what speaking entailed. He swallowed hard. Panic starting to set in, but he cleared his mind, forcing the panic down. He was safe, he reminded himself. Ron was here. He was in the hospital wing. He was safe, but feeling like he couldn't talk made him feel like something terrible was about to happen to him. The part where he could still so freshly remember being hunted and tortured didn't help matters at all. There was no point in worrying Ron about it though. He was safe.

After he'd pushed the memories of pain and terror down, he prodded Ron to get his attention. Ron was excited to see him up, and after Harry had waved away Ron's queries, he'd given Ron an expectant look and Ron had only taken a moment with a searching look of his own before he launched into the tale of the tournament.

"So that was the end of the maze, sure," Ron said continued. "But it wasn't the end because they stuck a fucking acromantula to hover over the damn cup."

Harry's eyebrows shot up, and he had to physically grip his left arm to stop himself from reaching out towards Ron. He could imagine how he might have felt about a giant spider.

"Yeah, exactly," Ron said. "I mean, I'd have rathered they just stuck another dragon in there. So
anyway, I just noped right out of there."

Harry raised a single eyebrow this time because obviously, Ron had gotten the cup.

"Well yeah, I went back eventually," Ron said. "But first I ducked back around the hedge and flipped off the scrying focus they had following me."

Harry grinned, and it only felt a little forced, and a little strained as Ron's story helped keep back the feeling that the shadows on the walls were pushing in on the light cast by the single candle on his nightstand.

"I was just going to send up sparks and call it quits," Ron said. "But then some idiot comes in from the other side and starts fighting the thing. You'd think Diggory was a bloody Gryffindor since he saw a giant fucking spider and just figured he'd try to fight it. Well now, it didn't sound like it was going too well for him so, eventually mind you, eventually, I decided to help him out. I turn the corner again and Cedric's five feet in the air with his arm clamped tight in-between the thing's pincers, so I used the damned grease spell, only I was a little too excited about it 'cause I wound up coating just everything, so the spider's legs are going out from under it, Cedric's falling down, I'm slipping and falling. Now that's also the last thing he casts because his wand slips right out of his hand, meanwhile, I'm completely blanking on the spell to cancel out the grease and Cedric and I have to yell about it for a little bit before I figure it out. Meanwhile, this great big ugly thing is trying to scramble over to us so it can eat us and it gets itself turned around and starts shooting webbing at us, but we're covered in grease so it doesn't stick, it's just sort of piling up on top of us and going all over the place."

Harry's actually holding his sides, because as terrifying as he's sure it was, Ron's making it sound hilarious, and his suppressed laughter seems surreal. Ron grins at him.

"So I have to, very carefully mind, I have to delimit an area for Cedric and me, without losing my wand, and then I cancel out the grease, we stand up, vanish this thick spider silk, and then we just look at each other, and would you believe it, he says, 'Well looks like you saved me there, I reckon you should probably take the cup.' I'm pretty sure he's bleeding to death from his arm, and the angry giant spider noises are really starting to drive me spare, but there we are, so we argue about that for a bit, and then we hear Fleur answering the Sphinx's question just outside and we look back at each other and we just grab the thing. Now, wouldn't you know it, the thing's a portkey, and we get transported to the front of the maze. There's a bunch of fireworks, and confetti, everyone's pretty flummoxed about there being two of us and then…"

Ron was interrupted as the hospital wing door slowly crept open. Harry tensed up, but it was only Draco who stuck his head in. He went a bit pale when he saw Ron.

"Weasley," Draco said accusingly.

"Malfoy?" Ron asked.

"Well obviously neither of us are supposed to be here," Draco said. "So you keep quiet and so will I."

"Okay," Ron said. "Well I know what I'm doing here, but I can't fathom why you're breaking into the hospital wing in the middle of the night. Here to do Harry in?"
Draco scowled. "I needed a potion," he said.

"A potion, huh?" Ron said. "I don't think Madam Pomfrey keeps any deadly untraceable poisons. Maybe try Snape's private collection."

Draco rolled his eyes. "Well, I'll just be going."

"Don't you need your potion?" Ron asked.

"And let you know what I was after? I don't think so," Draco said.

With that, Draco left and Ron started laughing.

Harry swatted him on the arm.

"Malfoy liiiikes you," Ron said.

Harry blushed.

"Seriously," Ron said. "Visiting you in the hospital wing now? This is getting serious."

Harry shook his head, covering his face with his hands, still denying that it was Draco he had been secretly absconding with to make out.

"Pfft, he probably wanted to see if Pomfrey had healed you up enough to suck face," Ron said.

Harry couldn't help but grin at that.

Ron shrugged. "He's lucky your Dad wasn't here."

Harry frowned. He'd actually been expecting his Dad to be there when he woke up.

"Oh, he was here, you know," Ron said. "I snuck in and he's sitting right here where I'm sitting now and he just rolls his eyes and is all, 'well, I'll just leave it up to you Mr. Weasley,' and left. Wouldn't tell me what had happened though."

Harry was pretty sure that his Dad had given up on the idea of them following the rules.

Harry gestured for Ron to continue telling his story.

"Oh, well, I got swarmed by my family, then you came and completely stole the spotlight," Ron said.

Harry grinned apologetically.

"Hah, yeah, I think Cedric's Dad was a bit put out," Ron said. "Anyway, not much after that, there were photographs, I talked to a couple of reporters, oh, and there was a party, no big deal."

"So I told you my story," Ron said. "And no one seems to know what happened to you, except your Dad and Dumbledore and they sure aren't talking. So, I guess I'm wondering if this no talking thing is, like a curse, or if you just don't want to talk, or what?"

Harry shrugged, looking down a bit, wishing that Ron hadn't called attention to it. Everything had been easier when Ron had been talking about the tournament. Madam Pomfrey had asked him how long he'd been under the Crucciatus Curse, as if he'd had a stopwatch. However long it had been, she seemed to think his symptoms a bit on the prolonged exposure side, and had warned about
intermittent neurological symptoms. He didn't know if an inability to talk was a symptom or if he'd just decided he didn't have anything to say, but he'd been managing just fine since he woke up. Ron seemed to understand him just fine.

"I have no idea why Madam Pomfrey rushed you off to the hospital wing," Ron said.

Harry pointed at his scar.

"You-Know-Who?" Ron asked.

Harry nodded.

"He come off worse for wear again?" Ron asked.

Harry nodded solemnly and dragged a finger across his throat.

"Wait," Ron said. "For real this time?"

Harry nodded.

"Like for good?"

Another nod.

"Oh wow, sweet Merlin, okay, so guess you aren't telling me how that happened any time soon?"

Harry shook his head.

"Well, I've got to say, that's a load off of my mind, you know?"

Harry nodded his concurrence.

"No really, I'd sort of gotten used to the idea of him just always being out there, like someday I'd be sending my kids off to Hogwarts and I'd be telling them to watch out for the defense professor."

Harry motioned with his hands to signify finality.

"Are you okay?"

Harry bit his lip and thought about it before he pointed to his lips and raised an eyebrow.

"Yeah, I guess not," Ron said. "Has this happened before?"

Harry shook his head, before thinking about it and wobbling his hand a bit. He'd never just stopped talking, but he remembered times growing up when talking had felt risky and saying nothing had been the safest bet; when making a sound could have been punished. Times when he'd had to force himself just to talk in class. He was pretty sure this was his fried nerves though.

"Well whatever's up, me and Hermione're here with ya, ya know? Your Dad too."

Harry ducked his head feeling a bit warmed. He did know now.

The first thing his Dad would probably do would be to have Harry occlude. Harry wasn't sure that that would work, but he was doing just fine not talking for the time being; he'd allow himself to deal with it later. Besides which, Ron could always carry on a conversation by himself.

Ron paused for a bit. "I guess I can recognize that tremor," he said, motioning towards Harry's
hands.

Harry frowned down at them and hid them under his blanket. Even after all the treatment, they were still shaking a bit. He knew that Ron, and probably Hermione too, had faced the curse when they'd been with Greyback, but it was one of the things that Ron had never really elaborated on. He'd only ever mentioned it once in passing and Harry had been too horrified at the time to comment on it. It had never come up again.

"Course, Greyback preferred to be physical," Ron said, sounding a bit distant. "But he was a twisted fuck so he wanted to make sure I was grateful that he was punching the shit out of me instead of cursing me."

Harry reached out and grabbed onto Ron's hand, before realizing that Ron probably didn't need to feel the tremors. He pulled his hand back and wrapped both his arms around himself.

"And shit, I made this about me," Ron said. "You probably don't want to talk about this right now. You need a distraction."

Harry shook his head in denial, because maybe Ron needed to talk about it, but Ron pushed on.

"So, are you getting another Order of Merlin?" He forced himself to raise his head and smile, giving Ron a skeptical look. He doubted anyone would award him for sitting still while someone took his blood. Besides, he rather thought they probably already regretted giving him the first one after he got outing.

"Oh, come on," Ron said. "They've gotta."

Harry nodded his agreement, though they both knew he didn't mean it.

"Well, anyway, that's about it for what you missed," Ron said. "A Witch Weekly reporter interviewed me and kept trying to get me to say something like how I was trying to prove something because of my sexuality. But then, there was this Quidditch Quarterly reporter who was talking to Krum, and he starts telling them about playing quidditch here, so Cedric and I got interviewed too, and we got to talk about our pickup games, and then this French reporter wanted to talk to us, and did you know Cedric spoke French? Because you'd think that would have come up before now, but he does."

Harry shook his head because he hadn't known. Ron yawned, reminding the both of them that they were tired. They could probably both do with a good bit of sleep but Harry didn't think either of them would sleep very well. Harry pointed to the book that Ron had been reading before he'd woken Harry up.

"Oh," Ron said, excitedly. "Bill brought it for me. Oh, and Bill might be getting transferred to London, but that's another thing. Okay, so it's a muggle book, like made by muggles and its about muggles, so it follows this archeologist, I think Bill's worried the rest of us think Charlie has the cooler job, anyway, there's this archeologist and it takes place during the war against Grindelwald, only, you know, they don't know about Grindelwald, so this guy's fighting these muggles called Nazis and they're both looking for this ancient magical religious thing that they think is going to give one side of the war like, a lot of power. It's sort of like the Auror Lyle series except no one can use magic, and everyone has guns. Oh, and get this, he's about as scared of snakes as I am of spiders, so that's sort of nice. Now I'm pretty sure Bill just sits in an office all day and works out runic arrays and solves arithmancy problems, I don't think he ever has to chase after Death Eaters to stop them from finding Merlin's staff or anything, but the story's alright, even if half this muggle stuff doesn't make sense."
Halfway through Ron's description of the book, Harry found himself squinting at the title and reaching for his glasses from the nightstand. He'd been pretty sure that that was a movie. Judging by the bookmark, Ron had already gotten a good ways through it, and Harry wondered how long he'd been waiting by Harry's bedside. He motioned at the novel and pointed at Ron.

"Oh, sure," Ron said, picking it up and opening it up to the beginning. "Chapter one…" he began.

Harry settled himself down and let himself get lost in the sound of Ron's voice as he excitedly started rereading the book. The fantasy of it all would be distraction enough.

Harry got released the following morning by an irate Madam Pomfrey who was not pleased to find her patient awake and getting read too at five thirty. He'd tried valiantly to speak, because surely she wouldn't let him leave if there was something really wrong with him, but just attempting it made him feel small and boxed in. He was getting angry at himself. She made a bit of a fuss about his muteness, but not finding anything physically or magically wrong with him she just made him drink some potions and that seemed to soothe his tremors a bit more and wrote him a note for any professor he might encounter. With the History of Magic exam they'd had the day before, classes were over and Harry was glad for it. No classes, no hospital wing, just a week to roam the castle while everything was graded and processed. There was supposed to be a Hogsmeade visit on Sunday, but Harry didn't expect he would go. With instructions to come back in the evening, she reluctantly let him go.

It was too early for breakfast so they went back to the common room where Hermione wasn't too surprised to find Ron climbing in through the portrait hole rather than the boys' dorm. Harry got a big hug, and he tried very hard not to tremble. It took Ron a bit to convince Hermione not to make a big deal about the fact that Harry wasn't talking.

Ron filled Hermione in on what little he'd gotten from Harry the night before, and Harry could only shrug apologetically when she'd tried to ask questions. Like Ron, she showed a great deal of relief at the thought of never having to worry about Voldemort again. For Harry's part, he wasn't thinking of it too much. He was feeling better though, walking in the early morning light that filtered in through the windows, still, talking just didn't seem possible at the moment.

They got to the Great Hall a bit earlier than they usually did for breakfast, and Harry scanned around and was a bit relieved to see that no one had been delivered their newspaper yet. With no more classes, it was a lazy morning for most of the school. He wondered if the news had broken yet. No one else from their year was at Gryffindor table but he got a number of stares from some of the older students. Sitting down, he glanced over at Slytherin table, where Draco definitely wasn't looking like he'd just been staring over at Harry. The normality of eating breakfast in the Great Hall had a surrealism to it that had Harry feeling a bit like he had the night before, like he wasn't really there. He was allowed to eat in peace for a while though, which was nice. Hermione kept shooting him worried glances while Ron chattered about summer plans. Harry felt like he was hearing about someone else's vacation, and not his own.

Students filed in for breakfast, and Hermione and Ron ran interference for Harry who was the subject of a number of curious conversations. Fortunately, Ron had won the tournament the night before, so there was plenty of interest there. Ron seemed to enjoy the positive attention at least. When Harry saw the owls, he tensed up and felt dragged back into himself as he waited for whatever announcement was coming.
Not for the first time, he wished he'd bothered to pull out a subscription for the paper, though he
didn't fancy paying them to write articles about him. Whatever the headline, it didn't take long for
Harry to determine that the news had indeed broken. Heads were turning and excited chatter broke
out across the hall.

Parvati stared at him over her newspaper. "Is it true?" she asked.

Harry tried for a less hunted look and raised an eyebrow and pointed to the paper. She turned it
around and Harry read the headline "You-Know-Who Finally Dead, Proclaims MoM Fudge," and
below it the byline "A mysterious prophesy, the Boy-Who-Lived, over two dozen Death
Eaters, and a covert Ministry plan to stop the return of He-Who-Must-Not-Be-Named at the
eleventh hour."

Harry nodded his head.

"You didn't lose your tongue last night did you?" Lavender asked.

Harry shook his head and resisted the urge to stick his tongue out. He looked up at the head table.
The Headmaster and all heads of house were absent, including his Dad.

"Do you want to read it?" Ron asked. "The twins have been getting the paper."

Harry thought about it. It wasn't like he didn't already know what had happened, but he did wonder
what had gone down after he'd been flown off. It wasn't like he was particularly hungry anyway.
He nodded his head and they walked over to the twins who were engrossed in the paper. Lee
Jordan and another student were also trying to read over their shoulders.

"Budge over," Ron said.

Fred looked at Harry. "You stabbed You-Know_Who!"

Harry shrugged. It had been less of a stabbing motion and more of a falling motion.

"To death?" Lee Jordan asked.

Harry shrugged. He wasn't sure if he should consider Voldemort to have been dead the moment his
tainted blood had been added to the potion. He found himself scanning the front page.

Harry was a bit startled a bit later when Ron put his arm around him, which made him realize that
he'd sort of zoned off. He nodded his head and realized that he'd been staring at a section of the
article titled "Twelve Death Eaters Confirmed Dead, Fourteen Captured."

Harry remembered asking the headmaster to credit Harry's decision and the headmaster had done
just that. The article didn't say what the ritual had been, only that Voldemort had wanted Harry to
be a blood sacrifice.

'It was important that there be a sacrifice,' the Headmaster was quoted as saying. 'The ritual could
have never worked as [He-Who-Must-Not-Be-Named] wanted it to if his sacrifice had already
sacrificed himself. This is why Harry was never told that there was a plan to rescue him, only that
he had a choice, whether he would face Voldemort or not.'

Hermione became very indignant when she got to that spot and Ron became pale when she pointed
it out to him. He gave Harry an almost betrayed look.
The interview never mentioned that Harry had Lycanthropy, only hinting that Harry had been given something that would mix with his blood and cause the ritual to go wonky. There were vague mentions of a prophecy that had given two possible outcomes, and it mostly seemed to be justification for having given Harry over to Voldemort in the first place. Harry skips another section of the article that talked about the battle that had happened after the rebirthing ritual.

Everything in the article seemed fairly accurate, though Fudge seemed to be taking a bunch of credit, when Harry was pretty sure he hadn't known anything about the plan beforehand.

So the article was fairly accurate, but at the same time, it didn't really feel like it described what Harry had been through. The author didn't understand the terror or the pain, and the article was more about the sensational things that had happened. It did nothing to make the night prior feel real. Harry went back and started reading about the mission.

"I think we should go," Hermione said, tugging at Harry's sleeve.

Harry had just gotten to the part where the Headmaster was talking about having discovered the imposter Moody and learning of Voldemort's plan and figured he knew most everything that was left to be said. They made it out of the dining hall with a lot of staring and a buzzing of excited babbling and as soon as they were out in the hall, it was hug time. It was a little grounding, to have Hermione's arms wrapped tightly around him. It took him a while to return it.

"How could you?" Hermione said. Harry didn't think he was expected to answer.

"It's over now," Ron said. "It's all over. The tournament, you-know-who, we don't have to worry about it anymore."

"It wasn't his job," Hermione said.

"I know," Ron said.

Hermione sniffles a bit and releases him.

"How could they ask you to do that?" Hermione asked.

Ron didn't have a response to that.

"Your Dad?" Hermione asked.

Harry shook his head.

"Next year will be normal," she said.

Harry nodded solemnly.

They found a secluded spot for themselves. No one mentioned Hogsmeade.

"Mum's going to have kittens, of course," Ron said. "When she sees you agreed to all that."

Harry reaches for his quill. It was like he was sending notes in class.

'Dad wasn't thrilled either,' he wrote. His handwriting even worse than usual. 'Prophecy seems to be a magic word though.'

"What did it say," Hermione asked. She seemed to have calmed down a bit.
Harry shrugged. Shrugging was easy.

"Prophesy's over," Ron said. "So no more magic words to get you out of trouble if you go out and do this again."

Ron was one to talk, given that he'd just completed a death tournament. There were a few more admonishments, that Harry nodded along to. In the end, they started talking about plans for the summer and Harry realized that there wasn't anything huge anymore that hung over his head that might keep him from actually going. Voldemort was gone. So many Death Eaters had been killed or captured the night before. There was nothing that would stop him from enjoying his summer vacation.

"Hey," Ron said. "Do you suppose Harry's famous in Germany?"

Harry rolled his eyes. That would be just what he needed.

'I'll dye my hair,' he scribbled down.

"That's the giveaway," Ron said. "It's the hair."

'I'll wear a hat,' he tried. 'You can all call me Jason. Real sneaky.'

They hung out for the rest of the morning until Harry figured his Dad would probably be finished with whatever he had been doing that morning. Ron and Hermione insisted on walking him to the dungeons. Harry still wore his invisibility cloak, he didn't want to get gawked at.

Of course, Ron was a bit of a celebrity now, and they were stopped a few times by students who wanted to talk about the tournament. None of the passing students wanted to talk to them once they got to the dungeons though.

Dad wasn't in his quarters, as Harry had hoped, so they headed to his office where it seemed odd to see him doing something so mundane as grading finals. Harry pulled off the cloak and went up to Dad for a hug.

"Any trouble?" Dad asked as he released Harry.

Harry shook his head and his suspicion that some of his classmates had lost family the night before grew.

Ron cleared his throat. "Well, Harry's got his note, so we're going to go to lunch," he said. "See you later, mate."

They walked out.

"What note?" Dad asked.

Harry bit his lip and pulled the note from Madam Pomfrey out of his pocket and handed it over.

Dad read it over and then looked Harry over.

"Hold out your hands," he said.

Harry sighed and held his arms out with his palms up. Besides an occasional facial tick, they were the most obvious sign that he was still dealing with the after-effects of the Cruciatius Curse.

Dad nodded and smoothed down the hair on the side of Harry's head with one of his hands.
"Have you tried occluding?" he asked.

Harry shook his head, he'd only just cleared his mind when he'd first realized he couldn't talk.

"Let's start there," Dad said.

Harry tried not to roll his eyes. He'd known this would be the first thing they'd do. He focused though, and in moments his mind was clear and he was occluding.

"Try talking," Dad said.

Harry opened his mouth, but still, nothing came out. He shrugged instead. He stopped occluding and pointed to the finals on the desk and then at himself.

"You earned an outstanding," Dad said. "I graded yours first."

Harry shook his head. Ron had never had trouble understanding what Harry was trying to say.

He picked up Dad's quill, dripping with red ink, and gestured to himself again. He was offering to help grade the lower years.

Dad cottoned on, but he shook his head. "I have Arden and Yates grading years one through three," he said, referring to his other two lab assistants. "Come on, we should have lunch, and then we can take some time to process what happened yesterday."

That meant Dad wanted to play therapist again, which would be fine, but it would be fine later.

He shook his head.

"Have you had much of an appetite?" Dad asked. "Did you eat breakfast?"

Harry huffed. He grabbed the quill again and found a piece of paper to write, 'it happened last night. Can't I have some time?"

"It's best to address these things early," Dad said. "Before they can take root."

Harry underlined "it happened last night."

He got another hug, and this one lasted a long time also.

"Come on," Dad said. "Time for lunch."

Harry looked at Dad skeptically, unsure that he had won and that his Dad wouldn't suddenly spring surprise therapy at him.

"Just lunch," Dad said.

They walked to Dad's quarters in silence.

"I spoke to the Headmaster this morning," Dad said, once they were behind closed doors. "The Ministry wants another award ceremony."

Harry tilted his head back and pointed at himself with a bit of a shocked expression on his face.

"Yes, for you," Dad said. "Others as well, though you'll likely be getting an Order of Merlin first class, this time."
Harry shook his head, a bit exasperated.

"While I wish you had stayed in the castle," Dad said. "You did a great service at great risk to your own life. That's what the award is supposed to be for. Besides, the Minister is up for re-election next year and he wants as much fanfare from this as he can get."

Harry scowled.

"Yes, well, it's too your benefit as well," Dad said. "Harder for them to come after you someday if they've put you up as the hero of the wizarding world."

Harry sighed. It fit exactly with what he wanted anyway.

Harry had to root around for a quill and paper while his Dad ordered food.

'Anything else I've missed?' he asked as sandwiches appeared on the table.

Dad nodded and became a bit more somber. "I want you to be more careful walking the halls."

Harry gave him a look, because he'd been cautious about wandering the halls the past two years.

"Some of your classmates lost family last night," Dad said. "To death or to Azkaban. Any one of them could decide that it was your fault."

Harry frowned.

"Of course, it is not your fault," Dad said. "Everyone there that night chose to be there, if they died at the hands of their master, then that is hardly your burden to bear."

Harry thought of the Death Eater he'd banished a small boulder at, and wondered what their fate had been.

"For all that they've already given a press conference and decided to give you an award, there will be official statements to be given later today. The Headmaster will go over the details with you later."

Harry nodded, a bit distractedly.

"Are you feeling alright?"

That got a glare from Harry. Dad had promised no therapy.

"You haven't touched your food."

Harry looked down at his plate, a bit surprised to find food there, even though he'd already known that there was. It wasn't exactly that he had lost his appetite; more like he'd forgotten that he was hungry. He started eating.

True to his word, Dad didn't try to psychoanalyze him. There were a couple of times when Harry had the feeling that he could talk if he'd wanted to, but he didn't. He didn't like the feeling of opening his mouth and having nothing come out. It was better to choose silence rather than to feel voiceless.

Dad wasn't as much up to the task of trying to have a one-sided conversation as Ron was, but he talked a bit about his research and about what he was hoping to do over the Summer. Harry listened with about as much interest as he could when it was hard to not think about the night
before. Ron was better at distracting Harry.

Harry finished eating and went to find another quill and paper. He pulled up a chair next to Dad and started writing.

'Mrs. Malfoy?' he wrote.

He'd never told Dad about Draco, just that he was seeing a boy, but he'd suspected that Dad probably knew.

"She was never marked," Dad said. "She's fine."

Harry nodded. 'Anyone I know?'

"I didn't think you wanted to talk about last night," Dad said.

Harry shrugged. 'I don't want to get my head shrunk,' Harry scribbled.

"It wasn't your fault," Dad said.

Harry had made his own choices. He wasn't exactly going to feel torn up about what had happened to Death Eaters returning to Voldemort, but that didn't mean it didn't suck that some of his classmates had lost parents.

"I don't believe you ever met any of them," Dad said. "Stay out of sight for the rest of the day. Certain students will be returning home early to deal with family matters."

Harry nodded. He didn't think he was as persuasive on paper, so he dropped it. He'd find out later.

'Are you okay?' Harry wrote.

"I am," Dad said.

'Any friends?'

"Acquaintances," Dad said.

Harry bit his lip.

"Acquaintances who would have killed us given the chance last night," Dad said. "No one died who I will miss."

Harry gave him a hug. He wasn't sure why, but he thought Dad needed it. Dad hugged him back and Harry wanted to tell him he loved him, but the thought of opening his mouth to say that, and of having nothing come out, kept his mouth shut. He hated this feeling.

When Dad pulled away, Harry thinks he had spaced out again. His arms feel like they'd been hugging a lot longer than he'd have thought. They spend the afternoon together and Dad grades papers while Harry brews a few of the more basic but perishable potions that his Dad liked to keep on hand. He paused a bit to wonder when he'd started to consider the Artemis Draught to be basic. Everything was uneventful, except a bit where it felt like every muscle on one side of his torso had decided to clench all at once for about a minute.

When it got to be evening, Harry went and tapped Dad on the shoulder and slid a note to him. 'Madam Pomfrey wanted to see me again, and I'm going to eat with my friends.'
Dad nodded. "Have you tried to speak at all since lunch?" he asked.

Harry nodded, a lie.

"Stay safe," Dad said.

Harry gave him a hug. He threw his cloak on and headed out. Madam Pomfrey tutted about him and did another examination. He didn't think he'd had any tics in the past hour, though the tremors had grown more severe as whatever potion was dealing with them had worn off.

"It's sort of like a sore muscle, dear," She'd said. "It gets worse before it gets better."

She had him try to talk again and he'd opened his mouth, but that was it.

She gave him another potion and the trembling subsided.

Dinner was difficult. Everyone wanted to talk to him and he couldn't exactly talk back. He was flanked by Ron and Hermione, and with his teammates there too, most people got the idea to let him eat dinner in peace.

Later that night, Ron climbed through Harry's curtains and he filled the silence until Harry was ready to attempt sleep. Clearing his mind before he drifted off helped, and it was Ron who woke Harry up later in the night after he'd dealt with a dream involving giant spiders. Harry wasn't complaining, he just got out the chocolate and prompted Ron to get his new book.

His neurological symptoms got worse, and came and went over the next few days. Muscle spasms and cramps, tics, phantom sensations, the worst was a few random bouts of vertigo and nausea; he was grounded from flying for the time being. They started to wind down on Sunday though. He still hadn't tried talking since that first day. Emotionally, he was sort of all over the place, and he was finding it harder to justify not working through it with his Dad. He wasn't sure why he was so reticent himself.

Draco managed to pull him away Monday evening, four days after the third task and Harry was greeted with a searing kiss that pushed everything else out of his head.

"How's that?" Draco asked, pulling back after a bit.

Harry gave him a thumbs up.

Draco frowned. "I thought that would work."

Harry raised his eyebrows. What was he, Sleeping Beauty?

They were in their usual corner of the castle and Draco wasted no time in transfiguring some desks into a couch.

"I suppose I could just pretend I'd snogged you speechless," Draco said.

Harry grinned and pushed him backwards onto the couch. They'd see who drove who speechless. They started making out, and it felt so good to let loose and enjoy the moment. Suddenly, kissing Draco had never felt so good, and Harry had never felt so close to him. Things were heating up, and Draco was in the middle of leaving a hickey on his neck when Harry started to wriggle out of his robes. Draco grinned and pulled out the hem of Harry's shirt, his hands moving up the bare skin of his sides.
Of all things, it was his elbow catching in his sleeve momentarily that set him off. One moment he was on cloud nine, and the next he was tied to a post in the middle of the ravine. It was only a moment of restriction. His arm was free before he had even registered the panic screaming in his gut, but suddenly he was spiraling downward and losing all sense of his surroundings. He pushed himself away from the arms around him and tried to push the panic down, shaking his head as if he could shake it out.

"Harry?" Draco asked, and Harry held up a hand to stall him.

It was alright. Everything was alright. He had better control over his own mind than that.

"Everything's fine," Draco said. "You're here with me."

Harry nodded, trying to calm his breathing, and Draco put a hand on Harry's shoulder.

Harry slumped forward and hugged Draco. They never really hugged, unless it coincided with their lips being locked together, but just then, Harry just wanted the comfort. He'd have preferred Dad, or Ron, but Draco was there and he hugged Harry back and it felt good, and even though it made him feel better, Harry found himself soon sobbing out all of the frustration and fear and anxiety he had been feeling the past few days. Draco held him, making soothing noises, and moved his fingers through the hair on the nape of Harry's neck.

It was a while later, when Harry had calmed down, that Draco finally said anything.

"I never blamed you for what happened to father," Draco said.

Harry pulled back, scrubbing at his eyes with his sleeve. Draco produced a handkerchief from seemingly out of nowhere.

"He made his own decisions that night, and you weren't the one who caught him," Draco said. "But I did wonder what might have happened if you hadn't interfered."

Harry shrugged, and Draco smiled at him.

"When the news broke about everything that happened with the Dark Lord, the first thing I thought was, 'thank Merlin father's in Azkaban.' How messed up is that? He'd have definitely been there that night if he wasn't. He could have been caught after returning to the Dark Lord, or he could have been killed. But he wasn't, so, thanks."

Saving Lucious Malfoy certainly hadn't been on his to do list, and it wasn't an accomplishment he would be taking credit for, but he was glad that Draco hadn't lost his father.

Draco gave a bit of a laugh. "I don't know how to do this if you don't say anything back," he said. Harry smiled and leaned forward. Maybe he didn't need to talk to convey what he was feeling. Their lips met and they kissed slowly. Where there was usually a hormonal and passionate urgency, now it felt more like an exploration. Draco's hands slipped under Harry's shirt again, and Harry ran his fingers through Draco's hair. Draco let out a low throaty moan, starting to writhe a bit under Harry, and Harry had the sudden thought that there was something different between them. That they weren't just two boys kissing.

Harry broke the kiss and laid his head on Draco's shoulder, his fingers still in Draco's hair, Draco's hands resting on the small of Harry's back. They stayed like that, breathing heavily for a while.

Eventually, Draco broke the silence. "I think we're getting good at this whole kissing thing."
Harry smiled and kissed the tip of his nose before pulling away. He got up and went to his book bag. It was mostly empty, with no more classes, but Harry had been keeping parchment and a quill so he could communicate as need be.

He returned to the couch and curled up, leaning against Draco.

'What are we?' Harry wrote out.

Draco looked at the question for a bit and blushed. "Gay, I suppose," he said.

Harry gave him a light shove on the arm and gestured between the two of them.

Draco went even redder.

"Boyfriends," he said; it was a statement, but Harry could hear the question in it.

Harry nodded, and Draco tugged at his lapel for a kiss. Harry finally got his robes off, and felt that there was something official about the word boyfriend now that he had Draco's hands groping at the seat of his trousers. He pulled back away a few minutes later, grinning and a little bashful.

'Summer?' Harry wrote.

"We'll just have to be creative," Draco said. "I have family in Germany. I could go visit. We could sneak out for clandestine rendezvous."

'You'll write?'

"All the time," Draco said.

Harry reached out and took Draco's hand. He thought for a bit, staring at their intertwined fingers. Draco's other hand moved up to brush against Harry's cheek, a thumb brushing over his lips. It was tempting to just go back to kissing. It was tempting, but everything suddenly seemed more significant now. He bit his lip and reached for the quill again.

'I have a secret."

"You always have secrets," Draco said. "I have secrets. Do you know how many secrets my parents keep from one another?"

'I'll tell you,' Harry wrote. 'Then you decide boyfriend thing.'

Draco frowned. "You don't have to," he said.

'Will you keep it a secret either way?'

"I think you already know enough of my secrets," Draco said.

Harry bit his lip. He started undoing the buttons of his shirt.

"Hey," Draco said grinning. "I meant I'd keep your secret, you don't have to bribe me. I mean, you can bribe me, if you want, but…"

Harry stopped when the buttons were undone, but kept the shirt on.

'I killed Greyback,' he wrote.
Draco gave him a calculating look. "Your Dad killed Greyback, you were already back in the castle," he said.

Harry shook his head.

'Dad killed the other one,' he wrote, Ron had only ever known him as Steven and Harry had never read any of the articles that had probably mentioned his name. 'I killed Greyback, used time turner to keep secret.'

Draco shook his head. "Why would you keep it a secret?"

Harry backed up a bit on the couch and pulled his shirt off, exposing his scarred shoulder. He had been supposed to have put on the Second Skin potion the night before, but his hands hadn't been cooperating at the time so he'd left it to wear off.

Draco let out a small gasp, followed by a silence in the room that was broken when he bit out, "You're a werewolf."

Harry nodded.

"This whole time?"

'A year now I guess.'

Draco moved his hand up to touch his lips.

'No one could know, or Vold. wouldn't have used my blood in the ritual.'

"Like you would have told me otherwise," Draco accused.

'Vold. dead, telling you now.'

"My dagger," Draco said. "It's silver. I've seen you naked! You didn't have that…"

'Second Skin.'

Draco laughed, sounding a little strangled. "I didn't even think of that last year."

'I'm the same.' Harry wrote out, and he was almost tempted to try and say it out loud. 'Just one thing different. I leave long before moonrise.' He paused. 'Can't catch it swapping spit. I'm safe. I'm still me.'

"You're a werewolf," Draco said.

Harry stabbed a finger into his own chest and then poked Draco in his. He underlined the word 'Same,' and wrote. 'Just different one night a month.'

"This is insane," Draco said. "You can't have been this whole time."

'Why?'

"Because I would have known!"

'How?' Harry wrote. 'I'm the same.'

"No, you're not," Draco said.
'How am I different?'

Draco didn't have an answer. "Why did you let them turn you over to the Dark Lord?" he asked.

'To stop him.'

"But what was in it for you?"

'So he couldn't hurt anyone ever again,' Harry wrote.

"He could have easily killed you instead," Draco said.

'Yeah, they made that clear.' Harry shrugged. 'Worth it.'

"Vengeance," Draco accused.

'My Dad, and Ron, and Hermione, and everyone.' Harry wrote. 'You too. Didn't want you to have to choose.'

"That doesn't make sense," Draco said, shaking his head.

"Being a werewolf didn't make me stop caring about them,' Harry wrote. 'That's why we broke several laws together in Knockturn Alley. I cared about Ron, and I wanted to protect him.'

Draco pulled out his wand and vanished the last line before clutching his head.

"That doesn't make sense," Draco said again.

'Why?'

"Because werewolves don't do that," Draco said.

Harry rolled his eyes and pointed to his own shoulder.

"Well look at Greyback," Draco said.

'I did,' Harry wrote. 'Look at Voldemort. What's your point? GB got self bitten on purpose cause he was already an asshole. Already messed up. He doesn't mean anything.'

"Werewolves can't be trusted," Draco said.

Harry underlined 'Voldemort.'

"You can't just throw that around," Draco said.

Harry underlined 'GB,' and wrote, 'I know you're smart enough to get this. That's why I'm telling you now. You don't get to hide behind stupid things people say when they don't know what they're talking about. People are people, good or bad, whether they've got lycanthropy or not.'

"But why are you telling me," Draco asked. "I could destroy you with this."

'Yeah,' Harry wrote. 'Doesn't make sense, but I thought it was right.' He underlined, 'I thought it was right.'

"You never made sense."

Harry underlined 'I'm the same.'
Draco was silent.

'Tell me how being a werewolf has made me a monster,' Harry wrote. 'Tell me how I'm not still the same guy who decided to chase after GB to save my friends. The same guy who went down to the Chamber of Secrets is same guy who signed up to get kidnapped by DEs and Vld.'

Draco covered his face with his hands. "Yeah, I guess you are the same," he said. "Still the same stupid Gryffindor."

'Gryffindor's not contagious.' Harry wrote out, 'Lyc. only contagious once a month, and I'll always be far away. Not dangerous.' He prodded Draco until he looked back at the parchment.

"You could have bitten me when we were making out," Draco said, a bit hesitantly.

Harry rolled his eyes. 'Good thing I'm not into that sort of thing,' he wrote.

…

"Yeah, what sort of thing are you into?" Draco asked, only a hint of teasing.

Harry blushed scarlet, and figured it was time. He went back to the top of the parchment and underlined, 'you decide boyfriend thing.'

There was a long pause as Draco stared at the page and Harry tried not to show his anxiety.

"You really are just the same, aren't you?" Draco finally said.

Harry put his hand on Draco's shoulder, looking him in the eyes and willing him to see the humanity within. Draco reached up and took Harry's other hand and held it in both of his own.

'I'm not out," Draco said.

Harry nodded sympathetically, giving his shoulder a squeeze before writing. 'We can keep it secret till your ready.'

Draco shook his head. "I have plans, Harry. That doesn't include coming out and settling down with my boyfriend." 

Harry frowned. 'Plans?'

"Get married, have children, change the world," Draco said.

'To a girl?'

"I can't marry anyone else, now can I," Draco said.

'Screw marriage,' Harry wrote, getting upset. 'You're gay.'

"Yeah," Draco said. "I'd hardly be the first to marry for a political alliance and to produce an heir. It's what's expected. I mean it's not anytime soon, but it's going to happen. There's plenty of time to have fun, but eventually… I have plans, Harry."

Harry hadn't exactly started planning a future with Draco in the twenty some odd minutes that he'd realized that he had actual feelings for the boy, but the thought of a relationship where Draco had a cutoff date in mind left a hollow feeling in his chest.
'New plans. Fit around who you are.'

"The world isn't ready for a gay leader," Draco said.

'Screw the world,' Harry said.

"You're the one that saved it," Draco said.

'And you're the one who's going to change it,' Harry wrote. 'Change it so that they'll follow you for who you are.'

"I can't start from that," Draco said. "I have to be realistic Harry." He sighed. "I like what we have. Even if you're a werewolf, even if it's not permanent, I like this, and I want more, I want to get closer to you. My goals come first, but I think I can have both… for now."

Harry's eyes prickled with tears, and he slumped forward, clinging to Draco. He wasn't sure why he was tearing up, he didn't know what he was feeling. It felt like frustration and joy and anger and want all together and the next thing he knew he was on top of Draco again and they were making out and he was gasping for breath. Maybe it wouldn't last the summer even, maybe it was stupid to think of an end date years in the future for a relationship started when he was fourteen, but everything felt real and important and Draco felt so good underneath him as Harry slid his hands under Draco's shirt and wondered how easy Draco would find it to someday forego guys and marry a woman he didn't love. Maybe Harry wouldn't be around on that day, maybe there would be another guy, but Harry had the thought in his head that things could be different in a few years, and he could give Draco more than enough reason to keep putting off a breakup. He could be enough for Draco.

Harry got impatient with Draco's shirt and popped a few buttons getting it open. Draco huffed a laugh and Harry found he liked the contrast of his hands on Draco's bare skin. He didn't even take a moment to think about his own skin, bare to the world, or the sharp contrast of the much lighter scar stark on his shoulder, he just leaned forward and enjoyed the moment.

Harry slid a note across the table towards Ron and Hermione who were curled up together on the couch in the little unused clubroom they'd commandeered for themselves.

'Come to a stuffy Ministry function with me?'

"Food?" Ron asked.

Hermione swatted him.

Harry nodded.

"It's not when we're supposed to be in Germany is it?" Hermione asked.

Harry shook his head. 'First week of break,' he wrote. 'Friday?' He was pretty sure it was Friday.

"Sure," Hermione said.

"Order of Merlin?" Ron asked.
'First class,' Harry wrote, still surprised himself.

"Well you've earned it, mate," Ron said.

'They want me to give a speech.'

Harry wasn't sure that that was true. He did know that he'd written the wizard who was organizing the event and that he'd been told that a speech would be allowed.

"Do you want one of us to read it for you?" Hermione asked.

Harry shrugged. Madam Pomfrey wanted to see him after lunch; the leaving feast was the next day and he still hadn't said a word. He just didn't feel like he could even try. Dad had been calm and supportive, but Harry could tell that he was getting frustrated and likely suspected that his muteness had stopped being caused by the after effects of the Cruciatux Curce a long time ago. Harry wondered if it wasn't time to accede and resume letting his Dad play armchair psychologist with him. It had helped in the past but Harry still felt like it was too soon to deal with everything that had happened.

"Well is there anything you want to say?" Ron asked.

Harry nodded and bit his lip. For all that he had instigated this, he still wasn't sure where he was going to take the whole matter.

Gryffindor won the house cup again that year, how could they not have, between the tournament win and Harry's 'community service,' it hadn't been a contest. Harry supposed Draco had never found a basilisk to slay after all. In spite of the house cup though, it was the standards of all three schools that decorated the hall for the leaving feast. The headmaster made a speech about the ties that bind people of very different backgrounds followed by the headmistress of Beauxbatons and Karkaroff who both offered their congratulations to the winners and made platitudes about enjoying the school's hospitality. Lastly, Ron and Cedric got called up to be recognized.

Later that night, Harry had his last clandestine rendezvous of the school year with Draco. They finalized how they'd stay in touch and Draco confirmed plans to travel to Germany to visit distant cousins. Harry didn't want to let him go when it was time to go their separate ways.

The following day saw the visiting students getting ready to leave. The four champions met up one last time and Krum gave away some tickets to games that would be played over the summer and told them that he expected to see them there. The foreign students departed soon after and then it was time for everyone to board the express back to London.

They had a compartment to themselves, though they were visited by friends and acquaintances along the way. Dean came by early on, with Seamus trailing along, to ask them about their summer plans and to bring up a muggle pride parade he was going to. Benjamin and Anna came over a little after the food trolley had gone by and Anna checked in to see how Harry was doing while Benjamin invited Harry to the dojo he frequented during the summer. Sammy and Justin visited a bit before they arrived in London. The two siblings seemed a bit sad; they'd be living with different families during the summer. Sammy wanted to know all about Harry's summer vacation plans and Ron was able to fill her in on most of it.
There were others too, who just stopped by to wish them a good summer and in between them all Ron kept the compartment from falling into silence while occasionally flirting with Hermione. Harry wished he could see Draco one last time before they got off the train and he reminded himself that their trip would start soon enough and they'd get to have their secret rendezvous in Germany.

It was almost weird to get off the train at King's Cross and see his Dad waiting for him there, not even disguised in any way. It was a good weird though, and he unabashedly walked up to him and got a hug, as if they hadn't just seen each other that morning. Mrs. Weasley also had a big hug for him, and a few choice words about what she'd read about the plot to kill Voldemort. The twins distracted her with their antics before she could really get going, and Harry got an admonishment to be good over the summer.

Next thing Harry knew the Grangers had shown up and Hermione was getting a big hug from her Dad while Mrs. Granger and Mrs. Weasley seemed to corner Harry's Dad and the next thing everyone knows the three families are going out to eat together. Harry's muteness is glossed over as a temporary malady and Harry doesn't have to worry about saying anything he shouldn't in front of Hermione's parents because he just doesn't say anything, but this just means that his Dad gets a bit of a grilling from the other parents at the table. They all survive though, and Harry's glad when they finally floo into their cottage.

"Will you be up to planting in the garden tomorrow?" Dad asked.

Harry grinned and nodded.

"I think we'll have some things to work on while we do," Dad said.

Harry's grin turned down a bit, but he nodded again. He'd known he couldn't run from it forever. He was surprised Dad didn't want to go consult with the shrink first, though, for all Harry knew, he'd already done so as term was winding down.

Dad put a hand on his shoulder. "It's going to be all right. We'll take it slow. It's your mind, just let me know if you need a break."

It felt incredibly daunting, but Harry knew it needed to be done. He couldn't leave the bandaid on forever. He stepped forward for another hug, feeling like a little kid seeking out comfort during a storm. It isn't too late so they stay up and play chess for a bit before they both settle down with something to read. Harry had been running on empty, so he'd borrowed one of Ginny's dragon rider books. His Dad had a potions journal and Harry thought it was for a commission he'd be working on over the summer. By the time Harry had showered and settled down for bed, he felt like he was in a place he could comfortably call home.

There was a repetitive quality to planting that helped Harry keep his mind cleared. The feeling of the dirt on his hands, digging in the loose earth, the gentle precision, his mind stayed in the moment as he cleared the rumination of his past and the worries of his future from his forefront. Pushing his emotions to the side was a well-practiced trick at this point, though he still wasn't good enough at it to be completely unaware of what he was feeling. His fingers dug a hole and another seed went into the ground, cover, rinse, repeat.
"It didn't start in the ravine," Dad said, a couple garden rows away, his own hands in the dirt. "It
didn't even start in the graveyard. Go back to the beginning, when you had a choice."

Harry thought of the Headmaster and Madame Bones, of talk of a prophecy and an indefinite
timeline that promised a showdown with Voldemort in less than a year. In a detached sort of way,
he remembered the feeling of dread he had had at the time, the cool pit in his stomach, the
knowledge that he would agree no matter what. He remembered being summoned that final time
when it was about to happen, and he hadn't gotten to say goodbye; needing to leave behind his
cloak and potions, which he had begun to feel dependent on.

"Now let those feelings in," Dad said. "How does it make you feel today?"

Harry let down the barrier. It wasn't the memory of those emotions, the past meant something else
today. He had felt alone at the time. He had felt like he was being abandoned to fate. He knew now
that there had always been a plan for his rescue, and that helped to lessen the pain of it all, but he
had still been alone. He had also survived. He let the thoughts and emotions come to him, slightly
distanced from them, able to analyze them while still experiencing them. His hands worked in
silence planting seeds one by one as he processed.

"Pause on those feelings for now," Dad said after what must have been half an hour. "We're not
going to push them away, we're going to let them sit for now. Think, how has this choice affected
your future? Imagine yourself at the start of your next summer vacation. Where do you think you
will be then? How could the choices you made in the past affect where you will be then? How do
you think you will conceptualize that choice in the future?

That was a good question. Harry didn't know. Voldemort was gone, but Harry was still a werewolf.
What did that mean for his future? At the very least, Voldemort was one less thing to worry about,
and the people who really mattered were still behind him. Even Draco. His hands dug another hole
in the dirt. He thought about how things were different from the night of the third task, how things
were changing from there on out. He thought of different paths his life could take without
Voldemort always lurking around the corner. He already had plenty to imagine for his summer, the
places he would go with Dad and his friends. He let his mind wander through the possibilities. He
allowed himself to feel satisfaction for what he had decided that night, he embraced the feeling of
hope that he had for the future.

"Deep breath in, and hold it," Dad said. "Now reassess the memory and clear your mind."

It was sort of like a merging, more than an overwriting. He linked his future with the past that had
caused it, linking the memory with the reconceptualized feelings he could now associate with it.
The memory of his distress was still there, but it was a small part of a whole. It was something that
had happened, but he could think of it without feeling overwhelmed by it. He cleared his mind,
ready to begin again.

They worked in that way through the nightmare of that night. When they were done, and
everything had been planted, and every aspect of that night had been analyzed, Harry felt very
much like he deserved a fly, even though Dad thought he should have dinner first. They cooked
together, and it was sort of like when Harry helped in the lab, only Harry was in charge when they
were in the kitchen, while Dad helped.

"Madam Pomfrey tells me that there's no longer any physical or magical reason for your silence,"
Dad said.

Harry nodded. She'd told him as much at the checkup he'd gotten before the leaving feast.
"I had thought perhaps that I would hear your voice sometime today," Dad said.

Harry shook his head, abandoning the stir-fry for the parchment on the counter where Dad was still chopping vegetables.

'Not about that night, I don't think,' Harry wrote. 'Will come back in time, probably.'

"Do you know where it went?" Dad asked.

Harry nodded, grabbing the snap peas and returning to the stovetop. That was the crux of the matter, he supposed. It wasn't exactly a mystery to Harry. It wasn't that he couldn't talk, it was that he couldn't try. Or he wouldn't try. Unwilling to find out if he was truly voiceless. He had enough of an imagination to think of times in his life when the feeling of not having a voice might have left an impression upon him. The thing was, how could he address that, if addressing it would lead him to an answer he feared knowing. He knew it was irrational, but he didn't need rational. He just needed to feel he had control over the situation.

Harry knew why he wasn't talking. He wasn't talking because he had decided not to after that first time in the Hospital Wing when the words had just refused to come out. He had been healed, his neurons were no longer misfiring. It was his decision not to talk and until he actually tried, he could tell himself that it was all his decision and not something outside of his control. He started energetically tossing the contents of the pan and started adding spices. He gestured to the sauce on the counter and Dad passed it over. He was getting by just fine without his voice. It was alright for the time being. He re-added the pork he had browned earlier and mixed everything up.

They sat down to dinner as a rumbling in Harry's stomach became very audible. He was glad he hadn't gone flying first. He was glad to be sitting down to dinner with his Dad. He was glad he had someone who would work with him all day on his baggage. He was glad he had someone who would love him whether he could talk or not, whether he was gay or straight, and whether he was fully human or not. There were plenty of things that were still uncertain in his life, but he thought he was doing alright.

"Harry," Mrs. Granger greeted when she opened up the door. "And Professor Snape. So good to see you again. Thank you for coming to pick Hermione up."

"No reason she should have to change into her dress robes at the ministry," Dad said. "Or to travel across London to get there."

"Please come inside. Hermione will be down in just a moment," Mrs. Granger said. They crossed the threshold from the Granger's backyard where they had just apparated, and Harry felt it a bit odd to be in a muggle home that wasn't the Dursleys'. It looked a lot more lived in than the Dursleys' house ever had.

"How are you holding up, Harry?" Mrs. Granger asked.

Hermione had written to tell them that since Voldemort was really gone she'd decided to tell her parents a bit more about what had been happening in the wizarding world. Harry gave a big thumbs up and pulled out the writing pad and pen Dad had gotten for him; so much easier than carrying around parchment and a quill.
'Doing a lot better,' he wrote. 'Got my head shrunk. Taking care of myself.'

"That's good to hear," Mrs. Granger said. "And this Voldemort Hermione told me about."

Dad shifted uncomfortably next to Harry; he'd probably never get used to the name.

'Gone forever,' Harry wrote.

"I've discovered you've all kept a good deal from me before," Mrs. Granger said.

Harry frowned and nodded his head.

"The Dark Lord has been destroyed, both in body and in soul," Dad said, his hand on Harry's shoulder. "The followers he had left, who were willing to return to him, are either dead or in prison. A second war was stopped before it could start." He squeezed Harry's shoulder. "That's what tonight's award ceremony is for."

"It's never been easy sending her away to a school in another world," Mrs. Granger said, and Harry was beginning to feel exceptionally awkward.

"I can't imagine it has been," Dad said. "It is over now. The Dark Lord, his followers, everything that led to the events of the past few years is gone, and our children can now go to school without the specter of our war hanging over their heads."

"You must forgive me if I still worry," Mrs. Granger said. "Though, thank you for looking out for Hermione, Harry. She tells us you've saved her life."

'I'd have been a goner without Hermoine,' Harry wrote out and showed Mrs. Granger. He hid it out of sight when he heard Hermione coming down the stairs. She was wearing the same dress robes she'd worn to the ball, though her hair had just been pulled back into a frizzy bun this time.

Harry very promptly got a hug from Hermione.

"Hello Professor, thank you for picking me up," Hermione said.

"It was no problem," Dad said. "We can leave as soon as you're ready."

"Right," Hermione said. She gave her mom a hug. Mrs. Granger didn't look much like she wanted to let go.

"Ron's meeting us there?" Hermione asked.

"His father will be taking him," Dad said. He held out an empty candy wrapper. Harry was pretty sure the portkey had come from the headmaster.

"Bye mum," Hermione said, grabbing a corner of the wrapper.

Harry grabbed on too, reassuring himself that it was just a portkey to the Ministry and not to a graveyard. His Dad activated it with the code word, "Lemon Drop," definitely chosen by the Headmaster. A sharp tug behind his naval pulled him into nothingness and then he sprang back out in the mezzanine of the ministry entry hall.

A steadying hand on his shoulder turned out to be Ron and Harry got another hug before Ron became attached to Hermione's side for the evening. Ron's Dad was also in attendance, and he showed them to the hall where the ceremony was to be held. They weren't exactly early, but there weren't a lot of people there when they arrived. Their table was right up front, and Harry was a bit
horrified to see that one of the placards had Fudge's name on it. The headmaster would be there too, though, so Harry suspected that he'd survive. It wasn't the first time he'd had to share a meal with the man.

"Can't sit down yet," Mr. Weasley said. "I promised Molly I'd get a picture of the three of you in your dress robes."

Harry frowned but dutifully stood next to Ron, who leaned an arm on Harry's shoulder and had his other arm around Hermione's waist.

"Big smile," Mr. Weasley said. The flash went off. "And one more, for good measure." Harry could feel Ron's hand behind his head doing rabbit ears and he grinned a bit wider.

The hall soon filled up, and Harry was glad to see that there was a press area in the back that seemed to be containing the reporters, at least for just then. There were a number of Aurors present in formal red dress robes and Harry recognized a few of them from that night. They looked like they were surrounded by their families. Then there was a table filled with department heads and Harry recognized Madam Bones and Miss Cooper. There were another few tables for the Wizengamot.

The headmaster came in just a bit before Fudge, for which Harry was grateful. Dinner was served, and people talked around Harry. Hermione and Ron kept to safe topics of conversation, surrounded as they were by adults. Eventually, a witch that Harry recognized as the Deputy Minister for Magic he'd met the last time he'd gotten awarded went on stage and announced a start to the banquet and there was suddenly an abundance of food being passed around the table.

"You got your speech?" Ron asked quietly.

Harry nodded.

"Did you decide who you wanted to read it?" Hermione asked.

"Well, you helped write most of it," Ron told her.

Harry pointed at himself.

"Are you sure about that?" Ron asked.

Harry nodded.

Eventually the Deputy Minister went back up on stage and introduced Fudge who gave a sanctimonious speech about bravery and the truly final end to the war against "He-Who-Must-Not-Be-Named." Harry found himself becoming upset and blocked him out. His speech lasted probably ten minutes and then his Deputy went back to the podium to announce those being recognized.

Aurors were awarded for valor, some for injury in the line of duty, all of them being brought up on stage to be pinned with their award by Fudge. There were brief commendations of great deeds followed by handshakes and placards and numerous flashbulbs. Madam Bones was brought up to receive the Order of Merlin, First Class, and she took the time to thank her Aurors, both those who had been there at the final battle, such as it was, and those who had fought and fallen in the first war. The Headmaster was called up to be similarly awarded, for his role in planning the death of Voldemort, and he too gave some brief words about the sacrifices made to ensure a peaceful wizarding world. Professor Moody's name was also called, but it seemed the retired Auror had decided to stay at home. Then it was Dad being called up for his role in finding where the Death Eaters had taken Harry and for protecting him from a hoard of Death Eaters. The specifics behind
his Dark Mark were not discussed, and Dad didn't say anything after being pinned for the second time with the Order of Merlin, Second Class. Harry didn't need the program to know that he was next, and probably last.

"Our final awardee tonight needs no introduction," Fudge's Deputy said. "Harry Potter, the Boy-Who-Lived, the young man who has been once before on this stage for another great act of bravery and selfless sacrifice and is tonight being recognized for willingly walking into a pit of vipers, knowing that death was likely, for the promise of a future without He-Who-Must-Not-Be-Named. He is once more being awarded the Order of Merlin, though this time it shall be the Order of Merlin, First Class. Mr. Potter, please join us on stage to receive your award."

Ron gave him a pat on the back as Harry stood up and headed for the stage, feeling once more as if he were walking into the aforementioned pit of vipers. First things first, he had to shake Fudge's hand and then he just had to stand there as the Deputy read out the commendation that came with his award certificate.

"Harry James Potter is being awarded on this, the Ninth of July in the third year of the seventy-first alignment over the Ministry of Magic for the United Kingdom, for exceptional services to the Ministry and the wizarding world as a whole. At the age of fourteen, Mr. Potter agreed to take part in the Ministry of Magic's mission to destroy the Dark Wizard, 'He-Who-Must-Not-Be-Named,'" Harry would have rolled his eyes if he hadn't already heard the phrase used so many times already in all of the other commendations. "Mr. Potter's role involved delivering himself unto the above Dark Wizard and his Death Eaters with no knowledge of any plan to rescue him, with only the assurance of an end to the greatest adversary our world has ever faced, and no assurance at all of his own survival. A matter of prophecy and dual fates, Mr. Potter's actions were the central piece of this mission, without which our world would still fall under the specter of the most powerful Dark Wizard of our age. The grievous injuries and ordeals he endured were predictable consequences of his decision and yet, in spite of his proclivities, he chose with certainty to move forward for the protection of the greatest wizarding society on this earth. There can be no doubt that his brave actions and selfless sacrifice are deserving of our highest honor, the Order of Merlin, First Class."

Harry had tensed up at the word proclivities, but he relaxed a bit once the commendation was actually over, though he tensed up again when Fudge appeared in front of him and pinned him with the medal. There was another handshake and then he was handed the certificate and commendation as flashbulbs went off over and over. The Deputy stood to the side and Harry knew that it was time for him to speak. He suffered through one last handshake and went up to the podium, setting aside his certificate and pulling out his notes.

He looked out over the crowd, flashbulbs going off in his face, and reminded himself of why he was there. He didn't want to open his mouth, but he knew he had to. He had to speak up; for himself, for those who came before him, supported him, saved him. He was terrified to find himself truly voiceless but what was the point of having a voice if he didn't speak up. He still wasn't speaking though. He swallowed hard and he could hear a buzz from the assembled hall. He looked down at his notes, at the first line, and willed it to come out of his mouth.

Then Fudge was there, all smiles, and he put his hand on Harry's shoulder.

"Yes, thank you, Harry," Fudge said. "Thank you again for your phenomenal service to the ministry, now I suppose it's time for some dessert and some socializing. Another round of applause for our most distinguished honorees tonight."

People started applauding and the hand on Harry's shoulder started tugging him to the side. Harry's
own hands started shaking as he let himself be guided towards the edge of the stage.

"That's a good lad," Fudge said in Harry's ear. "By the end of the night, no one really wants to hear a long speech anyhow."

Harry froze up and pulled away. He looked at his friends, looking at him encouragingly and took a deep breath. "I wanted to say thank you!" the words exploded out as he returned to the podium. "Sorry, I did have a few things I wanted to say... Got a bit nervous is all." His voice came out lower than he was used to and he tried clearing his throat a couple of times. He looked out over the crowd, waiting for the chatter to die down again. Fudge seemed frozen off to the side.

"I wanted to thank everyone first, of course. My Dad, um, my Dad came for me alone, without back up, he came for me, to rescue me, and I would have died if he hadn't. Even then, though..." He cleared his throat again and actually started consulting his notes. "By the end of that night, the both of us were cornered by Death Eaters, and I felt so much relief when those first Aurors arrived and got us out of there. The Headmaster, of course, and Madam Bones, making all of those plans, and trying to make sure I came out alright. I am very grateful to be alive and with you all today."

"There is something though that I feel must be addressed." He held up the commendation. "Inspite of my proclivities," he shook his head. "Tonight I was awarded for my 'brave actions,' but I never felt brave. I was told that I could help destroy Voldemort once and for all; that by giving myself up to him I would ensure his downfall. I was told there was a good chance that I would die. It didn't feel like a brave decision. It felt like the only option. I knew that Voldemort would never stop. That he would figure out a way to come back some day and he'd pick up where he'd left off. I knew that I couldn't survive a world where Voldemort had returned and started killing off the people who stood up against him as I knew that my friends and family would do."

"It wasn't a brave choice, it was the only choice, but it still took bravery to follow through. Back in January, an article was published without my consent or foreknowledge that outed me as gay. I had already come out to my friends and family and found acceptance there, but I wasn't ready for everyone to know. That decision was taken from me, but again, I had to take what bravery I had and face the world as it was." "A lot of people started to question me after that. They questioned my actions the year before when I rescued my friends from Greyback. They questioned whether I belonged in the house of the brave. They questioned whether I should play Quidditch. They questioned whether I had a place in our school. How was it, that no one had been asking these questions the day before? How was it that it seemed perfectly normal, for me to be heroic and brave and athletic one moment, but not the next. How odd it was, that the people who knew me, suddenly thought I was a completely different person. I hadn't changed. I was the same person, but suddenly I was getting pulled out of bed at five o'clock in the morning by housemates who wanted me to quit the team, and I was getting hexed in the halls."

"I didn't need to be straight to be brave. I didn't need to be straight to face Voldemort, or Greyback, or even a damned basilisk. I didn't do any of that to prove a point, I just did it because I had something to fight for and I'd be damned if I did nothing. I wasn't brave in spite of being gay, being gay didn't make my decisions or my survival any harder, but even still I get sneered at by people who think there's something wrong with me. That I'm less than I could be if only I were straight."

"Yet even before I had come out, I'd experienced that sort of treatment before. A rumor had started towards the beginning of my third year that I had been bitten by Greyback over the summer. The year before I had entered the Chamber of Secrets and slain a basilisk to save a fellow student, but as soon as these rumors started, people became convinced that I had returned to school with evil intent. People questioned my place in the school, they hexed me in the halls, and they even tried to kill me, all because they thought that lycanthropy had removed my humanity. If I had had
lycanthropy then, I would have died when two of my fellow students deliberately exposed me to wolfsbane. I almost did die regardless. It didn't matter that my humanity has always been on display. They heard a rumor about me and they tried to murder me."

"When I decided to face Voldemort, it wasn't for revenge, it wasn't because I thought it was my best chance for survival. I faced Voldemort because I wanted to save the people I loved. I faced Voldemort because I thought it would be worth it, even if I died. I proved my humanity that night, even though many of you might have doubted it had you had known what it was that truly stopped Voldemort that night."

Harry tore open the clasp of his cloak, letting it fall behind him as he pulled down on his collar to expose his shoulder.

"He wanted to use my blood. Blood of the enemy, the ritual called for. He never would have used mine though, if he had known that Greyback had bitten me the night I fought to get my friends back. His ritual sought to link his soul to a new body; well he merged his soul with the curse that is in my blood, and it was a wolfsbane coated dagger that snuffed out his short-lived rebirth."

"I have been called a monster, I have been called an animal, and yet my humanity shines through. My humanity is in my love for my friends. My humanity is in my bravery and in my fear. My humanity was there when I told Headmaster Dumbledore and Madam Bones that I was willing to give my life for a world without Voldemort. My humanity was in my screams of pain as I was tortured for that decision. My humanity is right here before you now."

"Selfless service, that's what this commendation says. Selfless service, yet I know from my third year that there are many who don't think a werewolf is capable of such a thing. Has your estimate of my actions changed now that you know what I am? What will you write it off as? I've shown my humanity time and time again over the past year through my actions. So if my actions aren't the actions of a human, if you don't think there is a soul residing within this body before you, if you think that I am a monster, then maybe I don't want to be Human. Because I know who I am. I am Harry James Potter, son of Severus Snape, Lily Potter, and James Potter. I am a Gryffindor and I am a Seeker. I am a gay boy living with lycanthropy. I love my friends, and I love my Dad, and I love my school and I'd risk it all over again to keep them safe. So if you think that my sexuality makes me less than you, if you think my lycanthropy makes me a monster, maybe you should look in the mirror and ask yourself what you would have done if you had been in my shoes, and think to yourself what exactly it is that makes us different."

Harry cleared his throat once more. "And that concludes my remarks. Please enjoy the dessert. I told the organizers that Treacle Tart was my favorite, and I think I see it there, so you're welcome."

Harry gathered his notes and his certificate and moved off the stage, and past a flummoxed Fudge.

"That was a very nice speech, Harry," the Headmaster said when Harry sat down.

"Thank you, Sir," Harry said. He glanced over at Dad and swallowed hard. "Um, surprise."

"I constantly am," Dad said.

Harry grinned.

"Well I think you've earned your dessert," Dad said. "It was good to hear your voice."

"I was worried for a bit there," Ron said.

Harry shrugged. "I've always drawn strength from my friends."
The rest of the night was awkward, to say the least, but Harry had his friends and his Dad, so he just let everyone else be awkward and ate his dessert.

Germany was awesome, Harry thought. Only a few days into their trip and Harry was convinced that he hadn't ever had so many consecutive moments of fun in his life. Tomorrow would be a bit more somber, they were going to a museum about the war against Grindlewald, but so far there had been exceptional food, and sightseeing, and a racing broom museum, and Harry and Ron had gotten a few goes around the obstacle course track they'd had set up next door.

News of his speech had made the news in Germany even, though between dying his hair and a headband, no one had pointed him out. The Grangers though, seemed to have decided to keep up with wizarding news, and had purchased newspapers whenever they'd been in any of Germany's wizarding districts. They'd given him some concerned glances but hadn't actually brought it up. Hermione had probably talked to them.

Harry wasn't worrying about any of that though. He was just enjoying himself. This particular evening was going to be particularly enjoyable, though.

"How'd you sneak out?" Draco asked.

"My friends are covering for me," Harry said, plopping himself down in Draco's lap. "Hermione's taking Ron out to see his first muggle movie. So everybody gets a nice romantic date night." It was a shame, because Harry had never been to a movie theatre himself, but such were the sacrifices one made to snog one's boyfriend.

"I thought we'd go out on an actual date," Draco said, holding up two bottles of what Harry identified as polyjuice potion.

Harry grinned. "It won't be the same," he said. "If I'm not sitting across from the prettiest boy I've ever met."

"Sacrifices must be made," Draco said. "Although the gardens I'm taking you to might just be pretty enough to satisfy you."

"Are you taking me somewhere fancy?" Harry asked, giving him a kiss.

"The fanciest," Draco said.

"And then what?" Harry asked.

"And then I take your breath away," Draco said.

"You already do that," Harry said, knowing it was cheesy.

Draco gave a low hum at that. "That was some speech you gave," Draco said, running a hand through Harry's hair.

"Did you like it?" Harry asked. It had been printed in full in the Quibbler, but all of the other papers had just talked about Harry coming out as a werewolf. It was a good thing the wireless had been broadcasting the award ceremony.
"Well I was thinking that you should have let a Slytherin help you with your prose, but it was very good for a Gryffindor."

Harry grinned. "Well you've got a charming tongue, maybe you could teach me a thing or two right now. Draco kissed him.

Originally, they had planned to join Hermione after the first full moon of the summer, but since Harry had come out, there really wasn't any reason for him not to just go ahead and transform in the werewolf area within the Black Forest.

"You're sure you'll be alright?" Dad asked.

"I'm sure," Harry said, letting his wand disappear into his pocket bracelet with a thought and Harry wished there was enough room in there for a spare set of robes. As it was, all he had room for besides his wand was a bit of paper and a pen in case he needed to remember something. The spell that the headmaster had used to sink the bracelet into his skin had been modified and it took only another thought for the bracelet to merge into his wrist. It would still be there after his transformation.

"You're going to make him nervous," Ron told Harry's Dad. "You'll be fine, Harry. Besides you already have plenty of experience." This he said with a bit of a wicked grin.

Ron had been taking the mickey ever since he'd found out what the dress code at the resort was.

"Experience?" Dad asked.

Harry blushed and mumbled, "Skinnydipping."

"How scandalous," Dad said in mock surprise.

"My biggest scandal of the summer," Harry said.

Ron laughed.

"I honestly wouldn't have thought you had it in you," Dad said.

It was Harry's turn to laugh. "That's what Ron said."

"Alright," Dad said. "Well, make sure to eat plenty of food before the transformation."

"I know Dad."

"And try to explore around, get comfortable in your surroundings," Dad said.

"I will."

"Though if you're feeling anxious you can take some time for yourself."

"Dad, I'm going to be fine."

Dad sighed. "This is your first transformation without support."
There is support," Harry said.

"It's your first transformation without me," Dad said.

"I'll manage," Harry said. "And then you can pamper me all you want tomorrow."

Dad gave him a hug.

"Alright," Dad said. "Ready to go?"

"As I'll ever be," Harry said. "What are you doing tonight? Besides worrying?"

"I have some potions periodicals to catch up on," Dad said.

"I've got a date," Ron said excitedly.

"You've mentioned," Dad said. He held out his arm and Harry grasped it firmly.

"I think I'm going to have fun," Harry said.

They disapparated with a crack.

Germany lasted over a month but even so, it felt like it was over too soon when they got back to England. Mr. Weasley was waiting for them at the International Portkey office within the Ministry.

"Your mother says you didn't write enough," Mr. Weasley said.

"I've got pictures," Ron said.

"That might mollify her," Mr. Weasley said.

"What have we been missing?" Harry asked. They had left soon after the award ceremony, and Harry had been purposely keeping away from any British news during his trip.

Mr. Weasley hesitated. "You have a lot of people supporting you," he said.

"Which means there's a lot of people I need support from," Harry said.

"Dumbledore won't let anything happen," Mr. Weasley said.

"Which means they want to kick me out of school," Harry said.

"It's not their decision," Dad said.

"My radio silence probably didn't help," Harry said.

"I'm sure there are plenty of people who'd love to do an interview with you," Mr. Weasley said.

Harry looked to Ron, who gave a shrug, and then to Dad, who gave a nod. "Probably a good idea," Harry said. There were enough Slytherins in his life, he could probably make that work in his favor.
"It's good to be home," Ron said.

Harry himself couldn't agree. Considering the company, it was like he'd never left home at all.

Chapter End Notes

Sort of a bittersweet moment for me. I've been doing this for so long. So, so long. I hope you've enjoyed the ride. Up next for me I've got a BH6 story I've had on the back burner for a while and I've been having thoughts about a Voltron reboot (with soulmates) for a while (OMG the last season left me so angry).

Some things about shipping and character aftermath. Drarry came sort of late to the game. I hadn't decided to add it till it was happening. I've got sort of an unromantic viewpoint of high school romance. Whenever I read a story where they marry their highschool sweetheart I get very skeptical. Ron and Hermione are great together, but I also see a large part of their relationship being a bit of a dependence on one another that came on from their shared captivity. They're both growing and recovering and I expect them to eventually break up. It'll be a bit stressful, but they'll stay very close friends. Ron's going to become a bit of a serial monogamist for a while. Harry is eventually going to decide that he can't wait for Draco anymore. They'll break up and Harry's probably going to take a break from dating. They'll stay distant friends and close allies. Eventually, Draco's going to fall in love with someone and he's going to work being openly gay into his plans. It wasn't that Harry wasn't worth it, it was that he wasn't ready yet. More students come out at school and Harry dates here and there. He and Ron never seem to be single at the same time. I've got this idea that Severus eventually works out a potion that transfers memory from short term to longterm storage that becomes popular with werewolves, (and students) so Harry is able to remember the day of the full moon. Because of this, he starts to get close to a German boy he meets at the werewolf colony in Germany. They have a summer romance that doesn't last too long into Harry's final school year. I envision Harry is eventually going to wind up with Ron, but years later. Harry is going to constantly be fighting for his right to exist in the wizarding world. It helps that he's a celebrity who saved the world. Harry is going to have a quidditch career, though he gets passed over by most teams. He lives very openly about who he is. He retires into potions and later in life takes over the apothecary in Dragon Alley. He starts a charity that makes sure people with lycanthropy can have access to potions that they might need. Ron goes into charm work. His chess project really starts to take off in sixth year and by seventh year he's Flitwick's unofficial TA. He starts out after Hogwarts working with the twins, who favor potions work. He rounds out their skillset perfectly. Eventually though, he branches out on his own and does private consulting. Hermione joins a think tank straight out of school and is very stressed to never be able to talk about her work at home. She eventually marries a coworker who handles the fieldwork for her team.

Fic recs? We've got desert born by discordiansamba on AO3. Keith turns purple at the age of three and lives the rest of his childhood in the desert, alone after his dad dies until Shiro finds him.
I've been on a non-fanfiction kick lately. I read the extended edition of Pride and Prejudice and Zombies. Also Artemis, by Andy Weir was awesome (Same author as The Martian). And in queer literature I listened to Aristotle and Dante Discover the Secrets of the Universe by Benjamin Alire Saenz and read by Lin Manuel Miranda. I also got Two Boys Kissing by David Levithan (A bit of an odd writing style but I got into it). Hero by Perry Moore (Gay superhero). Openly Straight by Bill Konigsberg (An openly gay boy goes to a new school and back into the closet to find out how people see him when he isn't just 'the gay boy').

End Notes

Reviews are welcome but please PM me with constructive criticism.

Please drop by the archive and comment to let the author know if you enjoyed their work!