Looking Beyond

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Looking Beyond

by shini_amaryllis

Summary

The first thing everyone noticed about Hope Potter was that she may have had her mother's face, but she had her father's penchant for causing trouble or somehow finding it. It only made sense that she would fall for a prankster, and it only made sense that danger was attracted to her very scent. Somehow, she was going to prove she was more than just the Girl-Who-Lived. FemHarry

Book One: Chapters 1-18
Book Two: Chapters 19-35
Book Three: Chapters 36-53
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Notes

See the end of the work for notes.
There was a flash of green and a cackle of high-pitched laughter that awoke Hope Potter from her nightmare, terrifying her so badly that she had to sit up in her small bed, breathing hard. The movement jarred her, and she had to bite down on her lip to resist making a noise as she swung her legs over the side of the bed, her feet brushing gently against the floor.

The pain had come from her left leg, the one that bore a deep and jagged pink scar across her shin with numerous lighter and less deep scars peppering the flesh from her knee up to her waist, the results of a car accident she had been in only a few months previously. It was her cousin Dudley's fault, the little idiot, he was the one who'd pushed her into the street a few seconds before the car came speeding by. He may have seemed a bit regretful at the start of it, but that had quickly diminished (Hope suspected that might have had something to do with her sarcastic and angry nature).

Her fingers fumbled for the light switch and she blinked harshly once she managed to turn it on. Her wand teetered dangerously on the edge of her bedside table, but she didn't bother moving it; if it did roll under her bed by the time morning came around, she'd still find it in the end. Hope stood up, the movement only causing a small twinge as opposed to earlier, raking her hands through her hair and scowling at the face of the girl her mirror reflected.

She knew the dark red hair was far less common than the brighter ginger, and if she wanted to, she could've changed the colour of her hair to any colour on the rainbow. She liked the colour, but at the same time, she hated it. Every time she looked in the mirror, she saw what she always saw; the face of her dead mother. She could see it in the almond and shade of her eyes, in the colour of her hair. She hated how much she looked like her dead mother, and she knew that was all anyone would see when they looked at her. She lifted a hand to pull on the ends of her short hair, not regretting cutting it from how long it had been before.

Hope palmed her forehead with a soft groan. Two more days in this hellhole before she could finally leave, to go to a magical school in Scotland called Hogwarts School of Witchcraft and Wizardry, because Hope Potter was, in every sense, a witch.

She had initially scoffed at the idea; who had ever heard of modern-day witches, anyway? But she had to admit it was strange how she could sometimes change her appearance when she got emotional, or that one time when she had made her science experiment turn red—when it was supposed to remain blue and calm— and explode like a volcano, or how snakes would find her and whisper things.

Well...maybe she had just been avoiding the signs. She was weird enough without all the magic throwing a curveball into her day.

Hope moved to lean her elbows on the windowpane, pressing her cheek against the glass to look outside and into the dark sky into which only a few stars were visible, most obscured by grey clouds. Hope scowled in front of her. If she squinted hard enough—even in the blackness—she could see a rosy shimmer, one that was characteristic of Blood Wards, according to one of the books she had read upon the discovery of her magical lineage. Though, she had to admit she had been far more interested in books on Ancient Runes than anything else, which was the only reason she'd recognized the Blood Wards.

Hope gave a mournful sigh, removing her eyes and face from the window to return to her bed and
pull her heavy trunk towards her, feeling restless now and conceding that she probably wouldn't fall asleep for awhile. It may have looked like an average school trunk, but it had cost her a pretty penny and had been worth every galleon, as it came with an incredible extension charm. The trunk was almost full with her uniform (and casual wear), potion supplies, and second hand books that had once belonged to her mother—her aunt had apparently kept them out of sentiment, letting them gather dust in the attic—as well as a good dozen that she had either picked up from the family vault—the books being the only thing she could remove while being underage—or had bought at Flourish and Blotts.

Hope clicked the trunk open, pulling one compartment of it up, revealing a lengthy bookcase that was nowhere near being full of books but included a number that could send her off to sleep no problem, and that was what she was hoping for.

She frowned thoughtfully, considering the small amount of books for a moment before choosing at random and pulling out her Magical Drafts and Potions. She opened to the first page and began to read.

If there was one place that Hope knew for certain she could be alone at, it was the Surrey Zoo, in front of the now-empty Boa Constrictor case that had once held the snake that she had set free the last time she was in the zoo with the Dursleys. It had been taped off and in need of a new glass covering since Hope had made it disappear.

So, if there was nothing to look at, there was no reason for anyone to linger.

Weasley family outings were rare, and even rarer were the ones that occurred in the Muggle World. So George was a bit surprised when their dad took them out to a local zoo—in Surrey, he believed—especially since they would be leaving for Hogwarts the next day. The exhibits were alright, but it was the girl sitting in the snake area that caught his attention, distracting him from the animals.

That wasn't too surprising, but he had never shown much of an interest in girls—though, he knew Fred was very much into their teammate and friend Angelina Johnson. But, he had to admit, she was definitely eye-catching.

Her hair was a dark red, probably closer in colour to rose petals, barely dusting her shoulders in tousled waves that he was sure Ginny would kill for—if her hair was long enough—and he could barely see a sliver of green that was her eyes, brighter than any green he'd seen in anyone's eyes. She was cute, he supposed, but small and pale, perhaps Ron's age, but he couldn't be sure. It almost looked as though she had been deprived of sunlight and proper nutrition. Her jeans were ratty and peppered with holes and she had bunched her shirt into a hair tie at the back, turning the tail inward so it fit her frame better. One of her legs was stuck outward in an odd black brace; it looked uncomfortable.

People just passed her by, almost as if they didn't notice her at all. That was strange to George, because he thought she should have garnered a bit more attention being the only one not looking at any of the exhibits, with her focus entirely on the paper and book open on her lap.

"What happened to the snake?" he asked out loud, referring to the empty tank in front of her, faintly aware of his family leaving him behind and of Fred's curious glance back.
Hope paused in her sketching, her pen stilling over the curve she had etched against the page. For a moment she did not move, far too stunned that someone had spoken to her than anything else, but then her head twisted upwards to pierce him with those bottle-green eyes. The orbs narrowed slightly, filling with suspicion as she looked him up and down.

His eyes were a bright, impossible blue, clashing with the ginger of his hair, and out of his trouser pocket she could clearly see the carved hilt of a wand, far more intricate than hers, but Hope didn't really mind; her wand suited her just fine.

Her eyes returned to her paper, adding a few final touches to the rune. "It might have escaped," she said evasively with a shrug, "in a burst of accidental magic."

Her voice had a strange lilt, George noticed, one he'd never heard before, like a cross between nobility and uncultured, but it wasn't unpleasant. And then he realized what she had said.

George's jaw unhinged as he stared at her. How did she know he was a wizard?

She arched a crimson eyebrow, before sighing and proceeding to stuff her things—several books that he now could see dealt mostly with magic, but looked too advanced for someone her age—into her bag. "Don't look so surprised; it's obvious." She rolled her eyes, even though it was only obvious if you were looking for the signs (such as wands sticking out of pockets, for instance).

"And what about you?" George asked curiously.

"What about me?" she asked, a little miffed, brushing her hair from her face as she stood, a beaded strand of her hair catching the light as she did so. "I'm just a witch."

Fred called his name in the distance and she smiled at him, glancing behind to see an identical boy. So he was a twin, was he? It was the first time Hope had smiled in awhile; it hurt her cheeks. "See you around, Wizard-boy," she winked and her green eyes shimmered an identical blue to his before returning to green in an instant as she disappeared through the throng of people with a fairly obvious limp, the brace making strange noises as it connected with stone and her cane clicking as she moved.

Only after she left did George realize she hadn't told him her name.

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In retrospect, Hope should have asked Hagrid, the Keeper of Keys at Hogwarts who had been her guide into Diagon Alley (the first time), how on earth she got into Platform Nine and Three Quarters, but it had slipped her mind at the time.

Petunia and Vernon, her aunt and uncle on her mother's side, had been curiously happy to drop her off at King's Cross Station on the first of September. It all made sense when they drove off in laughter, leaving Hope with a train ticket to a platform that didn't exist.

Hope sat down in irritation on a bench just beyond Platform Nine, tapping her cane against the ground. She couldn't ask someone about the platform, because how was she to know if they were Muggle or Magical?

Hope gave a forlorn sigh as the minutes ticked by; she was going to miss her train…

"Come on, Ced! Hurry up!"

Hope looked up as a strangely dressed man strode past, his clothes slightly mismatched as though he was only wearing them to fit in, waving his hand towards a boy that could only be his son with
similar brown hair and grey eyes like the woman following after him. He was pushing his cart and he had an owl.

Hope blinked once, and then again for good measure to remind herself that what she was seeing was indeed real. Since it was, this "Ced" had to be a wizard, why else would he have an owl in a cage like she did?

"Coming, Dad!" the boy called, his speed picking up as he passed his father, pushing his cart right into the dividing barrier between Platforms Nine and Ten.

A second later, Hope leaned forward in surprise, almost gaping; the boy had gone right through the wall! What the-?

And then his parents followed, doing the exact same thing, moments later.

Weird…

But better to try than to not, Hope had to concede to herself, on the upside, she might make it to her train on time, on the downside, she might just collide with the wall.

Hope opted to try, pulling herself up into a standing position, dangling her cane from the bar as she pushed it towards the divider. She first pressed it lightly against the wall, but it went right through the wall, so she added a bit more force only to find herself on what must be the opposite side, Platform Nine and Three Quarters.

Steam was rising around the scarlet train and more people than Hope could count were clustered around it, ready to send students off for the year. It made Hope feel awkward, considering that she had come alone and had no one to care enough to miss her, but that wasn't all she had a problem with.

If there was one thing Hope could say that she honestly hated, it was crowds. She was not at all in her element, being pushed to and fro, each shove sending a flare of pain up her leg before she finally managed to get her trunk to the train door, but there was no way she was going to be able to heave the trunk into the train with her leg in its condition. And her upper body strength left much to be desired.

Hope gave another sigh, mentally cursing herself when a sudden voice behind her caught her off guard.

"Want a hand?"

Hope turned so swiftly on her heel, that she almost sprained the ankle of her already-messed-up leg in her startled surprise. It was the boy from the previous day, the curious blue-eyed boy that had actually paid attention to her (an equally strange occurrence). She could feel embarrassment blooming inside of her, but she tried not to let it show.

"Wizard-boy," she said, her voice coloured with the surprise she still felt.

"Mystery-girl," he mocked in return, his eyes glinting mischievously, an expression she suspected he was known for.

Confusion replaced the surprise and she eyed him strangely. Mystery-girl? Had she come off as mysterious before? How odd…she certainly hadn't tried to be. Hope wasn't known for being mysterious, snarky and sarcastic, sure, but mysterious? Doubtful.
His eyes flickered to her thick black brace over her leg and Hope couldn't resist shifting uncomfortably, but he offered her no scathing remarks or piteous looks that she often garnered, much to her aggravation.

"That looks serious," he said instead, his voice kind. "Does it hurt?"

"Oh!" She said, her surprise returning and evident in the raising of her eyebrows and the widening of her eyes. She looked down at her leg in surprise as though she had forgotten of her injury, but that was doubtful as it was hard to forget about. Though the pain did indeed bother her, she found that if she didn't think about it, it almost felt like it was nonexistent. "Not as much anymore, but, yeah, a little," she admitted.

"How'd you really know I was a wizard?" he asked this time, more curious, and kindly not questioning her more about her injury as many often did.

Well, wasn't he a query-filled wizard? Hope threw him a rather dry expression. "I could see the handle of your wand sticking out of your pocket, happy?"

"Exceptionally," he agreed with a wide grin, before repeating his earlier words, "Need a hand?"

"Yes, please," she said gratefully, her cheeks still flushing slightly from when her eyes had met his vibrant blue ones. She wasn't used to someone keeping her attention so completely without resisting the urge to smack someone (because Hope did have a bit of a violent streak).

"I'm George," he added, extending his hand to her, surprising her even more, his lips still set in a smile. "Since you ran off before."

"Hope," she said simply, the flush fading from her cheeks as she slid her hand into his. "I can assure you running is something that I am hardly capable of."

George's smile shifted into a smirk before he called over his shoulder. "Oi, Fred! C'mere and help!"

It was the twin she had spotted in the crowd the previous day, and he raced over to assist him. Hope was grateful for the help; it wasn't like she really had the muscles to lift the luggage, besides her… social skills…were a bit rusty.

A boy took either side, tucking it with ease into a spare overhead compartment.

"Thanks," Hope said as they dropped back to the ground, brushing the fringe out of her eyes with an action that drew their attention immediately.

"What's that?" the second one, Fred, asked her, making a blatant gesture towards the scar that rested on her forehead. It was in the shape of a lightning bolt and Hope had had it for as long as she could remember, only recently had she discovered that it was a product of a murder attempt by a man called Lord Voldemort, the very same man that had killed her parents.

A scowl marred Hope's lips at the thought of how she had gotten it.

"Blimey!" George said, his eye widening comically in realization. "Are you—?"

"She is," Fred said before directing his attention to Hope, "aren't you?"

"What?" Hope asked, flummoxed by their behaviour. It seemed to her that she was only hearing half of the conversation, they seemed to be having most of it in their heads.
"Hope Potter," they chorused in unison.

She arched an eyebrow at them in return, mild annoyance setting in. "Yes."

"Why didn't you say anything?" George demanded, struck dumb.

Hope shrugged her shoulders disinterestedly. She didn't think there were many 'Hope's, it wasn't as common a name as one would think, but she suspected this had more to do with the events of October 31, 1981, and Hope really didn't want to talk about that, especially about what little she remembered. "It's just a name, nothing special, trust me."

She shifted uncomfortably under their stares before attempting to stumble onto the train, and she probably wouldn't have made it on if George hadn't gripped her elbows and lifted her up. A faint flush dusted across her cheeks at the move and the warmth of his hands at her elbows. "Thanks."

His smile was nice enough as she shut the door, the pair disappearing once their mother called out their names. They turned back briefly, giving identical waves with smiles that lit their eyes. She waved back, feeling genuine for once.

And then she sat down on the cushion, glancing out the window towards where the two boys had run towards.

She blinked. That was a lot of gingers, but Hope couldn't really judge, considering her hair was a similar colour.

Their mother was standing with a little girl and a boy her age when her older sons approached and Hope could hear clearly from where she was sitting.

"Ron, you've got something on your nose," the mother said, and Hope assumed that 'Ron' was the youngest boy's name, rubbing at the end of his nose with a spare handkerchief, and it was clearly something the boy didn't approve of.

"Aaah, has ickle Ronnie got somefink on his nosie?" one of the twins asked as the other sniggered. Hope supposed that was what it was like to have siblings, but Dudley was kind of her sibling, though she'd never much liked him.

"Shut up," the youngest boy retorted.

"Where's Percy?" their mother asked, glancing around for what must have been another of her offspring. Hope arched an eyebrow; how many of them were there?

"He's coming now," one of the twins said (Hope couldn't tell which one at this distance), nodding to their left where an older boy with the same ginger hair as his siblings with horn-rimmed glasses perched on his nose. He seemed much stiffer and restrained than his siblings if Hope was to go off of looks alone.

"Can't stay long, Mother," he told the woman in a serious manner that hardly suited his age. "I'm up front, the prefects have got two compartments to themselves—"

"Oh," one of the twins gave a noise of surprise, as though this information had not been made aware to him, "are you a prefect, Percy? You should have said something, we had no idea."

"Hang on," the other side, giving the pretence of thinking very hard, "I think I remember him saying something about it. Once—"
"Or twice—" his twin added.

"A minute—"

"All summer—"

"Oh, shut up," Percy said in reply, his words holding a bit of fire as he bid his mother farewell, permitting his younger sister to hug him before he headed back towards the train.

"Now, you two—" the mother had turned to the twins who gave off the impression that they were innocent, though Hope doubted that very much. "—this year, you behave yourselves. If I get one more owl telling me you've-you've blown up a toilet or—"

"Blown up a toilet?" said the twin on the left, slightly incredulous. "We've never blown up a toilet."

"Great idea though," the twin on the right added with a wide grin, "thanks, Mum."

"It's not funny," their mother said with an all-suffering voice. "And look after Ron."

"Don't worry, ickle Ronniekins is safe with us." They gave identical impish grins.

"Shut up," their younger brother said, but he was ignored. Hope suspected this happened a lot.

"Hey, Mum, guess what?" one of the twins said, glancing towards his brother. "You know that girl we told you that George was talking to at the zoo yesterday?"

"Yes?" she said in confusion.

"Fred," the other said in warning, and Hope suspected that this was George.

"She's here, and you won't believe who she is!" Fred added, grinning widely towards George.

"Who?" she asked in confusion.

"Hope Potter!"

Several pairs of eyes turned towards where she was sitting and she scowled at the twins in particular, before leaning back in her seat so she couldn't be seen.

"Blimey," said Fred. "She doesn't look pleased."

George gave his twin a "You think?" expression.
Ron knew all about that had happened at the zoo; George had fallen behind to talk to a girl. But the real question was why? George –according to Fred, at least, who hardly ever left his twin's side– had never shown an interest in a female, ever, so it had to take something special for him to strike up conversation with a girl he didn't even know.

Ron resolved to find out more, seeking out the compartment that she had glared out of earlier.

Up close, she was very different than he expected.

An intricately carved cane rested beside her, but he didn't give it much thought –only later coming to realize that it was carved to subtly appear like a snake did–, focusing more on the girl.

Her hair was dark red and in loose waves, despite it being so short (barely passing her shoulders, he had to wager)with a strand spun with green and blue beads, oddly enough. Her eyes were a bright and dark green that were focused downwards on a leather-bound book on her lap, but her gaze lifted when he opened the door.

He wasn't sure what he expected, to be honest. She didn't seem much like the heroine she was glorified to be. She looked remarkably ordinary, except for the strange brace that rested on her leg.

"D-Do you mind if I join you?" he asked her a bit nervously. "All the other compartments are packed." And Ron didn't want to be the awkward one intruding on others' conversations just because he couldn't find a seat.

"I don't mind," she said, closing the book softly, "who else is going to sit here, anyways?"

Ron took this as an invitation, so he shut the door behind him and sat stiffly across from her.

"I'm Ron, Weasley," he said, hastily tacking on his last name, "by the way."

"I'm Hope," she said, electing not to add her surname, shifting a little uncomfortably, a movement that caused the fringe on her forehead to part slightly so that the lightning bolt scar was obvious.

Any further conversation was halted when the door opened once more and two identical heads popped in.

The one on the left winked at Hope who scowled in return, while the other one tried to hide his snorts. That would make Fred the one on the left and George the one the right.

"Hey Ron," Fred said, grinning widely, "listen, we're going down the middle of the train –Lee's got a giant tarantula down there."

Ron fought to not shiver at his words. Spiders…*urgh*…disgusting creatures. "Right," he said, his voice low and quiet, almost not heard.

Hope leaned her cheek against her fist, giving off the vaguest impression of boredom. She arched an eyebrow at Fred as if she was expecting something from him while George clapped his hands to his mouth so that he wouldn't explode into laughter.

Fred coughed nervously as he turned towards her. "Er…sorry for talking about you behind your back, Hope."
Hope accepted this apology with stride and Ron got the feeling that a lot of people talked about her behind her back.

"I had a whole pub trying to shake my hand when I went with Hagrid to get my school things," Hope said in a dry manner. "Believe me, my name is hardly something to be in awe of, and neither is my scar."

Fred and George bid them farewell and George spared the Potter a roguish wink that Ron could have sworn made her cheeks pink.

"Are they always like that?" Hope asked Ron after a moment, blinking a few times as she stared at the compartment door that they had closed after them.

"Generally," Ron groaned, "but much worse."

"Something to look forward to," Hope said with a laugh, and that laugh made her seem far more approachable than before.

The first question that sprang from his lips but that he held back was concerning You-Know-Who and her parents, that night in October in 1981, but he remembered how his mum was every year on the anniversary of his uncles Gideon and Fabian Prewett's deaths. Sometimes it was best not to ask about the dead.

"So…your whole family is magical?" Hope guessed before he could think up something else to ask.

"Er, I'm pretty sure," Ron said, screwing his face up in thought for a moment. "I think Mum's got a second cousin who's a…stock broker, I think it's called, but we never talk about him."

Hope arched an eyebrow. "Oh…" She floundered, searching for another topic when Ron took initiative.

"I heard you live with Muggles now," Ron said, looking at her in fascination. "What was that like?"

Hope rolled her eyes in aggravation. "Well, I lived in a cupboard for ten years, until the letters started coming and then they moved me to the second bedroom."

"A cupboard?" Ron was agape.

"Under the stairs," Hope clarified.

"Wait…letters?"

"Well, Vernon, my uncle (and that was using the word mildly), every time he saw the letters he would burn them, so…" Hope explained how her aunt's family had taken her and had tried to physically outrun the letters and how it didn't end very well for any of them, especially Dudley who had ended up with a pig's tail. By the end of her tale, Hope was feeling very glad that Ron had a light-hearted personality as he stifled his laughter into chuckles with great difficulty.

"Running away from letters?" he guffawed. "I wonder what they told people about their leaving so suddenly?"

"Who knows?" Hope asked with a shrug before turning the conversation towards him. "How many siblings do you have?"

"One younger sister and five older brothers," he told her, "Ginny's not old enough to come to
Hogwarts yet, then there's me, then the twins, Fred and George, then Percy, Charlie, and Bill. Bill and Charlie are the only ones out of school, though." He scowled slightly. "I'm the sixth in our family to go to Hogwarts. You could say I've got a lot to live up to. Bill was Head Boy and Charlie was Captain of Quidditch. Now Percy's a Prefect. Fred and George mess around a lot, but they still get really good marks and everyone thinks they're really funny. Everyone expects me to do as well as the others, but if I do, it's no big deal, because they did it first. You never get anything new, either, with five brothers. I've got Bill's old robes, Charlie's old wand, and Percy's old rat."

He showed her the rat, Scabbers, though it was quite fast asleep.

"I like old stuff," Hope told him, unconcerned by his lack of wealth, she hadn't even known that she had any money of her own until her birthday and it was still barely touched.

Ron stared at her. "You do?"

"Maybe I'm just weird," Hope considered briefly, "but I like things that my parents once had, like these." She lifted her hands to show him the two rings her fingers bore. One was so large that it had to be worn on the thumb until her fingers weren't quite as small, that one was set in gold bearing a black opal. The other rested on her ring finger like a silver snake twined around her finger with emerald eyes. "My dad left them for me."

"It must be strange that everyone knows you and your parents' names," he said instead, wanting to move away from how poor his family was.

"A bit, yeah," Hope had to admit, leaning down so that she could straighten her leg and Ron noticed how her brow creased slightly and her face contorted before smoothing out as she leaned back; he pretended not to have noticed.

"I was that girl that no one wanted to associate with," Hope told him, "Dudley, my cousin, was a menace to me for years with his gang of friends before he pushed me in front of a car and I got this."

Hope tapped a finger to the black brace. "I was in the hospital for weeks…" Something flickered behind her eyes, but a second later it had gone and she released an embarrassed chuckle. "Sorry, that's kind of off track…"

Ron didn't mind too much. "I don't much like being the centre of attention and all everyone's said to me is 'You look so much like your mother.'"

A scowl marred her lips as she said these words, but Ron couldn't figure out why.

Luckily, at this moment they were interrupted by the sudden arrival of the candy trolley and Hope caused a distraction by buying what appeared to be a little bit of everything (except for Drooble's Best Blowing Gum), including: Bertie Bott's Every Flavour Beans, Chocolate Frogs, Pumpkin Pasties, Cauldron Cakes, and Liquorice Wands.

Ron was more than happy to help her eat them, explaining what each sweet was, laughing as the two gagged their way through the Bertie Bott's Every Flavour Beans.

And Ron Weasley, who had been so worried that he wouldn't fit in or find a friend found one in Hope Potter who had feared much the same.

Hope and Ron were distracted from their good fun by a tear-faced boy with brown hair and eyes that Hope thought looked vaguely familiar.

"Sorry," he said after he opened the door following a polite knock, "but you haven't seen a toad, have you?"
"Sorry," Hope said as she and Ron shook their heads in unison.

"I've lost him!" the boy bemoaned, his voice rising to nearly a keen. "He keeps getting away from me!"

"I'm sure he isn't completely lost," Hope consoled the distraught boy. "I mean, there's only so far he could've gone."

"You're probably right," the boy said in a sombre tone, still upset over the loss of his pet. "Well, if you see him..." And then he left them on their own once more.

"Can't imagine why he'd want to keep it," Ron told Hope in an undertone as though being wary of the boy in case he was listening in. "If I'd brought a toad, I'd lose it as quick as I could. Mind you, I brought Scabbers, so I can't talk." He nodded to the rat that had still yet to show any signs of life from where it lay on Ron's lap. Hope thought it might be dead but that probably wasn't the best thing to say so she kept her mouth shut.

A second later it didn't matter.

"He might have died and you wouldn't know the difference," Ron said, glowering slightly at the rodent. "I tried to turn him yellow yesterday to make him more interesting, but the spell didn't work."

"Pity," Hope said with a grin. "Want to give it another go?"

"Might as well," Ron said, struggling to pull his wand free from his trunk where he had stashed it in the overhead compartment with difficulty when he had first come in, dropping to the ground with a far more worn wand than Hope had ever seen in her life, but then he had said earlier that he had inherited his brother's wand, so that made a bit of sense.

"Unicorn hair's nearly poking out," he grumbled as he sat back down with the rat in one hand and the wand in the other. "Anyways—"

He raised his wand, preparing to incant the spell when they were interrupted the fourth time. Hope hid her sigh of annoyance.

It was the boy from before, obviously still without his toad if the despondent expression was any indicator. But he was not alone, he was with a girl, first year as well, Hope assumed from the standard Hogwarts tie that all first years wore until they were 'sorted' into the four Houses. Though, Hope had to wonder why she had changed so early.

She had a similar slight build to Hope's, though lacking the underfed impression, with brown bushy curls.

"Has anyone seen a toad?" she asked, or rather demanded. "Neville's lost one."

Hope took Neville to be the name of the boy.

"We've already told him we haven't seen it," Ron said in annoyance, but this did not deter her, her eyes fastening onto his wand with a manic gleam that Hope wasn't sure was a good thing.

"Oh, are you doing magic?" she asked, her tone of voice brimming with excitement. "Let's see it, then."

Hope blinked, slightly startled when the girl, being incredibly forward, sat herself on the cushion beside Hope to watch, and clearly Ron was similarly minded.
"Er–alright," he said a bit awkwardly, swallowing before opening his mouth:

"Sunshine, daisies, butter mellow,

Turn this stupid, fat rat yellow."

With an incantation like that, Hope wasn't surprised that it didn't work when he waved his wand.

"Are you sure that's a real spell?" the girl asked. "Well, it's not very good, is it?"

This was a bit of a rude assessment, Hope thought as Ron glanced towards her with an incredulous expression.

"I've tried a few simple spells just for practice and it's all worked for me," she continued, seeming to not notice the looks that were being passed between the two. "Nobody in my family's magic at all, it was ever such a surprise when I got my letter, but I was ever so pleased, of course, I mean, it's the very best school of witchcraft there is, I've heard –I've learned all our course books by heart, of course, I just hope it will be enough– I'm Hermione Granger, by the way, who are you?"

Hope wasn't sure she'd heard anyone talk so fast without breathing, which was probably why her words were said so fast, so that she could breathe afterwards.

"I'm Ron Weasley," Ron told her.

"Hope," Hope said, before reluctantly adding her surname when Hermione's gaze did not waver from hers. "Potter."

"Are you really?" Hermione was beaming at her now and Hope wasn't quite sure why. "I know all about you, of course –I got a few extra books. for background reading, and you're in Modern Magical History and The Rise and Fall of the Dark Arts and Great Wizarding Events of the Twentieth Century."

Hope blinked, startled by this information. "Really?" she said.

"Goodness, didn't you know?" Hermione asked. "I'd have found out everything I could if it was me." Hope was glad she'd only read one of the books Hermione had mentioned and it wasn't because she was in it.

"Do either of you know what House you'll be in?" Hermione continued. "I've been asking around, and I hope I'm in Gryffindor, it sounds by far the best; I hear Dumbledore himself was in it, but I suppose Ravenclaw wouldn't be too bad...Anyways, we'd better go and look for Neville's toad. You two had better change, you know, I expect we'll be there soon."

She was barely out the door when Hope called out to them, making them pause.

"You might want to try the Prefects," Hope suggested, (she knew what a Prefect was and she assumed because they were older that they knew more spells), "maybe they know a spell that'll help you find your toad."

Hermione contemplated her for a moment as Neville went off in search of someone wearing a Prefect's badge.

"And I wouldn't believe everything you read," Hope added, making Hermione's lips twitch slightly before the red-head ducked her head back into the compartment, sliding the door shut and leaning back into her sear.
"Whatever House I'm in," Ron grumbled with a scowl on his face as he thrust the wand back in his trunk, sitting in a huff. "I hope she's not in it. Stupid spell –George gave it to me, bet he knew it was a dud."

"He does seem the type," Hope had to admit, having been subjected to several tales concerning Ron's prankster older twin brothers. "Do you know what House you'll be in?" Maybe it was different for those who had family for through the 'Sorting Ceremony' already.

"No idea," Ron told her, "you don't find out how they Sort you until you're in the Great Hall. I hope I'll be in Gryffindor, though."

"Why's that?" Hope asked.

"Well, the whole family's been in Gryffindor," Ron explained, biting the inside of his mouth. "Mum, Dad, all my brothers. I don't know what they'll say if I'm not. I don't suppose Ravenclaw would be too bad, but imagine if they put me in Slytherin."

Ron didn't notice how her hand tightened into a fist at the mention of Slytherin.

"What'd be wrong with Slytherin?" Hope asked as casually as she could manage.

"That's the House that You-Know-Who came out of," Ron said, saying the title in a hushed voice, "they say there wasn't a witch or wizard that went bad that wasn't in Slytherin."

Hope twisted her serpent ring uncomfortably on her finger as she looked outside, the sky growing darker as time passed on.

"What do your brothers do?" Hope asked suddenly in interest, as though the thought had just occurred to her, which was very likely. She hadn't really considered what you did once you completed seven years of schooling at Hogwarts, she always figured you'd just be a witch or a wizard, depending on your gender.

"Well, Charlie's in Romania at a Dragon Reserve," Ron explained. "And Bill's in Africa working as a Curse-breaker for Gringotts."

"Ah," Hope said, though she didn't really understand, though this didn't particularly matter as Ron had jumped to another topic.

"Did you hear about Gringotts?" he asked her and she shook her head. "It's been all over the Daily Prophet, but I don't suppose you get that with the Muggles –someone tried to rob a high security vault."

That sounded like a very foolish thing to do in Hope's opinion. The only lock she tried to pick was the one that Vernon and Petunia had always put on her cupboard, bank robbing was something else entirely.

"How much trouble did they get in?" Hope asked.

"That's the funny thing," Ron said, his blue eyes sparkling, "they didn't get caught! My dad says it must've been a powerful Dark wizard to get round Gringotts, but they don't think they took anything, that's what's odd. 'Course, everyone gets scared when something like this happens in case You-Know-Who's behind it."

Hope arched an eyebrow, wondering how people could still be afraid of someone that was dead, but that wasn't her business.
Ron was halfway through explaining the game of Quidditch—which involved seven players on each team, riding broomsticks, four very distinct balls, and two bats—when they were interrupted once more.

Hope was starting to find it grating every time the compartment door slid open, but she couldn't resist her mouth opening slightly in surprise at who stood beyond.

There were three boys, two appearing as though they were much too stocky for their short height, but the third, a pale boy with blonde hair and cold grey eyes, Hope recognized very well. They had run into each other in Madam Malkin's robe shop and he had sneered at her leg and cane, hardly trying to hide disdain towards her even when he had been questioning her about her parentage.

He looked her up and down as though he couldn't believe that Hope Potter was a cripple (however, this gave Hope the opportunity to jab at people she didn't like with her cane and could get away with it).

"Is it true?" he asked, his lip curling slightly as he looked over her and Hope found she didn't like the look at all. "They're saying all down the train that Hope Potter's in this compartment. So it's you, is it?"

"It must be," Hope said sarcastically, rolling her eyes with a bit more exaggeration than was necessary towards Ron who hid his sniggers. "Since I'm the only girl in the compartment."

His lips curled into an expression that was halfway between a sneer at her attitude and a smirk that he'd found out that she was indeed Hope Potter (though, it wasn't as though Hope was trying hard to hide this fact).

"This is Crabbe," the boy said gesturing first to the boy on his left and then his right, "and this is Goyle. And my name's Malfoy, Draco Malfoy."

Ron hid another laugh and Hope could understand why. This boy hardly came off as frightening as a dragon—as 'draco' did mean dragon— that he was named for was meant to be.

However, Ron's actions in turn caused Draco Malfoy to turn on him with deep loathing.

"Think my name's funny, do you?" he sneered. "No need to ask who you are. My father told me all the Weasleys have red hair, freckles, and more children than they can afford."

Ron's face and ears flamed a brilliant crimson and Hope felt angry on his behalf. Forget rude, this brat was crass with the intention to hurt. And then Draco Malfoy was focused on Hope once more and she schooled her expression carefully.

"You'll soon find out some Wizarding families are much better than others, Potter. You don't want to go making friends with the wrong sort," he said, his eyes flicking towards Ron. "I can help you there."

He held out a hand to Hope and it was only then that Hope glared.

"I'm actually sure that I won't have a problem with sorting out the good from the bad, especially when I'm looking at you," she told him coldly.

Malfoy was not impressed by her attitude, but, then again, very few were.

"I'd be careful if I were you, Potter," Malfoy warned. "Unless you're a bit politer you'll go the same
way as your parents. They didn't know what was good for them, either. You hang around with riffraff like the Weasleys and that Hagrid, and it'll rub off on you."

Ron leapt to his feet in anger, but Hope did not.

"Ooh!" she said, grinning, "are you threatening me?"

"And if I was?" Malfoy retorted, though it was quite different threatening someone and having them be afraid than threatening someone and having them be humoured by the attempt.

"Well, who could really be afraid of you?" Hope asked, tilting her head slightly to the side as she pulled her cane free, shooting to forward so that it whacked against his head, sending him reeling out of the compartment before Scabbers caused a diversion by biting into Goyle's finger.

It sounded as though it was quite painful, and it took a good bit of effort before Scabbers' jaws released Goyle's finger, allowing all three boys to make a hasty getaway.

"Well," Hope said after a moment, "that was exciting."

Laughter bloomed from Ron's lips at her words.
The Sorting Hat's Decision

Hope almost fell flat on her face as she exited the train. This was yet another reason why Hope hated that girls were required to wear skirts, and being the self-conscious eleven year old witch that she was, none of the skin of her legs were visible due to tights that were so thick they could have passed for leggings (though, Hope really couldn't complain about this fact because the wind was a bit cool, even for September).

*Almost* being the operative word. An arm pulled her upright before she fell completely, placing her gently on the ground.

Hope looked up, not at all surprised to see a pair of blue eyes looking down at her, but entirely flustered.

"Watch your step, Mystery-girl," George Weasley said, grinning as Hope swallowed her embarrassment as best as she could.

She released a short laugh almost against her will, only slightly covering her humiliation. "Wizard-boy, keep your mouth to yourself."

George sniggered as his little brother followed Hope out of the train, and George raised his hands in defeat, though the grin on his lips ruined the image.

"Would I really mock Hope Potter?" he queried with an air of innocence that Hope didn't for one second believe.

Hope rolled her eyes as best as she could, but her lips were twitching upwards into a smile, and George would take what he could get. "Are you always this impossible?"

"Only when pretty girls are around!" he called over his shoulder, disappearing into the crowd of students that were above first years.

"Bloody bonkers," Ron said at Hope's side. "And I always thought George was the sane one."

"Who's really sane, anyways?" Hope had to ask and Ron had to wordlessly agree with her there, the pair settling into an anxious silence that had only been brought on by their arrival at the school, the school Hope had yet to see.

It seemed like Hope, Ron, and all the other first years were standing in relative darkness for a short while before a voice called out: "Firs' years! Firs' years over here!"

A lamp swinging from a giant hand as well as the voice and partially illuminated face revealed to Hope that it was Hagrid.

He grinned down at her. "Alright there, Hope?"

"Alright," Hope laughed as Ron gaped at the Keeper of Keys as though he had never seen a man so tall, which Hope thought was incredibly likely.

"C'mon, follow me," Hagrid called over their heads, his lamp swinging with every move that he made, somehow managing to miss any of the small heads attached to equally short bodies before him. "Any more firs' years? Mind yer step, now! Firs' years follow me!"
And then he turned, lamp still swinging, heading down a path that the first years could barely see. Hope almost fell once more, her cane slipping in the mud, only managing to remain upright by fisting the robes at Ron's arm at the last moment.

If this annoyed him, he didn't mention it.

"Yeh'll get yer firs' sight o' Hogwarts in a sec, jus' round this bend here," Hagrid told them, his voice belling out and echoing in the silence, causing several people trip at the sound, including Ron, and this time it was Hope that stopped him from falling over his feet.

"Ron, Ron!" Hope tugged on his arm, her eyes fastened on the magnificent structure beyond them. Hope had never seen anything so beautiful in her short eleven years of life.

It was a medieval castle of perfection, that was the best way to describe it. Several stories tall with spires branching off from the main structure. Hope had seen similar castles –though far less impressive– in history textbooks but they were worn by age and elements, and this castle was in prime condition.

The only thing that separated them from it was a lake that glittered like black glass.

"Bloody hell," Ron said beside her and Hope had to agree entirely as several others "Oooooh!"ed in appreciation. The sight was so distracting that the first years had to remember to start walking again.

Ron glanced at Hope and despite the darkness and the nervousness that they both felt, they grinned.

"No more'n four to a boat!" Hagrid called out, jerking them out of the awed trance that had been induced at the sight of the castle; several people started at his voice.

Ron and Hope got in the last boat with Hermione and Neville, but this might have had something to do with Hope not moving very fast with her blasted leg.

This day was turning Hope into a very clumsy person; Hope could not be blamed for this. And she couldn't blame Ron's older brother for everything, but she was going to blame him for the first time, and then the ground, and then the boat, in that order.

She was not going to think at all about when George had said "Only when pretty girls are around." No, she was definitely not thinking about that.

"Everyone in? Right then- FORWARD!"

Hope gripped the edge of the boat tightly, wary of falling into its depths, because she could swear she saw something moving down there. She recoiled quickly when she saw a pair of yellow eyes shimmer in the darkness before disappearing with a flutter of what looked to be green seaweed but Hope would one day learn it was in fact hair.

Hope breathed out slowly, quickly forgetting about the eyes as she looked on to the castle with its lanterns flickering in welcome.

Forget how nervous Hope had been before, because it had doubled, or even tripled, Hope wasn't quite sure as they waited in the antechamber as the witch in emerald robes from before had indicated.

The witch, Professor McGonagall, gave off a severe air that told Hope that she might want to tip-toe around her, especially if she went off wandering at night; who wouldn't with a castle this big (Hope seemed to have forgotten in her excitement that she couldn't move as much as others with her leg)?
Hope then had to wonder if the woman could hear her thoughts, because the calculating grey eyes flashed to meet her green ones.

The Potter recalled from the letter she had gotten from Hogwarts listing a woman named Minerva McGonagall as the Deputy Headmistress, so that had to be this woman. Minerva, Hope knew, being named after a Greek primordial being herself, was the Roman equivalent of Athena, goddess of wisdom, and Hope got the sense that she was aptly named.

Professor McGonagall held her gaze for only a moment and confusion marred Hope's face as she abruptly broke eye contact with her, as though it caused her pain to hold her eyes to Hope's.

"I shall return when we are ready for you," she told the gathering of first years. "Please wait quietly." And then she turned on her heel and exited the chamber, leaving the new students alone with two suits of armour and several lit brackets that cast an ominous glow on the walls and the suits of armour.

Both the suits of armour, Hope noticed, bore snakes on their shields which were held stiffly in front of them.

The other eleven and twelve year olds were conversing in low whispers when Hope noticed both bow themselves slightly in respect towards her. This resulted in Hope feeling much more flummoxed than before.

She opted to stare at the ground which held a strange swirling design, but looking at it made her dizzy, what with the swirls and the anxiety she was currently feeling.

"I think Fred said you have to do some sort of test so they can Sort you into your House," Ron hissed out of the corner of his mouth to her. "Fred said it hurt a lot…I'm sure he was joking, though," he added when her face went stark white.

Hope swallowed, trying to think of anything but leaving the antechamber. Surely Fred must have been lying. It would be cruel to subject them to something painful…so what would it be? Before she could even ponder that, Professor McGonagall had reappeared once more, causing all the murmurs to cease in an instant.

"Now, form a line, and follow me," was all she said as she led them through the doors.

Unsurprisingly Hope found herself behind everyone else, ignoring a few comments said in an undertone concerning her injury. If she hadn't been so focused, she might have turned her hair jet-black.

They left the antechamber to walk through the great magnificent oak doors and into the Great Hall, and Hope was awed by the hall beyond that. There were more candles than she could count dangling high up in the air without suspension, illuminating the four long tables and the Head Table at the front. Hope's eyes were drawn to the man at the centre whose long white beard was as clear as day. Even at this distance, she could see his eyes twinkling.

But his face was only one of so many faces bearing down on them, including those of the many ghosts hovering above.

Hope allowed her eyes to drift upwards, trailing upwards to the ghosts and then past them once she saw the ceiling, which could hardly be described as a ceiling, resembling the night sky.

She was so distracted by the sky being inside that she almost ran into the person in front of her, and she was sure that they wouldn't have been very pleased with her. This directed her attention towards
Hope blinked furiously, barely managing not to gape in incomprehension when she heard the rustic singing, coming from a *hat* of all things! What kind of school was this, anyway, to have a *hat* that could *sing*? An incredulous expression appeared briefly on her face at the sight of an old and patched once-pointed hat, singing from a rip in the material.

Its song was one of the strangest things she'd heard, giving fine descriptions of each House, the words regarding Slytherin ringing in her ears ("Or perhaps in Slytherin, You'll make your real friends, Those cunning folk use any means, To achieve their ends.").

Trying on a hat did seem to be less trying than whatever Hope and Ron had imagined as Professor McGonagall began to read off names from a roll of parchment, starting with "Abbott, Hannah!", "Bones, Susan!", and "Boot, Terry!" who went into Hufflepuff, Hufflepuff, and Ravenclaw respectively.

Professor McGonagall went through the names quickly, as the hat seemed to launch the House names out incredibly fast.

"Granger, Hermione!"

Ron groaned beside her as the bushy-haired first year was sorted into "GRYFFINDOR!"

"Greengrass, Daphne!"

A fair-skinned girl with pinned up blonde hair moved forward to barely sit on the chair, her blue eyes disappearing from view briefly as the hat called out "SLYTHERIN!"

"Longbottom, Neville!"

The last name of the boy who had lost his toad before on the train caught Hope's memory.

"I don't understand," she said, "the Dursleys weren't my parents' first choice for my guardians?" If that was true, then why was she living with them?

"No," the goblin behind the desk said, "that would be your godparents, Alice Longbottom and Sirius Black...unfortunately neither are in a condition to care for you."

Hope took this to mean that they were dead.

Neville must've been Alice's son. He was positively white in nervousness when he sat down on the stool and had the Sorting Hat dropped onto his head.

It took much longer than Hope would've thought for the hat to cry out, "GRYFFINDOR!"

But it wasn't long until "Malfoy, Draco!" came along and was immediately followed by a yell of "SLYTHERIN!"

It seemed like ages before "Potter, Hope!" was called, and by then Hope's heart was hammering in her chest. What if she was put somewhere she didn't belong? What if she wasn't Sorted at all? The butterflies in her stomach thickened into a swarm.

She leaned heavily on her cane as she walked through the now-small crowd of remaining first years, trying to ignore the whispers that had sprung forth at the merest mention of her name.

"Potter, did she say?"
"The Hope Potter?"

"Ooh! Look at that leg!"

She hoisted herself up onto the stool and permitted the hat to be dropped onto her head as well, the faces of those watching her disappearing as the brim flopped down over her eyes.

She had expected a sudden cry of one of the Houses to issue from the hat, but it did not happen as immediately as she had anticipated.

"Ah," it said in her mind, "a curious enigma, aren't you?"

Hope didn't really understand what he meant by this, just as she hadn't understood why George had called her "Mystery-girl".

"A remarkable mind," the hat continued and Hope had a feeling as though he was scanning through her memories, if that was possible – she hoped not, she didn't like people riffling around in her head. "Quite loyal too, with courage, such courage! And a thirst to prove yourself…but where shall I put you?"

She didn't offer any input, keeping her lips tightly sealed.

"What?" the hat's voice had grown amused; if it had had eyes, she was certain they would be twinkling. "No preference?"

"What's the point?" she thought back, her mental voice sounding as snarky as her physical one. "Aren't you supposed to choose?"

It chuckled at her response, still amused; Hope wondered if he'd ever Sorted someone who talked back to him. "Analyze yourself, Miss Potter, look beyond the shell and gaze within to who you truly are."

Hope nearly fell off the stool, and would have done so if she had not grabbed the edge of the stool, so surprised by his words. She had never had to analyze who she was before, what if she didn't do it right?

Hope closed her eyes and took a short calming breath. The four Houses each had certain traits: courage, ambition, loyalty, intelligence…

She was intelligent in some matters, she supposed, though she hadn't been allowed to score very high on her tests in the Muggle school she went to with Dudley, Vernon and Petunia wouldn't have been pleased. She was, in a way, street smart, as it was termed, as she wasn't really the studious type; trouble and her went hand in hand. Loyalty…she wasn't sure about that one. Ambitious…well, perhaps she was a little ambitious, but not overtly so; she wasn't the type to step over others to reach her goals. Brave…she wasn't afraid of standing up for what she believed in, so she supposed that counted.

A soft chuckle told her the hat must have been following her trail of thoughts. She could swear the hat was smirking when it spoke a few last words in her mind, before speaking her house aloud. "Very good, you really must come visit me…Your grandfather may not be pleased, Miss Potter, but I will be sending you to…GRYFFINDOR!"

Her face lit up at the loudest cheer yet filled the hall and she made her way towards the table, sliding into the area next to Hermione Granger, laughing aloud as Fred and George did a little victory dance, yelling "We got Potter! We got Potter!"
Hope smiled widely as the hat was removed from her head and she limped towards the loudest table by far, and just like that, she completely forgot about the hat's comment about her grandfather.

Moonlight was streaming in through the window as Hope lay awake that night, her eyes turning the same colour as the moonlight shining against her. Her bed was the one closest to the window, something that pleased her more than she’d be willing to admit, as she had a perfect view of the clear sky and all of its stars.

Hope Potter, as many would later discover, was a lover of stars. Indeed, star-gazing had gotten her into trouble more than one time or another, including when she had sketched a large—and misshaped—constellation on one of her tests, thus earning her a detention for her troubles.

But Hope was not currently thinking of the stars, she was instead attempting to use the moonlight as a light of sorts, not knowing any spells to produce it herself, her fingers pulling a worn bit of parchment from an equally worn envelope onto which her name had been etched with a careful hand.

_Hope_, it read.

*If you are reading this then your mother and I can no longer care for you, as I have entrusted this letter to the goblin in charge of the Potter vaults and subsequent Head of Gringotts, Ragnok, to be given to you upon your entry into the Wizarding World.*

*So, Happy Birthday at least ten times over, Hope, and I am sorry that I could not have stayed longer in this world for you or your mother.*

*Voldemort is no closer to discovering our hiding place, to our relief, and I can rest easy knowing that you are in the safe care of either your godmother, Alice Longbottom, or your godfather, Sirius Black, my closest friend.*

*Your mother is probably irritated enough with me—as she always is— for writing this letter; she thinks I am too pessimistic. So I will offer you as much advice in as little words as I can manage.*

*I once made the mistake of judging a Hogwarts House by their reputation alone, so I ask that you learn from my mistakes. Slytherin blood runs in our veins, you and I, and there’s no telling if it will shine more strongly in you than any other Potter.*

*We love you more than the stars in the sky,*

*Your father,*

*James*

Hope slid it back into the envelope and placed it on her bedside table, not at all tired. When she’d first read it, she’d burst into tears—not that she would ever admit to it—and Ragnok, being quite out of his depth, had simply sat in his chair, waiting for her sobs to subside.

"More than the stars in the sky," Hope murmured to herself as she grabbed her cane lightly from its resting place before manoeuvring around slumbering girls to reach the door. She could do with gazing up at the stars, even if she didn’t know her way around the castle at all.

What girl didn't like a good midnight adventure, after all?

Hope treaded carefully out of the portrait hole of the Fat Lady—the portrait that held the woman that
hid the Gryffindor common room and dormitories from view.

The only sound that Hope made was the constant clicking of her cane meeting the floor (the brace having been removed before she had 'gone to bed') as she climbed staircase after staircase until she found herself at a fork of two that she couldn't decide between.

"Take the left," a smooth voice to her left mentioned and Hope twisted violently to cast her eyes upon a handsome young man twirling a wand between his thin fingers. His eyes were a green, though much paler than Hope's, and his dark hair hung in loose locks around his face.

He smiled. "Trust me."

Hope wondered if that was the best idea as she glanced between the two staircases, but when she looked back the boy had gone. How very strange…

But Hope conceded to him, taking the one on her left and climbing it up to another corridor at the end of which she found a door that led out into the open air.

It was cold, there was no denying that, but it also had by far the best view, far greater than even the window in the girl's dormitory could ever hope to compare to.

Hope could see Sirius, the dog star, and the constellation Aquila, and more stars than she could usually see were visible, not hidden as they usually were by clouds gliding across the sky.

She wasn't sure how long she stayed there, transfixed by the heavens, but definitely long enough that she nearly lost feeling in her feet, and it was only then that she reluctantly left the tower to limp down the hall towards the staircases she had taken up to the tower in the first place, trying to remember which ones exactly they were.

Luckily, no one bothered her until she was nearly back to the portrait hole, and she froze, her grip tightening on her cane as she saw something ghostly pass in the nearby hall, a flash of pale skin and a dark cloak. It made her think first of the curious lad from before who had vanished so effectively that he must have been a ghost, but also of the man at the staff table that had glared at her when she had looked up. Hope couldn't imagine why…she'd never met him before.

She sighed. Making enemies on her first day; first Draco Malfoy, then him.

But she was distracted by a chiding voice that spoke from the darkness, startling her and sending a chill down her spine.

"My, my," it said. "Already sneaking out after dark, Miss Potter?"

She blinked a few times, a frown marring her lips slightly as she tensed her spine.

"A girl after my own heart," a second voice added as two boys stepped into the light, their grins the most obvious thing in the darkness.

Hope relaxed her posture, causing a white-hot flare of pain to shoot up her injured leg, something she had quickly grown accustomed to. She leaned her arm against the wall, and the second one—George, it must have been—was instantly apologetic.

"Sorry, didn't mean to startle you."

"It's fine," Hope said through gritted teeth, releasing a tired sigh as the feeling faded. "You get used to it after awhile…" She scrutinized them with difficulty; their pockets seemed to be bulging with
something that she couldn't quite tell what it was. "Causing trouble already?" she guessed, recalling Ron's words about his prankster brothers.

The identical smirks bore down on her as their answer and she chuckled under her breath.

"So," Fred began.

"What're you doing—" George continued.

"—out so late?" they both finished.

She stared, bemused. "Do you always finish each other's sentences like that?"

"Always," they chirped.

Her green eyes twinkled in amusement, but she didn't comment on it.

"You never answered our question," George reminded her, the pair becoming thoroughly confused and quite curious when a growing flush of embarrassment appeared on the girl's cheeks.

"I was star-gazing," she admitted, brushing past them and towards the Fat Lady, leaving the Weasley Twins rather puzzled as to why she was star-gazing.

Fred arched his eyebrows at his brother who gave a noncommittal shrug in return, watching her for a moment.

"Need some help, Potter?" he inquired to the night as Hope struggled to make it into the portrait hole.

He walked towards her and Fred winked at him, crossing his arms and watching the show as Hope's cheeks darkened even more.

"Erm…maybe just a little," she said at long last, taking the hand offered to her, allowing her to pull herself up.

"Thanks," she said, ignoring the grin that had graced his lips.

"No problem," he said, "always happy to sweep a girl off her feet."

Hope scowled at him but her bright cheeks ruined the image as she limped towards the girls' dormitories grumbling about troublesome gingers.

Fred followed his brother inside, impressed by how red his twin had turned the Potter, even if he didn't understand how fascinated he could have been with the small girl he'd seen at the zoo.
Day of Classes

Hope awoke early the next morning, surprisingly refreshed despite having fallen asleep past midnight, however, getting down to the Great Hall was a different matter entirely. She lost her way so many times that when she finally sat down at Gryffindor table—though mostly empty as it was still early—the muscles in her leg felt strained and she was breathing a little harder than before from the exercise.

She swallowed her pumpkin juice thickly as she spooned some eggs and sausage onto her plate.

"So, you like to stargaze?"

Hope choked on her eggs as a ginger-haired lad plopped himself onto the seat opposite her.

"Do you ever give up?" she managed after taking a hasty gulp of her drink to clear her throat.

"Sometimes," George said, swiping one of her sausages, earning him a glare. "You know what I said about pretty girls yesterday." He was grinning as the heat slowly rose in her cheeks.

"That would make more sense," Hope snorted, "if I was actually pretty."

George's eyes narrowed slightly. "I think you're cute," he admitted, a light flush adorning his cheeks.

"Really?" Hope asked, vaguely startled by this pronouncement. She had yet to meet someone who didn't view her looks as undesirable. Jane Collins with her blonde curls and bright blue eyes had always scorned Hope and her odd dark red hair and too-green eyes and had been subsequently horrified when Hope turned up at school every other week with a different hair and eye colour more appalling than the last. The mixture of disgust and horror on her face had pleased Hope greatly.

"Would I lie?" George asked, his eyes blinking innocently.

"You look like you would," Hope said, scrutinizing him intently.

His grin widened. "You're catching on, Potter!"

Hope couldn't even resist rolling her eyes at that.

"I like the stars," she said suddenly, catching him unawares.

"What?"

She gave him a rather direct look. "The stars. You asked me about stargazing."

"Ah, I mean, yes, I did," George floundered and Hope's lips twitched. "I guess you'll like your Astronomy class, then."

"Astronomy?" Hope perked up at that. What girl didn't like star-gazing for school credit?

George expertly hid his sniggers behind his own goblet.

"You know you can ask him to leave if he's bothering you," a voice commented and both looked up as Ron dropped heavily into the seat beside his older brother.

Hope's eyes glowed with mirth. "He's…manageable."
"Manageable?" George squawked in indignation. "I am not manageable, thank you very much!"

"Oh?" Hope's tone turned sardonic as Fred made his appearance at the table as sneaky as ever, delighting, it seemed, in how his twin was being ganged up upon. "Is that what you think? I think he looks quite manageable, don't you?" She directed her question towards Ron who grinned in response.

"Definitely," Ron said.

"Must you wound me so?" George cried with an air of drama. "I shall never forgive you!"

Hope arched an eyebrow towards Fred who was now sniggering.

"I think you'd best apologize," Fred said, his voice filled with humour. "Unless you want to see George get really upset."

Hope dubiously looked back towards George who was putting a great amount of effort into making his eyes look wet.

She patted his hand with a sweet smile. "Try better next time," she told him.

"Is that a challenge?"

Hope stared at him. "Are you always this impossible?"

"Usually worse," Ron told her for his brother as Fred mimed something to his twin.

"See you around, Potter," George said, ruffling his younger brother's hair as he stood, moving to join Fred, causing a scowl to mar Ron's face as he glared, attempting to straighten his hair from the mess George had created. "Try not to get lost, little bro."

"Your brother is strange," Hope told Ron as he took George's vacated seat across from her.

"You don't even know the half of it," Ron said with a groan. "You're looking at their favourite prank victim...after Percy, I mean."

"I ran into them last night," Hope admitted, not in the slightest embarrassed to admit this to him. "They were probably up to no good when I was heading back to the common room."

Ron goggled at her, aghast at her words; Hope wondered if she'd said something wrong. "You snuck out of the tower?" he asked, stunned.

His reaction only served to amuse her further. "Is that so surprising?" she asked, her mouth twitching into a smile.

"A bit," he confessed, "you didn't really seem like the type..."

Hope snorted. "I'm what you would call a 'troubled child' who's greatest skill is lock-picking."

"Really?" Light glinted in his eyes as he gazed upon her, impressed. "Can you teach me?"

Hope blinked in surprise and then she smiled widely. "Sure...it might take me awhile to find my picks, though, they're somewhere in my trunk...I might have left them in the library portion..."

Now it was Ron's turn to stare at her. "You have a library in your trunk?" he asked her incredulously.
"Yup!" Hope said, beaming proudly. "What girl doesn't have a proper library in her trunk?"

Ron could only mouth wordlessly at her for a few seconds before spooning porridge into his mouth in an effort to cover his disbelief at his friend as Professor McGonagall came along the Gryffindor table to hand out schedules.

"And Miss Potter," the older woman added after she had given Ron and Hope theirs, "sometime this week please make time to see the Matron, Madam Pomfrey."

"Who's Madam Pomfrey?" Hope asked blankly after she'd gone.

"She's a Healer," Ron explained, "they fix people up, you know when they're injured? She's in charge of the Hospital Wing."

Hope sighed. She didn't even know where the Hospital Wing was!

The first few days of classes weren't so bad, in Hope's opinion. Charms and Transfiguration were demanding but not overly difficult –though Hope had accidentally turned her hair purple during Charms class, thus ensuing a discussion concerning Metamorphmagi (Hope hadn't even known there was a name for it)and having several of her year-mates asking her to do certain colours for her hair and eyes (that was very annoying)–, Astronomy was very fun, and Hope didn't mind staying up late for it, History of Magic was a bit of a bore, and Herbology wasn't too bad, and now Hope and Ron only had Potions class left.

Hope rather thought that the professor didn't much like her going off of the rather unsavoury expression he wore whenever she was in his presence.

Thus Hope's hair had darkened and shortened to a mess of black tousled curls and her eyes had turned hazel by the time the door slammed shut and the class began.

Up close, Hope thought he didn't look like much. His skin was sallow from potion fumes, his dark robes making it more obvious, and his lips curled into a permanent frown. His dark eyes flashed dangerously as they glanced over her in barely a second as he reached her name on the class roster, the immense dislike clearly perceivable and it confused Hope.

"Ah, yes," he said, his snide voice soft, almost dangerously so, but not quite, "Hope Potter. Our new —celebrity."

Hope's eyebrow twitched in annoyance, his lips drawing downwards slightly in a frown at his words. She felt slightly insulted by his words, and she carefully ignored the sniggers of the arrogant Purebloods that she had met on the train.

"You are here to learn the subtle science and exact art of Potion-making," Snape began after he had checked every name for attendance. "As there is little foolish wand-waving here, many of you will hardly believe this is magic. I don't expect you will really understand the beauty of the softly simmering cauldron with its shimmering fumes, the delicate power of liquid that creeps through human veins, bewitching the mind, ensnaring the senses…I can teach you how to bottle fame, brew glory, and even stopper death—if you aren't as big a bunch of dunderheads that I usually have to teach." It was an enthralling speech, or at least, it would have been, had Hope been listening, but she was currently fascinated by the sheer number of potion bottles littering the room with varying colours and substances within.

"Potter!" He snapped out her name so suddenly that Hope very nearly jumped, making her eyes coming off a bit more wild than she had intended. "What would I get if I added powdered root of
asphodel to an infusion of wormwood?"

Hope scowled at him, sulking briefly at how he was picking her out, ignoring how Hermione's irritating hand shot up off to the side of her and Ron. She wracked her brain briefly; she'd read something about that somewhere...she was sure of it...

"The Draught of Living Death...right?" she asked, half-expecting it to be wrong, but she was not, and he seemed surprised that she knew the answer, but it did not deter him from asking her more questions.

"And where would I find a bezoar?" Snape demanded, nearly snapping his fingers at her in an effort to make her respond faster.

"Inside the stomach of a goat," Hope recited, having read it in *Antidotes to Common Poisons*, being a bit startled that someone would actually want to swallow a stone from a goat's stomach; sounded right disgusting, if you asked her.

And why was he just picking on her?

"What is the difference, Potter, between monkshood and wolfsbane?"

Now, Hermione's hand was almost connecting with the ceiling as she had stood up. And Hope was stumped; she didn't remember those ingredients much...

"Oh, I don't know, Professor, perhaps you should ask Hermione instead," Hope replied with a touch of exasperation leaking into her voice. A few people laughed, and Seamus Finnigan winked at her; she gave him one in return, her lips twitching upwards slightly.

Snape wasn't too pleased, though, and proceeded to give them a lecture on where and what they properly were.

"A point will be taken from Gryffindor for your cheek, Potter."

The second he turned his back, Hope stuck out her tongue in blatant disrespect, earning her an annoyed noise from Hermione, which she ignored.

The lesson went downhill from there, and Hope found herself wishing that she didn't have him as her teacher because clearly he had some unresolved issues to work out.

Sadly, Hope didn't have a lot of restraint at eleven years old and this was made quite obvious later in the lesson when Neville melted his cauldron with the potion that he had been working on with Seamus, resulting in having to be taken to the Hospital Wing by Seamus.

This left Hope and Ron open for attack, as they'd been the pair working beside Neville.

"You –Potter–" He snapped to her and Hope couldn't say that she was entirely surprised. "—why didn't you tell him not to add the quills? Thought he'd make you look good if he got it wrong, did you? That's another point you've lost for Gryffindor."

Hope was so furious that she ignored Ron as he tried to keep her quiet. "Oh, I'm so sorry!" she said with a sarcastic flourish. "It's not like I should have been paying attention to my own potion!"

"Detention, Potter!"

Hope growled, clenching her fist so tightly that her knuckles shone white. Hope had never hated a
teacher, but as she stormed out of Snape's class half an hour later, she was sure she would hate him.

Her bag swung violently on her shoulder as she walked, even with her limp, leaving Ron behind, climbing the moving staircases as she dug out a bit of parchment from her pocket that had been given to her by Professor McGonagall earlier that day. On it were instructions of how to reach the Hospital Wing using the Great Hall as a starting point.

Today may have been the first day that Hope and Ron didn't get lost on their way to their classes but that didn't mean that Hope knew where the Hospital Wing was. She lamented to not joining Neville when he had to be taken to the room in question.

She sighed, her anger abating somewhat as she walked more and more, taking the stairs up to the third floor, turning left down the first corridor. It was surprisingly difficult to find, even with Hope's directions she found that she walked past it twice (which was pretty sad, considering how large the double doors were), a numb feeling running through her leg with every step from the force of her storming out of the dungeons not ten minutes earlier.

Her leg paid for her anger, unfortunately.

Hope shoved the parchment into her pocket with her only free hand, the other tightening over the cane as she pushed one of the doors slowly to peer inside.

"Er…hello?" she called into the silence, stepping more completely into the room. It was quite large, she supposed, though the other classrooms were perhaps a similar size, if there was an absence of desks. A number of simple hospital beds with white sheets lay on either side of the room for students if and when they fell ill or were injured.

There was a small back office from which a woman appeared as if summoned by Hope's voice. This woman, Hope assumed, was the Matron, Madam Pomfrey.

"I was wondering when I'd be seeing you, Miss Potter," she said, and whatever Hope had been expecting, it wasn't this. The Matron was a stern-faced woman with crow's feet at the corner of her eyes from smiling and laughing and her hair was tied in a much less severe bun than Professor McGonagall's was, though all the hair gathered into the bun was grey.

"Er, hello," Hope repeated, swallowing slightly as she looked up and down the woman, "you're the…Matron?" It was still a strange term to Hope and she said it slowly, in case she was wrong, but she doubted that.

"I'm Madam Pomfrey," the woman said, inviting her forward, her eyes focused on the leg that had been giving Hope trouble for a long time. "I understand you were in an automobile accident?"

"Who told you that?" Hope asked in surprise, pressing more of her weight down on her cane. Madam Pomfrey nearly laughed. "You might have told Hagrid, but he's not exactly well known for keeping his mouth shut."

"Oh," Hope said with a bit of embarrassment. Hagrid had been surprised by her leg brace and cane so Hope had had to explain as best as she could manage how she had attained such an injury. "Right…of course he did."

Hope tried hard not to sigh, but it wasn't as if no one wasn't aware by now that the Girl-Who-Lived was a cripple.

As if that was a bad thing.
Cripples had more fun because you underestimate them. Hope couldn't have put all those tacks on
the seats because of her leg, she couldn't have turned three of her teachers hair different colours
because of her leg...the list goes on.

"I was expecting you to come in earlier," Madam Pomfrey admitted.

"Well, I'm not really known for being on time," Hope said with a shrug, gesturing towards her leg.

"Your father never was either," Madam Pomfrey lamented.

Hope looked up. "You knew my dad?" she asked.

"Well, he was a Quidditch player," Madam Pomfrey said with a light chuckle, "they always manage
to find themselves injured in some way."

A smile twisted onto her lips at the mention of her father.

"Would you lie on the bed, please?" Madam Pomfrey asked. "I'd like to run a diagnostic spell on
you.

Hope spared the Matron a curious glance before relenting and moving to sit upon the mattress,
stretching her legs out against it, one hidden under the bulky brace.

"This won't take more than a few seconds," Madam Pomfrey assured her, "and it won't hurt a bit."

"Great," Hope drawled out as the older witch pulled her wand, earning her a rather bemused smile in
return. She did not need to speak a spell, but Hope's leg glowed blue, so one must have been cast.
Hope supposed this was more advanced magic than first years were taught.

A moment later Madam Pomfrey leaned back, replacing her wand once more as straightened.

"I could use a spell to hasten your healing," Madam Pomfrey informed her, "but I think it would be
better for you to recover on your own. Your leg is healing up nicely, and I'd rather not interfere with
the healing process if it can be helped."

Hope had to say that honestly hadn't been expecting some miraculous cure, even given that she was
now living in a world of magic.

"That's fine," she said as more of an afterthought, her mind drifting slightly.

"You won't be needing that brace anymore," Madam Pomfrey added.

"Really?" Hope asked in surprise, looking down at her leg.

"Yes, if you want to get the full use of your leg back," Madam Pomfrey said seriously.

Hope gave a mournful sigh. "Alright, then," she said, removing the annoying brace from her leg and
handing it to the Matron who placed it on an empty bed.

"Of course, I'll want you to come back every so often so that I can check to see that your leg is
healing the way it should be, if that's alright?" she inquired of the Potter.

"Fine," Hope muttered in an almost dejected manner, "I suppose that's better than having to be in
here all the time."

"I suppose so," Madam Pomfrey said, her lips twitching just slightly. "I'll be seeing you again soon,
"Yay," Hope said with as much enthusiasm as she could manage, but despite her attitude, she left the Hospital Wing in much higher spirits than she had entering, making her way down to the Library with difficulty to finish an essay. Something told her Ron was going to wait until the last minute to finish his, but that didn't mean that Hope had to do the same.

The Library was included in one of the few places that Hope actually knew how to find, though this meant a bit of backtracking since Hope hadn't really come up to this part of the castle before.

But, before long Hope found herself sitting at one of the worn tables, parchment before her, ink staining her fingers as she scrawled words across it, referencing two books on basic Transfiguration, trying her best to ignore the whispers that followed her everywhere she went in the castle. It was by far the most annoying thing about her year thus far.

The essay wasn't too difficult, considering the one that Snape had given them was probably going to take her all night, if she had to wager a guess.

She could tell that she was going to have an undying hatred for the subject as long as he taught it.

The essay took surprisingly little time, and soon Hope stoppered her inkwell and shut her books, replacing them back where they belonged. She glanced over to one of the tables, the one that was closer to the front than Hope's had been; she was still there.

The blonde hair gave her away, bound in a tight French braid that couldn't hide her face. Daphne Greengrass, Hope remembered her name was from the Sorting Ceremony, a Slytherin, but Hope didn't much care for disliking people based on their House (though many did not share the same sentiment, she knew well).

Daphne had come in the library around the same time as Hope, but now Hope could see that she hadn't had as much success as Hope had with finding a useful book for that Transfiguration, if the scowl marring her face was any indicator.

Hope looked at the book cradled against her side, then at the girl, then at the bookshelves. And then Hope made a decision that surprised many in the vicinity.

She took her book and walked slowly towards the table, dropping the book onto the table before the blonde, making her jump rather violently, startled blue eyes rising from the parchment to look at Hope.

Hope couldn't resist smiling, though it was halfway between apologetic at how she had startled her and amused at how she had responded to Hope dropping the book. "Sorry," she said, "just thought you'd want this for the Transfiguration essay."

Wide blue eyes stared up at her, stunned that Hope was even talking to her, before Daphne remembered her manners.

"Er…thanks," Daphne finally managed to say to the Gryffindor Metamorphmagi.

"No problem," Hope said in a slightly cheerful manner, pulling her bag a bit more up on her shoulders and gripping her cane under her hand, moving with a dignified limp –if that were even possible; Daphne suspected it might be– towards the entrance to the Library.

It hadn't occurred to either of them that that was the first instance of civility between a Gryffindor and a Slytherin in over a decade. And it certainly wouldn't be the last time the Gryffindor and the
Slytherin conversed.

Hope was barely around the corner into a second hallway when she had to blink rather suddenly when her feet were lifted from the ground and she found herself with her arms around George Weasley's neck and her legs around his waist. Amusement and embarrassment warred on her features as she tried to gain the function of her tongue once more.

"Weasley, are you this sweet to all the new girls?" she asked in a would-be-light voice, winking to Fred who sniggered behind his hand at his twin's antics.

"Just the pretty ones!" George informed her in an equally light voice, making her cheeks burn as pink as they had the last time he'd said something similar.

"Mr. Weasley! Miss Potter! What in the name of Merlin are you doing?!"

Three heads twisted to the right to see a stunned Professor McGonagall who was eyeing them all suspiciously. Putting James Potter's daughter with two pranksters was never a good idea.

"We're going on an adventure!" Fred said, striking a dramatic pose. "And the fair maiden is not permitted to walk, so we have brought this mighty steed to whisk her away!"

"I know you didn't just compare me to a horse, Freddie!"

"Oh, I think I did, Georgie!"

Hope couldn't help but burst out into peals of laughter at the combined antics of the twins and the expression colouring Professor McGonagall's face.
Pranks and Broomsticks

Professor McGonagall wasn't sure what she should have expected when she looked upon the three figures standing before her desk. Two were grinning shamelessly and one gave off an air of innocence that she doubted suited her.

Fred and George Weasley were covered in multicoloured paint, the same paint that had been smeared across Hope Potter's cheeks. It appeared that Hope had been the one to prank the pranksters and the boys had retaliated by taking some of the paint she had lobbed at them and smudged it across her face.

James would have been so proud of his daughter taking up the noble art of pranking, or so he had thought at the time.

Professor McGonagall's eyes narrowed as she scrutinized the trio.

"A prank war does not mean that you can cover a corridor with paint," she told them.

"In all fairness," Hope piped up, her face remarkably unrepentant under the paint, "it's not that much of the corridor."

Fred and George sniggered.

"Be that as it may, Miss Potter," Professor McGonagall said shrewdly, "you and your accomplices will still be cleaning it up until the corridor gleams."

"Accomplices?" Fred squawked. "We're innocent here, Professor! We were minding our own business—"

"A likely story, Mr. Weasley," Professor McGonagall remarked with an arched eyebrow. "As the saying goes, it takes two to tango."

Hope didn't bother hiding her snort. "Innocent?" she scoffed. "Doubtful."

"My dear Hope," George cried, raising a hand to his chest as though injured, "your words cut like knives!"

"I'm sure," Hope said dryly in return.

Professor McGonagall very nearly sighed at the antics of all three of her students. "Report to Mr. Filch's office. He will give you cleaning supplies." She took out her wand and siphoned off the paint they were currently wearing on their skin and clothing so that more paint wouldn't stain the floor as they cleaned up their mess.

Hope gave a jaunty wave as she left, limping after the two third years, and not ten minutes later the three could be found with mops and buckets and rags.

"Well done, Potter, didn't know you had it in you," Fred told her with an approving nod that made her laugh.

"Thank you so much for approving of my rebellious streak," she returned with a grin. "But you're lucky I didn't take a picture of the looks on your faces when all the paint landed on you two."

"Very devious," George complimented, "no wonder I liked you."
Hope turned away, stabbing the mop against a stubborn spot of paint in an effort to hide her blushing face.

George smirked at Fred who grinned in return. If only Hope knew that George was purposefully trying to make her blush fifty percent of the time they were together; it was kind of hilarious...though Fred would never admit that to the Potter heir, he doubted she would take kindly to it.

"Did you think I wasn't going to get even with you for last week?" Hope asked after a moment, once the stain had gone so that she could move to another spot in the empty hallway. "After that horrible shade of green that you turned my hair?" She gave them a rather baleful glare and both boys turned rather sheepish.

They had been trying to see if they could come up with something that couldn't be changed by a Metamorphmagus --unfortunately, they had not succeeded, and thus earned paint-bombs to their clothes and skin for their efforts.

"We were just testing out a new product," Fred said innocently.

"And now that we know it doesn't work on you," George continued.

"—it's back to the drawing board," they said together, causing Hope to slap her hand to her face so soundly that she left a red mark on her forehead.

"You're impossible!" she decided.

Both Weasleys gave cheery bows in return and all three glanced up from their work of cleaning at the sound of approaching feet to see Ron come around the corner.

He looked over his brothers for any trace of paint. "Did the paint not work?" he asked his friend, ignoring the offended looks his brothers gave him for apparently rooting for the other side, as it were.

"Oh, no, it worked," Hope said with a grin, "right up until Professor McGonagall found us chucking paint at each other."

Ron stared at her and then at his brothers, and then back to her. "I'm not sure I should even be surprised anymore," he said at long last.

"It's best not to be," Fred agreed.

"Though we do enjoy when we surprise you, dear little bro," George added with a grin.

"One day it's just going to be me and Ginny here," Ron told him sourly, "and then I won't have to put up with the pair of you."

"Oh, look, Georgie! I think Ronnie's getting annoyed with us," Fred said with a snigger.

"Nah, can't be," George disagreed, "we're too much fun...right, Hope?"

Three pairs of blue eyes fastened on Hope who had been dutifully staying out of the sibling conversation up to this point.

She raised her hands in surrender. "Don't you turn this on me! I've got nothing to do with this!"

Hope squeezed one of the rags over the bucket as she scrubbed at the last of the paint left behind by her sudden attack. Well, if there was one thing for certain that she could say it was that she had one-upped the Weasley Twins in the most glorious way. And she certainly held bragging rights for the
rest of time for doing just that.

And then she stood, humming softly as she did, lifting the bucket off the ground as she clutched her cane, rolling her eyes at how the Weasleys were still conversing.

Brothers…

Angelina Johnson could honestly say she had never met someone like Hope Potter in her whole life. No one had ever managed to prank Fred and George and get away with it. Though Angelina suspected that it might have had something to do with the pair being fond of anyone with a rebellious streak, and that included Hope.

She spent every other day in detention, it seemed, with Snape, and from the rumours Angelina had heard, Hope and Snape didn't get along too well.

But Angelina could also see that she was the first girl that George had ever shown any interest in, and was subsequently the only girl who mocked him.

Their relationship was half-way between strange and cute. Angelina wasn't sure if they really counted as friends with how they talked to each other, it could almost be considered flirting.

"Hand it over, Weasley!" Hope demanded, her cheeks bright pink.

"Not on your life, Potter!" George said with a wide grin.

Angelina wondered if they knew about the betting pool Gryffindor House had started. She and Fred were jointly betting on Hope's third year; it was a general consensus to not date until you could actually leave the grounds (now if only she could convince him to take her out to the Three Broomsticks for a Butterbeer…). Lee Jordan thought she could hold out until fourth year, but Angelina doubted that. Hope would know when she was caught, that she was sure of. Even if Hope was remarkably resilient, Angelina had noticed how her smile often met her eyes whenever Fred and George (though, generally only George) cracked a joke.

Currently, the pair was making quite a scene by George holding her book over his head—and he was already quite a bit taller than her—and she used her cane to elevate her upwards, but it didn't seem to be working, only serving to annoy Hope further. Angelina knew better than to take the pair seriously; it was obvious they thought of it as a game, much to the disgust of Ron.

She secretly believed the youngest Weasley boy to be a bit envious of how casual she was with the twins, but he never said a word on the matter. Ron saw her more than the twins, anyways, since she and Ron were two years behind them.

"If you give it to me, I'll tell you how I pranked you," Hope coaxed, her smile on the sly side. The newest prank was a bit spectacular in that she had actually managed to prank them without them having any knowledge of it until after it happened. For the whole day, their robes had changed colour sporadically, and each colour was more outrageous than the last. Hope had told Angelina that it was a rather simple spell, if Fred and George bothered to look for it.

The book was in her hands within seconds.

"—Later," she finished, the smile widening when the twins gave identical groans.

Ron snorted at her words, but he still raised his hand so that they could high-five.
"How does it feel to be played, boys?" Hope said, resting her hands on her hips.

Fred's pout was more pronounced as Angelina laughed with them.

"You two," Angelina called over to the only first-years that weren't scared of getting pranked for hanging out with them, "Your flying lessons start today, don't they?"

The mention of flying had an instantaneous effect; Ron grinned and Hope grimaced. Angelina was slightly surprised by Hope's response, as she had once had to clean the trophy room for a detention in second year (why she was in detention when she was generally so mild mannered, no one would ever discover) and the name James Potter was on a plaque for Quidditch Players of Winning Teams.

"Worried?" Lee guessed from where he sat with his legs looped under the stone bench, on which his crossed arms supported his head. It was a strange way to sit, but no one commented on it.

Hope laughed uneasily, shifting her weight uncomfortably as she did so. "It's just that I don't like making a fool of myself," Hope had to admit, "especially in the air, and especially in front of Malfoy."

It hadn't been hard to pick up the resentment between her and the Malfoy scion. The pair practically threw insults at each other when they passed the other in the hall (that resulted in both being put in detention for a few days by Professor McGonagall who hadn't been very impressed).

"Not making a fool of myself in general would be nice," she concluded as an afterthought, looking strangely wane, as if she was used to making a fool out of herself.

"I'm sure you'll do fine," Alicia Spinnet assured her, closing her book on her Charms essay. "Better than Lee or Fred and George; they tripped over thin air, if I recall correctly." Her dark eyes glinted as she smirked at the three males who started at what she had revealed.

"Don't tell them that, Alicia!" The twins wailed, appalled, but Hope cracked a grin and Ron burst out into laughter.

"Well, here's to hoping we don't do serious damage to ourselves," she muttered under her breath. "We'd better go, Ron," she added in a louder tone, "wouldn't want to be late."

Once they were out of earshot, Ron asked the question that was bugging him.

"Did you really prank Fred and George again?"

Hope snorted. "Yes, is that surprising?"

"Very," Ron admitted, staring at her with something akin to awe. "People don't generally try, seeing as they would never get away with it, let alone do it twice."

That seemed to amuse her, because the smile she tossed his way was very light-hearted, even as they strode across the lawn to the area opposite of the Slytherins. Draco Malfoy was quickly becoming one of the most irritating creatures she had ever had the unfortunate opportunity to meet, such as the instance when she took up residence beside a free broom.

"Perfect Potter finally shows up for class," he said with a distinct sneer.

"Class hasn't started yet, moron," Hope said coolly, "but I guess your education didn't cover telling time, did it?"
Malfoy's cheeks turned pink and he opened his mouth to retort as a few of the Gryffindors sniggered at the insult when Madame Hooch, the flying instructor blew her whistle, signalling the start of class.

When Hope had first caught sight of her, she had likened her to a hawk, and she wasn't wrong. With her grey hair and yellow eyes she looked far more stern-faced than Professor McGonagall did.

"Well, what are you all waiting for?" she demanded, the irritation seeping into her voice as if they should have already known what to do even before she spoke. "Everyone stand by a broomstick, Come on, hurry up."

Hope's gaze shifted downward to her broom. It didn't look very impressive, and she was certain that she didn't want to ride something that looked like it had been roughly taken from a tree. Hope had had a front seat when Fred and George had complained about how handicapping the school brooms were. Riding something that was clearly unstable was not in her top ten things to do before she died, but Hope sighed, dropping her cane to the grass as she did as instructed.

"Stick out your right hand," Madam Hooch continued as if she hadn't seen the many uneasy glances between her students, "and say 'up'!"

A chorus of "UP!"'s filled the air, and Hope was faintly startled when her broomstick shot into her hand instantly, but those that did were few in number. Some didn't even bother moving; maybe some people were just meant to keep their feet firmly on the ground.

She couldn't resist laughing, however, when Ron's smacked him in the face.

Once they'd all managed to get their brooms into their hands --some ended up just grabbing the broom from the ground once Madam Hooch turned her back--, their instructor began to teach them how to properly grip and mount the broom. She did allow herself a small amount of mirth when Malfoy was told he'd been flying incorrectly for years; karma's a bitch, isn't she?

"Now, when I blow my whistle, kick off the ground, hard," Madam Hooch ordered, glaring at them all. "Keep your brooms steady, rise a few feet and then come straight back down by leaning forward slightly. On my whistle--three--two--"

She didn't have time to blow her whistle when Neville accidentally pushed off the ground too soon. It was quite obvious that he was completely terrified, so Hope couldn't help but wonder if yelling at him was going to get him to comply.

Neville was shooting upwards much like a rock shot out of a volcano, at that height, Hope doubted he could hear anything but his own whimpers of fear.

"Come back, boy!" Madam Hooch yelled despite Hope's thoughts.

The yell, it seemed, could still penetrate his auditory cortex, because he gave a startled gasp and slipped from the broom to fall a good twenty feet to impact with the ground with a dull thud. Hope was sure she wasn't the only one that winced.

Their flying instructor was at his side in a moment as the Gryffindors watched anxiously and the Slytherins sniggered behind their hands. Hope listened intently for a few seconds, garnering that he'd broken his wrist a bit badly. That was never fun; Hope had that happen to her when she was nine, it made completing assignments a bit difficult.

"None of you is to move while I take this boy to the Hospital Wing!" Madam Hooch's glittering eyes surveyed them all as if trying to glare them into compliance. "You leave those brooms where they are or you'll be out of Hogwarts before you can say "Quidditch". Come on, dear."
Not two seconds after she and Neville were out of earshot did Draco Malfoy burst into laughter, cruel laughter, Hope thought with a frown. What kind of person laughs at another person's pain? But this was Malfoy she was talking about; every bone in his body was rude and ignorant.

"Did you see his face, the great lump?" He demanded through laughter as his fellows joined him. Slytherin really was a rather unpleasant lot, weren't they?

"Shut up, Malfoy," a voice snapped. Hope was almost surprised that it was Parvati Patil that had spoken; she had hardly heard her speak of anything that wasn't fashion-related.

Hope did her best to ignore the Slytherins, but she caught Daphne's eye and the girl rolled her eyes obviously to her. Clearly, she didn't approve of her classmates either. Hope's lips twitched in response.

"Look!"

This time, Hope did look, and instantly, her eyes narrowed into a glare; Malfoy was clutching Neville's Remembrall in his pale hand.

"It's that stupid thing Longbottom's gran sent him!" Malfoy jeered, lifting it up for all of them to see.

"Hand that over."

Hope's voice had taken on a quiet and a dangerous edge. The tone itself should have been a warning, but Malfoy it seemed was incapable of complying to warnings whether or not they were clear to see. It was times like these that Hope liked to fondly remember all those detentions she'd earned in Muggle school for her…explosive behaviour.

Maybe he hadn't heard her.

"I think I'll leave it somewhere up high," he decided with a nasty grin that didn't much suit the nice weather they were having today. "How about in a tree?"

"Hand it over!" she snarled, but Malfoy had already taken flight, hovering above a rather tall oak tree that Hope would have probably climbed if her leg hadn't been so badly damaged.

"Come and get it, Potter!"

The jibe was there, waiting--

"Or are you as slow in the air as you are on the ground?"

Hope schooled her usually expression-filled face into a calm mask as she threw her leg over the broom and pushed off from the ground with more force than she probably should have. She could feel the gust of wind hitting her face, rustling her hair, and swirling around her as she rose and instantly she knew flying would be one of her favourite pastimes; who didn't want to feel as if they were higher than the world?

"Hand it over," she repeated once again, her voice remarkably cool, "or I'll knock you to the ground and break your wrist while I'm at it."

"Oh, yeah?" Malfoy demanded, but his face was a little pale, because Hope was looking completely serious when she administered that threat to his well-being (though she was rather well-known for giving death threats and not going through with them). "Catch it, then, if you can!"
He really shouldn't have pressed his luck when Hope flew past him in the direction he had thrown the palm-sized ball. The ball was nearly invisible, but Hope could see the light glancing off it as it was flung through the air. She sped the broom between her legs forward, the noise around her blurring into nonsensical sounds. The world fell out around her as her focus sharpened; it was only her and that stupid clear ball of Neville's (he was going to owe her for this, she swore).

She ducked into a graceful dive, triumph colouring her face when she pulled up, the light orb clutched in her hand. That triumph faded rather abruptly, however, when she heard the yell of "HOPE POTTER!"

She opted for a single word response that she felt summed up the whole troublesome situation. "Shite."

The next day Hope was so tired that she and Ron almost didn't wake up at an adequate time due to the events of the previous night.

And it was all because of some botched midnight duel that she hadn't been much keen on to start with. By some miracle she'd managed to not be expelled for her actions the day before during the flying class—though she doubted one could really be expelled for a short fly—and even more miraculously had managed to land a spot on the Gryffindor Quidditch Team. Fred, George, Angelina, and Alicia had been impressed when they had heard the story from Ron—who had elaborated on several parts, she'd noticed but had been too lazy to bother correcting him.

The attention they had paid her made her cheeks pink. But today she could hardly keep her eyes open as she attempted to eat her breakfast, and ended up resting her head tiredly on Lee Jordan's shoulder.

"I am never doing that again," she decided resolutely in exhaustion, her voice low and quiet as she contemplated dumping the milk jug on Ron's head, since it was his ludicrous idea. "Worst idea you've ever come up with!"

"On the bright side," Ron continued over her, "you can't say Fred and George have ever done something like that before."

"What haven't we done?" a pair of nearly identical voices inquired of them, announcing the arrival of Ron's older brothers.

"Had a midnight rendezvous go south, so south, in fact, that you nearly get eaten by a three-headed dog," Hope said in a remarkable deadpan. Neville and Hermione had been with them at the time (not by their choice, of course) and seemed as though they never wanted to go out at night anytime soon; a wise course of action, Hope thought, given the first time they had done so, they had run into what appeared to be a Cerberus.

"Well, no," Fred admitted in agreement.

"But who would we have to meet in a midnight rendezvous?" George added, giving her another one of his winks.

She gave him, in return, one of her baleful stares. "One day, Weasley," she muttered under her breath, slapping both of her cheeks so she could wake up a bit more, "I am going to one-up you, just you wait."

"I look forward to it, Potter."
She smirked. "Oh, you do, do you?" Her smile was a bit on the sly side. "I would like to see you try."

"Don't say that!" Ron hissed, his voice halfway between humorous and annoyed. "Now he'll be even more insufferable!"

"Has anyone told you that your eyes are unbelievably beautiful?" George asked instead, ignoring their friends and smirking as her cheeks burned a bright red.

"I am going to kill you," she threatened mildly, standing up so that the height difference wasn't quite so pronounced. "And I bet your mother will agree with my reasoning."

"Oh, yeah?"

"Yeah."

The pair was leaning so close together that they were practically nose to nose, but, of course, they didn't notice this.

"If you two are quite finished with your flirting," Alicia added, giggling when the pair jumped back like they'd been burned. "Hope, Ron, don't you have class?"

"Oh!" The first years made identical noises of surprise and scrambled to collect their things, bidding them a hasty farewell and racing –and limping– off to class, cursing themselves for not keeping track of time.
The Toils of Trolls

Hope's bad day started on the thirty-first of October. She didn't much like Halloween for obvious reasons, since it was the day her parents were killed, but Ron made it worse with his big mouth.

"It's no wonder no one can stand her. She's a nightmare honestly."

Hope glared venomously at Ron who looked vaguely startled to be on the receiving end of such a look as Hermione barrelled past, tears pouring from her eyes.

"You have no tact whatsoever," Hope told him before moving as fast as she could with her limp after the bushy-haired brunette. This was rather difficult given that Hermione was rather fleet-footed even with a heavy bag of books.

"Hermione! Hermione, wait!" Hope called, almost losing her before finding her as she pushed her way into a lavatory.

Hope sighed as she followed after her rather belatedly. She peered cautiously inside, entering quietly at the sound of sobs coming from the only closed stall.

"Hermione?" she asked gently.

"G-go aw-aw-away!" a voice sobbed from beyond the door, but Hope didn't listen.

"I'm really sorry about what Ron said," Hope told her with an earnest tone that couldn't have been faked.

Hermione said nothing, the only sound that could be heard coming from her was her crying so Hope settled herself on the ground, waiting for Hermione to calm down. It wasn't as though Hope actually had anywhere to go; Charms had been their last class and there was another half an hour until the Halloween Feast.

"Are you still there?" Hermione asked in a small voice after a short while had commenced. Hope couldn't be sure if the feast had started yet or not.

"Still here," Hope said.

"W-Why?" Hermione hiccuped. "You don't even like me!"

Hope scowled in a bit of irritation. "I don't not like you, that would take too much work. I don't like Snape and Malfoy, they've got a category to themselves."

Hermione choked on a small laugh.

"I don't do well at having friends," Hope admitted, "I'm used to being alone, thinking about myself and all...having friends this year is a bit new to me and sometimes I don't really know how to deal with people."

Hermione said nothing, but Hope got the feeling that she was listening intently.

"You're so smart and clever that it's kind of intimidating," Hope told her.

"Sorry," Hermione said meekly.
Hope scoffed slightly. "Why apologize? There's nothing wrong with it, you just threw me through a loop, that's all."

"Oh." Hermione swallowed on the other side of the stall, slightly pleased at how Hope said there was nothing wrong with being so smart.

"I think I just fit in with boys better because I'm so troublesome," Hope said with a shrug. "girls are just crazy, especially the ones at my old school."

The ones at Hermione's school always made fun of her for her teeth and her smarts, always stealing her homework.

"I liked to freak them out by changing the colour of my hair every other day," Hope told her. Hermione could hear the grin in her voice. "They were all so scandalized."

A small giggle was released from Hermione's lips and following that was a short stint of silence.

"Did you want to go up to the feast?" Hope asked her.

"I-I think I just want to stay here," Hermione said, her words weak as she waited for Hope to get up and leave. She peered through the crack in the door, but Hope hadn't moved. "Aren't you going?"

Hope shrugged. "I don't really like celebrating the day my parents were killed," she said wryly.

It was almost easy to forget about Hope's parents when her name was so well-known to the general Wizarding public, but it was just as easy to remember who had to die in order for her to gain the title of Girl-Who-Lived.

"I'm sorry," Hermione said sincerely.

"It was a long time ago," Hope said with a sigh, leaning back so that she could feel the wall through her shirt, "I barely remember it...them...whatever..." Hope twisted the serpent ring on her finger. "So it looks like we're both going to be here for a bit...I could read you something, if you want."

Hermione blinked her eyes red from crying. She hadn't expected Hope to offer to read to her; it made her wonder what she would read.

"I guess," she said, listening to the sound of Hope riffling through her bag and the sound of parchment being flipping through.

"It began as an idea and slowly grew into something so much more," Hope read. "Broomstick travel is so tedious even to those of us that are in still in our youth. Morea, my love, prefers travel over earth than by air, as it is. Thus Flashing was born.

Flashing is a name for a new magick I have created which will be used in order to move from one place to another instantaneously. The act of moving from one destination to another will be so fast that it seems as though a flash of light has appeared."

Hermione rather thought what was being described was something similar to what the Muggles liked to call teleportation. Perhaps the book from which Hope was reading was describing the first attempt at such a magic.

"Morea fears I am spending too much time in my study working on this magic, however I believe it is well worth the effort, else I would not risk the wrath of my lovely wife," Hope read, amusement
lighting her voice as she read the words on the page. "It, like many magicks is controlled by mere thought. To wish is to be. I can only hope I succeed when I test my theory on the morrow. It would be a shame for my wife to be told her foolish husband twisted himself into nothing before our first anniversary..."

Ron sat alone at the table, sulking as he picked at his chicken, hardly eating anything, his stomach roiling.

"You look like you're going to be sick," a voice commented to his left and Ron looked up as one of his brother's plopped himself into the seat beside him. It was George; he was the kinder of the two.

"Where's Hope?" he added. "Shouldn't she be sitting with you?"

Ron frowned. "I may have said something about Hermione," he admitted.

George arched an eyebrow. "Oh? Something not very nice?"

"Yes," Ron said sullenly.

"So Hope went to comfort her and left you alone," George guessed. "Sounds like a fair trade, if you ask me."

Ron scowled slightly at his brother, but it wasn't as though he could deny the truth.

"You know when Ginny gets upset when she doesn't get to fly with us," George said, "and you say she can't because she's a girl?"

Ron nodded.

"And then Mum makes you (and us) apologize for upsetting her?"

"What're you getting at?" Ron asked.

"I'm saying that it might be best to apologize to the girl," George told him with a rather significant look that Ron was sure he'd picked up from their father.

"I guess it was rather mean," Ron had to concede, making George grin as he ruffled his hair, much to Ron's eternal annoyance, standing to move back towards where Fred and their Quidditch teammates and friends were sitting.

Ron was about to stand to do just that when he was quite distracted by someone, as was the whole Hall.

The distraction came in the form of Professor Quirrell, their Defence Against the Dark Arts professor who barrelled into the hall, nearly out of breath with a face so white and the turban that he normally wore perfectly straight over his head was nearly loose and almost falling off as he skidded to a stop before the Head Table.

"Troll," he choked out, hysteria evident in his voice, "in the dungeons! Thought you ought to know." And then the professor's eyes rolled back into his head as he fell forward to collapse on the ground, unmoving.

Ron knew very well what a troll was, as most Wizarding children did, given that if you were compared to one it meant that you were thought to be large and stupid, not at all endearing. Surely trolls were too stupid to make it into the castle, though? Weren't there protections against that?
Fear swirled in his stomach as chaos erupted around him, the fear spreading like wildfire across the Hall from the Slytherin table to the Gryffindor table and it took a bit of effort by the Headmaster to regain a semblance of order.

"Prefects," Professor Dumbledore called out into the silence, "lead your Houses back to the dormitories immediately!"

Then there was a scramble to comply to his words, resulting in four different Houses trying to leave the Great Hall at the same time, and by the time Ron had forced his way out of the hall Percy's voice had grown distant as he led the first years along with the rest of the House up to the Gryffindor Tower.

And then a thought occurred to him. Professor Quirrell had said that the troll was in the dungeons, and his and Hope's last class of the day had been on the first floor and he'd watched Hope take the first staircase down to the dungeons when she was following after Hermione…

Ron wanted dearly to smack his own forehead with his hand. The two probably had no idea there was even a troll in the dungeons! Oh, what should he do? Ron contemplated briefly before making a sudden decision to follow the first Hufflepuff he saw –remembering what Fred and George had said about the Hufflepuffs common room being in the lower parts of the castle– following them down as far as he dared before ducking into the first empty and dark corridor he could find. He was almost caught by an older Hufflepuff, only managing to evade at the last second.

He knew his way around the castle more now, given that he'd been walking around in it for nearly two months now, and he was almost certain that the girls' lavatory was down the hallway and to the left so he rushed forward, making for the room in question when he was forced to hide behind a suit of armor at the sound of footsteps heading his way.

His first thought was a prefect, but it was Snape, and instead of staying in the dungeons he had taken the first flight up to the third floor, however, Ron didn't have much time to think on this, becoming thoroughly distracted by the horrible stench filling the air that didn't bode well for Hope or Hermione (or even himself).

And that was when he saw it and Ron nearly gagged at the sight of the monstrously tall misshapen grey-skinned creature with a large club held in his hands.

Ron had never seen a troll before, but he was sure that that was exactly how it was supposed to look.

He floundered on what he should do before he was spurned into action upon the realization that the room that the troll had just wandered into was the girls' bathroom.

And then he didn't really have time to think as he ran down the corridor towards the room from which a loud scream had pierced the air.

It didn't take much to guess that the owner of the voice was Hermione Granger.

Why, oh, why did it have to be a troll?

The first thing he noticed when he entered into the room was that the troll had done a lot of destruction in a short amount of time.

Hermione Granger was attempting to make herself as small as possible, looking as though she would keel over any second, her robes covered in dust and ripped by shards of porcelain from the shattered sinks. The troll, on the other hand, wasn't stalling in its lumbering movements towards her.
There was movement from under the broken wooden pile that could have only been from what used to be the bathroom stalls. With difficulty a head of dark hair—though, this didn't mean much as Hope had a habit of changing her hair colour more than the average witch was willing to, so Ron thought it was better to memorize her face and voice than anything else—appeared as Hope forced her way halfway out of the pile.

"Distract it!" Hope called over to Ron, fortunately causing the troll to stop, but unfortunately its attention then shifted to Hope who turned as white as a sheet once she realized she was in its gaze.

"Oi, pea-brain!" Ron yelled on the fly, clearly not coming up with a very witty insult as he threw a metal pipe at the troll's shoulder. The troll didn't seem to notice the pipe, though it did hear Ron's voice.

That distraction gave Hope just enough time to pull herself fully out of the rubble to struggle into a standing position and limp badly around the troll to half-drag Hermione from the corner, trying to head for the door, but she was very resistant, staring at the troll in open-mouthed horror. That didn't really help their situation much, if you asked Hope.

"Come on, run!" Hope commanded, tugging harshly on Hermione's arm.

The yells echoing off the tile wall seemed to drive the troll insane as it twisted its head violently, quickening towards Ron, until Hope did something similarly insane: she had released Hermione and done a stumbling run and by some miracle had managed to link her arms around his neck. The downside: she'd accidentally shoved her wand up his nose; she imagined this was rather painful going by how it yelled, moving its body and club in such a way that Hope was sure it was going to be the end of her short life when Ron did something that she later swore she'd kiss him for.

He raised his wand and said: "Wingardium Leviosa!"

The club lifted from the troll's grip to hover in the air above its head before smashing into the skull of its owner with an ominous and sickening crack. Its eyes rolled up and its whole body collapsed, sending Hope sprawling and coughing, her whole body aching.

It was hard to say who was the most stunned, but Hope was sure she was the most in pain as she struggled to stand. The carnage was a haze of colour, blurring together so that Hope had to lean against the wall to remain stable, feeling very much like she'd gone through the wringer.

"Is it-dead?" Hermione asked haltingly as Hope attempted to steady her heartbeat.

"Doubtful," Hope gasped, "more likely it's knock-out."

Ron pulled Hope's wand from its nose making a disgusted sound as he wiped the bogies on the troll's trousers before handing it back to his friend. "Are you alright?"

"Let me catch my breath," Hope said in exhaustion, sliding down until she was sitting on the floor, pressing a hand to her heart in an effort to manually slow the frantic beats under her palm—this did little good—and Hope hoped that these incursions into her life weren't going to be constant, she didn't think her heart could handle the stress.

The Fates weren't really working in their favour it seemed, but then, she supposed, they probably had been making quite a racket with their yells and screams (this was including the troll, mind you, who was quite obnoxious with its noise). Somehow, Hope was a bit surprised that the professors hadn't shown up before then. Those moving staircases must not have been very cooperative.

Hope blinked thickly a few times, her vision clearing enough to see that Professor McGonagall was
the angriest she had ever seen her, but Hope wasn't too perturbed; they hadn't done anything wrong, really. Hermione and Hope had been minding their own business when the troll had wandered in and Ron was the unsung hero.

"What on earth were you thinking of?!" she demanded, the fury in her voice echoing in the silence so loudly that her tone was nearly a shriek. "You're lucky you weren't killed. Why aren't you in your dormitory?"

"I was thinking," Hope said suddenly as Hermione opened her mouth to speak, "that if Ron hadn't come looking for Hermione and me, we'd both probably be dead." Her tired eyes were focused rather blearily on the ground, and it was then that she noticed the rip of Snape's robes, barely exposing the obvious bite mark on his leg.

"And why would you and Miss Granger even be here in the first place?" Snape asked snidely, his lip curling into a sneer.

Hope shifted her gaze upwards to glare at the man who had had it out for her since day one. Was he really going to blame this on her and Hermione? "I believe it would be something along the lines of recovering composure, sir." Her voice had grown as cold as it had when she was addressing Malfoy only two days previously. She wondered why Snape flinched at it, though, that was a bit curious by itself.

Ron looked vaguely uncomfortable and he murmured a quick and belated apology to the brunette, who, though still in a bit of shock, was grateful all the same.

Professor McGonagall seemed to have calmed down somewhat, though she appeared to still be heavily annoyed with them. Again, Hope felt the need to mentally point out that they really hadn't done anything wrong, not that their teachers could read her mind...or could they? That would be something interesting to look up. "Well, I still say you were lucky, but not many first-years could take on a full-grown mountain troll. You each win Gryffindor House five points. Professor Dumbledore will be informed of this. You may go."

Ron helped Hope into a standing position, and after a quick search found her cane, and the three set off towards the common room. No words were spoken between the three as they stood before the Fat Lady. The awkward silence settled down on them.

"So," Hope said quietly, "is this the part where we hug and make up?"

They both smiled as Hope gave the password and entered the room, following her after a second had passed. By then Hope had already been swept away by one of her Quidditch teammates, Angelina Johnson who was inspecting her face closely. "Ah, hell, what have been doing to yourself? George, keep an eye on her, I'm going to grab some things."

"I got it, Ang!"

Hope's cheeks filled with colour as she was suddenly lifted over the older boy's shoulder much like a fire-fighter. "Hey-hey-hey! What're you doing?! Put me down!"

Ron snickered at her predicament and even an amused smile spread across Hermione's face.

"George! Hey! You're not helping!"

Before Ron or Hermione even had time to blink, George had practically chained her to Angelina's vacated armchair.
"Alright, Ron?" Fred called from the couch, glancing quickly over the boy as if searching for injuries, but it seemed that Hope was the one most prone to injuries, and thus, while Ron and Hermione had escaped the troll attack unscathed, Hope looked much like she had gone face first through a window. The cuts to her face were quite extensive, Hermione couldn't help but wonder why she hadn't been sent to the hospital wing, but then, this was Hope she was talking about. The only times where she hadn't gone voluntarily to see Madam Pomfrey occurred when she was forcibly carried there by either of the twins—who were consequently the only ones strong enough to carry her and ignore the derogatory comments spewing from her mouth at the exact same time.

"Fine," Ron said, slumping tiredly into the empty seat beside him. "How does a troll get into Hogwarts, anyways?"

"Well," Hermione spoke, her voice quiet from her encounter with the troll, "there are supposed to be enchantments that protect the entire school, hiding it from prying eyes."

"It's protected by blood wards."

Three pairs of eyes stared her and Fred snorted. George was smushing her cheeks in his hands where she wasn't cut. He seemed to be trying his hardest to annoy her, if you asked Hermione.

"George..." Hope's eyebrow twitched slightly.

He grinned.

She pulled his hands from her face (Hermione noticed George didn't let her hands go, his grip a little tight; he must have been worried about her) and turned her attention on Ron. "Blood warding is one of the oldest forms of magic in the world, the protection they offer is...substantial," she explained as the stares turned on her, a pale, barely noticeable flush dusting her cheeks. "My house has blood wards around it, but they're a bit different. Blood wards are the highest protection you can get; it's why Curse-Breakers have such a hard time breaking into tombs. Only an exceptionally powerful wizard could rip a hole in that kind of barrier."

"So," Fred continued, surprisingly subdued, "someone inside the school let it in, that's what you're saying, isn't it?"

"It does seem very likely," Hope admitted, her eyes locking with Ron's for less than a second, and in that instant he was sure he'd read her mind.

The Gringotts break-in that had occurred on her birthday was a source of intrigue. Hope had said that the day Hagrid had taken her to Gringotts; he had removed something from a Vault 713, a small package. Whatever it was, it was worth something to someone if they went so far as to attempt to burglarize Gringotts. "Hogwarts business" was what she'd said he called it, so did that mean—? His eyes widened slightly and hers twinkled in return.

It took him a bit, but he was still a bit smarter than the average student. He noticed no one else had been able to theorize as far ahead as Hope, but then, no one had her inquisitive nature.

"Ow!"

Angelina had caught her off guard as she pressed what must have been the magical equivalent of Hydrogen Peroxide against the cuts on her face. "Holy Hell!"

"Oh, stop whining!" Angelina admonished the girl, but grinning all the same. "Don't be such a baby!"
Hope couldn't help but pout, making Ron and Hermione laugh, and they weren't the only ones.
New Friendships

The first thing that Hermione had learned about Hope Potter was that she was very easy-going. She was very amicable with her Quidditch mates, some on the level of how she spoke with her or Ron. Ron's brothers in particular, she'd noticed quite early on. The gentle teasing that occurred between her and Fred and George was a bit surprising; she hadn't thought they'd be people she would be friends with.

Hermione could tell when they were off on a prank, because Hope ran point, distracting Percy by picking his brain about the limitations of the metal a needle could transform into, or perhaps even why plants that were considered muggle weren't used in potions? They were really good questions (things that Hermione was curious about as well), and somehow the prefect didn't see through her misdirection because of how honest her face was.

The second thing that Hermione noticed was that Hope went up to the Hospital Wing every week to see Madam Pomfrey so that the older woman could make sure that her leg was healing up properly and that Hope wasn't overstressing the still-recovering muscle. Hermione hadn't noticed before how sometimes Hope would wince when she walked in a certain way.

But nothing got past Madam Pomfrey who seemed to know instantly when Hope had been walking around too much.

And this time Hermione joined Hope and Ron in the Hospital Wing, watching in slight apprehension as Madame Pomfrey tapped her new friend's leg in several places, the wand tip glowing slightly, illuminating her bare skin strangely. The scar on her leg was a bit on the obvious side, with a jagged dark pink line marring across the front of her shin, but when Hermione blinked, she thought it looked a bit smaller and less cringe-worthy. Madame Pomfrey winked surreptitiously to Hermione, noticing how she had seen what she had done, before falling into a focused mask.

"Alright, now I want you to stand on your leg for as long as possible," Madame Pomfrey said, wanting to see if there was a change since the last time Hope had come in, to the girl who wrinkled her nose in distaste, but stood all the same, balancing with difficulty on her damaged leg. Ron held onto her cloak –since it was made of a heavier material than her uniform– and bag for her, being surprisingly patient.

It seemed her initial assessment of the youngest Weasley wasn't quite correct, but that didn't surprise Hermione, as Ron had been friends with Hope since they shared a compartment on the Hogwarts Express on September first.

The seconds ticked by slowly as Hope's countenance faltered and exhaustion lined her fair face, clearly not much liking this exercise. Hermione hadn't even realized she was holding her breath until her chest began to hurt.

"I've got this," Hope grumbled to herself, probably not wanting Hermione or Ron to hear, so they pretended they hadn't, before pitching forward rather suddenly so that Hermione and Ron had to grab her elbows to keep her from face-planting into the floor. "Okay, maybe not," she admitted once they'd hoisted her back onto the infirmary bed, slightly breathless.

"Not quite, Miss Potter," Madame Pomfrey informed her with a curt voice that was similar to Professor McGonagall's in several ways, "but you are making much progress, faster than I could have ever imagined, perhaps by the end of next year you will be completely healed, if you're lucky."
"I can be very lucky," Hope said optimistically, her grin hopeful, her eyes bright.

Ron tried his best not to snort, but it came out strangled; Hope already had the worst luck than anyone he'd ever met. He doubted she would be lucky in this regard, but he wasn't going to say that to her face.

Though it didn't matter much, as Hope shot him a filthy look, interpreting the hidden snort accurately, looping her bag over her shoulder and stalking weakly out of the hospital doors to ram right into another body, sending her tumbling backwards gripped her face and groaning from the contact. "Aw, dammit, Weasley!"

Fred laughed from where he and George and Lee happened to have been passing on their way to class (or skipping, you could never really be sure with those three).

"It's not my fault you fall over yourself whenever I'm around," he replied with a grin that made his brother and friend snigger behind him.

"Oh, really?" Hope replied, arching an eyebrow, faintly amused at his antics, as she always was concerning the Pranksters of Hogwarts. "That's some delusion you're having, Fred."

"How'd you know I was Fred?" the twin asked in surprise; even their mother got it wrong sometimes, but Hope was on a roll, no slip ups yet.

Hope's eyes twinkled as she grinned up at him. "I solemnly swear I'm up to no good."

George gaped at her. "How d'you know about that?"

Now all three first years were staring at them oddly. "Know about what?" they all asked with varying degrees of scepticism and confusion.

"Oh, er, nothing!" Fred said quickly, waving his hands frantically.

"Gotta run!" George added just as feverishly.

"Forget about that," Lee added.

And then the two twins dragged Lee away and beat a hasty retreat, leaving three pairs of eyes blinking in confusion.

"Are they always that odd?" Hermione voiced after a few moments.

"Pretty much," Ron said tiredly, "though they seem to have taken Hope as a personal challenge."

She rolled her eyes at them. "Oh, don't worry, they just appreciate my tenacity for trouble."

"I don't think that's a good thing," Hermione said slowly, but Ron just laughed and shook his head.

"Just go with it. She's not going to change anytime soon," he advised. "Hey, Hope! Wait up!"

"Time and tide waits for no woman, er, or man!" Hope called over her shoulder. "And neither does our next class!" She added with a quick glance to her watch.

"Oh!" Hermione quickened her pace to catch up them, determined not to lose her friends so soon after gaining them.
"I think I'd prefer a staff."

"I'd still fancy a wand."

Professor Filius Flitwick had heard many a strange conversations during his tenure as Charms professor at Hogwarts, but this topic was one he was certain he had never come across; whether a staff was better to use for spellwork or a wand was.

And it was even stranger when one knew that this was a first year class and a conversation between Hope Potter, Ron Weasley, and Hermione Granger.

"Merlin had a staff," Hermione offered helpfully.

"Yeah, but where're you going to stuff it when you're not using it?" Ron demanded, his forehead creasing slightly as he raised his wand, incanting the spell that they had been learning in class."Lumos!"

The tip of his wand lit briefly before the light stuttered and faded. Ron, predictably, scowled at the wand that had once belonged to his brother.

"You'd just shrink it and shove it in your pocket." Hope replied, rather unconcerned as she tried her hand at the spell, only to have her own light flicker out as her attention wavered and she caught sight of her short-statured professor. "Professor Flitwick! Can you help us?"

"Having trouble with your charm, Miss Potter?" Professor Flitwick asked, bouncing forward on his feet.

"We were wondering if it's better to use a magic staff or a magic wand," Hermione said, leaning around Hope to ask the question.

"Hm," the small professor hummed thoughtfully. "I can't quite be certain."

Ron and Hope groaned, clearly the two opposing sides of the argument, whilst Hermione seemed to be the voice of reason.

"It is true that staffs fell out of favour in the twelfth century," he continued, gaining their interest once more, "and there is some debate as to whether the wand is truly stronger than the staff, but I'm sure you'd find that it is the caster of spells that makes all the difference."

"Cool," Hope said, before her eyes drifted towards the wall and she raised a hand to her mouth in surprise. "Oops..."

Professor Flitwick turned around to stare. Hope hadn't quite been paying attention where her wand was pointing as he had explained this and had caused what appeared to be a poplar tree to sprout from the floor, its white branches spreading outwards.

The Charms professor turned back to Hope whose face had enflamed, turning her hair a bright ginger.

"Sorry," she said apologetically as Ron sniggered beside her and Hermione attempted to silence her own giggles.

"Perhaps it would be best to be wary of where you are pointing your wand, Miss Potter," Professor Flitwick suggested.
"Yes, sir," Hope said a bit meekly.

He turned away, causing the poplar tree to vanish with a wave of his wand, causing a chatter from his students.

"Back to your spells," he said, "anyone who doesn't manage to light their wand once will have to write a three foot easy on the benefits of such a spell."

There was a scramble by his students to light their wands before the end of class five minutes later.

"Alright, forget about the whole staff-wand thing," Hope said with a careless wave of her hand, a bright smile worming its way onto her lips as she grinned at her friends. "You won't believe what I found last night!"

"When you snuck out of the dormitory again?" Hermione asked, straightening her bag over her shoulders as they walked through the corridor, keeping their voices slightly low so others would have to try a bit harder to be heard.

"I regret nothing," Hope said, her nose high in the air before grinning once more, "don't you want to hear about what I found?"

"Is it a secret room?" Ron asked, screwing up his face slightly in thought.

"No," Hope told him, "it was a talking suit of armor!"

"But none of the suits of armor can talk!" Hermione said, aghast.

"This one can," Hope said, "and he can tell riddles! C'mon, I'll show you!" Hope grabbed Hermione's wrist and began dragging her through the left fork and Hermione grabbed Ron's elbow so he wouldn't be left behind (though the chances of that were rather low, especially when one considered how slow she was with that limp of hers).

They didn't travel very far before stopping in front of the first suit of armor that Hermione and Ron had seen in the hall.

"Sir Michael Richmond," Hope introduced, waving a hand towards the armor, "Hermione Granger and Ron Weasley."

"A pleasure," the words were spoken in a rustic tongue and both Ron and Hermione jumped.

"Bloody hell!" Ron said.

"Not quite," the armor said, clearly amused by his reaction, "if only you'd been in my presence during a full moon."

Hermione goggled and Ron took a step back. "You're a werewolf!"

"Was," Hope corrected, "you can't really transform without a body…isn't that right, Michael?"

"Indeed, Milady," the armor said. "Did you return for another bout of riddles?"

"Maybe," Hope wheedled.

"What comes once in a minute, twice in a moment, and never in a thousand years?"

"The letter M," Ron piped up, moving forward cautiously.
"What fastens two people, yet touches only one?"

"A wedding ring," Hermione said, knowing that one from a book she'd once read.

"When one does not know what it is, then it is something; but when one knows what it is, then it is nothing," the suit of armour said.

Hope frowned, opened her mouth briefly, but then shut it just as quickly. "I don't know this one."

"It is a riddle," the armor informed her.

"How typical," Hope said dryly, before turning back to her two friends. "Cool, huh? When can you actually have a conversation with a suit of armor?"

Ron and Hermione had to concede to her there, though Ron thought it was a little strange that the armor had called her 'milady' (even if she was the heir to a Noble and Most Ancient House). Perhaps he was familiar with her family?

But Ron didn't have the chance to ask her before they headed out towards Great Hall for dinner.

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"I've got this, Oliver, thanks," Hope told the older boy with a bit of a dry tone.

Oliver Wood was the Captain of the Gryffindor Quidditch Team as Hope had learned last week after she had been dragged away from flying lessons by Professor McGonagall. He was a fifth year and built more strongly than Hope could ever dream of being.

"Make sure you get some extra sleep tonight," he was warning her.

"Yeah, yeah," Hope said, barely managing to resist yawning in front of him as he disappeared up the stairs that led up to the boys' dormitory.

"He is such a worrywart!" she complained flopping back onto the couch, pulling her potions essay towards once more. She was halfway done, Hermione was nearly finished beside her, but Ron had barely started his and he was already dozing in the armchair.

"I suppose it's because it's your first game?" Hermione suggested; sports weren't really her forte.

Hope grumbled under her breath, releasing a short swear when a ginger head seemed to pop out of nowhere; Hermione glared at her.

"George!" she growled in near-aggravation as his antics had nearly upended her inkwell and would have consequently ruined the essay she had worked so hard on. "You complete and utter—"

"Handsome prat?" George offered with a wide grin.

"I dunno whatever gave you that delusion," Hope told him stoutly and Hermione hid her giggles behind her book. "I'm busy, you know, unless you know the best way to cut a sopophorous bean…"

"No, you're doing it wrong, you've got to crush it with the flat side of the blade."

"Eh?" Hope gaped at him, startled that he was actually offering some help. "But it says cut!" she said, stabbing a finger at her potions book before shoving it under his nose.

Hermione generally didn't pay attention much to the banter (though she would more closely relate it to flirting, but she opted to not say anything) that was common place between Hope Potter and
George Weasley, but since this one was about a school subject, she listened in.

"Well, I'm telling you to crush it," George responded in amusement, propping his elbow on the back of the couch and leaning his cheek into his fist surveying the person that brought his cheekiness and joking nature to the surface in every conversation they held. "More juice comes out if you crush it."

"You're having me on," Hope decided.

"Would I lie?"

That comment earned him a rather unconvinced look in return. "Do you want an honest answer to that?" she drawled out.

George rolled his eyes. "You got your potions supplies?" he asked a brief second before riffling through her bag to pull out her silver blade and two sopophorous beans. "Alright, cutting..." He showed her a difficult time of cutting the bean which released only a small amount of juice, before crushing the second one, releasing a great deal more juice.

"Amazing!" Hermione breathed in surprise, scrawling it into the margin of her potion's revision (having completed the essay while Hope and George were talking).

"And you came up with this all by yourself, did you?" Hope asked the third-year dubiously, canting an eyebrow at him.

"Potter, must you wound me so?" George asked her in a dramatic manner. "You know I never do anything alone! I've got the other half of my soul!" Fred, who must have been half-listening to their conversation from where he was sitting across the common room with Lee, Angelina, and Alicia winked at her unamused stare.

"Of course you do," Hope sighed, rubbing at her eyes to keep the sleep at bay as she turned her eyes back to the paper before her. "You're not going to go away, are you?" she said after a moment.

"You're catching on, Potter," George said with a grin.

"Or maybe you're just predictable," Hope fired back.

Hermione just sat back and watched, brown eyes flicking from one to the other; it was like watching a tennis match. She didn't think she'd seen anyone act the way those two did, and she still wasn't quite sure what to make of it.

If you asked her, George had a bit of a crush on Hope who would've had the same on George if she wasn't in such a muddle of confusion about her feelings.

Hope did not sleep well that night, as it was on the eve of her first Quidditch match, and her worries were clinging to her heart with razor sharp claws and grip that could not be shaken free. What if she didn't catch the snitch? What if she disappointed her team? What if she disappointed Professor McGonagall? What if... What if... There were so many different fears fluttering inside of her.

And then there was something else entirely bothering her, and it had nothing to do with the Quidditch match that would soon be taking place.

"Look beyond."

Those words echoed in her ears like a dull bell that tolled for hours on end. She didn't understand
them at all. She hated not understanding things.

"Analyze yourself, Miss Potter, look beyond the shell and gaze within to who you truly are." Those were the words of the Sorting Hat, but she had a feeling that they weren't his. She opened her eyes, moving so that she was flat on her back on the bed, staring above her with a blank expression, before twisting on the mattress as if searching for the perfect spot to lie, but there wasn't one.

Look beyond…did it mean to see past disguises? Or perhaps to not take things for granted? Even her speculations sounded weak and feeble in her mind, and what was that jibe about her grandfather, anyways?

"Your grandfather may not be pleased, Miss Potter, but I will be sending you to…GRYFFINDOR!"

Hope's cheeks puffed out like a chipmunk's, filled with air that she expelled silently in the quiet.

Finally, she couldn't stand it, and she threw her covers from her body and limped painfully down the stairs to the common room. She was a little surprised to find that it wasn't completely empty.

Neville Longbottom had found himself plagued by persisting nightmares, and, feeling trapped in his dorm, had made his way down the stairs to sit on the window seat. The peace and quiet seemed deafening; he couldn't stand it about as much as he couldn't stand his nightmares. He was so wrapped up in his thoughts that he jumped rather wildly when a soft voice said, "Do you mind if I sit?"

"Sorry," Hope apologized, when he twisted violently towards her, "I didn't mean to scare you." Her lips twitched slightly.

It was strange to see the Girl-Who-Lived out of the school uniform, that was the first thing he thought. Rather unlike him, her pyjamas were mismatched with loose blue chequered bottoms that were so long they dragged on the floor and ratty shirt that hung loosely on her frame. The moonlight crossed her face, painting her hair with stardust and her cheeks with a silver blush.

It was equally strange to see her alone, but this could hardly be surprising, considering how late it was. Still, it was rare to see her out of the company of Ron or Hermione (the trio was practically inseparable these days) or the Weasley Twins who had taken a keen interest in her soon after she had arrived. Neville had opted to stay out of the betting pool concerning her and George.

He wouldn't have imagined that she was the type of person that would be awake at odd hours of the night or even be someone that would talk to him.

"Er…it's fine," he said a bit breathlessly from his embarrassment, "yeah, sit…I mean, if you want to."

Her smile was a bit on the indulgent side, it reminded him a little of his Gran.

"Nightmare or can't sleep?" she inquired, brushing a lock of her hair behind her ear. The lightning bolt scar on her forehead seemed to gleam in the darkness, clear as day against her forehead.

"Nightmare," he admitted.

Hope nodded in understanding. "I am no stranger to those." Neville felt grateful that she didn't ask him what it was about.

"You're Frank and Alice Longbottom's son, aren't you?" she asked, feeling like she already knew the answer but she thought it was best to ask anyways.
Neville's whole body went cold and his heart dropped into his stomach as his head flashed up, his eyes meeting hers. Her eyes were dark and sombre.

She had never been in the situation he had, but she too had grown up without a parent's guiding hand, and he'd heard stories about the muggle family she'd been raised by—the mother's sister's family, he was sure—like how her cousin had pushed her in front of a car (he didn't know what that was, but from Dean, he'd gathered that it was an object that could move at fast speeds) and caused her leg to be the way it was. He wasn't sure who between the two of them got the worst deal.

"I read about the Lestrange Trial in the *Rise and Fall of the Dark Arts,*" Hope said quietly. "I'm sorry about what happened to your parents."

Neville had never heard someone sound so completely downtrodden concerning his parents.

"Alice was my godmother, did you know that?" she asked out of the blue. "I only just found out when I was at Gringotts a few months back, they told me what happened to her and her husband."

Neville didn't say anything to that. What could he?

"Do you visit them often?" she asked.

"Every Christmas," he said, equally as quietly.

"Would you…" her voice faded slightly as her indecision, before it faintly revived, "next time you see them, would you tell them that I say hi?"

Tears pricked Neville's eyes as she asked that question.

"Why?"

"Why not?" Hope asked unperturbed, making Neville stare at her. It was times like these that he had to remind himself that Hope had been raised by muggles and as such viewed the world a bit differently.

"They…" His throat closed up, and he couldn't seem to force the words from his mouth.

"They won't understand?" Hope guessed in a wane manner. "Maybe they do, maybe they don't, but it's the thought that counts, Neville. What if they can hear and can understand but just can't speak or move in the correct way? Wouldn't you like to tell them things, anyways?"

Neville bit the inside of his mouth, but she wasn't wrong. Maybe he would try talking more next time, they might like that.

"Goodnight, Neville."

"G-goodnight!" he called after her quickly, watching as she used the furniture to help her to the stairway that led to the girl's dorms. "Good luck tomorrow!"

She just waved a casual hand airily, disappearing upstairs and leaving Neville to his thoughts.
The next morning Hope was a bundle of nerves and her hair was such a pale blonde that it was nearly white, almost matching the colour of her cheeks, while her green eyes had been leached of most of their colour so that they were a pale fern shade.

In short, Ron thought, she looked like a mere gust of wind would blow her over, which sounded a bit appropriate description, given that she would be taking to the air soon.

"Hope," Hermione said gently, tapping a nail lightly against the wood table. "Have you eaten anything?" She knew that she hadn't, but she asked anyways, more to get Hope to talk than anything else.

"I don't want anything," Hope said, her fork pushing the eggs around on her plate.

"Just a bit of toast," Hermione suggested.

"I'm not hungry," Hope said, dropping her fork onto the plate with disinterest.

"You'd probably just puke it up on the pitch," Ron added, earning him a glare from Hermione. "What? It'll probably happen!"

His words did nothing to calm her nerves and Hope's grip on her new broom tightened. It was the newest model, a Nimbus Two-Thousand that had been given to her by Professor McGonagall upon her making the Gryffindor Quidditch Team, but Hope had never played on it during an actual match. What if she screwed up?

The beaded strand of her hair (today red and blue for some strange reason) swung back and forth like a pendulum.

It seemed like an age had passed before Fred said, "We should probably head out," and Hope, following her teammates, filed out of the room with Hope moving at a much more leisure pace than her companions.

The only thing she could hear was the blood rushing past her ears.

"Nervous?" an all-too-familiar voice asked and Hope didn't even need to glance up to know that it was George.

"No," she said automatically, to which he simply raised his eyebrow at her.

"Maybe a little," she conceded.

The other eyebrow arched.

"Fine, a lot," Hope sulked slightly at being caught out.

"Don't worry," he said bracingly, "everyone gets nervous."

Hope released a choked laugh. "Did you?"

"My first game? Definitely," George said, wrinkling his nose slightly. "I don't remember much of it."

"Why's that?" Hope asked with curiosity.
"I mistimed with my bat and completely missed the Bludger," George admitted, "got myself knocked out of the air and unconscious in seconds."

This did not help Hope in calming herself down.

"On the upside," he continued, "I never made that mistake again."

He winked at her and a faint flush appeared on her cheeks. "Just stay out of trouble and you'll be fine."

She threw him an unimpressed look. "Sorry, I've gone these past three months thinking whenever people talk about 'Trouble' they were talking about you."

"Touché," he said in reply as the three Chasers and one Beater in front of them tried very hard not to laugh so that they wouldn't give away that they were listening, but it didn't really work very for them and Hope settled on glaring daggers at their backs.

But they still sped up their walk until they were in the changing rooms of the Quidditch Pitch and Hope was very nearly left behind, much to Hope's irritation.

When they were all settled in the locker room, Oliver began his pep talk for the game, which Hope had been well aware of weeks in advance as her teammates had seen fit to inform her of it on several separate occasions as well as including the warning of "try not to fall asleep when he's in the middle of it, it really irritates him."

Hope wasn't the only one who looked tired, though. Katie Bell, the Chaser that was a year behind Angelina and Alicia was rubbing furiously at her eyes while the two other girls blinked dazedly and the Weasley twins looked on, staring slightly blankly.

Hope was almost certain they would come around once Oliver started talking or once they had to head out onto the field.

It seemed as though a certain length of time had passed before Oliver even began his speech and Hope swore that she almost fell asleep right there, only to snap to attention at the sound of his voice.

"Okay, men," he started.

"And women," Angelina felt the need to interject.

"And women," Oliver had to agree. "This is it."

"The big one," Fred added cheerfully.

"The one we've all been waiting for," George added in a similar manner.

"We know Oliver's speech by heart," Fred informed the green-eyed girl who tried hard to contain her sniggers but failed, so she opted to hide them behind her hand.

"Shut up, you two," Oliver said in a wane voice that clearly said he had spent far too much time trying to rein the twins in than doing anything else during Quidditch practices. "This is the best team Gryffindor's had in years. We're going to win. I know it."

The way he was glaring at them was enough to threaten bodily harm if they lost which Hope was almost certain he might do if such an occurrence came into play.

"Right," Oliver said, practically vibrating with excitement (about as much as her heart was throbbing
in her chest). "It's time. Good luck, all of you." He gave Hope a rather significant look that did not help Hope as she dropped her cane to the ground and looped her broom over her shoulders, and expelling a long breath, a bit more of the blonde colour coming back to her hair so that it didn't look nearly as much like it was off-white.

And then she took a step out into the bright sunlight after Fred and George. At first, all she could hear was the sound of cheering that echoed around the pitch from all sides, but when Hope squinted her eyes, the world around her cleared and she could make everything out as her eyes adjusted to the brightness.

The fourteen players circled around Madam Hooch and Hope found herself opposite the Slytherin Seeker, Terence Higgs. Oliver had said that the Seeker was a pretty decent player—as opposed to the rest of his teammates—, typically playing by the rules more often than not, but he was also very good.

Both Seekers narrowed their eyes at each other, sizing one another up. Hope imagined she didn't look like much, but obviously smaller packages packed a bigger punch.

"Mount your brooms, please," Madam Hooch called out and the fourteen players did as asked and only after they had done so did she release a short and loud whistle that began the game as all the players kicked off of the ground and the balls were released.

The next few minutes passed in a blur to her, but this mostly had to do with the fact that Hope was feverishly searching for a golden ball the size of a walnut, the Golden Snitch.

Even so, she had to say that she liked the Potter for President sheet that was fluttering in the wind; she was going to have to thank Dean later for that; it was really a well-painted image of a lion, and Hermione's spell—it must have been—made it even better. The best part, she had to admit, though, was Lee's commentary. He never failed to make her laugh, much like his friends.

"Looks like Hope Potter doesn't have much to do but duck those nasty Bludgers! You lads be jealous—she winked at me this morning!" Laughter bubbled from her lips at that. She had almost been expecting this kind of behaviour after how he'd been buttering up to each of the Chasers since the game had begun.

"JORDAN!" Unfortunately, Professor McGonagall didn't seem to appreciate it as much as Hope or many of the other Houses who clearly thought the dark-skinned Gryffindor was hilarious, if the loud laughter was any indicator.

"Sorry, Professor," Lee apologized swiftly, not meaning it in the slightest, "just telling it like it is!"

Hope rolled her eyes in midair, before swiftly dodging a well-placed Bludger, luckily Fred was around to wing it in the opposite direction, aiming the furiously rocketing ball in the direction of Marcus Flint, though Hope wasn't sure if it made contact with the Slytherin.

"Alright there, Hope?" he called over the wind.

Hope opened her mouth to say something in reply when a Quaffle hit her hard in her chest. It wasn't hard enough to break bones or knock her out of the air, but enough that she noticeably had the wind knocked out of her and had to cling to the shaft of her broom in order to stay on.

"A cruel barrage of a Bludger and Quaffle nearly unseats the Gryffindor Seeker, but, wait, was that the Snitch?"

The Quaffle, though it had recently been thrown by Slytherin, was back in Slytherin's possession once more, only to be dropped at Lee's exclamation.
Hope's eyes quickly scanned the surrounding area, catching it in the corner of her eye. A beaming grin spread across her face as she directed her broom downwards, bumping her shoulders into Slytherin Seeker Terence Higgs in an aggressive movement. She probably could've –and would've– done more if the keeper hadn't blocked her, sending her spinning off course, forcing her to lay flat against her broom. After it had stabilized, she noticed –to her annoyance– that the Snitch had disappeared once more.

"Figures," she grumbled under her breath, adding in a few choice swear words that would've had Petunia washing out her mouth with lye, and would've earning her a glare from Hermione and a laugh from Ron.

"So-after that obvious and disgusting bit of cheating—"

"Jordan!"

"I mean after that open and revolting foul—"

"Jordan, I'm warning you—"

"Alright, alright," Lee conceded. "Flint nearly kills the Gryffindor Seeker, which could happen to anyone I'm sure –but don't be too surprised if he gets subjected to a public prank– so a penalty to Gryffindor, taken by Spinnet, who puts it away, no trouble, and we continue to play. Gryffindor still in possession—"

The next Bludger grazed the side of her head, burning over her hair and telling her just how close it came to hitting her by doing so. Once it had passed, though, she pointed the broom to the west, intending to start up her search for the Snitch there, when her broom gave a frightening lurch, moving against her will.

Her heart rate increased with terror –she was a hundred feet or so above the ground!– and her fingers went numb from how tightly she was holding onto the broomstick now. Every time she tried to turn it in any direction, it bucked more dangerously than the last, then it started to roll, jerking to the side in a last ditch effort that finally unseated her –causing her to release a short cry of alarm–, leaving her dangling from it with only her two hands.

The terror was truly gripping her now like an ice-cold fist around her heart as Fred and George flew close, trying to pull her onto their brooms, but the broom shot upwards every time they tried. The broom swung her to and fro when she tried to loop her leg over the side, forcing her back to where she was dangling precariously in midair.

Her fingers were slipping and had no way to get herself back onto the broom. What was she going to do?

Hope pried her eyes open to see Higgs racing after the Snitch that was steadily making its way towards her. What luck, just what she needed to make this day perfect.

"George?" Her voice was still shaking.

"Still here," the red-head said helpfully from where he was hovering, not completely below her, Fred having disappeared soon after to ward off some Bludgers from the Chasers, leaving Hope to his twin.

"I'm going to do something incredibly stupid," she said, her voice wavering in her fear, "will you catch me?"
Green eyes locked with blue. In that instant, he said one word that made Hope want to kiss him right in front of the whole school, something she would later deny fervently.

"Always." Her breath caught and her heart stuttered briefly and she swallowed hard.

Hope gritted her teeth, swinging precariously on her broom, gaining enough momentum to drop down from her broom to his and into his arms, missing Higgs as he flew past by inches. The raucous cheer that enveloped the stadium told her that she had succeeded. And then she choked.

"Hope?" George looked faintly alarmed as she hacked into her hand, until the alarm turned to shock once the tiny golden ball fell into her hand.

"A remarkable catch by Beater Weasley, and a remarkable catch of the Snitch by Seeker Potter! Gryffindor wins!"

"You are unbelievable," George informed her as he directed his broom down until she could jump lightly off it. "People'll be talking about that catch for years—"

He blinked in surprise when she leaned forward and upwards, standing on the tips of her toes to kiss his cheek suddenly, her cheeks pink.

"Yours was far more impressive," she informed him with a light laugh, before the crowd of gold and red swarmed around her, the cheering deafening her as Hermione and Ron pulled her into a very welcome hug. Despite their happiness, Hope could see that Ron's face was a bit pale—his freckles were standing out in contrast with the pallor—and Hermione had nail marks indented in her cheeks from clutching them in fear.

"Don't ever do that again!" Hermione told her feverishly, only serving to make Hope laugh.

She could see Professor Flitwick and Professor McGonagall in the distance, pulling her broom down from where it was still hovering a good hundred feet above the ground, but she didn't think too much of it as she was whisked away for a cup of tea with Hagrid as a congratulations for beating Slytherin.

Ron had to admit there was an obvious difference between the morning and now, since she had gone from pale and scared to bright-cheeked and beaming (her hair returned to its usual dark red) as she retold the tale to Hagrid from her point of view.

"Though," she added after she had finished her tale, "I wonder why my broom was acting like that...the only time I've had it out has been at practice and after that it was locked in my trunk..."

"That was Snape's fault," Ron explained to her befuddled look, gesturing to himself and Hermione, "we saw him. He was cursing your broom!"

"Rubbish," Hagrid refuted as Hope frowned thoughtfully, her eyes growing distant, "Why would he?"

"Dunno," Hope said slowly, glancing over at her friends, "but he did try to get past that three-headed dog on Halloween, so you have to wonder if he's plausibly sane—"

This subject had been discussed between the three at length when Ron had told the girls that he had seen the Potions Professor heading up to the third floor on Halloween and when Hope had told the other two about the wound he had sustained to his leg for his efforts that night. Needless to say, it didn't put the professor in a good light.

Hagrid made a racket dropping the teapot, smashing the ceramic and tea into the carpet as Hermione
smiled and Ron sniggered at Hope's choice of words. "How do you know about Fluffy?"

"Fluffy?!" Three voices chorused with varying degrees of disbelief (Ron), shock (Hermione), and incredulity (Hope).

"Yeah, he's mine, from a Greek chappie," Hagrid said in a nonchalant manner. "I lent him to Dumbledore to guard the—"

"Oh?" Hope asked, arching her eyebrows, her voice filled with curiosity.

"That's top secret!" he growled at their eager faces.

"And if Snape steals it?" Hope prompted, her face placid as he glared.

"Rubbish! Snape's a Hogwarts teacher!"

"Then why was he spelling Hope's broom to toss her off; she could have died falling from that height!" Hermione cried.

"Whatever yer thinkin', it ain't that," Hagrid refuted with a scowl, "Snape wouldn't do anythin' teh Hope's broom, that was somethin' else. Forget about it, meddin' in this stuff's dangerous. Forget about that dog and what it's guardin'! That's strictly between Professor Dumbledore an' Nicolas Flamel—"

"Nicolas Flamel?"

The trio beat a rather hasty retreat after Hagrid revealed that little piece of information, because it was hard to tell if he was angrier at them or himself.

"Who's Nicholas Flamel?" Ron asked when they were nearly back to the castle.

"I'm sure I've read it somewhere," Hope said, screwing up her face with thought, "I just can't remember where…"

"I've never heard of him," Hermione admitted, vaguely surprised that Hope knew something that she didn't.

Two pairs of eyes looked upon her in surprise. "Really?"

She gave them both a rather direct look that told them she wasn't amused by them in the slightest. "Well, I don't know everything," she sniffed.

"Just most things?" Ron asked innocently and Hermione glared while Hope burst into sniggers.

"Oh, shut up," she told him. "We should head up to the library and start researching."

Ron couldn't hide his groan. "The library?" he bemoaned, his words almost coming out as a whine. "Can't it wait? Gryffindor just won against the Slytherins for the first time in years! Can't we just take a day and celebrate?"

Hermione and Hope shared a look of amusement at how put-out their friend was at the idea of spending a prolonged amount of time in the library. It was safe to say that he didn't like it nearly as much as his friends did.

"I suppose it wouldn't hurt to wait a day," Hope decided with a faux-mournful sigh. "And I was so looking forward to picking up a new book on Ancient Magicks!"
"Blooming mental," Ron muttered under his breath as they moved off in the direction of the castle.

"Oh! I almost forgot!" Hermione pulled out the two rings that Hope had entrusted to her before the match and Hope blinked and looked down at her empty hands.

She had forgotten that she'd given Hermione her rings for safe keeping.

"Oh, right," Hope said as they walked through the stone courtyard, accepting her rings. "The things that slip your mind, huh?" She returned the black opal ring to her thumb and Hermione and Ron could've sworn that the snake ring tightened around her ring finger like the coils of a snake (which made a lot of sense, given what the ring was shaped like).

"So…did you really light Snape on fire?" Hope asked with mirth, causing Ron to laugh and Hermione to pale as she glanced around.

"Shh!" she insisted. "Don't say that so loud! I could be expelled!"

"And that's the worst that could happen," Ron snorted, "you know, after dying."

Hermione's cheeks flushed with heat as she glared at Ron. She'd said something similar the night Hope, Ron, Neville, and Hermione had gotten dragged into a midnight duel by Malfoy. "Oh, shut up!"

Hope sniggered as she watched her two friends argue back and forth; she would by lying if she said that it wasn't amusing.

But then she caught a pale green eye before it vanished into shadow and she paused searching for it.

"Hope, what's wrong?" Hermione asked.

"I thought I saw," Hope started to say, before saying, "never mind, it was probably nothing."

And she caught up with her friends, heading towards the Gryffindor common room, where, undoubtedly, a loud party was taking place.

Albus Dumbledore wasn't quite sure what to think of the only daughter of Lily and James Potter, and subsequently, the Heir to the Noble and Most Ancient House of Potter. She was quite…enigmatic.

She was exceptionally minded, much like Lily in that aspect, and appearance-wise as well; the likeness was so uncanny, he could have sworn Lily Evans had survived that night in 1981 and de-aged herself. She excelled in Charms and Transfiguration, a perfect blend of her parents, though she lacked a bit in Potion. Despite that, she had a way to subtly insult people that usually ended with her serving several detentions a week with Severus for the witty tongue she had inherited from her mother.

He watched her interact with the Weasley Twins and their younger brother, Ronald, as well as the young brunette, Hermione Granger. He'd seen how the smile melted through her facade, how her eyes would light up and shift very much like young Nymphadora Tonks' would. George in particular paid close attention to her. It was much like watching James and Lily all over again, except that Hope did not despise George like Lily had James. Times like those brought a smile to his aged and worn face.

But Albus Dumbledore was also one for over-thinking situations and people, and even underestimating them, with Gellert Grindelwald and Lord Voldemort being the most prime
examples. He had many regrets about how he handled those two situations.

And because of this thinking, Dumbledore could also view her as something akin to dangerous, for she reminded him of another student he had once had, though he had been in Slytherin, he had been as driven and as intelligently minded as she was, and that was worrisome.

When she had sat on the stool to be sorted, Dumbledore had been expecting her to be sorted immediately into Gryffindor as her parents had been and had been quite surprised when it had taken the Sorting Hat so long to decide where to put her. This made him think that she was wavering between two Houses, Gryffindor and Slytherin.

It made him wonder for a moment if she actually belonged in Gryffindor House, but only time would tell and soon he would see if she would be the girl he had hoped she would be when she arrived at Hogwarts.
"There's something very wrong with Binns," Hope decided one day, scrutinizing the many ghosts that haunted Hogwarts.

It was the nicest day they'd had in weeks, since the Quidditch match between Gryffindor and Slytherin, despite it being already half-way through December, which was why a great deal of the Hogwarts occupants were curiously absent. Including the three Hope had dubbed the Laughing Gas (which was in reference to the Weasley Twins and Lee Jordan; they approved), who were off playing a less competitive form of Quidditch. Hope was envious, but she had refused apologetically when they had asked her to join them, opting to remain in the Great Hall and wait patiently for Hermione and Ron to finish their homework.

She was actually a bit astounded that Hermione of all people had fallen behind in school work, because even Hope, who had Quidditch practice three times a week, was ahead in her studies.

Currently, she was flipping through her muggle playing cards –the first thing she'd ever bought, if how worn and frayed they were was an indicator–, playing her fourth game of Patience. She wasn't very good at it, but her only opponent was herself and when she was younger, that had a lot of appeal. She flipped over the card on top of her "excess" deck; Three of Hearts. She moved it to the pile that ended with a Four of Spades. She had said those six words out of sheer boredom, but they were completely true.

"Yeah?" Ron grunted. His fingers were spattered with ink, smudging his essay a little. It was supposed to be on the uses of the levitation charm, but he was quickly running out of reasons (and Professor Flitwick had pulled him aside to say that he couldn't use knocking out a troll as one of them).

"All his lectures are portraying goblins as vicious creatures," Hope said in a voice that made it seem like Ron was agreeing with her, "which seems a bit biased, since I've never met a particularly vicious goblin?"

"Have you met a lot of goblins?" Hermione asked, glancing up from her Herbology paper to glance over at her friend. That thought made her lips twitch at the corners. Having friends was still a new concept for her, but she liked it, and it was never boring when you were best mates with Hope Potter and Ron Weasley.

"Well, no," Hope admitted, realizing her whole argument was a bit flimsy, with rather large gaping holes in it, "but Ragnok and Griphook weren't like that when I met them. Granted, they weren't technically pleasant, but-"

Ron was staring at her like he had never done before (though, Hermione was sure she'd seen that same slack jawed expression on George's face one time or another). "You're on speaking terms with goblins?"

Hope shrugged her shoulders, placing a King of Diamonds onto the empty space between two piles. "It wouldn't do to annoy the ones in charge of my vaults," Her lips twitched. "I think they were the first ones who ever gave me a choice in anything." Her relatives, and she used that term loosely, has never given her any options, and even Hagrid, whom she liked well enough had carted her off without taking her opinion into account.

Hermione's eyes grew sad at that; she couldn't imagine not having a choice with anything. Even Ron
Hope's attention had shifted from her friends to land on the ghost of Ravenclaw House, the Grey Lady. Her dark hair—it must have been—fell past her translucent waist, and she was clothed in a medieval sort of garb. Hope supposed she was beautiful, but she could hardly look at her straight since she kept turning invisible whenever she looked in the ghost's direction. Hope got the feeling the spirit wasn't really looking at her though. She frowned, hardly noticing when her hair coloured black, set in bouncy curls.

Hope hissing slightly in pain as she banged her leg suddenly against the table. "Ah…"

Hermione and Ron had grown used to the brave face she put on when in pain. She never tried to draw attention to it, and that was what impressed Hermione the most about her, so Hermione followed her lead and didn't mention it.

She messed the cards with her hand, the distinct frown lining her face from what thought, Hermione couldn't be sure. It was times like these that Hermione had actually see why she liked George so much; he was the brightness that banished the shadows that lay behind her eyes.

She brightened quickly, and this time it was half-genuine. "Hey, we should go exploring after this!"

Hermione was a bit stunned by how quickly she'd changed, it was as if someone had flipped a switch inside her head, but Ron, who'd known her the longest, wasn't quite so surprised.

"Exploring?" he repeated, glancing down. "Won't that irritate your leg?"

The soft-eyed smile she gave him in return startled him, but only slightly. One of the great things about Ron was that he didn't walk on eggshells around her concerning her leg. Most people were careful about what they said, but he was a bit blunt. Fred and George took her mind off it, yes, but Ron accepted it. *My best mate has a serious injury, but it's healing,* seemed to be his mindset.

"I'll be fine," Hope scoffed, waving her hand in a careless manner, "a little exercise could do me good."

"Ah, Miss Potter!"

Hope blinked as the short-statured Charms professor came up to their area of his bench, holding Hope's Nimbus Two-Thousand in his wrinkled hands.

"Professor?" she asked, her voice coloured with confusion; she hadn't seen the broom since the Quidditch game when it had undergone several extensive tests to see if there weren't any more charms on it.

"We've checked it over a dozen times," he assured her as he handed it back to her, "but the most we could find was an Expulsion Charm, and it has been removed."

Hope couldn't come up with a response to that. She had been a bit apprehensive concerning her most recent possession.

"It's not going to throw me off again, is it?" she inquired slowly, scrutinizing the broom in such a way that the Ravenclaw Head was distantly reminded of her mother so many years ago, staring intently at a teacup that she was attempting to make tap dance.

"I am certain, Miss Potter," he assured her, smiling slightly as the lines on her face disappeared and she relaxed. Or had they? As Professor Flitwick walked away, he glanced back and saw the lines
had returned. The worry on her face was almost palpable, but he had a feeling that come a few days she wouldn't have to worry much at all.

Contrary to Hope's belief, the Laughing Gas –as she had so aptly named them– was not playing an epic game of pick-up Quidditch (how could they play when the best Seeker was stuck inside?). It was the last Hogsmeade visit before Christmas break, so everyone –including the aforementioned students– was out finishing their Christmas shopping.

Coming up with a gift for Hope was turning out to be more of a trial than George had originally thought. Of course, he, Fred, and their friends had clubbed together to get her some reasonably mild Zonkos products, but he wanted to get something else...something that meant a bit more.

The only problem was, he didn't know what to get her. She liked to cook (or, at least, she was good enough at it), he knew that, but Hermione was getting her something that involved that. She was smart, so he could get her a nice book, but that would be more like something he would get Percy (gag). They were passing by Tomes and Scrolls when he caught sight of it. T&S always set out free books that didn't sell well outside on the last Hogsmeade visit before Christmas, and they didn't disappoint.

The book in particular that had caught his interest was the *Tales of Beedle the Bard*. It was a collection of children's stories that their mum always used to tell them when they were little, but Hope had grown up Muggle, and she certainly hadn't heard any children stories. He lifted it from the pile. It was still good as new, he noticed. He thumbed through the pages, noting that the art was a bit better than the one his mum had, so he pocketed it.

If Fred noticed, he didn't mention it, because, either way, George still had to come up with a really nice Christmas gift.

"Oi, Angie!" Fred called over to Angelina where she was talking to Alicia, having just exited the local jewellery store, holding a small bag. He tried not to notice that his heart began to race when she lifted her head and smiled brilliantly.

"Yeah?"

"Got some advice for George?" Fred queried, his lips still upturned, gesturing with his shoulder towards the boy who was doing a mental analysis of his friend-whom-he-liked-a-great-deal and what she could possibly want as a gift.

Angelina grinned, an oddly feral grin not unlike Hope's, now that he thought about it. "Oh, I've got the best thing…"

Taking both twins by the arm, she dragged them inside the nearest shop, directing George's attention to the object in the corner.

It was perfect.

Hermione found herself pulling apart the curtains that hid Hope's bed from view the very next day, paling at once at the sight within. Hope, who had been complaining only of mild tingling in her leg the day previously, now looked worse for wear. Her skin was nearly a sickly sheen of grey and shimmered from sweat and her forehead was scrunched up in pain.

"Hope? Hope!"
She shook the girl hopelessly, before all but fleeing to find Madam Pomfrey.

Unfortunately, Hope was awake and grumbling by the time the Matron arrived, being in a very bad mood.

"Argh...I hate stomach flu!"

Hope certainly didn't look as though she was enjoying her time being sick, but then, no one ever seemed to. Perhaps she wouldn't have felt quite so bad if her leg hadn't been acting up as well, but her friends thought it best not to comment; who knew how she would react?

Hope's arms were currently tightly wrapped around her middle, as if that would assuage the pain, but no such luck. Her face was pinched and pale, but not nearly as pale as the day before. And she looked less miserable, so that was something.

"Moving will only make it worse," the Matron warned from her office, "I'm afraid you will just have to wait for it to pass."

Hope muffled her frustration in her pillow. "And how long is that supposed to take?"

"It should be only a few minutes," Madam Pomfrey assured her, "but the effects might last for hours; you may feel a bit drained."

"Fantastic," she grumbled.

Hermione was still noticeably concerned for her friend, hovering close to her side. "Are you sure it's just flu?"

Madam Pomfrey's smile was a bit sad as she watched Hope stubbornly turn her head away, a frown set firmly on her face.

"It's not just the flu," she admitted, gazing intently at her patient who was doing a spot-on impression of James Potter that it was almost scary, almost, but not quite. "It's her leg as well."

Hermione looked closer and saw that the scar horizontally across her leg was angry and puckered, looking very infected.

"She's overstrained the muscles somehow," Madam Pomfrey explained.

"I am right here, you know," Hope said sourly, crossing her arms, looking extremely petulant.

"Hush!" The Matron admonished the girl as if she was an impertinent child interrupting an important conversation.

Hope's scowl deepened, but the healer wasn't perturbed. Hermione guessed that she had gotten so used to her attitude from having Hope as a patient for so long.

"The muscles need time to recover, so you'll have to be off your feet for awhile." This time, her words were directed towards the red-head who was still sulking. "This time, try to actually follow my instructions." The despairing voice she used was enough to earn a quirk of the lips from Hope, but nothing else.

"Keep an eye on her," Madam Pomfrey warned the brunette as she left, "you know how she is about following rules."

"Sadly," Hermione agreed with a sigh.
By some miracle, Hope had managed to get through a shower and pull on her clothes and hop down the stairs to the common room without using her leg, though, with her luck, she was beginning to suspect that she would over-strain the muscles in her good leg. And that would not do.

"I can't stand sitting still," she said in an aggrieved tone. "This sucks!"

The other Gryffindors who happened to be in the common room as she said this smirked and snickered.

"Maybe if you hadn't insisted that we go exploring, we wouldn't be in this mess," Hermione admonished from where she and Ron stood beside the armchair.

"It seemed like a good idea at the time," Hope grumbled, hardly under her breath.

"You're impossible," Ron said, almost in awe.

"I do try," she drawled in response, waving them off. They were going to the library to try to look up some information on Nicolas Flamel. "Have fun."

Ron rolled his eyes at her sarcasm. "See you in a few."

They shared a smile at her huff of annoyance, leaving her to her devices.

Hope pulled an aged book from her bag, which had been conveniently left where it was the previous night. *The Origins of Blood Magick,* that was what it was called. It was a pity that Britons were so narrow minded when it came to truly extraordinary branches of magic. They quickly outlawed any magic that they couldn't and wouldn't understand, and Blood Magick was one such thing.

Sometimes Hope didn't understand wizards at all.

*Blood Magick is one of the two most ancient forms of magic known to wizard-kind. It came into favour in the early Dark Ages and has been used in several well-known branches of magic, such as: Wicca, Alchemy, Astrology, Necromancy, Sigil Magick, and Hoodoo. Blood Magick is the magic that resides in one's blood, impregnated with the blood on a cellular level. The most common way to activate the magic within the blood is through what is commonly known as Blood Warding which was highly popular amongst the Pharaohs of Egypt. The frequent use of it deterred grave robbers so much that legends spread that the tombs were cursed—*

"All by your lonesome?"

Hope lifted her head to gaze at the Weasley Twins.

"Peace and quiet is very nice once in awhile," she said with a slight smile, splaying her hand over the page so the curious third-years wouldn't know that she was reading about a subject that had been banned from the country. She highly doubted that they would recognize its contents but there was still an off chance that they could. "Not that you would know," she added dryly.

"Silence is so boring, though!" Fred complained.

"Noise is a much better alternative," George agreed in the same light sort of voice.

She smiled.

"You two."
Ron and Hermione—who had only just left the library after a fruitless search—turned back suddenly, remarkably tense, to face the owner of the commanding voice. It was a young boy, maybe fifteen with tousled black hair falling into his pale eyes. He wore a black robe but no house symbol or a distinguishing tie to allude to his house.

He was holding out a rather thick tome towards them. "Give this to Elpis, would you?"

"Elpis?" Ron asked blankly in incomprehension. "We don't know an Elpis."

But Hermione frowned, understanding the allusion. "Isn't Elpis the name of the Goddess of Hope in Greek myths?"

The boy's smile twisted until it was condescending. "Aren't you a clever girl?" he mocked, smirking as her cheeks coloured. "I suppose Muggle-borns have gotten smarter since my day."

That was both a compliment and an insult. Hermione struggled to settle her face into a stoic mask like Hope did, but she was sure her eyes had flashed in irritation as he had dropped the weighty tome into her hands. She read the title curiously. "Ancient Magical Languages?"

"Elpis has a distinct fondness for ancient history. She is rather fascinated with Egypt and Greece, I gather, from her frequent trips to this library," he gestured to the one they had just exited after coming up with nothing on Nicholas Flamel.

Ron stared at him oddly, his eyes narrowed in suspicion at how he knew so much about his friend. "How do you know that?"

"That is hardly a matter to concern yourself with," he said with scorn, bearing a superior smile as he gazed down on them. "Tell Elpis it is a gift."

In the time it took them to blink, he had vanished, and they were befuddled, but they hurried back to the common room all the same, finding themselves unsurprised that Hope was being entertained by Ron's elder brothers.

She looked better than when they'd left, for now the pallor that had adorned her face had faded, leaving her with the light rosy hue that she had always had. She did look a bit tired, but that was normal, as Madam Pomfrey had said.

"How on earth did you manage to set off those Dungbombs while being surrounded by witnesses?" Hope was saying, tossing her friends a smile and a nod as they approached. "I didn't know there was such a thing as a spell that could delay the explosion time!"

They bore self-satisfied smirks.

"Ask us no questions—"

"And we'll tell you no lies."

She snorted, glancing over Ron and Hermione. "Find anything useful?" she queried, frowning at the thick tome in their hands.

"Not re-"

Hope was goggling at the title. "Where the ruddy hell did you find that?!

She practically ripped the weighty book from Hermione's arms, gazing at it in awe.
"A boy said you'd like it, he said it was a gift for Elpis, you know, the Godde-" Hermione started to say.

"The Goddess of Hope, yes, I know." Hope nearly sighed. She knew all too well the tale of Elpis (or Spes, if you wanted to go with the Roman name)

Hope's eyes scrutinized the worn cover. "This has been touched by a spectre," she mused aloud, but more to herself.

Spectres had been something else she had been reading up on and you could always see when one had touched something because it left a pale shadow on the item.

"A ghost?" Fred asked in confusion, sharing a glance with his twin who was equally confused.

"Not quite." Hope was squinting at the surface of the book, holding it up to her face so she could look across it. "Spectres can maintain a solid form for a short amount of time, but they rarely stick around for centuries after their death like ghosts do; Spectres aren't afraid of death." She bit her lip looking thoughtful. "I wonder who it was…?"

She was speaking more to herself as she inspected the locked keyhole ("why would there be a keyhole on a book?" "If you don't know how am I supposed to?"). Hermione and Ron were surprised to note that it opened without an ounce of resistance, but they didn't see the small prick of blood collecting on Hope's thumb. Hope opened it slowly, flipping gingerly through the pages in complete awe.

There were so many symbols, so many runes…it must be Christmas.

"I think you killed her," George mentioned dryly as he waved a hand to and fro in front of her face, but she never let on that she could see it.

"This is…perfect," she said disjointedly in complete shock.

Three of the four watching her allowed themselves to be faintly amused by the jealous frown that had settled onto George's face.

Hope tried to smother her giggles the next day as she watched Fred and George carefully enchant a series of snowballs while standing behind a tree so that they would bounce against Professor Quirrel's turban as he walked past. Christmas break would start tomorrow and the Christmas spirit was heavy in the air. A large portion of the school was feverishly packing up their things for the break, but obviously the ones that weren't were staying behind.

Hope wasn't too choked up (in fact she wasn't choked up at all), not even after Malfoy's jibe about her not being wanted at home. Sadly, it was true, and if there was any chance that she could actually have fun on a holiday, she would take it.

"Hey."

George sounded out of breath as he sat down on the stone bench beside her, barely glancing at her broom which lay forgotten beside her. He grinned; she had probably come down to fly but had gotten distracted by their enchanted snowballs.

"Hey." Her lips twisted into a smile, bringing attention to her light blue eyes and now strawberry-blonde hair. "Having fun?"
"Always," he chortled.

It lifted his spirits when she laughed with him. Her heavily gloved hand dropped to squeeze his.

"So…flying?"

Her eyes pooled with anxiety, surprising George. She liked to fly quite a bit, though, now that he thought about it, she should be nervous about being on the broomstick that tried to send her off it if not for George's interference.

"Do you think I'm being stupid?" she asked him suddenly, her eyes imploring. "Being scared of a big, bad broomstick." Hope gave a shaky laugh.

"Not at all," George refuted. "I'd probably be scared if it had been me."

"Really?" She sounded surprised, but then Fred and George had never seemed like the sort of people that would or could be scared of something as trivial (possibly) as being tossed from a broom.

"Really," he said, sounding oddly serious. "I'll go up with you, if you want."

She seemed to be caught between two decisions, biting the inside of her cheek as she did so. Finally, she sighed and nodded as George pulled her into a standing position, settling himself over her broom and gesturing for her to do the same. Unlike him, her movements were not eager, more like they were resigned, but she replicated his moves and linked her arms around his stomach; George could feel how tense she was.

"But, if you kill me," she said in a surprisingly calm voice, "know that I will haunt you until the day you die."

George laughed, disregarding the comment, since he was rather used to the death threats she typically threw his way. They were generally coupled with a smile. "Duly noted."

Slowly, very slowly, he pushed off from the ground, pointing the broom upwards in a gentle manner, but he could feel Hope's arms digging painfully into his sides, even so.

"It's alright," he hummed in a contented voice that he usually adopted when speaking with Ginny after she woke up from a nightmare. "Look down."

Hope did as he requested and laughed aloud; they were barely a foot above the ground. He spun the shaft in a lazy figure eight. "Want to go higher?"

"Alright."

Trust was something she had always had an extraordinary amount of difficulty with, but here with George, with him being the only thing that kept her from falling downwards, she didn't find it so hard. She smiled into his back as the nervousness and the anxiety melted from her body, fading into the snow and frost that caked the castle like the icing on a gingerbread house.

"George?" she whispered.

"Hm?"

"Don't let me fall."

He chuckled ahead of her, one hand squeezing hers where they were still locked around him. "Never."
Winter Surprises

The cold had long since numbed Hope's toes where they were bared to the harsh winter wind as she gazed upwards at the stars. They were brighter tonight than they had been previously, or, at least that was how they seemed. She was a little chilled (really, what had she been thinking going up onto the Astronomy Tower in nothing but her bed clothes and bathrobe?), but that was to be expected. She doubted she'd been up there very long, but when one's feet begin to feel like icicles, the time would seem much longer. Finally, she sighed and shifted her gaze from the Pleiades, stumbling back inside, where it was only slightly warmer.

Hope kept to the shadows, wary of any prefect or professor out on patrol, when something startled her.

"You must be cold."

Hope tried very hard not to jump at the soft voice, far more startled that the Grey Lady had appeared before after looking so pained. Hope glanced down at her bare pale feet, almost having forget they were there since she had lost feeling in them (she was sure that wasn't a good thing).

"It's not so bad," she assured her, though it was a lie (but not an obvious one), her eyes still confused. "I thought you hated me."

The Ravenclaw ghost's smile lacked feeling. "My apologies. You simply reminded me a bit of myself."

Hope's mouth dropped open; whatever the reason could have been, that wasn't one she would have anticipated.

"I...I did?" She asked bleakly. Sometimes that was good, but sometimes that was bad; Hope was sure that this was the bad.

"Intelligent and seeking a way to prove oneself," the Grey Lady said with a voice filled with scorn, making Hope automatically flinch. "I have been watching you most closely, Hope Potter."

"You're being rather rude," Hope said equally coldly, her eyes turning a frigid grey. "You're more than Ravenclaw's ghost...you're Rowena's blood, aren't you?"

Now it was time for the ghost to flinch, but that only gave Hope a small amount of pleasure. She liked to put people down when they insulted her, but someone like the Grey Lady seemed more sad and angry than anything else. It would be cruel to insult a dead woman.

"Only Rowena didn't have any siblings, just a daughter, a daughter who vanished from all record."

Hope wasn't trying to be mean, only direct. She'd looked up the Four Founders histories in Hogwarts, A History and the most interesting, she had to admit, were the lives of Salazar Slytherin and Rowena Ravenclaw. "With all due respect, I'm not like you. I'm not as smart as you and I'm not as vain."

Vain was just a guess, but Helena Ravenclaw did seem to be a bit in her opinion.

The Grey Lady seemed caught between the compliment and the insult, but then she smiled, but it was rueful, filled with so many different emotions that Hope quickly lost track. "You remind me of your grandfather; he often spoke of blunt truths when he was riled up."

"My grandfather?" Hope asked in confusion, her irritation dropping from her face. "What do you mean?"
"Aisle Four, First Row, A History of the Founders," she said as an answer, "I'm sure you'll find it most...enlightening." And without a single utterance, Helena Ravenclaw faded into a wisp of wind, breezing past her and towards the Ravenclaw common room.

Hope frowned in thought, but she did as she asked. Getting into the library was no easy feat, mind you, especially with her leg the way it was. She almost ran into Percy Weasley trying to avoid Professor Burbage (she was the professor for Muggle Studies, a class Hope swore she'd never take; it was pointless by how she was raised). With some luck she managed to slip past the library's doors with a barest squeak of hinges, but finding the book was more difficult than she had anticipated, since the binding was rather worn (she passed by it three times without noticing).

When she found it, she was sure she stopped breathing for a few seconds, and she had gone stock still as she gazed at the youthful face of Salazar Slytherin. He was just as Hope remembered the boy from September, the one who had told her which way to go that reach the Astronomy Tower; dark tousled hair, pale eyes, sharp features, and a cocky smile. She was far more surprised that he easily stood beside Godric Gryffindor, someone whom he had apparently hated—if the current rivalries were anything to go by—, smiling secretively, as if they knew something that no one else did.

"Your grandfather may not approve..." that was what the hat had said, and now she understood why. It must be quite scandalous for the descendant of Slytherin to be sorted into Gryffindor. Slytherin had a bad reputation, and she doubted she would earn any favours by being of his blood. Remaining silent of her relation to him would probably be a good idea for now; she wasn't quite sure how any of her friends would respond.

She shut the book with a snap and shoved it back into shelf, but when she glanced at her hands, she saw that she was still shaking.

The early afternoon wind was still quite cold, almost a scorching cold, but the students making for the Hogwarts Express still battled against the fierce wind.

Hope had accompanied some of her friends with her broom locked under her arm as she ignored the jeers of the Slytherins, but she caught Daphne Greengrass giving her a slight nod, and she gave one in return. Their relationship was...odd, to say the least. They weren't really friends, but they weren't really enemies, either. Acquaintances, perhaps? Yes, that was a good term to use.

Hope was pulled from her internal musing when Hermione hugged her tightly around the middle as Lee Jordan pushed her trunk into the train, securing it with his and Alicia and Angelina's, who would be riding back with her (Hermione confided to Hope that she was grateful for the company). "You have a good holiday, Hope, and Merry Christmas!"

Hope grinned, squeezing her affectionately as well. "You too." She was sure she was the only one who came out to say goodbye—no one else had wanted to brave the cold (though she was sure she could have used her puppy-dog eyes on George and he would have bent like wet paper), but she didn't mind, even if the wind tangled her hair with snowflakes and pinked her cheeks with cold.

Angelina, Lee, and Alicia each gave her respective hugs, wishing her a Happy Christmas as well as they boarded the train.

Lee, in particular, ducked his torso out of the window and winked conspiratorially. "Don't have too much fun without me, Potter!"

Hope couldn't silence the laughter that bubbled from her lips, leaking through her fingers. "I'll try, but no promises!" She blew him a jaunty kiss that made the girls laugh as they ('they' referring to
Angelina and Alicia, since Hermione wasn't that forward) pulled him back into the compartment.

The train was starting to move and she hobbled alongside it, studiously ignoring the flare of pain at
her shin and she waved after them, before stopping and just simply raising her hand in farewell. She
wasn't sure how long she stood there, but it was only when the train had completely disappeared, the
red vanishing in the white, that she mounted her broom and hightailed for Hogwarts. She only
touched ground again once she'd reached the Great Hall (yes, she flew inside Hogwarts, don't
everyone get surprised at once), loping gracelessly over to the Gryffindor table to sit opposite Ron.

"I'm starving!" she bemoaned, resting her broom beside her. "I can't believe I slept through
breakfast!" As she said this, she began to pile steak and kidney pie onto her plate while spooning
some split pea soup into a spare bowl.

"I can't imagine what that's like," said Ron who had never missed a meal in his life.

Hope rolled her eyes, slurping the soup in an unlady-like manner. "Just because you eat all your
meals doesn't mean everyone does."

He snorted at that. Hope had a bad habit of getting so caught up in her reading that there would be
some days where she skipped a meal, like last night. She had been so engrossed in her new book that
Angelina had to coerce the twins into taking her to the kitchen to grab the girl some grub. Of course,
they had had to add a preservation charm to make sure it was warm when she ate it, since she hadn't
noticed it sitting beside her the first hour after its arrival.

"How late were you reading that book anyways?" he asked as she started in on her steak and kidney
pie.

"Past midnight, I'm sure," Hope said, well aware of the soft grey shadows beneath her eyes, "I just
couldn't put it down. There were Norse figures that I've never read before! It was so fascinating!"

"I'll take your word for it," Ron said dryly. "You really like this stuff?"

"A bit," she admitted with a flushed grin. "I probably wouldn't want to make a career out of it, but at
the rate I'm going at, they'll have to name me Official Knowledge-keeper of Magic."

Ron burst out into laughter at the ridiculous title she had apparently come up with on the spot.

Hope stuck out her tongue, but she was grinning all the same, content to not even spare a thought to
the lack of Christmas gifts she was sure would not be in her room the next day.

And so Hope awoke the morning of Christmas Day not particularly anticipating any presents, so she
went about her business as usual, gathering her clothes and entering the showers, not giving much
around her a glance until after she had left the loo. She raked a hand through her dampened hair,
noticing that it had grown a little longer in the passing months. She fingered the ends of the strands in
speculation; perhaps she would grow it out longer.

She walked past the bed to dump her dirty clothes in the hamper by her bed, only to backtrack once
she caught sight of the pile of packages at the edge of her bed.

Her mouth dropped open. She hadn't been expecting anything really, but her face couldn't help but
light up with childish wonder.

The first parcel was from Hagrid. It was a roughly whittled flute and Hope couldn't resist playing a
few notes, her fingers dancing across the holes, the air escaping it sounded distinctly like an owl,
reminding Hope of Hedwig.
The second was a rather lumpy parcel that confused Hope until she opened it and found a box of homemade fudge and a thick jumper made of emerald green. The note said it was from Ron and the Twins’ mother, Molly Weasley. Hope couldn't help but wonder if her own mother would have done the same if she had still been alive.

Then Hope scrubbed furiously at her eyes, wiping the remnants of tears from her green eyes, resolutely focusing on what a nice gift it was and pulling it over her head.

The next two gifts were sweets from Ron and Hermione, with Hermione adding to hers a small booklet, a cookbook, with a book filled with recipes that she could cut out and add to the blank cookbook. It was a lovely gift, Hope had to admit as she thumbed through the pages of the recipe book, she'd never had her own cookbook before.

The Laughing Gas (and co.) had gotten her a box filled with more prank items than she could ever hope to use –at least, that's what she thought–, just glancing over, she recognized a few Dungbombs and Chinese Fortune Sticks. She couldn't help but smile as she set it aside and pulled one last package towards her.

The first item in the bag was a small book, proclaiming The Tales of Beedle the Bard. Was it children's stories? She placed it with her other gifts, removing the last one.

_Convinced Angie to steal a couple of your pictures, hope you like it and don't mind._

_-George_

She blinked; glancing to where her camera that she used a bit sparingly lay by her bedside, next to the box that contained all the pictures she'd taken at Hogwarts. So that was why she thought she'd been missing some photos…

She pulled the wrapping to reveal a leather bound scrapbook with 'Year One' embellished at the centre. Her smile brightened as she flipped through the pages; her camera was one of the most used items in Gryffindor House, so she wasn't surprised that there were pictures there that she didn't recall taking. There was a lot of her with Ron and Hermione…and there was a surprising amount of her being manhandled by either of the twins (her arched eyebrow twitched a bit at that), but in almost every one of them she was smiling, much like she was now.

This gift was _perfection_. It was a hundred times better than the book on magical languages, if she said so herself. Hope traced a thin finger over the images painted across the cover with a soft smile.

Only one parcel remained now.

She removed the slip of parchment from the brown wrappings.

_Your father left this is my possession before he died._

_It is time it was returned to you._

_Use it well._

_A Very Merry Christmas to you._

The ring set with the black stone warmed in her hand as she lifted the garment from its packaging. It was silvery-grey, feeling and looking almost like fluid, gleaming in the sunlight that pooled through the window. It was gorgeous. Hope pulled the cloak over her shoulders only to look down at herself, stunned. Where was her body?
A cloak of invisibility…was there such a thing? She marvelled silently at the gift, picking up the slip of parchment as if trying to will the writer's signature to the surface, but it was hopeless. And she was clueless.

"Ron! Ron!"

Ron, who had been unwrapping his own presents was surprised when a flurry of dark red assaulted his face. "Hope?"

Hope's eyes weren't quite as haunted as they had been yesterday; they were bright and filled with life as she shook something at Ron. "Ron, look at this!"

It was a cloak, and once she threw it over her shoulders, Ron's jaw dropped. Her body had completely disappeared!

"No way! If that's what I think it is, they're really rare and really valuable!" Ron said in astonishment, walking in a circle around Hope's disembodied head. "It's an invisibility cloak! How'd you get it?"

"The note said it belonged to my father," Hope explained as she pulled it off and folded it in her arms. "Did you open my present?"

As a matter of fact, he hadn't, but he wasted no time in ripping the wrapping paper form the square-like item.

"Wow! Hope, this is cool!"

It was a brand new chessboard.

Hope smiled. "I saw it when we were in Diagon Alley the first time around. I remembered you saying something about your old chessboard and thought you could use a new one."

He hefted it in his hand. It wasn't very light, but it wasn't very heavy either, so it couldn't have cost as much as he would have thought.

"Thanks!"

"No problem." She grinned devilishly. "I got the twins a prank book."

"Of course," Ron sniggered at the precise moment Fred and George bounded inside.

"Merry Christmas!" Fred chirped.

"Oh, look!" George noticed with a grin that had Hope blushing. "Hope's got a Weasley jumper, too!"

Fred and George were wearing ones much like the emerald green one she had pulled over her torso…though, if she was correct, they were wearing each other's. Her lips twitched in amusement.

"Hope's is better than ours, though," Fred added, a mock-thoughtful expression on his face as he rested his chin in his hand. "She obviously makes more of an effort if you're not family, or are a girl."

Hope tossed him a filthy glance, speaking with a dry voice, "Gee, Fred, thanks."

He tipped an invisible hat to her, earning (yet another) eye roll. Seriously, he could make a lot of money by betting how many she went through daily.
"Why aren't you wearing yours, Ron?" George was demanding of his youngest brother, diverting all attention to the first-year Weasley, giving Hope the opportunity to hide the cloak under her jumper; she wasn't sure if she wanted to share it with anyone else yet. "Come on, get it on, they're lovely and warm!"

Ron only looked half-annoyed as he pulled his over his head. "I hate maroon," he groaned.

"Ah, no letter," George observed. "I guess she thinks you won't forget your name, but we're not stupid; we know our names are Gred and Forge."

At that point, Hope lost it completely, clutching her stomach as she roared with laughter, so much laughter that she had tears falling from her eyes. George seemed very pleased by that as Fred elbowed him.

"What's all this noise?" a demanding voice came from the doorway. Percy Weasley didn't anticipate all the noise to be coming from Hope Potter who seemed to be at her wits end, hanging off of Ron's arm in an attempt to stay vertical. Before he could say anything further, Fred—it was Fred wasn't it? (he was assuming that the twin closest to Hope was George)—snatched the lumpy jumper from his hands.

Hope seemed to be recovering slowly as Ron thumped her back as if she had been choking on something. Fred took advantage of that distraction.

"P for Prefect!" Fred chortled, seeming strangely hyper. "Get it on, Percy, come on, we're all wearing ours, even Hope got one!"

Hope was indeed wearing a lovely dark green jumper over her shirt.

"I-don't-want—" Percy started to say, looking immensely annoyed as he did so, but it was too late. Grinning identically, Fred and George had pulled the thick sweater over his ginger head, messing up his hair and knocking his glasses to the side slightly.

"And you're not sitting with the prefects today," George added with a crazy grin, "Christmas is a time for family!"

Hope had to stifle another bout of giggles as they marched out of the dormitory with Percy sandwiched between them, his arms locked at his sides by the jumper.

"Is it sad that I'm getting used to their antics?" Hope asked Ron after they had left.

Ron groaned. "Very."

He swore he could hear her smirking, if that was even possible.

The wind whipped around Hope's head as she flew, yelping at the flash of crimson that chased her through the skies.

"Got you!"

She pouted when she saw that Ron's hand was tugging on her boot.

"You're it!"

A loud yell pierced her from the left where she could see two more patches of red; her grin turned oddly feral. She pointed her broom in their direction, shooting past Ron so fast, she was sure that he
had yelled out as well. Their game of pick-up Quidditch had quickly devolved –seeing as there were
only four of them– since they didn't have any access to the Quidditch balls, and they had ended up
playing a game of "Tag" which the Weasley brothers hadn't really understood at first until Hope had
explained it several times.

She did a few lazy loops to give them a head start, seeing as she had the fastest broom, before
speeding towards the closest one –she couldn't really be sure which twin it was in this snowstorm-,
reaching out a hand when the edge of the shaft hit into one of the stone structures in the courtyard.
The movement dislodged the girl who let out a small scream as she was tossed into the side of one of
the many stone arches.

She lay in a crumpled heap where she had been thrown, more stunned than in pain when three pairs
of feet dropped down beside her.

"Hope?"

She groaned in response. "Ow."

"I'm starting to wonder if there is something wrong with your broom," Ron added as he helped her
up, noticing her wince. "Did you hit your back?"

"Just a little-"

"So a lot?" Fred and George said at the same time.

"Hospital Wing it is."

Hope groaned again, pressing a hand to her chilled face. "And I was having so much fun," she
muttered mutinously as Fred linked her arms around his neck and George went off to find her broom.

Her mood went down the toilet as they hauled her up to the medical wing of the school, but Madam
Pomfrey wasn't too surprised by her most frequent patient's appearance.

"Back again, Hope?" she sounded almost resigned as Fred deposited her onto one of the beds.
"What is it this time?" she asked in a benign voice.

"This time it's not my fault!" Hope said suddenly.

Madam Pomfrey arched an eyebrow and Hope relented in a small voice, making the Weasley boys
snigger, "Well…maybe a little."

"And where…"

"My back."

Hope's face settled into a sullen frown as Madam Pomfrey rolled back her shirt so she could see the
injury. The skin betrayed no sight of damage, but then it typically took about a half hour for bruises
to fester, so Madam Pomfrey wasn't surprised by the lack of evidence. She tapped her wand against
the skin, blinking in surprise.

"What did you do? Run into a wall?"

Hope scratched her cheek, chuckling sheepishly. "Err…sort of…"

Madam Pomfrey made an annoyed sound in the back of her throat as she murmured a spell and
unrolled her shirt where she had pulled it back.
"It's going to be a little stiff, but try to be more careful next time," she warned as Ron helped pull Hope into a standing position.

"I'm always careful, Poppy," she said with a wide grin, ignoring the eye twitch at her use of the Matron's first name, "you know me, always walking on eggshells."

Madam Pomfrey, it seemed, wasn't the only one that found that idea to be ludicrous, if the assortment of snorts and laughs were anything to go off of.

Hope just huffed in annoyance, her cheeks stained a pink that hadn't come from the cold. She was immeasurably relieved that the colour had faded by the time they had returned to the ground level, heading for the Great Hall.

Astonishment was the first emotion she felt when they sat down, because the sheer amount of food was completely insane. There was so much turkey, potatoes, cranberry sauce, buttered peas and much more.

"Are Christmas dinners always like this?" she asked in awe as they settled into the open seats by Percy—who had stuck to his promise and was not sitting with the prefects.

"Typically, yeah, great, aren't they?" Fred said with a grin, holding out a cracker for her to pull apart with him.

Bemused, she gripped the opposite end and pulled, giving a yelp of surprise when it exploded and hid them in a blue cloud. The shocked expression was still on her face when it had cleared, revealing an admiral's hat…and some very alive white mice. Hope stared after the rodents as they scampered away, completely dumbfounded.

Ron had already dug into his food, but Hope was still in a bit of astonishment when something soft brushed against her cheek. She turned and smiled, grabbing the end of George's cracker, but jumping again when the loud noise erupted from it, this time covering them in a cloud of bright red. The gift in the centre was a band new chess set—much like the board that Hope had gotten for Ron. She grinned, setting it with the hat and finally tucking into her food.

Of course, everything was delicious, and even that was an understatement. Somehow, the food was even better than it generally was, but that was probably because it was Christmas. She laughed with them all as she carried her pile of new gifts (which now included a grow-your-own-warts kit and a few packs of non-explodable, luminous balloons) up to the common room.

"Ready for a snowball fight?" George grinned as she returned from the stairs to her dormitory, carrying her thick hat and gloves in one hand, the other using the railing for assistance on the way down.

"Oh, absolutely," she laughed. "Get ready to brained by my awesomeness!"

She ran off before he could respond to that, leaving him blinking in surprise, musing aloud. "How can she be so fast with that limp?"
The snow was falling heavily and deep around the Granger's house, making it look remarkably like a gingerbread house that had been recently iced. All the houses on the street looked like that, though, so Hermione couldn't really complain as she unwrapped all of her presents giving the appropriate amount of joy for each gift. Hers were mostly book-related, true to her love of the written word. Once she had finished unwrapping all the packages, she pulled out a small pile of photos that Hope had given her to show to her parents.

"This is me, Hope, and Ron," Hermione was telling her parents, showing them a few pictures of her friends at Hogwarts. They were still in a bit of awe that the images could move.

"Hope, Ron, and I," her mother corrected automatically with a kindly smile as she took the pictures from her daughter. Her daughter's friends (oh, how she would never tire of using that word!) were both red-haired, but the girl's was far darker than the boy's. The girl was the one she automatically drew attention to, as she was the female of her daughter's friends. Her smile was tired, but happy all the same, leaning heavily on a cane with one leg set in a brace as her other arm looped over Hermione's shoulders. She had a fragile sort of appearance that many girls desired at her age (and thereafter), one that drew eyes, like the next picture.

"Who's this boy?" she asked, watching in fascination as a slightly older boy bent down to toss the red-haired girl over his shoulder despite her protests and embarrassment. He looked a little like the boy Hermione was friends with.

"Oh, that's probably George, Ron's older brother," Hermione supplied with an amused grin, "he's fascinated by Hope."

A crush, then, it was sweet, Mrs. Granger had to admit, smiling reflexively at Hope's wide smile.

"He's a bit of a troublemaker," Hermione added as an afterthought, "but then so is Hope. She doesn't like authority much."

Her father arched a brown eyebrow, glancing at the pictures his wife handed him. "Wouldn't have figured that you would befriend troublemakers," he said slowly, ignoring the look his wife shot towards him.

Hermione shrugged, a fond smile melting onto her lips. "Hope only causes trouble mostly when we're in Potions class, like with our potion's professor, he hates her. He picks on her every day and she just insults him to his face."

Both parents look startled at that, but Hermione only grinned, one hand still playing lazily over the cover of the book Hope had gotten her, The Magick of Wicca. The note enclosed had said:

_I saw this and thought of you, her letter had said. Happy Holidays!

"I got her a cookbook, but only because she said she has trouble keeping recipes straight in her head," Hermione admitted, "what she really likes is discovering things, old and new."

Her father reached over to ruffle her bushy hair that was so like his. "She sounds lovely, they both do."

Hermione just grinned, knowing that they didn't really understand a bit about her life at Hogwarts but supporting her nonetheless.
"Take this!"
Fred yelled as a ball of icy-cold snow hit him in the face, knocking him back to the snow-covered ground.

Hope's laughter echoed on all sides before silencing rather suddenly as she pitched forward slightly by a blow to the back of the head.

"Ronald!" she yelled after the boy that had begun to race away soon after the ball had made contact with her face. The youngest Weasley boy ran as Hope hobbled after him packing snow into a compact ball. Fred was more impressed by how fast she was going with that limp of hers than the size of her orb.

"Mmph!"

"Oh!" Fred felt a bit sheepish as he went to unearth George from the pile of snow he had been encased under after the weighed-down branch above him had deposited it on him only moments before. "Sorry, Georgie!"

His twin hacked up a glob of white as he regained his breath, blinking around blearily, before his eyes shot wide and he ducked quickly to avoid a snowball that embedded in the tree behind him.
Fred wasn't so lucky, getting a shot to the stomach courtesy of Ron.

"Firsties versus Thirds!" Hope yelled, her thickly gloved hands clutching two impressive snowballs. "We're gonna cream you!"

"Bring it on, Potter!" they said, dodging quickly to avoid the barrage, ducking quickly behind an oak tree, making their white orbs in its safety.

She shrieked at the snowball that jarred her in the back. "You brats!" she yelled, scooping up the snow beside her as she leapt after the madly cackling twins. "I'm gonna get you!"

George yelped as she flung her body onto his back, shoving the ball of ice down the back of his shirt, making his body arch in an effort to make the cold ball not touch his skin. "MERLIN'S BALLS!"

Hope laughed loudly as he fell into the snow, thus adding more snow to his skin.

"Better luck next ti-ah!" Hope rolled off his back, dodging Fred's snowball aimed at her forehead. "Bring it on, you arse-hole!"

"Switching sides already?" he jeered back, only to yelp as she lobbed a new snowball at his big, fat mouth. "I'm gonna get you!"

"You can try!" she yelled back, dancing out of the way as George's snowball flew past her face by a few inches, a few scant inches at that. And then she fell over. Three ginger heads swivelled in her direction, but the funniest part is that none were more surprised than Hope herself. The stunned expression was priceless as she stared down at her now immobile leg.

She swore. Loudly.

The boys laughed. Louder.

"Unfair!" she complained as she struggled into an upright sitting position, bending the leg at the knee
in an attempt to force the tense muscle to relax. "I've got-oh!"

She tried hard not to blush as she was swept up into George's arms, but she had lost that battle a long time ago.

"Hand it over, George!"

The twins were grinning ear to ear as they tossed Percy's prefect badge back and forth causing a general ruckus in the Gryffindor Tower with their older brother. Hope smiled through sleepy eyes, stuffed with the Christmas dinner they had just had. Ron had bypassed her completely, dozing in the armchair closest to the fire. Sometimes she wished she could fall asleep as easily as him, but that was far from her reach.

"Freddie!"

George lobbed the badge to his twin, ducking under Percy's arms, dancing out of reach. Hope chuckled softly, rubbing the sleep from her eyes as she did so in an effort to focus a bit more on the impromptu game. Fred and George were nothing if not persistent, at least that could be said of them.

She leaned back suddenly so it wouldn't bash her across the head as it passed, turning a baleful stare towards Fred, her face no longer amused.

"Whoops!"

She rolled her eyes as Percy took that brief lack of attention to steal his badge back from his brothers.

"That's enough!" he snapped, their antics grating on his last nerve.

"Boys," Hope said in a tired voice, "play nice." She turned her big green eyes on George. "Please? For me?"

"Sure!" George said with a wide grin, the tips of his ears a little pink, making his twin snort. "Yeah, we'll just head up to bed now—"

Fred winked at her as they ascended the stairs after their younger brother who quickly—and sleepily—bid his friend goodnight. Percy made to follow them when Hope stalled him with her words.

"Spare a moment, would you, Percy?"

Percy Weasley glanced over her, taking in her sleep-lined features, despite her lively green eyes which glowed strangely in firelight. She looked very exhausted, as if she hadn't slept well in a long time.

"I have an academic question," she added at his confusion (and concern). "I wanted to do an extra credit paper on Nicolas Flamel for Professor Binns, but I'm not quite sure what kind of book would have something about him."

"Nicolas Flamel?" Percy repeated. "The famous alchemist?"

Hope snapped her fingers, a grin touching her lips. "That's the one! So, do you know what kind of…?"

"Well, the man is over six-hundred years old," Percy admitted, "maybe the books you're looking in are too modern?"
Her surprise melted quickly. "Thanks, Percy!"

Percy smiled gently as she dug through her bag for her books. "No problem, just try not to stay up too late, alright, Hope?"

"You got it," she responded, her finger tracing down the page as she skimmed for the name. Percy got the feeling that she wasn't really listening to a word he said, but there was no use in responding, she probably wouldn't hear it either way. So, he muttered a hasty goodnight and ascended to his empty dormitory, leaving her in silence.

He was over six-hundred years old? That would explain why he wasn't in Great Wizards of the Twentieth Century, or Notable Magical Names of Our Time, or Important Modern Magical Discoveries, or even A Study of Recent Developments in Wizardry. Those books would all be too up-to-date for him to appear in.

Hope sighed a bit forlornly. She didn't feel like going upstairs to grab any of the ancient books in the library of her trunk, but as she sat there in deep thought, she decided she would to grab her new (and old) invisibility cloak.

*Use it well,* her note had said, and what else could she do with it but walk about the castle when most others were fast asleep? It was almost too hard to resist and five minutes later she was moving invisibly through the halls. She was mildly tempted to investigate the Restricted Section of the library, but as she already had the general idea of who Flamel was, there really was no point to, so she merely wandered about, simply gazing at the pictures she passed. She had never particularly noticed how beautiful some of them were.

Then, she had to stop, to scowl at the suit of armour that was staring right at her even with her invisibility cloak. Sir Michael Richmond was a strange suit of armour. Its visor creaked as if it was smiling underneath. Hope wasn't sure how long she stared at him in aggravation, before she stepped backwards, almost bumping into a professor but catching herself at the last possible second and teetering away from him suddenly.

It was Snape. She held her breath, her hand covering her mouth and nose effectively as he stared right at her. It was quite a bit like the way the suit of armour had, but his was unnerving, because she knew he couldn't see her, but she had the feeling that he knew she was there.

She backed away from him slowly, careful to make as little noise as she could, moving backwards until she was out of his sight and she could breathe again. She gulped the air greedily, resting her back against the door that she had hidden behind. Her lungs felt as though she had swallowed fire; exactly how long had she been holding her breath?

It was only when she opened her eyes that she realized she had no idea where she was.

The cloak fluttered to her feet as she stood, gazing inquisitively at the only item that lay in the room. It was tall, nearly reaching the ceiling and hidden behind a lengthy maroon sheet. Her eyebrows furrowed in confusion as she limped forward to grasp a bit of the material and yank it from whatever it was hiding. She gave the barest of tugs and the sheet fell, pooling at her feet, revealing what lay beneath.

It was a mirror. That stunned her, because why on earth would someone want to hide a mirror? It was beautiful too, she had to admit, standing on a pair of golden clawed feet that matched its intricate golden frame. Carved into the frame that was spread across the top were letters and words that made no sense to her: *Erised stra ehru oyt ube cafru oyt on wohsi.* They weren't from any language she'd ever read, not that she'd read many to begin with, so it must have been a code. A code written on a
mirror… her eyes narrowed, her lips moving soundlessly as she read the letters backwards, as words often appeared in reverse when shown in a mirror: *I show not your face but your heart's desire.*

Heart's desire… that was a bit foreboding. Her breath shook as she breathed in and out slowly, her eyes closing before she could even look upon the reflection.

Theoretically, she could leave this room and pretend she'd never gone exploring, but at the same time, she wished to know what her greatest desire was. So, at long last, her eyes finally fluttered open to stare at her reflection.

At first it was simply her, standing there, twisting the black stone on her ring with a sorrowful expression. Hope knew that expression well. She stepped back suddenly, a startled gasp escaping her lips as two figures appeared beside her.

The one on the left she recognized easily, for it was the face she saw in the mirror, the face of Lily Potter. She was far more beautiful than she could have possibly imagined, Hope would have likened it to gazing upon an angel or a dryad of Greece who were notoriously fair.

"Mum?" she whispered faintly, her eyes glazing with tears as her mother's lips widened into a smile that she recognized as her own. It was only then that she shifted her eyes to the man who was her father. His hair was messy and black and his eyes were a bright hazel, framed by circular glasses. She had never seen a picture of James Potter before. When she was little, she would play a little game of pretend and guess where her looks came from, as it had been before she had found a picture of her mother that Petunia had kept. She imagined that she got her eyes from her Mum and her hair from her Dad. It made her a little sad that she didn't really have any of her father's physical traits.

His eyes grew soft as if he could read her mind and hear her thoughts, and the image of her parents morphed into her reflection, but the image of the eleven year old witch was growing before her very eyes until a young woman stood before her. Her dark red hair shimmered different colors in the sunlight as it caught her thick and loose braid, her eyes as bright as her smile. In her arms she contently held a small boy with red hair and green eyes and an impish smile, looking very much like his mother.

She stumbled backwards in shock and a spiteful voice inside her head whispered, *There you go, Hope, what you really want is a family of your own.*

Her sadness was mixed with happiness as her parents reappeared, their smiles sadder than before. She felt at a loss as she stumbled backwards and away, but it wasn't like she could change what she wanted to see, could she? Her eyes fell instead to the floor so she would not have to feel the obligation to stare upon the mirror's reflective surface once more, because she had felt the keen sting and ache that enveloped her heart, leaving a residual pain that lingered.

It was late at night when George slipped soundlessly down the stairs, shivering at the cold. He wasn't sure why it was that he was so cold, because Fred had been sleeping soundly in bed next to him. So he had left the dormitory to make his way down the stairs to sit before the fire.

"What are you doing?" a tired voice proclaimed from the couch.

George swore as he stumbled and fell on his face, twisting to stare at Hope.

Her eyes were closed, giving off the impression of sleep, though her lips twitched into a smile. She had a number of blankets wrapped around her and the *Tales of Beedle of Bard* and a small book had fallen open to the ground perhaps minutes or hours before.
"Er…nothing," George said quickly, feeling secretly pleased that she had been reading his book.

She opened one sleepy green eye, the fire dancing in the orb, making it appear as mystical as the moon outside, before closing it rather lazily. "What're you doing down here?"

"I was sleeping," she said in irritation, "you know, dreaming."

"About what?" He couldn't help but ask.

"Some inventive ways to shut you up, now go to sleep."

"Oh yeah?" George quirked his eyebrows in amusement. "Like how?"

"Go away!" she groaned, burying her face in her pillow that had been pushed against the arm of the couch.

"No, seriously, what are you doing down here?" he asked her.

She lifted her head, her eyes twinkled. "Sleeping, Weasley, now, off you go." Then she paused. "Wait…why are you down here?"

George shifted uncomfortably, garnering the green-eyed girl's unabashed interest. She didn't comment on how obviously cold he was, simply crooking a finger towards him, inviting him closer. As soon as he was near enough to touch, she cupped his cheeks with her warm hands, letting out a hiss of surprise.

"You're ice cold!"

She dragged him slightly closer, brushing the back of her hand against his forehead and cheek. "What have you been doing, Weasley?" she admonished him as she pulled one of the blankets from her back to don his like a majestic cloak. "Geez! Have you been sitting in an open window?" she demanded, her eyes sparkling in the firelight.

George opened his mouth to refute, but his cheeks had flushed so suddenly with heat that he found himself at a loss of words. She looked so pretty when she was angry on his behalf (and at him, at the same time).

"That's very helpful," Hope added dryly, ignoring the blush on his cheeks as best as she could, though she couldn't help but wonder what had brought it on. "You're a menace, you know?"

"It's been said," George agreed, regaining the use of his tongue, and in doing so, his voice.

"I hope so," she said in return, ignoring the unintended pun on her name that she had used. "I didn't get to tell you earlier, but I really liked your present."

A pleased grin lit his face. Hope tried not to blush at the sight of it. "Really?"

"Yeah," she agreed, "but what are the Tales of Beedle the Bard?"

"Oh, they're a collection of children's stories," George informed her with a smile. "Mum used to tell them to us when we were kids. Did you like them?"

"I haven't had the chance to read it yet," Hope admitted, blinking harshly in the half light, rubbing her eyes and giving a wide yawn that reminded George a bit of how Ginny was when she was tired. "Are they any good?"
"Depends on what you like," George offered, "Everyone's got a favourite, I suppose, and everyone's got one that they'd rather hear first to get it over with."

Hope quirked a curious eyebrow, a soft smile lighting her lips, making her face seem more alive. "Oh? Why's that?"

George looked at her oddly. "Well don't you have a least favourite and favourite fairy-tale? Don't muggles have fairy-tales?"

The smile her face now bore was on the bitter side, but also filled with deep longing. "They do, but I never read or had any read to me, I preferred *The Hobbit* and *The Lord of the Rings* a hundred times over to those unrealistic fairy-tales of theirs," she said, waving a dismissive hand.

"What's a hobbit?" George asked in confusion, having never heard the term before.

Hope's eyes lit up as she laughed. "It's a being that lives in the fantasy world of Middle-earth, and they're very short and walk barefoot. They don't approve of adventures but one of them always manages to go off on one...I wanted to be a hobbit when I was a little girl," she said stoutly.

George was staring at like he'd never quite seen anything like her (which was quite true, but never mind that). Short, he could see, barefoot, also, and seeking an adventure, that was a given. "I think you'd be a good hobbit."

She smirked. "Coming from someone who doesn't really know what a hobbit is?"

"Nope!" George said, popping the 'p'.

Amusement lifted her lips. "I could read it to you, if you like, *The Hobbit*."

His blue eyes watched her for a long moment, which would have been unnerving if she wasn't so used to looking into his eyes (they were such a pretty blue...and very hypnotic, but she would have rather clubbed herself over the head with a blunt axe than admit that). She wasn't sure what it was that he sought in her eyes, but she was certain whatever it was couldn't be found there.

"I'd like that."

She was so focused on his eyes, she'd almost missed his words. She blinked twice. "What?"

His lips twitched. "Storytelling, I'd like it."

Her beaming smile outshone his as she scooped the fragile looking book from where it lay atop a book on Egyptian Mythology. George noted that the spine was falling apart from how often she'd read it.

"In a hole in the ground there lived a hobbit," Hope began, the bright smile still lighting her face as she read the long-familiar words. "Not a nasty, dirty, wet hole, filled with the ends of worms and an oozy smell, nor yet a dry, bare, sandy hole with nothing in it to sit down on or to eat: it was a hobbit-hole, and that means comfort."

"Why does that mean comfort?" George found himself asking, much like a child interrupting their story-telling parent with needless questions.

"Because homes are filled with comfort, now hush!" Hope admonished with a grin. "It had a perfectly round door like a porthole, painted green, with a shiny yellow brass knob in the exact middle. The door opened on to a tube-shaped hall like a tunnel: a very comfortable tunnel without
smoke, with panelled walls, and floors tiled and carpeted, provided with polished chairs, and lots and lots of pegs for hats and coats – the hobbit was fond of visitors."

Neither knew how long they sat listening or reading from that book, but Hope's gentle earth-enriched voice paired with the warmth of the fire lulled George to sleep in no time, the last words he heard and understood being: "Bilbo went to sleep with that in his ears, and it gave him very uncomfortable dreams. It was long after the break of day, when he woke up…”
Hope worried Ron. It wasn't the normal worry either, as she typically worried him with that leg of hers and that clever tongue that got her into so many detentions with Snape. She worried him because she had an obsession with that old mirror.

Ron had seen it's strange, mysterious powers himself—him, Head Boy, Quidditch Captain!—but the way Hope was drawn to it couldn't be healthy. Her temper was rearing its ugly head too, so now Ron had to be extra careful about what he said to her. He could only hope that she'd snap out of it soon.

Hope, on the other hand, though Ron was being ridiculous. She was not obsessed! Hardly! She just couldn't help but be fascinated by a mirror that could show you what you wanted, whatever you wanted. What kind of magic was that, exactly? The mirror was certainly old, perhaps older than Hogwarts, and had carvings reminiscent to the Celtic Tree, which meant (at the most basic level) that everything was connected to each other. She'd seen the same carvings at the main level of Hogwarts—at its foundation, appropriately—only in stone.

And so, on the third night, she returned once more to marvel at the ceiling-high mirror. This time, though, she wasn't alone.

"You can come out, you know," she said, her voice tinged with annoyance, "I can hear you."

For one startled moment, Hope was almost certain that she had imagined it, but then a smooth voice answered her.

"Your eyes are keen, Elpis." The words echoed in the silence, hiding the speaker's location, until—She twisted around to glare with angry red eyes at the speaker. "It's Hope, you arse-hat!"

The soft chuckle emanated from the space of the doorway as a young man walked through it, seemingly unaware of Hope's venomous stare as he moved forward to stand beside the first-year, gazing into the mirror as well. She wasn't too surprised by his appearance, considering she'd already seen a picture of the youthful Salazar Slytherin and she'd already seen him before, albeit months perviously.

"Quite a marvellous display of magic, no?" he inquired, his lips twitching slightly as he did so, glancing down slightly towards his many times great-granddaughter. "Took me a very long time to craft it, you know."

"You made it?" Hope was much too surprised to be angry this time. "I mean, I knew it was old…and the pattern is almost identical to the pattern on the bricks at the foundation of Hogwarts."

"Caught that did you?" He sounded a bit pleased that she had noticed. "Aye, I made it for your dear old grand-mum." He ran a hand along its surface, recalling when he had etched it by hand so very long ago, though, to him, it seemed like only short years as opposed to centuries.

"Oh?" Hope said, though her voice was soft. Salazar took note of it immediately as he glanced back at her, trying to gauge her reaction, but the dark—for her hair was now pin-straight and black—fringe hid her expressive eyes from view.

"Morea was a very difficult woman," the man said with a laugh that far more light-hearted than he was portrayed, "and she was set on being a powerful, unmarried witch at the time, she wasn't..."
someone you could simply *woo*.

"No matter how hard you tried?" she asked dryly.

He chuckled nervously, rubbing his chin with one hand. "Well, she was a beauty and had such a fiery spirit. She turned me down a total of thirteen times."

"For marriage or just courting?"

"That was just to court her," he admitted, "took me seven tries to propose marriage, but anyways, back to the mirror. I was trying to show her that even she had something that she desired."

"Hm," was all Hope said to that. "You are a very strange man."

"And you're a thief," he retorted, though he didn't deny her words.

A laugh actually escaped her lips this time at his words. She hadn't been much of a thief to begin with. "Not anymore; I can't be a good thief if I can't run away as fast."

Her grandfather's eyes dropped to her leg that was in the thick wrap she wore while sleeping. His magic was weak as it was and his time in this realm was short; he could not heal her leg.

"I'm not asking you to."

He blinked his pale green eyes, meeting her still-red ones. Oh, he must have spoken aloud. The stony stare was one that he'd often been on the receiving end of, courtesy of Morea. He reached out a hand to steady her as she struggled into a standing position, but she ignored it, using her own strength to stand.

"I love a good challenge," she said with a smirk reminiscent of her father's, "and I don't need some century-old ancestor of mine keeping tabs on me. Go," her voice dropped, becoming soft, "be with your wife; she's waited long enough for you, don't you think?"

Salazar's eyes softened, raising a hand to cup her cheek as he did so. "You remind me a good bit of her," he said quietly, smoothing his thumb over her cheekbone. "Spirited with fire in the heart…and curious, ever curious. She had the same kind of curiosity that drove my son mad."

Hope froze into an ice statue under his hand, but he feigned not noticing the effect his words had on her.

"He was a bright, fascinated creature, until he delved too deeply into the very arts you yourself are drawn to," he said quietly, his eyes shadowed and his face unreadable. "I pray that the same does not become of you, granddaughter."

"And if it does?" Hope whispered, her mouth dry.

His eyes glowed as he met hers, one last time. "It won't," he said with certainty, "because you have something that keeps you pure."

And then he faded from the world of the living completely, leaving Hope alone before that mirror of his.

Pure had many connotations, but she was pretty sure that he wasn't talking about virginity. When she thought of pure, she thought of a slate wiped clean, or the colour white. Pure…something that keeps you sane…was it stupid that she thought of George's insane smile?
"Back again, Hope?"

She screamed, loudly, twisting around wildly, her wand tangling with her sleeve as she pointed it aggressively at the speaker. Not really a good thing, as the person who had spoken was Headmaster Dumbledore.

"Don't do that!" she gasped, her heart still throbbing in her chest, too startled to realize how rude she was being. "I don't like to be-" She waved the hand that held her wand around for effect, giving her a chance to get a few gulps of air.

An amused smile settled on his lips and his eyes twinkled behind his crescent spectacles. Crazy old man… Her heart rate picked up for a moment when she thought that the headmaster had heard the words she had exchanged by arguably the most dangerous of the Founders of Hogwarts, but then she realized that he hadn't been standing there long, so he couldn't have. She relaxed slightly as that knowledge seeped through her, reminding herself that some things should be kept secret, for more than one reason.

"So," Dumbledore continued with that mild voice of his, "you, like hundred before you, have discovered the delights of the Mirror of Erised."

Green eyes drifted back to the reflective surface, almost involuntarily. Longing filled them as she watched her mother weave together a wreath of flowers which she placed like a tiara onto child-Hope's head, and as she father lifted her up and swung her around, making child-Hope giggle. She bit her lip, sucking it between her teeth to force it to stop trembling.

"Delights?" she grumbled under her breath. "Hardly." Delight was not a good word to describe this situation she found herself in. Taunting, perhaps, but not delightful in the slightest.

"I expect you've realized by now what it does?" Dumbledore continued, not having heard her grumble.

Hope twisted slightly to glance back to him. Was it her, or did he look a little sad? Perhaps he too saw something he had lost once. "It shows us what we want most in the world, even if it can't be granted to us."

The answer surprised and impressed Albus Dumbledore, who had thought she would need a bit of prodding to come up with it. Lily's daughter through and through; he shouldn't have expected any less.

"Yes," he said in agreement, "however, this mirror will give us neither knowledge nor truth. Men and women have wasted away before it, entranced by what they have seen, or been driven mad, not knowing if what it shows is real or even possible." As he said this, her lips turned downwards, irritation settling onto her face.

Was that a jibe at her? She knew the difference between reality and illusion, thank you very much. "The Mirror will be moved to a new home tomorrow, Hope, and I ask you not go looking for it again. If you ever do run across it, you will now be prepared. It does not do to dwell on dreams and forget to live, please remember that. Now, why don't you put that admirable cloak back on and get off to bed?"

"In the mirror," Hope said suddenly, before he could leave, "in the mirror, what do you see, if I may ask?"

She saw a flicker of that aged sadness before he gave her a kindly smile. "I? I see myself holding a
pair of thick, woollen socks."

The dubious stare Hope's face bore told tale of disbelief. Was that the best lie he could come up with?

"One can never have enough socks," Dumbledore said, giving her a conspirator wink. "Another Christmas has come and gone and I didn't get a single pair. People insist on giving me books." And with that being said, he left the Gryffindor to mouth wordlessly in his wake.

"Argh!" she burst aloud, slapping her cold cheeks feverishly with her hands until she was sure they were red from the movement. "Stupid-stupid-stupid girl! Should've listened to Ron in the first place! No good- foolish- rotten piece of sh-

"Hope?"

Hope swung around on the heel of her good leg, her hands still on her cheeks. She must have looked quite the picture. "Ron?" Her first friend wasn't too surprised of her situation (she could see his lips twitching at how she looked, though), though a little exasperated. "What're you doing here?"

"Trying to keep an eye on you," he said with no short measure of annoyance. "You and that mirror are a bad combination, you know."

She wrinkled her nose at that, resisting the urge to get one last look at the mirror. It had, after all, been a creation of Salazar Slytherin, and could –arguably- be as dangerous as he had been in life. She grimaced. "Well," she mumbled, punctuating her words with a tired yawn, "you aren't wrong there, mate."

"When was the last time you slept?" Ron demanded as she stumbled forward, pulling one of her arms over his shoulders as he did so, the other wrapping securely around her waist.

"Mn…dunno," Hope slurred in exhaustion as he pulled her through the door (bending down to grab her cloak because she'd probably kill him with he forgot it), down the corridor and up a few stairs. Her brain wasn't functioning as well as it should, because she asked: "How many hours are in three days?"

Ron crooked an eyebrow at her, almost tripping over a step. "You haven't slept in seventy-two hours?!

"Wasn't really tired at the time," she murmured as they came to a stop in front of the portrait hole, taking but a second it get into it, "but I'm really sleepy now…weird…"

Ron rolled his eyes at his friend who had collapsed onto the couch –which had become her makeshift bed during the Christmas hols–, hoisting the thick blankets up around her small body and curling her arm over her pillow and under her head. He was more than slightly amused when she fell instantly to sleep.

No sleep for three days? Ron could only shake his head at that. You wouldn't catch him doing such a thing as foolish as spending hours upon hours staring into a mirror that showed you something you would never have (for her at least). He'd prefer sanity instead.

Hope slept through the whole next day, which was an impressive feat on its own, as Fred and George often forgot that she was slumbering away on the couch, unaware of all that transpired. Which was really lucky, because Fred had taken to concocting scenarios to how she would awaken; George kissing her awake was quite popular (George gave his twin a glare for that).
It was only the day after when she finally awoke, well rested. It was still dark out, but Hope hurried into the shower and into a fresh set of clothes before leaving the common room in a rush. It was a miracle none of the Weasley boys awoke from the noise she made, but she paid it no heed, limping down the stairs with her cane in hand, making for the viaduct bridge.

The sun had only just begun to paint oranges and pinks across the sky, luckily for Hope, who had long desired to see a winter sunrise (and sunset), yet never seemed to awaken early enough to see the former.

"Miss Potter?"

Professor McGonagall was surprised to find one of her favourite Transfiguration students leaning against a stone window of the viaduct. Her face was set in a surprisingly bright expression and her eyes –dark brown– were millions of miles away. She was positive she hadn't heard her. "Miss Potter?"

No response.

She reached out a gentle hand to rest it upon her thickly clad elbow when she jerked away suddenly, twisting violently, her eyes wild (turning bright hazel).

"Oh," she gasped, resting a hand against her chest. "Professor! You startled me!"

"I can see that," Professor McGonagall said dryly, "shouldn't you be sleeping Miss Potter?"

"Sleep—?" she started in confusion before staring out at the early morning sun. She waved a hand dismissively, laughing lightly. "Oh, I slept the whole day away; Zeus knows I don't need any more rest."

Her professor's face grew concerned, but she just laughed and waved it off. "Don't look so worried, Professor, my mind was too active for sleep."

Her eyes grew to the same colour of pink that was painted across the horizon as she leaned her elbows on the stone. She didn't know why, but she had an utter fascination with the sky, whether it be night or day, stars or not (though, preferably with stars).

"And why, may I ask, are you out so early in the morning?" McGonagall asked primly, glancing her over with a careful eye.

The grin she gave her in response reminded her of the girl's deceased father a bit too much. "Why, to see the sunrise of course." She could hear James' amused sort of mocking way of talking.

"Can I ask you something, Professor?" she asked suddenly.

"Of course," she said automatically, reminded distantly of a young Lily Evans asking her if it really mattered how she had inherited her magic.

"Do you ever not compare me to my parents?"

The tone of her voice was strangely blunt, not at all like her emotion-filled voice. It made McGonagall feel oddly guilty, as if she was the child that had been caught with her hand in the cookie jar. Honestly, she was startlingly like either of her parents that it was difficult to not view her as such, and she told her that (voicing it as delicately as she possibly could).

Hope's eyes turned an icy-blue and she gave a small huff of annoyance, muttering something
unsavoury and French under her breath. She knew French? "I don't like when people compare me to my parents," she said finally, brushing her hair from her face, curling one strand around her finger as she did so. "They often forget that I am not them." Her eyes fastened on McGonagall as if to say "like certain professors, for instance."

McGonagall's smile was thin. "You have my sincerest apologies, if I have offended you." And she meant it.

"You haven't," Hope said with an air of amusement. "I was just going to see if you were going to admit it."

It was so utterly backhanded and Slytherin that McGonagall was impressed. She had enticed an apology out of her with very few words.

"I do not think your parents would have dared to do something like that," the older woman said dryly.

Hope laughed, her laughter bringing a new light to her eyes. "That is good to know." This whole situation was a bit odd, as students didn't typically have casual conversations with their teachers, unless it involved their grade or schoolwork in general.

"Then, would you mind if I asked you a question myself?" she asked, to which Hope gave a light inclination of the head, her eyes once again on the sky beyond.

"You're a metamorphmagus, so why is it that you don't change the colour of your hair and eyes as often?" She had only seen it a few times when it was not that dark crimson that she had inherited from her mother.

"I was told that it suited me," Hope said calmly, though her cheeks had flooded with colour, greatly amusing the professor. Like father, like daughter, she thought, being attracted to red-heads, and all.

"George Weasley is not wrong."

Her cheeks turned the colour of beets and she stared, stunned at McGonagall. "Now, wait a mo', I never said-!" Her words quickly faded into incoherent ramblings that she couldn't decipher, but at the same time, didn't need to.

McGonagall's lips spread in a slight smile as Hope turned up her collar against the wind and turned on her heel, still sputtering about professors and troublemaking red-heads. That was something she had often heard Lily Evans complaining of (though her thoughts involved "toe-rag" and "black-haired fool" more often than not), with slight variations, of course. But, now that she'd thought about it, she'd never heard George and Hope fight so vocally or rudely (or at all) as her parents had.

It seemed Hope really was a bit different than her parents.

Fred wasn't quite sure how he got roped into helping Hope make a snowman, but the fact remained that he had. One would have thought that she had confused him with his brother, but Hope didn't make such mistakes. As it just so happened, George hadn't finished his homework and had been forced by Percy to remain inside (with Ron as well, who had left his holiday homework to the last minute) and finish it. Hope had pouted and begged until finally Fred gave in (mostly so she would simply cease her behaviour) and was dragged out into the freezing wind.

Hope's intense eyes –because, make no mistake, they were intense; he didn't know how George could stare so easily into them every day– were narrowed in concentration as she knelt in the snow,
packing the snow together into a large ball.

"Aren't you cold?" he asked her with a quirked eyebrow.

She laughed lightly. "Of course, but this snowman is going to be the best snowman in the world, so I must give a little to gain a lot," she said stoutly in an almost childish gesture that got him for about five seconds until he realized she was joking. "Course I'm cold, you numpty! I just want to make a snowman, that's all."

Fred stopped where he was making the body (as Hope was making the base) of the snowman. "Have you ever made a snowman?" he asked cautiously, silently wishing he had George to deal with all this (she told George everything).

Hope's thickly gloved hands stilled over the snow. "Why do you ask?" she inquired, her voice strangely high, giving her away.

"I just do," Fred said bluntly. "So? Have you ever made a snowman?"

A sigh of visible fog left her lips as her eyes fluttered closed for a short moment. Fred wasn't quite sure why, but she seemed to be gathering herself, like whenever his dad got angry. "No," she said finally, "I've never made a snowman in all my life."

"Why not?" Fred asked, honestly curious.

Hope pursed her lips at the question. "Because Petunia didn't want me mixing with her son, or having any kind of fun, now that I think about it. She thinks I'm a bit unnatural, so does her husband." She grinned suddenly. "Hence why I've been a complete utter bitch for the last few years."

"You are unbelievable, you are," Fred said with a bit of awe, staring at her as if he had never quite looked at her properly.

"Thank you," she said, batting her eyelashes at him in a flirtatious gesture, "but I think George might get a little jealous if you keep talking like that, Weasley."

Fred snorted at her comment as she pulled a carrot missing its tip out of her pocket and stuffing into the centre of the head, using an assortment of coloured buttons as the eyes, mouth, and (obviously) the buttons that went down the front.

She grinned feverishly, clapping her hands together in happiness. "See, told you! He's perfect!"

Fred wasn't so sure with a bulging belly like that (he wasn't quite sure how exactly it had gotten so big, but here it was, oh well). "Are you sure? He looks a bit on the plump side…"

"What are you talking about?" Hope chortled. "He's beautiful! And I'm going to call him Bombur, just to be on the safe side."

Fred couldn't help but stare at her as if she had a second head as she hummed the lyrics to the song she had sung—embarrassingly—for George not several nights earlier whilst reading that first chapter of her beloved book:

"Chip the glasses and crack the plates!

Blunt the knives and bend the forks!"
That's what Bilbo Baggins hates-

*Smash the bottles and burn the corks!*

It finally made sense when George and Hope explained it a dinnertime, but at the same time, made no sense at all. And, thus, Hope became the not-so-official storyteller of Gryffindor House, reading the Hobbit late into the night until her three-boy audience had fallen asleep. She shook her head; Weasleys never changed, did they?
The weather was downright terrible when Hope had gone down to practice for the up-coming Quidditch match, and it hadn't improved at all during the few hours that they'd practiced, in fact, it probably got worse. Hope could hardly see her hand in front of her, though Oliver's voice was loud and clear, his irritation leaking through at the twins pretending to fall off their brooms (which was a bit foolish, Hope had to agree).

"Will you stop messing around!" Oliver demanded, barely being heard over the dull roar of the storm around them. "Snape's refereeing this time, and he'll be looking for any excuse to knock points off Gryffindor!"

It was not a pleasant taste that mud had, just ask George Weasley who had fallen from his broom only moments previously, swallowing a bit of mud as he did so. He struggled to spit it out, howling, "Snape's refereeing?! When's he ever refereed a Quidditch match? He's not going to be fair if-argh!"

Five heads swivelled in the Weasley boy's direction, trying not to laugh, because Hope, who had just landed, hadn't been able to see very clearly in the dark and mud, and had tripped, falling onto his back, pressing his face into the mud again.

"Sorry," she groaned into his ear as she rolled off him into the mud as well. "It's kind of dark, you know…"

Angelina hid a smile –though Fred was roaring with laughter– as she helped the younger girl stand, but the smile soon slipped from her face. "What's wrong? You're really pale."

"Snape," she muttered simply, "the bane of my existence…why do the gods curse me so?"

Alicia Spinnet snickered behind her hand as Wood called out the end of practice. "Come on; let's get you changed, maybe that'll get you in better spirits."

"Doubtful," Hope grumbled, but complied all the same, limping in the direction of the changing room until Oliver had to run after her and tug her in the opposite direction, the real direction of the changing rooms. The girls ended up deciding to shower in Gryffindor Tower, because it was a much better prospect compared to the showers in the changing room, and so, not ten minutes later (because one could move very fast when a shower was near at hand) the Chasers and Seeker were washing the mud and grime and sweat from their bodies.

One thing everyone had to get used to in Hogwarts was the shared showers, meaning one didn't have much time to be self-conscious of their body. Of course, there were separate stalls, but with thin shower curtains. If you wanted to make sure your clothes didn't get wet, you usually had to strip before entering one of the stalls (something that Hermione wasn't a fan of).

Hermione wasn't really surprised to find her best friend and her teammates having yet another discussion as they showered; it happened more often than it didn't. Angelina Johnson was leaning on the tiled separator between her stall and Hope's, her chin propped on her arms.

"A bad feeling?" she asked dubiously. "About what?"

Hope shot her an annoyed glance, rinsing the shampoo from her hair. "You know what: Snape."

Hermione slipped into the stall beside Hope, flushing darkly when all the girls called out greetings to her.
Angelina arched an eyebrow at the younger girl. "What, you think he'll play dirty?"

The direction of this conversation was quite confusing to Hermione as she tossed a glance to Hope who in turn tossed a glance to Angelina that said "Snape always plays dirty."

"Snape's going to be the referee for the next Quidditch match," Hope supplied with an annoyed wrinkle of her nose. "And I have a bad feeling," she added as an afterthought.

"A bad feeling?" Hermione repeated Angelina's previous words. "Why?"

Hope's eyebrows creased in irritation, her eyes dark pits (it wasn't a look Hermione was fond of being on the receiving end of, though, thankfully, she rarely was). "Oh, I don't know," she said, her voice bitingly sarcastic, "maybe it's 'cause he's a cock."

The air was suddenly thick with coughs and gags and gasps, but Hope paid none of them any heed, seemingly more focused on her hair than anything else.

"What?" she demanded when the stares were turned on her. "Oh, come on! He's the biggest piece of —" she called Snape something that made Hermione say "Hope!"— "that ever lived! He doesn't teach us anything! The only thing I'm ever going to learn in his class is how restrain myself from taking my silver knife and shoving it—" She mimed the action, much to Alicia's amusement. "He has something against me, mark my words; he'll make the match a living hell."

Angelina couldn't help but arch an eyebrow. "Maybe he's just got something against Potters and Weasleys," she said, trying to sound reasonable, but not really hoping to change her mind about anything.

Hope gave her a baleful stare. "Or maybe he's just got something against Gryffindors, the ruddy tosspot."

Katie sniggered quietly as Hope dressed in silence, still muttering obscenities under her breath, before bidding them all goodnight, leaving several pairs of round eyes staring after her.

"Do you...do you think she's alright?" Hermione asked quietly, still staring in the direction that her friend had left.

"Meh," Angelina said carelessly, with a wave of her hand, "don't worry, she's just been pushing herself really hard lately, and her leg's been bothering her; I wouldn't be surprised if she started hexing some people by the end of the week."

Hermione grimaced as the others left her in silence and solitude.

Angelina was right about one thing; Hope had been pushing herself very hard, harder than she should have. Hermione thought maybe something had happened over the holiday, but no one ever mentioned anything, so she assumed it was just her being irrational.

Hope had been so preoccupied before the holidays, it had almost seemed as if she was missing out on an assortment of things, but now she was lively, very lively indeed. Hermione had almost stayed at Hogwarts for the short vacation because she was worried about her friend, but Hope had convinced her that she was fine and didn't need any looking after.

She had been sure that there was something wrong with her leg, because she'd gone to her last few appointments without her or Ron, but she never said a word about it. However, when she had asked Madame Pomfrey about it, the woman had seemed surprised. She said that there was nothing of the sort wrong with her, more likely than not, it was the stress of the on-coming exams or the Quidditch match, or maybe she just wanted to be alone for a bit.
Hope had never worried about Quidditch matches before, though, but then those matches hadn't been conducted by the professor who hated you the most.

Maybe she was on to something with that bad feeling of hers.

The next few days didn't help Hope's mood, and she actually had to have both of the Weasley Twins restrain her from killing that blonde-haired ingrate whom shall never be named (cough, Malfoy, cough)

"Don't play," Hermione advised one night as Hope rested her cheek on her fist, her homework lying unfinished on her lap.

"Say you're ill," Ron added from the armchair, "you look the part, at least."

"Pretend to break your leg," Hermione offered.

"Really break your leg."

Hope rubbed a tired hand over her eyebrow, trying to ignore her low throbbing headache (or soothe it with the movement, she couldn't be sure which). "I can't," she refused simply. "Oliver'll kill me if I back out because of some unjust ruling, besides, if I did, we'd have to forfeit, because we don't have a reserve seeker."

"You're too nice!" Hermione moaned. "What if—" What if you're right? What if something bad happens? She didn't say anything, but she was sure the rest of her question showed on her face.

"I'll be fine," Hope assured her with that kind smile that suited a much older face. "You'll see-" Whatever else Hope had intended to say was cut short when Neville toppled into the room. The response: the whole common room erupted into loud laughter, annoying Hope as greatly as it had Hermione who had stood instantly, freeing his legs with the counter-curse.

Neville stumbled shakily over to the couch, on which Hope and Hermione had cleared a spot.

"Malfoy?" Hope asked sympathetically, sighing when he nodded mutely. "I tried to get me on my way out of the library earlier, but I knew the counter-curse."

"He got me there too!" Neville moaned into his hands. "He said he'd been looking for someone to practice it on."

"Go to Professor McGonagall!" Hermione said adamantly. "Report him!"

Hope tried to hide a snort; when did anyone take students seriously? She remembered how many times she complained to her Muggle teachers of Dudley, whether it be cheating or other forms of bullying, and how they never seemed to side with her, or at least always believed whatever lie Dudley put out. Like when he told everyone "She slipped", and that was how she got in the car accident; so she was a klutz on top of being an attention-seeking liar (now that had just been insulting; if Hope had been someone else, she was certain she would have been bawling). McGonagall may be nice, but at a certain point you had to stick up for yourself.

"You've got to stand up to him, Neville!" Ron was saying (had she zoned out? She must have). "He's used to walking all over people, but that's no reason to lie down in front of him and make it easier."

"Ron!" Hope warned.
"There's no need to tell me I'm not brave enough to be in Gryffindor, Malfoy's already done that," Neville said in return, his voice becoming throaty and choked, as if he was holding back tears.

"That's not what Ron's saying," Hope disagreed, her eyes latching onto his, gazing into the brown orbs imploringly. "There are different kinds of courage and the Sorting Hat saw that in you. Ignore Malfoy, you're worth twelve of him, and he knows it," she said with finality to the round-faced boy, handing him a chocolate frog, "besides, he's an attention-seeking prat not worthy of yours."

Sometimes when Hope spoke one had to take her words for granted, and this was one of those times.

"Thanks, Hope," he said, noticeably happier as he handed her the card that came with the chocolate before thanking Hermione as well and heading up for bed. Hope set the card on the small table beside the couch, staring into the fire once more.

Ron couldn't help but wonder what she saw in it, but Hope wasn't thinking about the fire at all.

She stared into the fiery depths, lost in thought. She hadn't told the other two that she had a rough idea about where they could read up on Nicholas Flamel, and she knew that she should have, but...

Hope frowned slightly. The search for his identity had been put on hold after the whole Mirror of Erised incident, but now she really didn't have a reason not to look him up.

"Hope? Are you coming?" Hermione's voice could be heard in her periphery and Hope dragged her eyes away from the fire to look up at her friend.

"Yeah, I'm coming," Hope said automatically, grabbing her cane from the floor and standing with as much grace as she possessed –which, frankly, wasn't much–, following the bushy-haired brunette up the stairs to the first year dormitory.

She changed in silence and climbed in her bed, laying asleep there for what seemed like hours, waiting for her dorm-mates to drop off to sleep, which took a surprisingly long time.

And once they had done so, it was only then that Hope finally decided to look into Nicolas Flamel once more. She threw off the covers of her bed and grabbed her wand before climbing out of the bed to walk around it to where her trunk was located.

She fumbled with her trunk, using a very faint "Lumos!" so that she might see the contents within. Hope mouthed the titles that the spines of the books bore, before finding the one she wanted and withdrawing it, locking her trunk once more, and climbing back into bed.

_Greatest Wizards of Ages Past_ was the book she had been searching for. It looked to be a bit of a bore, but the man who'd sold it to her had said it would be useful for History of Magic, and he wasn't wrong, there. And if it had something about ancient wizards, Nicholas Flamel would definitely have to count, since he was over six hundred years old.

Her illuminated wand tip was hidden behind the thick drapes so she wouldn't awaken her dorm mates, and tucked behind her ear as she skimmed the pages for one passage in particular.

_A Short Synopsis of Alchemy:_

_The ancient study of alchemy is concerned with making the Philosopher's Stone, a legendary substance with astonishing powers. The Stone will transform any metal into pure gold. It also produces the Elixir of Life, which will make the drinker immortal. An incorrect assumption was that the Stone could turn a base metal such as lead to gold or silver, when it can only turn metal to gold. The Philosopher's Stone has been a symbol of enlightenment or complete perfection, another reason for alchemists' to strive to create it._
There have been many reports of the Philosopher's Stone over the centuries, but the only Stone currently in existence belongs to Mr. Nicolas Flamel, the noted alchemist and opera-lover, who celebrated his six-hundred and sixty-fifth birthday last year, enjoys a quiet life in Devon with his wife, Perenelle (six-hundred and fifty-eight).

At last! Success!

A stone that could make one immortal, well, that would be something that a large number of people would desire. And there was the question of why Dumbledore would have it in Hogwarts; surely there were more secure holdings?

"Gringotts is the safest place in the world fer anything yeh want to keep safe- 'cept maybe Hogwarts." Wasn't that what Hagrid had said?

And then a vault had been broken into the day she'd gone with him to Diagon Alley, the same vault he'd emptied. If what he had removed from the vault was indeed the true Philosopher's Stone, then why hadn't the vault it was in been of a higher class? Or would that have attracted too much attention?

She frowned, tapping her chin thoughtfully, theorizing for a few minutes more –some theories possible, some not so much– before calling it a day and cancelling her light, replacing the book and wand beside her on the bedside table, closing her eyes and slipping into a deep slumber.

Hope leaned forward on her arms, the cool air brushing against her hair as she looked out upon the terrace. The weather was fair, not completely lovely, but then, it was only March, so she shouldn't have expected any less. Thick red gloves covered her palms and fingers so that her hands wouldn't freeze quite so much while clutching her broom. She frowned in annoyance at the soft noises her cane made with every movement.

Now Hope had a reason for why she hadn't told her friends of her recent breakthrough concerning Flamel, and that was mostly because she was feeling a bit more than slightly vindictive.

Bad feeling were real, they existed. Hope was more than a little annoyed that everyone thought she was being silly about the whole thing. Sure Snape was a douche, but there was something else that sent a shiver down her spine. Bad things seemed to follow her onto the Quidditch pitch. So, Hope walked silently out onto the field, trying to calm her racing heart as she disappeared into the changing room, returning just as morosely.

"Hope?"

Her eyes shifted upwards to regard George's concerned blue ones. "Hm?" she mumbled quietly, her voice a little raw from trying to defend herself so much.

"Are you alright?" he couldn't help but ask her. She looked very anxious, more anxious than he'd ever seen her.

"Just fine," she murmured in the same quiet manner. He wasn't sure if she could raise her voice much higher than that.

"Did you get any sleep last night?" he prodded.

She gave him an odd look. Maybe she looked tired (which she was; tired of trying to explain herself over and over again) "I slept fine."
"Hope!" Oliver sounded relieved when he saw that his seeker was already there and in uniform. "Good you're here! I need to talk to you for a second."

She nodded mutely, rolling her stiff shoulders to follow her captain.

George shared a glance with his twin. "Did she look a bit...worried to you?"

Fred's face was marred in a frown. "Angie says she's been a bit anxious about this match, something about Snape, I think."

Well, George couldn't fault her there.

"Don't want to pressure you, Potter," Oliver was saying to Hope, "but if we ever need an early capture of the Snitch, it's now. Finish the game before Snape can favour Hufflepuff too much."

Hope gave a lazy salute, trying not to roll her eyes at him. "Yes, sir."

"Are you sure you're alright?" he pressed after a brief moment of assessing her, catching sight of her over-flushed cheeks and slightly glazed eyes.

She threw him an annoyed glance. "I'm fine, stop asking."

And Oliver relented after she gave him a firm glare.

"The whole school's out there!" Fred commented from the door. "Even-blimey–Dumbledore's come to watch!"

"Really?"

Fred turned towards Hope's voice and balked slightly. "What in the name of Merlin are you doing?"

Hope had bent over backwards so that her body was shaped like a lowercase n. She rolled her eyes – the most life he'd seen in her today– and scoffed. "It's called stretching, genius."

If Hope was already that annoyed this early in the morning then the day was already off to a bad start. George winced behind him.

Hope pulled herself into a standing position, her eyes a brown so dark that they were almost black. "I still have a bad feeling," she grumbled under her breath as she fell into line with the rest.

"Nothing's going to go wrong," Angelina said in exasperation—and a bit of annoyance. "Stop worrying!"

The dark glare that settled on her face pulled Angelina's words up short, but, luckily, there was little reason to talk—or argue—, as not several seconds later both teams marched onto the pitch. Hope couldn't but feel a little glad that Snape looked a bit angry, though she couldn't fathom why; it was a beautiful day. Her eyes shifted upwards slightly, or at least it was a clear day.

They said their pleasantries, which consisted of a tough handshake by both captains and an agreeable nod—since it was Hufflepuff—and the whistle perched between Snape's lips began the game.

Apparently Hope had already begun to gain a bit of a reputation, because the first Bludger she saw was the one hurtling towards her collarbone. She rocketed her broom upwards, but she needn't have worried; George battered it away sending it—whether accidentally or on purpose, she couldn't be sure—towards Snape.
A penalty was awarded to Hufflepuff, but Hope thought it was worth it. She winked at the grinning Weasley as he flew past. He almost missed the next Bludger; Hope took full credit for that.

Hope circled the pitch, eyes trained on anything that was gold, but in this crowd, that could be anything. Catch the Snitch fast, he said, before Snape gives Hufflepuff too many penalties, he said. Fine. Her eyes flashed to something that small and golden fluttering by the Ravenclaw stands. She didn't dare glance to the Hufflepuff Seeker, Cedric Diggory, to see if he had seen it, already speeding towards it in a low dive that few ever dared to do (thus why she could hear, in the back of her mind, cheers and gasps), and even less at the speed she was going at.

Sharp dives were starting to become a signature of hers, something that both pleased and annoyed Oliver greatly (she suspected he was only annoyed because of the possibility of her getting ploughed). No one else minded as long as she made an attempt to worry about her own skin for once, which was rare.

She shot past Snape, hiding a smirk as she angled her elbow in such a way that it rammed into his side, but before he had the chance to call for a foul, Hope had pulled up, waving a clenched fist in triumph, inside which the silver wings of the Snitch fluttered weakly.

The roar was deafening; it had to be a record, someone catching the Snitch so soon after a match had starte-

Wham!

Hope didn't see it coming when something hard and round slammed into the back of her head, sending her toppling off the broom and into a freefall. She was barely conscious enough to hear the screams, but her world faded into blackness once her body collided with the earth. She was conscious long enough to feel her bones crack and to feel the pain that resulted from them.

The whole school spilled out onto the field when the Gryffindor Seeker didn't move. Barely anyone had time to even think as Madam Pomfrey all but flew to her most frequent patient's side, her face pale with worry as her wand fluttered over the girl's body. If she had looked back, she would have seen the barricade the professors had to make to force the students back. If she had looked back, she would have seen how horrified both the Quidditch teams were. If she had looked back, she would have seen Hermione Granger in tears and Ron Weasley as white as a ghost. But, Madam Pomfrey had no time for such things, because, as it was, Hope Potter's life hung in the balance.

She needed to take her to St. Mungo's; this level of healing was out of her hands. She twisted the pearl ring on her pointer finger, cradling the back of Hope's neck so that the portkey wouldn't jar her head too much, before girl and Matron vanished from a sea of worry.
"It's called flashing," Hope explained.

"Flashing? Why do you call it that?" Ron asked, canting his eyebrow slightly.

It was a few weeks after the troll incident—as it was now called, rather famously—and Hope had finally agreed to tell Fred and George how she could get around Hogwarts so fast. Ron and Hermione had opted to tag along, wondering just what exactly she was going to show them.

Hope's eyes rolled towards George who sniggered lightly. "'Cause one second you're there and the next you're gone," Hope said with a shrug, "like a flash; I guess it was the best name my granddad could come up with."

Hermione's mouth dropped. "Your grandfather invented that teleportation method?!" He was the owner of that little leather bound book that Hope had read from when they were in the lavatory during Halloween? He would have to be incredibly advanced—

"Yup!" Hope said, popping the 'p' loudly as she smiled at George. "So, Weasley, apple or orange?"

He blinked, not quite understanding, but he answered anyways, in a completely flummoxed way. "Apple...why?" But by the time he blinked, she'd disappeared.

Fred twisted around, glancing in every direction. "Okay...so—"

"Here you are." An apple was tossed lightly into George's open hands and four pairs of eyes looked at it as if it was some sort of alien creation or forbidden fruit...or something...

Then, Hope had the audacity to yawn as if disappearing and reappearing just as quickly was as common as breathing (which it most certainly was not). George looked down at the apple then back up at her with a bit of incomprehension.

"It's not poisoned," she said in amusement, "don't worry, Weasley, if I wanted to kill you, I would at least be more creative than that."

George felt awkward sitting beside Hope as she slumbered, but he had been volunteered, so he had little choice. It was a wonder McGonagall hadn't asked his younger brother or the Granger girl ("Her name is Hermione, George," Hope admonished) to sit by her bedside. She was on the mend, the whole school had been assured of, but would be out of commission for a few weeks while she recovered from the extensive injuries she had sustained.

Hermione and Ron were taking it the worst, being her best friends, but even Angelina was feeling a bit guilty for tossing her worries aside. She had been right; every Quidditch game she'd played this year had been quite dangerous, so why didn't anyone believe her when she said that she had a bad feeling?

George exhaled loudly, curling his fingers around her limp hand. She was so pale and so small, the purplish smudges under her eyes stood out against her skin. Her hair was a silvery-blonde, almost hiding the blue—wait, what blue?

He frowned, gently brushing her hair from her shoulder to see the bit of blue colouring. What on earth was that?
"Still here?" a kind voice asked, making George quickly remove his hand and twist around to see a young woman in a healer's uniform. Her smile was kind. "You should get some rest."

"I'm fine," George said, but his stomach gave a loud growl.

The healer smiled. "Come on, I'll show you to the floo-"  

"What's the blue mark from?" George asked suddenly, gesturing to his slumbering friend.

She gave him a strange look. "What mark?" she asked, moving forward and pulling out her wand and hovering it over the area he had specified. "Oh," she said, relieved, "it's just a transfigured burn, nothing to worry about. Was she in a fire when she was younger?"

"I, I don't know," George admitted. "She barely talks about her childhood."

She said nothing to that, a slight smile brushing her lips as she glanced over the mark again. "The person who made it probably thought they were being clever."

"Huh?" George said in confusion. "What do you mean?"

"It's an iris," she explained, straightening up as she did so, "and its blue; that is symbolic of hope."

"Oh," he said dumbly, but neither said anything else on the matter. George frowned again, dropping his hand onto hers to squeeze it gently, and he could have sworn that for one moment, she squeezed back.

Hope shifted slightly in the bed, her shoulders tensing slightly as her brow furrowed.

"Is she… in pain?" he asked in concern.

"A bit," the healer admitted, "but that's expected, because we have to make sure everything's healing up properly; if we loaded her up with potions all the time, she wouldn't be able to know what was what."

"She would hate that," George agreed. "She hates when she gets sent to the hospital wing, always says the potions mess with her head."

She laughed lightly. "I know the type, so she's intelligent, then? Probably always has her nose stuck in a book?"

"Sometimes, but she's not much of a bookworm." This was very true. Where Hermione often spewed random dictionary definitions, Hope dumbed down or simplified her knowledge.

She winked after pulling the blankets more securely around her patient. "Don't worry, she'll be fine after she's rested a good bit, you'll see." And she left as swiftly as she had entered, leaving him in silence once more.

A soft sigh left Hope's lips as her tensed muscles relaxed and her fingers curled tightly around his, but she made no other movement.

George leaned down to lift a small spine-broken book from the pocket of his cloak, setting it down beside her. She would get bored with nothing to read if – when - she ever woke up, besides, it was her favourite.

He leaned down to whisper in her ear, "You better wake up soon, Hope Lily Potter, you hear me? Soon."
He didn't see the ghost of a smile on her lips as he left, her mind still a muddle of pain and potions, but his voice rang familiar to her, though she could not place it yet in her memory.

Madam Pomfrey peered intently over her patient, her face lined with worry as she looked over her charts. The bones were healing nicely—at a much slower rate so as not to damage her internal organs—held in place by the bandages that were wrapped around the majority of her body, spelled to keep the bones beneath the skin in their proper places, and only a few of her organs were still bruised.

"So she's doing much better, then?" Madam Pomfrey guessed to the healer in charge of the student, Healer Archer. The girl hadn't stirred for nearly two weeks.

Archer smiled, patting the older woman's hand kindly. "Much better, Madam Pomfrey," she assured her, "she's tougher than she looks."

Madam Pomfrey's smile was a bit wry. "Oh, I know."

She reached down to smooth a loose crimson lock from her face when her eyes fluttering open at long last. They were the palest shade of green she'd ever seen, but it was the first sign of life in her that she'd seen in weeks.

"Hope!" she said in rather obvious relief. "You're awake! Finally!"

Those green eyes which had been staring at a spot on the ceiling above her shifted sideways to meet hers.

"P-Poppy?" her voice croaked, weak and raspy. "Wha-what happened?"

Madam Pomfrey couldn't even be a little annoyed that she used her first name—so much like James often had—too relieved that she was awake, before she became quickly appalled at her attempting to sit up. "Don't do that! You'll—"

Hope groaned loudly in aggravation, cutting her speech off as she raised a hand to inspect the thick bandages around her arms. "Do I look like a mummy?"

"Only a little bit, Miss Potter," Healer Archer said in amusement, stepping into the space beside her, opposite Madame Pomfrey. "I'm Healer Archer; I've been monitoring you since you arrived."

Hope blinked owlishly at her a few times, looking the young woman up and down. "Healer," she said slowly, "like..." Her mouth was still a little numb from the potions and the lack of moisture so she settled on pointing at Madam Pomfrey.

"That's correct," Healer Archer said as Hope descended into a brief coughing fit, handing her a cup of water that almost slipped from her hands due to how weak and badly shaking they were.

"Ah..." Hope said tiredly, her eyes staring vacantly around her as if trying to ascertain where she was.

"You're in St. Mungo's," she added, but Hope only stared blankly at her. "It's a magical hospital."

"Of course," Hope said bemused, glancing at the healer that was running her wand over her body. "What are you doing?"

"Hm?" Archer glanced up. "Oh, just checking your vitals, making sure everything's working
Hope's eyes didn't trust, but she made no other comment concerning the matter. "What happened exactly?"

"What do you remember?" Madam Pomfrey countered, instead.

Hope's eyebrows furrowed as she attempted to recall the events that led to her accident. "I had just caught the Snitch," she said slowly, curling her fingers inward until they made contact with her palm, as if still feeling the tingle of the cold metal. "And then something hard hit me in the back of the head and I fell off and fainted."

"Well," Madam Pomfrey began slowly, "the Hufflepuff Beater who hit the Bludger had actually been aiming in the opposite direction, so the ball was charmed to head towards you. He's been feeling rather guilty about the whole thing."

"I would assume so," Hope grunted over the growl of her stomach. "Damn, I'm starving!"

Archer chortled slightly and excused herself to bring the Girl-Who-Lived her long awaited food.

"Be honest with me, Miss Potter," Madam Pomfrey warned, reverting back to the girl's surname, "how do you feel?"

"Like lead," she said bluntly, lifting her arms experimentally with difficulty, "are they supposed to feel like that?"

"Lead is good," Madam Pomfrey said, pleased. "The bandages are a bit heavy, but the weighted feeling means that they're healing properly."

"So when can I get out of here?" Hope asked bluntly, collapsing back into her pillows with another low groan. "I hate hospitals."

"I had no idea," Madam Pomfrey said sarcastically, "though I suspect you will be leaving sooner rather than later, now that the healers can use undiluted potions-"

"That's...good," she said finally, "that's really good."

Hope seemed to be a bit lost in thought, sliding one of her two rings onto her finger where they had rested on the bedside table. It gleamed in the barely lit room.

"What's that?"

Her attention had been directed to a small pile of gifts at the foot of her bed. Their presence seemed to surprise her, making Madam Pomfrey smile. And then her gaze shifted sideways to the worn book that lay on the bedside table.

"Was George here?" she asked suddenly, straining the muscles of her arm so that she could reach the book and lift it with difficulty towards herself.

"Oh, yes," Madam Pomfrey agreed with a sly smile, "he was probably the most upset after your... fall."

Hope's cheeks darkened, muttering under her breath, "We're just friends."

She didn't notice the amused smile Madam Pomfrey cast her way, and she had no way of knowing that Madam Pomfrey was going to return to Hogwarts and inform her friends of her awakening and
perhaps subtly (or not so subtly) suggest to the Weasley Twins a possibility of a truly spectacular welcome back gift.

The Fourth Floor was Spell Damage, and it was the floor that Hope's godmother and her husband had resided since that night in autumn all those years ago. It was quite late and she was certain most patients and healers were asleep, but Hope had a whacky sleep clock and a very awake mind. And the locks were really child's play, honestly, couldn't have they at least tried a little harder.

She twisted the knob of the door open slowly, entering the ward as quietly as one could with a leg like hers.

The Longbottoms weren't too difficult to find, but they were much harder to look at.

Alice Longbottom should have had a pixie-like look about her, but her cheeks were sunken and pale, far too pale, and her hair was white and wispy, nothing like the chestnut brown from the photo Hope had of her and her mother together. Frank was much like his wife, just as hollow-looking, and just as dead-looking.

Hope could feel the bile rising in her throat and the tears clinging desperately to her eyelashes as she dropped a shaking hand until it hovered over Alice's limp one, but she didn't touch her. Maybe it was because she was afraid, or maybe it was because she didn't want to wake her.

Hope slumped into the chair that was positioned beside the bed for visitors, rubbing at her eyes and erasing all traces of the tears that never fell. So this was what happened to you from overexposure to the world's worst torture curse. Her stomach churned and she felt sick.

It felt quiet, too quiet. The only sound was of Hope's rather audible sigh.

"You don't know me," she whispered finally, but it sounded louder, much louder than she had intended, echoing in the silent ward, "but my name's Hope, and…I-I'm you're goddaughter."

She cleared her throat with difficulty, giving a shaky laugh. "I don't even know why I'm here, or what I could possibly say. You don't know me and I don't know you; we're strangers on a train, I suppose."

She bit her lip, plagued with uncertainty, before deciding to finally speak. "My name's Hope, but I don't really like it, because it's like I've got so much to live up to, and I hate that. I love Mum and Dad, but they're not here to…" her throat caught once more and she had to pause. "I'm sure they would have been great…" She breathed in and out deeply, trying to keep her emotions carefully in check, and failing.

"Anyways, er, I live with my mother's sister and her family, but they're rubbish and terrible caretakers, if you ask me. I'm not even sure if they have a kind bone in their bodies. They like everything neat and orderly, you know? And me? I like some disorder and things that maybe don't shine like they've been scrubbed over and over again. I like old-fashioned things, I guess, or at least things that have an old-fashioned look. I'm…" she faltered again; she was rambling, but it mattered little. "I'm sentimental."

"I've got a terrible temper," she added as an afterthought, "I'm not sure if I got that from Mum or Dad, maybe both. I was a very angry little girl," she said after a moment, simply twisting the opal ring around her finger, "or, at least, that was what I appeared to be. I had a terrible reputation when I was younger, always getting into trouble, bad-mouthing teachers." Her lips twitched slightly as she glanced towards the sleeping insane woman. "You can imagine, I'm sure."
"I was pretty quiet, kept to myself mostly, unless Dudley got involved," she admitted, "him and his mates always managed to piss me off, and the teachers always took his views over mine…that always made me so explosive."

"It hardly came as surprising when they told everyone I was going to St. Agnes' Secure Centre for Incurably Criminal Girls," she said with a despairing sigh. "I would've been a little insulted if I hadn't been so relieved to be leaving."

"Hogwarts is great and your son is a sweetheart." Hope glanced at the woman, as if hoping she could understand her or at least hear her, despite her sleep. "I've got these two great friends, Ron and Hermione, and there are these two prankster twins, Fred and George, that are always getting into trouble, causing mayhem, the like, and they really cheer me up when I'm in one of my moods…it's nice to have someone like that, I guess. I think Neville needs someone like that, someone that'll make him smile and laugh ridiculously."

She rubbed a hand absently against the scar across her leg. "Let me tell you about this one time in Potions…"

There was no one to greet Hope when she took the portkey Healer Archer gave her and was deposited out in the stone courtyard.

"You have been greatly missed, Milady."

Hope very nearly sighed at the sound of Sir Michael Richmond's voice, as she had now discovered why the talking suit of armour was always following her around (owing, no doubt, to Salazar Slytherin's last request) and she couldn't say she was impressed by how seriously he was taking it.

Hope opted to scowl at him instead, but the cool wind whipped her hair around, making it difficult to look at him without restraining it with her hands.

Hope was sure she would've preferred to Flash to the castle if she could've gotten away with it, but what could you do?

"I doubt that," she said calmly, "but you might want to be less obvious, Michael, people are going to notice when a suit of armour keeps following me around."

"I keep mostly to myself," a voice from within spoke defensively.

Hope arched her eyebrow again, dubious, but she settled on rolling her eyes at him instead. "To your post, Sir Knight."

He gave her a low bow and lumbered off, the sound of metal clashing together with every movement. He looked so utterly ridiculous, Hope could silence the small giggle that burst from her lips (she still blamed her grandfather for the whole thing; honestly, she didn't need to be watched like a child by someone who had been dead for at least a good thousand years).

She'd left the hospital despite them wanting her to remain for another few days, but Hope really hated hospitals. It wasn't that there was anything wrong with hospitals in general, or even doctors or healers, it was just that she didn't like being strapped to a bed. Not being able to move at all was possibly the most torturous thing she had ever endured; quite ironic considering her leg required her to not move for extended amounts of time.

She pulled her jacket a little tighter around her, hoping that it would shield her from the wind a bit more effectively, because, despite the fact that it was April, she was still in Scotland, and even they
had cold weather. She glanced down at herself, noticing how muggle she looked and it made her smile.

The jacket was baggy on her, but she liked it too much to complain about the size (she'd grow into it), as usual, her legs were covered with thick tights, but her skirt was denim and worn, and her shirt depicted a band called the Weird Sisters (she had no way of knowing that it was actually a Wizarding band).

She looked perfectly muggle, which was good, because the Wizarding World was quite behind in what was considered fashionable, mind you, not that she cared much for fashion (Parvati was to blame for this, with what she and Lavender always talked about).

A harsh light danced in front of her eyes, making her step back (almost tripping; thankfully, she had her cane on her) and blink frantically.

It was a star. Well, not a real star, those massive balls of gas were light years away, but this was as close to a star as one could get. In awe, she tentatively reached a hand out to the floating light.

She had told them she liked to star-gaze…it could be no one else. She laughed out loud and swung her cane forward, heading inside and making for the Great Hall.

At first, no one noticed her –strange, to say the least–, but people began to notice that something was amiss when the reflection of the sky above them shifted suddenly to a night filled with stars and the moon painting a lovely picture.

She was almost too busy admiring the scenery to notice the red blur heading her way, only catching sight of the twin a fraction of a second before she was swept into his arms with a hearty laugh.

"George Fabian Weasley, you put me down right now!" she ordered, despite her smile, ignoring the rising noise behind them.

"You are so…" George struggled to find the right words.

"Me?" Hope offered with a grin. "Oh, I know." Her green eyes glanced upwards briefly. "I like the present; very impressive magic."

His eyes lit up, and so did his ears, but that was nothing compared to his cheeks when she kissed one of them. "You are far too sweet," she said amused. "Oi! Fred! Get over here, I know you helped!"

Fred's casual smile never slipped as he gave her a tight hug. "I figured you wanted some privacy to snog Prince Charming over there-OW!"

Hope shook her cane aggressively at him, her cheeks only slightly flushed. "I have a cane, mister," she warned, "and I am not afraid to use it."

Her attention was now drawn to the pair that she had missed the most (sorry, George!), the two that looked the most like Hell. Red rimmed eyes and light bruising under the eyes told her all she needed to know.

"So," she began slowly, "which of you morons do I hug first?"

At those words, Hermione burst into tears, only slightly alarming Hope (nerves of steel, that one) when she flung her arms around Hope and sobbed into the shoulder of her coat.

"Er…it's alright, see? Good as new. Well, I say new, but that's a relative concept. If I was as good as
new then I wouldn't have any imperfections, which is impossible, since everyone's got those—"

"Shut up!" Hermione muffled into the material, before pulling back and quickly wiping her eyes. "You oaf!"

Hope held up a hand making a small space between her first finger and thumb as if to say "Just a smidgen."

"Miss me, Ron?" she grinned, her eyes glimmering blue when he gripped her into a hug as well.

Hugs all around, really. Hope lost track of how many people she actually hugged, in fact, she didn't remember much of that lunch until later when she had to empty it into a toilet after stuffing her face a bit too much (hospital food was nothing compared to the real thing). Being back in those walls gave her such comfort and relief, like coming home after being away for such a long time. She had missed it.

"Miss Potter."

Hope turned and grinned as her Head of House finally approached the table that she had been forced to sit at, squashed between her best friends. "Hey, Professor! Miss me while I was away?"

Her cheeky grin almost made the professor give a derisive snort, but her restraint was tremendous.

"Welcome back, Miss Potter," she said simply.

Hope's beaming grin widened and her eyes lightened to a hazel identical to her father's. "Thanks. It's great to be back."

And she wasn't lying.
"What d'you mean you found out about that ages ago?" Hermione wailed. "Why didn't you tell us?!"

It had hardly been several days since Hope's return to Hogwarts, and she was hard at work, trying to catch up in all of her subjects, something that was proving incredibly trying for her. So, here she sat with rectangular glasses perched on her nose to help her focus a bit more on the words before her and her wand tucked securely behind her ear. ("You look smart." "Shut up.")

"The incantation in which to alter the metallic nature of an object i-hm? Oh, that might have to do with the fact that you lot thought I was a bit bonkers, wouldn't it?"

Hope skimmed through the pages, biting gently on the corner of her mouth as she highlighted bits of the next passage with a pink marker. She was too busy to notice how embarrassed and uncomfortable that made her friends. She was good at that.

"What'cha talking about?" Fred asked in confusion, lifting his gaze from the small lock he was trying to open with Hope's lock-picks. ("Give me that!")

"Nothing," the trio said quickly, earning several suspicious stares.

"That's really quite a convincing act," Lee said dryly from beside her, where he was attempting to assist her in Transfiguration and utterly failing.

"I am the Queen of Convincing!" Hope said, affronted, twirling her quill in one hand and curling a lock around her finger with the other. "I can lie my way out of anything!"

"Liar," coughed Alicia under her breath, earning a pout from the girl.

However, Hermione's horrified expression was truly hilarious, if the laughter was anything to go off of. Secretly, though, she was pleased that Hope was so lively as opposed to her time in St. Mungo's. On the other hand, everyone was practically smothering her, and poor Hope wasn't quite sure how to deal with all the attention. Oliver Wood, in particular, was quite difficult, in fact, he had been practically in tears the day she came back and hadn't ceased being an overprotective mother hen since.

Hope's lips twitched slightly as she tried to restrain the smile, but it didn't last long. Her eyes drifted to the watch strapped to her wrist and she swore colourfully (adding in a few French words that no one in the vicinity understood but assumed to be curses). "Crap! I've got exams in five minutes!"

She stood up so fast that Ron would have been surprised if she hadn't gotten a head rush. Her eyes met his for only a second, but he could read that expression well enough. "When I get back, we're going to have a talk about whatever you haven't told me."

Sometimes he really hated how well she could read people.

Hope barely made it down to Professor McGonagall's classroom on time (conveniently forgetting about her ability to Flash at the time).

"Sorry, Professor!" she gasped, completely winded as she clutched the stitch in her side, attempting to regain her breathing.
Her Head of House seemed startled by her condition. "Did you run here, Miss Potter?"

She sounded faintly worried, or maybe that was just Hope.

"Yup!" Hope said with difficulty, restraining from wincing as a hot flare of pain shot up her leg (like usual), though not as painful as it had been months prior. "Don't worry, I'm fine," she added when Professor McGonagall's face grew more concerned. Seriously! Everyone around her was turning into overprotective mother hens!

She took the large pile of papers (almost moaning in horror) from her, astutely ignoring the look and limping towards a desk, taking out her quill and ink and beginning a very long afternoon.

Very soon there was no other sound in the room other than the repetitive scratch of the quill against parchment and the sound of exhaled air. Hope hardly stopped writing from the second she started her exams to when they ended, but her facial expressions were a source of entertainment to Professor McGonagall. The relieved looks told her she knew some of the questions, but then the creased forehead (she knew some of the question) and the irritated frown (she didn't know how to answer the question at all) soon followed.

The steady tapping of her foot never halted, something that had always caused her classmates a bit of ire during exams like the ones she was taking now. However, they soon grew used to it, because it was highly unlikely that she would ever stop.

Hope's lip curled back in disdain when she glanced down the Potions Exam that had been assigned to her. Honestly, these questions were too high up! She was almost certain that her year-mates didn't have the same question, but who was she to complain? It wasn't like Snape would get called out for it.

What are the ingredients of a Shrinking Solution and if brewed correctly, what colour should it be and if brewed incorrectly, what colour and state should it be?

She sucked on the edge of her quill, pondering that one. The Shrinking Solution wasn't even in the First Year Syllabus, but Hope actually liked Potions—it was just like cooking, if you ignored the instructor—, so naturally she would have looked ahead.

The known ingredients of the Shrinking Solution include: minced daisy roots, peeled Shrivelfig, sliced caterpillars, rat spleen, leech juice, cowbane, and wormwood. If brewed correctly, the potion turns a bright green colour. If brewed incorrectly, it turns orange and can be highly poisonous.

The questions that followed were remarkably similar, which was good, because Hope excelled at memorization, if nothing else.

It must have been at least three hours later when she finally put her quill down and turned in every—blasted—piece of parchment and bidding her professor goodbye and limping out of the room with a relieved smile.

The corridors were practically empty, which wasn't too surprising, as it had been a Hogsmeade weekend (though the Laughing Gas and Co had too much homework that they couldn't go, or so they said) and most of the upper years were gone.

So she had been very surprised when a voice called out "Potter?"

Almost involuntarily, she stiffened, only relaxing minutely to turn towards the owner of the voice—a voice she wasn't sure that she recognized. She turned swiftly on the heel of her good leg to scrutinize the speaker.
There were two of them, both boys, both wearing the black and yellow tie of Hufflepuff. The one who had spoken couldn't have been older than Fred or George. His eyes were a startling grey, and paired with the dark brown of his hair, she remembered him first as the boy who she had followed through to the train platform and then as the Hufflepuff Seeker. The second was rather plain in comparison with straw coloured hair and dark eyes.

"May I help you?" she asked in a clipped tone that she had copied—quite expertly—from Professor McGonagall. She didn't bother hiding the smirk when they both shifted uncomfortably.

The one with chiselled features spoke first, Cedric Diggory, as he had been the speaker to begin with, seeming incredibly nervous about something as Hope watched on a bit bemused. "Er…my name's Cedric Diggory, and this is Anthony Rickett…"

She blinked staring at them oddly.

"It was my Bludger!" The younger one, Anthony, burst out suddenly. "It's my fault you were in the hospital!" He sounded so beside himself that Hope wasn't quite sure how to respond.

At long last, she sighed, tightening her grip on the cane as she did so. Her eyes met Cedric's briefly. "Would mind giving us a few minutes?"

Curiosity coloured his pale eyes, but surprisingly not suspicion, which was something. Cedric had barely left when Hope spoke again, making the boy flinch. She wasn't that scary, was she?

"I would have thought the other professors would have told you by now," she said, speaking slowly with a distinct frown on her face. "That the bat you were holding was charmed so that any Bludger you hit would aim towards me." She remembered ducking the first one, with no time for the second.

"They did," he admitted, his cheeks such a deep beet red, "but…"

Her eyes softened minimally and a small smile lit her face. "You Hufflepuffs…too honourable."

His head shot up instantly, his mouth open to refute the insult, until he saw the look on her face.

She chuckled lightly. "Don't worry about it, it wasn't your fault."

And then she limped away from him, linking her arm around George Weasley's as he bounded up the stairs, free from a detention with Snape. Anthony could see his wild gestures from where he stood and hear her bright laughter.

Poor Hope had no way of knowing that Cedric later tracked down Fred (who was conveniently in charge of the Hope-George Betting Pool) to tell him "Five galleons on second year."

The foxy grin on his face was enough to earn him a wary glance from Hope, who subsequently treaded lightly around him for the next few weeks, for fear of a prank. The fact that one hadn't occurred caused her to be even more paranoid, much to his humour.

"What d'you mean Hagrid's got a dragon?!" Hope all but yelped before Hermione and Ron could shush her. Her appalled expression was perfect: mouth gaping, eyes so wide that it was almost comical. It would have been comical if she hadn't been so horrified. "When did this happen?"

"Er…" Her two friends shared uneasy glances. "Well, we just found out about it a few days ago."

"Wherever did he get it?" she demanded.
Ron took over from there. "Er...he said he won it off of a stranger in a game of cards."

"He's bloody mental," Hope decided, still thunderstruck. "Do you think he knows that dragons breathe fire and he lives in a wooden house?!"

"I don't think it's dawned on him yet," Hermione offered helpfully.

"Of course not," Hope grumbled crossing her arms. "What on earth is he thinking?"

This whole conversation was one of many concerning dragons and their foolish friend. Over the next few days, they theorized if it was indeed possible to raise a dragon in secrecy within a wooden house. The answer was rather obvious: No. It was a terrible idea, they all had to agree.

"I wonder what it's like living a peaceful life," Ron wondered mournfully not three days after their initial explanation to Hope.

"Probably very boring," Hope said with a yawn, her drooping eyes fastened on the text in her Charms book which she had propped up against the pumpkin juice jug. The amount of homework was unbelievable, but Hope still had make up what she missed (something everyone agreed was totally unfair), thus amounting to many sleepless nights. She had taken to sleeping most of her weekends away. "And I hate boring."

"You would have to," Ron mumbled under his breath, "to put up with Fred and George for so long."

Hermione giggled, but Hope –who had missed the mumble– looked confused, blinking furiously at him. "Did you say something?"

"Me? Nope," Ron disagreed quickly, earning a suspicious stare.

Hope opened her mouth to say something, probably a few choice crude words, but Ron was saved by Hedwig who swooped down to deliver a small note.

Her face fell as she read it before showing it to them, and the smiles slid from their faces at the two words scrawled hastily onto the parchment: It's hatching.

Now Hagrid was really going to be in trouble. How exactly did one go about sneaking a dragon off to a dragon reserve when it was out of its shell?

Ron, of course, was all for going down to see it as opposed to attending Herbology class, but neither Hope nor Hermione would hear of it. Hermione, for academic reasons, Hope for...

"If you don't show up to class and your best friends don't and you don't have a plausible excuse, then people will know you're up to something," Hope advised calmly.

"I suppose you would know," Ron admitted grudgingly.

"Of course," Hope said in faux-vaughtiness. "I'm the thief, remember? Always have an exit plan."

"I keep forgetting that you used to steal!" Hermione burst out, a little louder than she had intended. "You had something with locks, right?"

Hope's eyebrows raised, her eyes shifting upwards to bring attention to the black pins in her hair (contrasting with the strand of green and blue beaded lock of hair). "Something like that. It's very bad for you; I'm trying to give it up."

"You say that like it's an addiction," Hermione said in a deadpan.
"I suppose it is," Hope mused aloud as they turned the corner. As she did so, her gaze shifted out of the corner of her eye, where she could see Malfoy lurking in the shadows. She frowned, instantly suspicious. "Let's talk about this later, alright?"

Once they heard the steely edge of her voice, they agreed instantly, but only after Hermione conceded to Ron to run down and visit Hagrid once lunch came around.

However, once Hope found herself opposite the large egg with deep an obvious cracks appearing on the shell and listening to the strange clicking noises from within, she was beginning to think that it wasn't such a good idea. It wasn't that she had something against dragons—they were incredibly fascinating creatures—only that this was one that was coming into a world surrounded by creatures that weren't dragons and didn't know the first thing about taking care of a baby dragon (Hagrid didn’t count because his knowledge that he had obtained from the school library was minimal at best). What if it reacted violently? Hope couldn't help but worry.

She was distracted rather suddenly from her worries when a loud scraping noise came from inside the egg which then cracked open, revealing the baby dragon. Hope wasn't quite sure if she'd seen anything like it.

It was very ugly, was what she meant. (Meaning that it took an awful lot after Dudley, she couldn't help but think.) It was midnight black with the vague appearance of a crumpled umbrella that gave Hope the desire to straighten it out. Its eyes were orange and flickering about the cabin, with a long nose and tiny little horns protruding from its small head.

Its head reared back quite suddenly as it sneezed, dislodging a few orange sparks from its snout.

"Isn't he beautiful?" Hagrid said in a voice so affectionate that Hope couldn't help but stare. She opened her mouth to say something—she wasn't quite sure what—when Hagrid reached out a hand, intending—no doubt—to stroke the beast's head, but it only snapped at his fingers, probably thinking they were something to eat.

"Bless him," Hagrid chortled, "look, he knows his mommy!"

Hope caught Hermione's eye and was incredibly glad that she wasn't the only one who thought he sounded ridiculous.

"Hagrid," Hermione said, her voice a little strained, "how fast do Norwegian Ridgebacks grow, exactly?"

Hagrid opened his mouth to tell her, possibly, when his face suddenly turned the colour of sour milk, as he moved quickly to the window, seeing something the three students had missed.

"What is it?"

"Someone was lookin' through the gap in the curtains— it's a kid—he's runnin' back up ter the school."

Hope looked out the window as well, her eyes narrowing as she saw Draco Malfoy's light hair disappearing into the courtyard. Now they really were in trouble.

By the end of the week Hope was convinced they should get rid of it, but Hagrid wouldn't hear of it. It seemed he was beyond the point of reasoning as they visited him on a Friday. And it was then that Hope thought of something rather brilliant, if she said so herself. Ron's older brother Charlie worked with dragons on a dragon reserve. His superiors wouldn't think too much was amiss if a rare breed
suddenly appeared in Romania, especially since it happened at times—if that small article they had found was to be believed. It only took them a few days to get Charlie's reply:

Dear Ron,

How are you? Thanks for the letter— I'd be glad to take the Norwegian Ridgeback, but it won't be easy getting him here. I think the best thing will be to send him over with some friends of mine who are coming to visit me next week. Trouble is, they mustn't be seen carrying an illegal dragon, though your friend is right about how some of the rare dragons come here.

Could you get the Ridgeback up the tallest tower at midnight on Saturday? They can meet you there and take him away while it's still dark.

Send me an answer as soon as possible.

Love, Charlie

The plan would have been prefect, if not for several kinks along the way, such as Ron's new injury. The youngest Weasley male had taken to visiting Hagrid, helping him with Norbert, as he had now named him. It was nice of him, if he hadn't been bitten by the dragon for his trouble ("When it bit me he told me off for frightening it! And when I left, he was singing it a lullaby!"). And the next day it had swollen and bloated, turning a shade of green and being so numb that he had to go to Madam Pomfrey.

Of course, she didn't believe him when he told her a dog bit him, but she didn't press the issue. Perhaps it was that she was far too used to students getting into trouble and then lying about it. And then Malfoy added more to the chaos by "borrowing" Ron's book which conveniently had Charlie's letter in it.

The plan was unravelling, so Hope had to use some drastic measures.

Her hand closed around George's wrist. "Fred, d'you mind if I borrow your twin for a moment? I've got something I need to talk with him about."

Both of the twins blinked at roughly the same time, staring at her for a few seconds, before Fred said, "Er…alright." He hadn't even finished talking when Hope began to drag the third year away.

"I need your help," she said seriously when they were alone. "And it's highly illegal."

"How illegal?" George asked, furrowing his eyebrows together (gods, that was adorable; Hope wished she had a camera).

"Well," Hope said dryly, tugging on her beaded strand of hair, "it involves a dragon; use your imagination."

Eventually, the whole story came out, and Hope talked so much that her throat felt like sandpaper by the end of it.

"So, Hagrid has a dragon and you lot are trying to get rid of it by sending it off with some friends of Charlie's?" he asked finally, his voice strangely high pitched.

"That's the gist of it, yeah," Hope agreed, tapping her foot lightly on the ground, watching his reaction carefully. He seemed strangely closed off. "George? Are you alright?"

"Yeah, fine… it's just, first a troll, now a dragon? You don't ever take the easy road, do you, Potter?"
He said with a shaky smile.

"Danger and trouble follow me constantly," Hope said with an amused grin, leaning forward with a devilish smile that made George worry. "Now, are you going to help me or not?"

George wasn't sure how, but somehow he had been convinced by a short, red-haired, stubborn, snarky, unyielding first year into illegal activities. Of course, George couldn't keep any secrets from Fred, so by the end of the night, he knew as well. And he had to be threatened within an inch of his life to keep his silence (Hope still had her cane to whack him with, and it was quite the weapon, if you will recall), which he did.

Hermione felt a little better about having one of the twins help, mostly because she was worried that it wouldn't work, which it would, Hope kept telling her.

So, Saturday night found Hope and George holding the crate that held Norbert the Norwegian Ridgeback on opposite sides, mounted on their brooms and preparing to push off from the ground.

"Fred'll watch for anyone," he whispered to her, "just in case…you know."

Hope nodded, swallowing thickly. "I know. Ready?"

"When you are." He grinned as she rolled her eyes, pushing off gently from the ground, until they both hovered side by side with the crate making some suspicious ripping sounds (no doubt the dragon was dismembering the teddy bear that Hagrid had packed with it). "Up we go."

Getting up to the tower via broomstick was much easier than using the various staircases, Hope had to admit as she steadied her broom with careful precision. It had been Fred's idea, actually, who had said it completely as a joke, but somehow had been turned into this.

The tower was very high up, if one didn't know, and by the time they had actually touched down again, Hope's heart was still beating rather rapidly against her ribs and her arm felt like lead.

"Alright?" George asked as he watched her wring out her arm once they'd set the crate down.

"Fine," Hope muttered, "just pins and needles, that's all." She rolled her eyes at his half grin. "Oh, like you don't feel the same."

His grin spread, encompassing his face. "Oh I don't, I'm all brawn, you know." He gestured to his arms, making the slight muscle bulge and look far bigger than they were.

"And no brains, it seems," she said with a small giggle at the pout he gave her.

"Ah, but you're the brains of the operation," he said cheekily.

"And you're the flirt," she retorted, tucking a strand of hair behind her ear as it had flown up and into her eyes by the wind. "How on earth do you ever get anything done?"

"I have skills," he said in a lazy manner that made her bite her lip to keep from laughing aloud. "Oh, look, there they are."

Hope was a little surprised by how cheerful the small group was, considering that what they were doing was incredibly illegal. George knew one or two of them, but the rest were strangers.

"Thanks so much for doing this," Hope said gratefully once they'd buckled the crate into the harness they had made for it before hand. "I know it's not really…"
"It's no problem," the oldest one assured her, "trust me, this isn't the strangest request Charlie's given us." They all shared a private laugh, though George looked as if he wanted to find out what exactly was the strangest thing his brother had asked of his friends.

They gave one last goodbye as they all shook the pair's hands and went on their way.

"Interesting night," George commented mildly, looping his broom over his shoulder.

"That's a word for it," Hope muttered, pulling her invisibility cloak from out from under her shirt and beckoning him downwards. "Bend over, George, you're too tall."

"Too tall for what?" he asked, befuddled as she threw her cloak over them, making them disappear entirely. "What-?"

"I'm a woman of mystery," Hope said smugly, wishing she had her camera to take a picture of his complete and utter shock.

And that simple act was all that spared them from a fate of detention with Hope's irritating and annoying "rival", Draco Malfoy. But Hope wouldn't discover that until the next morning when the Malfoy scion glared at her as if hoping to vaporize her with his very eyes.

How unfortunate that Hope was a master of that look and unfazed by other's use of it.
With Hagrid's crisis averted, Hope, Ron, and Hermione could turn their attention once more towards the Philosopher's Stone. Obviously, it was still under that trap door on the third floor, and still protected by enchantments (as Ron and Hermione had discovered from Hagrid during her brief coma). How long it would remain there, they couldn't be certain.

Either way, Hope wasn't too worried when she went to sleep days after the dragon removal (Ron was still roaring with laughter that they'd managed to not get caught while Draco had detention and a loss of points)…

The first thing she felt was the collision. The pain was ripping through her leg and through her torso as if she was being torn apart. The force of the hit threw her back, landing heavily on the pavement. Her vision shook as if she was moving feverishly back and forth, she couldn't get a clear focus on anything. She could distant hear the sound of screeching tires and screams of people passing by, but they did nothing to help; the only sound she could be completely certain of was her heartbeat, fading and strengthening at different intervals. The ringing in her ears intensified as she lifted a hand with difficulty, feeling very much like her limbs had turned to stone.

It was covered in a red liquid.

Blood.

Hope tried her best not to freak out, but how could you not when you were bleeding and in pain in the middle of the road?

The air was getting heavier, thicker, more difficult to breathe in… the world was getting blurrier, and that was before several blobs appeared beside her, lifting her up onto a stretcher, causing pain to jar through her. Then they tried to stanch the flow of her blood from her side, and Hope swore that everything turned white.

"Hope! Hope, stay with me!" The paramedic was trying to keep her awake, keep her alive, but it wasn't working. The lightheaded feeling was spreading from her toes up. "We're losing her!"

Giving up was much easier than she anticipated. There was no one who was going to mourn her death, either way.

And then she was floating, up and away from her body. Freedom…she had never tasted it before. She vanished from the living world, passing into the realm of the dead in barely a second.

When she opened her eyes she was in a foreign place, something that was strange and beautiful and eternity. She wouldn't mind being dead if it meant spending the rest of forever there. Two figures drew her attention from the world. Their faces weren't very definite but Hope could make out that the man had dark unruly hair and the woman looked very much like her.

She took one step forward, towards the pair that had to be her parents, but then the ground crumpled under her feet and she was screaming as she fell until her eyes flew open and all she felt was pain and all she heard was the sound of a steady beep until her world faded to blackness…
Remus Lupin wasn't sure exactly why Albus Dumbledore had asked him to go check out the local hospital in Surrey, but now he knew why. He felt the guilt, and it was justly deserved. If he had…

He looked pained as he stared through the glass wall that the slumbering Hope Potter (age ten, with a bit of stunted growth, it seemed) lay, unaware of the attention she had garnered.

"Are you her father?"

He looked up, startled by the sudden question, to stare at the young nurse whose face was lined with concern. "Oh," he said quietly, "no. I was an old friend of his, but no, I'm not her father."

The woman nodded in understanding. "Do you want to go and sit with her?"

The pained expression was back. "No, I don't think that would be a good idea; she doesn't even know I exist. It's better for me to be as far from her as possible."

"Then why are you here?" the nurse couldn't help but ask. Why say it was better to do things one way and do the opposite?

He didn't respond to that, standing with an aged sort of exhaustion that made her wonder just how old he was. "Would do me a favour?" he said instead. "When she wakes up, tell her Moony's watching over her, alright?"

What a strange request, the nurse had to think as he moved away, leaning heavily on his cane as he did so. And what a strange man…she never even got his name. Still, she did as he had asked and gave her the message upon her awakening, but it seemed to confuse her more than anything.

Hope Potter was in the hospital for an extended amount of time for someone who had only been in a car accident, but then her injuries were a bit extensive. Her leg in particular was heavily damaged. The doctor predicted that she would have walk with the use of a cane for several years at least.

The pain would fade, the doctor assured her, but she was going to need a therapist to help her along the way.

She hadn't been very impressed by that, answering "Only mental kids have therapists, you numpty."

The nurse was more impressed that the doctor had only given the barest of an eye twitch at that mild insult.

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The flashes of light and of sounds echoed in her ears and shone like after images behind her closed eyelids which twitched with every image, though they were shaky and not even close to being solid. A blur of colour circled in her sound, mixed with a muddle of voices, words thrown together in ways that Hope couldn't understand. She could feel the pain vibrating through her, just as easily as she could feel the pain leaving her. The world of brightness and tranquillity left to be replaced with darkness.

Her eyes flickered open finally and she almost screamed.

What the ruddy hell was she doing in the forest when she was supposed to be asleep in her bed?! She looked around frantically; of course this would happen to her! In her bed clothes, in the Forbidden Forest, at Hades knows what time! Seriously, whose idea of a joke was this?!
She whirled around, fighting to make a sound other than branches cracking under her feet. In the quiet and in the blackness Hope could see why Dumbledore had warned students away from the forest. As she thought about it, she could still hear his words from the beginning of the year:

"First years should note that the forest on the grounds is forbidden to all pupils."

It wasn't a wonder why.

She twitched, twisting around at the sound of something moving in the dark. She gulped. Fred and George liked to sneak out here when they were first years, she knew, but why, she still wasn't sure; for all she knew, they could have undiagnosed schizophrenia. Of course, they had never really run into anything remotely bad, mostly because they'd gotten chased away by Hagrid before they could do much damage.

Unfortunately, damage seemed to be something that Hope excelled at, much to her displeasure. Well, there was no point in hanging around if she was only going to get attacked by creatures of the dark. And so, she began to take a number of cautious steps in the direction she thought led out of the forest. She had to focus her eyes on the ground rather than her surroundings not one minute later after she almost fell face first into the undergrowth, tripping over a big root that was sticking out the ground. Every so often a thread of moonlight would shine through the branches overhead, but she didn't pay much attention to it until it made contact with something that was a silvery-blue colour.

Ever curious, Hope moved cautiously forward until she was only a couple feet away, and it was then that she stopped dead. Was that some kind of magical animal's blood? She clamped a hand over her mouth, feeling bile rise in her throat.

And then there was the question of what actually bled that colour to begin with.

Hope mentally cursed her curious nature as she followed the nearly invisible trail of blood, barely standing out against the dark leaves that lay crumpled and strewn throughout the forest. She had a very bad feeling, much like before. The blood was now thicker and in larger amounts than before, dripping from jutting roots that Hope had to be very careful to avoid.

Hope jerked herself to a stop as she peered through the branches of an oak tree, gasping aloud at the sight before her.

It was a unicorn. The blood must have come from it as it attempted to escape whatever had attacked it. Hope wasn't sure if she'd seen anything quite so beautiful in all her life, so beautiful and at the same time, so sad. Its legs protruding out at odd angles as though they had broken, or at least tangled with each other as it had fell, with the silvery-white of its mane contrasting brightly with the dark leaves. Was it even alive? It wasn't moving, but maybe—

Hope took one step towards it when she froze rather suddenly. It was a sound that caused to her turn to statue, a sound of something slithering, like a snake, but bigger, much bigger. Oh please say there weren't massive snakes here!

But it wasn't a massive snake, as Hope had believed. The sound came towards a bush on the edge of the clearing that trembled and shook as if someone had stepped on it, and then, the creature came out. Hope held her breath, hoping it wouldn't see her as it crawled across the ground like some half-human, half-snake hybrid (Hades, she hoped there was no such thing). It didn't take long for it to finally reach the unicorn where it lay, and then it did something that made Hope choke on the breath she was holding; it had lowered its head and began to drink the blood pooling from the body.
She took one step back, wincing when her bare foot connected with a branch, making it crack under her weight.

The head jerked up suddenly, fixing her with a stare, even though she couldn't see its face. It was then that she realized that the moonlight had fallen over her, making her almost as obvious as an unmov ing unicorn. Shite!

It got to its feet (it had feet? Why was it crawling around earlier, then?) and began to move swiftly towards Hope who was rooted to the spot in a mix of horror and morbid curiosity (mostly horror, though).

Then pain exploded around her. It was as if her head had been split open and lit on fire at the same time. The pain was so great that as she stumbled backwards she fell harshly onto her back. The pain did not pass even as she heard the sound of hooves battering against the ground, only leaving her when eighty-three seconds had come and gone. She, exhaustively, propped her elbows into the ground, leaning forwards slightly so that her body was at about a one hundred seventy degree angle.

The hooves belonged to one person, and person was a relative term. He had four hooves that were connected to a horse body, only instead of a horse's neck and head, a human's body was connected to the front. It would have looked a bit like a twisted mix and match, if Hope hadn't been such a mythical nut.

Hope scrambled to come up with words, completely dumbstruck. "You're a-a-a-centaur!"

She hadn't even known they existed outside Greek myths! Oh, she was going to do a lot of reading over the summer…

"I am," the centaur agreed, seeming a little bemused by her reaction as he extended an arm to pull her up. "Are you alright?"

"Er-fine-yes, thank you," she stuttered quickly, "what was that?"

To that question, the centaur seemed to have no answer, instead he simply stared at her with his very pale blue eyes, the twin orbs lingering over her forehead where she was sure the scar stood out angry and red as if burned.

"You are the Potter girl," he said, looking her over, no doubt taking note of the twigs and leaves in her hair and the dirt clinging to her clothing. "You had better get back to the school. The forest is not safe at this time ("No arguments here," Hope muttered) – especially for you. Can you ride? It will be quicker this way." He bent his front legs forward into a sort of half-bow that was low enough for her to clamour on. "My name is Firenze."

"Are you sure?" she asked, slightly suspicious and slightly concerned. Were centaurs even supposed to give humans rides? Somehow, it seemed like a demeaning gesture.

"Completely," he assured her as she hoisted herself onto his back, but before anything else could be done, the sound of more hooves filled the air and two more centaurs burst into the clearing. They must have been running (galloping, Hope mentally corrected herself) a good bit to be sweaty and out of breath as they were. The one on the right had the body of a chestnut coloured horse, with a tail and hair that was reddish in colour, while the one on the left was completely black –black hair and a black body, looking as though he was part of the darkness itself.

The one that was as black as night spoke first with a voice that echoed in the silence –previous silence. "Firenze! What are you doing? You have a human on your back! Have you no shame? Are
So, Hope had been correct in guessing that it wasn't a good thing to offer yourself as a ride to a human. It was official; Firenze the Centaur was awesome.

"Do you realize who this is?" said Firenze, ignoring the centaur's crude words. "This is the Potter girl. The quicker she leaves this forest, the better."

Hope wrinkled her forehead in confusion, not quite understanding why it was such a problem for her to be in the forest, well, apart from the obvious, that is.

"What have you been telling her?" the dark one demanded lowly. "Remember, Firenze, we are sworn not to set ourselves against the heavens. Have we not read what is to come in the movements of the planets?"

His red-haired and red-tailed companion pawed the ground with one of his hooves, betraying his unease. "I'm sure Firenze thought he was acting for the best," he said, speaking in a solemn voice that wouldn't be out of place at a funeral. Depressing sort of bloke, wasn't he?

The dark one's legs lifted and slammed into the ground in anger. "For the best!" His voice echoed loudly, making Hope glance around nervously. "What is that to do with us? Centaurs are concerned with what has been foretold! It is not our business to run around like donkeys after stray humans in our forest!"

Hope frowned a little at that, but wisely kept her mouth shut, and not to seconds later she had to clutch at his shoulders to stay on his back when he reared back suddenly, kicking his front legs up like she'd seen a few horses do on the telly when she was skimming through channels when the Dursleys weren't around.

"Do you not see that unicorn?" Firenze demanded of the dark one. "Do you not understand why it was killed? Or have the planets not let you in on that secret? I set myself against what is lurking in this forest, Bane (So, his name was Bane, was it?), yes, with humans alongside me if I must."

His vehemence seemed to temporarily stun the other two who couldn't even find the words to speak as Firenze turned around and made off through the thicket of branches, only slowing to a walk after there was a good bit of distance between them and the other two.

This finally allowed Hope the opportunity to talk.

"What was it that you saved me from?" she queried, an eyebrow quirking as she ducked under a low hanging branch.

He did not answer that, only offering a different question in its stead. "Hope Potter, do you know what unicorn blood is used for?"

Hope pondered that for a moment. "I thought that using any part of a unicorn other than the tail or horn was strictly forbidden under the Potion Claus—" And she had only read about that because she had been completely bored in St. Mungo's.

"That is because it is a monstrous thing, to slay a unicorn," Firenze said in a solemn voice that quite similar to the one who was with Bane. "Only one who has nothing to lose, and everything to gain, would commit such a crime. The blood of a unicorn will keep you alive, even if you are an inch from death, but at a terrible price. You have slain something pure and defenceless to save yourself, and you will have but a half-life, a cursed life, from the moment the blood touches your lips."
Oddly enough, it sounded very much like when people were put on life support in muggle hospitals. Technically speaking, they were alive, but at the same time, it was almost as if they were dead at the same time. During Hope's visits to the physical therapist (she always choked a little when she said 'therapist', gods, it was like she was messed up in the head!), she sometimes passed hospital rooms like that. She'd always thought how terrible it would be to decide whether or not your family member should live out their days on a respirator or die painlessly.

"Wouldn't death be better?" she asked. "Why be cursed when you can live however long without being cursed?"

"Death would be better," he agreed with her first words, "unless all you need is to stay alive long enough to drink something else – something that will bring you back to full strength and power – something that will mean you can never die. Miss Potter, do you know what is hidden in the school at this very moment?"

Hope's eyes became the size of dinner plates as realization rippled through her. "Oh! Of course, the Philosopher's Stone can make the Elixir of Life!"

"And can you think of nobody who has waited many years to return to power, who has clung to life, awaiting their chance?" he asked her in such a way that there was only one conclusion to be drawn.

She was reminded of the first time she had asked Hagrid about how her parents died, and, more specifically, who had been the cause of their deaths. "Some say he died. Codswallop, in my opinion. Dunno if he had enough human left in him to die."

The breath was strangled temporarily from her lungs. "You mean Voldemort," she whispered.

"Hope! Hope!"

Hope blinked in surprise as Hermione came vaulting down the path to come to a stop before her and Firenze. It was hard to tell which girl was more surprised.

"Hermione!" Hope said aghast. "What are you doing here?"

"I couldn't find you anywhere!" Hermione said pitifully. "I got worried—"

"And rightly so."

Hope winced at the sound of Professor McGonagall's crisp no-nonsense tone. Crap. She was in so much trouble, and none of it was her fault. Talk about bad luck; she was probably the most unlucky person in existence.

"I know what you're thinking, Professor," Hope said quickly, because that was the only way the strict professor was going to hear her case, "but I was minding my own business –sleeping mind you– and when I woke up, I was here and there are things in there that make weird noises!"

The look on McGonagall's face said that she didn't believe her for a second. Hope could practically feel the weight of the points she was going to lose.

"Accidental apparition…I've never heard of it happening during sleep," McGonagall said finally, making Hope's head jerk up.

The expression on her face was one of horror. She clapped her hands to her cheeks. "Oh, no! I was Flashing!"
"I thought you could only Flash to places you'd been, personally?" Hermione asked, befuddled.

"That's what I thought too," Hope agreed, the pair unaware of the confusion that Professor McGonagall felt, out of the loop of what they were talking. "I've never been anywhere near the Forbidden Forest except when we go visit Hagrid…I dunno how that works, really."

It was when she stopped to ponder this that she realized she was still on Firenze who spoke suddenly, as if to remind her of his presence. "This is where I leave you. You are safe now."

Hope jumped off his back with a movement that jarred her foot. "Thank you, again," she said sincerely, "you saved my life."

"It was no trouble," the centaur said in a rumbling voice that told her how grateful he was that she was grateful of him. "Good luck, Hope Potter. The planets have been read wrongly before now, even by centaurs. I hope this is one of those times."

Those words felt a little more than a bit ominous to Hope who tilted her head upwards to look up at the planets. Only one of them was bright red dot in the sky…Mars, probably, named after the Roman god of war.

"I really didn't mean to end up here, Professor," she swore as they trudged back up to the castle. "And I'm really sorry that you got woken up. Please, please don't take any points!"

She was trying to look as cute as possible, pressing her hands together in front of her lips and making her eyes look rather large.

"I will not take off points…this time," the transfiguration professor warned, "but do try to not make a repeat of tonight, Miss Potter; you have already caused me a large amount of stress."

"Thank you!" Hope cheered.

"However," Professor McGonagall continued, "I want you to write a short essay in the stead of detention."

"Aw!" Hope complained, pouting and making Hermione giggle, but that was just a façade. She was still thinking about what she had seen in the forest. The creature, Voldemort, drinking the unicorn's blood…the very memory of it made her gag. She couldn't imagine falling so low as to drink something like that.

It was much later when Hermione asked her, whispering so that they didn't wake up their dorm mates, "Did you see anything in the forest."

To which Hope had replied with utter surety: "Nothing human."
The problem with exam week wasn't the exams themselves—gods knew Hope had spent too much time reviewing with Hermione and Ron, but that it was so bloody hot! She was starting to think that was the point of having exams in June, so that it was too hot for anyone to even think straight. So, it was very much a relief when they left their last exam (History of Magic) to relax on the sunny grounds.

"That was far easier than I thought it would be," Hermione said as they plopped their bodies down onto the grass, soaking in the sun under the willow tree that overlooked the Black Lake. "I needn't have learned about the 1637 Werewolf Code of Conduct or the uprising of Elfric the Eager."

Hope did her best to ignore her friend, massaging her bruised brain. She had definitely over-studied, if that was possible, which it was. And then she had recently been getting a number of frequent stabbing pains in her forehead, making Parvati and Lavender think she had exam nerves since she wasn't sleeping, but it wasn't that. She was just having terrible nightmares that gave her little peace.

The Weasley Twins weren't far off, tickling the Giant Squid, making Hope smile before she frowned, rubbing her forehead, aggravated.

"Hope, go to Madam Pomfrey," Hermione suggested as she watched her friend rub at her forehead until it was bright red. "If it hurts that bad, then go."

"She'll be of no help," Hope said dismissively. "Scars aren't supposed to hurt. Besides…I think it's a warning or something, like danger's coming…"

However, Ron and Hermione didn't share her opinion there, much to her irritation.

"Hope, relax, Hermione's right, the Stone's safe as long as Dumbledore's around." Hope tried not to roll her eyes at how unconcerned Ron was about the stone that could both make you rich and live forever. "Anyways, we've never had any proof Snape found out how to get past Fluffy. He nearly had his leg ripped off once, he's not going to try it again in a hurry. And Neville will play Quidditch for England before Hagrid lets down Dumbledore."

Hope sighed, but conceded that some of that may be true. Then she tugged off her falling-apart converses and her socks, standing up.

"What're you doing now?" Ron asked warily.

Hope winked. "Relaxing." She limped over to where the Twins and Lee (plus the girls who waved at her from a couple meters away) were in the Black Lake. The water was soaking through the pant legs of their uniforms, but they didn't seem to mind.

"Hey, Potter!" George gave her an enthusiastic grin that her heart do cartwheels. "Come to join the fun?"

"I suppose, Weasley, if that's what you call fun," Hope said in a mock-disdainful voice.

"Oh, absolutely," he said with a saucy wink.

"Is the water cold?" Hope continued conversationally, glancing into the shallows.

"Just a little," he said, holding out a hand. "Want to meet the Giant Squid?"
"Is he nice?" she asked, taking his hand.

"Very nice," he assured her, "has a thing for red heads, too."

"Uh-huh," she said sarcastically, taking one cautious step into the water. "Not bad…a little coo-

"What did you do to your head?"

Warm fingers cradled her forehead in his hands as he inspected the flesh. It was still red from where she had been rubbing it, but the scar was the colour of blood, as if it was still fresh. Irritated, she pulled her face from his hands.

"It's nothing," she insisted, "I'm fine."

The look he gave her told her that he didn't believe that for a second. However, she was spared from the words when someone called off to the side: "For the love of Merlin! Just snog already!"

Both red-heads turned the colour of cherries, but then a flat rock shot out to smack against Lee Jordan's forehead, courtesy of an angry Hope. The throw had enough force that it actually made him fall backwards into the water.

"You. Complete. Utter. Arse!" Hope seethed. "Get over here so I can kill you!"

Thrown through a loop, Hermione and Ron watched from the sidelines as a water battle ensued.

"Do you think they realize they walk right into those moments?" Hermione asked Ron, slightly amused as Hope tripped and got soaked in water all the way up to her waist.

"I don't think so," Ron said after a moment, "but I think Fred and George think it's hilarious how she reacts. Well, George thinks it's cute, I guess, Fred's the one who finds it the most funny."

Well, no one said they weren't good for comic relief, that was for sure. Alicia and Angelina joined in the fight to even the genders out, when Hope fell into the water, almost submerging her whole body as she shook her wet hair out of her eyes which then fell on Hagrid's Hut, the smoke rising out of the short chimney.

"Of course," she murmured before fighting her way towards Ron and Hermione with a dumbstruck expression on her face, soaked completely to the bone.

"What's wrong?" Hermione asked in confusion.

"I've just thought of something," she said with an insistent tone of voice, though her cheeks were a few shades off of the colour of snow. "We have to go see Hagrid. Right now!"

And then she was hobbling barefoot in the direction of Hagrid's cabin, much to the annoyance of her friends who had to race to catch up with her, which was sad by itself, seeing as she was notorious for being slow.

"Why are we going to see Hagrid?" Hermione gasped once they'd caught up.

"Isn't it just a tiny bit strange that what Hagrid wants more than anything in the world is a pet dragon and some stranger in a pub just happens to have one? I mean, they're a First Class Non-tradable Creature, how many people would go around carrying one in their pocket? A bit lucky, wasn't it that they happened across Hagrid, wasn't it? Why didn't I see it?"

"What are you going on about?" Ron demanded, but she didn't answer him, banging loudly on the
Hagrid answered it immediately with a bright grin. "Hullo. Finished yer exams? Got time fer a drink?"

"Ye-" Ron started to say, but Hope cut across him before he could much.

"We can't, we're in a bit of a hurry. Hagrid, you know the night you won Norbert? What did the stranger you were playing against look like?" Hope asked, slightly out of breath, her heart beating frantically in her chest.

"Dunno," Hagrid said with a shrug, "he wouldn't take his cloak off."

Hope was appalled and Ron and Hermione were stunned.

"It's not that unusual," he assured them as best as he could, "yeh get a lot o' funny folk at the Hog's Head – that's one of the pubs down in the village. Mighta bin a dragon dealer, mightn't he? I never saw his face, he kept his hood up."

Oh gods, he wasn't that gullible, was he?

"But when you talked," Hope pressed on, "did you mention Hogwarts at all?"

She watched as his forehead creased into a frown as he tried to recall what had actually been said. "Mighta come up," he admitted. "Yeah…he asked what I did, an' I told him I was gamekeeper here… He asked a bit about the sorta creatures I looked after… so I told him… an' I said what I always really wanted was a dragon… an' then… I can' remember too well, 'cause he kept buyin' me drinks… (Hope gave a quiet groan at that) Let's see…yeah, then he said he had the dragon egg an' we could play cards fer it if I wanted… but he had ter be sure I could handle it, he didn' want it to go ter any old home…So, I told him, after Fluffy, a dragon would be easy…"

"And, the man, was he interested in Fluffy?" Hope asked in a voice that was deathly calm.

"Well," Hagrid seemed a bit surprised by the line of questioning, "yeah – how many three-headed dogs d'ye meet, even around Hogwarts? So I told him, Fluffy's a piece o' cake if yeh know how to calm him down, jus' play him a bit o' music an' he'll go straight off ter sleep – "

Oh, gods. He knew how to get in. The day had just gone from bad to worse.

It was a complete bloody miracle no one had suspected them of anything, because Hope was pretty sure the three of them looked pretty suspicious. With Dumbledore out of the school and with Snape knowing how to get past Fluffy, the Stone was up for grabs.

After Lee had finally meandered up to bed, Ron had nodded to Hope who then pulled her father's invisibility cloak from under her shirt.

"We'd better put it on here," she said barely higher than a whisper, tucking her wand behind her ear for safe keeping as she held the cloak out, "just in case it doesn't fit over us completely, we wouldn't want anyone to see three pairs of feet wandering about disembodied."

"What are you doing?"

"Nothing, Neville," Hope tried to assure him, but even though her face was convincing, Ron and Hermione's were quite guilty.
"You're sneaking out again," Neville guessed, his eyes turning a little frantic. "You can't go out again! You'll get caught and Gryffindor will be in so much trouble!"

"Neville," Hope said tiredly, "you don't underst-"

"I won't let you!" Neville said, seeming to gather his wits slightly. "I-I'll fight you!"

It would have been comical, if they weren't so pressed for time. Moving faster than Hermione would have dared to think Hope could, Hope had grabbed the heaviest book she could find closest to her and struck it against the base of his skull. Neville crumpled instantly to the floor, boneless.

Ron and Hermione gaped at her.

"What?" she demanded. "We're running low on time."

And they were, so, for once, they didn't complain as Hope threw the cloak over the three of them, making them vanish from visibility. The trek there was as terrifying as the enchantments they knew were ahead. Every step was laced with uncertainty and every breath was weighted with worry. It was almost miraculous when they finally made it to unscathed in their minds.

When they reached the corridor, the door was already open, and seeing it there made the danger they were facing more real.

"You can always go back if you want," she said quietly, "I'll understand if you don't want to-"

"Don't be thick," Ron said.

"Of course, we're coming," Hermione added.

Hope glanced at them, her smile touching her eyes. "You two really are the best mates a girl could have."

Even entering through the door caused noise and through some talented flute tunes, courtesy of Hermione, the beast began to slumber once more.

"I think we'll be able to pull the door open," Ron surmised, looking over Fluffy's back. "Want to go first Hermione?"

The thunderstruck expression on Hermione's face didn't need a translation. Hope and Ron pried the door open.

"It's too dark," Hope whispered, glancing at Ron, "can you see anything?"

"No," the Weasley boy admitted, "just blackness. I don't see a way of climbing down."

"We'll have to drop," Hope said. "I'll go first, shall I?"

Ron nodded mutely.

"If anything happens," Hope continued, trying to keep her voice calm, but Ron and Hermione could hear the tremor, "go to the Owlery and get to Dumbledore. Tell him what's happened."

"Alright," Ron agreed.

"See you in a minute…I hope."
And she scooted so that her legs hung over the side of the trapdoor and with one mighty push, she was freefalling into the shadow. It took only seconds, but Hope felt as though it was longer when she collided with the bottom landing against something that felt a combination of soft and firm. She was instantly suspicious of the softness, but she still called up to her friends that the landing was soft, and they soon followed.

Hope touched it lightly. It felt like a plant…was this one of the challenges? Probably Professor Sprout's, then. Hope could barely make out Hermione who was at least two feet from her, so she jumped when the girl spoke.

"We must be miles beneath the school…"

Hope looked back up to where the trapdoor was, a little surprised that it was so far away. Had they really fallen so far so fast?

"Lucky we had a plant to cushion us," Ron was saying as Hope began to struggle. What the—?!

"Lucky?" Hermione had shrieked. "Look!"

There were thick, snake-like vines already wrapping around Hope and Ron, but Hermione had actually made it to the safe side.

The tight grip on Hope's injured leg was cutting off the blood flow and she could feel her ribs and wrists starting to bruise from how tight the creepers had wound about her body. A tendril had snaked around her neck and her vision was beginning to waver.

"Stop struggling!" Hermione. "This is Devil's Snare! Devil's Snare, Devil's Snare… 'It's deadly fun, but will sulk in the sun!'"

"Then make a fire!" Hope gasped, clawing at her throat.

"But there's no firewood!" Hermione almost wailed.

"HAVE YOU GONE MAD?!" Ron roared, making Hope wince and jump at the sound. "ARE YOU A WITCH OR NOT?!"

Hermione didn't seem to be able to dignify that with a response and not three seconds later, Hope could feel the vines that had wrapped around her receding, giving her the opportunity to crawl weakly to the wall where Hermione was.

"Oh God!" Hermione said in horror. "Your neck."

Hope flinched as she reached out to touch the bruised flesh. She couldn't see it, but she could imagine how it looked.

"I-I'm fine," she croaked, massaging her throat a little. "We should get going, we've wasted a lot of time as it is."

There was no disagreeing with her there.

For a few moments as they walked down the passage, the only thing they could hear was the steady dripping of water, but then something else echoed in the quiet.

"Is that—?"

What Ron thought it was, Hope never found out, because Hermione had opened the door to the next
trial (In the name of Zeus! This was turning into the Labours of Heracles, wasn't it?). The next chamber was a little smaller than the last, but then, it wasn't filled with a massive plant, so that was good. Instead of a plant it was filled small, jewel-encrusted…what a second—

"Are those keys?" Hope asked dumbstruck. "Keys with wings?"

"They can't be," Hermione disagreed, but she looked closer. "On my god, they are!"

"How can keys be winged?" Ron demanded, staring up at them as well.

"Enchanted, probably," Hope wagered, tilting her head as she looked to over to the door opposite them. "One of them must be the key to that door…we probably'll have to catch one."

"Look!" Hermione was pointing into the cloud of metal and wings. "One of the keys! It has a crumpled wing!"

Hope followed her hand, to the key it was pointing at. She was right; one of the keys was having difficulty remaining aloft with its injury and its weight.

"So, what's the plan?" Hermione asked Hope, but she looked back at her friend, she wasn't there. She whirled around in time to see Hope mount one of the broomsticks and launch into the air. If Hermione had been the swearing type, she probably would have uttered a few vulgar words. Why couldn't Hope just think before she acted?

Hope swerved dangerously, looping and turning as all the keys aimed at her as if she was the enemy, but she never lost sight of the blue-winged, silver-coloured key. It was rather quick for having a busted wing, but Hope was faster, and she cornered it against the wall, slamming all of her weight on it, cracking it onto the wall.

She would have felt a little sorry, if the thing was alive, but it wasn't.

"Next time," Hermione said, a little irritated as Hope turned the key in the hole, opening the door, "tell us the plan before hand."

"I'm a think-and-go kind of girl," Hope said with a wink as they entered the next chamber. "Oh, please tell me the next one's how to cross a darkened room without light, I'm really good at that."

Ron wasn't sure he wanted to know why she was good at seeing in the dark. He took one cautious step forward, and then they all had to blink quickly, the light catching them all by surprise.

"Oh…" Hope said a little weakly. "Er…guys, this really isn't my forte."

The light above had revealed a massive chessboard set with just as huge chess pieces.

"Lucky thing it's mine, then," Ron said from off to the side. "Do you think we have to play our way across?"

"Probably," Hermione said weakly, gesturing past the white pieces on the opposite side of the board, "there's the door."

It was short work for the three of them to find their own spots on the board. Ron was a knight, Hermione a castle, and Hope was a bishop. And then the game began.

Hope had never quite remembered playing a game of chess where the stakes were so high. It didn't
really hit them that this game of chess was exactly like wizard's chess, until the white queen slashed her sword through the other black knight.

"Ron, not to question your skills or anything," Hope said shakily, looking over to her red haired friend who was now so pale that he almost looked like one of the white pieces, "but you do know what you're doing, right?"

"Y-yeah," Ron said weakly, "don't worry Hope. This is what I'm good at. Hermione, take the bishop."

Still, he seemed to get so into the game that three times he almost missed that Hope and Hermione were in striking distance. That was the thing that worried Hope the most, and one look at Hermione told her that she was just as terrified. This was one area Hope did not excel at, but even she could see that there were only a few moves left to make, and none without losing a piece, and there was only one that's loss would give them the win.

"I've got to be taken," Ron said in the same blunt manner that Hope sometimes adopted.

"NO!" cried Hermione.

"That's a bad idea," Hope agreed, conflicting emotions warring on her face.

"Some pieces have to be sacrificed!" Ron yelled back to them. "Once I make my move, that leaves you free to check the king, Hope!"

Hope opened her mouth to say something, but then Ron's eyes met hers, and the words were strangled from her lips. It was strange to think how alike Ron and George's eyes were and yet different at the same time. There was a pale fire burning in his eyes; determination.

She gave a jerky nod.

Hope had to throw up her arms when the queen struck her friend, sending him tumbling to the ground where he moved no more. Vaguely, she thought that this must have been what it was like for Ron and Hermione when that Bludger hit her in the Gryffindor-Hufflepuff game.

And then she made the final move. Three spaces to the left.

Hope tilted her head back to survey the white king. "Check mate," she intoned duly and the king dropped his crown from his temple to the space before her feet. And then Hope and Hermione were gone from their spaces and at Ron's side in seconds.

Hope moved Ron's head slightly away from her so she could survey the damage.

"Is it bad?" Hermione whimpered.

"There's no blood," Hope noticed, "it's just a nasty bruise. He'll be fine, but we have to get going. We'll come back for him."

Hermione looked as though she wanted to say something, but then she changed her mind, linking hands with Hope and entering the next door.

Luckily for them, that trial had already been taken care of, if the unconscious troll was anything to go by. However, the next one was not. As soon as they had stepped through the door, eerie purple flames had erupted behind them, ensuring that they were trapped in the room with a table holding a row of potions.
"Let's get this over with," Hope grumbled as they came up to stand before the table and read the contents of the parchment that lay beside the row.

*Danger lies before you, while safety lies behind,*

*Two of us will help you, whichever you would find,*

*One among us seven will let you move ahead,*

*Another will transport the drinker back instead,*

*Two among our number hold only nettle wine,*

*Three of us are killers, waiting hidden in a line.*

*Choose, unless you wish to stay here for evermore,*

*To help you in your choice, we give you these clues four:*

*First, however slyly the poison tries to hide,*

*You will always find some on nettle wine's left side;*

*Second, different are those that stand at either end,*

*But if you would move onwards, neither is your friend;*

*Third, as you see clearly, all are different sizes,*

*Neither dwarf nor giant holds death in their insides;*

*Fourth, the second on the left and the second on the right,*

*Are twins once you taste them, though different at first sight.*

"A riddle," Hope said in relief, "oh, I'm good at riddles. Shall we?"

Hermione nodded, looking a bit relieved at being able to use her cleverness in a logic puzzle.

"Okay," Hope said, cracking her knuckles. "So the second on the left and the second on the right can either be poison or nettle wine, right? But the second on the right is the 'giant' so it has to be nettle wine." She moved those two back, still in position, but behind the rest.

"And poison can be found on the wine's left side," Hermione added, "so…" She moved back the bottle furthest to the left and the green pyramid-shaped bottle.

"The blue one has to take you forward," Hope added, lifting the little light blue bottle into the air, inspecting its contents, "because its already been used."

"And the purple one on the right has to take you back," Hermione continued, lifting it up, impressed by their combined brilliance.

Hope glanced into the blue bottle. There wasn't much left, only enough for one person. So, being the reckless, noble git Hermione would later claim she was, she downed it in a gulp and rushed through the blazing fire even as she heard her friend cry out her name.

The last chamber was occupied by the person who had been her second suspect after Snape himself.
(honestly, he was in too many places at the wrong time and was too jittery…or maybe she was just being judgmental.

"So," she said remarkably coolly and calmly, "it was you after all."

The turban-wearing man turned from the mirror (wasn't that the Mirror of Erised? What was it doing here?), to face her. Quirrel no longer seemed to be the twitching mess he always was during school.

"Me," he said with scorn, "now, tell me, Miss Potter, what was it that gave me away?"

"You gave me a bad feeling," Hope said bluntly, "and you're terrible teacher."

His lips curled into a sneer, making Hope feel silently pleased that she still excelled at being an irritating bitch.

"You spelled my broom to throw me off," she continued frigidly, "and when that didn't work, you made sure that Bludger would hit its mark."

"It was a pity none of those killed you," Quirrel told her, "but it matters not, because I'm going to kill you tonight."

With a snap of his fingers, ropes appeared out of nowhere, tightly binding Hope where she stood. She strained against them, wincing as they pressed into her bruised skin. "I am trying very hard not to see this as kinky," she muttered to herself, flexing her wrists and grimacing.

"You're too nosy to live, Potter," Quirrel continued, as if he hadn't heard her comment, which he might not have. "Scurrying around the school at Halloween like that with your miserable little friends, for all I knew your friend Ron seen me coming to look at what was guarding the Stone."

"Us give me too much credit," Hope said snidely, her rings digging into her fingers.

"Or you don't give yourselves enough," Quirrell said absently, turning away from the bound first year to gaze upon the Mirror. "Now, wait quietly, Potter. I need to examine this interesting mirror."

Hope made an irritated huff that was ignored.

"This mirror is the key to finding the Stone," Quirrell murmured to himself, his fingers brushing over the arched frame, as if searching for some secret compartment. "Trust Dumbledore to come up with something like this…but he's in London…I'll be far away by the time he gets back…"

Hope frowned, peering intently at the back of his turban. Was it just her or was something moving under the cloth?

"I see the Stone…I'm presenting it to my master…but where is it?"

"First sign of insanity," Hope sang behind him, "talking to yourself."

"Can you be more annoying?" the man snapped, turning to glare at her, but she was unfazed.

"Oh, absolutely," Hope said, nodding seriously, "this is just the tip of the iceberg, I can bitch all night."

He made a derisive noise as he turned back to the mirror, missing Hope sticking her tongue out at him.

"You were my second choice," Hope said as he continued ignoring her, "after Snape."
"He does seem the type, doesn't he?" Quirrell sneered. "He's always hated you. He was at Hogwarts with your father, didn't you know? They loathed each other. But he never wanted you dead."

"Such a comforting thought," Hope said dryly, rolling her eyes as Quirrell cursed.

"I don't understand…is the Stone inside the mirror? Should I break it?"

"Well," Hope said contemplatively, even though he wasn't really talking to her, "if you do break it and it's not there, that's all on you."

"Will you shut up!" Quirrell commanded venomously. "What does this mirror do? How does it work? Help me, Master!"

Hope opened her mouth to add in something rather derogatory, but then her heart stopped completely when a voice came from within that wrapped turban.

"Use the girl…Use the girl…"

Hope was released from the ropes and dragged forward until she was before the mirror, her legs so numb that she almost fell over.

"Look in the mirror and tell me what you see."

Hope felt as though her tongue had been glued to the bottom of her mouth and her heart beat frantically against her chest.

It was the second image that she had seen when she had found the mirror the first time around. The little red-haired boy was smiling just as brightly as before, laughing without sound as his mother lifted him into the air, twirling him around. Hope lifted a hand to press against the surface of the glass as her older self turned to look at her, pressing a kiss to her son's forehead.

And then she held out a red stone to Hope with an amused grin, winking as she slipped it into her pocket. And Hope could feel it in her own pocket!

"Well?" Quirrell snapped with impatience. "What do you see?"

It was such an intensely private moment that Hope didn't feel fear at all when she turned and spat angrily. "Go fuck yourself."

She saw that slap coming a mile away, but that wasn't going to stop her, and she collided harshly with the ground.

"That was pathetic," she growled as she pushed herself up off of the ground, her cheek throbbing, "my cousin can hit harder than-"

His foot collided with her rib and she was pretty sure she felt it crack as pain blossomed through her side, leaving her choking on pain.

"Tell me!" he yelled. "What did you see?!"

The high voice from his turban spoke once more. "Let me speak to her…face-to-face…"

That idea seemed to make Quirrell very nervous. "Master, you are not strong enough!"

"I have strength enough…for this…"
Hope pushed herself off the ground again as Quirrell unwound the turban and turned so that his back was to her.

Hope's mouth opened in horror and she was certain that she would have screamed if she could have, but she was once again rendered incapable of speech. Where the back of the head should have been smooth, a face had risen out of the flesh. It was chalk white with red eyes that had her frozen in fear and instead of a nose, it had slits like a snake.

"Hope Potter…" the face rasped, sending a bad shiver down her spine. "See what I have become? Mere shadow and vapor…I have form only when I can share another's body…but there have always been those willing to let me into their hearts and minds…Unicorn blood has strengthened me, these past weeks…you saw faithful Quirrell drinking it for me in the forest…and once I have the Elixir of Life, I will be able to create a body of my own…Now…why don't you give me that Stone in your pocket?"

Hope's heart beat frantically, her blood surging in her veins as she pulled out her wand and pointed and made a quick jab, causing the stone floor a foot or two from Voldy-Quirrell to explode, giving Hope the opportunity to scramble to her feet and limp towards the flame door.

"SIEZE HER!"

Hope screamed as Quirrell grabbed her from behind, tugging her back.

"Let me go!" she screamed, battering her fists against his hands, her pain amplified by his arms hitting against that damaged rib and her scar exploding in almost blinding agony. She raised a hand to strike at his face from behind her, and it was only then that he released her, and she fell, crumpling into a heap in a haze of pain, the world fading into blackness.

And then she knew no more.
Flying High

She could hear a steady thrum of voices that her head was too hazy to identify. Some were quiet, some were loud, but she really couldn't be bothered; she was just so tired and whatever she was sleeping on was just so soft…

But the sleep was fading on fast wings and finally her eyes fluttered open to see a pair of deep blue eyes.

"You are in big trouble, missie," George said as she gave him a sleepy smile.

"Whatever for?" she murmured in amusement, rolling back her shoulders.

"The Quidditch match against Ravenclaw's tomorrow," George grinned, "and Wood's beside himself."

She chuckled lightly. "That doesn't surprise me…how bad am I?"

"Now?" George helped her hold the cup of water that had been set beside her on the bedside table and take a long drink. "You're pretty much healed, but when you came in?" He screwed up his eyes, trying to recall the list of injuries Madam Pomfrey had given McGonagall and Dumbledore. "Cracked rib, bruised limbs, a couple scratches…not too bad, considering your track record."

"Cute," she said dryly, sitting up in the bed, running a hand through her loose hair, "your bedside manner is so wonderful, Georgie." She patted his cheek, amusing herself at how it flushed at the touch. "How are Ron and Hermione?"

"As right as rain," a different voice answered her as Angelina sat down beside her. "Their injuries weren't as…extensive…as yours, so they've been healed up for awhile. Fred's making sure they get some food." Angelina's careful eyes looked over her healed body. "I'm glad you're awake," she added with a grin, "you've had a lot of us worried."

"As usual," George coughed, earning a glare from Hope.

"Don't be such an arse, George Fabian Weasley," Hope said, rolling her eyes at him in disdain. "Saving the world is hard work."

She gaze shifted to the end of the bed and she goggled at the large pile of gifts and sweets that lay there. "Whoa. What's all this for?"

"Saving the world?" George mocked. "The rumour mill's been bursting since the three of you had your little adventure…I almost wanted to send a letter home to tell Mum what Ron's been up to just to see how much punishment he'd get."

"George," they both said reproachfully, chastising the boy.

"How did I get here?" Hope added, looking around the hospital wing, "the last thing I remember was falling in the…wherever I was."

"Oh, I heard some of the professors talking about that," Angelina said brightly, pleased that she had answer. "Apparently one of the suits of armor carried you out. They were surprised by the amount of devotion it paid you."
"So it was Michael," Hope mused to herself, smiling fondly, "that idiot won't leave me alone."

"Who's Michael?" George asked suspiciously, but Hope just waved off his concerns.

"Sir Michael Richmond was young in the tenth century, George," Hope admonished, "he was once allied with my great—gods knows how many—grandfather. He tries to keep an eye on me, keep me from causing too much trouble."

"Not very successful, is he?" Angelina said with a grin.

Hope shrugged her stiff shoulders. "Well, I have told him to not interfere with my life, so... I'm surprised he even came and got me from that chamber...or how he even got there."

She frowned at that, a little befuddled, until Madam Pomfrey came out of her office. "Poppy! Did you miss me?"

The Matron clicked her tongue in irritation as she had her patient lay back down so she could run another diagnostic spell over her. "Not particularly, Miss Potter, I was growing so used to having all the beds in my ward empty, but then, I should have expected this...you and trouble go hand in hand."

"You know, I always thought 'Trouble' was your nickname for this bloke," Hope said with a laugh, jutting her thumb towards George who blinked and rolled his eyes, remembering what she had told him about 'Trouble' before her first Quidditch match.

"Not quite," Madam Pomfrey said in amusement.

"Hm," Hope appraised George with her eyes, "you look highly troublesome, George; I can see why we're friends."

A pale flush rose on his cheeks and he looked to Madam Pomfrey, a bit at a loss of words.

Madam Pomfrey mouthed "That's the potions talking."

"Okay..."

Hope twisted her head from side to side, making it crack. "Gods, I can't stand hospitals. When am I getting out of here?"

"Soon," Madam Pomfrey promised, "but your muscles are going to be a little sore either way."

"Well," Hope said dryly, "isn't that just lovely." One of the fingers of her hand tapped across the arm of the opposite one as she frowned thoughtfully. The last thing she remembered was Quirrell's screaming, clutching at the body parts her skin had touched (namely the face and hands). It was almost as if her touch had been like hydrochloric acid to him, but she'd touched other people loads of times, like when she hugged her friends or like when she just patted George's cheeks. Her touch hadn't affected them, and Quirrell had shied away from her hand the first time they met too, in Diagon Alley, when she'd offered her hand for a shake. So it must have only affected him...or Voldemort. But why wouldn't Voldemort be able to touch her? It was all a bit strange, if you asked her (and even if you didn't).

"Hope?" Madam Pomfrey was looking at her in concern. "Are you alright? You just zoned out a bit."

"Oh," Hope said quickly, "don't worry, I was just thinking."
"Maybe that is a worrying thought," Angelina teased, standing up. "I'd better go tell Ron and Hermione you're awake…and we only just forced them to get some breakfast too." She sighed mournfully as she left, ruffling Hope's hair in a sisterly fashion that made the younger girl smile.

"Am I going to be free by tomorrow?" Hope asked Madam Pomfrey as she replaced her wand in her pocket.

"Worried about disappointing your House?" she asked.

"Worried about disappointing Oliver Wood," Hope corrected, winking to George who grinned, "I'm afraid he might drown himself in his sorrows if I don't show up."

Madam Pomfrey actually cracked a smile at that, and Hope knew there was hope.

Oliver Wood looked caught between crying and kissing Hope when he saw her dressed in full Quidditch gear awaiting them in the Gryffindor changing rooms, complete with a bright smile.

"Oh, don't give me that look, Oliver," she admonished of the boy, looping her broom over her shoulder. "We haven't won the Cup yet." Her eyes sparkled with life. "But don't worry, we will."

Hope's enthusiasm was infectious that the rest of the team couldn't help but feel optimistic.

For Hope, this would be the first time she was on a broom where something (or someone) wasn't going to try to get her killed. It was great! She couldn't wait to feel sun on her face and the wind whipping her hair with every move.

She looked up from struggling to tighten her arm guards to find George gazing at her fondly. Flushed, she tucked a lock of hair behind her eyes, making her new beads more obvious (she'd braided them red and gold for the occasion). "What?"

"I just don't think I've seen you smile so much before," he admitted.

Her grin widened. "Oh, I disagree…I must say I never smiled so much until I met you."

His smile became a tad roguish. "Now don't go getting sentimental on me, Potter, I had such high hopes for you."

"Shut up," she said, rolling her eyes in good humour, bouncing back and forth on the balls of her feet, jittery with excitement before they finally made their way out onto the field amidst raucous cheering. The sea of red and blue made her blink a few times before her attention was drawn to the Ravenclaw Seeker.

She had never played against Cho Chang, but Oliver had drilled it into her to "know your opponent". She knew that the girl had a fondness of tailing others as opposed to actually doing the seeking, but she was light enough that she could out-fly her opponents. Unfortunately for her, this was not her lucky day, because Hope had both the eyes for it and the speed. She didn't bother hiding the smirk; she hoped it unnerved her.

Cho was a second year, she believed. She was a pretty Asian girl who had to be at least a little smart to have been sorted into Ravenclaw, but other than that, Hope knew nothing about her. As sad as it was, other Houses rarely associated with those outside their own; cross-House relationships were much fewer than ones within the same House. It wasn't that there was anything wrong with it, it was just that those that were in the same House saw more of each other than they did of anyone else.
Besides, Cho had always come off as a smarter and Chinese version of Parvati or Lavender, being far too giggly. Gods, she hadn't ever thought there was such a thing.

The whistle blew and the fourteen players pushed off from the ground.

"And a warm welcome back to Hope Potter after her little adventure out of bounds!" Lee Jordan was saying from the microphone. "Hoping for a win for Gryffindor today, no offense to you ravens!"

But Hope wasn't too surprised that they took offense, really, Lee was such a charmer. He had thought he was being clever when he brought in flowers that had had letters on the side spelling out "S-N-O-G G-E-O-R-G-E", she'd given him a very nice slap for that.

Hope spun her broom backwards so she could avoid the Quaffle that had been thrown towards her head. Honestly, everyone loved aiming at her head, didn't they? Unluckily, the movement turned in the favour for Gryffindor as Katie caught the large red ball and went speeding towards the opposite end of the field, giving Hope the chance to circle the pitch, searching for that flash of gold, but it was nowhere to be seen.

She glanced back, her face tinged with annoyance at the girl who was following her closely.

Cho waved.

Hope rolled her eyes, attempting to increase her speed so that she would lose her, but the girl was wily.

"And the Seekers seem to have engaged in a flight version of tag…"

Hope shot downwards into a dive, a very steep dive, before pulling up just as abruptly, pleasing herself with seeing how much force Cho had to exert to right her broom before she could get ploughed. She sniggered, a pleased smirk plastered across her face.

"Yet another reason why tailing the Gryffindor Seeker is a bad idea for people who don't want to end up in the hospital…"

Professor McGonagall couldn't help but feel a bit nostalgic when she saw that smirk, the superior smirk that James Potter had always worn. Even though she and Hope had had that talk about not comparing her to her parents, she just couldn't help it, they were just so alike. But that wasn't to say that Hope was arrogant, maybe confident, but not overly so. She wasn't much of a flaunter unless it was in a joking manner.

Hope looped through the air, high-fiving Alicia in the air as she went back to circling the pitch, her eyes intent on any flash of gold.

She must have caught sight of it --and they were only about a half hour into the game; not as impressive as the last one where she had caught the Snitch in under five minutes, but still-- because then she was hurtling in the opposite direction, Cho closely following her, frantically trying to keep up, but Hope had the upper ground (speaking figuratively). She was outstretching her hand towards something that Professor McGonagall could hardly see, and then she pulled up. A bright, beaming grin was spread across her face as she waved her closed fist in the air, the silver wings fluttering weakly.

To say the crowd went wild would be an understatement. It was the first time in several years that Slytherin hadn't won the Quidditch Cup, and that had it unbelievably amazing. The Ravenclaws were good sports because, even though they lost, the Cup went to someone that wasn't Slytherin, something the other three houses had been trying and failing at for years.
Hope wished she had a picture for when Angelina, Alicia, and Katie all hugged her—screaming with elation; her ears would never recover—and when Fred and George kissed one of her cheeks at the same time, and then when Oliver promptly burst into tears, almost collapsing on her. The Twins had to haul him off long enough for Oliver to hand over the Quidditch Cup (tearfully) to his Head of House.

Hope wasn't sure she'd smiled so widely in a very long while.

"Should you really be balancing on that?"

Hope looked up from where she was sitting on one of the stone rails, the rail squarely between her with one of her legs dangling in the free air. She grinned. "I like a little danger in my life, Georgie, didn't you know?"

"I might have guessed," he joked, leaning against the stone. "What's wrong? You left the party rather early."

Hope stared out into the beautiful terrace that Hogwarts was a host of. There really was no place more beautiful, was there?

"I'm just…thinking about what happened down in those chambers," Hope said quietly, strumming her fingers against her arm, "and I don't want to leave here and go back to Number Four. Hogwarts is…home, I guess."

"Don't worry," George said with a grin, "I'm sure Ron'll convince Mum and Dad to let you spend some of the holiday at the Burrow."

"The Burrow?" Hope said, flummoxed. "What's the Burrow?"

"Oh, that's our house," George informed her, "don't people name houses these days?"

She rolled her eyes at his antics. "Not generally, no."

"Well, you should come anyways," he continued. "It'll be fun."

"If you say so," Hope responded easily, moving her body so that she was leaning against the rail as opposed to dangling precariously on it.

"Was there really a mirror down there?" George asked her suddenly, earning him an odd look. "Everyone's been talking about it, everything that went down in the chamber, and that was before you lot all got those points for your valour, or whatever it was… Was there really a mirror that could show you your heart's desire?"

A frozen smile appeared on her face.

"There was."

"Only one who wanted to find the Stone—find it, but not use it—would be able to get it, otherwise they'd just see themselves making gold or drinking the Elixir of Life. My brain surprises even me sometimes—"

"But how did you get the Stone inside of the mirror?" Hope persisted. "That mirror's at least as old as Hogwarts, you can't just put things inside of it."

Dumbledore's eyes twinkled, but he offered no explanation, irritating Hope in ways that she would
never understand. She didn't like his eyes, there was something about them that always put her on edge…

"Would it be a bit… rude to ask what you saw?"

"A bit," Hope agreed, raking a hand through her hair, a soft smile lighting her face, making George wonder what it was that she saw, "but maybe one day I'll tell you."

"I'm going to hold you to that," George warned her.

"Can I ask you something?" Hope countered instead, and once he nodded, she continued: "What's it like having siblings?"

"Having siblings? But you live with your cousin, isn't that like living with a sibling?" George asked in confusion.

Hope scoffed, crossing her arms. "Dudley doesn't count…he's practically part whale."

George snickered.

"Besides, we've hated each other for as long as we've known each other, and understood what hate is," Hope said offhandedly. "Is it like that with your siblings?"

"Not really," George admitted, "I mean, sure, we get into fights now and then, but I don't think I could really imagine living without them."

"Especially Fred?" Hope grinned, bumping her shoulder against his.

"Life would be very boring without Fred," he agreed, grinning as well.

"Speaking of Fred," Hope continued, "I need a favour from the two of you."

"What kind of favour?" he asked as he was tugged none-too-gently back towards the castle.

"Nothing too strenuous," Hope laughed, "come on!"

If Hope, Fred, and George had anything to do with a number of Dungbombs dropped in the Great Hall as a last prank for the year, they would never admit it.

Fred and George weren't too hard to make out in the crowd, much to Molly Weasley's relief (those two always caused her such worry, not unlike how her elder brothers had been, barring Percy). And then she had to pause, because George was helping a girl get down off the train.

It didn't take her but a second to recognize the face of the deceased Lily Potter. The resemblance was uncanny. They hugged their various friends, waving goodbye. As she approached, she could hear Ron speaking to Hope and the brown-haired girl that must be Hermione, "You must come and stay this summer, both of you –I'll send you an owl."

"Sounds fun," Hope said with a grin, "anything to get me away from the Dursleys."

"Bye, Hope!" called Angelina and Alicia as they made their way to their folks.

"See you!" she called.

"See you, Potter!" Lee yelled over the noise, making her laugh and wave.
"Still famous?" Ron guessed with a grin.

"Maybe a little," Hope laughed, "but trust me, no one's going to know my name where I'm going."

Molly thought they looked very sweet, Hope smiling lightly, leaning not quite so heavily on her cane as she had before, her things already miniaturized and in her pocket as her other hand was linked with George's. George leaned down to whisper something into her ear, making her colour at the comment. She attempted to detach herself from Molly's son, but he caught her hand again, giving her a wink.

"You are such a flirt," Hope complained.

"I work very hard to be like this!" George retorted amidst the laughter of his twin.

"This way, Hope!" Hermione called, tugging her towards a muggle couple off to the side.

"I'm catching a ride with Hermione," Hope said, "so I'll see you later, alright? Stay out of trouble!"

She should have given that advice to herself, but then, if she had, she would have never followed it. For once, maybe the summer holidays wouldn't be too bad if she was counting down to the silver lining...
Summer Blues

Hope Potter's summer started going downhill the moment she stepped back inside Number Four Privet Drive, and she nearly blew her top completely when Vernon locked her trunk in the cupboard under the stairs and put a padlock on Hedwig's cage.

Hedwig, was not very impressed with this, if it wasn't obvious with the (owlish) scowl she had turned on the man and attempted to peck his hands through the bars of her cage as he slipped on the padlock.

It was almost July and Hope was bored out of her skull. She had, of course, picked the lock on the cupboard the day after her things had been locked away and removed her schoolbooks, parchment, quill and inkbottle, as well as her books on Blood Magick and the Ancient Arts and a journal into which she had made a number of notes into already concerning the Ancient Arts.

Hope was also annoyed by another matter, and that was that no one had wrote her any bloody letters! Not even one!

Okay, so maybe she had been hoping that George would write her at least one (she tried not to blush at the thought, but failed), but she was certain that Ron and Hermione would have sent her something, but no such luck. Hope had never felt so downtrodden in her whole life.

"I mean, I can understand Ron not sending letters," Hope complained to Hedwig –the only one who seemed to listen to her these days–, "but Hermione should've, at least."

Hedwig could offer no reply. She was probably still irritated by the padlock on her cage.

"Whatever," Hope grumbled, creasing the last of her Transfiguration homework and shoving it into her book before slamming the book shut on the parchment and opening her Blood Magick book again. "I don't care anymore," she decided, flipping through the pages with a flurry of fingers to look for the passage she had left off on.

Hope traced the Blood Sigil for 'healing' onto the last bit of empty space on the page of her journal before flipping to the next one as her eyes roved over the old book.

*Gemstones are a useful medium for employing Blood Magick in that they are one of the few substances that can take in the blood of the user. The effect that the blood will depend both on the runes carved into it and the type of stone it is. Thus, if the stone known both as a Bloodstone and a Heliotrope is carved with a healing rune, its magick is amplified, as opposed to the rune being carved into a simple stone with the user's blood, as Bloodstone is a gem used for healing.*

Hope's eyebrows arched in surprise at this new information, but she was forced to shut the book quickly at the sound of voices beyond the door. Hope lurched to her feet, shoving the books and parchment and quill under her bed as she flicked off the light and clamoured back into her bed, throwing the covers over herself and turning away from the door with only seconds to spare.

The door was creaked open as her mother's sister peered inside, her eyes falling on Hope's deeply-breathing form and then she retreated, leaving Hope alone.

Hope's eyes opened as soon as the door shut, though she did not move until the Dursleys had stopped moving around all the lights were shut off, bathing the house in darkness.

It was only then that Hope threw her covers aside, fishing out her torch and flicking the light on as
she returned to her research yet again, because if there was one thing that hadn't yet failed her, it was magic.

Hope mutinously scowled out her window and into the night. Well, she wasn't going to wait for them to remember that she was their friend, nope, that was not Hope's style. If they wanted to talk to her, then they could do it themselves, because Hope had better things to do with her time! (She really didn't, but who was going to tell them that?)

*Common gems used as a Blood-binding element include: Crystal, Onyx, Moonstone, Opal, and Turquoise. Many gemstones are considered far too fragile to act as a base for Blood Magick. Even the weakest Blood Sigils caused such gemstones to shatter from the magic imbued with the runes…*

Hope couldn't remember how long she sat there on her bed with the torch in her mouth, its light shining down on the old parchment as she scrawled notes into her small journal, but before long she had to put the quill and ink aside and pick up her lock picks and stumble over to the window and throw it open before fixing the picks into Hedwig's padlock until it clicked open.

Hedwig was only so happy to leave her cage, even if she wasn't allowed to be gone very long, because being out for a short amount of time was at least better than not being out at all. Hope was sure that if Hedwig had to wait until the end of the summer to go flying, the owl would have been driven mad.

Luckily it never came to that, because of Hope's trusty lock picks (that were getting a bit rusty – figuratively speaking, of course– as Hope hadn't hardly used them except to unlock Hedwig's cage and unlock the cupboard door.

Hypothetically, Hope could have possibly Flashed the trunk to her room, but she was sure the Dursleys would notice if it was gone, and besides, Hope had never Flashed something that was heavier than her.

And she certainly wasn't going to test it out now.

Hedwig hooted dolefully as she hopped onto Hope's arm.

Hope sighed. "I know, Hedwig, I miss Hogwarts too." And then Hedwig launched herself out of the window to hunt.

If there was one thing that was terrible about summer, on top of going back to live with the Dursleys, it was finishing her required meetings with her therapist, Doctor Joanne Samuel. This was a requirement after being in a traumatic accident like she had, and Hope didn't approve in the slightest. They had been put on hold until the summer, as she had been at a boarding school in Scotland, but know that she was back, they had resumed once more.

And if there was one thing Hope really hated, it was therapy sessions that involved talking about yourself. She saw absolutely no point in going to these sessions, but who was she to criticize doctors with legitimate degrees in the healing arts (and she meant medicine, not healing, if you didn't pick up on that).

Hope lay flopped on the couch while the good doctor sat in the corner chair attempting to appear serene as she jotted notes into her notebook. Hope dearly hoped that she had put something in there about her now-violet spikes.

Hope stared at the ceiling, her hands interlocked on her stomach, one finger tapping incessantly against the back of her opposite hand. Her brow creased with irritation as she stared off into space,
looking at nothing in particular. The colors of the room were too bright and obvious, and for younger children, yet another reason why she shouldn't have been there.

"Hope. Hope."

Rolling her eyes, Hope turned her attention to her therapist with an air of boredom that Hope pulled off perfectly. Personally, she didn't have anything against Doctor Samuel, but she didn't much like talking about herself, so they were at a bit of an impasse, and had been for probably as long as Hope had been sent to her. "What?"

"You need to talk some time," the doctor said kindly, though she was speaking with her most trying patient by far, "why don't you tell me about your new school?"

"Its fine," Hope said shortly, shifting her gaze back to the brightly coloured ceiling once more, "it's in Scotland and my parents used to go there. There isn't much to say about it, really."

"Did you make any friends?" Doctor Samuel asked, probing for a response that wasn't sarcastic, though that was a losing battle. "Without having your cousin around?"

"Yeah." Hope sighed, rubbing her eyes tiredly. "At least, I thought I had."

"What do you mean?" she asked, jotting down notes in her notebook, a habit that annoyed Hope greatly, but she tried not to show it (she was failing).

"Well, Ron –he's one of my best mates– said he was going to ow-write to me," Hope explained, wincing slightly when she almost said 'owl' before quickly smoothing it over, "and Hermione –she's my other best mate– only I haven't gotten anything from either of them, or from my other friends, and would've thought that at least George would write…"

"And who is George?" Samuel prompted.

It was quite amusing to see the flustered expression on Hope's face, even if it was only for a few seconds. "He's one of Ron's older brothers, he's a friend of mine." Or something more, the doctor thought, if her face was anything to go off of.

"And what have you done so far over the holiday?" she asked her, turning the subject away from her friends.

Hope shrugged her shoulders, bouncing her leg as she did so. "Nothing much."

"So, been at home a lot?" she asked.

Hope snorted humourlessly. "No, besides home would imply that I have an attachment to where I live, but I don't. Anything that keeps me out of the house is great."

So she still had a terrible relationship with her aunt and uncle. It wasn't too surprising. Hope could be very hard to handle, depending on who you were; she couldn't imagine dealing with her in a home setting.

"Hope," she said, leaning forward in her chair, trying to prompt the girl to look in her eyes, "you do know why I'm asking you all these questions, don't you?"

"I haven't the faintest idea," Hope said dryly, twirling a strand of purple hair between her fingers.

The doctor sighed, hating when her patient was purposefully obtuse. "Hope, you went through an
incredibly traumatic experience—"

"It was just a car accident!" Hope complained. "That's hardly traumatic!"

"You were dead for sixty-seven seconds," she continued, Hope's face turning sour at the mention of that detail. "No one comes back from an accident like that without being a little changed."

Hope scowled fiercely at that. "I'm not afraid of death, dying doesn't frighten me."

"Then what does?" she asked gently. It wasn't too surprising that Hope thought that way; she did seem to be made of tougher stuff than any other twelve year old her knew.

For a long moment Hope didn't say anything, then she finally muttered, "I dunno."

"An honest answer, I'm impressed." Doctor Samuel couldn't help but use that tiny bit of sarcasm; one couldn't help it when dealing with such a difficult patient as Hope Potter had proven to be even on her first day.

Hope glared at her; it was very impressive for a girl who was just a few days shy of turning twelve years old.

Doctor Samuel tried hard not to react to the stare, it was quite unnerving. "And tell me about your grades in school."

"I passed everything."

Hope would have gotten The Most Blunt Person of the Year Award two times over, if there was such a thing. Really, it was like the girl didn't use emotion at all when she spoke, unless she was irritated or angry.

"Why don't you like talking to anyone about yourself?" she asked instead.

"Because I'm a private person," Hope responded in a voice that was both curt and sour, "I only talk about myself when I'm with my friends."

"And why is that?"

"Oh, I don't know," Hope said sarcastically, "maybe it's because I trust them."

"You don't strike me as someone who trusts easily. I can see that you have a certain distrust of authority…"

"That depends on the kind of authority," Hope said mildly, her eyes glancing at the clock. "Oh! Look at the time! Looks like our last little meeting has come to an end. How sad, but I've got to go —"

"Hope," the doctor interrupted her, "I can't force you to come to more meetings with me, but it might be a good thing if you talked more with your friends."

"Oh, I talk to them plenty," Hope said dryly as she stood up with the aid of her cane, limping ever so slightly towards the door. Or, at least she had before, but that time was gone and they clearly didn't want to talk to her.

These words were beginning to sound like Hope's new mantra, perhaps Hope thought if she repeated them enough she would believe them, but this had not occurred and deep down, Hope thought maybe she didn't want to believe that her friends really didn't want to write to her…
Hope was used to ignoring her relatives—that's all they seemed to do to each other; Hope ignored them and they ignored Hope—, or at least, to a certain point. Petunia still demanded chores of her daily, and Hope couldn't very well skip out of those, or it would be her head.

But once those were done, Hope was free to do whatever she wanted, well, within reason, Hope supposed. The Dursleys liked it best when she was out of the house and thus out of their hair, as Hope had a bit of an attitude towards them that most people didn't appreciate.

Hope couldn't understand why, but if they had thought she was going to tone down the sass and blatant sarcasm, then they were very much mistaken.

But who didn't like sass and sarcasm?

So, once she was free, she, in spur of sudden boredom, grabbed a cab to the centre of London, however, by the time she had paid the cabbie off, just outside of the Leaky Cauldron. Which was very lucky, since Gringotts was so close.

Hope expelled a breath, ruffling her now dark blue tousled curls with a single streak of black through her fringe (it was hard not change her hair and eyes to outright strange combinations when she was one of the few that could change them at will). It also helped a great deal when she wanted to be incognito.

She pulled open the door and strode inside, easily overlooked by her height and age, passing through the crowd of patrons to reach the rear of the pub, where a door opened to a blank brick wall. Hope remembered this to be the same wall that Hagrid had tapped with his umbrella when he had first taken her to Diagon Alley before first year.

It seemed so long ago now as Hope limped forward, one hand secure on her cane as she withdrew her wand to tap it against the stone.

Unfortunately, Hope had only been half paying attention at the time and it took her a total of seven times before she got the whole brick-tapping-thing right. A tick developed over her eye at her own inability to guess the bricks right.

But she got through eventually, and was unsurprised to see the street packed with shoppers, that made it easy to blend in with the crowd.

Getting into Gringotts was more troublesome than she had remembered, though this might've had something to do with her being with Hagrid—who people had often careened out of the way of—so Hope waited patiently in line for the number of witches and wizards to thin out until she could make her way to the podium.

The goblin that looked down at her could have been scowling, but Hope wasn't quite sure, as it was quite difficult to tell with faces like that. Hope grinned up at him, holding up a letter embossed with the Gringotts seal.

"Hello," Hope said in a tone that was very nearly cheerful, "I have a meeting with Ragnok in a few minutes."

Goblins held no titles, therefore it would have been insulting to call them 'Mr.' or 'Lord' or anything similar—or, at least, that was the way they viewed it, as it had been explained to Hope on her first day to Diagon Alley—, and goblins much preferred their given names, as long as they were not spoken with a condescending tongue.
The goblin took the letter from her, unfolding it and reading its contents before glancing her over one last time.

"Wait here," he said gruffly as he hopped down from his podium to move at a leisure pace to find the Head of Gringotts. Hope smirked at the sound of several groans from behind her where the lines continued, well, it couldn't be said that goblins didn't like drawing out the wait-time.

So Hope waited, smoothing her thumb over her cane where she gripped it until the goblin reappeared once more, motioning for her to follow, which she did so, limping slightly towards the double doors that held within the spacious office of Ragnok.

Unlike his brethren, Ragnok bore the title of 'Master' that befit his position, and he was the only one allowed such a title.

"Miss Potter," he said simply upon her entrance into the office. "How may I be of service?"

"Master Ragnok," Hope said in reply, inclining her head slightly, an action that earned her a glimmer of respect in his eyes. "I have only a few requests of you, actually, and I hope you won't find them too bothersome."

"That would depend on the requests," Ragnok replied, gesturing Hope forward and she took the seat gratefully.

Not half an hour later Hope left Gringotts with her money bag refilled and a package miniaturized in her pocket containing a few new books from her family vaults and several very valuable gems that had been taken from the Slytherin Family Vault. This vault had lain undisturbed for centuries due to family becoming extinct upon the male line, until Hope had claimed it today.

She didn't know if Voldemort had known about it before, but it didn't matter anymore because the vault and its contents now belonged solely to Hope and to her descendents.

It was the gems in particular that she cared more about, since she really wanted to try her hand at Blood Runes, but she still had to wait until she got home to even try that, so Hope wandered off in the direction of Flourish and Blotts.

There were a few people inside, but not that many, so Hope limped off in towards one of the older sections of the shop, tracing lightly over book spines as she mouthed the titles to herself.

"Looking for something in particular?" a voice asked, startling Hope terribly as she whipped around to look upon who had spoken.

Daphne Greengrass gave her a pearly smile. "Sorry," she apologized in a manner that was a bit unrepentant, reminding Hope of just the last year when it had been she who had startled Daphne. "Oh, forget it," Hope said, blinking a few times before she stared at the Slytherin. "How'd you know it was me?"

Daphne arched a pale eyebrow towards Hope. "Oh, please, as if its really that hard," the girl scoffed, "you are the only one our age that walks around with the aid of a cane, you know."

Patches of pink appeared on Hope's cheekbones at her words. "Oh, right," she said, chuckling softly under her breath. "Of course I am."

"Are you looking for some books on the Ancient Arts?" Daphne asked her, smirking a little.
"I'd have more luck in the library I haul around in my trunk," Hope sighed mournfully. "But I guess that's to be expected."

Daphne hummed in agreement. "Since Ancient and Dark seem to get lumped together."

"A real tragedy," Hope said with a sigh, "but I guess you've got to have something to blame when it can't be a witch or wizard."

Daphne sniggered in a way that was distinctly unlady-like. "No truer words have been spoken…do your little lion friends know about your fascination?"

"I think a few of them can guess," Hope admitted, turning back to the shelf, "either that or they don't really know how frowned upon they are."

"Very few do," Daphne had to agree with her there as Hope withdrew an old text from the shelf. Hope frowned at the cover, blowing the dust from it so she could read it before opening it and flicking through the pages. It held some old remedies and enchantments that dealt with herbs as the basis of magic, for warding and healing were just two examples of its uses.

Hm…that sounded slightly interesting, not as interesting as Blood Magick, obviously, but interesting enough.

"Do they know that you're the last living descendant of Salazar Slytherin?"

Hope was so startled that she dropped the book, her heart rate skyrocketing at Daphne's words as her eyes flashed up to meet the blonde's.

"Relax," Daphne said with a careless wave of her hand as Hope glanced around to see if anyone had heard, but, luckily, they were so far into the shop that there was no one else there. "Your secret is safe with me."

Hope knelt to grab the book from the ground before rising to eye the Greengrass heir with suspicion.

"I'm from an old family," Daphne told her, "its not hard to find the family tree of the Slytherin family…though, it is very extensive."

"Should I take that as a compliment?" Hope asked wryly.

Daphne shrugged. "Just a fact…but it does explain that ring of yours."

Hope's hand tightened into a fist, the snake ring cutting into her hand as she did so.

Daphne grinned in an amused manner. "See you at school." And then she turned on her heel and left Hope to her own thoughts.
The day Hope turned twelve wasn't a momentous occasion in the slightest, in fact, not one soul in Number Four Privet Drive celebrated it, including Hope. Hope was still angry over her friends not owling her at all, and then she tried to carve a Blood Rune into one of her gems only to have it backfire spectacularly in her face, leaving her with a few cuts on her hands that she didn't really care for, but there was little she could do about the matter.

Hope shut her room's door behind her and slouched down the stairs and into the kitchen, exhaling a tired breath. She almost headed right back up the stairs to her room when she heard voices, but then she paused to listen to exactly what Vernon was saying.

"Now, as we all know, today is a very important day," he began and Hope made a face behind his back.

It was also coincidentally her birthday, but he had never given a damn about those so it must have been that business dinner he wouldn't stop raving about. Personally, she'd rather not have a dinner with him; just looking at him made her sick, but, she supposed, that was all a matter of opinion, after all, Petunia had been the one that married him.

"This could well be the day I make the biggest deal of my career," he continued, oblivious of Hope's distaste towards both him and his business dinner. "I think we should run through the schedule one more time." Hope couldn't help but roll her eyes; they had a dinner schedule! Who does that? Who prepares what they're going to talk at during a dinner before the actual dinner? (And they thought Hope was the one that was strange in the family; they should have looked in the mirror) "We should all be in position by eight o'clock. Petunia, you will be—?"

"In the lounge," Hope's horse-faced aunt answered primly, as if that somehow made her more attractive, "waiting to welcome them graciously into our home." She waved her hands around in what she thought was a gracious manner, but Hope thought it was more reminiscent of a sideways windmill.

Hope looked around their 'home' in disgust. It was too clean, and she hated things that were immaculate and lacking sentiment. Nothing Petunia and her family owned meant anything to the three of them. The Dursleys were a family very ruled by public opinion, something Hope cared little for. That was one of the reasons Hope didn't get on well at all with her family; they were complete opposites. And opposites repelled each other.

They were too different.

Hope didn't know how Hermione made it work with her family, since her parents were Muggles, but she suspected that it was an awful lot of work and that both sides put an effort into making it work. But the Dursleys hated magic, which was only one of the many problems Hope had with them.

Hope wished for the thousandth time that month that she couldn't have just stayed with Hermione at her place, but no... so here she was, in her personal hell. But then Hope remembered that Hermione wasn't talking to her just like the rest of those tosspots and this only served to sour her attitude further.

"Good, good. And Dudley?" Vernon said, snapping his fingers towards his son.

"I'll be waiting to open the door," Dudley said, his voice like always annoying Hope greatly as he
used a simpering tone. "May I take your coats, Mr. and Mrs. Mason?"

"They'll love him!" Petunia cried, her voice lovingly sappy; Hope tried not to gag at Dudley and his mother's reaction to him.

"I certainly wouldn't," Hope muttered under her breath, ignoring the glare the three of them shot her.

"And you?" Vernon demanded coldly, as he often did when speaking to his niece.

Instead, Hope crossed her arms looking distinctly irritated. She wasn't going to stand there and repeat the words he'd told her several days previously, and those words were: "I'll be in my bedroom, making no noise and pretending I'm not there."

Pretending she didn't exist was more like it, if you asked Hope. As if she didn't do that enough already.

"We all know what we're supposed to do," she said in disdain. "What's the point of going over all this?"

"Hope Lillian Potter! You listen to your uncle!" Petunia barked, and Hope could feel the defiance spilling over inside of her at the use of 'Lillian' instead of 'Lily' as her middle name, as if her aunt couldn't bear to even say her dead sister's name. Hope didn't even try to stop the sneer from forming on her lips.

"It's Hope Lily Potter, Petunia," she said frigidly, "twelve years and you still haven't figured that out? I wonder what that says about your brain capacity?" And then she stormed violently towards the stairs, stomping up them with more force than was strictly necessary.

"There goes your dinner privileges!" Vernon roared after her.

"Good!" she yelled back, slamming one of her feet down aggressively for emphasis. "They weren't much to begin with!"

She slammed the door to her bedroom shut so hard that it rattled the hinges and then she sat down hard on the bed, dropping her cane to the floor and exhaling as she looked around the room.

Her room was surprisingly bare, or not so surprisingly. All the items that she cared about were locked away in her trunk which was locked in the cupboard under the stairs, her former living space, and Hope wasn't about to try to Flash the trunk up to her bedroom and back down to the cupboard every night, that would just be exhausting, besides, Flashing too much wouldn't be very good for her health.

She twisted the rings around on her fingers as she flopped onto her back, staring bleakly up at the ceiling and wishing that the summer holiday would be over sooner rather than later.

Hope still held onto that long-lost dream that one day a distant relation would come and rescue her from this hellhole that only three could call home, just as long as they weren't Salazar Slytherin himself. She rubbed her head tiredly, recalling that little tidbit of her history. A Gryffindor being descended from Salazar Slytherin…that wouldn't gain her any friends; Slytherin had a rather bad reputation. Once she had discovered the fact, she had been too ashamed to tell her friends just who that spectre was; she was afraid of losing them because of all the bad Slytherin had done.

But, of course, Daphne Greengrass had figured her out. Though she was grateful that the Slytherin girl wouldn't share her secret with anyone.
She hated herself for fearing that she would lose her friends if she told them too, but she couldn't stop herself from imagining the possibility.

Not that it mattered anyways, seeing as none of them were willing to write to her. Hope withdrew her lock picks and fiddled with Hedwig's padlock until the bird door swung free and sighed mournfully as her beloved owl hooted softly, flapping over to perch on her knee, permitting her mistress to stroke her feathers. Hope could let her out of her cage in her room, if she made sure no one was around (Vernon had been very adamant about her not being allowed to let out her owl and though he had had the gall to padlock her into her cage, Hope, unfortunately had a degree in Lock-picking, so that was easily rectified) to see her, and then she'd let her out for two hours at night when no one was awake, giving her some time to stretch her wings. She knew Hedwig wasn't pleased with the situation, but it could've been worse; she could have been padlocked inside that cage for the whole summer.

"I miss freedom, Hedwig," Hope said sullenly, "I wonder what it tastes like?"

Hedwig gave a sad, low hoot of agreement as Hope stroked her feathers gently and Hedwig nipped lightly at her fingers.

The first few days of summer had been fun, when Hope could stalk Dudley mercilessly, chanting nonsense words that made him grab his buttock and run for his Mummy, but it lost its appeal after Hope had to duck a swipe to the head with a frying pan. Now Hope was unbelievably lonely. It was like all the happiness had been sucked from the world, at least, her happiness; without all of her friends around, she had no one.

She missed Ron and Hermione, and Fred and George, and Lee and Angelina and Alicia, and Katie, and even the Quidditch-obsessed Oliver... she was beginning to get desperate –and slightly mental–, having barely seen anything, person or otherwise, from the magical world in nearly a month (not including her brief trip to Diagon Alley during which she saw none of her friends).

But, right now, she was too tired to even think about how miserable she was, having slept terribly the night before.

Hope scrubbed vigorously at her eyes before returning Hedwig to clutch her talons to the top of her cage as Hope fell back onto her bed, falling into a light doze, only to be awakened rather suddenly when the doorbell rang and Vernon's face appeared in her open door, but only a sliver of it, she noticed (or else she would have been worried that he had seen Hedwig sleeping above her cage, but the Fates were on her side tonight). "One word, girl, and I swear—" he hissed through the crack.

"Yeah, yeah," Hope waved a hand carelessly, rolling her eyes for good measure. "Whatever."

His face purpled, but he didn't seem capable of coming up with words, so he simply pulled the door shut as Hope sat up, groaning softly, rubbing at her eyes, as she searched under her bed for the owl treats that she had swiped a few nights ago. Hope muttered a soft swear under her breath as she finally pulled it free, and uttered a muffled complaint.

"Sorry, Hedwig," she told the owl, "it looks like we're almost out of owl treats...you'll only get half of treat if you want them to last."

Hedwig opened her eyes to give Hope a rather distinctly annoyed expression.

"Don't give me that look," Hope said shortly, breaking a treat in half and giving it to her owl. "It's not my fault that we're nearly out."
Hedwig gave her another look that clearly said that it was indeed Hope's fault that they were nearly out of her treats (seeing as Hope was the one that bought them, not Hedwig).

And then Hope's eyes flashed completely open, because she was not alone with Hedwig in her room, there was someone else there.

Even though she couldn't use it, Hope's holly and phoenix feather wand was in her hand in seconds. She didn't know why, but she always found its warm wood comforting against her hand, almost feeling as though it beat, like a heart, but that would be ridiculous talk. Wands didn't have hearts in the conventional sense.

"Who are you?" she asked suspiciously, her eyes narrowed into dangerous slits. How would you feel if something magically appeared in your bedroom? Something that wasn't anything like what she had even seen before.

It wasn't even close to being human and probably only went up to her knee. Its bat-like ears flapped in the air and its green eyes seemed almost too big for its head. Its limbs were painfully clear to see from its sharp elbows to its knobby knees. She would have thought it was wearing a miniature toga, if she hadn't thought it looked more like a ruined pillowcase.

"Hope Potter!" the creature squeaked in a high pitched voice that made Hope wince and glance nervously towards the door, in case Vernon came up to complain of the noise, which was very likely, given Hope's track record. "So long had Dobby wanted to meet you, miss…Such an honour it is!"

"Right, sure," Hope said exhaustively, lowering her wand after a moment of deliberating. "So your name is Dobby, then?" It sounded a little like a name, she supposed, in a weird way.

The thing –creature, whatever it was– nodded so fast that its ears flapped against its head from the movement. "Dobby the House-elf," it told her.

"Dobby the House-elf," she repeated faintly, blinking her eyes a few times, "right, of course. So, why are you exactly in my room?"

"Dobby has come to tell you, miss…it is difficult, miss…” Dobby seemed a bit nervous about whatever he had come to tell her –Hope felt she should have been the one more nervous, since he was the one in her room. "Dobby wonders where to begin…”

Suddenly Dobby grabbed her cane –which had been propped against the wall by the window– and began whacking himself in the head with its grip. Hope went past stunned to completely startled, but only for about two seconds, and then Hope had to wrestle the cane from his grasp, hissing, "What the ruddy hell do you think you're doing?!"

"Dobby should not speak or move against his family," the house-elf whimpered.

"There are more of you?" Hope asked dumbstruck.

"Oh, there are many house-elves," Dobby agreed, "but Dobby was referring to the wizard family Dobby serves-

"You're a servant?" Hope asked in a horrified voice. She had never heard of servants in the Wizarding world, and she certainly had never expected them to look like this.

Dobby smiled weakly. "Yes, miss."
"Do they make you beat yourself up like that?" Hope demanded, disgusted, gesturing towards the bruises forming on his flesh.

"Sometimes they remind Dobby to do extra punishments," Dobby said sadly, his ears drooping slightly.

"That's barbaric!" Hope said, aghast. "Why don't you just leave?"

"A house-elf must be set free, miss," he told her simply. "And the family will never set Dobby free… Dobby will serve the family until he dies, miss."

"That's awful," Hope said in genuine revulsion. She had never heard of something so…sixteenth century (or was it further back than that? Hope couldn't really be sure). The idea of being with the same family, especially if it wasn't a good family, made Hope glad she was at least human.

"Tis the life of a house-elf," Dobby said gloomily, before brightening unexpectedly, "Dobby has long heard of Hope Potter's triumph over He-Who-Must-Not-Be-Named!"

"I was one year old!" Hope complained, keeping her voice low enough that it wouldn't be heard downstairs.

"Dobby has also heard," the house-elf continued, "that Hope Potter met the Dark Lord for a second time just weeks ago, and that Hope Potter escaped yet again!"

"I suppose that counts as an escape," Hope grumbled under her breath, smoothing a finger over her eyebrow as she remembered the events of the end of the previous year. They were rather vivid.

She should have just kept her mouth shut, because Dobby's face shone with joy.

"Hope Potter is valiant and bold! She has braved many danger already ("Now hold up," Hope complained, "many dangers'? When have I braved many dangers?")! But Dobby has come to protect Hope Potter, to warn her, even if he does have to shut his ears in the oven door later ("Do you have to?" Hope asked with a wince)…Hope Potter must not go back to Hogwarts!"

One could have heard a pin drop with how quiet it had become as Hope stared at the house-elf in blatant surprise at the words he had just said.

"Excuse me?" she balked. "Not go back to Hogwarts? Are you mad? Hogwarts is my home! I don't belong anywhere but in the magical world!"

"No, no, no," Dobby was shaking his head frantically, trying to reason with her. "If Hope Potter goes back to Hogwarts, she will be in mortal danger!"

"What are you talking about?" she demanded, her eyes sparking an impossible blue.

"There is a plot, Hope Potter," Dobby whispered, looking about as if expecting to see ears listening in on their conversation. "A plot to make most terrible things happen at Hogwarts School of Witchcraft and Wizardry this year." He had begun to tremble something fierce. "Dobby has known it for months now, miss. Hope Potter must not put herself in danger, she is too important!"

"I'm not, trust me," Hope said dryly, aggravation seeping into her voice, "but what plot? Wait, don't answer that, you'll probably just give yourself a concussion."

"Does this have anything to do with Vol- He-Who-Must-Not-Be-Named?" she prompted instead.
The house-elf slowly shook his head and Hope sighed. "I'm not sure if that's good or bad. It doesn't matter either way, Dobby, because I'm going back, whether there's danger or not, I've got friends out there."

"Friends who don't even write to Hope Potter?" Dobby asked, instantly making Hope simultaneously angry and suspicious.

"How," she said lowly, cold and dangerous, "did you know that they haven't been writing to me?"

"Dobby did it for the best-" the house-elf stuttered out.

"Have you been stopping my letters?!" she growled, her eyes shifting to an enraged red that now matched the colour of her hair.

He was holding a thick pile of envelopes, and that made her even angrier. She could see George's untidy scrawl, Hermione's carefully etched words, and Ron's nearly illegible script. And in the face of her anger, Dobby knew that he was treading on thin ice.

"Hope Potter will have them, miss, if she promises that she will not return to Hogwarts!"

"Give me those letters!" she demanded, lunging for him, but the elf was fast, quicker than she would have thought, and had darted through the door and down the stairs in the time it took her to turn on her heel and head in the same direction.

Her heart hammered. Oh no…

It was a mountainous pudding complete with sugared violets and cream, and it was floating in the air.

"Stop!" she hissed. "They'll murder me!"

"Hope Potter must say—"

"Dobby," Hope said in a voice that was deadly calm, "please…"

"Say—"

"I can't!"

"Then Dobby is sorry."

And the pudding fell with a crash, completely caking Hope in cream.

Hope had never felt so miserable that she was going to be punished for something that wasn't her fault and she hadn't even gotten her letters back in exchange for the injustice.

Her birthday officially sucked.

After that incident and then the owl that arrived from the ministry claiming that a Hover Charm was used (though it wasn't her that did it, damn it!) and resulted in Hope's mood reaching an all-time low. She was then locked in her room almost around the clock with only two opportunities to use the bathroom. To make matters worse, bars had been fitted onto her window (what? Did he think she was going to jump two floors to run away? Never mind, she probably would've if she could've) so Hedwig could no longer take her nightly flights, leaving her disgruntled.

Hope was so angry about the whole situation that she was becoming more prone to tears these days.
(she was one of those kinds of girls). The skin around her eyes had already been rubbed raw by her scrubbing the tears from her face for so long and she was just so sick of this house!

Hope leaned forward resting her elbows on her knees, her hands cupping her forehead, nursing yet another headache.

Why didn’t she just Flash out? Because then she’d have to come back for all of her things, that's why, and her strength wasn’t up to par and that trunk was far from silent.

A light shone across her bedroom floor.

She frowned, blinking harshly as she saw a pair of headlights coming over the row of houses to hover beside her bedroom window. She scrambled to the window, throwing it open to clutch at the bars, recognizing the person in the back seat. A blue-eyed, ginger-haired, freckled somebody.

"Ron!"

"Hope!" her best friend grinned and then he frowned. "Have you been crying?"

Hope laughed softly, more happy to see him than she had ever been to see anyone else. "I'm a mess. What're you doing here?"

"Figured you were in trouble or something when you didn't answer any of our letters," Ron said gesturing between him and the two people in the front seat.

"Fred, George!" Hope breathed in relief, her eyes focusing more on George than Fred. "They've locked me up and—"

"Tell us on the way back," Ron advised, holding out a thick rope. "Wrap that tight, would you?"

Hope did as was requested of her. "I'm dead if—"

"Don't worry," Fred admonished, driving the car in the opposite direction, ripping the bars clean off, and dropping them (by complete miraculous accident that made Hope laugh) into Petunia's bed of flowers below.

"Get in," Ron said, holding out a hand when the car came close to her window again.

"But, all my things," Hope said, glancing nervously back as she handed Hedwig through the window.

"Where are they?"

"Locked in the cupboard under the stairs—"

"No problem," George assured her from the passenger seat. "Out of the way, Hope."

Hope moved back as the Weasley Twins crawled from their window through hers to pull out a hairpin and pick the lock. It wasn't as sophisticated as Hope's lock-picking art, but it would have to do. Hope found her eyes dropping lower, to ogle a bit at George.

"Really?" Ron hissed at her. "Do you have to do that now?"

Hope’s cheeks ignited in embarrassment. "Sorry."

He just rolled his eyes. "Anything else you want from your room?"
Hope glanced about sullenly. "No, nothing."

Ron's eyes passed over her. "You look terrible." Her hair was a midnight black and limp, not at all like the full locks that he was used to seeing and the redness around her eyes made her green eyes more obvious.

"That's what every girl wants hear, Ron," Hope said dryly, sounding more like herself.

"I thought so," Ron agreed with a smirk.

Fred and George were faster than she remembered them ever being, or maybe that was just her mind playing tricks on her. But the trunk was still remarkably heavy, so heavy that all three of those who were in the room had to throw their weight against it to get it to slide into the boot of the car.

"Alrighty…" the twins climbed back into their seats, steadying the car as Ron held out his hand to his friend, accidentally knocking Hedwig's cage (with Hedwig herself still inside) to the ground, earning a loud squawk of indignation.

"THAT RUDDY OWL!"

The locks undid faster than Hope had time to get out of the window, so Ron had to pull her bodily through the window at the second Vernon had grabbed her ankle.

"Let me go!" Hope yelled, kicking him in the face with her shoe.

"Step on it, Fred!" Ron yelled, keeping a firm grip on Hope's waist as her leg was finally pulled free and Vernon tumbled out of the window to land heavily on the ground.

"See you next summer!" she roared out the window, flipping him the bird as they shot off into the sky amidst laughter.
"So?"

"So, what?" Hope asked bemused, massaging her ankle where Vernon had grabbed her.

"Our letters!" Ron snapped his fingers under her nose, making her glare at him. "Why haven't you been answering them?"

"I didn't even know you lot had sent me letters until my birthday!" Hope complained in annoyance.

"What were you doing all summer, then?" Fred asked from behind the wheel.

"Wallowing in self-pity," Hope said gloomily, picking at her frayed sleeve.

"That's never a good thing," George said sagely, earning an eye roll.

"I might have figured that out for myself, thanks," she said with humour. "A house-elf named Dobby nicked them before they even got to me; he's the one that used the Hover Charm that I'm getting blamed for."

"Why?" Ron asked incredulous.

"Why'd he steal my stuff?" she clarified before shrugging her shoulders. "No bloody idea; he seemed to think that if I thought I didn't have any friends I wouldn't want to go to Hogwarts."

"Why would—" Fred began.

"—he even care?" George finished for his twin.

"Zeus only knows," Hope groaned, pinching the bridge of her nose, "something about a terrible plot occurring this year, I don't know…"

"Very fishy," Fred said after a pregnant pause.

"Definitely dodgy," George agreed, swivelling in his seat so that he could look his friend in the eye (he was pleased to note that her hair had gone back from the black it had been when they picked her up to the dark red tresses he was so fond of). "And he wouldn't even tell you who's supposed to be behind everything?"

Hope screwed up her face, trying to recall all that the house-elf had said. "No, he just said that it wasn't Voldemort—"

Ron gave a small whimper at the name, but Fred and George were largely unfazed.

"Oh, calm down, Ron! It's just a name for Zeus' sake!" She turned back to George before Ron could come up with a response. "Do you think he was lying, then?"

"Could be," Fred answered her instead, "I mean, house-elves are pretty powerful by themselves, but they usually can't use their magic without their master's permission. Maybe sending him out to you was someone's idea of a joke."

"I could only think of one person arrogant enough," Hope said in annoyance, sharing a glance with Ron as they both said, "Draco Malfoy."
"Wasn't that the kid you were always complaining about?" George asked her, frowning slightly. "The one that kept trying to get you in trouble?"

"The very same," Hope agreed, poking out her tongue at the mention of her nemesis.

"He isn't Lucius Malfoy's son, is he?" Fred asked, glancing up at the rear-view mirror to look at her.

"Probably, why?"

"Dad talks about him –hates him really– he was a big supporter of You-Know-Who," George told her. At this, Fred turned around to look at her and Hope was impressed that the car didn't swerve at all, but then, it was a flying car. "And when You-Know-Who disappeared Lucius Malfoy came back saying he'd never meant any of it—"

"If that isn't a load of dung, I don't know what is," Hope drawled out.

Fred grinned. "That's what Dad says, too."

"Then he's sane," Hope said with a laugh. "So, is the car your dad's, then?"

"Yup!" Ron responded cheerfully. "He has a bad habit of buying up muggle items, taking them apart and enchanting them, and then putting it back together."

"But wouldn't that erode at the internal workings of the items?" Hope asked confused.

Ron grinned. "You'll have to take that up with Dad; he'll be thrilled."

"Wonderful... Do any of you know if you can challenge Underage Magic Warnings?" Hope asked with a smile.

"Really don't like people assuming it was you doing that spell?" George asked fondly. A fire ignited under Hope's cheeks, making them burn a pale pink. "Oh, shut up."

"Seriously? I don't know," Fred said, grinning slightly at her reaction. "But the Improper Use of Magic Office should be willing to listen to your claim, if you really want to go against it."

"That'll be fun," Hope muttered.

"Anyways," Ron said, squeezing her hand briefly, "I'm glad we came to get you. I thought it might have been Errol's fault—"

"Who's Errol?" Hope asked blankly as she undid the padlock on Hedwig's cage ("Sorry, Hedwig!") "HOOT!") and let the pure white owl spread her wings, flying beside them like a guide thought the night ahead.

"Our owl," Ron said morosely, "he's positively ancient. It wouldn't be the first time he's collapsed on a delivery."

Hope winced. "That's not good."

"Nope."

"Does your dad know you've got the car?" Hope asked, poking her head out of the window to look
down, a smile spreading across her lips as she looked down at the world so far below.

"Er, no, not really," Ron said nervously, "he had to work tonight."

Hope appraised him with a grin. "Oh, my bad habits are rubbing off on you, Ronald."

He grinned. "Shut up, you."

The sun was beginning to peak over the trees, suddenly dawning on Hope that he'd been driving through the night. Fred dropped the car lower and lower, driving overhead the road, ("It's Ottery St. Catchpole, we're just outside of it.") landing with a slight jolt, coming to a stop on the lawn before what must have been Ron's home, the Burrow.

It was as far from Vernon and Petunia's house as one house could get. Disorder and mayhem, just the way Hope liked it. The structure of the house was far from straight, crooked to the point that it just had to be held up by magic. Though...why were there six chimneys perched on its warped roof?

"It's brilliant," Hope said in awe, gazing around fondly as they all got out of the car. "I've never seen a house like this before!"

"Okay," said Fred, "here's the plan—"

However, Hope never quite learned what exactly the plan was, because Fred stopped dead in his tracks and Ron had turned a sickly green colour. Confused, Hope turned in the direction the three Weasley brothers were gazing in horror.

It was Mrs. Weasley, and she was glaring something fierce. Hope was morbidly fascinated with the glare; maybe she could replicate it later on whenever any of her sons were acting out of line. She mentally sniggered; so George would be on the receiving end of it often, she predicted.

"Ah," Fred said weakly.

"Oh, dear," George choked out.

"So," Mrs. Weasley said, low and dangerous.

"Morning Mum," George said, taking the initiative, making Hope snort. He gave her a look, but she just smiled like she knew something he didn't.

The explosion that followed was one that had Hope theatrically rubbing her ears for hours on end. Clearly, Mrs. Weasley had been very worried about her sons. Hope was hard pressed to not laugh at their predicament, but somehow she managed it by clapping a hand to her mouth to hide her smile and strangle her laughter. It was only after Mrs. Weasley's fuse had burned out that she turned to Hope.

"I'm very pleased to see you, Hope, dear," she said with a kindly smile that only a mother could possess, "I'm so sorry for the scene—"

"Oh, don't mind," Hope said with laughter bubbling from her lips when three betrayed looks were thrown her way, "I find everything hilarious at their expense."

Mrs. Weasley laughed at that as well.

Hope Potter seemed to have grown a little since the last time she had seen her, her hair now falling to her shoulder blades, and it seemed she was an early bloomer, if the way she kept crossing her arms
uncomfortably across her chest was anything to go by. Her face was thinner than she remembered, making her cheekbones seem more prominent, like her mother's. Her cane clicked with every movement, reminding Mrs. Weasley of that injury of hers; she'd almost forgotten about it.

Breakfast was wonderful, if one ignored how Mrs. Weasley kept tossing glares at the sons who had participated in the "Rescue Hope from the Muggles" escapades of the night, and Mrs. Weasley herself was amusing herself by how Hope and George bantered back and forth.

"Oh, I threw myself at you?" Hope said incredulously, lifting her gaze from her sausages to stare disbelieving at George. "If I recall correctly—and I do—, it was dark and I tripped…you ate mud, remember?"

Ron roared with laughter, but George just waved his hand carelessly. "Details, Hope, details."

"Right," she drawled out.

"And you want to know what else, Hope?" Fred asked with a bright grin, making his eyes twinkle like sapphires. "He spent the better end of last year staring at your bum!"

Both George and Hope turned bright red at that.

"And Hope was staring at George's back when you two were unlocking her door," Ron added.

"Ron!" Hope looked so horrified that George had to smirk. "Shut up," she grumbled, crossing her arms and glaring at nothing when a small squeal echoed in the kitchen before abruptly disappearing once more.

"What was that?" Hope asked blankly.

"Ginny," Ron whispered, so his mother wouldn't hear, "my sister. She's been talking about you all summer."

"Oh…" Whatever Hope was planning to say was cut off by the sound of the door opening.

"Morning Weasleys!" called a male voice and she looked up. Mr. Weasley had red hair like his wife and all of his children, but his was sparse, his head balding, and an askew pair of glasses was perched on the bridge of his nose, through which Hope could see eyes identical to the twins and Ron (Percy having his mother's eyes).

"Morning Dad!"

Hope was waiting for him to notice her, which he didn't until he was halfway through his breakfast. "Oh! Hello!"

She smiled. "Hello, Mr. Weasley, I'm Hope."

"Ah!" The man smiled congenially. "Yes, Ron's told us so much about you, so have Fred and George."

Hope eyed them all speculatively. "I hope nothing too terrible…"

Fred and George gave her mock salutes before everyone jumped at the sound of something running headlong into the window.

"Oh, dear…"
Mrs. Weasley rushed over to the windowsill as the owl righted itself and fluttered inside with a mournful hoot.

"I'm going to guess that's Errol?" Hope asked half-amused, half-surprised, directing her question to Ron.

"Yup." He swallowed some eggs thickly. "And you wonder why we thought it was all his fault you weren't answering our letters."

Hope grunted in agreement as Mrs. Weasley handed them all their Hogwarts letters ("Even me?" "Even you, dear.").

She glanced down the list. Most of the books were what you would expect for someone who was going into their second year at Hogwarts, but—

"Do we have seven books for Defence Against the Dark Arts?" she asked Ron incredulously. "What's the point of that?"

"Must be a fan of Lockhart's," Fred said around a mouthful of toast, earning a glare from his mother. "Probably a witch."

"But seven?" Hope demanded. "That's just overkill!"

Fred shrugged. "That's Hogwarts for you."

She snorted humourlessly, before turning to Mr. Weasley. "Mr. Weasley, could I ask you a favour?" She didn't even wait for his answer. "I need to go to the Improper Use of Magic Department; do you think you could tell me where it is?"

"Ah, this is about that Hover Charm, isn't it?" he queried, wiping his mouth on his napkin. "I can take you there after breakfast, if you like."

"Oh, thank you," Hope said appreciatively.

Hope clicked her nail against the metal armrest of the chair she was sitting in, an eternally bored expression pasted onto her face. It had been ten minutes since she requested to see Mafalda Hopkirk—the woman who had sent her the letter that gotten her the dungeon treatment (Hope was trying very hard not to be overly irritated that it was her fault that she had been locked up to begin with)—and Hope was starting to get very bored. The office was practically empty and there was no one else waiting, so what could they possibly doing? Surely they didn't make those letters all by hand, that would just be abur—

"Miss Potter? Madam Hopkirk will see you now."

A sigh was expelled from her lips as she stood using the aid of her cane to walk past the receptionist and into the room.

Hope felt as though she was in a dentist's office, and she hated the dentist (Sorry, Hermione!) almost as much as she hated the therapist.

Madam Hopkirk wasn't very impressive for someone who was the deputy of a ministry department. Her pinstriped suit and her brown hair tied back in a tight bun made her look very plain.

"Hello, Miss Potter," she greeted the girl kindly, offering her a hand to shake, which she did,
internally debating whether she should try to squeeze it until she winced, but she shot down that idea quickly. "A pleasure."

"Hello."

"Please sit," the ministry worker offered as she bustled around. "Would you like some tea?"

Hope shook her head with a wan smile. "No thank you, I don't expect my business will take long."

It was times like this that Hope felt very strange. Kids her own age weren't typically in charge of their vaults, nor did they have the opportunity to advocate for themselves. She wasn't quite sure how she should've reacted, so she typically adopted a stoic façade that suited her fine.

"Of course," Madam Hopkirk said easily as she sat down once more in her chair. "How may I help you?"

Hope held out the letter that had dropped on Mrs. Mason's head less than a week ago. "It concerns the letter you sent to my… 'place of residence' earlier this week."

Madam Hopkirk perched her spectacles on the end of her nose as she read the contents on the letter. "Yes, what of it? Forgive me, but it's rather routine. You like all your classmates were warned not to use magic over the holiday."

"Only I didn't use the Hover Charm," Hope corrected, thrumming her fingers against her cane, "I noticed you didn't specify in your letter who cast it, though you automatically assumed it was me."

The woman chuckled as if Hope was acting ridiculous. Acting like a child. Hope's eyes narrowed minutely, betraying her irritation; did she think this was a joke? "Ah, forgive me, but you are saying that someone else was in your house performing magic?"

"Possibly," Hope said evasively. She wasn't sure if she wanted to mention Dobby just yet after what Fred had said about it maybe being a joke.

"Miss Potter," she said humorously, "I have heard better lies."

"I highly doubt that; I'm a great liar," Hope said coldly, "Believe me, I would have no reason to lie about not performing magic, especially when I can offer my wand to you to check yourself."

Madam Hopkirk blinked. Well, that was a first; never had someone offered their wand for her to check their magic activity. Finally, she merely held out her hand, into which Hope's wand was deposited.

She tapped its tip with her own, murmuring the spell that could recall past spells: "Prior Incantato."

The light spell shape that she had been anticipating did not appear; instead a bright red circle appeared, at least several weeks old. Madam Hopkirk's eyebrows rose to the creases of her forehead. "You used the Explosion Hex? But that's at least Third-year level!"

Hope frowned. "I just pointed and got angry, that's not a spell, that's pure emotion."

Madam Hopkirk had to wonder just who or what she was mad at.

"If you want, you can owl Professor Dumbledore," Hope added, "he'll tell you the same."

And then Hope stood once more, giving a slight nod. "Good day, madam." And then she left.
"So, how did it go?" Arthur asked as he drove the blue Ford Anglia through Ottery St. Catchpole, having let Hope sit in relative silence almost the whole journey back.

"Well," Hope said slowly, "at first she thought I was lying about the whole thing, but then I convinced her to change her view."

Arthur Weasley glanced sideways at his passenger. She looked a bit tired, but lively at the same time; a strange combination. George had mentioned that she always wore a string of beads in her hair, but she must have thought that she'd grown out of them, because her hair was free of adornments apart from the single small braid to the side of her face, hiding a bit of her scar.

"The boys have told me all about you," he said, a phrase that was seemingly random after the previous short conversation they had just had, but it didn't seem as though Hope minded.

"Have they?" she asked mildly, leaning her forehead against the cool glass of the window as if she was overheated.

"George in particular has spoken quite fondly of you," he continued, sparing her a smile when he caught the rising flush of her cheeks and how her gaze shifted away.

"Has he?" she said quietly.

Mr. Weasley chuckled lightly. "Yes, he has. In fact, I can safely say that you're the only girl he's ever mentioned, much like Fred only talks about Angelina Johnson."

"Yeah, he's sweet on her," Hope agreed.

"And George is sweet on you," Mr. Weasley countered.

"Why are we having this conversation?" Hope asked, trying vainly to keep her cheeks from igniting again but failing.

Mr. Weasley smiled. "Oh, I was just trying to ascertain if you felt the same."

Hope had never been quite so astounded in all her life than in that moment. It was very clever of him, she had to admit to herself, outfoxing her like that. She'd raise a glass to Arthur Weasley in that department.

Sly and sneaky...maybe the twins took more after their father than they thought.

Trying to talk to Ginny was like pulling teeth, really, and Hope was very close to just grabbing the girl and rattling her senseless. There wasn't anything particularly wrong with her, not at all, well, other than how unbelievably painfully shy she was. The problem was that she couldn't seem to stand being in the same room as Hope for long, which made sleeping in the same room a bit awkward.

It was easy to forget about Ginny when she made herself practically nonexistent during the day and when Hope was usually off doing other things with her brothers.

"I feel kind of bad," she admitted to Mrs. Weasley as she helped her with dinner one night, quartering potatoes, "I mean, we share a room, and it's her room and all I do is go off with her brothers."

Mrs. Weasley smiled in understanding as she sliced the fat from the meat they were going to cook for dinner. "She's not usually like this, dear, she's just...star struck."
"Star struck?" Hope asked with a furrowed eyebrow. "What do you mean?"

"How do you think every Wizarding child knows the name 'Hope Potter'?' Mrs. Weasley asked rhetorically. "Hearing stories about how you vanquished You-Know-Who when you were a baby… it's just hard to equate that into someone like you."

"Someone like me?" Hope asked, quirking an eyebrow. "You make it out like I'm something bad."

"Oh, not at all," Mrs. Weasley assured her. "You're just…very normal."

Hope looked horrified at the prospect. "But that's terrible! Who'd want to be normal? That would take out all the fun in life!"

Mrs. Weasley chortled lightly. Hope and George were quite well suited with that mindset.

"What I mean," she tried to explain, "is that she is more used to you as an icon, not as a person. I don't think it's really dawned on her that you are just like other witches, just like her."

"That's…" Hope struggled to find an appropriate word for the situation, before settling on, "odd."

"Perhaps," Mrs. Weasley hummed in agreement, taking the bowl of cut potatoes from her companion, "but it is the life we live."

"It's a very judgmental life," Hope said with a sigh as she pulled the meat towards her, cutting very defined cuts into it. "If I expected everything to be the way I read it to be…well, then I'd probably be very blood prejudiced against Muggle-borns." She wrinkled her nose in disapproval. "You don't know how many books I read on that subject."

"Why bother reading them, then?" Mrs. Weasley queried as she handed the girl silverware to set on the table.

"It's always best to get the arguments from both sides," Hope said sagely. "If we didn't, the whole world would probably be in a state of anarchy."

"You are…very strange," Mrs. Weasley said to that, chuckling again, "not in a bad way of course. You're just different."

"I do try," Hope agreed with a wink. "I am a shade of grey in this hopelessly black and white world," she added in a faux-mournful voice that Mrs. Weasley was sure she'd heard her use before when she was talking with Ron.

"Call the boys in, would you?" she requested as she carried the food to the table. "They're probably —"

"OI!" came the roar from the door. "DINNER'S READY, YOU TOSSPOTS!"

Mrs. Weasley blinked and stared at Hope as if she had never quite seen her properly.

"They're coming," Hope said, a bit pointlessly, Mrs. Weasley thought, as probably everyone in a ten mile radius heard her voice. That girl had a pair of lungs on her!

"You're still calling us that?" a voice complained over her shoulder and the girl turned to be faced with a very sweaty George Weasley. Her tongue froze for a moment, before it started working again.

"Yes, I'm afraid it's quite the loveliest name to refer to you all by, don't you think?" Hope prompted.
"No," said three voices, making her pout.

"You lot ruin all my fun!" She complained, marching away with her nose in the air, ignoring their snorts of amusement.

This was turning into a very fun summer.
In retrospect, Hope would have preferred Flashing to any other form of teleportation or a variation of it. But then, hardly anyone even knew what Flashing was, let alone enough for her to use it. And it is because of that mistrust that Hope got into her first predicament (or misadventure, depending on which Weasley sibling you talked to) of that summer. She should have just stuck to Flashing; it would have saved her a lot of trouble.

What was the cause of this incident, one might wonder?

A flower pot.

That's right, a simple flower pot, but this flower pot resided in a wizard's home, so it wasn't just *any* flower pot. It was a flower pot filled with Floo powder.

And it was being held out to Hope who looked completely bemused, staring at it with varying degrees of scepticism. It looked *relatively* harmless…just a simple faded orange pot with gray powder inside it, though one had to wonder *why* someone else would put powder of all things in a flower pot.

"Er…what is that, and what am I supposed to be doing with it?" she asked, stabbing a cautious finger at it.

"Oh, yeah!" Ron almost kicked himself for forgetting. "Hope's never travelled by Floo powder. Sorry, mate."

"And what, pray tell, is Floo powder, exactly?" Hope queried, her suspicious eyes locked on the pot as if waiting for it to spring legs and do a dance. *That* would be impressive. "Is it dangerous?"

"Not remotely," Mrs. Weasley said, glaring at Fred and George who were nodding feverishly with devilish grins on their faces. "But how did get to Diagon Alley last year to buy all your things?"

"Oh, Hagrid took me on the Underground and then I took a ca—" Hope started to say, but she was interrupted by Mr. Weasley.

"Really?" He said, his voice and face tinged with excitement. "Were there *escapators*? How exactly —"

"Not *now*, Arthur," Mrs. Weasley cut across her husband using the same tone she used to admonish her children. "Floo powder's a lot quicker, dear, but goodness me, if you've never used it before-"

"She'll be fine, Mum," Fred disagreed. "Hope, watch us first."

And so Hope did, watching carefully as the twin scooped up a bit of powder, tossing it into the fireplace, making the flames turn a bright acid green that rose to the top of the fireplace. Fred stepped right into the flames, and he didn't seem to be burned at all! How very strange…upon the shout of "Diagon Alley!" he promptly vanished!

Hope goggled even as George did the same. "What the—?"

"Cool, huh?" Ron asked with a grin, bumping his shoulder with hers.

"Surreal!" she said, gaping at the grate. "But Flashing's still better."
"You would say that," Ron complained.

"You can go after Arthur," Mrs. Weasley was saying as her husband disappeared into flame. "Now when you get in the fire, say where you're going."

"And keep your elbows tucked in," Ron added as she took a pinch of powder.

"And your eyes shut," Mrs. Weasley said, "the soot—"

"Don't fidget. Or you might well fall out of the wrong fireplace—"

"But don't panic and get out too early; wait until you see Fred and George."

The advice the two of them were giving her was echoing loudly in her ears giving her the distinct feeling that she was lightheaded. Really? Did they have to overwhelm her like that? She dropped the powder into the grate and winced as the rose and burned emerald. Stepping into the fire was much like one would expect; it was hot. The smoke was making her eyes water as she opened her mouth, choking on ash particles as she did so.

"D-Dia-gon Alley!" she choked out as she was sucked through the fireplace, not unlike the way a toilet was flushed. She was spinning, spinning faster than she would have liked. It was quite an uncomfortable experience that Hope wasn't planning on repeating the experience anytime soon. And then she was propelled forward and out of the fireplace, landing in a heap on someone's floor.

She sat up feeling stiff and bruised, blinking several times to clear her vision. The first thing she noticed was that she had no idea where she was, and the second thing she noticed was the shop was very…dark. She stood, glancing around for any sign of the owner. She could either hide, or she could explain her situation to him. She really wanted to go with hide.

There was a withered hand on a cushion with a card proclaiming 'Hand of Glory- Gives Light to Only the Beholder', and beside it was a pack bloodstained cards that seemed to be a likely murder weapon in a homicide and a glass eye that seemed to stare straight at her, unnerving her. That was by no means the mildest of the objects, because Hope could see an assortment of rusty (maybe bloodstained, but Hope couldn't really tell) weapons hanging from the ceiling, as well as a number of human bones on the counter and a lot of creepy masks on the wall.

This place gave her a made feeling, but she had to move fast as the front door opened and Hope hid inside the nearest available hiding place, a closet.

She had never met Draco Malfoy's father, but now she could see he bore a remarkable resemblance to him, in fact, he looked as much like a carbon copy of his father as Hope did her mother.

Hope glanced between the crack in the door to watch with open curiosity, smirking at how Malfoy was complaining like a child, "I thought you were going to buy me a present."

"I said I would buy you a racing broom," the man who must have been Lucius Malfoy as he awaited the man who owned the shop.

"What's the good of that if I don't make the house team?" Hope had never seen Malfoy act so…childish. "Hope Potter got a Nimbus Two-Thousand last year. Special permission from Dumbledore so she could play for Gryffindor. She's not even that good, it's just because she's famous…famous for having a stupid scar on her forehead…"

Hope glared at him from her hiding place, feeling a spike of anger, as she always did when dealing with Malfoy.
"…everyone thinks she's so smart, wonderful Potter with her scar and her broomstick—"

Hope stuck out her tongue at that comment, almost wishing that her enemy could see her doing it. Clearly, this wasn't the first time that Lucius Malfoy had heard the spiel, if his unimpressed response was anything to go by. But, she was far more interested in the father than the son, particularly of what he was speaking of. Apparently Malfoy Senior had some unsavoury items locked away in his manor (Manor? Really?).

It took a very long time for the Malfoys to leave, at least, long in Hope's mind. Draco came very close to discovering her, but he was called away before Hope could come up with a proper disguise (probably making herself look like a corpse, yeah, that sounded like a good idea).

It was only when Mr. Borgin, the man who owned the lovely little shop went into the back room that Hope left the safety of her cabinet.

The street beyond the store was darker, much darker than Diagon Alley. It seemed almost as though shadows themselves lived there, where it seemed only Dark Arts existed in this section of street (a glance at a mouldy wooden sign told her that it was called 'Knockturn Alley'…how suitable). The sheer accumulation of bones was astonishing, making Hope's skin crawl, and Hope had read up on Ancient Magicks.

Hope turned up her hood, so she wouldn't be recognized by any of the strange characters that meandered through the street looking for this or that. Hope could see a number of what looked like voodoo dolls, as well as a few jars of what looked like human blood. As she passed through the street she saw a number of poisoned candles (who on earth poisoned candles of all things?) and gigantic caged spiders at least the spread of two palms width.

She was feeling a bit overwhelmed when she finally saw someone she recognized.

"Hagrid!"

Hope tried her hardest not to look too relieved to see the giant-sized man, but that was hard to do when you went one grate too far in the Floo Network. Hope threw back her hood as he looked in the direction that she had spoken from, running and throwing her arms around him, cane and all.

"Hope!" Hagrid grunted in surprise, lifting her by the scruff of her neck so that she was standing properly, making the back of her neck hurt a little at the grip. "What're yeh doing down here?"

"There was an accident, Floo powder," Hope said regretfully. "I got a bit lost."

"Well, come on, then," the Gamekeeper said, "Knockturn Alley's no place for Hogwarts students."

"Sorry!" Hope couldn't help but say as she followed his long strides back into the light and busy streets of Diagon Alley.

"Hope!"

A mess of frizzy brown curls hit her face as the owner of said curls collided bodily with Hope who grunted with surprise, but somehow had managed to stay vertical only by the use of her cane.

"Hermione!" Hope hugged her friend tightly. "At last! Someone who's not ginger!"

Hermione laughed as she released her. "You're ginger, Hope!"

Hope screwed up her eyes, making her hair shorten to a short and spiky bubblegum pink. "Who's
ginger now?"

Hermione giggled.

"I've missed you so much!" Hermione spoke fervently. "We knew something was wrong when you wouldn't answer any of our letters!"

"Yeah, a barmy house-elf was nicking my post," Hope said.

"A what?" Hermione gasped, but Hope shook her head, mouthing "Later." "Never mind. Are you going to Gringotts?"

"As soon as I find the Weasleys," Hope said, glancing around for the family of red-heads that stood out anywhere. She chuckled nervously. "You'd think they'd be easy to find with that bright hair of theirs…"

"Oh, there they are!" Hermione was pointing to where a small group was sprinting up the street, consisting of Ron, Fred, George, Percy, and Mr. Weasley, all of them looking quite relieved at her reappearance.

"Hope!" Mr. Weasley said in obvious relief. "We'd hoped you'd only gone one grate too far… Molly's frantic with worry –she's coming now."

"How'd you get in the wrong grate?" Percy couldn't help but ask.

"I swallowed some ash," Hope said dryly, red splotches appearing on her cheekbones.

"Where'd you come out?" Ron asked, curiosity piqued.

"A place called Knockturn Alley," Hope said with a distasteful expression on her face, but the three youngest Weasley boys were impressed.

"Wicked!" Fred and George said identically, ducking their heads around in an effort to see down the road Hope had just come from, but the view was hidden in shadow.

"We've never been allowed in," Ron bemoaned, envy colouring his voice. "What was it like?"

"Very creepy," Hope supplied with a grimace. "There were lots of bones and buckets of blood and enough poison and deadly weapons to make one consider a more peaceful way of living."

"You'd want a peaceful life?" Hermione asked incredulously.

"No, of course not," Hope disagreed, "what on earth gave you that idea?"

Hermione giggled and Ron shared a secret smile.

The last place that Hope would ever want to be was at Flourish and Blotts. It was a great bookshop, don't get her wrong, she'd gotten loads of books from there, but she had never been there during a book signing. She could sense that it was going to be a horrible experience. Hermione was quite excited about the whole matter, but Ron shared Hope's sentiment; it was too troublesome for words to express.

"What is the point of having seven books?" Hope bemoaned yet again as they entered the shop, with Hope's free arm looped around the crook of Ron's arm so she wouldn't trip or fall in the crowd. "I mean, Quirrel-Voldy was a bad teacher, but his book was amazing! So why in god's name do we
need seven?"

Hermione gave her a sharp glare. "Hope, he's done a lot of amazing things—!"

"Doubtful," Hope said morbidly, "with terrible titles like these "Year with the Yeti", "Voyages with Vampires"...oh Hades, "Magical Me"?! The vanity...I thought it was bad when I read about Narcissus!"

"Who's Narcissus?" Ron asked in confusion as they were jostled to the side.

"Greek prince," Hope said, leaning back so they wouldn't be mauled by some overexcited witches, "he fell in love with his own reflection and withered away staring at it."

Ron blinked. "How is it that you know so much about Greek myths?"

"Childhood obsession," Hope admitted with a grin, but then she and Ron both swore, though not very loudly, as a short man with an annoyed expression on his face and a large camera clutched in his hands stepped on their feet in his haste to get a photo.

"Out of the way, there," he snapped to the pair of them, "this is for the Daily Prophet!"

"Big deal," said Ron, rubbing his toes, trying to get the feeling back into them.

"Who cares?" Hope said at the same time, earning her a glare.

Gilderoy Lockhart was not a very impressive man, and Hope thought she was quite right about his vanity. The way his hat was positioned made it so that his blonde hair was accented nicely and the blue of his robes matched his eyes. That blue wasn't quite the right shade, wasn't quite the real shade that Hope preferred. She wanted to gag at his appearance which was so obviously fake.

He had looked up suddenly at the two comments they'd made and his eyes automatically went to her forehead, annoying Hope greatly. His next words horrified her.

"It can't be Hope Potter?"

Before Hope had any time to react (and by react, she meant run), Lockhart had grabbed her tightly by the arm and had hauled her onto the stage. She was more stunned than anything else and was quickly losing feeling in her fingers as the man instructed her to smile at the camera (which she didn't). Each time she tugged on it, for him to release her, his grip tightened.

She was further horrified to learn that he was going to be teaching at Hogwarts, and it was only after then that he finally released her, upon doing so, she slammed the end of her cane into his toe with great pleasure.

"Arsehole," she grumbled with annoyance and embarrassment at being singled out as she lumbered back to the Weasleys, giving her books over to Ginny, as she had no use for them. She was still bullied into buying them later on, but told Mrs. Weasley she and Ron could share, earning a fond pat on the cheek. "Think I could sue him for assault?"

Ron sniggered.

"Bet you loved that didn't you?" a cold, drawling voice that could only belong to one person voice interrupted them. "Famous Hope Potter can't even go into a bookshop without making the front page."
"Oh, shove off, you twitchy git," Hope snarled, the expression on her face cold as ice. "Just because you have a need for attention doesn't mean that we all do."

As always, there was a palpable tension between the two of them. Hope really was so eloquent with her words, wasn't she?

Malfoy's cheeks burned a pale pink and he opened his mouth to speak, but at that moment Mr. Weasley and the twins had finally made their way over to where Hope, Ron, and Hermione stood.

"Ron! What're you doing? It's too crowded in here, let's go outside." The balding wizard tried to gesture his brood out the doors when he too was interrupted. Honestly, did no one know how to wait their turn?

"Well, well, well – Arthur Weasley."

Now, Lucius Malfoy was an impressive figure, though Hope loath to admit it. Power and prestige practically oozed off him, if his fine silk robes and immaculate blonde hair was anything to go by. However, he was also the sort of person that Hope distrusted immediately…there was a shadow that glimmered behind his eye that put her on edge.

"Lucius," Mr. Weasley said, his voice as frigid as Hope's had been when speaking to Malfoy Senior's son.

"Busy time at the Ministry, I hear," Mr. Malfoy said in an unfeeling voice that automatically made Hope hate him. "All those raids…I hope they're paying you overtime." Which they weren't.

As he said this, he reached into Ginny's cauldron to withdraw a worn down and reused transfiguration textbook.

"Obviously not," he said, his lips curling into an obvious sneer. "Dear me, what's the use of being a disgrace to the name of wizard if they don't even pay you well for it?"

"That's uncalled for, and quite rude, don't you think?"

His cold grey eyes swept over Hope, for it was she who had spoken. Her face was pale with anger, her eyes dark and glowing with heat. Her knuckles were white, clenched tight over the handle of her cane (it was a muggle design; she knew that he would notice right away).

She canted her head to the side, well aware that all the attention was on her, and that she was using her "dangerous" voice, as Fred had aptly named it. "Your opinion of Muggles is abysmal at best, Mister Malfoy, but I can assure you, that opinion is not shared, and as for sorry excuses of wizards…at least Mr. Weasley didn't switch sides as soon as the going got tough."

His eyes narrowed slightly at her blatant insult, but he could find no suitable words to respond to such a speech, and instead swept out of the shop with his son right behind him, glaring venomously at Hope's insolence.

The Weasleys, on the other hand, gave Hope a standing ovation, applauding her loudly and hooting with enthusiasm.

The smile Mr. Weasley gave her made her face brighten, as it had been him he had been insulting. Hermione looked faintly disapproving but smiled once she saw the relieved and amused expressions on her parents' faces. Percy was the only one who seemed to remain disapproving, because even Mrs. Weasley was smiling. Ron, on the other hand, was roaring with laughter, while Fred and George bowed to his best mate saying "We are not worthy!"
Hope had never felt so embarrassed and amused in all her life.

Sleep did not come easy to Hope the night before their departure to Platform Nine and Three-Quarters. It was strange to be nervous about going back to Hogwarts, because she loved it there, and it was practically her home. But after spending this summer with the Weasleys, it almost felt as though she had a second home as well. She'd never had something like that before.

She pursed her lips lightly in annoyance, shifting onto her side, in irritated sigh left her lips as she did so.

"Are you still awake?" she said, speaking to the silent room, it seemed. A sharp intake of breath was all the answer she needed, telling her that her roommate was indeed awake.

"Nervous?" she continued, as if she often spoke to the mute red-haired girl that had hardly spoken two words to her all summer. She waited patiently for an answer, when finally Ginny whispered, "Yes."

"I was nervous, too," Hope admitted, making Ginny turn her head on her pillow to look over at her. "I didn't really have anyone to tell me how to do anything…I was a bit lost. My relatives just dropped me off at the station and left me."

"Your family left you there?" Ginny asked, stringing a sentence together for the first time in front of Hope all summer.

"Yup." Hope snorted, though mentally cheering at the accomplishment. "The Dursleys and I aren't really compatible…in fact, we hate each other's guts."

"Ron said," Ginny said slowly, gaining her confidence little by little, though she still had a deep flush gracing her cheeks, "that as soon as you're legal, you're going to move out."

"Yup," Hope said, popping the 'p' with her lips, "why torture myself further when I can be independent?"

When Hope heard the rather miniscule giggle, she knew there was hope.

Hope groaned, arching her back into the mattress. "What is with this bed? There's no nice spot at all!"

Then she sat up suddenly in bed, her expression clearing. "You know what we should do?"

"What?" Ginny asked fuzzily, rubbing at her eyes, wishing sleep would come sooner rather than later.

Green eyes met hers and the owner of said eyes grinned brightly. "We should go star-gazing."

"Star-gazing?" Ginny asked flummoxed.

Hope nodded her head, a movement Ginny could barely see in the dark. "Come on, it'll be fun!"

Ginny wasn't so sure; she couldn't see the appeal of staring up at stars for hours on end, but it was better than lying around trying to force herself to sleep.

"Alright," she sighed, throwing her legs over the bed and standing up. Hope grabbed her arm and in less time than it took her to blink, they were outside and Ginny was staring about owlishly.
However, Hope was far too busy gazing up at the stars with her head tilted back. Ginny could see why she liked to stare at them so much…there was a sort of calm beauty of the night sky that nothing could possibly compare to.

"That one's my favourite," she said, pointing up to the brightest star in the sky, "Sirius, the dog star."

"Why?" Ginny asked, her eyes following her hand and pinpointing the star with ease (none of the other stars shone as brightly as it did).

"I don't really know," Hope said, slightly amused, "but it always struck me as ironic."

"Why?" she asked again.

"No idea," Hope said with a shrug of her shoulders, a wide grin plastered onto her face as she flashed it to Ginny who flushed darkly again, embarrassed at making eye contact. "Maybe one day I'll figure it out."

The name Sirius Black was long forgotten to Hope, the letter in which he had been named lost in the depths of her trunk, and she would not realize the connection between herself and the mass murderer until the next year had come round.
Early Arrival

Chaotic was one word to describe the next morning at the Burrow. Later Hope would question how they got to the station before the train left, even if it was only by five minutes. The Weasleys apparently had a terrible organization problem, because as soon as they left the first time, George had to go back for his Filibuster Fireworks, and then they had to go back for Fred's broom, and then for Ginny's diary.

So by the time the Weasleys plus Hope wheeled their carts into the train station, they were running very behind and tempers were high.

"I'll take Ginny, you two come right after us," Mrs. Weasley told Ron and Hope as she rushed through the barrier with her daughter in hand.

Hope shrugged her shoulders as they disappeared. "Shall we?"

Ron nodded. "Together, then?"

And they wheeled their carts towards the junction between platforms Nine and Ten. Of the single thing Hope had predicted to occur, what truly did was an entirely different matter. The second their carts connected with the pillar—

CRASH!

The trolleys hit the pillar and bounced back, to Ron and Hope's complete and utter surprise. Trolley, students, and baggage went arse over teakettle from the force of the recoil that ended up with Hope trapped under her heavy trunk and Hedwig squawking angrily in her cage, drawing attention to them.

"What the blazes d'you think you're doing?" a guard yelled over to them as Ron picked up Hedwig and rushed to pull Hope out from under her luggage.

His yell made Hope's temper flare. "Lost control of the trolley, what're you doing?" she snapped back, helping Ron get their things back onto their carts, ignoring the purpling colour of the man's face at her comment.

Ron pressed his hands into the brick pillar. "It's completely solid!" He glanced at the clock. "Oh no! The train's leaving!"

The clock had struck eleven while they had been righting themselves.

"How are we going to get to Hogwarts now?" Ron bemoaned.

Hope pinched the bridge of nose…this could hardly be a coincidence. It had to be Dobby. She gritted her teeth in annoyance. What was it that he'd said to her? "Hope Potter must not go to Hogwarts." Well, it seemed he had succeeded, one way or another.

"Flashing!"

Hope blinked, looking at her friend, feeling as though she was completely missing something. "Sorry?"

Clearly, whatever it was, it obviously excited him. "You can Flash us to Hogwarts!" he said, his eyes
and smile bright.

"What?" Hope said weakly. "Ron, I've never Flashed that far before! What if something goes wrong?"

"What if nothing does?" he countered. "Come on, Hope!"

Hope opened her mouth to refute his words when she glanced around quickly, taking note of the stares they were receiving. "Come on, we'd better get outside."

Hope thought this was a very bad idea, but unfortunately, it was also the best one, considering their current situation. So she and Ron wheeled their trolleys into an abandoned alley close to the station.

At Ron's questioning look, she explained, "How do you think Muggles would react if they saw two kids disappear into thin air?"

Ron had to concede to that.

Hope moved the carts so that they were side by side, her fingers linking them together. "Okay, put your hands on mine, and don't let go."

No sooner than Ron had done so, the two of them had vanished, boy, girl, luggage, and all.

Meanwhile, six hours away from where Hope and Ron flashed from, Professor McGonagall was enjoying an early lunch, like many of her fellow colleagues (thank Merlin, though, Lockhart was still in his study), when they were suddenly interrupted by the sound of something crashing, something screeching, and then of a child swearing.

The transfiguration professor was the first one out of the Great Hall, and what she found stunned her. Amidst a wreckage of trolley carts and school trunks and a bird cage, Ron Weasley and Hope Potter lay. Ron looked quite pale, and he was holding up his friend who was clutching her profusely bleeding arm, looking almost translucent.

"Ah, Professor," Hope said faintly, "so lovely to see you. I'm afraid I'm going to need a healer."

She wasn't wrong, but Madam Pomfrey had her fixed up in seconds and drinking a mild blood restorative potion with a look of disgust.

"Next time," she said seriously to Ron, "let's just take the flying car to Hogwarts."

Professor McGonagall wasn't quite sure if she was joking or not. She hoped she was or she'd have to have a few words with Arthur Weasley.

"Miss Potter, Mr. Weasley, perhaps one of you can enlighten me as to your sudden appearance at Hogwarts six hours ahead of schedule?" Professor Dumbledore inquired of his most curious student. Miss Hope Potter hadn't changed much since June. Her hair was now long enough to be tied in a low ponytail, which it was, her fringe hiding her scar from view. Her lips were set in a frown and her eyes were slightly narrowed, doing a spot on impression of Lily Evans.

"We couldn't get through the barrier," Hope said rather bluntly, "so we Flashed here."

"Flashed?" Snape's lips curled into a sneer, but it was met with one of Hope's own.

"Yes, Flashed. It's a method of teleportation that is far superior to apparition, invented by Salazar Slytherin himself," Hope said snidely, "I wouldn't expect you to know about it because it's only
referenced once in his only diary, and I'm the one who owns it."

"Miss Potter," Professor McGonagall warned, and Hope fell silent.

"I didn't think it was a good idea," Hope admitted, "but we were attracting too much attention, so here we are."

"You could have sent an owl," Professor McGonagall said dryly.

"Oh!" Hope and Ron's eyes widened almost comically. "Yeah, we probably could've done that."

Professor McGonagall had to resist the urge to snort at the pair – something she found she was constantly doing towards the daughter of one of the infamous pranksters of Hogwarts. Oh, it was going to be a trying year, she could just see it.

Hermione didn't see Hope until the next day, though she did see Ron at dinner, and he assured her that it was just a small stomach bug, nothing to be worried about. So she, Parvati Patil, and Lavender Brown were extra careful when they went up to their dorm, because her curtains were already drawn around her bed and a half-eaten plate of shepherd's pie lay on her bedside table next to her wand.

At breakfast Hope looked a little tired, but not as much as she had last year when she had to make up all that work from when she was in the hospital. And she seemed to be taking the whispers and stares rather well, considering.

"I can't believe you Flashed to Hogwarts!" Hermione was positively raving. "Couldn't you have done something more sensible?"

"This is us you're talking about, right?" Hope inquired, quirking an eyebrow. "Not someone else?"

Ron sniggered into his bacon.

"Oh, shut up," Hermione said, her cheeks pinking. "Are you feeling better?"

"Much," Hope admitted, frowning slightly, "it must have been a side-effect of Flashing so far…"

"Hey, sleeping beauty!"

"Prince Charming," Hope said in reply, her tone as dry as the Sahara Desert, "you must stop flirting with me; people will begin to talk…"

Both of the twins laughed at that.

Ron gagged. "Come on! Do you two have to do that when I'm eating?"

"Yes," Hope and George said with matching grins.

"Have you got Lockhart today?" Fred asked conversationally.

"This afternoon," Hope bemoaned. "I know I'm going to hate that class, I just know it! I'm going to die!"

"Better you than us," the twins chirped, ducking as bits of egg were tossed their way as they ran from the hall.

"Gits," Hope muttered, dismembering her sausages and sticking them in her mouth.
"We'd better get going," Hermione said, checking her watch, "we've got Herbology in ten minutes with the Hufflepuffs."

Herbology went surprisingly well, in Hope's opinion. She'd never really had a fondness towards the care and identification of magical plants, but the Mandrakes were a whole different matter. They were really weird, looking a great deal like fat little earth babies with a cry that could kill you. Even muffled, the sound was pretty bad. In this particular greenhouse, they were all paired in groups of four, in charge of repotting the Mandrakes, something Hope hoped she never had to do again. Hope, Ron, and Hermione were paired with a Hufflepuff boy by the name of Justin Finch-Fletchley; he was a chatter box, even with the earmuffs. One might say that he talked too much.

Herbology was a brief respite for the hellish lesson that was to come, and after lunch Hope, Ron, and Hermione found themselves in the stone courtyard, talking about their summers, family, and about nothing in particular, waiting for the bell to ring, signalling that they should begin heading to class. Hope could tell the Hermione was a little upset that Ron had seen the most of her in the past few weeks, so she was trying to speak more to her than to Ron.

"I was in a terrible mood!" she laughed with Hermione, spreading out her hands as she spoke. "How else was I supposed to react to someone who's a complete and utter arse?"

"Maybe more tactfully," Hermione offered with a smile.

"But I don't think they know what that is!" Hope said with amusement. Hermione couldn't stop a laugh at that.

The hairs on the back of Hope's neck tingled, as if someone was watching her, and once she looked up she knew why. The person who was watching her must have been a new student. He was wearing the Gryffindor crest and had a bit of a mousy face and clutched in his hands was a camera. Cameras were quickly becoming a hated thing for Hope, not including the one that was shared between every member of Gryffindor House.

"Can I help you?" she asked mildly.

The fact that she was talking to him seemed to embarrass him greatly, because his face turned a bright red.

"H-Hi!" he breathed in excitement. "I'm –I'm Colin Creevey. I'm in Gryffindor too. D'you think – would it be alright if– can I have a picture?" he asked breathlessly.

"A picture?" Hope arched an eyebrow. "No. Why?"

His face fell and Hope felt a little bad, but she wasn't very much into being a subject of a photo that wasn't for her or her friends. "So I can prove that I've met you. I know all about you, everyone’s told me. About how you survived when You-Know-Who tried to kill you and how he disappeared and everything and how you've still got a lightning bolt scar on your forehead and a boy in my dormitory said if I develop the film in the right potion, the pictures'll move." The excitement had returned to his voice and face. "It's amazing here, isn't it? I never knew all the odd stuff I could do was magic till I got the letter from Hogwarts. My dad's a milkman, he couldn't believe it either. So I'm taking loads of pictures to send home to him. And it'd be really good if I had one of you, and then, could you sign it?"

He seemed to have distinctly forgotten that Hope had quite fervently said "No." Her irritation about the whole matter grew in leaps and bounds once she heard a very familiar cold voice. "Signed
"photos? You're giving out signed photos, Potter?"

"You know, I rather think you would benefit from a trip to the hospital wing, Malfoy," Hope said in a surprisingly mild voice. "If she can't cure you of your delusions of superiority, then at least she can cure your deafness."

A multitude of snorts echoed through the courtyard and Malfoy opened his mouth angrily, but Hope waved whatever he was going to say off. "You might want to think about what you say next, Malfoy, because I'm sure you don't have the brains for it."

She was so going to get in trouble for this later, but at the moment, Hope was far too annoyed; restraint was something she would practice at a later date.

"Did someone mention signed photos?"

"Oh, gods!" Hope muttered as Gilderoy Lockhart flounced—yeah, that's right, flounced—into the courtyard, wearing turquoise robes that brought attention to his eyes. Hope gagged, in front of him, and he didn't even notice. Was he purposefully blind to the fact that she really didn't like him? He must have been.

He gave a beaming smile at the sight of her. "Shouldn't have asked! We meet again, Hope!"

Horror-struck, Hope found herself glued to his side and a subject of a photo that she hadn't wanted in the first place, and then she found herself being steered to her next class which was unfortunately his.

"A word to the wise, Hope," Lockhart was saying. "I covered up for you back there with young Creevey—if he was photographing me too, your schoolmates won't think you're setting yourself up so much…"

"And we wouldn't want that," Hope said with biting sarcasm, still attempting to wrestle herself from his grip, but it wasn't working so much in her favour. She could see a number of students laughing silently at her predicament; she glared at them.

"Let me just say that handing out signed photos at this stage in your career isn't sensible—looks a tad bigheaded, Hope, to be frank. There may well come a time when, like me, you'll need a stack handy wherever you go, but I don't think you're quite there yet."

Hope was so angry, embarrassed, and irritated that she couldn't come up with the proper words to voice how she felt, so instead, like in Flourish and Blotts, she slammed the end of her cane into his foot, and then swept it harshly between his legs, relishing in the squeak he made.

"Yeah," she snarled, "great advice, tosspot."

"I will kill him," Hope threatened, her fork carving a chip out of her plate that night at dinner, practically seething. "Unbelievable! How can someone be so arrogant and unintelligent at the same time? How has stayed alive for so long?"

"Sheer dumb luck," Ron offered.

Hermione gave the pair of them glares. "I think you two are being too harsh on him; he's a professor!"

"And what's he taught us?" Hope retorted. "How to successfully run out of a classroom? How to not give a wand to a pixie? Or maybe how to not unleash pixies on unsuspecting students?" She rubbed
her eyes with a tired hand as the Laughing Gas plus their ladies came to sit beside her.

"So," Lee said without preamble, "how bad was Lockhart?"

Hope groaned loudly and the upperclassmen laughed.

"I have never met someone so... ooh!" Hope complained, flexing her fingers inwards every few seconds like claws. In fact, she looked vaguely feral-like all around, whether by intention or not. "I'm not going to last the year with him as a teacher... which is why he is going to find himself subjected to a prank in five minutes."

"A girl after my own heart," George said solemnly, pressing a hand to his chest directly over his heart, acting touched.

Hope rolled her eyes, now rubbing at her jaw where a bruise was forming from one of the pixie's attacks. "Don't make me hit you, Weasley, you know I will."

George laughed, the laughter soon joined by a majority of the hall as Gilderoy Lockhart expanded to the size of a small car.

"There," Hope said, sounding pleased, "now he's the proper size for his ego... or at least closer to the proper size..."

"You are amazing!" Angelina said fondly, making the red-haired girl flush with pleasure at the praise.

"I do try," she admitted. "It wasn't much."

But Hermione looked horrified. "You blew up a teacher!"

"Yup!" Hope said, popping the 'p'. "Come on, Hermione! Don't be that way! You saw how terrible he was today!"

"Hands on experience!" Hermione cried in their Defence Against the Dark Arts professor's defence, ignoring the other professors who were attempting - half-heartedly - to pull down the bloated egotistical man and reverse Hope's expansion charm.

"Of course," Hope said dryly, rolling her eyes.

But to Hermione's dismay, everyone seemed to appreciate the prank in the common room late that night, applauding the metamorphmagus who had turned five shades of red that she hadn't been sure existed. This was a sort of fame that Hope would gladly revel in, she knew, because it wasn't for something she didn't remember, or something that her parents had done, so she couldn't help but spare a fond smile to her friend as she excused herself from the crowd to make her way up to the dorm room for the second year girls of Gryffindor House.

Parvati Patil was already there, putting her clothes into the dresser by her bed, as she apparently hadn't the night before, sparing her a quick smile before going back to her diligent work. Hope's gaze landed on the green leather bound journal that lay on her bedside table, patterned with a serpent.

That was the journal that contained the personal thoughts of her grandfather. It had been among the books that Hope had removed from her vaults before the beginning of first year, but she had never begun to read it in earnest until that Christmas, after she'd met the man and bid him farewell at the same time. She had judged him harshly, she knew, but his opinion of those born Muggles or from Muggles with magic was even worse than Mr. Malfoy's. And at the same time, his past was so
heartbreaking sad, especially concerning his wife, whom he had stated in his writing "had a beauty like no other, whether illuminated by sun or moon, she was a gift only gods could bequeath unto the earth."

She flipped through the pages of the book, suddenly frantic. The picture of her grandmother! It was gone!

Parvati turned away from the dresser to make her way over to her trunk once more, when she almost stepped on something that looked very old. She bent down to pick it up, her interest piqued.

Hope must have dropped it the night before, or maybe it fell out of one of her books, Parvati mused as she held up the flimsy parchment to the light. On it was a sketch of a truly beautiful young woman with a secretive smile and bright eyes, garbed in a medieval gown that wouldn't have looked out of place in a Renaissance fair. She could see a little of Hope in her, with that smile of hers.

"Hope? Are you looking for this?" she questioned the girl, holding out the portrait to the frantically searching girl who relaxed instantly when she caught sight of what the Indian witch was holding.

"Oh, thank gods," Hope murmured as she took the picture from Parvati — gingerly so as not to tear it — cradling it in her hands. "I'd worried I'd lost it…it's the only picture I've got of her."

"She's beautiful."

"Thank you," said Hope, pride in her voice.

"Who is she?" Parvati asked.

Hope smiled sadly. "She's my grandmother, of a sort; she has too many greats attached to her name for me to count."

Parvati watched as she trailed a finger over the woman's silhouette. "What was her name?"

"Morea," Hope said quietly, "Morea of the Earth."

"The Hamadryad?" Parvati said in surprise. It wasn't as uncommon for magical children to read about the Greek myths as one would think, and Parvati in particular had been fascinated as a child by the women who could be trees and enchant gods.

Hope laughed aloud. "Heavens, no. She was named after the dryad, but she was not the dryad… apparently she was aptly named." She was blinking furiously now. "Sorry, I'd just read the part about…how she died in my grandfather's diary yesterday, I'm not usually this emotional."

"I think you're just better at hiding your feelings," Parvati disagreed, watching her closely, before asking gently, "How did she die?"

"She was murdered." Hope swiped a few fingers over her eyes, ridding them of liquid. "Her son… Adrian… got in too deep with the Dark Arts, it drove him mad… have you read the tale of Hercules?" Parvati nodded in confusion. "You know where Hercules slaughtered his wife and three sons? That's what Adrian did… he lost control…"

She seemed lost in thought for a long moment, giving a weak chuckle. "Sometimes I forget that the tenth century was called the Dark Ages for a reason."

"The amount of Dark magic that was used would sometimes create a dark cloud that would hover in the air over where the magic was used."
Hope blinked in surprise. "How did you know about that?"

Parvati gave her a smile. "You think you're the only one who reads up on ancient history? Not by a long shot."

"I'm impressed," Hope said, placing the portrait back where she'd found it, between the creases of the pages of Salazar Slytherin's journal, tying the leather cord around it again and putting it back in her trunk. "You don't seem like a smarty-pants."

Parvati actually gave her a laugh at that. "I've never heard that one before. You didn't think Padma was the only one of us that inherited the brains of the family, did you?"

"One can never too sure with identical twins," Hope mused, her lips twitching upwards, "it's hard to tell with Fred and George, they're so similar, but you and Padma seem so different."

"We are," Parvati admitted, "we like being our own person, and we're not a tight as the Weasley twins, but that doesn't mean we don't love each other, or anything."

"I understand," Hope said, "I mean, I probably would better if I actually had siblings…but Hermione and I are practically related, I guess."

"Practically." Parvati grinned. "That prank of yours was brilliant, by the way."

"Thank you," Hope preened, "but you should seen him when I gave him the cane to his bits."

And then the dormitory was filled with peals of laughter.
Hope had received a lot of strange things, even so, Hope was very surprised to find a letter addressed to her one morning, accentuated with a crescent moon.

_You might want to read up on the Hogwarts regulations for Quidditch, I get the feeling tomorrow that you'll need it._

Though she was a bit curious of the message, Hope did as she asked, and the morning after, she was glad she did.

"Hope!" a voice hissed. "Wake up, sleepy-head!"

"Mmah?" Hope mumbled, throwing up an arm to shield her eyes as Angelina Johnson opened the curtains that surrounded her bed. "Wazzgoingon?"

"Quidditch practice," Angelina said duly. "Get dressed."

Hope moaned as she buried her face into her pillow, but she got up at Angelina's insistence.

If they had gone right into flying, maybe Hope would have been able to stay awake, but, as it was, Hope was deathly tired and the sun was barely peeking over the horizon, adding to her belief that they really shouldn't have even been up.

She fell asleep about half-way through Oliver's second board.

"So, is that clear? Any questions?" Oliver said, his voice jerking Hope suddenly awake.

"I've got a question, Oliver," George said, yawning widely and appearing as though he too had fallen asleep, which was highly likely, knowing him like she did, "why couldn't you have told us all this yesterday when we were awake?"

Hope coughed to hide a laugh.

That question didn't impress Oliver much, who glared at them all.

"Now listen here, you lot," he hissed, "we were lucky to even win the Cup last year…due to certain circumstances –so this year we're going to train harder, now let's put these theories to practice!"

Hope couldn't mirror his enthusiasm. As they trudged out onto the field, Hope caught sight of Ron and Hermione sitting in the stands, waiting for her to finish.

"Done yet?" Ron called as she jogged over to meet them, gratefully taking the napkin filled with grapes from Hermione ("I figured that it was the only thing that wouldn't spill or anything.").

"Haven't even started," Hope complained around her mouthful of grapes, earning a stern stare from Hermione. "And I fell asleep in the middle of Oliver's theories so I have no idea what we're supposed to be doing."

"Bad luck," Ron said.

She rolled her eyes, kicking off of the ground and flying over to where the rest were hovering in the air.
"Fancy a race, Potter?" George asked with a grin.

"Get ready to lose, Weasley!"

And then the three of them were speeding through the air, doing complicated spins and turns that one wouldn't have been able to do at all if they hadn't had prior training in the art of Quidditch.

Everything was wonderful until she heard that clicking noise that was more often than not accompanied with a camera. She groaned; really, what was with this kid? He took stalking to a whole different level.

"What's that?" Fred asked, swerving his broom as he looked around for the source of the noise. "Where's that noise coming from?"

"First year Gryffindor," Hope said in annoyance, "one who's got an obsession with taking photos."

Fred snorted, glancing back. That was an understatement.

"Look this way, Hope, this way!"

"How much trouble do you think I'd get in for killing him?" Hope asked him mutinously, her expression going downright scary.

"Maybe life in Azkaban," Fred contemplated thoughtfully.

"What's—"

"What's going on?" Oliver had skimmed the air until he hung in the air close to the three of them. "Why's that first year taking pictures? I don't like it. He could be a Slytherin spy, trying to find out about our new training program."

"He's a Gryffindor, Oliver," Hope said curtly, rolling her eyes again.

"Besides, the Slytherins don't need a spy," George said.

"What makes you say that?" Oliver asked in annoyance.

"Because they're here in person." The whole team followed his finger, where it pointed off into the distance, where a small group of green-clad boys were approaching the field.

"Unbelievable!" Oliver growled. "I booked the field today! We'll see about this!"

All the Gryffindors dismounted, with varying degrees of irritation and anger.

"Flint!" Oliver roared, stomping up to the burly and bulky Slytherin Captain, Marcus Flint, who seemed to be amused by the anger present on Oliver's face. "This is our practice time! We got up specially! You can clear off now!"

Unfortunately, that didn't deter the bigger team captain, who smirked. "Plenty of room for all of us, Wood."

Hope snorted. "Yeah, like that would happen. There is a point to having teams practice separately, you know."

Flint sneered at her. "What would you know of it, you lame—"
"Hey!" barked the whole team as one, and George pushed Hope behind him, much to her annoyance. "You shut up about her."

"Oh, were you talking to me?" Hope asked from around George. "I thought you were talking to yourself, because if you were, I quite agree with you."

So much sass could not be contained inside of Hope it seemed, because she was starting to sound an awful lot like she did when she was talking to Quirrell-Voldy.

"But I booked the field!" Oliver snapped, his cheeks bright red, bringing the two teams back to the task at hand. "I booked it!"

"Ah, but I've got a specially signed note here from Professor Snape. I, Professor S. Snape, give the Slytherin team permission to practice today on the Quidditch field owing to the need to train their new Seeker."

This news distracted Oliver briefly. "New Seeker? You've got a new Seeker? Who?"

Her stomach reeled as Draco Malfoy came out from behind the taller, more impressive boys of the Slytherin team, his smirk earning him an incredulous look. "Malfoy?"

"Aren't you Lucius Malfoy's son?" Fred and George were gazing at the younger boy with increasing dislike.

"Funny you should mention Draco's father. Let me show you the generous gift he's made to the Slytherin team."

Each member of the team was holding a brand new broom that was sleek and black with not a twig in disarray. Nimbus Two Thousand and One was inscribed on the handles of each one.

"You got your father to bribe the team to take you on?" Hope snorted. "You've got to be kidding me…"

Draco's lips curled into a sneer as Ron and Hermione made their way over to the group.

"What's going on?"

"I'm the new Seeker, Weasley. Everyone's just been admiring the brooms my father's bought for our team," Malfoy said with a superior smirk.

"Well, at least none of the Gryffindor players had to buy their way onto the team," Hermione said, feeling much braver than usual, channelling a bit of Hope. "They got in on pure talent."

Malfoy's expression darkened significantly at her words, and he snarled out, "No one asked for your opinion, you filthy little Mudblood."

Hope didn't know what that word meant, but it must have been bad, because the Gryffindors exploded in an angry gusto of the likes that she had never seen before. Fred and George in particular looked ready to rip out Malfoy's eyes and the girls were shrieking profanities at the boy. Everything came to a rather sudden stop at the sound similar to a cannon being fired, and everyone turned to see Hope holding her wand.

Like that time in the lower chamber with Quirrell-Voldy, she only came up with pure emotion, though this time, it was annoyance.
"Now that I have your attention," Hope said dryly, crossing her arms in irritation, "how about this, one player from each team goes and gets their Head of House and have them work out this issue, alright?"

Surprisingly, they all agreed (or at least didn't press the issue).

"What d'you thinks they're talking about?" George muttered to Hope from where she sat next him on the front row of the stands, her fist pressed into her face, looking very bored…and hungry.

"Probably trying to make a compromise about when each team gets to use the pitch," Hope said in a monotonous voice. "It's in the school rules that teams have to sign up for whichever days they want to practice, and no signature from a teacher is going to change that."

She looked up and around to find everyone staring at her. "What?"

"Nothing," they all said quickly.

She glared at them all. "A fellow student gave me a tip-off that this was going to happen today."

"A student gave you a tip-off?" Oliver said astounded, repeating her words.

"Yeah," she said in a voice that implied an 'and so?'. "Oh, look, they're done."

"Mr. Wood," Professor McGonagall said in a firm voice, "you and your teammates have the pitch until lunchtime comes around, and then it belongs to the Slytherins."

"Fine," Oliver said with a despairing sigh. "Come on, team, let's warm up."

"Miss Potter," Professor McGonagall's words stalled her as she stood, "a word please."

Hope squeezed Hermione's shoulder reassuringly as her eyes were a little red before loping gracelessly towards her favourite teacher. "Yes, professor?"

"Professor Dumbledore has asked me to inform you that 'Flashing' has been incorporated into the forms of teleportation that are not able to be used in the school," Professor McGonagall said seriously, "and I would advise you against using it."

"That's…fair, I suppose," Hope agreed, before wincing. "Er…about the day Ron and I got here…I might have lied a little."

Professor McGonagall arched a thin eyebrow, frankly surprised that she was admitting to such a thing. "About what exactly?"

"About Flashing," Hope admitted. "When I said that Flashing was superior to apparition. It was created before apparition, but there were a couple…defects, I suppose you could say."

"Miss Potter," her voice was filled with warning, "what is it that was defective about it?"

"Using Flashing is like being exposed to radiation for too long," Hope tried to explain in simpler terms than how her grandfather had worded it, "It kind of creates a poison in the veins the longer you use it." She held out her wrist, showing that the blue veins were now a colour closer to black. "Prolonged usage, Madam Pomfrey has told me, is fatal, so I'm stopping Flashing, for good, and I'll be back to full speed in a week or two once the poison's diluted in my blood."

"I see," Professor McGonagall said, sounding much calmer than Hope would have expected. "It
seems Madam Pomfrey has you well looked after, Miss Potter."

Hope laughed lightly. "Always. See you, professor!"

Professor McGonagall watched her jog away, her bright hair flying out behind her like a crimson banner. Sometimes—and by sometimes, she meant always—she worried about that reckless nature of hers.

"You two go on ahead," Hope told her friends with a dismissive wave of her hand, "trust me, I'll be fine. Madam Pomfrey's just doing a check-up on me, that's all."

"For your leg?" Hermione persisted. "Or something else?"

Hermione really was the cleverest witch of her age, wasn't she? Hope gave an internal wince at her friend's ability to see through her.

"I'll be fine," she repeated.

Hermione huffed a little at that, but she allowed herself to be dragged away by Ron who promised to come find her as soon as dinner was out.

"You don't want to tell them," Madam Pomfrey noticed as Hope rolled up her sleeve a little for her to take her pulse.

"I don't want them to worry," Hope corrected, "there's a difference."

"If you say so," Madam Pomfrey said agreeably, pressing two fingers to Hope's wrist, over the pulse point. "Now breathe normally for me." Hope breathed in, exhaling shortly after, and then repeated the process until Madam Pomfrey told her she was done.

"Your heart rate's faster than it was before, but it's still a little slow," Madam Pomfrey said, "I want you to come by again in a few days, alright? So I can be sure that the poison is leaving your system."

"Yes, ma'am," Hope said with a mock-salute, before asking her, "Madam Pomfrey, do you know what the word 'Mudblood' means?"

Madam Pomfrey dropped a vial of potion that she was putting away, whirling around to snap at Hope. "Don't ever say that word! You hear me? Ever!"

Surprised by her vehemence, Hope recoiled slightly and stared. "Why? What does it mean?"

The Matron of Hogwarts sighed tiredly. It wasn't really Hope's fault, it was clear she didn't know the connotations of the word. "Hope, you know how some people view Muggle-borns, don't you?"

"Yeah…" Hope said slowly. "Why?"

"Mudblood is a…derogatory name for someone who was born to non-magical parent," Madam Pomfrey said slowly. "Pure-bloods think of them as if they have dirty blood, the opposite of Pure-bloods."

Hope's face was strangely blank of emotion, before her eyes sparked with anger, turning a bright and angry red, much like her hair. "That's horrible."
"It is," Madam Pomfrey agreed. "But some people simply think like that…I take it that someone insulted Miss Granger today?"

"Don't worry, the whole team cheered her up before we started practicing," Hope said.

"Good," Madam Pomfrey replied. "Now you come straight back here if you start feeling sick, dizzy, light-headed, the like. Are you listening to me, Miss Potter?"

"Yeah, I heard you," Hope said in irritation, unrolling her sleeve and reaching forward to take back her cane when Madam Pomfrey grabbed it and moved it out of reach.

"I want you to start using your leg fully, Hope," the woman said seriously. "That's the only way it's going to heal completely, and you said you stopped having pain over the summer."

"Yeah," Hope admitted, her eyes dropping to her leg, as if she was capable of seeing through the fabric to where the jagged pink line marred the flesh of her shin. "I'm just…"

"I know," Madam Pomfrey said gently, "but it's your leg, you need to get used to using it."

"I suppose," Hope muttered through a sigh. She stood up slowly, experimentally putting her weight on the leg. It didn't give her a flare of pain as a warning, so that was good. She took a few tentative steps; same response.

She let out the breath she hadn't realized that she had been holding. "Okay, but if this doesn't work, I'll be back here before you know it."

"Oh, I know," Madam Pomfrey said with a slight grin, "now get going; there's a plate in the Great Hall waiting for you."

"Oh, I know," Hope said, repeating her words. "See you later, Poppy!"

"That's Madam Pomfrey to you, Miss Potter!"

Hope laughed lightly as she limped through the doors, making her way slowly down the stairs. It was remarkably quiet without all the students rushing about. Deadly quiet. Hope's own footsteps echoed in the silence, in an almost creepy way, she had to admit. The flickering flames of the torches that hung on the wall cast an odd glow, an odd shadow on the stone that made up the structure of the entire castle. Sometimes those shadows could be quite freaky.

She would have gladly continued on, oblivious to the monster that lay beneath the floors, that is, she would have, had she not heard something, something that was low and guttural, dangerous and cold. A voice that chilled her to the bone and froze her in her tracks.

"Come...come to me...Let me rip you...Let me tear you...Let me kill you..."

A murderous voice that echoed in her ears, making her heart stutter frantically as she whirled around, searching for the owner of the voice.

"Hello?" she called out faintly. "Is anyone there?"

But no one answered her.

"I know you're there!" she said, her voice stronger this time. "I can hear you!"

But still, there was only silence as an answer to her words. Hope frowned; she couldn't have imagined that voice, could she? She was pretty sure that she wasn't much into killing. Could the
"Hope!"

The red-haired girl spun around to see her two friends running towards her, and she quickly removed her hand from the wall.

"I thought you two were still at dinner," Hope said in surprise.

"We finished and came looking for you," Ron gasped out, winded from the short run.

"We thought you might still be in the hospital wing," Hermione said logically, "but when we went to check, Madam Pomfrey said you'd already gone, so we figured that you would have taken the straightest route."

"Ah," Hope said helpfully, scratching her cheek, "am I that predictable?"

"Sometimes," they said at the same time, making them blush and Hope smirk with hidden amusement.

"You're really pale," Hermione noticed, "are you sure that you don't need to go back to Madam Pomfrey again?"

"Oh, no," Hope said, "I'm fine." She was still looking down the hall for something that couldn't be seen, though.

"What is it?" Ron asked, looking in that direction too, but seeing nothing.

"I thought…" Hope's voice faded away, her lips set in a confused frown. "It's nothing, forget about it."

"What is it?" Hermione prodded. "Come on, something's got you…befuddled."

Hope rolled her eyes at her. "It's just that…before you two turned up, I thought I heard a voice, only there's no one around."

She missed the worried looks that were exchanged behind her as she turned to look around once more. "It had to be real," she murmured to herself.

"Well," said Ron, chuckling nervously, "it can't have been someone invisible, because even they can make sounds."

"I know," Hope said annoyed, looking back at them. "Do you reckon I should tell someone? McGonagall or someone else?"

"No!" Hermione said quickly, "even hearing voices in the Wizarding world is a bad sign."

"You think I made it up?"

"No, but if what that house-elf told you is true," Hermione said slowly, sharing glances with both of them, "then maybe it has something to do with that plot that it was so scared of occurring."

"Maybe," Hope murmured, glancing back at the wall with growing suspicion.

The flames flickered in the fireplace, burning brands into the wood and releasing smoke and heat. It
was late into the night by now, but Hope couldn't sleep, not with all the things that were on her mind, not with that voice plaguing her thoughts.

"...Let me kill..."

"Hope?"

She jumped violently and swore loudly at the sudden voice.

"By the gods!" she gasped, clutching at her chest, within which her heart was racing, looking up into George's blue eyes. His eyes were crinkled up in the corners at her response, and she blushed, hard.

"Oh, shut up," she muttered, casting her eyes from him. "Anyone would react like that if you snuck up on them."

Truthfully, he hadn't really snuck up on her, but she must have been so lost in thought that it didn't matter anyways. "Sure," he said with a smirk, before looking her over, "what are you doing down here? Can't sleep already?"

"It's more of my mind is too active," Hope corrected him, her lips upturning slightly. "What're you doing up?"

"I'm mentally devising new pranks," George said in a snobbish tone, sticking up his nose like he was arrogant, or something. "I'm brilliant, as you know."

"Do I know?" Hope asked mildly. "I'm afraid I wasn't too aware of your acclaimed brilliance, are you sure you have it?"

"Oh, absolutely," George grinned.

Hope turned her gaze back to the fire.

"I'm starting to think you have an obsession with fire," George mentioned as he sat down beside her. "You spend an awful lot of time looking at it."

"I just think fire's fascinating," Hope said dismissively. "Muggles have learned how to change its colour, you know? Just like wizards can, only I think it involved something to do with salt..." She frowned for a moment, trying to recall what exactly had to be done for the colour change to occur, but then she just shook her head and gave up. "I thought that was the most insane thing I'd ever heard as a kid. Imagine a fire being green, or blue, or even purple!" Her eyes changed to every colour she named. "It must seem strange to you, but you grew up with fires turning different colours I guess..."

"Sometimes," George admitted, "though Mum and Dad weren't too keen on changing the colour of the fire, they were afraid we'd stick our pudgy hands into it."

Hope laughed lightly. "Well, I don't think they'd be wrong in that aspect, but I think seeing it a couple times would be cool."

George wasn't sure what to say to that, so he just sat quietly beside her, watching the fire in the fireplace.

"George, can I ask you something?" Hope said suddenly.

"Sure," he said in response, "what is it?"
"That day in the Surrey Zoo," she said, looking at him in the eyes – hers were still purple, he noticed –, "why did you go and talk to me?"

He stared at her. What a strange question to ask to him, but not one he wasn't capable of answering.

"I thought…" he said slowly, "'Merlin, what a gorgeous bird!'"

She hit him, hard, in the ribs, her face flaming red, almost the same colour as the fire. "You're terrible!" she complained. "Can't you be serious?"

He waggled his eyebrows at her. "What makes you think I wasn't?"

"George…"

"Fine." He pouted briefly, but she was looking at him so imploringly that he couldn't help but open his mouth and speak once more. "I saw a girl sitting all by herself, forgotten by the world and alone in every possible way. I noticed you because you needed someone to notice you, to see you. I noticed you, because I looked beyond what you seemed and I found a beautiful, fun, sarcastic, smart, impertinent girl who has completely changed my life."

Her face had gone beet red. "Now you're just pulling my leg; I can't have possibly changed your life that much."

"Oh, really?" He quirked an eyebrow daringly.

"Yeah." She lifted one of her own.

He smirked. "Goodnight, Hope."

"Night," she called after him, "and if you tell Fred about this…I'll kill you."

George had to smother his laughter so that he wouldn't awaken anyone with it, but Hope was more focused on the words he had used before.

"I noticed you, because I looked beyond what you seemed…"

She smiled.
It was a full moon tonight. Hope leaned her elbows on the stone railing that overlooked Hogwarts' vast land, staring up at bright star-filled sky. The stars always seemed to shine brighter when the full moon was out, but it was far easier to star-gaze when the moon wasn't out. She sighed longingly, flexing her stiff wrists. She assumed the stiffness had to do with the blood poisoning from flashing, but, even though Madam Pomfrey had told her to come back to her if she ever felt anything out of place, Hope didn't want to spend longer than she had to in that hospital ward.

Her leg tingled slightly as she twitched it, but like the whole day, she felt no pain, and that, all by itself, was liberating. The leg still had tremors every so often, but Hope had been assured that that was a passing thing.

And sleep was not coming easily to her this night, so she had opted to wander around in the night, knowing the patrols like she did (one could not wander around Hogwarts at night without knowing the patrols). It was not uncommon for her to do so, not to say that she was an insomniac, just someone who was fascinated by the castle. Wandering about at night or at day was something Hope Potter was becoming renowned for; earning the respect of the Weasley Twins who considered anything that involved breaking rules to be a plus.

The patrols were something wandering students always had to be on the lookout for, but Hope had once actually mapped out a timetable for when each patrol passed a certain sector, taking into account the possibility for being ahead of time or being behind. Single patrols were always teachers and double patrols were always prefects or the Head Boy and Girl. The next one wasn't due to pass by her for another ten minutes, so she was a little surprised when she heard the sound of patient footsteps. Patient single footsteps. This was remarkably strange as the next patrol that was due to pass was one that was made of students, not of teachers.

She didn't even have time to hide when the owner of the footsteps stepped into the corridor, and Hope couldn't help but be surprised by who they belonged to.

It was just a girl.

Her eyes were closed and her blonde straggly hair swung back and forth with every movement she made. Hope had thought that her gait was rather strange, but that was until she realized the girl was sleepwalking.

"Hey…" she nudged the girl, but she didn't respond until Hope gave her a sharp jab in the cheek, and then a pair of silvery-blue eyes fluttered open.

"Oh, hello," the girl said dreamily.

"Hello," Hope said, a little nonplussed. "You were sleepwalking."

"Was I?" she asked in bemusement. "I do that quite a lot. It's why I wear my shoes to bed, you see."

Hope looked down as the girl wiggled her toes in her bright red converses.

"Okay…" Hope looked at her oddly. "Do you need some help getting back to your common room?"

"Oh, yes, please," she said in a vague voice, "that would be lovely."

"What's your house?" Hope asked, her eyes taking in the bottle-cap necklace she was wearing over
her dressing gown with curiosity.

"Ravenclaw."

"That's only a floor up," Hope mused, looking off into the distance. "The next patrol up there doesn't start for another fifteen minutes, so come on."

Luna Lovegood recognized Hope Potter as all did upon seeing the scar that marred the flesh of her forehead. She was surprised that the older girl was out late, but then, she apparently had a reputation for bending the rules. She walked with a slight limp, she noticed, and her housemates had said it was from a Muggle automobile accident that had required her to use a cane for assistance in walking until this year.

"What's your name?" the Gryffindor called back to her as they ascended a tight spiral staircase.

"Luna Lovegood," Luna said airily.

"Hope." She didn't mention her last name, Luna noticed.

Luna tilted her head, gazing at her. "Did you like my little warning?"

Hope's footsteps stuttered at her question and she glanced back to the blonde. "So it was you."

"Yes," Luna said dreamily. "I overheard some Slytherins talking about it and thought you might like to know."

"That's..." Hope struggled to find the right word before settling on "nice."

"It is, isn't it?" Luna said with a beaming smile as they came onto the landing before the Ravenclaw common room. "How do you know where the Ravenclaw common room is?" Most Houses hardly interacted with one another.

A smile twitched her lips slightly. "I know a few guys that are all about knowing shortcuts."

"Ah!" Luna said brightly, coming to a stop before the bronze knocker that was shaped like an eagle.

Upon their arrival, its mouth opened and it spouted a riddle, much to Hope's amusement and surprise.

"At night they come without being fetched. By day they are lost without being stolen. What are they?"

Luna thought hard for a few moments, but this one stumped her. "I don't know."

"The stars," Hope intoned dully beside her to her surprise.

"Well said," the knocker agreed, swinging open to reveal the common room.

"See you, Luna," Hope called lightly as she disappeared down the stairs.

Luna watched her until she had vanished completely in the shadows, before she skipped back into her common room once more.

Luna Lovegood was a strange one, Hope thought as she ducked behind a suit of armour so that the passing Percy Weasley and Penelope Clearwater wouldn't see her. She seemed to have a permanent expression of surprise on her face, accentuated by high arching eyebrows and wide eyes. Her company wasn't unpleasant, though, despite how short and to the point it was. It was refreshing for
Hope to be around someone who wasn't like her friends from Gryffindor.

Still, Luna had her respect for that little stunt she pulled with the warning, whether it was needed or not.

The next few weeks passed slowly for Hope, much to her eternal annoyance. Lockhart was making her completely miserable, and had somehow managed to forget that she'd knocked him in the family jewels not too long ago. Hope had never been so close to killing anyone ever, not even Snape (very surprising, she had to admit, given their history), until this year.

Gilderoy Lockhart was a very trying individual, that was the least she could say about him. The most she could say was: trying, egotistical, self-centred, arrogant, narcissistic cock, and even that wasn't close to the number of adjectives she could use to describe him. Hope had taken to ducking into spare rooms, whether they were in use or not, just to hide from him. She had once popped into Professor McGonagall's fourth year class, surprisingly not being given detention or a loss of points afterwards, mostly because Professor McGonagall was much too humoured to give her a punishment for "looking out for your own well-being."

Lockhart wasn't the only thing that was making her miserable. The blood poisoning was proving quite difficult for her to manage that even Ron and Hermione had noticed the sheen of light gray that clung to her skin. She had headaches almost constantly and her wrists were much stiffer than they had been weeks ago.

"Ow!"

Hope clapped her hands to her head, wincing in pain and eyeing Madam Pomfrey as though she was the enemy. "Do you have to jab so hard?"

"Perhaps I wouldn't if you had come in here the second you felt any pain," Madam Pomfrey in a surprisingly mild voice as a soft blue mist escaped the tip of her wand, surrounding Hope in a cloud of azure.

"Is she alright?" Hermione asked, heavily concerned for her friend, who was now literally on "Cloud Nine," if the loud sneeze inside it was anything to go off of.

"Hope has an abnormally high pain tolerance," Madam Pomfrey admitted, "but I can assure you, she is most certainly not alright."

The cloud cleared in a snap, leaving a very disgruntled Hope Potter behind in its wake. She crossed her arms in annoyance, her cheeks a faint pink in embarrassment.

"How did she get sick?" Ron asked curiously, ignoring how his friend huffed at them for talking about her right in front of as if she wasn't there, or at least couldn't understand them. It was how one might treat a child, and Hope was most certainly not a child, at least, in her mind.

Madam Pomfrey glanced over her patient minutely. Hope hadn't wanted to tell her friends in the first place why she was a "little" sick because she'd known that they would worry, but Madam Pomfrey wondered if she shouldn't just tell them anyways and save her the trouble.

"Hope has a bit of blood poisoning from her... 'Flash' as she calls it," Madam Pomfrey admitted as Hope glared darkly at her. "Prolonged usage would be inadvisable."

Ron blanched. It was, after all, his idea to Flash to Hogwarts. If he'd known, he wouldn't have even suggested it in the first place!
"Why didn't you say anything?" he demanded.

"I didn't know about it the time," Hope snapped in irritation. "I only just found out about it the night of the day we Flashed here."

Ron took a step back slightly; it was never a good thing when Hope got mad, her temper was phenomenal.

"Be nice," Madam Pomfrey chided as she held out a thin bottle filled with a purple liquid that earned her an apprehensive look from her patient. "The poison is building up in your body; this will cause it to thin out and relieve the pain and stiffness you are currently feeling.

"Yay!" Hope cheered without much emotion.

"And I think you should stay in here while it spreads through your body," Madam Pomfrey said, "I can send for some food to be sent up here if you like."

"But its Halloween!" Ron complained, however, Hermione's attention was on Hope's face which looked strangely put-out.

"Can we eat up here with Hope?" she asked suddenly, drawing three pairs of eyes to her instantly (she could feel the heat rising in her cheeks at the attention).

Ron looked like he was going to protest one minute, but then he changed his mind. "Yeah, Madam Pomfrey, can we?"

Madam Pomfrey looked between the three of their faces, taking in the pleading eyes of Hermione and Ron and the dumbfounded one of Hope. She sighed, honestly, the things she did for this troublesome group of second years.

"Only, and only, if Hope stays on that bed and the three of you try not to make much of a mess." She gave them a severe look that Hope had sometimes been on the receiving end of by Professor McGonagall. "Alright?"

"Yes!" the three second years promised quickly, and within minutes, they were tucking into a rather lavish dinner in the hospital wing. It was nice for them to be on their own for once, without everyone else making noise around them…sometimes some peace and quiet was very much desired.

The food, of course, was delicious as always, and their plates kept refilling themselves once they were cleaned. Hope hadn't eaten so much in days, due to her painfully throbbing head, but now she was happy to eat to her heart's content.

Hope and Hermione didn't have too much difficulty following Madam Pomfrey's instructions, but Ron had always been a little bit of a messy eater, so that caused a few problems, though not very many. A mild cleaning charm erased the small mess from existence once they had all finished and Madam Pomfrey had checked over Hope again to make sure the potion was working, which it was, and then she sent them all on their way.

"That was a nice of her, to let us eat up there with you," Hermione said as they descended the staircase.

Hope shrugged her shoulders. "That's Poppy for you." Her grin widened at the uncomfortable cough Hermione gave at her use of the woman's first name. Hope ran a finger over the wall as they walked; tracing over the rough ridges and gorges of the stone, and it was then that she heard the voice that had long plagued her thoughts.
"...rip...tear...kill..."

Her feet firmly glued to the ground where she stood, quite unable to move. She pressed her hand more firmly into the wall, as if she would be able to feel the vibrations of the voice, and then she pressed her ear to the wall.

"Hope?" Ron was eyeing her curiously. "What're you—?"

"Shut up, Ron," she hissed, straining her ears so she might listen more closely, "the voice, I can hear it again, it's back."

Hermione and Ron exchanged looks that Hope couldn't see, but they clearly thought something was amiss, because they couldn't hear anything.

"...so hungry...for so long..."

Her ear was going to bruise by how hard she was pushing it into the wall, listening intently.

"...kill...time to kill..."

The voice was growing fainter with every word...heading up the stairs. Hope rushed after it, running through the Entrance Hall and then up to the First Floor, following it as fast as her weak legs could carry her.

"Hope, where are we going?" Hermione yelled from behind her as she and Ron raced after their friend.

Hope only made a shushing motion at them.

"...I smell blood...I SMELL BLOOD!"

The voice was quite loud now and was echoing in her ears, making her stomach roil as the soles of her shoes slapped against the floor. She didn't stop running until they'd reached a deserted corridor that Hope didn't recognize and then she froze up completely.

What was that...hanging from the torch bracket?

"What was that all about?" Ron complained between pants for breath, bracing his hands against his knees. "I can't believe you can run that fast..." He didn't seem to have noticed how strangely quiet Hope was being, until Hermione gasped beside him, pointing up at the wall.

"Look...oh my—"

The shining letters were illuminated by the ominous glow of the torchlight.

THE CHAMBER OF SECRETS HAS BEEN OPENED.

ENEMIES OF THE HEIR, BEWARE.

"What's that...is that Mrs. Norris?" Ron balked, gazing in horror at the cat that was hanging beneath the message like an immovable shadow. It was indeed Mrs. Norris, and she was staring ahead with unblinking, glazed eyes.

Hope could feel the bile rising in her throat as she stepped away, the water soaking through her shoes. She could feel Ron's hand on her elbow, keeping her upright as she stumbled over her own feet.
"Let's get out of here," Ron said tersely, glancing down the corridor but seeing no one.

"Why?" Hope asked blankly. "Shouldn't we do something?"

"No," Ron said seriously, "trust me; we don't want to be found here. We should leave."

But it was too late for that, the distant sounds of the rest of the school leaving the Great Hall could be heard echoing through the hall. If only Hope could have used her flashing…but then reality rained on her parade. The noise, however, abruptly faded at the sight of Hope, Ron, and Hermione standing in the middle of the hall and the sight of Mrs. Norris and the words she was lying under.

And then there was a shout, a shout that stirred anger within Hope. "Enemies of the heir, beware! You'll be next Mudbloods!"

Draco Malfoy seemed to take great pleasure at the sight of Mrs. Norris' body. Ron tightened his hand around her elbow in case she felt the need to sock the arrogant Pure-blood in the face, which, she had to admit, she was nursing the desire to do.

"I'm going to kill him," she hissed under her breath so that only Ron and Hermione could hear her.

"Not where there are witnesses."

Hope blinked and stared at Hermione as if she'd never quite seen her properly, and the girl gave her a barely perceptible wink. Apparently the word was still affecting her negatively, as it should.

Filch's voice could be heard coming through the crowd, and Hope gave a mental wince. Everyone in Hogwarts (meaning the professors, students and ghosts…just to name a few) knew of Filch's deep affection for his cat, and Hope could guess that he wouldn't take her condition well.

"My cat! My cat! What's happened to Mrs. Norris?" he screeched upon catching sight of Hope standing the nearest to the feline. "You! You! You've murdered my cat! You've killed her! I'll kill you! I'll—"

Hope opened her mouth, an affronted expression plastered onto her face, but she didn't have enough time to defend herself before a voice interrupted her.

"Argus!"

It was Dumbledore. In a matter of seconds he had removed the cat.

Hope's heart beat against her ribs when Dumbledore spoke again. "Come with me, Argus. You too Miss Potter, Mr. Weasley, Miss Granger."

He couldn't possibly think that she was one that killed Mrs. Norris, did he? She, Ron, and Hermione were just in the wrong place at the wrong time! So, she and her friends followed the headmaster and a selective number of teachers into Lockhart's room, feeling as though all the eyes were on her as they moved through the crowd.

Hope sank into the nearest seat and Ron and Hermione followed suit. Hope tugged subconsciously on her earlobe as if believing that would cause the voice to leave her mind, but it hadn't. She sighed tiredly, tapping a finger against her left temple.

Dumbledore was inspecting the cat closely, his face bent so close that his crooked nose was probably being tickled by the long hairs of Mrs. Norris' fur. Hope couldn't help but wonder how a closer look was going to make a difference; Mrs. Norris was still going to be dead.
Filch was inconsolable, and Lockhart wasn't making it any better with his comments. "It was definitely a curse that killed her – probably the Transmogrifian Torture – I've seen it used many times, so unlucky that I wasn't there, I know the very countercurse that would have saved her…"

A very obvious snort came from Hope's general direction, but instead of being told off by Professor McGonagall, who had looked up at the noise, she gave her the barest of smiles.

What Hope really wanted was for Lockhart to shut up, but it didn't seem like that was going to happen any time soon. He really had no understanding of other people, did he? His orders were only making Filch sob worse.

"…I remember something very similar happening in Ouagadogao, a series of attacks, the full story's in my autobiography, I was able to provide the townsfolk with various amulets, which cleared the matter up at once…"

Hope rolled her eyes at Ron who was staring at their Defence Against the Dark Arts professor like he was out of the world, and not in a good way.

"She's not dead Argus," Dumbledore said finally straightening up from his examination.

"Not dead?" Filch's voice was high and shaking from his tears. "But why's she all – all stiff and frozen?"

"She has been petrified," said Dumbledore, making Hope frown. Petrification was rare, it had been more common in the sixteenth century than any other century of magical history, not counting the instances in Ancient Egypt and Greece that were only partially recorded (hello, fascinated with ancient Egypt and Greece). There were very few creatures that could petrify, as it was a "natural talent" and the closest anyone had ever gotten to replicating it with a spell was with the *Petrificus Totalus* spell. "But how, I cannot say…"

"Ask her!"

Hope blinked owlishly as all the attention was turned on her. She arched an eyebrow in incredulity.

"No second year could have done this," Dumbledore said with certainty, his eyes drifting over to where Hope sat. Her hands were folded together and her back was straight, perfect posture… he'd seen James Potter display that same posture only once, and that was the only time he and his best friend had been in serious trouble… it was an impressive replication for one who had never seen it in person.

"She did it! She did it! You saw what she wrote on that wall!" Filch shrieked, jabbing a finger at Hope who stood up angrily.

"I never go down that corridor and I'm not even close to being tall enough to write that message!" Hope snapped heatedly.

"If I might speak, Headmaster," Snape spoke with his silky voice, making Hope's eyebrow twitch (as it always did when he spoke in that voice that said he had no praises for her… which was all the time, now that she thought about it). "Potter and her friends may have may have simply been in the wrong place at the wrong time. But we do have a set of suspicious circumstances here. Why was she in the upstairs corridor at all? Why wasn't she at the Halloween feast?"

Hope's mouth snapped shut and a distinctly pissed off expression clouded her eyes. Hope was very private about her visits to the hospital wing; most times she didn't even tell Ron and Hermione when
she was dropping by. Snape would have to rip out her tongue first before she admitted to being in the hospital wing.

Her fingers curled into balled up fists.

"Well?" he prompted with sneer.

Before Hope had the opportunity to advise him on a perfect place to shove his wand, Hermione and Ron had slapped their hands over her mouth, smothering the words.

"I suggest, Headmaster," Snape said slowly, taking in the hateful glare Hope was throwing his way, "that Potter is not being entirely truthful. It might be a good idea if she were deprived of certain privileges until she is ready to tell us the whole story. I personally feel she should be taken off the Gryffindor Quidditch team until she is ready to be honest."

"Ooo ud!" Hope said behind the two hands over her mouth.

"Really, Severus," Professor McGonagall interrupted swiftly, her eyebrows drawn together in irritation, "I see no reason to stop the girl from playing Quidditch. This cat wasn't hit over the head with a broomstick. There is no evidence at all that Potter has done anything wrong."

"And there won't be any," Hope added, finally wrestling Ron and Hermione's hands from her face. "Because I didn't do anything!"

"Innocent until proven guilty," Dumbledore said with a slight nod to McGonagall.

That didn't seem to please Snape or Filch, but there was little that could be done. Hope and her friends hadn't done anything wrong, and so Hope, Ron, and Hermione found themselves being escorted back to the common room by their Head of House. Ron and Hermione were quite silent about the whole thing and Hope was very tight-lipped. So Professor McGonagall held her back as the others entered the common room.

"Miss Potter, next time you are questioned, perhaps it would be best to just say you were in the hospital wing," Professor McGonagall said dryly.

Hope scoffed lightly, digging her hands into her pockets, looking particularly rebellious. "It's none of anyone's business what I do in my spare time."

"Potter!" Lily seethed. "It doesn't matter if I was with Sev, its none of your business what I do in my spare time!"

McGonagall almost smiled as Lily Evan's daughter clamoured into the portrait hole.
The Chamber of Secrets was on everyone's mind for the weeks that followed the "Mrs. Norris Incident," as it had been dubbed, even Hope's, though she was more worried about it than anyone else, even if she didn't show it. The Chamber of Secrets was something Salazar Slytherin had made himself, a chamber that supposedly held a terrible monster, it was a rumour that Salazar had encouraged, though he never mentioned if there was any truth to it. Heir of Slytherin could easily refer to her, honestly, even though she hadn't petrified anyone or written on any walls. So, that left her two options. Either someone was trying to set her up, or they didn't know; she was going to go with the latter.

"Miss Potter? A moment of your time?"

Hope paused before exiting the Charms classroom, waving her hand at Ron and Hermione, telling them not to wait up as she turned to face Professor Flitwick.

The short-statured man was easily one of her most favourite teachers, right up there with Professor McGonagall. He seemed to find her sarcasm quite humorous and he didn't always point out her faults or compare her to her parents like many of her teachers did. That was the one of the things that made him so great in her eyes.

"Yes, Professor?" Hope said politely, adjusting the strap of her bag on her shoulder.

"Hope." She blinked at the use of her first name. "No one truly thinks you had anything to do with Mrs. Norris' attack, you needn't be so worried."

"I'm not afraid of a few judgmental arses, Professor, if you'll pardon my language," Hope said, her tongue tipped with annoyance. "I know I didn't have anything to do with it, and that's what matters."

Professor Flitwick gave her a fond smile. Well, no one said that Hope wasn't stubborn. "Look after yourself, Miss Potter."

Hope tipped an invisible hat to him. "Will do."

"What was that about?" Hermione asked as soon as she'd caught up to the two of them.

"Professor Flitwick just wanted to say that he knew I didn't have anything to do with Mrs. Norris," Hope said with a careless wave of her hand.

"Nice of him," Ron grunted, noticing several students around them becoming skittish at the sight of his best mate. He glared at them. It might not have been as impressive as Hope's but it fit the bill quite well.

If Hope noticed them, she didn't comment, but then Hope was always able to brush off things like that.

"I don't suppose we're going to properly see you for a complete day?" Hope called out after Hermione who was racing ahead of them in the direction of the library.

"No!" Hermione called back to them, giving them a brief wave as she jumped up the stairs two steps at a time.

"Do you think she's going to tell us what she's looking up in the library?" Ron asked her.
"Doubtful," Hope drawled.

"Do people always assume you're the bad guy?"

Hope glanced at him, surprised by the line of questioning, and then she smirked. "Usually, yeah," she admitted, "I've got the face of a troublemaker, didn't you know?"

Ron rolled his eyes at her. "By the way, why aren't you and George talking anymore?" Ron asked curiously. "Did you two have a fight or something?"

Her smirk froze on her face and then she was streaking in the opposite direction as soon as Ron's elder twin brothers rounded the corner. Ron cast a glance towards them before following his best mate's speeding away steps.

"Alright, spill it."

"I have no idea what you're talking about," George said in a vague voice, barely glancing at his twin, which was a first for him. Fred arched an eyebrow at his twin's inability to meet his eye.

"I'm talking about that." Fred was pointing a finger into the distance where Hope's rose-red hair could be seen flying in the wind as she moved in her haste to get away from George. It was strange that she was actually adverse to the Weasley twin; Fred would have never thought it possible, until he saw it today. "I've never seen her avoid you before!"

Angelina was glaring at George as well. "You did something," she accused. "You pissed her off."

George opened his mouth, floundering. George would have never thought that he would've found himself in this position with Hope. She was avoiding him, actually avoiding him! Every time he came even remotely close to approaching her, she went tearing in the opposite direction, and he didn't even know why.

He had resorted to using the Marauder's Map to try and catch her off guard, but she always seemed to have a place to run to, much to his annoyance.

"I don't even know what I said!" he complained, burrowing his hands into his hair.

"Well, I suggest you figure it out," Alicia warned, "because Hope doesn't look mighty pleased about whatever you did."

George gave her a sullen look, watching as his little brother raced after his friend.

"Hey, Hope!" When he finally caught up with her, she was sitting on a stone rail of the viaduct (typical of her…she had something with looking out into the distance) with a deep frown settled on her face.

"Never thought I'd see the day where you and George ever fought," Ron said in a pseudo-light voice that told Hope he was trying hard to make the conversation not quite so awkward, which was very hard to do considering the blatant flirting to two of them did in front of him practically every day. "What'd he do wrong?"

Ron never seemed to assume that it was Hope that had done anything wrong, that always meant a great deal to Hope.

"Nobody thinks that you're the great-great-granddaughter of Salazar Slytherin."
Hope's eyes narrowed into angry slits. "He just…" She sighed, raking a hand through her already wind-blown hair, making her locks look even wilder than before. "He said something that mad me mad." The way he'd said it made it sound like she couldn't possibly be related to Slytherin, and that was what really got her fired up.

"What kind of something?" Ron prompted, canting his head at her.

"A jibe at my family," Hope said darkly, "I doubt he realized what he'd said, and I have no love for that part of my history, but I'd prefer it if my friends didn't point it out."

Ron frowned thoughtfully. What could be so bad about her family that Hope now avoided his brother like the plague?

Hope jumped off the rail and stumbled as her feet came into contact with the floor. "We should get going; we've still got that Medieval Assembly of European Wizards to write."

Ron smacked a hand against his face, having completely forgotten about the essay, it was due in about an hour! "Why did you run out here in the completely opposite direction of the library?!"

Hope cracked a smile and her angry mask broke, which had been Ron's intent, and he was pleased that it had succeeded. Hope looped her arm around the crook of his elbow with a grin. "Lead on, shining knight."

Ron's ears turned a bright red, and she couldn't help but release a swift laugh that echoed in the silence as they made their way slowly back to the castle, up a large number of stairs, before finally reaching the library at long last.

However, finding the proper book from which to write the essay was increasingly difficult, as a large number of students were in the library writing the very same essay. At least, it was a difficult hunt for the proper book, until a thick tome was slid Hope's way.

She barely looked up in time to catch sight of a ponytail of blonde hair whip around the corner. The scrap of parchment inside the cover said: For last year. We're even.

So it must have been Daphne Greengrass, then. It was true that they weren't friends and that they hardly spoke to each other, but it seemed Daphne knew a little about debts, even small ones, such as being offered a book. It couldn't really even be considered a debt, more of a favour, but who was Hope to criticize?

Hermione seemed to have vanished, which was pretty impressive because you couldn't really vanish from inside a library. Hope had already finished her essay and was looking around for her when Ron began to mutter furiously under his breath.

"This essay's impossible!" he grumbled. "Hermione's already finished hers, and its four feet and seven inches!" He cast her a look. "And you know how small her handwriting is."

Hope's lips lifted into a smirk before she pulled his essay towards her, tracing a finger over the lines of Ron's scrawl, her eyes moving back and forth as she read it over. "Well, you listed everyone involved in the assembly, but you've forgotten to include the reason for the assembly in the first place."

"Ah!" Ron pulled his essay towards him and the book they had been sharing as well, rifling through the pages until he found what he was looking for. "Perfect! I bet this'll make it to three feet!"

It was at this time that Hermione finally reappeared.
Hope arched an eyebrow at the irritated expression splashed across her face. "What's up? You look like someone stole your favourite book when you weren't looking."

Ron hid his snort with a hacking cough that earned him a glare from Hermione and Madam Pince.

"Oh, shut up." Hermione pulled back the chair next to Hope and sat down hard, giving Ron the opportunity to turn half of his attention to his essay. "All the copies of *Hogwarts, A History* have been taken out and it'll be another two weeks before one is free. I wish I hadn't left mine at home, but there was no way I could fit it in my trunk with all the Lockhart books."

Hope cocked an eyebrow, giving off the appearance of confusion while in the worry set in and she swallowed nervously.

"And why do you want it?" she asked, keeping her tone deceivingly light.

"The same reason everyone else does," Hermione said in a "duh!" voice, "to read up on the Chamber of Secrets."

"Do you even know if the Chamber of Secrets is even mentioned in *Hogwarts, A History*?" Hope inquired, nervously tapping her fingers against the wood of the table.

"I must have read in there at some time," Hermione muttered to herself, for the most part ignoring Hope and Ron.

"Done!" Ron set down his quill in relief, leaning back in his chair before checking his watch. "And with ten minutes to spare! Excellent!"

Hermione glared at him again. "You should have finished last week like I did!"

"Why aren't you yelling at Hope, then?" Ron demanded as they left the library not too long after, heading towards their History of Magic class with Binns. "She didn't finish hers until a few minutes before me!"

"Hope's been sick," Hermione said with an airy wave of her hand, "what's your excuse?"

It was almost funny how they could talk about Hope like she wasn't there, and sometimes it annoyed Hope, but right now it didn't. She worried about the knowledge of the Chamber, she worried that people would find out of her relation to its creator, and that was a connection she hoped none would make, because she had no love for the Founder of Slytherin House; he had done far too much bad to outweigh the good.

She gave a silent sigh of relief when they finally made it to History of Magic, settling down into a boring lecture. Hope generally tuned Binns out (he wasn't much of a teacher, mind you, always droning on about goblin rebellions and neglecting other crucial parts of history, some of which Hope found very interesting), and today was no different. She pulled out her pink highlighter (she was going to need to get a replacement soon, it was running low on colour) and began to highlight the bits of the passages that would most likely appear on the test of the chapter.

However, she like the rest of the Gryffindors turned and stared when Hermione's arm shot up into the air, waving around impatiently.

Hope wasn't sure if anyone had ever interrupted the ghostly professor before, they must not have, going off of how Binns paused and stared at Hermione in surprise.

"Miss-er-?" His memory was really lacking for a dead guy, but then, Hope supposed, his brain was
no longer capable to making the neural connections for long term memories, so he could get away
with it. Though she wondered how he ever passed back papers without knowing their names.

"Granger, Professor," Hermione said, a little out of breath, "I was wondering if you could tell us
anything about the Chamber of Secrets."

Hope's heart stuttered in her chest, and she glanced up and caught Binns meeting her eye
nervously…did all the ghosts know of her relation to Salazar Slytherin? She remembered that the
previous year, the Grey Lady had known instantly of her connection to the man, but could the same
be said for all ghosts? Her heart fell into her stomach. It seemed so.

"My subject is History of Magic. I deal with facts, Miss Granger, not myths and legends," the
apparition professor corrected in his croaky voice as he returned to the text, "Now, in September of
that year, a subcommittee of Sardinian sorce..."—

But Hermione's hand had shot up again, interrupting him for a second time.

"Miss Grant?" And he'd forgotten her name again.

"Please, sir," Hermione said imploringly, "don't legends always have a basis in fact?"

Hope pinched the bridge of her nose in irritation. Why on earth couldn't she just leave it alone?

"Well, yes," Binns admitted, "one could argue that, I suppose. However, the legend of which you
speak is such a very sensational, even ludicrous tale—" He didn't seem remotely keen about telling
them until he looked out at all the eager faces watching him and listening to every word he said.

"Oh, very well," he conceded. "Let me see...the Chamber of Secrets...

"You all know, of course, that Hogwarts was founded over a thousand years ago –the precise date is
uncertain ("September 1, 993," Hope muttered under her breath, having only read one mention of it
in Salazar Slytherin's journal before she had decided to stop reading the little book)– by the four
greatest witches and wizards of the age. The four school Houses are named after them: Godric
Gryffindor, Helga Hufflepuff, Rowena Ravenclaw, and Salazar Slytherin. They built the castle
together far from prying Muggle eyes, for it was an age when magic was feared by common people,
and witches and wizards suffered much persecution."

Ah, yes, the famed Witch Trials. The Muggles had barely caught any real witches or wizards, but it
was enough to make them hide their magic when in public.

"For a few years, the founders worked in harmony together, seeking out youngster..."
added, "sealed the Chamber of Secrets so that none would be able to open it until his own true heir arrived at the school. The heir alone would be able to unseal the Chamber of Secrets, unleash the horror within, and use it to purge the school of all those who were unworthy to study magic."

"The whole thing is arrant nonsense, of course," he said, as the rest of the class waited for him to tell them more, but it was clear that he had nothing more to say. "Naturally, the school has been searched for evidence of such a chamber, many times, by the most learned witches and wizards. It does not exist. A tale told to frighten the gullible." And by gullible, it was clear that he meant all of them.

"Sir –" Hermione interrupted again (seriously, she was on a roll), "what exactly do you mean by the 'horror within' the Chamber?"

"That is believed to be some sort of monster, which the Heir of Slytherin alone can control," Binns said coolly.

In the wake of his words, many theories began to crop up, forcing the ghostly professor to stall his lecture in order to calm them down, and even that didn't occur until the bell rang signalling the end of class.

"You two go on ahead," Hope said to Ron and Hermione, "there's something I want to talk to Binns about."

They didn't question her, for which Hope was eternally grateful as they turned on their heels and exited the classroom, leaving her alone with the slightly transparent bluish ghost.

"I thought you might want a word," Binns grumbled, more to himself than to her.

"You know about me, don't you?" Hope guessed. "You know about…you know."

Binns surveyed her in an almost tired fashion, his pale opaque eyes fastening on hers. "Yes."

"Do all the ghosts know?" Hope asked weakly.

"Only a few," Binns conceded, "others are not quite so adept to seeing…his blood flows within you, and you share his witty tongue, to those who lived during that time, we can recognize the signs."

"Great," Hope mumbled under her breath, "this is exactly what I need today."

"We'll keep our silence, as we have with your father and grandfather before you," he continued. "The ghosts of Hogwarts are not dishonourable beings."

Hope's lips twitched upwards into the barest of smiles. "Thank you."

He gave a slight inclination of the head before collecting all the scrolls of parchment that was their homework and floating through the wall…Hope had to wonder how the parchment even went through when they were solid, but that was a mystery for a another day.

For the next few days, Hope had begun to notice increased watchful eyes towards her, earning the watchers a pair of stony eyes staring at them unnervingly until they looked away. It was obvious that everyone thought she was the Heir of Slytherin, which was only half true.

Yes, she was descended from him, but a "True Heir" was someone who shared the ideals of the Head of the family, and Hope wasn't anywhere close to that (for those too stupid to see that, please reference the put-down she gave Mr. Malfoy).
She was getting so sick of all the whispers that now followed her everywhere she went, as if waiting for her to slip up and announce "Yeah, I really am the Heir or Slytherin and I like to send out monsters after cats and Muggle-borns in my spare time," which was never going to happen, since Hope wasn't the one behind the attacks.

Hope had become quite irate in the presence of the stares and whispers, something all of her professors were all quick to note. Professors McGonagall and Flitwick were pretty understanding (and it was a plus that she liked them the best), Professor Sprout tried to be as calm as she could when dealing with Hope's sarcastic tongue, but Snape and Lockhart were the worst.

She was going to die in Potions and Defence Against the Dark Arts, she just knew it was going to happen.

Snape was, of course, as insufferable as he'd always been, so that wasn't surprising, but Lockhart had taken to reading out passages from his books instead of actually teaching them anything (the only thing Hope was learning was "How to spot a fraud") and most times he brought Hope to the front of the class to act out parts with him. Hope's face was so murderous that it was quickly becoming the most humorous class for the Gryffindor second years.

Hope liked to say that there were two sides to every coin, that everyone had a bit of good and a bit of bad in them. For Hope, those two sides sometimes intermingled, but even so, she wasn't a bad person. However, it was the opposite for Salazar Slytherin who had killed many people—wizard and Muggle, alike. Of course, she understood why he did what he did, even if she didn't like it.

He was born into a magical family, but several years after his birth, his parents and younger brother were killed by Muggles who burned them at the stake for witchcraft. He had only survived because he had been out playing in the field at the time and had hidden in the tall grass when they took them away.

He had a brief happiness with his marriage to Morea of the Earth, but darkness and death followed him, enchanting his son who then presumed to take the life of Morea, her daughter and her daughter's husband, leaving Salazar's only grandson unscathed because the man in turn killed him before he was given the opportunity to touch the baby.

He descended into madness and grief, emerging as a much more solemn man when he met Godric Gryffindor for a second time. He conceded to assist him in his endeavour to craft a school for those of magic where they could learn in peace and quiet and have no fear of prosecution. At the time, it was a revolutionary idea, and one that reaped benefits, because up until that point, young witches and wizards were taught in the solitude of their home.

But Salazar refused to teach those with "impure" blood running through their veins, because he held a deep mistrust and disgust towards Muggles and those borne of them, due to the tragedy of his family. And the rest, as they say, was history.

What happened to his family was awful, but ultimately it was he who chose to walk the path of darkness, and he had no one to blame but himself, and Hope had a feeling that that was why his spirit had remained on the physical plane for so long; it was because he knew of the damage he had done and he did blame himself, and he feared going to where all the dead went because of what he had done.

But Salazar Slytherin's chapter in this book was done and Hope would expect and accept no help from the dead.

She would never find herself in a situation where she used Dark Magic almost constantly, as if it was
a compulsion; no, that would never happen.

It was the dawn of a new day, and maybe this one would be brighter than the one before.
"I can't believe you're fighting with him!"

"Can we please not talk about this right now?" Hope griped through gritted teeth. "And we are not fighting, we're just not talking; there's a difference."

"Not much," Hermione muttered as they walked past the writing on the wall, pausing to look at the glistening words.

"Are those…scorch marks?" Hope asked suddenly, drawing their attention away from the wall and towards the floor at where there were indeed black marks etched into the stone. "Here…and here. Where did they come from?"

"No idea," Ron frowned, kneeling on the floor to scratch at the blackened area. "You ever read about something that could make scorch marks?"

Hope frowned. "I don't read up much on magical animals…but I don't think I've ever heard of anything like that."

"Hey, you guys," Hermione called over to them, "look at this. This is funny…"

She was standing over by the window which had been cracked open slightly, though which a rapid line of spiders were crawling out of, as if eager to get away from the castle.

"That's strange," Hope said, leaning her head in close, "have you ever seen spiders act like that?"

"Not at all," Hermione agreed, "what about you, Ron? Ron?"

Both girls turned to see their other friend as far from them as possible to be still in earshot, though his body was tensed as if ready to dash off in the opposite direction as soon as he possibly could.

"What's wrong with you?" Hope asked in bemusement.

"I-don't-like-spiders," Ron said in a disjointed manner that made Hope and Hermione exchange surprised looks.

"I never knew that," Hermione said, "you've used them in potions loads of times—"

"Yeah, well, I don't mind them dead," Ron snapped, avoiding looking at the little black arachnids crawling out of the window. "I just don't like the way they move."

Hermione couldn't stifle a giggle and Ron's ears burned an angry red and he opened his mouth—

"Alright," Hope said quickly, interjecting before a full-on war could start right in front of her, over spiders, no less, "ignoring Ron's arachnophobia…guys, wasn't there a lot of water on the floor?"

Hermione blinked, glancing towards the ground. "Yeah, didn't you slip in it?"

Hope nodded. "Where did it all come from?"

"It was level with this door," Ron said, eager to be off the subject of spiders, "but…that's a girl's toilet, we can't go in there."
Hope couldn't hide the snort. "Well, Ron, Hermione and I have to use the loo somehow, that would be quite difficult without using a girl's toilet."

Ron blushed bright red, amusing the girls further. "Oh, you know what I mean!"

"Let's go have a look around," Hope said, wrenching the door open, "oh, come on, Ron! It's just Moaning Myrtle's place!"

"Who's—?"

Hope had only been into this toilet once during school, and that was because she had really needed to use the loo, or else she wouldn't have bothered even coming into the bathroom in the first place. It was one bathroom that you wouldn't want to do your business in because it was by far the gloomiest, dampest, dreariest bathroom Hope had ever seen, and once you factored in the overly emotional ghost that haunted it, it was practically unapproachable.

The ghost in question was hanging in midair as if sitting on a floating, invisible seat, which was highly plausible, now that Hope thought about it.

"Hello, Myrtle," Hope said calmly; Myrtle didn't react very well to cheery tones.

"Hello," she said sullenly, her eyes falling on Ron's. "This is a girls' bathroom. He's not a girl."

"No," Hope agreed, speaking before Hermione could, because Hermione could be a little obtuse sometimes about others feelings and Hope knew better how to deal with the ghost. "He's here with me and Hermione. We wanted to ask you if you noticed anything on the night of Halloween. Did you?"

Myrtle took in a deep shaking breath and Hope waited for the waterworks, but surprisingly, they didn't come, instead Myrtle began to speak with a dramatic air, like the Drama Queen that she was. "I wasn't paying attention. Peeves upset me so much I came in here and tried to kill myself. Then, of course, I remembered that I'm— that I'm—"

"Already dead?" Ron finished for her, jumping when she gave a keening wail and dived into the OUT OF ORDER toilet, spraying water everywhere.

"You don't need to point it out," Hermione admonished her friend, "she's very sensitive."

"She's always like that?" Ron asked aghast.

"Typically, she's a lot worse," Hope said with an airy wave of her hand as they exited the room, "and that is why no one uses the bathroom."

"RON!"

All three of them jumped wildly at the loud yell, swivelling around to see Percy Weasley gaping at them.

"That's a girls' bathroom! What were you—?" he gasped, his voice raising an octave.

"Just having a look around," Ron said quickly, seeing where his older brother's mind was going, "for clues, you know—"

Percy swelled in a manner that looked remarkably like a blowfish (Hope was watching in fascination to see if he would expand anymore) as he strode over to them, ushering them away from the
bathroom door. "Get-away-from-there- Don't you care what this looks like? Coming back here while everyone's at dinner—"

Hope's face had gone completely white with anger and she pushed herself away from the prefect and stalked away from him and down the very stairs that he had just come up.

"Great going, Percy," Ron snapped, "now she's in one of her moods again."

Percy opened his mouth to defend himself (to his own brother, no less) when Hermione said in disappointment, "I can't believe you just said that to her! Everyone's been saying that about her, but I never would have expected it from a Gryffindor, especially one who knows how she acts and doesn't act."

"We have to go find our innocent friend, Percy," Ron added, "and apologize for what you just said, so goodbye."

And then the two headed after their red-headed friend, leaving Percy gaping and feeling a twinge of remorse.

Calming Hope down was relatively easy when you knew her as well as Ron and Hermione did, but finding her first was an entirely different matter. She wasn't at the viaduct bridge like she usually was, or the Astronomy Tower, and they only found her by trudging up to the Owlery.

She was leaning against one of the walls, tracing her fingers lightly over her owl, Hedwig's, feathers, humming softly.

"Hope?" Hermione asked cautiously. "Are you alright?"

"Fine," she muttered, "absolutely bloody perfect, that's what I am."

She cast a glare towards Hermione, who, to her credit, did not flinch, despite the blood red colour that her formerly green eyes had taken on.

"Ignore Percy," Ron added, "he's always been a bit obsessed about appearances."

"You think he's the only one?" Hope snorted. "Please." The Dursleys were a great example, but she was also talking about probably about four-fifths of Hogwarts as well. "I'm starting to really hate this year."

"You and me both," Hermione mumbled. "Come on, you don't you come back down to the Great Hall with us?"

"I'm not hungry."

"You can still walk down with us, though, cant you?" Ron prodded with a slight smile. "Come on…"

Hope tried in vain to keep that frown on her face, but one end of her lips twitched upwards (Ron and Hermione gave a mental rejoice at its sight) and she finally agreed to leave her vigil by Hedwig's side and to make herself go down the steps.

"Anyways," Ron said, issuing a long exhalation of breath that turned to fog in the cool air, "I was saying that Malfoy could be the Heir of Slytherin."

Hope bit the inside of her mouth.
"And Hermione says she might have a way to prove it."

Hope arched an eyebrow at the brunette whose cheeks dusted pink. "Might have a way," she agreed. "Of course, it would be difficult, and dangerous, very dangerous. We'd be breaking about fifty school rules, I expect-"

Hope frowned thoughtfully. "Are you thinking about what I think you're thinking about?"

"Quite possibly," Hermione agreed.

"Sometime this year would be nice, you two," Ron drawled out in an uncanny resemblance to Draco Malfoy.

"What Hermione is suggesting is a way to transform ourselves into Slytherins and interrogate Malfoy without him knowing it's us," Hope explained in a dry tone, knowing that it was entirely pointless, there was no way in hell that Malfoy could possibly be related to her through that line; if he was, she'd eat her own shoe.

"But that's impossible," Ron complained.

"Not entirely," Hermione disagreed, "if we had a bit of Polyjuice Potion we could do it."

"What's that?" Ron asked flummoxed.

"It's a potion that can transform you into someone else," Hope explained. "Malfoy wouldn't know it was us if we were disguised as three Slytherins."

"But what happens if it goes wrong and we're stuck looking like a couple of Slytherins forever?"

"It wears off after awhile," Hermione said calmly. "But getting hold of the recipe will be very difficult. Snape said it was in a book called *Moste Potente Potions*, and it's bound to be in the Restricted Section of the library."

"Oh, you won't need to worry about that," Hope said suddenly, "I own it."

Ron and Hermione turned to stare at her. Hermione was gaping at her. "Where did you get that book?"

Hope crossed her arms uncomfortably. "It was in the pile of books that I grabbed from my vault and that has been sitting in the library in my trunk for the past year or so." They were still staring at her as they rounded up the stairs to the common room. "Hang on, I'll run off and grab it."

"Do you ever wonder why she has the strangest books?" Ron asked Hermione, still staring after the Potter as she ascended the stairs to the girls' dormitory.

"Honestly, I've given up wondering about Hope," Hermione said, rubbing a hand over her forehead, "it's best just to go with it."

That, Ron could agree on.

Hope descended the stairs not several seconds later, clutching in her hands a large weighty tome that looked as though it had mould growing on it.

"Ghastly."

"Shut up." Hope ran a finger down the index, finding the page in question that she was looking for
and flipping to it slowly so as not to damage the other pages. "Here it is, the Polyjuice Potion… Hermione's right, it's incredibly difficult."

"I thought you knew all about it?" Ron asked in surprise, earning him an eye roll.

"I wasn't looking at the ingredients or the directions, genius," she said with the barest of humour. "I was more interested in the effects of the potion."

"Lacewing flies, leeches," Hermione was muttering, looking over the list of ingredients required, "fluxweed, and knotgrass. Well, they're easy enough, we can get them from the student's store-cupboard, but…powdered horn or a bicorn, shredded skin of a boomslang…and we'll have to cook it somewhere where it can't be seen."

Hope stood up suddenly. "I've got the best place. Come on, follow me!"

Ron and Hermione were doing an awful lot of chasing Hope around today. They leapt up stairs and raced down corridors until Hope finally came to a stop in an area of the castle they had never been to before.

"Where are we?"

"The fourth floor," Hope said, smoothing her foot over the stone floor, speaking clearly and saying, "Give me a place to stand, and I will move the earth."

"You've read the Iliad?" Hermione asked, surprise colouring her voice and expression.

"It was actually my grandmother who came up with the password," Hope said generously, "these are her private quarters."

"What—?"

But then the stones of the wall had slid outward as if they were steps intended to be trodden on.

"Up we go," Hope said, placing one foot on it and then the next, pressing a hand against the trapdoor on the ceiling and opening it, hoisting herself into the hidden room. "Come on, you two!"

It took them a little bit of time to finally clamour up and onto the new landing.

"Whoa!" Ron said in bafflement, staring around in surprise and awe. The area was wide and spacious with only the edge closest to the window having a carpet thrown down over the hard stone floor, upon which a couch and two chairs had been placed on top of. With the roaring fire in the fireplace, it looked a little like the Gryffindor common room, but with very obvious differences. The rest of the room had a multitude of items, such as a bookshelf stacked to the ceiling with old tomes that looked as though they hadn't been read in centuries, and there was a shelf filled with rare potion ingredients.

"It looks like a potion's lab!" Hermione said, moving around a bit to gaze at it all. "Wherever did you find it?"

"I read about it in a book," Hope said modestly, glancing over to the lowest shelf of the bookshelf, where she had wedged Salazar Slytherin's journal not a few days prior. Salazar had listed where to find his wife's study and how to reach it, saying that it had been untouched since her tragic demise and that he had no intention to enter it. It was actually a complete replica, seeing as she had died before Hogwarts was built, after he had placed all of her things inside it, he had never entered it again. "Great, isn't it?"
"Fantastic!" Hermione breathed.

"All the potion ingredients have permanent Everlasting Charms on them," Hope added, nodding to the shelf with all the bottles, big and small, "shall we see if there are any that we need?"

"Yeah."

Ron stood back as Hope and Hermione glanced over the list of ingredients and then the labels of the bottles, smiling fondly. He was often made fun of for being close friends with two girls, but no one else got Hope like he did, or even Hermione, even though they fought like cats and dogs some days. Hope made life fun, even if it was a little dangerous, but he'd take that life any day over a boring one.

"Stop worrying, Oliver," Hope admonished as the team sat down for their pep talk on Saturday before the match against Slytherin. "We'll be fine."

He didn't look so convinced, but then he steeled himself, no doubt putting on a brave face. "Alright, team. Slytherin has better brooms than us, there's no point in denying it. But we've got better people on our brooms. We've trained harder than they have, we've been flying in all weathers, and they're going to rue the day they let that bit of slime, Malfoy, buy his way onto their team."

"Hear, hear!" Hope called out, earning a few mild chuckles.

"Get that Snitch before Malfoy, or die trying, Hope," Oliver said seriously to the youngest member of his team (he was trying his hardest not to comment on how she and one of his Beaters weren't saying two words to each other when they usually flirted daily), "because we've got to win today, we've got to."

Hope gave a two fingered salute.

Fred winked at her. "But no pressure, Hope."

He got the one fingered salute.

The tension hung over the group like a cloud on a bright day, and George looked as though he was fighting the desire to pull Hope around to face him so that she would look him completely in the eye. Oliver coughed uncomfortably before leading them out and onto the pitch.

Adrenaline was pumping through Hope's veins as she positioned her broom under her, waiting for the kick-off whistle, which greeted her after the captains had shaken each other's hands (looking more like they were trying to break the other's fingers than having a show of camaraderie.

She kicked off of the ground faster than her teammates, whipping her head around searching for that little golden ball. Seeking was easily the hardest part of Quidditch, and anyone who said different was full of shite. The idea that Malfoy could even come close to Hope without that broom of his was ludicrous (he didn't have the eyes of a Seeker), but the fact remained that his broom could give him an edge over Hope's experience, as much as she loathed to admit it.

"Alright there, Scarhead?"

Malfoy had to come up with some better insults, because the ones towards the scar on her forehead were getting old, even though they gave her a twinge of annoyance every time she heard them used.

She opened her mouth to retort with a nice swearword, but she had to duck suddenly when a black Bludger came pelting towards her head in the vain hope that she would be spared of a braining
(which, luckily, she was).

"Close one!"

George sped past her in the air, speaking almost subconsciously, because Fred and George typically talked to their teammates during games that to not do so would be regarded as strange, even though they weren't speaking to each other. He raised his bat to the Bludger, giving it a powerful strike that should have caused it to pelt towards Slytherin Chaser Adrian Pucey, but it only maintained that course for a few seconds before rocketing towards Hope's head again.

This time Hope really did swear, diving quickly and doing several evasive manoeuvres that would have unseated anyone who hadn't practiced them for so long (meaning Malfoy wouldn't be able to do it in ten thousand years if he tried), but the Bludger followed her as if it had some sort of magnetic attraction to her. She shot towards Fred who was raising his bat, which she ducked neatly under.

A loud crack told her that the bat had made contact with the Bludger and she could hear the happy yell of "Gotcha!" but unfortunately, the Bludger was only stalled in its pursuit of Hope which it continued to do so, much to the laughter and cheers of the Slytherin section of the stands.

The presence of the Bludger was really putting Hope off her game, and the Weasley twins were shadowing her at every turn, trying to keep the enchanted ball from breaking the head of the most valuable player of the team. On the plus side, Hope had yet to score a broken bone, on the downside, Slytherin was in the lead, the Gryffindor Chasers needed the coverage of the Beaters, and Hope couldn't look for the Snitch with them hovering around her as if she was the sun and they were orbiting planets.

And it had started to rain; perfect. This bloody day was going so well for her, couldn't you tell?

With difficulty, George had managed to call for a time-out and the group of soaking Gryffindors huddled together on the ground looking worse for wear.

"What's going on?" Oliver demanded of the twins. "Fred, George, where were you when that Bludger stopped Angelina from scoring?"

"We were twenty feet above her," George bit out angrily, his knuckles going white around his bat, "stopping the other Bludger from murdering Hope, Oliver. Someone's fixed it, and it won't leave her alone, she's been the only person it's gone after all game!"

"But the Bludgers have been locked in Madam Hooch's office since our last practice," Oliver said, his brow furrowed, "and there was nothing wrong with them then…"

Madam Hooch was beginning to walk towards them, so Hope blurted out, "Let me handle the rogue Bludger."

"You're mental!" Fred snapped. "It'll take your head off!"

Hope glared at him, her green irises turning a dark colour. "Look, there's no way that I'm going to be able to see the Snitch with you two flying around me. Oliver, tell them to let me handle the rogue Bludger." She turned to gaze imploringly at their captain.

"Don't be thick!" George exclaimed. "You'll be out there undefended—"

"I don't need some protector!" Hope snapped out, giving him a furious glare.

"Oliver, this is insane," Alicia stepped in, "you can't let her deal with that Bludger all on her own!
It'll knock her off her broom!"

"Thanks for the vote of confidence," Hope interjected.

"Let's ask for an inquiry," Angelina added, ignoring Hope as Madam Hooch came closer.

"If we do that, we'll have to forfeit!" Hope complained. "Come on, Oliver; tell them to let me handle it!"

"This is all your fault," George said angrily to the Keeper, "'Get the Snitch or die trying' what a stupid thing to tell her—"

"Ready to resume?"

Madam Hooch had finally come to stand just outside their little circle.

"Oliver." Hope's face was quite determined, how could he say no?

"Alright," he found himself saying, "Fred, George, you heard her, let her handle it."

None of the members of the Gryffindor team seemed pleased with that decision, but there was little else they could do, and there was no way that Hope was going to change her mind concerning it.

Hope and the others rocketed into the air, Hope dodging every few seconds looking for that small glimmer of gold that would signify the movement of the Snitch, but that was rather difficult in the rain, even if Hope was up for the challenge.

"Training for the ballet, Potter?" Malfoy asked, roaring with laughter.

Hope glanced towards him, gritting her teeth, and it was then that she saw it.

The Golden Snitch.

It was flapping its silver wings too fast to be seen, bobbing in the air beside Malfoy's head, and he hadn't even noticed it yet!

CRACK!

Hope cried out as the Bludger slammed into her arm, feeling the bone break under her skin. The pain was numbing, but Hope had a car rip through her leg once before, and this, by comparison, was much more manageable. She turned her broom in the direction of Malfoy who ducked out of her way, not realizing that she was heading for the Snitch.

She pointed her broom downwards, going into a low dive, leaning close to the handle to give her an increase in speed as she came alongside the Snitch, her fingers closing around it as the Bludger came around to deal a blow to her back, sending her forward headfirst off of the broom.

Thankfully, the ground was remarkably close, even if it still jarred her broken arm.

"Hope!"

She could faintly see the outlines of Ron and Hermione racing in front of a cloud of red and gold that must have been the Gryffindor supporters.

"Hey," she said weakly as they knelt beside her, "we won."
"You're an idiot," Hermione said fervently.

"There have never been truer words," Hope agreed, closing her eyes and opening them again, straining her eyes when she saw something white and glittering to her right. "Oh, not you," she complained, "go away!"

"Doesn't know what she's saying," Lockhart assured the crowd of Gryffindors who didn't believe him for a second. "Not to worry, Hope, I'm going to fix your arm."

"I'd prefer it broken over whatever you could do with a wand," Hope snapped, attempting to sit up with the assistance of her friends, earning her a few chuckles from her House-mates. "I'll take my chances at the hospital wing, thanks."

"She really should, Professor." Hope blinked, having not recognized Oliver until he had spoken, seeing as he was now covered in mud. How on earth had he managed that? "Great capture, Hope, probably your best yet—"

"Thanks," she muttered, realizing a second too late that Lockhart had taken that opportunity to aim his wand at her arm and say an incantation. "Oi!"

She looked at her arm, and the sight made her faint like a little girl; it didn't look remotely like an arm, being far too jiggly and rubbery.

When she awoke again, she was in the hospital wing and Madam Pomfrey was on the verge of an apoplectic fit.

"You should have brought her straight here!" she said angrily to Hermione and Ron who looked a little ashamed, even though it hadn't been their fault.

"You'll be able to won't you?" Hope asked, making them jump, surprised that she was awake. "I'd hate to do everything one-armed for the rest of my life."

Madam Pomfrey gave her a smile, but it was more of a grimace. "I will, but it will be painful and you'll have to stay the night."

Hope groaned, but she conceded; there was no point in arguing with the Matron.

"Now, the both of you, out!" Madam Pomfrey ordered. "This girl has thirty-three bones to regrow!"

"Could I have five minutes?"

Hermione and Ron glanced at the speaker and then at each other, before making themselves scarce. Madam Pomfrey eyed the speaker before sighing tiredly. "Fine, but only five minutes."

And then she left Hope with George Weasley.
Reconciliation of Silence

George could see just how nervous she was by the way her fists clenched around the sheet until her knuckles shone white against her skin and how she bent her head slightly, her crimson fringe overshadowing her emerald eyes, but not hiding how she bit the corner of her lip.

She could feel her heart beating traitorously against her ribcage and she turned her head away from him, determined to ignore his presence for as long as possible, after all, she had done it quite successfully for several days now.

"You're going to have to talk to me sometime," George murmured, speaking in low tones so that Madam Pomfrey wouldn't overhear. His eyes fell to the silver ring on her finger of her good hand. It was one of the two rings that she hardly ever took off; a token from her parents, perhaps? It was silver and wrapped around her finger in the pattern of the coils of a snake, with tiny emeralds for eyes.

The facts were quite literally staring him in the face all this time. How could he have not seen it? She was as sly as Slytherins were stereotyped to be and she could outsmart people with just her words. She was witty and quirky and sarcastic, and it was her Slytherin traits that made her such a great friend; fun and exciting (which was the very best kind, mind you).

"Hey." He was hardly speaking above a whisper now. "Five minutes, Hope, that's all I'm asking. Please?"

Her eyebrows scrunched together and her lips pulled down into a frown. George recognized the expression easily, it was the I'm-thinking-hard-about-something expression. The look itself was adorable, but George had too much riding on her answer to notice.

"Fine," she said, staring at a spot directly in front of her so she wouldn't have to look at him. "You talk, I'll listen; no promises."

George breathed a sigh of relief; that was better than nothing. "I'm sorry about what I said, about you not being Slytherin's great granddaughter—"

"It wasn't that," Hope said shortly, cutting him off, "it was that I couldn't possibly be related to him that really made me mad."

George lifted his head slightly to find himself caught in eyes that were a stormy hazel.

"I like you, George," she said honestly, "I really do, but there are just some things that can really piss me off, and the relation to Salazar Slytherin isn't something I like to talk about, but I don't need it pointed out to me as if there was no way I could be of his bloodline, because I am, whether I like it or not."

"I'm sorry," George said a bit morosely. "I was just trying to cheer you up, and…"

Hope sighed, the air exhaling loudly from her lips. He was making it really hard to be mad at him. "I know. I was scared that if my friends knew about it, they'd…" She shifted uncomfortably.

George could guess what she was thinking. She thought that if she told them, they wouldn't want to be her friends anymore because of the terrible reputation Slytherin had. "Come here you worrisome girl."
Hope blinked as George gave her an awkward hug, being careful of her injured arm, her forehead making contact with his shoulder. She reached an arm around to squeeze his side. "I'm sorry I was mad at you," she said, her voice muffled by the cloth of his robes, "especially over something as stupid as that…I was just so mad—"

"I know."

He released her. "And for the record, you are definitely sly enough to be Slytherin's Heir."

She gave a light chuckle at that. "If you say so," she said. "But thanks anyways."

"I'm serious," he said with a grin.

"I'm Hope," she answered sarcastically, "nice to meet you."

George's lips spread into a wide smile at probably the most overused joke in the history of jokes, but it was the first joke or even the first use of sarcasm that he'd heard from her in about a week.

"That's was bad."

"Absolutely terrible," she agreed, "but it made you smile."

"A lot of the things you do make me smile," George returned easily. "Just like a lot of things I do make you smile."

She cast him an amused glance, her cheeks pinking at his words, and would have probably said more if Madam Pomfrey hadn't come over to tell them that their five minutes was up. So, regretfully, George left her to a restless night of sleep.

Hope awoke the next morning to find her arm a little stiff, but filled with thirty-three new bones, and she'd take that stiffness any day if it meant she had have all her bones in her arm.

Once she'd left the hospital wing, she almost collided with another body and had to step back suddenly so she wouldn't.

"Did she finally let you go, then?"

Hope blinked. "Oh, it's you."

George grinned in a roguish manner. "You weren't expecting some other dashing ginger-haired Gryffindor, were you?"

"I didn't know you were dashing," Hope said with a slight smirk, "do tell."

"Ah, Milady," he said solemnly, sounding a bit like Michael the Knight, "it is a rather lengthy tale that involves the outsmarting of pompous students and arrogant teachers."

"That's always fun," Hope said after a short laugh had erupted from her lips as he extended the crook of his arm to her, and she looped her arm around his and they descended the stairs together.

"Ravenclaws and Snape and Lockhart?" she guessed.

"Oh, yes," George agreed. "Some Ravenclaws can be…"

"I can imagine," Hope said humoured as they stepped through the doorway and into the Great Hall. Ron and Hermione were nowhere to be seen, something that confused and disappointed Hope a bit. She would have thought they would be the first to come and find her…she wanted to talk to them
about Dobby (who had visited her in the night) and the attack on Colin Creevey.

She had barely managed to get a bite of toast when Angelina drew her attention from the food.

"So you two aren't fighting anymore?" Angelina asked hopefully.

Hope curled a strand of her vibrant hair around her finger, looking a little awkward. She glanced at George, but he was smiling at her. Her cheeks flooded with heat. "Erm, yes," she muttered, "we've worked everything out."

"That's great!" Alicia said in relief. "Because your boy here was wallowing in self-pity."

"I was not wallowing —"

"He's not my —"

Angelina smiled sweetly, but there was something sly lurking in those dark brown depths. "You two are so adorable when you try to defend yourselves."

George mouthed wordlessly at the girl whom his twin was so enamoured with, while Hope gave her friend a shrewd glare.

"Angelina," she said, her voice filled with warning.

"Alright, alright," the dark-skinned girl conceded, drawing in her claws temporarily. "But, really, it's good that you two aren't fighting anymore…it's really weird when you don't talk."

Hope stuck out her tongue before taking a long swig of pumpkin juice. "Anyone seen Ron or Hermione?"

"Nope," was the consensus of the small group, leaving Hope frowning slightly.

"I'll catch you later?" she asked, "I'm going to find them."

She was cheerfully waved goodbye, exiting the Great Hall in search of her elusive friends, almost running into Percy in the process. Honestly, she was going to have to watch where she was going, if she kept almost running into people like this.

"Oh, hello, Hope," Percy said brightly, a beaming smile plastered to his lips…and was that a hint of lipstick? Hope smothered her grin; so Percy had a girlfriend, did he? "Excellent flying yesterday, really excellent. Gryffindor has just taken the lead for the House Cup—you earned fifty points!" This prospect seemed quite exciting to him.

"Thanks," she said, "You haven't seen Ron and Hermione around, have you? I thought they'd be at breakfast, but I guess not."

"No, I haven't. I hope Ron's not in another girls' toilet…"

Hope laughed lightly at Percy's words, but they gave her a different idea. And not five minutes later she could be found rushing along the fourth floor corridor, barking out a choice phrase and ascending the staircase that led to her grandmother's secret room.

They were both on edge as she hoisted herself through the trapdoor, only relaxing once they'd recognized her.

"Hope!" Hermione gasped out loud, raising a hand to her chest as if its presence would calm her
frantically beating heart. "Don't do that!"

Hope rolled her eyes at her.

"How's your arm?" Ron added from where he was leaning on his elbows on the table upon which a pewter cauldron had been set up with a pale blue fire flickering underneath.

"A little stiff," Hope said with a shrug, "but Madam Pomfrey says that'll fade soon enough. Trust me, I'm fine," Hope added when they gave her dubious looks (she was a notorious liar, after all).
"Seriously...Are you starting the potion, then?"

Hope leaned forward on the table so she could look within the black cauldron, wrinkling her nose at the putrid smell, and frowning at the beige colour it had turned. "Is it supposed to look like that?"

"We decided to start this morning," Hermione agreed, answering her friend's first question first, "after Professor McGonagall told us about Colin."

Hope frowned slightly, recalling how stiff the first-year had been when the staff had brought him into the hospital wing late the previous night, just like Mrs. Norris had been.

"It should look like this until we add the bicorn horn," she added.

"Looks disgusting," Hope said for good measure, earning her a sharp whack to the back of her head.
"Dobby came to visit me last night," she told them.

Ron and Hermione looked up at her in surprise. "What? Why?"

Hope wrinkled her nose in irritation. "Apparently, he was the one that charmed that bloody Bludger, hoping that I would be so grievously injured that I would have to be sent home."

Ron's eyebrows creased together in a frown. "But that doesn't make any sense," he said, confusion obvious in his voice. "I mean, even last year when you got his with that Bludger, you just went to St. Mungo's and then came right back here when you were all healed up. Even if Dobby had gotten you seriously injured, you wouldn't be sent home. That never happens, especially with Muggle families."

"What do you mean 'especially with Muggle families'?'" Hermione said, sounding a little insulted.

Ron backpedalled fast. "I don't mean it like that, I just mean that if they sent you home, for instance, then you'd be living with people who wouldn't know how to deal with a magical injury, that's all."

Hermione's eyes narrowed suspiciously, but she didn't say much else on the matter, much to Ron's relief.

Hope's day went downhill the second she uttered that word to the snake that Malfoy had conjured out of thin air.

That word was "Stop" but no one else heard it the way she did.

She could see the fear and the anger that flitted across their faces, as if she was the enemy, the abomination that should have never existed on the physical plain. Like she was a disease. Ron and Hermione had to drag her away from the converged group so they could speak without prying ears.

"You're a Parselmouth!" Ron exclaimed as soon as they were out of earshot. "Why didn't you tell us?"
"Parselmouth?" Hope said flummoxed. She had never heard of such a word before. "What's a Parselmouth?"

"Someone who can speak snake language," Ron said. "Didn't you know you were saying it? It's no wonder Justin freaked out; for all we know you could have been egging it on, or something…"

This revelation of Ron's stung Hope, who would have never thought that her own friend would believe her to be capable of setting a snake on a fellow student. She gritted her teeth and clenched her fists into tight shaking balls.

"The last known Parselmouth was Salazar Slytherin," Hermione added.

"And now the whole school's going to think you're his great-great-great-great-granddaughter or something—"

"So what?"

Ron and Hermione both blanched. Hope's voice had grown dangerous and cold; distant and frosty like a snowstorm was about to hit. She lifted her head and they saw that her green eyes had morphed to a midnight black, like dark, angry onyx spheres had been grafted into her eye sockets. Her voice trembled but it was hard to tell from what.

"So what if I'm Salazar's granddaughter," she snapped out like the crack of a whip, "so what? I'm not the one sending people into the hospital wing; I'm not the one in control of some sort of beast—!"

"We're not saying that!" Hermione said, frantically trying to calm her down because she had once seen Hope's temper crack stone.

"Then what?" Hope seethed. "Maybe I'll murder my whole family like his son did. Oh, wait, I don't need to they're already dead!" You knew it was bad when Hope brought up the death of her parents.

"We know you're not behind anything," Ron said, sounding a lot calmer than normal (as one had to be when dealing with Hope's few but damaging tantrums). "Hope." He put as much emphasis as he could on her name, hoping (pun unintended) that would snap her a little out of her anger.

The girl deflated a bit but still looked as though steam should have been pouring from her ears. Her clenched fists loosened and she released a heavy sigh, but much to Hermione's relief, the tension and anger seemed to have melted off of her.

That night, Hope went to bed early, feeling legitimately a little sick to her stomach. She hadn't meant to blow up like that towards Ron and Hermione, she knew very well of how…unfavourable Salazar was, but, like his brother, Ron had brought up her possible relation to the founder, and not in a good way.

She should take up meditation, or at least something less…oh, she didn't really know.

The next few days afterwards were remarkably tense, mostly because Hermione and Ron were trying to tread very cautiously around their friend, but also because the whispers about Hope had begun again and not in a good way. Hope didn't look as though it was affecting her, but Hermione and Ron could see the light bruising under her eyes from many sleepless nights. After the fourth night had passed, the tension between the three had finally eased past and they had all forgiven each other, like all children do, and the next day—a snow day—, Hope was in a much chipper mood and had actually smiled a few times, and that was a miracle.

So Hope skipped off to the library in search of a good book, happening upon the Invisibility Section.
She pondered it for a second before skimming her fingers over the titles in search of one that might explain how something could roam the castle unseen… *Invisibility for the Cowardly: A Guide to Hiding From Your Enemies... Travelling Unseen...* that one looked promising. She lifted the book from the shelf, pausing when she heard low voices speaking close-by.

"So anyways," the voice of a young boy said, "I told Justin to hide up in our dormitory. I mean to say, if Potter's marked him down as her next victim, it's best if he keeps a low profile for a while. Of course, Justin's been waiting for something like this to happen ever since he let slip to Potter he was Muggle-born. Justin actually told her he'd been down for Eton. That's not the kind of thing you bandy about with Slytherin's heir on the loose, is it?"

Hope's hands clenched around her book and she turned on her heel, stalking up to Madam Pince to check the book out, pausing once again as she found herself close to the small group that must have been made entirely of Hufflepuffs.

"She always seems so nice, though," the girl who had spoken from before said with voice layered with anxiety, "and, well, she's the one who made You-Know-Who disappear, so she can't be all bad, can she?"

The first boy's next words drove an ice pick through Hope's heart. "No one knows how she survived that attack by You-Know-Who. I mean to say, she was only a baby when it happened. She should have been blasted to smitherens (Oh please, Hope thought angrily, the Killing Curse doesn't blow you up, it just kills you where you stand!). Only a really powerful Dark witch or wizard could have survived a curse like that. That's probably why You-Know-Who wanted to kill her in the first place. Didn't want a Dark witch competing with him. I wonder what other powers Potter's been hiding?"

"Do you just talk to hear yourself talk?" a new voice asked in irritation. "Because the last time I checked, surviving a killing curse doesn't automatically make you evil."

Hope glanced past the bookshelf to see George glaring at the small group.

"How would you know?" the first boy demanded, though Hope could hear the slight tremor of his voice; Fred and George could look very impressive when they wanted to, especially when they were irked or angry. "You and her haven't talked for weeks, probably because—"

"Because I said something stupid," George said, cutting across him, "I insulted her by accident and she took personally, which she should. We made up about a week ago, which you would have known if you weren't hiding away in your common room like frightened little rats." Hope felt her lips twitch slightly; oh, she really was a bad influence on the Weasleys… George had to have picked up that sarcastic tongue from her.

The Hufflepuffs had the decency to look ashamed as Hope stepped out into the light, and then they looked terrified, many going stark white.

"Hello, Hope," George said conversationally.

"Hello," she said quietly, much more quietly than she had intended, and she wished more than anything that they would stop looking at her like she was some monster under the bed. She eyed the boy who had insulted her the most with distaste. Ernie… was it? McMillen, or something? MacMillan?

"I thought Hufflepuffs were supposed to be honourable," she said spitefully, holding her book tightly to her chest as if it was a shield of some sort. "But I guess the hat made a mistake there, didn't he?"
Ernie's face purpled at the insult. "Turning it back on me, how very Slytherin of you."

Hope's glare would have melted two holes where his eyes should have been, that is, if glares were capable of doing such, which Hope dearly wished they could.

"And I'll have you know," he said, puffing up slightly and sounding braver than he looked (anything could sound braver than he looked), "that you can trace my family back through nine generations of witches and warlocks and my blood's as pure as anyone's—"

"I don't give a damn about how pure your blood is," Hope seethed, "and I don't have anything against Muggle-borns!"

George reached to squeeze her fingers tightly.

"I've heard you hate those Muggles you live with."

Hope went stark white with suppressed anger. What did he know of her life? Nothing! So what gave him to right to judge her as if she was the villain? Like she was some sort of criminal?

"Yes, because decent folk put bars on their niece's window," George said coldly, gripping an arm around Hope's shoulders and steering her away before she exploded for the second time within the same week.

"Are you alright?" he asked quietly once they had left the library.

"I'm fine," Hope said without feeling.

George glanced her over. "I'm fine" was her go-to phrase which usually meant she was far from fine but didn't want to talk about it. She looked angry and sad and disheartened all at the same time.

"Ignore what that kid said," he advised, relaxing his grip on her shoulders which must have been uncomfortably tight he realized, slightly ashamed, "he doesn't know you like we do." He pressed a light kiss to her temple, making her cheeks burn a bright red.

"George...thanks," she said sincerely, tilting her head back slightly to look at him in the eye. "Thanks for everything."

"No problem," the ginger-haired boy said with a grin, pulling her back swiftly. "Whoa! Look out for Hagrid!"

Hope stuttered out an apology to the large man who just waved the comment aside (almost whacking Hope in the head in the process but she was willing to forget about that, as it was Hagrid). "'Lo you two, why aren't yeh in class?"

"Cancelled," Hope said shortly.

"Free period," George added, his time having completely slipped his mind while in the library...his time was almost up by now...damn.

"What about you?" Hope asked, her eyes dropping to what looked like- "Is that a dead chicken?"

Hagrid nodded almost solemnly. "It's the second one killed this term," he agreed. "It's either foxes or a Blood-Suckin' Bugbear, an' I need the Headmaster's permission to put a charm around the hen coop." He looked down at the pair of them, gazing intently at them with his black shining eyes from under his bristly eyebrows. "Is something wrong? You two look upset."
"It's nothing," Hope said quickly, Ernie's words still ringing in her ears like an ever-ringing echo. "We'll be seeing you around, Hagrid, bye!" And she dragged George away before he could contradict her.

They got about fifty feet before Hope went stock-still.

"Wha-?" George blinked and stared at his friend.

Hope seemed to have frozen over completely, almost as if she had been turned to stone, or ice, even. George followed her eyes to what looked like a fallen suit of armour.

Her hand clenched tight over his arm. "That's Michael," she whispered, her voice laced with worry and confusion, "why isn't he getting up?"

George remembered Hope mentioning the suit of armour that had carried her back from the chamber that had once held the Philosopher's Stone, but he had never given it much thought until now.

"Wait-Hope!"

But she had already reached the side of the suit of armour, but not as close as George would have expected, and when he finally approached, he saw why. The armour…it was melting, as if it had been doused completely in acid, which could be quite possible. Before George could speak a few words of warning, Hope had darted forward to wrench the helmet from the now mangled ruin, holding the metal gingerly in her hands.

It was only when George looked beyond that he realized how bad the day had gone.

'Shite.'
Eroding of a Seal

Hope didn't see what George did because her attention was focused completely on the suit of armour sizzling before her. That was Aegean Metal, forged on the island Aeaea centuries ago, back when it was a Provence of splendour; it was said that nothing could melt that metal.

So why was Michael's armour eroding as if it was common iron? That was impossible!

"Michael?" She whispered his name. "Michael, can you—?"

She gulped; what could have done such a thing? She couldn't—

And then she looked up and she saw what had made George stutter to a stop.

It was Justin, the boy who had been hiding in the Hufflepuff common room in fear of her. He was stiff and cold, frozen on the stone floor and gazing uncomprehendingly at the ceiling. Hope glanced up, as if hoping to see what he had seen, but there was nothing there; had there even been at all?

Then she balked, leaning back slightly and into George's shoulder —a small comfort in the emptiness and the cold. "Is-Is that Nick?"

She was, of course, referring to Nearly Headless Nick, the Gryffindor Ghost, who was now hanging suspended in the air looking not quite so transparent and more opaque than he usually was. She supposed that if he was alive that he would have been frozen like Justin had been.

She clutched the helmet to her chest as if hoping it would protect her from the scene before her, but she had no such luck when the sound of a rather loud crash echoed in her ears and she turned quickly to find Peeves the Poltergeist who roared out words upon seeing the figures that were frozen like statues.

"ATTACK! ATTACK! ANOTHER ATTACK! NO MORTAL OR GHOST IS SAFE! RUN FOR YOUR LIVES! ATTAAAACK!"

Hope's mouth dropped open, recoiling slightly at his words. He was shifting the blame onto her once more! Really, she couldn't catch a break, could she? Her shoulders slumped obviously as every door in the vicinity was flung open and a multitude of students outpoured from within with Professor McGonagall rushing to the front of the crowd, attempting to force the students back into their classes, an endeavour that took some time as a number of them had begun to react rather violently to the bodies.

This had given Ernie MacMillan enough time to run to the corridor in which George and Hope now stood. He pointed his finger, stabbing it aggressively in Hope's direction, his eyes lit with a mad light.

"Caught in the act!"

Hope's eyes bled red and George found that he had to actually physically restrain her so that she wouldn't run over to the Hufflepuff and brain him with the helmet that was still in her hands, because that was entirely possible, knowing her.

"Nobody asked you, Faithless!" she snarled, jibing at a quality that was the opposite of what Hufflepuffs stood for. "Go tell it to someone who gives two sh—"

"Miss Potter!" Professor McGonagall snapped. "Mr. MacMillan! That is enough! One more word
out of either of you and I will resort to taking points and issuing you each a detention!"

Ernie and Hope glared silently at each other instead until each were forced to go their separate ways.

"It wasn't me, Professor!" Hope said to her Head of House as soon as Ernie had gone, wafting Nick up the stairs with a large fan that looked a little heavy. "You know I wouldn't do something-something like this!"

She gazed imploringly at the Transfiguration Professor, but she only received a mournful stare in return. Surely Professor McGonagall didn't think she was capable of this?

"It's out of my hands, Miss Potter," she said, her voice betraying her exhaustion of the whole matter, "I don't really have a say in the matter."

And then she swept the pair of them forward with a light swish of her hands, down the corridor until they came before a gargoyle that was shaped very much like a griffin.

"Lemon drop." Professor McGonagall ushered them up the staircase, informing them that they should wait there.

"Ever been sent here?" George asked quietly by her side as they came out onto the landing. He'd been so quiet that she'd almost forgotten that he was actually there, and she jumped slightly at his voice. He gave her a tight smile when she glanced at him.

"No. You?"

"Oh, loads of times," he said with a slight grin, "you know, me and Fred are troublemakers and all."

Her lips twitched slightly and then it faded entirely as she looked down at the helmet that was still clutched in her arms.

"Maybe Dumbledore can fix him," George suggested quietly and cautiously.

"No," Hope said bluntly as she turned the helmet upside down glancing it into the inside of the metal, "whatever he was attacked with, it eroded the seal, see?"

George looked within but he couldn't see anything remotely close to looking like a seal. "No…"

"That's 'cause it's gone, you fool," she said in a lighter voice. "Once you've owned something for so long, worn it for so long, sometimes that object can gain an imprint of your personality. That's all Michael was, you know, an imprint. You don't usually hear of suits of armour talking, because they aren't supposed to. They're bound by enchantment to serve the school, but they're just chunks of metal sewn together, no thoughts, no feelings, just metal. But Michael could talk, could move on his own…" She gave a brief smile. "He told me a lot of riddles last year…I think he might have done that a lot when he was alive."

George shuffled his feet uncomfortably, as he had always been a little jealous –of a suit of armour!– but Michael seemed nice.

"He was a werewolf, you know," Hope continued, "one of the first documented ones."

George blinked at her in surprise. Werewolves were some of the most discriminated against beings known to the Wizarding world, for one to be so closely aligned with the family of one of the founders…
Hope sighed. "What's it matter anyways? He's been dead for over ten centuries...his being a werewolf doesn't change all of the good that he did."

She stepped forward slightly, stumbling backwards when she heard the aged voice that could only belong to the Sorting Hat.

"Bee in your bonnet, Miss Potter?"

She whirled around slightly, searching for where the voice originated before finding the patched hat perched high up on a shelf away from prying hands.

Hope frowned slightly. Sometimes she wondered if she made the right choice going into Gryffindor, but the Hat had said that she would have done well in any of the four Houses.

"It's nothing," she said, turning away from it, that frown still present on her mouth. "I'm fine."

"If you say so," the hat said agreeably before becoming silent.

"What was that all about?" George queried, eyeing her curiously.

"What was what all about?" Hope asked, attempting to dodge the question as she looked around the office curiously. She had never seen anything like it before in her life. There were shelves upon shelves of books that would quite possibly take her a lifetime to read, the walls were completely covered with portraits, and there was a surprising number of strangely shaped silver objects that either made soft whistling noises or emitted light puffs of smoke.

The hacking gigging sound drew her attention away from the walls instead to look upon what looked to be a dying bird. Half of its feathers were gone and it had a starved look about it.

Hope was sure that she'd gasped. "Oh my—" and then she gave a startled yelp as it suddenly burst into flames.

"Ohmigods!" She gaped at the pile of ash that had once been a bird in complete and utter shock. "Are birds supposed to do that?!"

"Er..." George said slowly when the door on the above landing opened and out strode the headmaster. It was times like these that Hope was struck by just how old Albus Dumbledore truly was.

"P-Professor!" Hope stumbled over her words, still stunned by the sudden death of the bird. "Your bird-it just-I didn't-fire—"

To George and Hope's utter astonishment, the older man smiled congenially. "About time, too," he said with a small lilt of relief, "He's been looking dreadful for days; I've been telling him to get a move on."

"But that's horrible!" Hope burst out. "Why would you want your bird to die?!"

George coughed lightly and Hope blushed a deep and bright red, realizing that she had just been chastising the headmaster. Talk about awkward...

"Fawkes is a phoenix, Hope," Dumbledore explained kindly, smiling despite the tone she had taken with him only seconds ago, "Phoenixes burst into flames when it is time for them to die and are reborn from the ashes. Watch him..."
So, Hope leaned in close to see a bit of the dark grey ash shift as a tiny little beak peeked out from
under it, connected to a withered looking head. It didn't look very impressive, but who was she to
criticize of the headmaster's taste?

"It's a shame you two had to see him on a Burning Day. He's really very handsome most of the time,
wonderful red and gold plumage. Fascinating creatures, phoénixes. They can carry immensely heavy
loads, their tears have healing powers, and they make highly faithful pets."

Could've fooled Hope.

She opened her mouth to say something when the door to the office was thrown open and Hagrid
tumbled into view looking quite out of breath.

"It wasn' her!" Hagrid burst out. "I know everyone's sayin' it was, but I was talkin' to her and George
seconds before that kid was found, she wouldn't've had time-"

"Should I be upset that I'm not getting blamed?" George whispered into Hope's ear, making her skin
tingle slightly.

She rolled her eyes at him. "Oh, shut up."

He grinned, delighting in how a pale flush dusted across her cheeks as she caught sight of it.

"—it can't have bin her, I'll swear it in front o' the Ministry o' Magic if I have to!"

"Hagrid, I—" Dumbledore tried to interrupt the large man, but there was no stopping Hagrid once he
got started.

"—yeh've got the wrong girl, sir, I know Hope never—"

"Hagrid!" Dumbledore had to near yell to speak over Hagrid. "I do not believe that Hope attacked
those people."

Hope blinked owlishly in surprise, almost dropping Michael's helmet as she did so, only catching it
on her fingertips at the last second.

Hagrid mumbled a quiet and a hasty apology and opted to await outside the door, leaving George
and Hope alone with Dumbledore.

Dumbledore gazed at her with eyes that hid shadows. Hope Potter was a very guarded individual,
that much had been obvious since her first year, but now he could see she was somewhere caught
between fortifying and demolishing those walls. Her penchant for getting into trouble was getting
worse as the years wore on and so was her temper.

There was a darkness that rested inside her, he knew, but he did not yet know of the depths of it.

Or perhaps what he mistook for darkness was a swell of several different emotions.

He had to give himself a mental shake when Hope placed the helmet she had been carrying around
in his hands with a fierce stare that wouldn't have looked out of place on the face of Lily Evans.

"That's Sir Michael Richmond's helmet, you should give him a posthumous award for services to the
school," she said seriously, "he's been guarding it since the tenth century."

Dumbledore's eyes crinkled slightly. "I will see to it."
"Good." Hope's shoulders relaxed slightly as if no longer holding onto the metal hat lifted the stress from her shoulders. "He deserves it."

Dumbledore couldn't help but feel a little bemused was he watched Hope being tugged towards the door, disappearing down the stairs, complaining after the ginger-haired boy in a way that made him smile.

"Hope, what in Merlin's name are you doing?"

It was Friday night and Hope looked up from her cocoon of parchment to stare at Ron and Hermione who had just come up the secret staircase to check on the Polyjuice Potion. Her eyes were a little cross-eyed from reading and writing for so long and her fingers were stained with ink.

As sad as it was, this was probably the most that they'd seen of her all week when they weren't in class.

"Research," Hope said bluntly, "what're you doing?"

Ron stooped down to look at her notes all scattered around her, noticing a number had been recently thrown into the fire. They were completely covered with her bubbly and slanted scrawls. The words were rather disjointed, though, much like her trains of thought. He picked up one paper:

**Big or small? Invisibility charm or wall chameleon? Language specific? Affects dead and living.**

"Hope..." Ron said slowly, "just how much research have you been doing?"

"Dunno, really," Hope said, barely stifling a yawn, "and then Angie's asked me to help her with werewolf research."

"Why?" Hermione asked from over by the simmering cauldron.

Hope shrugged, uncomprehendingly. "Angie says she wants to be a Healer and she wants to see if there might be some way to cure them, so she's asked me to help her find out everything on them."

"Ah," Hermione said, though she didn't really understand.

"You've been looking up ways to travel around invisible?" Ron guessed, lifting one of her books from the ground and flipping through it. "Find anything promising?"

"Some," Hope admitted, "but nothing that points to a creature that can use invisibility, that's why I have Ancient Magical Beasts, because if it must be very old if this has happened before, but maybe not in living memory..." Her lips creased into a thoughtful frown. "What d'you think?"

"I think you're assuming too much," Ron said carefully, looking over a few different pages at once. "What if this is the baby, or something, of that beast?"

"Hm...you could be right," Hope admitted, taking his hands and allowing herself to be hoisted into a standing position. "So, how's the potion coming?"

"Nearly done," Hermione said with a beaming smile, lowering the fire to a simmer. She helped her friend pile up her parchments accordingly before the three of them left together.

The good thing about the Christmas holiday was that hardly anyone was left in the school apart from Hope, Hermione, the Weasleys, Malfoy and his cronies. It was probably as close to having free reign as they could possibly get at Hogwarts.
The snow was coming down heavy and fast, caking the land and castle in the purest of whites. So, Hermione found herself dragged out into the whiteness, clad heavily in a coat, gloves, boots, and hat as a minor protection against the cold.

"A snowball fight!" Hope was saying as she dragged her down the stairs with Ron close behind. "Come on! It's practically a tradition!"

"But!" Hermione complained half-heartedly as she was pulled out of the castle and into the snowy turf. She'd never been in a snowball fight before; she'd never had the friends to play with. Just thinking about how much her life had changed in the past two years almost made her want to cry; she'd never been so happy.

"It'll be fun!" Hope insisted with a grin, her eyes a sparkling hazel. "Come on! We'll show Fred and George that small packages can pack a big punch!"

"Who're you calling small?" Ron asked in a pseudo-insulted voice. "I'll have you know that I am very tall!"

The identical dubious looks that were thrown his way by his two female friends, both of whom were still rather short, was almost comical.

"Sure you are, Ron," Hope said in a voice that said she was humouring him. "Maybe we should take him up to the hospital wing and get him checked out," she suggested to Hermione, "if he's having hallucinations about his height…"

Hermione schooled her face into a serious expression, looking Ron up and down as if looking for some symptoms to a serious disease. "Yes, I think we should. Who knows how serious this is? He might have done some serious damage to his—"

"Alright, alright," Ron grumbled mutinously, "I'm short; happy?"

"Immensely," Hope said with a wide grin, "I'm oozing happiness can't you tell?"

Hope was a lot more cheerful now that practically the whole school was gone, Hermione noticed. She didn't like being watched every second of her day, but it seemed as though she was managing her temper better, which was always a plus. Hope had admitted that Madam Pomfrey was the one who had been helping her in that aspect; she didn't think it was good for someone so young to be so angry. It was relieving to Hermione to know that she was learning to let go of all that anger; being angry wasn't very healthy.

Hope had been so moody lately that her smiles had become a rarity, but Hermione and Ron were secretly (or not-so-secretly, depending on how you looked at it) pleased at its presence, knowing that it would vanish as soon as Malfoy drifted into her path or when all the students came back from their brief vacation from class.

It wasn't something that any of the three were looking forward to.

"OI! You three hurry up!"

Three heads swivelled to stare at Fred and George. They both wore bright, beaming grins with cheeks pink from the cold and they were surrounded by little pure white balls.

"Oh, hell no!" Hope snapped, stabbing a double-gloved hand towards the identical pair. "Who said you could make ammo while we were getting ready?!!"
"You snooze, you lose, sweetheart!"

Hope's whole face light up like the setting sun at the endearment and the next second she was racing after George shouting at him and throwing snow at him at every opening that she had.

"Do you think she knows that there's a betting pool going on between her and George?" Ron mused aloud, sniggering when Hope managed to stuff a bit of snow down the back of George's coat, earning him a yelp of surprise.

"I doubt it," Hermione said dryly, "if she had, you'd be short a brother or two."

"Probably," he agreed before giving his own yelp as a tightly packed ball of snow collided with his face, sending him reeling slightly, his face stinging with the cold. "FRED!"

His older brother was grinning like the cat that got the canary, tossing a ball of snow up and down in his hand. "Come on, li'l bro', you didn't think it was just going to be Hope against George, did you?"

Ron groaned before dodging wildly as the ball whisked by his head. He could hear Hermione squeal, so he must have hit her. Moving fast he scooped up a bit of snow in his hands, flinging it at Fred.

Fred stared, a bit bemused as the ball broke apart in the wind leaving him unharmed. He quirked an eyebrow at his brother as if to say: "Really, Ron? Is that the best you've got?"

Ron's ears turned red in embarrassment, but then he grinned widely as a clump of snow smacked into the side of Fred's head, knocking his head to the side slightly. Fred had just enough time to see Hermione bending down for a second ball before he went streaking in the direction that Hope and George were waging their snow war, because it did indeed seem to be war.

"Where d'you think you're going?" Ron called to him as he and Hermione raced after the ginger-haired fourth year. "We're not done yet!"

Fred's laughter was almost lost to the wind as he reached his twin, ducking behind him for protection.

"Oi!" George complained, before ducking swiftly to avoid another well aimed ball to his face. "Oi!" he said again. "The face!"

"Where's that famous Weasley Focus that I've heard so much about?" she shot back with a wild grin, before toppling to the ground from a blow to her chest with a small scream. "FRED!"

The Weasley twin grinned impishly until he saw the glint in her eye, and then he started to worry. He tried to run, but he didn't get very far, and Hope latched onto his back like a leech, shoving the snow down his shirt (it was starting to become a signature move for her).

He yelled at the feel of the ice against his skin, flinging her off as she gave a bout of triumphant laughter.

"I'll get you for that, Potter!" he swore, dancing around in an attempt to shake the dissolving snow out of his layer of clothes, but it didn't seem to be working much in his favour.

Hope grinned widely at his predicament, opening her mouth to say something more, when her feet slipped and Hope fell backwards, tumbling down, down, down until she finally came to a stop in a heap of limbs. She sat up, feeling a little dizzy and then she had to stare. She had never been to this part of Hogwarts before, it was generally avoided by most students, and now she knew why.
It was a willow tree. The willow tree everyone called the Whomping Willow. She had always thought it was a strange name to give a tree, but now it made perfect sense.

The willow did look like a normal willow, with flexible branch-like tendrils hanging in a low droop, but it also had thick, heavy, mace-like branches that looked as though they could crush you into dust if you got too close, and Hope had indeed gotten too close, because now the willow had begun to move.

"Hope! Get away from there!"

George’s voice helped her regain her senses, but by that time, one of the club-like branches struck downwards, intent on flattening her to a pancake, which she had no doubt that it would have done, had she not rolled to the side and out of harm’s way. But then she was attacked by the previously innocent looking hanging vines, slapping at her hard enough to give her whip-lash. Hope barely had enough time to roll out of the way of the next strike when the tree suddenly stilled.

"Where'd she go?" Ron demanded, staring open-mouthed at the tree.

The willow had stopped, but Hope was gone.
Becoming Someone Else

Awareness came very slowly for Hope despite her mind insisting that she'd only been out for a few seconds. The last thing that she wanted to do was move, but she had to eventually.

The darkness faded very slowly, but surely for Hope.

Hope's head was throbbing, that was the first thing that she noticed. She groaned under her breath, rubbing her closed eyes with her hand. What had just happened? She stumbled to her feet, her hands scraping against the wall as she did so. She blinked and stared at one side, her fingers tracing against the scratches gored into the stone...like claws. She retracted her hand quickly wondering where on earth she had come out. And then she heard the voices.

"Where did she go?"

"She was just here!"

Hope limped in the direction of the voices, hoisting herself through a thicket of what looked like roots until her fingers brushed against cold snow. She gripped at it as though it was her life-line, coughing out in a voice that sounded a bit clogged, but maybe that was just her. "H-Here!"

In a matter of seconds, her hands had been gripped and she had been pulled up and out until the bright afternoon sky could be seen, not that it could compare to the precise colour of George's eyes...she blushed, what an embarrassing thought.

Fred and George dragged her back and out of reach of the Whomping Willow which had began to rouse once more.

"Where the ruddy hell'd you go?" the twins demanded identically, though she could hear from their voices that George was more concerned; that made her want to blush, again.

"I fell," she said, still a little confused, "there was some kind of hidey hole or something...and I hit my head—"

She didn't have time to say much else because she was already being forcefully dragged in the direction of the hospital wing with a rather bemused expression on her face. Hermione, Ron, and Fred aren't quite so restrained, and they laughed at the pair, as the crisis has now been averted.

"It's only a small bump," Madam Pomfrey said, once her chronic patient had returned via George Weasley, her fingers lightly probing at the back of her head, searching for the spot Hope had reluctantly indicated and finding it in a matter of seconds. "You fell, didn't you?"

Hope's cheeks dusting a faint pink and she screwed her lips together in the "I'm-not-telling-you-anything" look that Madam Pomfrey had grown so used to seeing. Its reappearance made her roll her eyes for good measure.

"The throbbing will subside in a few minutes," she told her dryly, "and the bump will be gone in a matter of hours."

Hope gestured mutely at Madam Pomfrey, directing her face towards George's with a very clear "You see?" look on her face.

George rolled his eyes at her. "Oh, don't say that you wouldn't be a tiny bit worried about me if I fell
inside the Whomping Willow and got a bump on my head."

Hope stuck out her tongue. "I don't know, it doesn't sound like something you'd do…"

Madam Pomfrey waved them out of her hospital wing looking a little paler than usual, but the pair didn't seem to notice at all, bickering all the way down the stairs whether or not Hope would have cared if it had been George that had been injured. She felt an enormous amount of relief as their voices faded away, as they went off to meet their friends and siblings.

If Hope had gone a few steps too far in that secret passageway located under the Whomping Willow, then there would be an entirely different conversation taking place. She could only imagine if Hope discovered that the passageway led to the Shrieking Shack down in Hogsmeade…Hope had a talent for sticking her nose where it shouldn't be, and this was one of those cases.

Hope didn't even know who Remus Lupin was, let alone his condition, or even where he was led to transform. That wasn't necessarily a good thing; Hope deserved to know the friends her father had had, even with the knowledge of the bad ones, but Professor Dumbledore had forbade her from speaking of them to her patient. She did not understand why, the girl was certainly in need of some men in her life that fit the bill of "unrelated uncle" and Remus Lupin fit that to a 'T'. But Professor Dumbledore had cited that she should find out about her father's friends in due time, pushing so much in her face on top of all the stress that she had been undergoing since Argus Filch's cat had been attacked…she might not handle the knowledge too well.

But, Hope was very good under pressure, so she wondered what was really behind the headmaster's reasoning in that aspect, but she knew better than to question Albus Dumbledore.

She watched through the window as Hope and George rejoined Hermione, Ron, and Fred, starting up their game of snowball once more, though being careful enough to stay away from the Willow, much to her silent relief.

She couldn't help the small smile that wormed its way onto her lips as she noticed how George hung close to Hope's side—even though it earned him a startling number of snowballs to the face— it was an unbearably sweet gesture, but Hope didn't seem to take much note of that, only considering it far too annoying to have him watching her like a hawk.

That was so like her.

Madam Pomfrey's grin widened; it would be the end of this year, or the beginning of the next, that much she was sure.

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Hope was beginning to regret the whole business with the Polyjuice Potion once she got a very good look at it. It looked like mud, and mud was the most unappealing thing Hope could ever want to drink.

"God, I hope that tastes better than it looks," Hope said, looking into the cauldron as the thick brown liquid bubbled malevolently. "It looks revolting."

Hermione tossed her a glare. "Oh, quite complaining!"

Hermione seemed to have planned everything out and had three folded Slytherin uniforms lying on the couch.

"Easy for you to say," Hope groused, "you're not turning into a bloke."
Hermione tried to hide her snigger, but Hope heard it anyways.

"So where's your hair?" she asked like some people would ask "Where's your Transfiguration book?" or "Where's your potion's kit?"

Hermione held out a small stoppered bottle that held a small and thick hair. "Millicent Bulstrode left this on my robes after the disastrous Duelling Club incident. She's gone home for the holiday, so I'll have to tell the Slytherins that I've decided to come back."

"No one's going to believe that," Ron said.

"Besides," Hope added before Hermione could snap at them, "what happens when Millicent doesn't show up for the rest of the holiday? Wouldn't you be a tiny bit suspicious if you were a Slytherin?"

Hermione deflated at Hope's words. She had to admit, that she was probably right. That was the only part of the plan that she hadn't completely worked out. "Oh, fine," she grumbled, "what am I supposed to do, then? Just sit here and wait around for you two to come back?"

"Better than making the Slytherins more suspicious than they already are," Ron said sagely as Hermione poured the potion into a pair of tall glasses, having them insert their hair into their glass. Hope's, which contained Goyle's hair, turned a dullish sort of yellow-brown, while Crabbe's hairs turned Ron's to a brown that was almost the same colour as the original potion.

"I stand corrected," Hope said with a look of utter disgust as she swished the potion around in her glass, "this looks revolting." She scrunched up her nose for emphasis. "Exactly how long am I going to have to be a bloke?" she demanded of Hermione, making Ron snort slightly.

"Er…about an hour," Hermione said, grimacing slightly.

"Great," Hope drawled out. "Just, great. Fine…We should change before we drink," she said, directing her attention towards Ron, "or we might ruin our clothes."

"Merlin forbid."

She smacked him on the back of his head. "Easy for you to say, you're still going to be a bloke when this ends, but I'm a girl!"

She huffed in irritation, gathering up the mass of clothes that could only fit Goyle and taking her potion in hand, striding across the room and into the loo that had only two stalls. The clothes were rather difficult to get into because they were so big, but that was nothing compared to the potion itself.

As soon as the liquid trickled down Hope's throat she felt as though a dozen different somethings were pressing outwards from her stomach, making it feel as though it was on fire, and Hope was certain that it wasn't. Her skin was beginning to swell, her slim frame disappearing in a matter of seconds and the skin bubbling outwards adding to the largeness that was Goyle.

For a few seconds more, nothing happened, so Hope assumed that the transformation must be complete and moaned, "Gods, I feel like I'm gonna be sick!" And then she blinked, because the voice that had left her mouth was male.

She unhinged the door and looked into the mirror across from the stalls.

Goyle was shorter than her, but not by much, and his hair was short and brown cut close to his forehead. Hope glared at Hermione who was shaking with suppressed giggles. "If you tell anyone
about this,” she threatened in Goyle's low voice, "I'll kill you."

"I'll keep that in mind," she promised, but Hope could tell that she wasn't taking her very seriously, only to be reduced to giggles again when Ron stepped out of the second stall.

"You look absolutely gorgeous, Ronald!" Hope said sarcastically, though it didn't quite come out the way she'd intended in Goyle's voice as it did in her own; Hope's voice was made for sarcasm, and Goyle's certainly wasn't.

Ron ignored her, morbidly fascinated by his reflection, poking his/Crabbe's nose with a fat finger. "This is unbelievable. Unbelievable."

"We should get going," Hope said, glancing at the ancient grandfather clock as they left the safety of the bathroom, "we've got about fifty-seven minutes until this potion runs out…”

"Right," Ron agreed, as they descended the stairs with a bid of farewell from Hermione as the trapdoor closed, "so where exactly is the Slytherin common room?"

"In the dungeons," Hope said, screwing up Goyle's face slightly trying to recall everything she'd ever heard about where the Slytherins lived during the school year, and that was startlingly small, "but apart from that, no idea."

"Great," Ron grumbled as they descended down so many staircases that Hope had begun to lose count. "Now we have to find someone to fol—"

"What are you doing here?" he cut across himself suddenly at the sight of his older brother performing his prefect rounds, speaking before Hope had the chance to silence him, mentally slapping a hand to her face. *Idiot!*

Percy didn't appear to be very impressed by Ron/Crabbe's question, speaking in a stern voice that Hope had often seen him use towards his younger siblings. "That is none of your business. It's Crabbe, isn't it?"

Ron seemed to have momentarily forgotten that he wasn't actually himself and gave an affirmative.

"Well, get off to your dormitories," Percy said, "it's not safe to go wandering around dark corridors these days."

Hope stepped on Ron's foot a few seconds too late to stop his next words. "You are."

Percy seemed to puff out his chest slightly, a bit like a blowfish Hope noticed, to her silent amusement. "I am a prefect. Nothing's about to attack me."

Hope resisted arching an eyebrow at that statement; he didn't seriously think a badge was going to protect him from an invisible beast, did he?

Hope had half the mind to open her mouth and say just that when they were interrupted by the drawling voice of Draco Malfoy.

"There you are. Have you two been pigging out in the Great Hall all this time? I've been looking for you; I want to show you something really funny."

And then he saw who had stopped them and he gave Percy a glare that he might have thought was impressive, but Ron knew was nowhere close to being as scary as Hope's.
"What are you doing down here, Weasley?" he asked snidely.

Percy's ears burned red and his eyes sparked with anger. "You want to show a bit more respect to a school prefect!" he snapped. "I don't like you attitude!"

Hope had to catch herself from saying in a dry voice, "No one does."

Malfoy waved at the pair to follow them as if they were henchmen, or something of the like. Hope tried very hard to keep her face blissfully blank, but that was always difficult to do around Malfoy.

"What's the new password again?" he asked Hope, who had to scramble for a few seconds.

"Er..." she grunted, doing a spot-on impression of Goyle, before Malfoy remembered it on his own. "Oh, yeah— pure-blood!"

Hope frowned; who was in charge of setting the password every month? They had no imagination.

The wall in front of them slid open to reveal a hidden common room that had a strange sort of beauty that only Hope could appreciate. Maybe that was just the Slytherin in her blood talking, but the common room was really nice. The room seemed to have a greenish tinge that was added to by flickering lamps that were an acid emerald colour and the sofas and chairs were made of black and dark green leather.

In a word, the Slytherin common room was grand, grand and beautiful, but nothing like the warmth and safety that the Gryffindor common room held and she knew which one she liked better.

"Wait here," Malfoy said, "I'll go and get it, my father's just sent it to me—"

So, Hope and Ron had no choice but to slump into the black couch that was closest to the fire, waiting until Malfoy returned with the Daily Prophet, forcing the pair to read it.

**INQUIRY INTO THE MIND BEHIND THE MUGGLE PROTECTION ACT**

Arthur Weasley, Head of the Misuse of Muggle Artefacts was called into question earlier today in response to the number of Muggles finding themselves in possession of potentially dangerous items previously owned by witches and wizards.

Lucius Malfoy, a governor of Hogwarts School of Witchcraft and Wizardry, who has been a staunch opposer since the bill was first written had much to say on the matter: "Weasley has brought the Ministry into disrepute, suggesting laws and bills that only serve to benefit the Muggles and not wizard-kind. If he does not provide a compromise between the two, then the Muggle Protection Act should be scrapped immediately."

Mr. Weasley was unavailable for comment, although his wife told reporters to clear off or she'd set the family ghoul on them.

Hope schooled her face appropriately, but she couldn't see how Malfoy really found it funny at any point in the paper, apart from the part where his father insulted Ron's and tried to make himself seem like a saint by contrast. He would find that funny, she thought in annoyance.

"Well? Don't you think it's funny?" Malfoy said as Hope handed the clipping back to the Slytherin boy.

Hope gave a few low grunts that could have easily been mistaken for laughter, since Goyle was such a quiet bloke and everything...
"Arthur Weasley loves Muggles so much he should just snap his wand in half and go and join them," Malfoy said with disgust, his lips drawing upwards into a scornful sneer. "You'd never know the Weasleys were pure-bloods, the way they behave."

He had taken a step too far and Hope glanced worriedly to Ron who had his hands clenched into shaking fists and his face was pinched, colouring with rage at Malfoy's blatant insults of his father.

"What's up with you, Crabbe?" Malfoy demanded, and Ron, thinking very fast it seemed, went with: "Stomach-ache."

"Well, go up to the hospital wing and give all those Mudbloods a kick from me."

Hope's jaw almost unhinged at that. What?!

"You know, I'm surprised the Daily Prophet hasn't reported all these attacks yet," he said in a pondering voice that sounded very fake, as though he had already figured everything out. "I suppose Dumbledore's trying to hush it all up. He'll be sacked if it doesn't stop soon. Father's always said old Dumbledore's the worst thing that ever happened to this place. He loves Muggle-borns. A decent headmaster would never've let slime like Creevey in…"

Hope was starting to find his voice entirely annoying, not that she hadn't always before, but it was more obvious now. She was actually finding herself zoning out, which wasn't necessarily a good thing, as they were trying to gather information here.

"…And people think she's Slytherin's heir!"

Hope felt a flash of irritation at that, doing her best to pay attention to Malfoy's next words, which proved to be a breakthrough. Apparently Malfoy wasn't the heir, which had been what Hope had been praying for –she didn't really want to be related to him– but he had some useful information. The Chamber of Secrets had been open before, at least fifty years prior, and during that time, a Muggle-born student had died, and the person who had done it had been expelled.

Unfortunately, they had no time to learn anything else, (apart from the secret stash of Dark items hidden under the drawing-room floor of his manor) because their potion had run out, and they had to practically run to make it out of the common room and down the hall before they reverted completely back to their true appearance.

At which time, Hope fell over her feet as her trousers loosened, almost falling completely before Hope gripped them and hoisted them up her body like some very fat clown suit.

Ron would have laughed if her face hadn't been so downright murderous.

"Shut those blinds before I kill you and dangle your corpse from the Astronomy Tower," a voice proclaimed in the early morning, making Percy jump from where he had drawn back the curtains to allow sun to filter into the common room.

His gaze drifted to over where Hope had claimed the couch closest to the fire and was so completely swathed in blankets, that the only skin that was visible was her head and arms, the arms being thrown over her eyes in an attempt to shield her eyes from the sunlight.

She'd caught a mild cold the day before and had proclaimed loudly with a sniffling voice that if anyone bothered her for the rest of the night, they'd wake up with a load of unmentionable poisons in the bed. Of course, the Weasleys knew her too well to take her seriously, well, except for Ginny who had gone stark white, and had to be assured several times that death threats were something Hope
often gave out but never acted upon, so she didn't need to worry.

"Percy!"

"Oh, right, sorry!" The oldest Weasley boy still in school stuttered, quickly shutting the curtains as the now-brunette struggled to sit up in her make-shift bed, scrubbing at her eyes and yawning widely. "Were you still sleeping?"

"Slightly," she grumbled, fumbling as she tried to remove herself from the blankets, before simply falling onto the ground in a tumble of limbs that looked painful. Percy winced slightly, but Hope was unperturbed.

"Doesn't that hurt?" he asked awkwardly.

Hope looked down at herself in surprise before straightening herself. "Nah," she said dismissively, "not anymore, I've fallen out of bed too many time."

"See you later, Percy," she drawled, pulling herself into a standing position, "tell the others I'm out on business."

And then she vanished up the stairs for a shower and fresh set of clothes, leaving Percy a bit befuddled.

Not twenty minutes later, Hope found herself exiting one of the Floo fireplaces located in the Atrium of the Ministry of Magic, stumbling forward so much that she almost fell. Luckily, she had regained her balance at the last second, her cheeks pooling with warmth.

Professor McGonagall had offered to come along with her, mostly because she didn't trust that Hope would be able to meander through the Ministry of Magic without getting lost or causing a fuss ("Come on, Professor!), but Hope had assured her that she could manage just fine, and would be back in a matter of hours. Still, her Head of House wasn't entirely comfortable with leaving the twelve-year-old heir of the Potter family to wander through the Ministry without instruction, but Hope had been invited.

There were a lot of people moving about, as it was still a bit early in the morning. Hope found herself staring at that ridiculous fountain as she had the first time she had come over the summer. It was a golden fountain with equally golden figures poised in the centre. Of the figures included a wizard, a witch, a centaur, a goblin, and a house-elf. The way the last three looked up to the witch and wizard with a sick sort of admiration was enough to show that the Ministry considered those who were non-human to be less than them; she knew that Ragnok wasn't pleased with how goblins were portrayed on that statue, from the time that she had mentioned it to him when she saw him at Gringotts over the summer. Inscribed onto a plaque read:

ALL PROCEEDS FROM THE FOUNTAIN OF MAGICAL BRETHREN WILL BE GIVEN TO ST. MUNGO'S HOSPITAL FOR MAGICAL MALADIES AND INJURIES

And that was the only reason that Hope dug a galleon or two out of her pocket, tossing them into the water, because she would have avoided the fountain altogether if nothing went towards the magical hospital that she had once stayed in last year.

Hope headed towards the golden gates that a majority of the employees were heading in, but she branched off from the rest of them, making towards a small black desk, behind which a balding wizard sat.

"Oo you?" he asked in a tired sort of manner.
"Visiting," Hope said, dodging the question of her name.

"Step over here," he said somberly, as if her very presence sapped the happiness from him...though, he hadn't been very enthusiastic to begin with, so it wasn't such of a change.

Hope did so, allowing him to take his long golden rod that reminded Hope of a Muggle metal detector and pass it up and down her, searching for what, Hope couldn't be sure.

"Wand?"

Hope reluctantly handed over her wand. It was quite beautiful in her not so modest opinion. It was roughly carved, unlike many wands were, and the handle was made of a darker wood that twisted around the base, meeting the soft brown wood in an utterly perfect way. There weren't any embellishments on it to make it look pretty; her wand was completely natural.

"Eleven inches, phoenix-feather core, been in use one and a half years?"

"Yes," Hope said, and the wand was returned to her and she was pushed forward and into the crowd that was making for the lift. This was the part that annoyed her the most; the lack of personal space. Hope did not like being jammed into a lift with about twenty other people wondering what on earth a twelve year old was doing in the Ministry all on her own.

Hope hated prying eyes.

The lift always started on the Seventh Floor, which was the Department of Magical Games and sports, slowly moving down to the Sixth Floor (Department of Magical Transportation), the Fifth Floor (Department of International Magical Co-operation), the Fourth Floor (Department for the Regulation and Control of Magical Creatures), the Third Floor (Department of Magical Accidents and Catastrophes), before finally reaching the Second Floor, the Department of Magical Law Enforcement, by which time Hope was the only person in the lift. When the doors opened, she caught sight of a very relieved Mr. Weasley.

"Hope!" he said with a smile. "Thank you so much for coming!"

He had only written her the letter the day before, requesting her assistance. A couple of Aurors had come across a locked box in an investigation and had taken it to the Misuse of Muggle Artefacts, because it was obviously enchanted, quite heavily enchanted, too, but the enchantments were such that the box could only be opened by Muggle means, and no one knew a Locksmith. Except for Mr. Weasley who remembered that Ron had mentioned that Hope was rather good at lock-picking.

He had promised to bring in someone who might be able to crack it, but that they shouldn't hold their breath, and, wanting to avoid interacting with the Muggle side (because who knew how many international incidents could occur if a Muggle saw what was inside a wizard's box), they had agreed.

"No problem," the girl said, her box of lock-picking utensils clutched tightly in her hand. "Just put me to work."
"I thought you were in Egypt with Mrs. Weasley visiting Bill," Hope said as she followed him through the department, looking around at the surprising number of cubicles and earning a large number of curious looks in the process. She noticed a number of eyes jumping to her forehead where her scar was clearly visible.

"I was," Mr. Weasley admitted, "but this is a case that involves the use of a Muggle item, so I was pulled out."

"Sucks," Hope sympathized, before snapping on the large group, "What're you staring at?"

The Aurors meandering around on desk duty suddenly found themselves busy at work.

"So, what kind of box is it?" she asked him as they weaved around people and through the throng of workers.

"It's old, about sixteenth century, give or take a few decades."

Hope's head twisted around to look at the owner of that deep, reassuring voice. It was a sort of voice that was trusting, but new voices always put Hope on edge; she wasn't the trusting kind, in case that hadn't been obvious.

The owner of the voice was dressed rather unlike the other Aurors, all in their dark robes, looking dead depressing, wearing robes that were richly coloured and perhaps styled to be reminiscent of the robes that natives from Africa wore. A golden hoop dangled from one ear and his dark eyes were deep and dark, contrasting with the lighter brown of his skin.

"You must be the locksmith that Arthur's mentioned," the man said calmly, extending a hand for her to shake. "I'm Auror Shacklebolt; it's a pleasure to meet you. Are you certain you can handle the job?"

Hope might've been annoyed if someone else had asked her this question, but Auror Shacklebolt was in luck; Hope was in a good mood today.

"Hope Potter," she said, shaking his hand and smirking as his eyes widened slightly in surprise (she had to commend him for not glancing up to her forehead, though, he got points for that), "and I'm just a modest lock-picker, nothing special, but I'll give it a whirl."

Mr. Weasley chuckled lightly. "Yes, she's always like that," he said to the dark-skinned wizard who had arched his eyebrows at her response, glancing towards Mr. Weasley, "and you might want to show her the box before she loses interest."

"Right," Shacklebolt agreed, directing her and Mr. Weasley to a private office in the back of the department that only held two things, a young woman and a box.

The woman had bright pink hair and a stud in her ear and looked more like a punk rocker than any kind of Auror that Hope had just seen. She grinned, striding forward to grasp Hope's hand. "Wotcher, I'm Tonks." She winked and her eyes turned a sky blue.

"Hope," Hope said, blinking hard and turning hers a blood red.

Tonks' eyes almost popped out of her head. "Cor! You're a Metamorphmagus! I've never met
another one!"

Hope shrugged carelessly. "I like my privacy…" She blushed slightly, "a friend of mine thought it was really nice when I had my Mum's hair and eyes, and I like consistency."

Tonks' eyes shone with suppressed laughter. "Oh," she giggled, "oh, I see."

Hope couldn't help but roll her eyes. "Is this the box I've heard so much about, then?" she asked, directing her attention to a large square-shaped cube sitting at the centre of the desk. Shacklebolt was right about one thing, it did look remarkably old, but Hope knew better than to judge without testing it out first.

"Yup!" Tonks popped the 'P' loudly.

"Is it safe to touch?" she asked, eyeing the box apprehensively.

"Completely," Shacklebolt assured her.

Hope lifted the box, bringing it close to her face, investigating the keyhole. It looked remarkably simple, but Hope knew better than to trust appearances…maybe a little old-fashioned, to match…the box's…age…

She flipped the box so that it was end up. "So…where exactly did you get this box?"

"Some British wizard smugglers tried to take the box on an illegal portkey, but it didn't go quite as planned. The Egyptian Ministry had just reported a theft of some ancient treasure they had removed from one of the pyramids," Shacklebolt explained, "so, obviously, we have to take special precautions, and when some men show up with a box and illegal portkey, well, we have a right to be suspicious. But the box is a British make, were not sure if it's capable of handling the weight of the gold—"

"The box is a fake," Hope said bluntly, tapping the bottom that she'd turned up with a finger, "see? It's brand new. Your thieves probably did it too quick and forgot to add that glamour charm to the bottom."

She found herself on the receiving end of three surprised stares. "What? Anyone could have recognized that, I just happen to read a lot…maybe too much," she amended, scratching one of her cheeks uncomfortably before pulling out her picks and setting to work, clicking the two picks into the hole and fiddling with them.

Mr. Weasley waited patiently as she worked, noticing the differences between then and the months previously. Her hair shadowed her face, hiding it for the most part, but he could see there was a slight bruising under her eyes from a lack of sleep; his sons had mentioned she was having a hard time at school. She seemed quicker to anger, if how she had reacted to the stares was anything to go on, and more sarcastic (not always a good thing, George had said).

She twisted the picks until the lock clicked and opened. "Ah!"

She handed it over to Shacklebolt who took it gratefully. "Thank you."

"No problem," Hope said, waving off his words with a casual fling of her hands, "I didn't have anything planned for today, anyways, and picking locks are always fun."

Tonks giggled slightly at her words.
Hope tipped an invisible hat. "It's been nice to meet you, Mr. Shacklebolt, Miss Tonks, but I have to get going...people tend to get rather worried if I'm gone for too long." She rolled her eyes slightly. "Honestly, you'd think I couldn't keep my nose out of trouble from the way they make it sound..."

Kingsley Shacklebolt watched her stride out of the office and towards the fireplace, Flooing back to Hogwarts once more with an eyebrow arched. It was hard to tell which she was more like: her mother or her father.

"Have I mentioned how much I hate homework?" Ron asked his friends as they lay in front of the fire. He had an old book open and was working diligently on an essay for Charms, while Hermione read through a book on Arithmancy and Hope skimmed through a book on Shielding Magic.

"Maybe once or twice," Hope said dryly, flipping through the pages with disinterest. "But it's February now, Ron, you've been doing homework for a month now."

"Doesn't mean I have to like it," he grumbled mutinously, jutting out his chin in defiance.

"No one likes homework," Hope said in a dry sort of voice, "well, maybe Hermione does," she amended.

"Hey!"

The other two sniggered lightly at the glare their brunette friend tossed their way.

It was a Saturday morning and most of the students were down in the Great Hall for an early lunch, but Hope and Hermione were up in the common room, waiting for Ron to finish so they could head down; the promise of food was a surprisingly good incentive for Ron to finish his paper, and soon, if that obvious stomach-growl was any indicator.

"Are you sure you don't know of any Slytherin relatives?" Hermione asked again, for what felt like the hundredth time to Hope.

Hope's eyes rolled up to the ceiling and stayed there. "Yes, Hermione, I've checked a hundred times; there are no heirs to Slytherin attending Hogwarts apart from me."

"I was so sure that it was Malfoy," Ron complained as he slid the book shut and rolled up his parchment and headed out the portrait hole with Hope and Hermione by his side. "I guess that means we're back to square one."

"Not entirely," Hermione corrected. "We've still got the information that he gave us, and that's very helpful."

"But that's not much!" Ron complained. "All we know is that the attacks started about fifty years ago! Even if we could look at the student records from back then, we wouldn't have any idea where to start!"

"But the attacks stopped, didn't they?" Hope asked suddenly, having drifted off in thought momentarily.

"So?" Ron asked looking confused.

Hope snapped her fingers under his nose. "Think about it, Ron! Why would the attacks stop?"

Ron's ginger eyebrows creased together as he thought hard and then his eyes widened in realization.
"You think the culprit was found, don't you?"

"And if the culprit was caught," Hermione continued on that line of thought, a beaming smile spreading across her face, "then the one who caught him was probably given an award to the school!"

Hope looked at them with fond eyes. "It's like we could be triplets."

Ron snorted and Hermione gave a small giggle.

"Oh, shit—"

Hope danced back suddenly, because at that moment, she had walked straight into a puddle of water. A puddle of water inside of Hogwarts…she hoped that didn't occur often. All three looked up, noticing that they'd accidentally made it down into the corridor where Mrs. Norris had been petrified, and the whole floor had been flooded.

"Moaning Myrtle," they all said as one.

Hope lifted up one dripped converse, swearing under her breath. "I really liked these shoes…"

"What d'you suppose's upset her this time?" Ron asked, wincing at the frequency of the ghost's wails which were made worse by the tiles that caused the noise to echo and amplify.

"No idea." Hermione peeked her head inside of Myrtle's bathroom, motioning for the other two to follow her in, which they did, despite Hope's complaints about her shoes (they were the only ones she owned!).

"Myrtle?" Hermione said gently, not wanting to freak out the quite obviously emotional ghost too much; no good ever came from that. "Are you alright?"

"Who's that?" she hiccupped between tremulous sobs that resounded loudly in the silence. "Come to throw something else at me?"

This time Hope frowned. "Someone threw something at you?" she asked. "Why?"

"DON'T ASK ME!" Myrtle bellowed, making the trio grip their ears quickly (Hope could swear there was blood coming out of hers, even when she was certain there wasn't). "Here I am, minding my own business, and someone thinks it's funny to throw a book at me!"

Ron's lips twitched slightly and he opened his mouth, no doubt to say something that could be construed as insensitive, but Hermione and Hope both elbowed him in the side, effectively silencing the boy.

"Who threw it at you?" Hermione asked, still using that gentle voice of hers.

"I don't know!" Myrtle sobbed morosely, looking far more piteous than Hope had ever seen her thus far. "I was just sitting in the U-bend, thinking about death, and it fell right through the top of my head." Her transparent lower lip wobbled dangerously as she pointed off to the side. "It's over there, it got washed out."

Ron grabbed both of their arms before either of the girls could reach down to grab it. "Don't touch it! What if it's dangerous?"

But Hope couldn't see how a little black book could be dangerous at all; look at it! It wasn't as
though a bunch of knives were going to shoot out of it and stab the person that happened to open it. She lifted it up, feeling almost as though it was alive…for a second she felt as if it was hers and that she had merely forgotten it or lost it, but that was impossible, Hope didn't own a diary, let alone one that dull and drab.

"It was bought fifty years ago," she noticed, tapping the inscription on the inside of the cover, "…by a T.M. Riddle…reckon he's worth checking out?"

"Probably," Hermione reasoned, "it means something if someone was trying to flush it…is there anything in it?"

Hope flipped through the wet pages. "If there was, the toilet water's washed it away."

"Let me try something."

Hope handed over the small book to Hermione who pulled out her wand and tapped a random page with her wand, saying very clearly, "Aparecium!"

But nothing happened.

"It's probably just an empty diary," Ron said to Hermione, "we'd probably have better luck looking him up in the Trophy Room and see if he's the bloke we're looking for."

There was no point in refuting that fact, and the trio went and ate a hasty breakfast before making their way towards the Trophy Room.

Hope had never been inside this room, apart from the brief time the previous year when Malfoy had challenged her to a midnight duel that she hadn't been very keen on to start with, but she had never had the opportunity to admire it fully. It wasn't very impressive; she now realized in retrospect, it was almost as if a majority of the school forgot that there was a Trophy Room.

There were a large number of glass cases, all practically completely filled with awards, trophies, cups, plates, shields, statues, and an assortment of medals.

"So…" Hope said, goggling slightly at the sheer number of trophies, "divide and conquer?"

So they split up to cover more ground and Hope found herself before a case inside which a helmet had been placed on a purple cushion, the plaque in front of it reading: Sir Michael Richmond, service to Hogwarts School of Witchcraft and Wizardry from 1993-1992.

She couldn't help but smile at that.

"Found him!" Hermione said suddenly, waving them over to where she stood. "He's right here!"

"Medal for Magical Merit," Ron read aloud, "doesn't say what he got it for, though…"

"The headmaster probably didn't want anyone to draw attention to the incidents of that year," Hermione theorized, "it would be embarrassing to admit that the students under your protection had come under attack and you weren't able to do a thing about it."

Hope wondered if she was talking about the old headmaster or the present one.

"Valentine's Day?!" Hope seethed on the morning of the Fourteenth of February, already in a bit of a bad mood. "What kind of moron came up with Valentine's Day?!"
"Well—" Hermione opened her mouth to say which moron came up with it, but then she apparently changed her mind.

"Oh it's sickening!"

"Oh, there's nothing wrong with Valentine's Day," Angelina said dismissively, sliding into the seat next to Hermione, "it's what Lockhart's done that's really awful."

"I think it's cute!" Hermione said affronted as Alicia and Lee joined them, hand-in-hand.

"Everyone else thinks its revolting," Angelina added, "or at least a majority of the people here think that."

She wasn't wrong. A large number of people had frowns on their faces towards their Defence Against the Dark Arts professor, who seemed to be basking in the glow of the pink atmosphere. Hope scowled furiously, bemoaning of what she'd done to deserve this life. The poor Great Hall had been decorated so extravagantly, and, understandably, it would have annoyed any decent person. Up and down the walls could be seen a large number of obnoxious bright and dark pink flowers, and there was confetti, shaped like hearts, falling from the ceiling! Oh that poor ceiling…it probably hadn't felt so violated until today; Hope pitied it, she really did. And all the confetti was getting in the food…that would explain why Ron wasn't too happy. Imagine not being able to eat properly without accidentally chewing up paper as they did so.

"This has to be some sort of nightmare!" Hope said horrified as Hermione burst into giggles, gazing imploringly at Angelina. "Angie! Tell me this isn't real!"

"I'd like to say it wasn't," Angelina said, blowing the confetti from her plate before loading it with eggs and sausages, "but..." She shrugged. "There's only one thing to do in this kind of situation."

"And what's that?" Hope said glumly, poking at her confetti-encrusted bacon.

"Soldier on."

"I was hoping for something more…I don't know, proverbial," Ron said, resting his cheek on a fist, looking equally glum.

"Oh, cheer up!" Alicia giggled slightly; her cheeks still bright red from where Lee had kissed her not a minute ago. "It's only twenty-four hours! Then it'll be back to normal."

It took Hope about three more seconds before she gathered up her things upon seeing Ernie MacMillan enter the hall. She was studiously avoiding the Hufflepuff whenever it was possible, but he was going out of his way to always manage to be in her way and saying something rude about her 'darkness.'

"Nope, sorry, can't do it," she said, "I'll see you lot in class."

Lee watched her go, frowning slightly. "What's up her knickers?"

"LEE!"

"What?" he said defensively. "It's an honest question!"

"We ran into Ernie MacMillan on the way here," Ron said thickly, swallowing a bit of confetti and gagging at the taste, "he wasn't too pleased to see Hope."
"Is he that Hufflepuff numpty George was complaining about?" Angelina asked with a frown. "The one that thought Hope was the next Dark Lady?"

"Something like that," Ron grumbled under his breath. "He makes these little snide comments every time he sees her, and Hope doesn't really respond to them well."

"I can imagine."

Over at the Hufflepuff table, Ernie MacMillan felt his ears burning.

Hope sat down in her seat in the empty charms classroom, waiting for the class to begin, even though it wouldn't for another good ten minutes or so. She inhaled deeply, breathing out just as deeply, carefully controlling that explosive temper of hers.

"Doesn't it get a bit boring?"

Hope jumped slightly at the sudden voice, looking up and into the bright yet dark blue eyes of George Weasley.

"Sometimes the quiet is calming," she said with a smile, "maybe you should try it sometime."

"Nah," George said, jumping slightly to situate himself on top of the desk table in front of Hope who raised an eyebrow. "That would be too boring."

"And heaven forbid being boring," Hope said with a grin, leaning back slightly, "it's not the worst fate in the world."

"Oh, I don't know," George said with a grin equal to hers, "sounds pretty bad."

She couldn't help the laughter that bubbled from her lips at that comment.

"Here," he added, "I got you something."

He was holding out a blue iris. Blue irises (well, irises in general) weren't shaped like flowers normally were, its petals contrasting with petals that drooped and petals that were raised upwards with lighter blue speckles patterning the deep blue of the flimsy petals.

The blue iris was her favourite flower, but she'd never told anyone that. No, it wasn't because of the transfigured burn on her shoulder blade, though that did add to it, she supposed. By itself, it was a rather beautiful flower, and it wasn't one of the overused flowers, that was why she liked it. Some people liked roses or lilies or tulips, but Hope Potter liked blue irises.

"How did you know?" she said, completely stunned, taking the delicate looking flower from him in surprise. "How did you know this was my favourite flower?"

"Is it?" George asked, his voice lilting in a mixture of amusement and surprise. "I'll remember that next time."

Hope could feel her cheeks heating up slightly, and covered quickly by inhaling the flower. So, there was going to be a next time...

"When you were in St. Mungo's I went to visit you—"

"I know," Hope said quickly, "I saw the Hobbit next to my bedside. I figured only you would read to a unconscious girl."
"Only if that unconscious girl was you," George said with a smirk, "anyways, I saw a bit of blue on your shoulder, and one of the Healers said that you had a transfigured burn of sorts, into a blue iris...it means hope, did you know that?"

Hope's eyes glowed with mirth. "Yes, I did. I know an awful lot about my name, you know."

"That's always good," George said agreeably, "though I have to wonder how many times your name's been used as a pun."

"Oh, I stopped counting after awhile," Hope said with a wink. "It gets rather repetitive, you know."

"Don't worry," George said with a grin that worried her, "it could be worse."

"What's worse than having 'hope' or 'hoping' for the best or being 'hopeless'?"

He sniggered. "Okay, that's pretty bad...but at least your name isn't 'Dick'."

There was a brief moment of silence and then Hope was roaring with laughter, her laughter echoing loudly in the silence.

"You are a horrible human being," she gasped out as the laughs subsided. "How does your mother deal with you and Fred? I'll never understand!"

"You don't need to understand," George said with a grin, "just sympathize. She raised two of the greatest pranksters in the history of Hogwarts."

"A bit cocky, aren't you?" she asked in amusement, bending the stalk of the iris so it wasn't quite so long and tucking it into her rosy strands, the blue contrasting with the red.

"Better to be cocky than to lose your nerve," George said wisely, "being cocky has led to some of the greatest pranks in Hogwarts history."

"Uh-huh," Hope said arching an incredulous eyebrow. "That's just the cocky talking, I'd wager."

"Possibly." He leaned down suddenly and faster than she had time to think, blink, or even speak, he had pressed a light kiss to the hollow of her cheek and had jumped off the desk, leaving her dumbfounded as he called behind him, "See you around, Potter!"

One day, she swore, one day she was going to kill him, and she was going to enjoy it.
A Blast From the Past

Hope would get no peace of mind once class had ended that very same day and she was getting ready for bed with the other three girls with whom she shared a dorm. Parvati and Lavender had been badgering her relentlessly and it was beginning to try on her nerves, as the subject of the matter involved her, George, and one blue iris that she had worn the whole day.

"That's so sweet!" Parvati and Lavender gushed as Hope finally relented told her dorm mates where the flower she had been wearing all day had come from.

"I wish a boy did that for me," Lavender moaned with longing, pulling her blankets up around her, "and the Weasley twins are so cute, too!"

Hope felt a flash of irritation at that comment that she didn't want to decipher. She narrowed her eyes ever so slightly at the giggly pair who gave her knowing looks. Hermione hid a smile behind her book at the expression on Hope's face and couldn't help but add, "He gave you a kiss, didn't he, Hope? Right on the cheek?"

Hope glared darkly at her friend for her betrayal, her cheeks inflaming at the memory of the action, making the two other girls burst into giggles once more and Hope had to draw her curtains around her bed in an effort to save herself from embarrassment, but it didn't work to well.

"Oh, go to bed, you idiots," she snapped from behind the curtains in a snippy sort of voice. "And stop theorizing about my love life," she added, raising her voice slightly for emphasis.

She could hear the giggles that ensued following her words, but she chose to ignore them. She lay there, awake and in bed for quite some time, ever after the other three had dropped off to sleep. Hope just couldn't fall asleep; it was as though all the sleepiness had left her body and now all she felt was awake. Every time she felt herself drifting off, it was like her back found itself to be quite uncomfortable, and so, here she was, wide awake (and thoroughly irritated).

She gave a sigh of frustration after another ten minutes of wakefulness before finally throwing the blankets from her legs and thrusting open the curtains from her bed. Luckily, the movement didn't awaken her friends. She rubbed furiously at her face, annoyance tingeing her face.

"This is all George's fault," she grumbled to herself, glaring at the iris beside her bed, "I can't sleep because I keep thinking about that stupid git." Her cheeks flushed slightly at the words as she said them. It was strange how she could be so plagued by a simple kiss to the cheek.

Hope squashed a groan, rubbing at her eyes, her eyes falling on the little black book that belonged to T.M. Riddle. Her eyebrows creased together into an obvious frown. Sometimes she could swear she could hear a voice coming from within its pages, but that couldn't be, it was just a book.

Or was it?

She wrinkled her nose, finally making up her mind, grabbing it from the bedside table and making her way downstairs.

The common room had been empty for at least an hour by now. Books had been strewn carelessly about in the haste of last minute studying. The fire still burned in the fireplace, the embers glowing softly in the dark, tossing a dappled glow upon the little diary where Hope held it in her hand. It looked slightly malevolent, but when Hope blinked, it had gone and she was left wondering what exactly she had even seen. She glared at it suspiciously, as if it was playing some sort of mind game
with her, but it was just a book…wasn’t it?

Hope grabbed the quill and ink from a nearby table, taking it back to where she settled onto the floor before the fire, propping open the diary, poising her quill tip over the page, a single drop falling onto the page as Hope considered what she should write, because, she felt she should write at least something (she wasn’t sure why, though), but then something decidedly strange happened.

The drop that fell onto the page was instantly absorbed into the page, as if the page was a sponge. She flipped the page back and forth, but the absorbed ink hadn’t gone through the page, it had gone into the book! But it couldn't have!

Hope creased the spine, searching for the ink that had disappeared, but there was no trace of it.

How could something be sucked into a diary? It made no sense!

So, at long last, Hope touched the tip of her quill to the paper and began to write. *My name is Hope Potter and I don't know why I'm writing in this diary.*

Those words disappeared as well, but then something happened that Hope did not anticipate; words began to appear on the page in someone else's scrawl directed towards her.

*Hello, Hope Potter. My name is Tom Riddle. How did you come by my diary?*

You know you're in trouble when you start writing in a book that writes back to you. Maybe this was something that magical diaries could do? She frowned, well, if that was the case, then why had she never seen any diaries like that? Wouldn't something like that be something a lot of girls would be interested in owning?

She eyed it suspiciously once more, but she couldn't resist writing a response.

*Someone chucked it into a toilet, must've been a terrible diary.*

She had meant for the dairy to take offense, but what could it do? It was a diary, what was it going do? Slam shut? However, much to her ire, the diary seemed to skate right over her biting response.

*Lucky that I recorded my memories in some more lasting way than ink.* Hope frowned…recording memories? Was that something that could be done? Something she would have to look up later. *But I always knew that there would be those who would not want this diary read.*

And Hope felt an increase of suspicion at that comment. Something about this diary was very…off. It felt…dangerous, but unfortunately, Hope was very much attracted to danger and trouble (Number One Rule Breaker, you know), so she couldn't really stop herself from asking.

*And why would that be?* Hope's quill twitched as if she wanted to write more, but what else was there to write? Obviously, insulting it didn't lead anywhere.

*I mean that this diary holds memories of terrible things. Things that were covered up. Things that happened at Hogwarts School of Witchcraft and Wizardry.*

Hope froze her quill where it was, unbridled shock completely encompassing her face. What were the chances of this? What were the chances of finding something that could possibly tell her just what she needed to know? This little diary might be able to tell her just what happened the first time the Chamber of Secrets opened! Excitement bubbled in her veins as she scrawled the next few words.
That sounds exactly like what's going on right now. Were you there the first time the Chamber of Secrets was open?

Of course I was, the diary responded, and Hope thought it sounded a trifle bit smug. I was the one who caught the person who’d opened the Chamber but until a student had been killed by the creature. I was warned against speaking the truth of that night and was given a nice medal for my silence, but the creature lived on.

Do you know who opened the Chamber last time? Hope wrote, feverish with the desire for the truth.

Yes.

Hope was now giddy with excitement. Can you tell me?

No.

Irritated, Hope cast a frown at the pages as she would have done so if it had been a real person she had disagreed with, but then five words appeared that made her change her mind about it.

But I can show you.

Now, what happened next wasn't something Hope could completely recall, because all she had felt was a feeling much like falling and then she had opened her eyes to find herself not in the Gryffindor common room at all, but Dumbledore's office, only it looked nothing like the way it did now, missing a great number of the curious trinkets that it had possessed when she had been taken there after Justin Finch-Fletchley's attack. She gazed around in a bit of wonderment, staring up at all the portraits when she tripped and fell backwards…right through the headmaster's desk.

Her eyes grew to the size of dinner plates as she sat up, struggling to her feet before pressing a hand against the hard wood of the desk, but it was no good; her hand sank right through!

"What the—?" Hope goggled slightly as she removed her hand and repeated the process over and over again, in a bit of shock.

"Okay, I'm not a ghost," she snapped out irritably, "there's no way that I should be able to go through…anything…" Hope froze. "Unless," she mused aloud, "none of this is real at all."

So that's what he'd meant by show…but how could a diary hold memories? This was turning into a very strange night, that was all Hope knew.

"Professor Flitwick?"

The aged Charms professor lifted his gaze from the parchments on his desk to give his full attention to possibly one of the most inquisitive students he had ever had the joy to teach. The same could be said for her two friends, only with varying degrees and with looks not quite as intense as Hope's.

"Yes, Miss Potter?" he asked kindly, earning a slight smile as he did so.

"I was wondering," she said in that pondering voice that he had heard on countless occasions, "if it was possible to implant memories into an object…say a diary?"

It was a curious question, Professor Flitwick had to admit, and he had to wonder what had inspired the question in the first place, but he conceded to answer it anyways.

"The only thing that is capable of holding memories, Miss Potter, is a Pensieve," he said, "a simple
"book does not have the magical capabilities of withholding the magic of memory."

"And a Pensieve is…" Hope asked, canting her head slightly to the side.

"They are shallow stone basins," he said, "very few in number and always carved with runes to keep the memories intact and to preserve them whilst they are in the basin."

Hope screwed up her face slightly (he doubted that she noticed her hair had lightened to a soft orange) but then she grinned. "Thanks, Professor!"

Professor Flitwick watched bemused as Hope raced back to her friends with barely a limp.

"So?" Hermione pressed as Hope caught up with them. "What did he say?"

"He says that a diary shouldn't be capable of holding memories," Hope said stoutly as they leapt up the stairs, making for the left hand staircase that would take them down to the Herbold Greenhouses. "So I want to know how it could."

"Could it be…you know," Ron glanced around to check if anyone was listening in on their conversation, "Dark magic?"

Both girls wore identical frowns at that, both considering the possibility.

"Well…” Hermione said, half-contemplative, half-nervous, "I suppose, there is a possibility…”

"I'm not quite sure," Hope said, "I mean, it's not like it tried to kill me or anything—"

"They don't have to kill you," Ron said, sounding surprisingly grim, "they only have to have you completely obsessed with them and you're as good as gone."

All three fell silent at that comment; Ron would know more about the subject, no doubt his father had dealt with countless items enchanted by Dark magic.

"Well," Hermione said once more, "how could a memory be bad?"

"Depends on whose memory it is," Hope mused before raising her voice slightly, "Oi! What're you two up to?"

She was of course speaking to Fred and George who could be seen huddled closely together, whispering feverishly back and forth. Hope was instantly suspicious, as she always was with them, but she never reprimanded them (because she always enjoyed the outcome of their pranks).

"Nothing!" the twins sang in unison, with identical innocent smiles on their faces that weren't actually innocent at all.

"Run along, underlings!" Fred added with a wink.

"I'd stay away from the pudding at dinner," George added with a wink as well, one Hope felt ashamed to admit that she thought had been directed at her alone.

"They're impossible!" Hermione bemoaned.

Hope gave a small shrug, an amused smile on her face as always with George. "I think they're brilliant."

"You would," Ron said glumly, resigned to the fact that his best mate and his brother were going to
flirt shamelessly with each other until the day they died.

"Besides," Hope continued, ignoring Ron as she did so, "you can't really think that Hagrid's actually a killer?"

"No," Ron and Hermione said quickly, with Ron adding, "but you have to admit that he does have a fascination with dangerous creatures. It wouldn't be hard to imagine him having a creature like that under his wing."

"Yeah," Hermione couldn't help but agree, "but we're talking about a creature that killed someone, Ron! You can't think that Hagrid would keep something like that!"

"Er…maybe we should talk about something else?" Hope suggested a little meekly, attempting to keep another fight from breaking out between the two. "Like…what classes are you two wanting to take for next year?"

The change of subject evaporated the tension that had appeared between the ginger and brunette.

"Oh, I don't know!" Hermione cried. "They all look so interesting that I can't make up my mind on any two of them!"

Hope gave her a sheepish smile and a half shrug that told Hermione that she was in the same boat. "I can only settle on three. Ancient Runes, Care of Magical Creatures, and Divination." Obviously, Ancient Runes was at the top of her list, being one of the subjects that was quite a bit like the hieroglyphics she'd read about, but Divination and Care of Magical Creatures both sounded very interesting. She had considered Arithmancy briefly, but she hadn't been any good at math in the Muggle world, so why would she be here? And Muggle Studies sounded quite boring, especially to those who had grown up in the Muggle world, except for a select few, who, like Hermione, wanted to see the Wizarding point of view of Muggles.

"Just Care of Magical Creatures and Divination for me," Ron piped up as they rounded the corner.

"You only want to take those ones because they're blow-off classes," Hermione grumbled in disapproval as she pushed open the door to the greenhouse, putting her things in her cubby hole by the wall next to where Ron and Hope's things were designated to go.

Herbology classes were quickly becoming one of Hope's least favourite classes. They would have been your least favourite class if the other half of it (meaning the Hufflepuffs) were intent on avoiding you, insulting you, and glaring at you like you were some sort of villain who had killed the hero of the story. Professor Sprout tried to keep normalcy, but it was very awkward currently, and the Gryffindors weren't taking kindly to blatant rudeness displayed towards one of their own.

So, Hope shredded her Fluxweed in silence, like she always did nowadays, her lips pressed together in a tight line, even as her blade nicked her fingers slightly (it was little more than a paper cut, but sometimes even paper cuts hurt, not that you'd ever see her crying over a paper cut).

"Miss Potter? Class has ended."

Hope blinked, looking up startled and into the earthy brown orbs of Professor Sprout. "Huh?"

"The class, Miss Potter," the stout woman said gently, peeling the silver knife from Hope's grip as if she thought she might use it as some sort of weapon, "it has ended."

"Oh," Hope said, a bit on the quiet side, "sorry…guess I got lost in my thoughts."
Hope glanced past her shoulder to see where the Mandrakes were rummaging about in their dirt-filled pots. "How long until they're ready?"

Professor Sprout followed her gaze and smiled. "The moment they start trying to move into each other's pots, we'll know they're fully mature," she said brightly. "Then we'll be able to revive those poor people in the hospital wing." She patted her shoulder gently. "Don't you worry about a thing. Now run along."

"Yes, ma'am."

"You're starting to get really spacey," Ron said when she rejoined them for the second time that day, "you're starting to over think things."

"Heaven forbid," Hope sniped back, a frown creasing her forehead as Lavender raced up to her, out of breath, her golden-brown curls swinging with every movement.

"Hope!" she gasped once she had regained her breath. "You'd better come-the dorm- we don't know how it happened-"

"What are you talking about?" Hermione and Hope said as one.

"The dorm!" Lavender said, stabbing a finger in the direction of the Gryffindor dorms. "It's been ransacked!"

"What?!"

Ransacked was a surprisingly mild term to describe how utterly demolished the dorm was when Lavender, Hope, and Hermione finally raced up the stairs to meet a slightly shocked Parvati. Mattresses had been overturned, books thrown everywhere, clothes tossed from their dressers. Everyone's things were thrown about, but Hope's had taken the brunt of the ruin, and it took them a good while for the four of them to get the room into order once more.

"Who would do this?" Parvati asked as she held out a stack of Hope's rare books as she replaced them gingerly in the section of her trunk for the books.

"No idea," Hope said, keeping her head down as she mentally listed off everything she owned and everything she'd found. There was only one discrepancy.

"What is it?" Hermione whispered once Lavender and Parvati had gone.

"It's Tom Riddle's diary," she hissed back, "that's what they were looking for, and they found it."

Worry lined Hermione's face. "But," she said faintly, "it couldn't have been someone outside of Gryffindor, no one else knows our password."

Hope bit her lip, avoiding saying what she knew that they were both thinking about. It was time to entertain the possibility that the person who had caused the chaos was from Gryffindor House.

"Are you still awake?"

"Yeah."

Hope leaned over the couch that she was sprawled on (having won the game of Rock-Paper-Scissors that allowed her to sleep on it) to look at Hermione. The four of them had reported the incident to Professor McGonagall, who had had the dorm thoroughly searched and checked for spells, but she
had come up empty. Still, she had asked the girls to kip in the common room for the night just to be
sure.

"Can't sleep?" Hermione murmured lightly so as not to awaken their companions.

"Something like that," Hope mumbled lightly. "Tomorrow's the Gryffindor-Hufflepuff game, you
know."

"Yeah, I know." Only everyone knew that. Oliver Wood had been positively raving about for the
past month or so. Obviously, he was very excited about it. "Pre-game jitters?"

"Playing Quidditch hasn't given me jitters since my first few games," Hope disagreed. "It's the
Hufflepuffs."

Hermione sighed lightly. "You know, one day you and the MacMillan boy are going to have to
make up."

Hope's eyes fastened on her and for a moment they looked so old, so very old. "I have a long
memory." And then she winked and she was back to herself once more.

"Hope…" Hermione said quietly, "can I ask you something about your family?"

Shock coloured her eyes blue. "My family?" she said in surprise, having to lower her voice suddenly
when Parvati twitched in her sleep several feet away. "What do you mean?"

"What do you remember about your parents?"

Hope hardly ever spoke about Lily or James, and when she had it was always in glowing terms; she
was her parents' number one supporter which was why she hated Snape so absolutely. Hermione
could tell she thought about them, though, because sometimes she would get that look in her eye, like
she was thousands of miles away…and so very sad, just like her eyes had been a second ago.

"My mum was beautiful," she said after a moment of silence that had been so long that Hermione
had almost thought that she'd fallen asleep, "everybody says I look just like her, but…" She exhaled
loudly, "my mum was one of a kind, you know, and my dad…he had these bright hazel eyes that
would light up when he smiled." She smiled herself, but then it faltered. "That was the most I
remembered of them when I was a baby…the colour of my dad's eyes, and the colour of my mum's
hair…and that flash of green that took them away."

Hermione caught Hope's hand. "I'm sorry," she said regretfully, "I shouldn't have asked."

"It's fine," Hope said a little thickly, "sometimes it's good to remember…" Her eyes were trained off
in the distance once more. "Besides," she added swiftly, "a few memories is better than no memories
at all."

Hermione could only nod mutely in response as Hope turned her back towards Hermione, the
material of her sleep shirt pulled tight across her back, a pale blue outline bleeding through her shirt,
illuminated by the firelight. She frowned slightly at it; it wasn't a tattoo was it.

"Go to sleep, Hermione," Hope proclaimed in a tired, muffled voice. "You've got a worse attitude
than me when you don't sleep well the night before."

Hermione's cheeks attained a healthy bit of colour at that comment and she opened her mouth
affronted to whisper heatedly, "I do not!"
The low chuckle she got in return was enough for her to know that she was forgiven for asking such a personal question, if she had even taken offense in the first place.

And that night, for the first time in a long time, Hope dreamed about glowing hazel eyes and a stream of red hair the colour of a rose's petals. And then, she smiled.
"Must've had a nice rest, those shadows under your eyes aren't as noticeable today."

Hope smacked George aggressively on the back of the head, her face coloured with irritation.

"Idiot!" Angelina said in complete exasperation. "You don't tell a girl that!"

George stared at both of them a look of uncomprehending plastered to his face. "Huh? What d'you mean? I was being nice!"

Hope hung her head, barely resisting from smacking herself in the face, but Angelina did it herself, smacked her forehead in dismay. "You know, sometimes I wonder how you and Fred can function when you're half clever, half-dim."

"Oi!" Fred and George said, sounding very insulted. "We're not dim!"

"Could've fooled me," Angelina said sarcastically, glancing to Hope who was now hiding an amused smile. "Ignore them, Hope. You know how troublemakers are."

A short burst of laughter left Hope's lips at that comment and she bobbed her head in agreement. "Ah, but without troublemakers our days would be quite boring," she said solemnly, her expression more appropriate for someone at a funeral visitation, but it had the Weasley twins howling, earning a dark look from their Head of House for their behaviour. "See you at the pitch," she added before Angelina could begin to reprimand her friends.

Hermione and Ron followed her out, as usual.

"Will you be alright today?" Ron asked as they made their way down the staircase. "I mean, you are playing Hufflepuff…they aren't really a fan of you right now."

"Big surprise," Hope grunted. "Just because they're acting like a bunch of—" She called them something that made Ron snigger and Hermione look scandalized "—doesn't mean that I'm going to throw the match just to make them happy…" She words trailed off as she came to a stop, a blissfully blank expression on her face, as if it has been completely wiped clean of emotions.

"What is it?" Hermione asked in confusion only to be shushed frantically as Hope listened intently to that murderous voice that had been silent for so long, finally speaking for the first time that she had heard it in months.

"Kill this time…let me rip…tear…"

The voice still sent shivers down her spine as it had the first time she'd heard it.

"There it is!" she said. "The voice! Its back! Can't you hear it?"

But like the other times, Hermione and Ron were oblivious to it. Hope wasn't sure who was in a better position; her for hearing it or them being free to not.

And then a look of realization dawned on Hermione, her epiphany making her whole face seem brighter. "Hope! I think I know! I've got to go to the library! I'll meet you at the pitch!" She gave her friend a firm hug and raced up the stairs faster than Hope or Ron (who were both staring after her in complete confusion) could say "Wait!"
"One day," Ron grumbled, "she's going to have to tell us everything upfront."

Hope gave a light snort. "Yeah, like that'll happen." When pigs fly, as the old saying went. "What's she hoping to find in the library?"

"No idea," Ron said with a deep sigh. "But you know Hermione."

Hope hummed in agreement, balancing her broom on her shoulder as they finally made their way out onto the field with Ron branching off to save him and Hermione a good seat and Hope heading towards the Gryffindor changing rooms.

"Ready to kick some yellow-and-black butt?" Alicia asked with a grin as she entered, using her teeth to tighten the arm guards onto her arms as a substitute for her other hand.

Hope raised an eyebrow. "I suppose…do you need any help with that, Licie?"

"I got this," the older girl said around the leather string used to tie the guard to her arm. "No worries—been doing this for years."

"Uh-huh…"

Hope pulled her red and gold robes over her body, tying the assortment of ties, doing a much better job than Alicia, if the huff of annoyance was anything to go by. But all the girls made it out onto the field in record time, only to be met with Professor McGonagall's voice blaring out across the pitch.

"This match has been cancelled!"

"Can you cancel Quidditch matches?" Hope muttered to the other three.

"I don't think it's ever been done before," Katie admitted, "but there's a first time for everything, I suppose."

"All students are to make their way back to the House common rooms, where their Heads of Houses will give them further information. As quickly as you can, please!" Though it seemed that Professor McGonagall had tried to keep her voice calm, the last few of her words were slightly higher than the rest, betraying her worry.

"Potter, I think you'd better come with me," she said to the girl whose hands tightened over her broom, as if the feel of the smoothly carved wood under her palm could comfort her.

"I didn't do it!" she hissed angrily, the red of her hair turning absolutely fiery. "Whatever you think I did, it wasn't me!"

"What's going on?" Ron demanded as he came to a halt before the rest of the team and the professor.

"Where's Hermione?" were the first words out of Hope's mouth. Surely their brunette friend would have joined him by now? She hadn't been intending to take long, Hope knew that; she should have been back by now.

Professor McGonagall seemed to be a bit at a loss. "The pair of you better come with me."

"What? Why?" Hope's eyes were becoming frantic, glancing feverishly beyond McGonagall as if hoping to see her there. "Where is she? Where's Hermione?!"

"She's not—?" Ron asked, his voice choking slightly, his face pale. "She couldn't be…"
"Weasley, Potter," Professor McGonagall said firmly, "please come with me."

Hope and Ron followed her numbly, leaving behind her teammates in a flurry of worry. The trek up the stairs to the hospital wing felt much longer than it should have and Hope and Ron rushed ahead of the Transfiguration professor, skidding on the stone as he halted suddenly.

Hermione was stiff and frozen like Colin, Mrs. Norris, and Justin had been. One hand was lifted in front of her, curled slightly as if she had been holding something when she saw the creature. Hope walked shakily to her side, curling her hands over Hermione’s, feeling how cold her skin was…it was almost like she was a dead body, but she wasn't dead, Hope knew she wasn't! Her eyes were like marbles, Hope noticed, blank and empty. They were so very different from how her eyes usually were that Hope could hardly bear to look at them.

She didn't even realize she was crying until she felt a wetness trailing down her cheeks.

"Follow the spiders? Tell me you're not thinking about doing this?!" Ron squeaked, his voice pitching a bit higher than he intended and fading out completely.

"Look," Hope snapped, tucking her cloak away in the corner by the fireplace, lifting the heavy wrought-iron lantern with one hand, "we need answers and now that Hagrid's gone, our best bet is following what he said. So yeah, following the spiders sounds like a great plan."

Ron whimpered softly, gripping his now Spell-o-Taped wand (as he’d lost his temper trying to work on his Transfiguration homework not several hours earlier and had slammed the wand down too hard, resulting in the tip breaking off and Ron's subsequent horror). "But."

"Hermione saw something we missed," Hope bite out, "it's our job to figure out the last pieces of the puzzle. Now, are you going to help me or not?"

Ron glanced mournfully back towards the castle and safety itself, but his loyalty to his friends was something else, Hope had to admit as she watched him gather himself and nod resolutely. There was no point in going against Hope, either way; she was too headstrong to back down from whatever she put her mind to.

"Hold this." She thrust the lantern at him and withdrew her own wand, holding it aloft, training her eyes to the ground, finding what she was looking for in a matter of seconds. "There they are!"

The small spiders were scurrying towards the forest in a hurry, much like the ones that they had seen exiting the castle through the window by Moaning Myrtle's bathroom all those months ago. She could hear Ron's whimper at the sight of them, but she ignored that too, striding into the forest without looking back. The forest was as fearsome and terrifying as it had been the last time she had been in it, and she had hoped to not have a repeat of those events; however desperate times, or so the saying went.

The roots were as twisted as the trees, protruding from the earth as though they were diseased. The air was damp, much like the earth itself and Hope could feel her shoes sinking into the ground with every step, but a little mud wasn't going to stop her from finding out the truth.

The number of spiders was growing, all converging into a small tunnel that was just tall enough that Hope and Ron could make their way through it without having to bend down. Ron was now holding her hand painfully tight, but it wasn't like she was going to be able to shake him off.

You know that feeling like you've stepped into someone else's territory? When you get a shiver down your spine and the temperature seems to drop? That's what it felt like when Hope and Ron
stepped out from the tunnel and into a clearing that would have been mistaken for being empty, if the scuttling sounds weren't quite so obvious.

"We're in so much trouble!" Ron gasped, but Hope shushed him, listening intently for the things that were making the noises. Hope cupped Ron's elbow, forcing him to lift the lantern higher, to spread out a fan of light over the forest floor, and that was when they saw it.

The spiders they had originally followed had been small in size, but these ones...she gulped. These ones were much bigger. Some were the size of small dogs, but some were larger, much larger. Ron was mouthing wordlessly by her side, his face a mask of horror.

"Aragog!" the spiders cried, clicking their pincers so the words sounded a bit like an applause, only much, much creepier. "Aragog!"

It must have been a name, and the next second, Hope and Ron stumbled backwards because out of the darkness a spider had appeared, dwarfing the largest spiders they'd seen yet by a great deal. Even Hope, who didn't have a fear of spiders, felt a bit of fear at its massive size.

"What is it?" the massive spider that must have been Aragog called to the spider that had spoken. It was then that Hope noticed his eyes. They were a milky white, gazing around unseeing. Hope had to fight a gasp when they landed on her before moving away once more.

She could understand now why Ron was so scared of them. Hope was impressed with her ability to not piss her pants at the sight of them.

"Men," the spider hissed. Hope couldn't help but scoff lightly at that comment; did she look male to it? Or perhaps it had never seen a female human before.

"Is it Hagrid?" the large spider rumbled.

"Strangers," a different spider hissed, making Ron jump and clutch Hope like a life line. At this point, she wasn't going to have any feeling left in the left side of her body...that might be a bit detrimental to her health...

"Kill them," Aragog said in a voice that made Hope wonder just how many times the spider had said those same words before. "I was sleeping..."

"Wait!" she yelled, attempting to get his attention and moving away from the other spiders at the same time. "Wait! We're friends of Hagrid's! He's the one who sent us in here to find you!"

This new information made the spider temporarily freeze in its tracks.

"Hagrid has never sent men into our hollow before," he said, his voice slow and ancient and Hope had to bite down the urge to correct him of her gender.

"Yeah, well, Hagrid didn't really have any other choice, now did he?" Hope said with a touch of sarcasm. She really couldn't help herself, could she?

A few of the closest spiders hissed at her lack of respect.

"What do you mean?" the spider queried.

"Hagrid's been taken away," she said, gaining confidence knowing that he was going to listen to her now, "they think that he's the one behind these attacks that have been happening at the school. They've taken him to a place called As-Azkaban."
This seemed to anger every spider in the clearing, including Aragog who clicked his pincers malevolently.

"But that was years ago," Aragog said, his tone now regretful, as though he knew what it was that they were looking for. "Years and years ago. I remember it well. That's why they made him leave the school. They believed that I was the monster that dwells in what they call the Chamber of Secrets. They thought Hagrid had opened the Chamber and set me free."

So, that meant he was out as the possible creature within the chamber…he would have had a hell of a time getting into the castle unseen with that large body of his, not to mention the blindness.

"The monster," she said slowly, "did you ever see it?"

"No." Was it just Hope, or did it sound like Aragog had a tremor in his voice? "It is an ancient creature we spiders fear above all others."

Ron was beginning to tug frantically on her arm, as if fighting the desire to run towards the exit. The spiders rustled around them, making Hope grip her wand so tightly that she was almost sure that the wood would break under her hand. Could spiders eat humans? Hope didn't really want to find out.

"Er, well, thank you," Hope said a bit more meekly than she intended, "so, er, we'll be leaving now…" She gulped slightly as they closed in slightly around them. "We'll just go and give this information to our headmaster…and he'll try to get Hagrid released."

And before Aragog could say anything else, Hope had yanked Ron back and through the thicket of trees, barely stopping once they'd reached Hagrid's hut to grab her invisibility cloak, before racing back to the castle with hardly a word being spoken, only stopping once they'd reached the common room and had become fairly out of breath.

"They were going to eat us!" Ron squeaked in between pants. "Hagrid sent us to be eaten, that's what he did!"

Hope rolled her eyes, her heart beating against her chest. "Oh, don't be dramatic, Ron, we got what we wanted, we know Hagrid's innocent."

"Innocent!" Ron scoffed. "Yeah, because someone who was innocent would send us to our deaths!"

Way to be overdramatic.

"I think I'm going to go and pass out in my bed," Ron said in a weak sort of voice as he stood shakily, "and if I see another spider again, it'll be too soon."

Hope gave him the barest of smiles. "Imagine if I hadn't thought up some sort of excuse for us to live."

Ron shivered. "Don't even get me started on that," he bemoaned, "I don't even want to think about it."

A smirk wormed its way onto Hope's lips. "Goodnight, Ron, don't let the spiders bite."

The glare he tossed her lacked any real fire, but she got the message well enough. "Alright, alright."

She waved him off, curling her body up by the fire, swathing her body in the blankets that were thrown over the couch.
"Do you ever sleep?"

Hope jumped strongly at the sudden new voice, twisting her head around so fast that she was sure her hair had given her whiplash.

"George!" she complained, placing a hand over her frantically beating heart. "Do you have to do that?"

"It brings me great joy to freak you out," the Weasley twin said dryly as he plopped down onto the seat beside her. "But seriously, how are you doing?"

The flames cast a soft glow onto her face, both hiding the fatigue with ease and making it more obvious. Her eyes seemed darker, almost black and the fire dappled shadows across her skin. For once, she looked rather vulnerable. It was rather strange for her to appear as such, because Hope was a very free-spirited individual and one whom had a very strong will.

Hope smiled tightly before hiding it behind her hand. "I'm fine," she said with a small trace of irritation, "I don't know why everyone keeps asking me—"

"Because we've barely heard you speak at all since Hermione…" George trailed off suddenly at the glare she gave him.

"She's my friend," Hope snapped, "of course I'm upset! Wouldn't you be?"

"Hope." The way he said her name sent a tingle down her spine and her hand felt warm where he reached over to squeeze it. She could feel a steady thrum in her stomach that had nothing to do with being sick. "It's alright."

Hope frowned, glancing up at him from underneath thick lashes before staring into the fire, not realizing that she had yet to release George's hand.

"I know it's stupid," she said, giving a watery smile, "but I just can't help thinking that Hermione's going to be pulling out her hair when she realizes how much school she's missed."

George cracked a smile at that comment. "Yeah, a bit mad about school, that one."

A small chuckle escaped her. "She'll kill me if I don't take proper notes."

"Don't worry," George consoled with a slight grin, "I'll save you."

The smile that she gave him actually reached her eyes that time, the irises barely glimmering with emotion. "I'll keep that in mind."

When Madam Pomfrey strode into the hospital wing one morning, she had to give a small cry of alarm because she now had six students in the wing instead of four.

Hope Potter had dragged one of the hospital chairs so that it was side by side with Hermione's in the night. Her pitch-black hair was a curtain hiding her face from view. She looked remarkably like a statue, she couldn't help but notice, with her pale wrists hanging in the free air as she was hunched forward with her elbows braced against her knees. Ron Weasley had commandeered a chair as well, only on Hermione's opposite side. His face was clear to see with his shoulders slumped slightly and his cheek resting on his hand, his lips barely ajar enough for a rather audible snore to sneak through. Madam Pomfrey's eyes softened slightly as she looked at the three of them.
It was like looking through a mirror and into the past. Hope had picked up a few friends that mirrored the relationship that her father had had when he was growing up.

Obviously Hope was James, the ring leader with his clever tongue that could sometimes get her out of trouble, given the right circumstances. Then there was Hermione, who was the Remus Lupin of the trio, mad about studying and always getting after her friends to do the same. And then there was Ron, who was (unfortunately) the Sirius Black of the crew, the one Hope was hardly seen without, the one who was lazy but loyal (at least, it had seemed he had been loyal…at the time). It put a frown on her face to know that there was no Peter Pettigrew, for she was certain she would prefer a squirrely friend in the place of one whom could possibly betray the others.

But she was getting too ahead of herself, and as Hope said, she was not her parents. She could understand why she got so irritated with everyone else for bringing it up; it must be aggravating.

Ron Weasley wasn't Sirius Black.

Hermione Granger wasn't Remus Lupin.

Hope Potter wasn't James Potter.

Hope was Hope. Hermione was Hermione. Ron was Ron. Madam Pomfrey couldn't help but admonish herself for looking for parallels when there were none. That was Professor Dumbledore's job.

Hope's black waterfall of ink coloured hair shifted slightly and Madam Pomfrey heard the tell-tale signs of someone breathing in rather deeply before one of the pale wrists shifted to cup the forehead under the hair.

"Miss Potter?"

Hope's head jerked up suddenly, glaring blearily at the person who had said her name. "Wha?" she said muzzily, rubbing at the side of her eye with the flared hem of her sleeve. "S'meone say m'name?"

Madam Pomfrey gave her a small but relieved smile. "It's just me, Hope," the Matron said in a comforting voice. "Perhaps you want to tell me what you and Mr. Weasley are doing here?"

Hope's eyebrow twitched as she gave her an expression that said, "You already know why, so why are you asking?"

But Madam Pomfrey wouldn't budge, so Hope finally sighed and said, "We came to visit Hermione, happy?"

"Immensely," Madam Pomfrey said dryly, "now wake up Mr. Weasley so I can get you back to your common room before Minerva comes to take you all to breakfast.

Hope tossed her a look of surprise; she had honestly been expected to be turned in, but, she supposed wryly, that Madam Pomfrey had a soft spot for her most frequent patient.

Ron complained a bit when he awoke, but Hope informed him that if he didn't want to wake up so early, then he shouldn't have snuck out with her in the first place, earning a glare.

Madam Pomfrey looked away when they both gripped Hermione's hands tightly, whispering words that she couldn't hear but could garner the general message: "Wake up soon."
Horrified Realizations and Poisoned Blood

The tension was still thick in the air at breakfast that day and Hope and Ron ate in silence, much like the rest of the hall. The only sounds that could be heard were the scraping of plates and utensils and the quiet thrum of whispers. The whispers weren't that loud separately, but when you put together just how many people were whispering, it came off as rather loud, but none of the presiding professors mentioned it.

"Hope."

Hope raised her head slightly to indicate that she was listening, twisting her spoon back and forth in her porridge as Ron whispered to her across from the table.

"Do you think there are going to be any more attacks?"

Hope's lips curved downwards into a frown. "Without Dumbledore around? Probably. The teachers are worried, just look at them."

"And no one else knows anything about the Chamber of Secrets," Ron grumbled under his breath, before giving Hope his full attention, because her eyes had shifted to the wood of the table, her eyebrows creased together in deep thought. "What is it?"

"Alright, we know that the attacks first started and stopped about fifty years back," Hope said, reviewing all that they had learned, "that the attacks were caused by some sort of monster that can't be seen and causes spiders to fear, and we know that the monster killed a girl fifty years ago."

"Yeah?" Ron said, not quite following.

"What if she became a ghost after her death?" Hope asked, pushing her half-eaten food aside. "Because she died here? What if she was still young when she died?"

"You have got to be kidding me?" Ron breathed. "Moaning Myrtle? No way."

"But just talking to her would be a pain," Hope muttered to herself, "we need to find which beast it was that Hermione was looking for...she was in the Magical Beasts section of the library but that doesn't really narrow it down much..."

"Why am I sensing that we're going to have another midnight adventure to the library?" Ron asked dryly.

"Do you have a better plan?" Hope retorted, but, unfortunately, he did not, and so, after everyone had gone to sleep, Hope pulled out her invisibility cloak for the second time that week and they snuck out of the common room once more. The number of patrols had increased since Dumbledore's removal and since Hermione and Penelope Clearwater's (the girl who had been petrified along with their friend, one of the prefects of Ravenclaw) attack, and dodging around a number of professors proved to be quite difficult. Ron almost tripped in front of Professor Flitwick and Hope skidded slightly on the floor in front of the stern faced Professor Vector, the Professor of Arithmancy. Luckily, the noise they made was only a small amount, so they went unnoticed for the time being.

Still, it took longer than anticipated for them to finally unlock the door into the library and make their way towards the Magical Beasts section. Hope opened the first book she could find which dealt with creatures of the water, including: Merpeople, Kelpies, Ramora, River Trolls, and Kappas. However, none of the creatures matched any of the information that they had.
"Maybe we should stick to creatures that can walk on land," Ron hissed to her, his voice echoing slightly in the silence. "It can't be something that would die without water."

Hope hummed in agreement, handing over the lit tip of her want to Ron once more as she replaced the book and grabbed another one. *Serpentine Critters…*

"A snake?" Ron asked in surprise, "…wait that would make a lot of sense-

"Shite!" Hope swore, glancing out of the window. The sun was beginning to peak over the horizon, painting a sliver of orange across the sky. "We're running out of time…" She feverishly flipped through the pages, but it was no use, the professors would be coming to get each of the houses soon. "We'll just have to slip away later."

Later just happened to be after Defence Against the Dark Arts had concluded. Lockhart had been growing increasingly arrogant as the lesson had worn on, and had been so for the past few days since Hagrid's arrest and Dumbledore's dismissal. Ron found his attitude draining and Hope found the man to be entirely too irritating; she was restraining herself from throttling him but not very well. But, luckily, the man was an idiot, so Hope and Ron used that to their advantage, making sure that they were the last ones to leave the class, moving at a much slower rate and slipping away once all of the other students and professor (and mind you, Hope was using that term lightly) had their attention focused entirely forwards.

Unfortunately, this was where Hope and Ron's plan went south. Though Hope had taken to carrying her invisibility cloak around, she hadn't had enough time to pull it out when they happened upon Professor McGonagall.

"Potter! Weasley!" she snapped, her voice sounding much more strained than usual, no doubt to the enormous amount of pressure that had been placed on her as Deputy Headmistress of Hogwarts. "What are you doing?"

Ron stammered, but Professor McGonagall's eyes had gone to Hope, as she was every bit the leader of the group as her father had been with his group of friends. Both Hope's and Ron's eyes were red, whether it be from crying or lack of sleep, she did not know (she had no way of knowing that the pair hadn't slept in more than a day), giving them the most affected profile she'd seen of the friends of the students who had been petrified.

"We were—"

"—going to see Hermione," Hope blurted out, saying the first thing that had come to mind, her thoughts happening to rest on the morning the day before yesterday when they had spent the night in the hospital wing with Hermione. Hermione was one of the few things on her mind these days, and it just fuelled her determination towards finding out what had rendered her to such a state.

Ron’s face would give away the lie if Hope didn't talk fast, so she steeled herself, trying to make her sound as convincing as possible.

"It's just," she started, "we wanted to give her the good news, tell her the Mandrakes were ready and everything…she hates not knowing about things, so…" she waved her hands helplessly by her sides. It wasn't really a lie, now that Hope thought about it; she did have a habit of talking to people when they weren't listening (being comatose or insane), and that helped it sound more believable.

Professor McGonagall's eyes shone like brown quartz, suppressed tears glinting in her eyes, surprising Hope slightly, but then she'd always thought the tough-but-fair woman had a soft spot for the three of them, just like she did with Fred and George (because, let's face it, no one else would be
"Of course," she choked out. "Of course, I realize this has all been hardest on the friends of those who have been..." She had to collect herself momentarily before speaking once more. "I quite understand. Yes, Potter, of course you may visit Miss Granger. I will inform Professor Binns where you've gone. Tell Madam Pomfrey I have given my permission."

By the time they sat down beside Hermione once more, Hope was regretting using her friend as their excuse. Just looking at how stiff and rigid her body was, how glassy her eyes were...it brewed a dark anger inside of her. And then there was the fact that they wouldn't be able to make it to the library unseen, even with Hope's invisibility cloak folded under her robes. And make no mistake, Madam Pomfrey would notice their absence.

"Maybe the monster's dead," Ron said hopefully across from her, "maybe the attacks have stopped because it did?"

"No..." Hope frowned slightly, "it's much too clever, think about it; the only attacks have occurred in places that are almost always unoccupied—"

"The library's unoccupied?" Ron asked sceptically.

"During a Quidditch match?" Hope asked rhetorically. "You bet. It targeted places that had two or less students in the vicinity..." Her eyes drifted slightly. "Or maybe that was just a coincidence? Maybe the monster didn't know that those places would be next to deserted?"

"Maybe," Ron shrugged, "but I guess we'll never know will we?"

Hope sighed again. "At least the Mandrake Draught will be administered soon...tomorrow, was it?"

"Yeah." Ron yawned widely, barely making an attempt to cover it with his fist. "Hard to believe we've been awake for two straight days."

"Yeah," Hope agreed, "but then, remember when I was obsessed with that mirror? I was awake for longer."

Ron and Hope grimaced identically. That mirror was more trouble than it was worth; as expected of a creation of Salazar Slytherin himself.

Hope exhaled audibly as she squeezed her hand tightly around Hermione's clenched one, and that was when she noticed it. Something flimsy and crumpled had brushed against her hand. She bent her head close to see what it was that Hermione had been holding when she was attacked.

"What is it?" Ron whispered, noticing the curiosity on her face.

"I think Hermione found something," Hope said lowly, mindful of Madam Pomfrey in her office, "let me try for a second..."

It would have been easier had Hermione not been gripping the paper quite so tightly, but it was also good that she hadn't dropped it before now. Hope leaned in much closer, peeling the parchment as gently as she could from Hermione's stone-like hand, unfolding it just as gingerly.

"What's it say?" Ron whispered lowly watching as Hope's mouth dropped open, betraying her shock. A Basilisk! Of course! A green serpent that could be fifty feet long once mature with venomous fangs and a stare that could kill you from looking it straight in the eye. Everything fit, except for...
Hermione's tidy scrawl clearly said *Pipes*.

"Pipes!" Ron said faintly. "No wonder you thought it could move through walls! It was using the plumbing!"

"And what if—" Hope continued. "What if the pipes started at—"

"Moaning Myrtle's bathroom," they both said.

"Now can we go find McGonagall?" Ron questioned.

Ron's face was pale in the firelight, and Hope couldn't bring herself to go over to him and make an attempt to comfort him.

*Her skeleton will lie in the Chamber forever…*no one ever wanted to hear that about their little sister.

"What should I do?" she asked aloud, not even sure who she was directing her question to when a large hand squeezed hers. She didn't have to look up to know that it was George, but she did anyways. His eyes were red, much like Ron's were, only Ron's red was closer to bloodshot than anything else.

He shook his head, looking far too miserable to be George Weasley, but Hope could offer no words just as he could not. She wanted to say something, something that could make him and his brothers feel better, but even those would be laced with shards of glass.

She couldn't give him hope when she didn't know the truth. Ginny could still be alive, but there was no certainty.

Ron's eyes met hers and Hope read what he was thinking in a matter of seconds. *Tonight.*

And so, Hope and Ron waited until each and every Gryffindor had slowly filtered out of the common room, finally leaving only Ron and Hope alone.

"Do you—" Ron's voice extinguished quickly before coming back a little strained, "could she be alive?"

"Ron…"

"Just tell me!" Ron snarled.

"I don't know," Hope said quietly, calm despite how angry Ron was, "I don't know everything, Ron, and if Hermione was here, she'd say the same."

Ron's face fell slightly and he had the decency to look ashamed, but then his eyes sharpened.

"Then we should go talk to Lockhart," he said resolutely.

"Huh?" Hope said blankly, confused as to why he wanted to talk to someone who couldn't have possibly cured a werewolf of lycanthropy. "Why?"

"He's going to try and get into the Chamber, remember?" Ron asked, referring to the earlier conversation that they had overheard between the professors. "We can tell him where we think it is and tell him there's a basilisk in there."

Hope opened her mouth to disagree (anyone but Lockhart!), but Ron was already moving towards
the portrait hole and she had no choice but to follow him. She had yet to see Lockhart do a spell that was remotely useful, but he was going to go down into the Chamber…she sighed, closely following her friend; this was turning into a truly terrible day.

Ron threw open the door of Lockhart's office with an echoing bang.

Lockhart seemed to be in a bit of a hurry. His walls were bare of portraits of himself, his illustrious books were being thrown haphazardly into his trunk, and his ostentatious robes were being shoved into a spare trunk.

"And where do you think you're going, Professor?" Hope said in a dark and cold voice. He was packing to leave when he said that he was going to go down and fight the basilisk…that didn't really paint a good picture.

Her voice seemed to startle him if how whirled around, his eyes wild. "Miss Potter – Mr. Weasley —"

Both Ron and Hope had their wands out and pointing at him in a matter of seconds.

"You're running away!" Ron said in startling realization, giving him an angry glower. "You coward! After all that stuff you did in your books!"

"Books can be misleading," Lockhart said in almost a squeak, quailing slightly before Ron's righteous anger.

"Books can be misleading?" Hope quoted with a snarl. "You wrote them, didn't you! Or have I been right about thinking you were a fraud all this time?"

She would have to go with the latter, going off of how Lockhart's face had grown pitiful. "My dear girl," he said in a condescending voice that rubbed Hope the wrong way. "My books wouldn't have sold half as well if people didn't think I'd done all those things—"

"You make me sick," Hope said with a growl. "Stealing other people's work for profit! You're worse than I thought you were."

And then Lockhart whipped out his wand and pointed it at them. Ron took a step back, surprised that a teacher was actually going to curse them, but Hope's eyes narrowed.

"Terribly sorry," Lockhart said coolly, "but I'm going to have to put a Memory Charm on you now. Can't have you—"

"Expelliarmus!" Hope snapped, her anger spilling over so that Lockhart was actually thrown backwards, slamming into the wall and causing one of the bookshelves to collapse, dumping books over his head, even as Hope hauled him to his feet, keeping her wand and Ron keeping his trained on the professor.

"Now," she seethed, "we're going into the Chamber to find Ginny, and you're coming with us."

Lockhart could only glance between each of the angry faces glaring at him before he was forced out of the office and down to the first floor.

"Myrtle?" Hope called as they entered the lavatory, her wand still pointed at Lockhart's neck. "Are you here?"

"What do you want?" came Myrtle's sullen voice, her ghostly form shimmering on top of one of the
The ghost goggled at her as though no one had ever asked her such a question which seemed highly likely, given her attitude. And then she looked pleased that Hope was asking her about it.

"Ooooh, it was dreadful," she said, her voice filling with zest and a smile splitting her face, "It happened right in here. I died in this very stall." She patted the stall on which she was "sitting". "I remember it so well. I'd hidden because Olive Hornby was teasing me about my glasses. The door was locked, and I was crying, and then I heard someone come in. They said something funny. A different language, I think it must have been." Myrtle had to reassert herself, going a bit off-topic. "Anyways, what really got me was that it was a boy speaking. So I unlocked the door to tell him to go and use his own toilet, and then—" Myrtle swelled with pride, her smile beaming. "I died."

"Did you see anything?" Hope asked. "Like some sort of creature?"

"No," Myrtle said, sounding a bit lost in thought for a moment before her attention returned, "but I did see a pair of great, big yellow eyes."

"Where?"

"Over there," Myrtle said in a vague manner, gesturing to the sink. Hope had Ron take over guarding the fraud as she investigated the sink. Far away, it looked just like the other sinks, but this one was different, she could just feel it.

"Find anything?" Ron demanded.

"Hang on," Hope called back, crouching close to inspect the taps of the sink. Someone had scratched a hasty drawing of a snake into the side. "Yep, found it. It's got a snake on it."

"So that's the opening to the Chamber of Secrets?" Ron demanded.

"Possibly," Hope said, rubbing a thumb over the carving, twisting the tap, but it didn't work. "But how do we get in?"

"Parseltongue!" Ron blurted out, making Hope turn back to look at him. "Try Parseltongue, that's got to work."

"Maybe," she said agreeably, kneeling once more. "I've never really tried talking Parseltongue when there wasn't a snake around."

"Have a go," Ron said, adding, "please."

"I'll try," she said, "no promises."

Her green eyes were level with the tap, but then her silver ring caught the light, giving it the illusion that the thin silver snake wrapped around her ring finger was moving. "Open," she hissed in that tongue that no one else could understand, a tongue that was low and guttural and sounding much like a resounding hiss. Instantly, a low clicking sound could be heard as the sink sank lower and lower until it had disappeared completely, a metal grate sliding over the top of it. Hope stepped forward slightly, without the sink, now a large pipe could be seen, big enough even for Hagrid to slide down.
She turned, aiming her wand at Lockhart. "You're going first, Fraud."

"I don't think –Think about this!" Lockhart tried to reason with them as Ron shoved him towards the opening. "What good will it do?"

"What good—?!" Ron took an angry step forward, but Hope held him at bay.

"There's an eleven year old girl down there," she said shortly, "she could be dying, so we think it'll do a lot of good, yeah." Then they pushed him, his body clanking against the pipe as he fell.

Ron held out a hand to Hope. "Together?"

"Always," Hope said with a wry smile, gripping his fingers as she jumped with him.

The pipe was dark and dark and slick and seemed to go on forever. The only thing she could be certain of was Ron's hand tightly clasped in hers (reminding her in times like these that there was no one more loyal than her best friends), a comfort in the darkness. It felt like minutes at least before the pipe levelled out, but she couldn't be sure before she and Ron tumbled arse over tea kettle onto the wet floor.

"We must be under the lake," Ron said, attempting to brush the grime that had accumulated on his robes on the way down—in vain, mind you— and glancing around them at the same time, taking note of the damp surroundings. He swallowed nervously.

"Alright, Ron?" Hope prodded, stumbling to her feet with a small cut on one of her legs that had ripped through the thick black material that she always wore over them.

"Yeah," he said with a grimace, "let's go."

She nodded as well. "Lumos!" The light emanating from the tip of her wand spread out, encompassing a large area. "Try to avoid the bones," she added, making Lockhart squeak like a mouse and Ron recoil slightly, but neither made any other comment.

Walking through the tunnel with nothing but silence made Hope very tense because she felt as though someone was watching her, even though no one else was around.

"Hope," Ron's voice directed her in the direction of where he was pointing, "look at that!"

Hope's heart stopped beating momentarily when she saw the acidic green scales…was this the basilisk? She held a finger to her lips, silently telling Ron to be silent as she approached slowly. And then she breathed again.

"It's alright," she called close to where the head should have been, "it's just the snake skin; the basilisk isn't here."

Ron sighed in relief, but Lockhart crumpled to the ground.

"What's wrong with him?" Hope demanded, picking up a few green scales and pocketing them for later.

"Dunno, I think he fainted," Ron said, kicking him slightly. "Oi! Wake up!"

"Look out!" Hope yelled, noticing what he was planning a split second too late as Lockhart lunged at Ron, wrestling his wand from his grip.

"Sadly," Lockhart said with wild eyes, "the adventure ends here. I shall take this bit of skin back up
to the school, tell them I was too late to save the girl, and that you two tragically lost your minds at the sight of her mangled body. Now, say goodbye to your memories!"

He raised Ron's damaged wand. "Obliviate!"

Hope lurched away as the wand gave a loud explosion that rocked the tunnel and had her falling to the ground and keeping her arms protectively over her head as if they were a helmet. That didn't stop a heavy rock from jarring into her back hard enough to leave a bruise.

It was only when the tunnel had stopped shaking and the debris stopped falling that Hope finally sat up.

"My name is Hope Lily Potter," she reminded herself before grinning, "ha-ha! Still got my memories intact!" And then her face fell as she looked behind her. "Oh, shite." A wall of jagged stone cut her off from Ron.

"Ron!" she yelled. "Ron, are you there?!"

For one terrifying second she thought Lockhart had succeeded in wiping his memories, but then a cough followed by a muffled voice. "I'm here," Ron called through the wall, "I'm fine, but the git isn't—the wand blasted him."

Hope winced at the pitch of the shriek and assumed Ron had expended some of his anger towards the man.

"What do we do now?" Ron complained. "It'll take too long to move the rocks, and Ginny—!" His words were cut off by his anguish.

"I'll-I'll go on ahead!" Hope said, hoping her voice sounded more confident than she thought it did. "Why don't you just shift those rocks and come when you can, alright?"

"Alright," Ron said quickly, his voice strained slightly, "see you soon."

"Right."

And then, gripping her wand, she turned away from the wall and towards danger, loping with difficulty around the massive snake-skin. The tunnel was longer than she thought at first glance and she considering moving faster, but with how uneven the ground was, she doubted that would end well for her. It wouldn't matter anymore, though, because the tunnel had finally ended.

She found herself standing before a circular door on which several carved snakes were positioned in curves, the onyx of their eyes glinting as Hope spoke that same Parseltongue word that she had uttered earlier, and a metal snake slithered out of the wall, forcing of the heads of the other snakes backwards until it disappeared into a hole in the wall at the top as the door swung open, admitting Hope.

She climbed down the short ladder before placing her feet on the ground once more.

It was a second chamber, only this one was lit with green flames held in serpentine torch brackets, illuminating the snake-like columns and the massive statue at the end of the chamber. He didn't look anything like the young albeit arrogant young man that she had met at Christmas the previous year, but this must have been when he had grown bitter and angry from all of the horrors that had occurred in his life.

And there…close to the statue was—
"Ginny!" Hope yelled, skidding across the ground as she ran to the body lying supine before the statue. "Ginny?"

She cupped the younger girl's pale cheeks, feeling how ice-cold her skin was. How long had she been lying down here? Hope elevated Ginny's head slightly, slapping her cheeks lightly. "Come on, Ginny," she whispered, "wake up!" but she didn't seem to even be aware of Hope's presence.

"She won't wake."

Hope twisted her head fast enough that it gave an audible crack as she turned to survey the person who had tried to convince her of Hagrid's guilt. Tom Riddle. His dark eyes were fastened to hers, as if her face was an interesting piece of art.

"You!" she snarled. "What did you do?!"

Riddle smiled in a way that set Hope on edge. "She's alive," he said in a voice that could have been taken as assuring, but Hope saw through it, "but only just."

Hope's eyes narrowed as she gently placed Ginny's head back on the ground and stood before him. "What are you?" she demanded. "You can't be a ghost, you don't have that blue aura that they do."

"I am a memory," he said in that quiet voice of his, "preserved in a diary for fifty years."

Hope's eyes narrowed further. She'd already asked Professor Flitwick and he'd told her that preserving a memory inside of an object that wasn't a Pensieve was impossible, so what exactly was he?

And he was holding a wand, a wand that looked strangely familiar... Her eyes widened comically as she checked her person.

"Give me my wand!" she said, her temper flaring. "I need that!"

"Oh, you won't," he said.

"Won't be—? What the ruddy hell are you talking about?!" Hope demanded.

He smiled at her, but it made her skin crawl at the lack of warmth it held. "I've waited a long time for this, Hope Potter. For the chance to see you. To meet you."

Why would he want to talk to her? Hope dropped a hand to Ginny's pulse-point at her wrist, sighing at hear the slow but steady thrum of her heart.

"Did you do this?" she asked quietly.

"You will find that young Ginny Weasley did this to herself."

Her head shot up to stare increduously. "What do you mean she did this to herself?"

"I suppose it's because Ginny Weasley opened her heart and spilled all her secrets to an invisible stranger," Riddle said, taking in her thunderstruck expression. "Because, you see, little Ginny's been writing in my diary for months and months, telling me all her pitiful worries and woes—how her brothers tease her, how she had come to school with second-hand robes and books, and how—" his eyes had now attained a malevolent gleam that seemed more sinister in the lighting of the Chamber "—how she didn't think famous, good, great Hope Potter would ever like her."

Hope's scowl darkened as he continued to talk, his voice droning on and on, grating at her nerves
and giving her the firm desire to bury her fist in his face. The longer he spoke, the angrier she got until her hands were balled up into shaking fists at her side, exercising as much control as she could to not strike him, not that it would matter, seeing as any attack she made would probably go straight through him.

"...For many months now, my new target has been you."

Hope's frown intensified.

"Imagine how angry I was when the next time my diary was opened, it was Ginny who was writing to me and not you," he said in a mild voice. "She saw you with the diary, you see, and panicked. What if you found out how to work it, and I repeated all her secrets to you? What if, even worse, I told you who had been strangling roosters? So the foolish little brat waited until your dormitory was deserted and stole it back. But I knew what I must do. It was clear to me that you were on the trail of Slytherin's heir. From everything Ginny had told me about you, I knew you would go to any lengths to solve the mystery—particularly if one of your best friends was attacked."

Hope could feel herself filling with white-hot rage. He had targeted Hermione...how dare he!

"And Ginny told me the whole school was buzzing because you could speak Parseltongue…" His eyes seemed eager now, happy at how angry he was making her. "So I made Ginny write her own farewell on the wall and come down here to wait. She struggled and cried and became very boring. But there wasn't much life left in her…She put too much into the diary, and into me."

"You piece of scum!" she seethed. "You're talking about her like she's some kind of tool!"

"I suppose she was," he said carelessly. "She's little more than a corpse now, but I have so many questions for you."

Hope glared furiously, but he was not deterred. "How is it that you—a skinny, weak, girl with no extraordinary magical talent—managed to defeat the greatest wizard of all time? How did you escape with nothing but a scar, while Lord Voldemort's powers were destroyed?"

"What's it matter?" Hope asked, more than slightly irritated when he slighted her for being female. "Voldemort—"

"Voldemort is my past, present, and future, Hope Potter."

Hope felt an awful sense of foreboding when, using her wand, he wrote out his full name in fiery letters that rearranged themselves into "I AM LORD VOLDEMORT."

"Oh, you've got to be kidding me," she muttered.

This arrogant, cruel-hearted boy was Voldemort? And then she laughed as he said "I had become the greatest sorcerer in the world!"

"What," he said coolly, "is so funny?"

"Oh, it's nothing," Hope said in between guffaws, "but how on earth can you claim to be the greatest wizard in the world when you're so bloody terrified of Dumbledore!" She probably would have bent at the waist in her laughter if her back didn't throb lightly with every movement. "You're scared stiff when it comes to going against him!"

A low growl left his lips at her insults and he opened his mouth to speak when the sound of music penetrated Hope's eardrums and a red-and-golden bird streaked through the air, dropping something
old and ratty into her arms.

This time it was Riddle that laughed, his laugh high and cold and chilling to the bone. "So this is what Dumbledore sends his defender! A songbird and an old hat!"

And then Riddle turned away from Hope, speaking directly to the stone face of Slytherin.

"Speak to me, Slytherin, greatest of the Hogwarts Four!" The words came out as a hiss, but Hope understood them. And her grip tightened over the hat as Slytherin’s mouth dropped down and down until an obvious hole was left and Hope took a step back not feeling brave at all when she caught a glimpse of the king of serpents within the hole, but then she shut her eyes quickly, fearing petrification if she did look upon him.

As soon as she heard Riddle's next words she was racing backwards: "Kill her."

But the tile floor was too slippery with slime and water and she tripped, tumbling to the ground ungracefully and giving herself a long scrape along her jaw as she did so. And then she heard it cry in pain, so she couldn’t resist turning around opening her eyes to see Fawkes the Phoenix (the bird that had given her the hat, Dumbledore’s bird) using its golden talons to slice up the poisonous eyes of the basilisk.

It had blinded the serpent.

"NO!" Hope didn’t have to glance back to Riddle to see the pure fury on his face, because it was laced in his voice as well. "LEAVE THE BIRD! LEAVE THE BIRD! THE GIRL IS BEHIND YOU! YOU CAN STILL SMELL HER! KILL HER!"

Hope huffed lightly in annoyance. Talk about having an obsession.

She lifted the Sorting Hat carefully, only to blink in surprise, because the hat had gained a bit of weight since her fall. She looked into it and was surprised to see the hilt of a sword shimmering within the fabric.

She drew it and without thinking at all of the repercussions, drove the blade into the belly of the serpent.

As expected, the basilisk threw back its mighty head and screamed in a tongue that was universal; pain. Hope withdrew the sword from the snake and poised to strike again when the basilisk aimed its head downwards, aiming for her. Hope had barely a second to twist the sword upwards and into the roof of its mouth.

And then the pain exploded around her and she screamed and poison like fire coursed through her veins.
Ron kicked savagely at the wall, anger and worry adding to his crazy bundle of emotions that he was currently feeling and doing him no good. He glanced viciously back at where Lockhart lay, knocked out from a rock. Yes, he would admit that it was him, using a rock. It was all his fault anyways. He deserved a good few knocks to the head.

He stopped cold when he heard the pain-filled scream that echoed through the chamber, and then he broke a hole large enough to slip through and he raced down the tunnel in the direction Hope must have gone, coming to a stop before the door.

He wrenched and pried at the metal snakes since there was no handle, but the door wouldn't budge. "Come on!" he complained, kicking at it with an already aching foot. "Open up!"

He screwed his eyes shut and focused on trying to remember what Hope had said up at the top of the pipe, that word in Parseltongue. He gave it a shot, allowing a strangled hiss to leave his lips, sounding much like it had when Hope had said it. Still, he was a bit surprised when the door swung open and he almost vaulted through it.

"Hope!"

Everything was hazy and fuzzy to Hope, the pain spreading outwards from her arm, the poison filtering through her body, strangling her from the inside out as she stumbled towards that blur of red and black that was Ginny.

"Hope!"

"Ron?" She mumbled, her eyesight blurring as her friend came beside her, helping to guide her towards his sister, and once she was close enough, she collapsed onto the ground next to her, fumbling blindly for the little diary.

Ron was scowling at the boy who was standing next to his sister—who was still alive, he'd checked—becoming more solid as the time wore on. And he was holding Hope's wand.

Hope gave a low hacking cough. It was getting harder to breathe; was the air getting heavier, or something? Her fingertips made contact with the flimsy leather cover and she gripped it.

"You're dead, Hope Potter," Riddle said with relish. "Dead. And I'm going to sit here and watch you die, and watch how your friend reacts." He smirked. "Take your time. I'm in no hurry."

Hope flipped the book open, ignoring him, pulling out the fang from her arm, crying out and making Ron pale. Was she really going to die? "Hope," he whispered, "you're not going to die."

She looked up and gave him a bright smile even though the color was fading from her cheeks and the light from her eyes. "Ronald Weasley," she said fondly, "I'm glad I met you." And then she raised the fang and punctured it into the open pages of the book.

"NO!" Riddle screamed as ink spilled from the puncture mark, and, stunned, Ron stared as the boy twisted in on himself before exploding into a flash of light, letting Hope's wand clatter to the ground.

"Good," Hope hissed through clenched teeth. "Now I can die in peace."
"Shut up!" Ron said furiously as a beautiful crimson and gold bird fluttered down to land beside them. "You're not dying!"

"You know I hate stating the obvious," Hope slurred, smiling at the bird, "'lo Fawkes."

The phoenix trilled a few low keening notes as Ginny began to stir.

"I'm so tired…" Hope said slowly, her eyes falling shut, feeling as though her blood had turned to sludge.

"Don't fall asleep!" Ron ordered, slapping her cheeks and making her head loll slightly. "You can't —" and then he stopped, his eyes falling to where the phoenix had bent its head over the spot of her arm, the spot where she had pulled that fang from. The spot was still covered in blood, but the wound had disappeared completely.

Hope groaned, bowing her head forward slightly. "Can we take a really long nap after this?"

Ron gave a noise that was somewhere between laughing and crying. "You can sleep all you like, I promise."

"Good."

Ginny gave a similar groan as she finally awoke.

"Ginny!" Ron cried in relief as his little sister sat up, and he couldn't resist pulling her into his arms. Seeing her brother and having him hold her was enough to break the dam and a flood of tears and wails left her as she threw her arms around him.

Hope couldn't help but watch the pair in amusement, rubbing her eyes in an attempt to rid them of sleep. Fawkes hopped onto her knee and trilled a few notes to her that made the hammering in her skull and the ache of her back dull slightly. She gave him a drowsy smile, reaching out a hand to pet the feathers of his wings with the back of her hand.

She could see now what Dumbledore had meant about him being quite handsome.

"Thank you," she whispered to him, and he merely blinked his eyes at her, canting his head to side slightly as if he didn't understand. He fluttered up to her shoulder as she stood up, stumbling as she did so and almost falling again, but regaining her balance at the last second.

"Oh…yeah," Hope blinked and stared at the carcass of the basilisk. "The things that slip your mind," she murmured to herself with a weak chuckle.

"Alright, Ginny?" she asked in between a yawn as the girl's tears died down to sniffles. Ginny nodded sorrowfully.

"I'm going to be e-expelled!" she bemoaned.

"No," Hope said firmly, "somehow I think that's going to be the last thing that's going to happen. No one can blame you for all this, you didn't do this of your own will, and Professor McGonagall will understand."

Ginny didn't look like she agreed, the tears still streaming down her face with no sign of stopping.

"I suppose we should go find Lockhart and get out of here," Hope mused aloud.
These past two days had been too exhausting in Hope's honest opinion. Retelling everything that they'd done over the past year, excluding the Polyjuice, of course, to Dumbledore (who had returned from his dismissal by the governors) had been incredibly draining. Hope had been a bit reluctant to hand over Godric Gryffindor's sword, but what could you do? Ron and Hope had received awards to the school, but the two of them had insisted on Hermione receiving one as well, after all, if she hadn't been petrified, they would have figured out just what had caused the attacks weeks ago. The issue of Ginny's involvement had been resolved and Hope had managed to free Dobby the House-elf from his servitude to the Malfoy family.

All in a day's work for Hope Potter.

"Can you ever not get into trouble?"

Hope froze before shifting her eyes to the left where George Weasley was leaning against the wall in his pajamas. Hope's cheeks filled with heat as she realized that she was covered in dirt, grime, slime, and blood.

"I'm kind of attracted to trouble," she said cheekily, flouncing over to stand by his side, "it's why we're friends…or did you not get that memo?"

"Oi, cheeky," George said with a grin that lit up his face, "I may have to prank you for that."

"Oh, you wouldn't dare," Hope disagreed with an even brighter smile. Now that the basilisk was dead, everything seemed so much brighter and happier and funnier. It was funny to think of it like that, but it was absolutely true. "You've met your match, George Weasley."

He arched a crimson eyebrow towards the girl. "My match? You really think so?"

Hope gave a light laugh bouncing onto the balls of her feet and the tips of her toes. "Oh, absolutely," she said cheerfully, swinging herself in a circle, closing her eyes before skipping off in the direction of the Great Hall.

George stood still for a few seconds, his mouth gaping slightly as he stared after her. "Oi, wait!" he yelled, racing after her until he caught up with her just outside the Great Hall. "Merlin, woman, you can run!" he said in surprise as they walked in together, Hope earning a loud raucous applause from a good three-fourths of the room making Hope turn absolutely scarlet, ducking her head and moving to a free spot at the table and burying her face in her arms even as she received many thumps on her back. And then Ron entered and he received the same sort of welcome, and he handled it much like Hope had, turning the exact shade of cherries, but beaming as he came to sit at Gryffindor table.

Hope recovered enough to lift her face from the table, but she looked rather like she had a bad sunburn.

The party in the Great Hall lasted all night so Hope and Ron virtually forgot that they'd been awake for over two days and simply enjoyed the festivities.

"Hope!" George called from the opposite side of the table, grinning again and nodding towards the front of the hall. "Look who's here!"

Hope and Ron twisted to see a familiar head of bushy hair.

Hermione Granger beamed as her two friends stood up suddenly from the Gryffindor table to stare, and then she was running down the aisle, yelling in exuberance, "You solved it! You solved it!"

She threw her arms around Hope as the two laughed and cried, embracing each other firmly before
dragging Ron into the mix, much to his embarrassment. And then a number of congratulations went around to Hermione.

It seemed to be a day of red faces.

"Next time," Hope said, wiping at her grimy face, "next time tell us what you're thinking when there's a monster on the loose, alright?"

"I promise," Hermione laughed as her friends piled food onto her plate.

Hope fell asleep halfway through desert after Hagrid's release from Azkaban and return to Hogwarts, despite all the excitement, only to wake up a day and a half later in the hospital wing.

"My illustrious patient returns," Madam Pomfrey said in a wry voice as Hope sat up in her bed, scrubbing at her eyes and groaning slightly. "I'm starting to miss our little chats."

Hope chuckled nervously. "Don't worry, Poppy, at least you'll probably still see me once a year."

"I'm overjoyed," she said dryly, ignoring how she casually used her first name, placing a tray of food on her lap. "Do try not to make a habit of staying up for days on end, Miss Potter, its rather detrimental to your health."

"I had no idea," Hope said sarcastically, spreading jam onto her toast and taking a rather vicious bite of it, "I mean, it's not like Ron and I didn't just find and kill a basilisk."

Madam Pomfrey pointed her wand offensively at her patient. "Don't make me spell you, Miss Potter, you know I will."

"But if you did that your life would become less fun," Hope wheedled with a grin, finishing her breakfast at an incredibly fast rate and setting the tray aside and swinging her legs over the side of the bed, allowing Madam Pomfrey to tap her wand along her formerly lame leg.

"You haven't been limping for a while now," she noticed, "are you having any pain?"

Hope gulped down the last of her pumpkin juice. "Nope, not for a few months, at least."

Madam Pomfrey smiled. "That's good, that's really good. The muscle atrophy has lessened since you've been using your leg again, but if you want to really get back up to speed, I would suggest some kind of exercise for your legs, running perhaps?"

Hope groaned, her shoulders slumping slightly. "I suppose I'll have to, won't I?"

Madam Pomfrey tried very hard to keep a straight face when faced with Hope's pout. Hope picked at the two rings that she always wore, smiling lightly.

"Thinking about your young man?"

Was it really possible for someone to blush that red? Madam Pomfrey couldn't help but smirk at how flustered she got.

"I do love how your mind jumped to Mr. Weasley right away," she said, humored.

Hope buried her face in her hands in an effort to hide embarrassment.

"The school year's almost over," she noted. "Are you going to say anything to him?"
Hope bit her lip slightly, a look of indecision gracing her face. "I'm brave, Poppy, but I'm not that brave."

And that time, she was being completely honest, and Madam Pomfrey had to exercise a bit of self-control to not mention the betting pool that had encompassed at least three-fourths of the school. So she simply settled for wishing Hope a good holiday, to which she had simply snorted.

She had forgotten that Hope hated summer holiday. So, she just watched as Hope left the hospital wing in much brighter spirits when she saw her friends waiting for her outside.

And for a second Hope forgot about having to return to the Dursleys and just basked in the warmth of being with her friends.
Now, while Hope Potter hated summer holidays, George fervently loved them, as all Weasley children did. Summers meant freedom to them just as they meant solitude to her, but luckily, Hope received a number of letters that kept her from wallowing too much, a stark contrast from the previous summer.

Ron’s letters weren’t very frequent, but George’s on the other hand...

"I don’t think I’ve ever seen George so obsessed with a letter before," Bill mused to his other brothers as they all sat watching George unfold the letter that had just come in the mail for him, courtesy of a very lovely snowy owl that seemed quite affectionate towards him.

"That’s because it’s a letter from Hope," Fred sang, a pleased grin spreading across his face as he crowed, "Angie and I are definitely going to win the bet now!"

It was a miracle that George didn’t look up at all the noise his twin was making, but he seemed very intent on the parchment in his hands.

Bill stared at his younger siblings in confusion and a bit of bemusement. It was Ron that gave him the answer.

"George kind of has this crush on Hope Potter," he said dryly, rolling his eyes, "and she kind of has a crush on him, too. They’ve been practically flirting for the past two years."

"Ah," he said slowly, "I see," even though he didn’t.

George was fervently ignoring them, simply reading his letter.

George,

Sounds like you're having a lot of fun with your family! Ron doesn't write as much and neither does Hermione, but I think Hedwig is liking the exercise of going back and forth between Egypt and here. Is it really hot? Is the desert all there is in Egypt? I wish I could go! Egypt is in my top two places I’d ever want to visit, Greece being the first, of course. The hieroglyphics must be really cool, well, maybe not for you, but for a crazy nut like me, paradise!

It’s rather boring here, as you might expect. The Dursleys and I aren’t talking (big surprise), with makes my life a hell of a lot easier. I’ve had to send Madam Pomfrey weekly reports of how my leg’s doing, but she thinks it’s almost completely healed now. Thank Zeus! On the plus side, Angie gave me my birthday present early! It’s a communication mirror, so Fred better be jealous! And the both of you are going to be jealous about this: Lee, the girls, and I all went out for dinner at this Chinese restaurant that Angie and Licie are completely obsessed with, and I have to say the food was to die for!

We were thinking fondly of you two while eating our amazing food. (He could almost imagine her winking at him with a smirk)Next time you and Fred have to come!

I thought your cartouche necklace was really amazing! I forgot that Egyptians didn’t use vowels, but if nothing else, at least I know what my initials are!

About that permission slip to go to Hogsmeade… I have a plan to con a signature out of Vernon… and it will be set in motion before the end of the day, and it will work, mark my words!
Anyways, have lots of fun with your brother!

Love, Hope

George's eyes widened slightly at the endearment at the end of the letter. He had never had her write 'love' as a salutation in a letter before, but then she'd never responded to any of the letters he'd sent last year because of that house-elf.

He grinned. Now he definitely couldn't wait to see her again. He creased the letter and stuffed it into his pocket, rejoining his siblings, and meanwhile, miles away, Hope Potter was following around her uncle and being a general annoyance (something that wasn't very hard to do).

Hope was not someone you wanted to cross, most people knew that quite well, but her family on the other hand, wasn't too intelligent in that aspect. So, she glared at Vernon as he shook her permission slip to get into Hogsmeade in front of her face.

"And why would I sign this bloody thing?" he demanded, spittle flying from his mouth as he scowled at her.

"Because if you don't," Hope said with a feral smile. "Then I'm not even going to try to behave when your sister comes around, and I know you'd hate that."

He glared at her but it wasn't as impressive on him as it was on her. And finally, he etched his signature onto the line and all but shoved it at her.

"One toe out of line, girl," he warned.

"Right, right," Hope said, waving a careless hand as she did so, "I'll keep that in mind."

And then she pulled open the door, and disappeared through it, tying her hair into a high ponytail and setting of at a brisk jog down the street.

The only good thing about Privet Drive was that it was private and no one liked to exercise at all. It probably wasn't a good thing for their health, but at this point, Hope really lacked the ability to care. She thought that she would find it incredibly awkward if she happened across anyone else out running, but no one ever seemed to feel the need to.

Hope exhaled loudly, breathing in and out harshly as her heart beat began to speed up. She actually found running to be pretty calming, and it gave her another one of those excuses to stay out of the house and come back stinking of sweat (she still remembered the revolted expression on Petunia's face the first time it happened; if only she had a camera to document it). And it helped that the more she ran, the more the muscles in her legs became stronger.

So Hope couldn't complain to Madam Pomfrey when she gave her her weekly report, there wasn't really any reason to, to begin with.

Still, running didn't balance out how utterly terrible her summer holidays were and she was counting down until school started once more.

George's frequent letters were perhaps some of the few things that kept her sane in her not-so-modest opinion. She had never had someone write to her so regularly. It made her a little flustered, but she would never admit to that to anyone.

Anyone would have thought that she was counting down the days until she could see George again, but, again, you would be hard-pressed to actually get her to admit to such a thing.
Marjorie Dursley was a demon, of that, Hope was entirely certain...or maybe it was the whole family (why oh why couldn't Hope just be seventeen, move out and get her own place?). Of course, "Aunt" Marge had never really liked Hope to begin with, why, Hope couldn't fathom, it wasn't as though she had done something wrong, or anything.

Or maybe the woman liked being cruel? She had once given her dog treats as some sort of present, much to Hope's disgust. Did she even look remotely like a dog?

She had something against how green her eyes were ("I mean, look at them! No normal person has eyes that colour!"). and Hope dearly wanted to say that she had inherited the colour from her mother, but she kept her mouth shut, and then she complained about her hair ("It's not even the proper ginger!"). *Proper ginger, my arse*, Hope thought angrily. Her hair was perfectly natural thank you very much, identical to her mother's!

And, of course, Hope was forced to make dinner for the entire week, and it was amazing thank you very much. Steak and Kidney Pie, Beef and Mustard Pie, and, on the last day, Sheppard's Pie (now that she thought about it, that was a lot of pie). Of course, Marge thanked Petunia for such a lovely dinner each night while Hope sulked, eating her small share of the food she'd made.

Hope cleared away her things and excused herself from the table once she was finished, doing her best to block out Marge's voice. And by "excusing herself" she meant standing up abruptly as going to the kitchen. She snuck a bit of the leftover Sheppard's Pie into her mouth when they weren't listening.

And then Hope froze when Marge began to talk about Hope as if she wasn't there.

"You mustn't blame yourself for the way the girl's turned out, Vernon," she said to her brother in a soothing voice. "If there's something rotten on the inside, there's nothing anyone can do about it."

Rotten? Hope seethed to herself. *If you want rotten, go look in the mirror!*

Oh, Hope could see where this was going...

"It's one of the basic rules of breeding," she continued, unaware of the lighting storm brewing inside of Hope at her callous words. "You see it all the time with dogs. If there's something wrong with the bitch, there'll be something wrong with the pup—"

Without meaning to, Hope caused her wineglass to shatter, caused hairline fractures on the windows, and made the plate she'd been holding cleave in two.

Did she just insinuate that there had been something wrong with her mother?!

She didn't turn around, but she could feel the glares burning into her back courtesy of Petunia and Vernon.

"Marge! Marge, are you alright?" Petunia asked.

Luckily, Marge was dismissive of her shattered glass. "Not to worry. Must have squeezed it too hard. Did the same thing at Colonel Fubster's the other day. No need to fuss, Petunia, I have a very firm grip..."

Hope gritted her teeth as she packaged the rest of the dinner, just like she was supposed to for a day of leftovers, accidentally spilling a bit of water in the process, forcing her to hike up the stairs and grab a spare towel from the closet.
She arrived back down the stairs in time to hear Marge complimenting her bulging "cousin" for being "proper-sized".

Hope resisted gagging. Proper-sized? Maybe she needed to get her eyes checked if she thought becoming obese was proper-sized and healthy-sized.

"Now this one," she said, jerking her head towards Hope with a look of disgust, "she's got runty, troublesome look about her. You get that with dogs."

Hope's eyebrow twitched. There she went again, comparing her to a dog again.

"It all comes down to the blood, as I was saying earlier. Bad blood will out. Now, I'm saying nothing against your family, Petunia, but your sister was a bad egg." The plate that had broken in two gained another crack. "They turn up in the best of families. Then she ran off with a wastrel and here's the result right in front of us."

Wastrel?! What gave her the right to call her father wasteful and good-for-nothing?! The nerve! Marge's words were stabbing into her like white-hot pokers.

"This Potter," she said, glancing slyly at Hope as if keen to see how long she was going to remain in control of her emotions, "you never told me what he did?"

The dinner small talk wasn't going in the direction that Petunia and Vernon had hoped, if the nervous looks on their faces were any indicator.

"He –didn't work," Vernon said after hesitating a half-second. "Unemployed."

Hope could feel her rage bubbling. Her parents were in hiding! Of course they couldn't work!

"As I expected!" Marge sounded almost positively gleeful that she had some grounds to insult Hope's parents now. "A no-account, good-for-nothing, lazy—"

"Why don't you keep your fat mouth shut?" she said finally in a low and dangerous voice.

"What did you just say to me?" Marge blustered.

Hope gripped the counter so hard that she was sure that she could feel her tendons popping, her eyes darkening rather noticeably.

"I said," she seethed, "keep your fat mouth shut about my parents. They're far better than you could ever hope to be and they're dead. There wasn't anything wrong with them, maybe there is just something wrong with you, you fat old bat!"

Marge mouthed wordlessly at Hope, apparently completely stunned at being spoken to the way she had, but then she started to expand, much to Hope's surprise, until she was a balloon-shaped thing (or was that generally how she looked?) that was floating up to the ceiling.

"MARGE!" Vernon screamed as Hope made her escape, darting upstairs.

Sirius Black couldn't really help himself. He couldn't resist making a detour to the muggle neighbourhood of Privet Drive. Just a glimpse of his goddaughter would be enough…or would it? And it seemed luck was on his side tonight.

A door slammed open with a loud crack and a small figure strode out of it, a bird cage tucked under her arm, dragging a heavy trunk behind her…and was that a woman shaped like a balloon?
Her face was shrouded by darkness until she came under the lamppost, intent on the park bench that was just a few feet in front of the bush behind which Sirius was hiding in, and then Sirius' heart began to beat rather rapidly, even as he was in his dog form.

Her face was Lily's face. The hair, the eyes, the cheekbones…that was all her mother, Sirius noted with a forlorn whine as she withdrew a small compact mirror, causing her head to shoot up and her hand to tense over her wand, but she didn't see him, so she relaxed.

"Angelina Johnson," she said clearly.

"Hey, Hope!" a female voice answered her before becoming a bit confused. "What's wrong?"

"It's nothing," Hope said quickly, "I just had a question about that bus you told me about…the Kn —"

"The Knight Bus," the second voice finished for her, "yeah, you just hold out your wand and it'll take you wherever you want to go." The voice grew suspicious. "You're not in any trouble are you?"

"No, I'm fine," Hope disagreed. "See you when term starts, Angie."

"Al—" but Hope had shut the compact and shoved it into her pants, raking a hand through her long hair.

"Okay, I know you're there," she called out into the darkness, "you can come out now."

Sirius balked slightly and then terror overwhelmed his senses. What should he do? Should he come out or stay hidden? But then he took a step slowly forward and came out of the shadow so that she could see him.

The dog made "drowned" seem like an understatement as it approached her, whining softly. Its ratty fur was pitch black and sticking up every which way and its eyes seemed to glow with an inner madness.

"C'mere," she crooned softly, holding out a gentle hand and wearing a smile. She scratched behind his ears, making him lean into her hand. Her eyes were drawn to his side and she winced at how obvious the ribs were protruding slightly under his coat.

She gave him a tight smile. "You must be very handsome when you have a bit of meat on your bones," she said, stroking the fur that covered his head.

Sirius wagged his tail and licked her hand, making her laugh aloud. She pressed a sound kiss to the top of his muzzle, but had to blink in surprise because the next second the dog had completely vanished. She scratched her cheek in slight confusion; there had been a dog there, hadn't there been? She was pretty sure…and then she saw why it had bolted.

Hope blinked owlishly at the purple double-decker bus that came to a stop right in front of her (she hadn't even realized she'd pointed her wand towards the road…oops). So this was the Knight Bus, was it? Not entirely what she was expecting.

A young man with enough pimples to make constellations on his face stepped down, speaking loudly to the night rather than to Hope.

"Welcome to the Knight Bus, emergency transport for the stranded witch or wizard. Just stick out your wand hand, step on board, and we can take you anywhere you want to go. My name is Stan Shunpike, and I will be your conductor this evening!"
Hope raised an eyebrow as he finished, sounding very much like he’d swallowed a script. But that action made her scar shift upwards on her forehead, bringing a bit of it into the light and making Stan's eyes jump to it.

"Woss that on your 'ead?" he asked her.

Hope ran a hand over her fringe, making certain that her scar couldn't be seen. "It's nothing," she said quickly.

"Woss your name?" Stan asked suspiciously.

"Hermione Granger," Hope said, thinking of the first girl that came to mind, even though she could have possibly said Ginny Weasley and be taken seriously with that red hair of hers. "Can this bus go to London?"

"Fo' eleven sickles," Stan said, bobbing his head up and down, "but fo' firteen you get 'ot chocolate, and fo' fifteen you get an 'ot water bottle an' a toofbrush in the color o' your choice."

She tossed him a galleon. "Just to the Leaky Cauldron, keep the change."

Stan grinned toothily as the pair of them managed to haul her rather heavy trunk into the landing of the bus. It was a bit strange on the bus, Hope had to admit, mostly because she had never seen a bus with beds in the place of seats, but then, this was a Wizarding bus, so maybe it was different.

"You 'ave this one," he told her, shoving the trunk under the bed that was directly behind the driver. "This is our driver Ernie Prang."

Hope had the overwhelming feeling as though she was looking at some kind of insect, but then she realized that he was just wearing large and thick glasses that made his eyes seem larger than normal and bulbous.

"Take 'er away, Ern."

Hope yelped aloud as the bus accelerated suddenly, making her fall back onto her bed due the sharpness of the lurch in speed. She clamped her hands down on the bedposts to keep from flying off, and gazing out of the window in slight awe at how fast the streets and cars and people were passing them by, or was it the other way around?

Then she looked back to Stan, her attention drawn to the Daily Prophet he was reading. The figure photographed on the front of it was someone that she had seen before. She'd seen those same dark, endless eyes, that same thin, stretched face on the telly. An escaped convict or something, wasn't it? Was he a Muggle or a wizard, then, if he was on muggle television and on the wizard newspaper.

"That man," she said, nodding to the photo, "who is he?"

"'oo is 'e?" Stan asked, completely startled. "'oo is—? That's Sirius Black, that is. Don't tell me you've never been hearin' of any Sirius Black?"

"No, never," Hope said, eyeing the paper curiously, though, now that she did think about it, the name did sound slightly familiar, though from where Hope couldn't be certain.

"'E's a murderer," Stan said, gleeful to be the bringer of morbid news. "Got himself locked up in Azkaban for it."

"Azkaban?" Hope said in confusion. That name did sound familiar...was that the place Hagrid had
been sent to, the one he was terrified of? "The prison? How did he escape the prison?"

Stan's eyes widened dramatically and Hope wondered if he was pulling her leg for all this. "That's the question, innit? He's the first one that done it!" His voice dropped. "He was a big supporter of You-Know-Who. I reckon you've 'eard of him."

Well, Hope couldn't disagree with him there.

Hope didn't trust Minister Fudge from the second she saw him last year from underneath her invisibility cloak with Ron, and she certainly didn't trust him this year. That pseudo-fatherly smile of hers seriously freaked her out, and she was seriously regretting agreeing to not stray back into Muggle London, because it was pretty awesome...though she supposed she could always raid Flourish and Blotts for new material.

Hope thumbed through the letter from Hogwarts that listed the new book requirements for the year as she walked down the street, only half paying attention to where she was going, at least until she heard someone calling her name. She looked up, twisting around slightly until she caught sight of the pale and dark face paired together.

"Dean, Seamus!"

She grinned as she skipped over to them, giving the pair a quick hug, because she was friends with them, even if they were just casual friends.

"Had a good summer?" Seamus asked with an impish grin, his Irish accent lilting his voice, as usual.

"Absolutely," Hope said with more than a touch of sarcasm. "What about you two? I guess you went between each other's houses?" You'd be hard pressed to find any other two friends tighter than Dean Thomas and Seamus Finnigan. The answering grins told her that her guess was true.

"Did you really blow up your aunt?" Seamus asked excitedly.

Hope's cheeks burned in embarrassment. "Has everyone heard about that?"

"Probably," Dean mused aloud, "you know, Rumour Grapevine and everything."

Hope groaned audibly. "Oh, Hades."

"So, anyways," Dean added as Hope attempted to hide her burning face in her hands, "you're going to get your books, right? We'll come with!"

"Er...okay," Hope said, a little flummoxed as they entered Flourish and Blotts.

Seamus and Dean were a little startled at the appearance of the Monster Book of Monsters, and Hope was eternally grateful that Hagrid had sent it to her as a birthday present (though why she had yet to understand).

"I need Rune Translation and Unfogging the Future," Hope said when the griping man finally managed to free two books from the cage. He grunted, bobbing his head as he lumbered off to find the two books she needed.

"You're taking Care of Magical Creatures, Divination, and Ancient Runes?" Seamus asked incredulously. "What is wrong with you?"

Hope's nose twitched with irritation. "I'm just fascinated with...stuff..." her words trailed off as her
eyes fell to a different book, on which a great black dog was depicted. That very dog was identical to the one she had seen on Privet Drive.

*Death Omens – What to Do When You Know the Worst Is Coming.* Death omens? She couldn't help but swallow nervously...but death omens weren't real, were they?
Okay, now Hope had just about convinced herself that death omens couldn't possibly real. People didn't just die for no reason, there was always a cause of death…wasn't there? She exhaled loudly in her silent room late that night. She didn't survive an attack from Voldemort himself, three times in a row (as she was counting him as Tom Riddle), and the venom of a basilisk to be scared to death by a black dog that could have been a stray and clearly needed a few good meals. That would just be stupid. Just because she saw a damned dog didn't mean that it was real…it was late and she had been running on adrenaline.

She groaned loudly, smacking her face in her hands before finally pulling herself from the bed and into the shower.

The bad thing about rooming at the Leaky Cauldron was that you got a lot of stares if you were Hope Lily Potter, and that wasn't necessarily a good thing. Every morning she'd eat her breakfast at the bar with her back firmly facing the opposite direction, though that didn't stop her from hearing the ever-present whispers that followed her everywhere she went. It was really quite annoying, but Hope couldn't stop them from doing it (and if she changed her looks too much then she'd get even more attention).

So she kept her head down as she pulled out her roughly carved wand and tapped the third brick on the left above the trash bin, stepping back as the barrier melted away to reveal Diagon Alley. The first time she'd seen it had been amazing and she'd been in complete awe, but every time she had done it since then, the awe had worn off and was now starting to become a bit boring.

She strolled down the street with her long hair plaited into a loose ponytail that was flung over one shoulder, her fringe long enough that it could hide the scar with ease. She tried to ignore the glistening beautiful broom mounted on a podium, but it was really distracting. Its shaft was shining and its tail bristles were sleek and unmarred by many gusts of wind. Hope had seen very few things as beautiful, and that was saying something.

She sighed forlornly as she passed it by, returning to Flourish and Blotts once more to skim the shelves for something good to read. She tapped her finger gently across each of the thick spines with varying heavy lettering, finally coming to a stop at a tome labelled: The Duelling Arts: Book One.

Duell...hm, that could be potentially interesting, and she could probably get Ron and Hermione interested (Hermione for the bookish part and Ron for the action-y part). So, really, it was the perfect book, and it wasn't too expensive. She mentally debated for a few seconds before grabbing it and the book next to it, A History of Duelling.

Obviously she had her topic for the year picked out.

The owner was rather pleased by her return, but that was probably a mixture of making money and not having to remove one of those Monster Book of Monsters from that cage in the centre of the shop that shook and rattled violently, and he waved her off with a toothy grin as she swung the bag the books had been placed in on her wrist.

Hope paused outside of the door to the shop and pulled out the roughly tied ponytail, before hiking it high up on her head, allowing her scar to be more obvious. It was too nice for her to not wear her hair up for fear of recognition, it was pointless to hide now; she had a very distinctive face. Then she sighed and began making her way smoothly down the street, despite how packed it was.
She saw a number of her friends as she did so, including poor Neville who had lost his supply list and gave her a beyond grateful look when she gave him hers ("Just ignore the Ancient Runes books," she said), and Katie arguing with Oliver as they walked together, their hands interlocked (Katie had blushed when Hope winked at her), she gave a few waves to some of her casual friends as she made her way back into the Leaky Cauldron and up to her room, but there was someone waiting outside her room.

George Weasley hadn't been standing there long enough to lose his nerve, but enough to question it. However, none of his indecision showed on his face as he turned to see her.

Hope's lips curled upwards into a bright smile when she saw him, bolstering George's confidence enough to make him make up his mind.

He was taller than the last time she'd seen him, and his time in the Egyptian sun seemed to have made even more freckles appear on his skin. His eyes seemed brighter, or maybe that was just her, and his hair was longer. She could feel her heart beating faster at the sight of him, because he looked utterly gorgeous.

"George!" she said, her voice holding obvious surprise, but also obvious pleasure. "I wasn't sure if you and your family would be back yet!"

George grinned slightly, loping over to her, noticing how much she had grown. Her hair was longer and now tied in a high ponytail (he noticed that the scar was rather obvious now…or maybe that was an accident), her cheekbones were sharper and her face thinner, hollowed out slightly from the baby fat that had finally left her.

"Well," he said, realizing that he'd just been staring at her and not saying anything, "term does start tomorrow."

Hope, who had begun to smirk when he had silently been ogling her, rolled her eyes, placing her hands on her hips and canting her head slightly to the side, arching an eyebrow. It was the "Oh, really?" look that he was so very used to by now.

"I had no idea," she said in amusement.

"Then perhaps another trip to the hospital wing is in order," George said in a mild voice.

"Oh, shut up," she laughed, dropping her bag to the floor in order to throw her arms around his wide shoulders and hug him tightly. The feel of his arms around her back filled her stomach with butterflies, but she ignored them, pulling away from him enough that they were standing inches apart.

"But," Hope pondered, "I must be crazy to put up with you for so long, Weasley."

"Oh, you must be?" George asked amused, his fingers twitching to interlock with hers, but he restrained himself.

"Yes, I—"

However, Hope never finished her thought, because at that very moment the dam had burst and George had cupped her cheek and leaned down to press his lips against hers. She couldn't help the small sound of startled surprise that escaped her mouth, nor could she help the heavy flush to her cheeks and the increased beat of her heart.

Hope had never been kissed before, much less by one of the school's troublemakers. His lips were
soft, but firm, moulding perfectly to her lips and making the butterflies that had already been in her stomach begin to flutter wildly as if attempting to escape. The kiss wasn't gentle, but at the same time, she didn't think she'd ever expected it to be. The kiss wasn't harsh, because it wasn't like having your lips pressed to a rock. It was the perfect in between that Hope couldn't quite describe. It made her feel...well, she couldn't quite describe that, either.

George could feel her lips curling under his as she reached up to rake her hands through his hair and finally kiss him back, filling him with so much relief that his shoulders actually sagged slightly, his lips breaking from hers, causing her blink owlishly at him, her lips tingling from the kiss.

"Well," she said dryly, her voice a few octaves higher than she intended before she cleared her throat, righting it once more, "it seems you have the perfect way to shut me up."

That made George grin widely, because he had been kind of worried about how she would respond to such a bold action. "On the plus side," he said, "you have a way to shut me up, too."

She sniggered, her hands dropping from his hair to hang from the sides of his jacket.

"So...Hogsmeade weekend?" George asked. "You and me?"

"Why, Mister Weasley," Hope said pseudo-coly, "are you asking me on a date?"

"Why, Miss Potter," George said in a falsely solemn voice, "I do believe I am."

"I...er, think I'd like that," Hope said quietly, her deep blush returning as she tucked a bit of her longer fringe behind her ear, "I'd really like that."

He grinned brightly and kissed her soundly again, leaving her breathless and blushing like the setting sun.

"Oh, yeah," he said, suddenly remembering something, "Ron and Hermione went looking for you..."

"They did?" Hope's face brightened further at the mention of her best friends. "I'll go find them. See you at dinner!"

She pressed a chaste kiss to his cheek before bounding off towards the stairs and down into the busy street once more, searching for her friends, leaving a bemused George behind.

They weren't as hard to find as one would have thought, sitting at a table in front of Florean Fortescue's Ice Cream Parlour.

Hermione's face, brown from her time in France, brightened when she saw her, a beaming smile morphing onto her lips. "Hope!"

Hope gave the pair of them a jaunty wave. "Hello, nice summer?"

The three of them shared a laugh.

"We were out looking for you for awhile, but you weren't at Madam Malkin's, the Apothecary, Eeylops, or even Flourish and Blotts, we thought you'd at least be there."

"Sorry," Hope said, rubbing the back of her head slightly as heat flooded her cheeks, her head still on that mind blowing came that she had received only a few minutes previously.

"So, I'm guessing George snogged you," Ron said in blunt observation, "otherwise I couldn't
imagine what would embarrass you so much."

Hermione gave a gasp and a smile, clapping her hands together. "Oh, did he?!

"I didn't really think George would do it," Ron admitted, "it seems like more of Fred thing than a George thing, but maybe he thought you'd say no to a date."

Hope blinked, the blush still prevalent on her face. "Because it's not like we haven't been flirting for two years, or anything."

Ron shrugged his shoulders. "You know George; he's confident about everything until he's left time to brood about it." He eyes Hope speculatively. "Actually, that sounds a little like you too."

Hope gave him a scowl, making her two friends share a laugh at her expense before leaving to finish their business in Diagon Alley.

Hope liked Crookshanks, even if Ron didn't; the cat had a lot of personality. He wasn't very pretty, true, but he was very intelligent. Ron, however, was holding a personal grudge against him for attacking his rat, Scabbers, when he was trying to buy some rat tonic for him.

"He needs rest and relaxation!" Ron was complaining to Hermione who was fervently ignoring him as Hope scratched behind her cat's ear as they walked, earning her a purr of contentment. "How's he going to get it with that thing around?"

Crookshanks gave a cranky meow at his words, making Hermione and Hope grin.

"Oh, stop worrying," Hermione snapped, "Crookshanks will be in Hope and my dorm, and Scabbers will be in yours."

However, Hope couldn't help but think, that wouldn't stop the cat from leaving their dorm to go into Ron's in search of dinner, but she didn't say that; why poke the dragon in the eye when it was already awake?

"Poor Crookshanks," Hermione cooed, stroking the cat's ginger fur, "that witch said he'd been in there for ages; no one wanted him."

"Aw…" Hope said in sympathy at the same time Ron said "I wonder why" with heavy sarcasm, earning a glare from both girls as they re-entered the Leaky Cauldron. The pub and inn was pretty packed, as it should be because everyone was doing last minute shopping and they had to go through the Leaky Cauldron to get to Diagon Alley, but it seemed that Mr. Weasley had managed to snag an empty chair and was reading the Daily Prophet with surprising intensity.

And then he looked up and saw Ron and Hermione with the girl he was most concerned about. Hope seemed blissfully unaware of the worries that plagued his mind and the minds of every witch and wizard in Britain, and that ever present worry had a name: Sirius Black.

Hope had no way of knowing just what horrible things that her father's old friend had done, and he hoped it would stay that way. If she knew, Mr. Weasley was certain that she'd stop at nothing to hunt him down and demand the answers from the mass murderer herself, even if it meant throwing herself right in the way of death and danger. Stubborn to a fault was a way that George had described her, and he wasn't wrong, just as Ron had described her as the most loyal Gryffindor you could ever find (though Mr. Weasley was certain that Hope would claim the same of his son). To meet someone who was the complete opposite of what you were…Mr. Weasley was almost certain that it wouldn't end pretty, which was why she needed to be aware of what Black was capable of…just maybe not
told all of the story.

He forced a smile onto his face as he met Hope's bright green eyes. "Hope! How are you?"

Surprise flitted across her face; perhaps his smile wasn't as much of a smile that he had been going for. "Fine," Hope said, her eyes shifting to the photo on the front page as she, Ron, and Hermione joined him at the table. "Have they not caught him yet? How long has he been out?"

"Three weeks," Mr. Weasley said solemnly, "and they still haven't caught him. They've pulled us off all our regular jobs at the Ministry to try and find him, but no luck so far."

"Well, that's not very smart," Hermione said, before blushing slightly when the attention was turned on her.

"I think Hermione means," Hope continued for her friend, "that how is someone like you, who disenchants muggle artefacts daily, not to be rude or anything, going to be expected to hunt down a killer, something you weren't trained to do?"

Hermione nodded in agreement. "Wouldn't that affect your salary, the salary of everyone working at the Ministry?"

"We are getting a bit of backlog," Mr. Weasley admitted, smiling at the pair, "but we are getting paid to at least try, so that's something, but most of us will be back to our normal jobs by the end of the week, so that'll be a relief."

"So, who's going to be in charge of catching Black, then?" Ron couldn't help but ask.

"The Azkaban guards, I don't doubt."

The four were interrupted rather suddenly by the appearance Mrs. Weasley, Fred and George, Percy, and Ginny. The amount of red hair always made Hope have to blink her eyes a few times to adjust and debate about changing her colour, but she liked the dark red too much.

"Hello, Hope, dear," Mrs. Weasley said kindly, giving her a tight hug. "How was your holiday?"

Hope struggled to not laugh, the exertion making patching of pink appear on her cheekbones as her eyes twinkled like the stars. "Er...it was alright."

Fred and George sniggered behind their mother's back, earning a light glare from the Potter.

"Hope," Percy said, his voice as serious as ever as he extended a courtly hand for a shake. "How nice to see you."

"Hello, Percy," Hope said, struggling now to not burst into laughter, only to have it leak out into her voice.

"I hope you are well?" Percy continued.

Hope would have thought that he was pulling for a laugh, but she knew how Percy could be, and serious (as well as pompous) was a great word to use to describe the recently named Head Boy. "Er...very well——"

"Hope!" Fred cried, pushing his older brother none-too-gently from the green-eyed girl and giving her a deep bow at the waist. Hope was impressed that he hadn't fallen over. "Simply splendid to see you old girl——"
"Marvellous!" George said, shaking Hope's hand fervently with a grin at the faintly amused look on her face. "Absolutely spiffing!"

She arched an eyebrow even as their mother said, "That's enough, now."

"Mum!" Fred cried, turning on his mother and, acting as though they hadn't spoken in months, wrung her hand. "How really corking to see you—"

Hope smacked a hand against her forehead and groaned. "You two are really too much." She gave a serious stare to Mrs. Weasley. "Mrs. Weasley I'm still not quite sure how you're still alive after living with them for so long."

The pair sniggered again, waggling their eyebrows suggestively.

"Don't make me kill you," she threatened them mildly.

George's eyes twinkled. "You won't kill me, I'm entirely too good a kisser."

Mrs. Weasley shared a look of surprise mixed with amusement with her husband, whose eyes glimmered and lips twitched. Hope's face turned a beet red. "Now who said anything about you being a good kisser?"

"Who indeed?" Fred mused to his brother. "It must have been when she agreed to that date?"

"And because I agree to a date that automatically makes him a good kisser?" Hope asked, crossing her arms as the rest watched them like Hope and the twins were some sort of live reality show.

"Well, yeah," they both said, "that's pretty much how it goes."

She rolled her eyes in disdain, her cheeks now only a faint pink. "I give up on you two."

"Probably the best bet," George agreed, looping an arm over her shoulders and kissing her cheek.

Hope glared, pink-cheeked as they all laughed.

"Hope? It's me, can I come in?"

Hope looked up from the duelling history book that she had been reading at Hermione's voice at the door. She marked her place and crossed the room to wrench the door open to find Hermione outside, already dressed in her pyjamas.

"I wasn't interrupting you, was I?" Hermione asked hopefully, noticing that her friend was wearing her pair of reading glasses perched on the bridge of her nose.

"No," Hope assured her, "I've already finished packing most of my things; I was just reading. Come on in."

Hermione stepped through the threshold to sit on the edge of Hope's bed before she had even shut the door. Hope sat down next to her, crisscrossing her lags on the mattress. "So, what did you want to talk about?"

"It's about the classes I'm taking—"

"Too many," Hope added, "I'll probably drop one by the end of the year, but I think you're trying to do too much."
Hermione's face fell slightly. "I just really want—"

"I know, but you might end up making yourself sick," Hope added. "If you want to take all the classes, that's fine, but I don't really think it's very healthy for you to take so many. Remember how hard I had to work first year to get up to date after that broom accident?"

Hermione winced slightly. The amount of work had resulted in Hope having several sleepless nights, but she had made it up eventually.

"I think," she said slowly, "that I'll make a decision at the end of the year, that way I'll know which classes I want to stay in and which I want to leave."

Hope shrugged. "If that's what you want."

Hermione smiled at how understanding Hope could be in regards to Hermione's studiousness.

"Thanks, Hope," she said in relief, "for listening."

"No problem," Hope said as they both winced at the yells coming from the room next door. "Why don't you go to bed, and I'll figure out what the bloody hell they're doing."

"Thanks," Hermione said in relief. She had been contemplating going to yell at them herself, but she was already in her bed clothes, and she was certain that she would feel awkward about them seeing her like that.

Hope scowled as she looked in on the room that had been torn apart by Ron and Percy, the latter who was still yelling at his youngest brother.

"What are the two of you going on about?" she demanded. "Some of us are trying to get some sleep around here!"

"My Head Boy badge is gone," Percy said, his blazing face turning to Hope who had to resist the urge to roll her eyes and sigh.

"So's Scabbers' rat tonic," Ron noticed, checking under the bed and in his trunk. "I think I might've left it in the bar—"

"You're not going anywhere until you've found my badge!" Percy snapped.

This time Hope really did sigh, and then the dam burst.

"Shut up!" she snarled, making both of their jaws snap shut. "If you want to argue, argue quietly! Ron, I'll check the bar for Scabbers' stuff, alright?" And without asking his opinion on the matter, she strode down the hall and made it down the stairs and halfway to the parlour when she heard a pair of voices arguing. It was Mrs. Weasley and Mr. Weasley. Now, Hope could eavesdrop when she wanted to, but when the parents of your friend were fighting, you tended to look the other way, however, the moment her name was spoken, the resolve to leave it alone vanished and she leaned in close.

"It makes no sense not to tell her," Mr. Weasley whispered testily, his voice only echoing slightly in the darkness. "Hope has the right to know. I've tried to tell Fudge, but he insists on treating Hope like a child. She's thirteen years old and—"

"Arthur, the truth would terrify her!" Mrs. Weasley hissed back, making Hope frown slightly. "Do you really want to send Hope back to school with that hanging over her? For heaven's sake,
"I don't want to make her miserable," Mr. Weasley refuted, "I want to put her on her guard! You know what sort of trouble those three get into! Hope's ended up in the Forbidden Forest twice already, and Ron once! But Hope mustn't do that this year! When I think what could have happened to her that night she ran away from home! If the Knight Bus hadn't picked her up, I'm prepared to bet that she would have been dead before the Ministry found her."

Hope swallowed thickly, breathing in sharply. This couldn't have anything to do with that escaped convict, could it?

"But she's not dead," Mrs. Weasley insisted, "she's fine, she's better than fine, so what's the point—"

"Molly." It sounded like Mr. Weasley was straining to remain calm with his wife. "They say Sirius Black's mad, and maybe he is, but he was clever enough to escape Azkaban, and that's supposed to be impossible. It's been three weeks, and no one's seen hide nor hair of him, and I don't care what Fudge keeps telling the Daily Prophet, we're no nearer catching Black than we are inventing self-spelling wands. The only thing we know for sure is what Black's after—"

"But Hope will be perfectly safe at Hogwarts."

Hope's heart fell straight down into her stomach. What?

"We thought Azkaban was perfectly safe," Mr. Weasley said bitterly. "If Black can break out of Azkaban, he can break into Hogwarts."

"But no one's really sure that Black's after Hope—"

Hope flinched back slightly both from the words and from the echoing sound of a fist colliding with wood.

"Molly," he said, his voice even more carefully controlled than before, "how many times do I have to tell you? They didn't report it in the press because Fudge wanted it kept quiet, but Fudge went out to Azkaban the night Black escaped. The guards told Fudge that Black's been talking in his sleep for awhile now. Always the same two words: 'At Hogwarts.' Black is deranged, Molly, and he wants Hope dead. If you ask me, he thinks murdering Hope will bring You-Know-Who back to power. Black lost everything the night Hope stopped You-Know-Who, and he's had twelve years alone in Azkaban to brood on that."

Hope took a step back, a hand clamped onto her mouth as she felt bile rising in her throat. Sirius Black wanted her dead? She gulped with difficulty as her heart beat frantically against her ribcage, quite different from the way it had when George had kissed her earlier that day.

Now those death omens were starting to make sense.
"Black is deranged, Molly, and he wants Hope dead."

Those words rang in Hope's ears well into the night. Hope couldn't have imagined someone hating her so much that they would want her dead, well, if you excluded Voldemort, that is. But Voldemort was an entirely different matter, if you asked Hope; the only thing he seemed to want was her dead.

Hope slept restlessly that night and awoke far too early in her opinion, but she couldn't find a way to go back to sleep so she forced herself awake and into a refreshing shower to smooth the tension from her muscles. She rung her hair out with a bit more ferocity than she probably should have, ripping a few hairs from her head by mistake, much to her grumbled annoyance as she braided the dark red locks in a flurry of fingers.

Sirius Black…just who was he?

Unconsciously she raised a hand to brush against the upraised scar, feeling the roughness under her hand that she had long since memorized and then she sighed, picking up the small number of books that she had scattered about the room and wrenching open the lid of her trunk, earning her a squawk of indignation from where Hedwig was perching on top of her cage.

"Sorry, Hedwig," Hope apologized quickly, giving her owl the barest of smiles as she reached over to stroke her pure white feathers lightly, ignoring how Hedwig nipped lightly at her fingers. "I'm just…scatter-brained, I suppose."

Hedwig hooted in understanding, nudging the side of her face slightly into Hope's hand. Hope glanced out the window and frowned. Diagon Alley was still dark and the sun hadn't yet begun to rise. She sighed audibly.

"Great…I need to start waking up and going to bed like a normal person," she grumbled under her breath as she checked the expanded sections of her trunk, thanking the heavens for the thousandth time that she had a magical trunk as opposed to a normal one; she would have never fit all of her things inside if it was normal.

She almost closed the lid of her trunk when she caught sight of a familiar red binding. She rested her hand against it before pulling it out without a second thought, flipping it open to a random page. As sad as it was, Hope hadn't really looked much through the album Hagrid had given her. True she had never had any pictures of them, but sometimes looking at them made her sad. What would they have done different? Would they have liked how her life had gone, thus far? Or would they have reprimanded her?

She shook her head, a surprised laugh escaping her lips. From what she'd heard, James would congratulate her on getting into trouble so often while her mother would scold her. At least, that's how she thought it would it would be.

She gaze dropped to the first picture she saw. It was of four boys, all with beaming smiles and their arms thrown over each other's shoulders. She recognized her father, of course, the description left it impossible to be anyone else with that messy hair and that troublemaker smile. The boy on the right was equally as handsome with dark hair that fell to his shoulders and silver eyes; she couldn't help but notice that his smile was more on the roguish side than her father's. The boy to her father's left was obviously the Hermione of the group. She knew her father was intelligent, of course, but this boy actually looked the part. His book bag was strung on his shoulder, filled with heavy books if
Hope was seeing that correctly, making his tired face make more sense, but not his scars or his greying hair. And the last boy, he seemed a bit far from the norm compared to them. He was chubby and had nowhere near their good looks.

She frowned slightly, he didn't fit at all. That wasn't to say that he couldn't have been friends with her father because of his appearance, only that it was clear that the other three boys were superior in some way. But maybe he had something that made up for it—oh, she wouldn't know.

She flipped to a few pages later, to her parents' wedding day. Lily's smile could have outshone the sun and James' eyes were alight with happiness. She lifted a finger to trace over the curve of James' smile and the almond shape of her mother's eye. She couldn't help but wonder how long their happiness would last after this picture, before they had to go into hiding.

She sighed again, flipping the album closed and replacing it inside her trunk, along with Hedwig's empty cage.

"Do you want to go ahead and fly to Hogwarts?" she asked the snowy owl, who was highly intelligent, in case you forgot. "I think you'll prefer that to being stuck in your cage all day on the Hogwarts Express."

Hedwig hooted in agreement, nipping her fingers again in affection before soaring out of the open window.

The room felt a bit empty without her animal companion (as Hope refused to call her her pet, because Hedwig was too amazing for that), and so Hope decided at long last to simply drag her trunk down the stairs, as the sun had finally begun to rise on the new day.

"Some eggs and sausage for me, Tom," she called into the kitchen as she pulled her trunk up beside one of the tables and plunked down into one of the open seats.

"You've got it, Hope," the man called from within as she picked up a stray Daily Prophet from the table; it must have just come, seeing as it was that day's date in the corner. Sirius Black's face glared at her from the front page, just as it had since she had come to the Leaky Cauldron, but it may have been longer, he had been out for three weeks.

…new leads…vanished without a trace…Muggles have been told that Black is carrying a gun…murdered thirteen people with a single curse…

They seemed to be rerunning the same article every day with very slight differences. She forced herself to not roll her eyes at the person in charge of the Daily Prophet, thanking Tom politely as he slid the food in front of her, taking the bit of silver that she forked over with a grin before returning to his duties of cleaning of tables and pulling chairs off from the top of those tables.

"Hope, what are you doing up so early?" She looked up and into Mr. Weasley's familiar blue eyes which were coloured in surprise.

Hope gave a noncommittal grunt, swallowing a bit of her eggs as she did so. Then she shrugged. "When I'm up, I'm up," she said without too much concern to the few hours that she could have slept in. "That's usually how it works, ask anyone in Gryffindor Tower." She stabbed a sausage and placed it in her mouth, chewing it ruthlessly before swallowing and looking up and at Mr. Weasley again. This time he had a look of contemplation instead. "Mr. Weasley, is something wrong?" Could he be thinking about telling her about what he and his wife had been yelling about the previous night?
"Hope," he said finally, "there is something I need to talk to you about." He glanced around to check and see if anyone was close enough to overhear them, but he didn't see anyone.

"Oh, it's alright, Mr. Weasley," Hope assured him as she pushed her empty plate aside. "I already know about it."

This information seemed to stun the man who gaped uncomprehending at her. "You know? How could you know?"

A bit brazenly, Hope admitted, "I heard you and Mrs. Weasley arguing about it last night." Then, adding as afterthought, she said, "Sorry."

He didn't seem as concerned about her overhearing his argument with his wife, more of how she had heard what he had said. "That's not the way I'd have chosen for you to find out," he said, his fingers twitching in nervousness.

"It's fine," Hope said, rolling her eyes. Honestly, why were adults so dead set against children knowing anything? It was really annoying. "Just think of it like this, this way I know what's going on and you haven't broken your word to Fudge."

"Hope," he said, a bit stunned by the lack of fear her green eyes held, but that was to be expected after all, this was Hope, "aren't you scared?"

"No," Hope said, arching an eyebrow slightly, "well, I do want to know why a madman would be after me and all, but really, when you think about it, Sirius Black can't be worse than Voldemort, can he?"

She waited patiently as he gave the typical flinch to the name of the Dark Lord responsible for so much death in the First Wizarding War. Come on, it was just a name!

"Hope," he said choosing his words carefully, "I knew you were made of stronger stuff than Fudge seems to think, and I'm obviously pleased that you're not scared..." he cut himself off looking more tired and older than Hope had ever seen him look.

Hope's lips curled downwards slightly. "Maybe I'm just ordinary," she said in disregard, "maybe I'm just foolish."

The smile he gave her told her that he didn't believe that for a second. And then it faded as quickly as it came. "Hope, I want you to give me your word—"

"That I won't get into trouble?" Hope asked incredulously. "Well, that's not going to happen if George and I keep hanging out." Her cheeks flushed slightly as she said the last part and she found herself looking everywhere but at the boy in question's father.

His lips twitched slightly at the mention of one of his sons that went hand in hand with trouble, but then he frowned seriously at her. "I want you to promise that you won't go looking for Black."

Hope goggled at him, her eyes flickering hazel for a second, making her look a bit more like a mesh of her parents than just taking after her mother. "Excuse me?" she asked, completely stunned. "Why would I go looking for him? You're the one who said he wants me dead!"

"Yes," Mr. Weasley agreed, wincing slightly; she must have heard the whole conversation, "but there are things you might hear—just—" But whatever else he had intended to say was cut off rather suddenly by the thundering of footsteps as the other occupants of the inn slowly awoke and made their way downstairs.
Hope's eyes were drawn back to the photo of Sirius Black and she found herself drinking in his appearance more than she should have. That ratty hair reminded her a bit of that great black dog that she'd seen in Surrey before she had come here, and those eyes...there were so haunted. But she shouldn't sympathize, she reminded herself, this was a man that had killed thirteen people with a single curse, a man that followed Voldemort. He deserved to be that way, she thought viciously.

George found her hand under the table as the rest of his family and Hermione spoke animatedly. She blushed at the contact, looking up from the newspaper and into his eyes.

"Are you alright?" he mouthed silently to her, concern furrowing his eyebrows.

Her smile didn't quite reach her eyes, but at least she didn't look quite as ready to kill something as she had a few moments previously.

She gave him a jerky nod and squeezed his fingers lightly before turning her attention once more to the newspaper as she opened it with difficulty, using only one hand, and continued to read with her fingers interlocked with his for the duration of the breakfast.

She still didn't agree with what Mr. Weasley had said about her. She wasn't made of tougher stuff, at least, that was what she thought.

Remus Lupin's consciousness wavered at the sound of the compartment door sliding open and the sound of three voices arguing slightly as they stowed their trunks.

"You could have gone and sat with George, you know," the first female voice said, "we wouldn't have minded."

"Nah," said the second female voice, scoffing lightly, much like James could be when he spoke, "I asked him if he would mind that I just spent the ride with you lot, he didn't, so here I am."

There was a third gagging noise to which Hope, it must have been Hope, snapped, "Oh, shut up Ron!"

Hope's eyes turned towards the slumbering older man that was hunched in the corner against the window. "Who's that?" she asked, taking in his greying brown hair and the scars across his face. Her eyes narrowed slightly.

"There was a man 'ere to see you," the nurse said as she tucked the covers in around the child who had barely awoken from her coma.

"A man?" Hope asked blankly. "Who?"

"Not quite sure," the woman said with a shrug, "'ad a few scars on 'is face, 'e was going prematurely gray." She waggled her eyebrows suggestively at the ten year old. "Not too bad on the eyes, though. Said 'is name was Moony, know 'im?"

Hope couldn't say that she had.

"We can look for a different compartment, if you want," Hermione offered, noticing the look of contemplation that her friend was wearing towards the man.

"Hm?" Hope asked startled, but then she realized that she had been staring a bit at the man and she blushed. "Oh, no, it's fine."
"Who is he anyways?" Ron asked, sitting down beside Hermione and giving the sleeping man a look over. "He's not a student, so he'd have to be—"

"Professor R.J. Lupin," Hermione recited for him, reading off of the suitcase.

"How do you know?" Ron said before giving Hope a meaningful glance that made her grin. "How is it that she knows everything?"

"It's on his suitcase, Ronald," Hermione said in a voice that was clipped with impatience.

"Oh."

Hope sniggered slightly before casting another look to the man. "Think he's really asleep?" she wondered aloud.

"I suppose so," Hermione mused, her eyebrows quirking at the question. "Why?"

"Because I've got to tell you something," Hope said, checking to make sure the door of the compartment was shut before opening her mouth and spilling all of what she had heard the previous night to her friends. She wasn't too surprised that they took the news worse than she did, but what was she supposed to expect? It wasn't like Ron or Hermione had a homicidal maniac after their blood every year.

"You'll have to be really, really careful, Hope!" Hermione said, worry colouring her voice. "Don't go looking for trouble!"

"I don't!" Hope said in a bit of irritation. "But Trouble is attracted to me, even if it is a one-sided relationship…"

Neither of them cracked a smile at her terrible joke.

"And how thick would Hope have to be to go looking for some bloke who wants to put her six feet under?" Ron demanded on Hermione, his voice shaking slightly.

"Guys," Hope said dryly, "I'm right here."

"Sorry," they both apologized quickly, making her roll her eyes.

"How does someone escape from Azkaban?" Hope asked Ron instead, seeing as he knew the most about Wizarding things as he was a Pure-blood.

"No idea," he said seriously, "no one's done it before, ever. And he was a top-security prisoner too; imagine how many of the Azkaban guards he had to pass to get out." He shivered.

Hope and Hermione shared a look of confusion at the mention of the guards of Azkaban, but they didn't bring it up again, instead moving to talk about something much less dreary than Azkaban: the village of Hogsmeade.

"What exactly is in Hogsmeade?" Hermione asked curiously. "The books I had didn't tell me much about it…"

"There's Honeydukes," Ron said dreamily, "it's this sweetshop where they've got everything… Pepper Imps –they make you smoke at the mouth– and great fat Chocoballs full of strawberry mousse and clotted cream, and really excellent sugar quills, which you can suck on in class and just look like you're thinking what to write next, and massive sherbert balls that make you levitate—"
It was clear that food and sweets were the only thing on Ron's mind.

"George has promised me some Butterbeer from the Three Broomsticks," Hope said with a shrug, though her cheeks pinked slightly as she mentioned him.

Hermione gave her an amused smile, but Ron had only fastened onto the part about 'Butterbeer'.

"Oh, Butterbeer," he practically moaned. "I heard that stuff is to die for! Way better than Pumpkin Juice."

"So basically it's like the soda of the Wizarding World," Hope drawled out to Hermione, rolling her eyes slightly making her friend giggle.

"What's soe-dah?" Ron asked in confusion, drawing out the word longer than he should have, sounding the word out slowly.

"Soda," Hope sighed, "my dear, sheltered friend, is one of the greatest inventions known to mankind. Hermione, please explain to Mister Weasley what he is missing."

Hermione laughed lightly at the posh accent her friend had adopted for the purpose of sarcasm (which was also one of the greatest inventions known to man-kind, if you asked Hope).

"Alright, Ron," she said in a long-suffering voice, "soda is…"

Hope leaned back and watched as Hermione patiently explained the concept of soda to their wizard-raised friend who asked so many questions about the drink that she had to wonder if he was channelling Hermione (despite the fact that she was still alive and sitting beside him). She couldn't help but smile at how a faint flush dusted Hermione's cheeks at how much attention Ron was paying to her, but she couldn't for the life of her tell if Ron was aware of what he was doing or not.

Hope had almost been asleep when the train finally began to slow down, coming to a sudden halt, becoming stationary in the raging rainstorm that was outside the train.

"Great," Ron said in relief, "I'm starving!"

"But," Hermione checked her watch in confusion as Hope rubbed the sleep from her eyes, "we can't be there yet. It's another hour until we reach Hogwarts, at least."

"Then why're we stopping?" Hope asked in confusion, unable to stifle a yawn.

Hope stood up and unlocked the compartment door and sliding it open to look out into the corridor, along with a good number of heads. She saw a familiar brown-haired Hufflepuff.

"Oi, Diggory!" she called over to him, a few heads down.

He looked in her direction, searching for the person who had spoke before landing on her. "Yeah, Potter?" he called back.

"What gives?" she demanded.

"Dunno!" he yelled down to her. "Maybe we've broken down."

Hope groaned and withdrew her head, letting the compartment door slide shut again precisely two seconds before the lamps that lit the entire train flickered out.
"What now?" Ron complained, rubbing his sleeve against the window. "Hey, I think someone's outside…they're getting onto the train, I think…"

"Who is it?" Hermione demanded, leaning over to look out the window as well.

"I can't tell," Ron muttered, "I think they're wearing black cloaks, or something…"

"Ow!" Hope complained as the door slid open once more, disgorging someone who fell on her legs. "What-Neville!"

She reached out blindly for him before finding a limb that must have been his arm and tugging him into a standing position.

"Hope?" he groaned slightly which was nothing compared to how Hope's legs felt now. "What's going on?"

"How am I supposed to know?" Hope said sullenly before Neville was thrown into her by the entrance of a second person making Hope give a low grunt and Neville a stuttered apology.

"Who's that?" Hermione questioned to the shadow.

"Who's that?" a voice answered her.

"Ginny?" Hermione guessed.

"Hermione?" Ginny guessed.

"What're you doing here?"

"I was looking for my brothers, but I couldn't find anyone, so I figured Ron had to be somewhere close to the back—" Ginny started to explain.

"Guys," Ron said, cutting through all of the voices, "doesn't it feel a little…cold to you?"

All the voices ceased in a matter of seconds, finding that he was right. The windows hand begun to form ice and the bottle of water beside Professor Lupin had completely frozen over. Hope breathed out mist with every exhalation, her heart beating slightly faster than normal as she rubbed her hands over her arms in an effort to warm them.

She opened her mouth to speak, but she found the words quite strangled from her lips as a slimy, skeletal grey hand slid the door open (for who knows how many times that night). The hand did belong to a dark cloak, as Ron had mentioned before, but the most terrifying thing about it was that she couldn't see a face of any kind on it.

Neville gave a cry of fear beside her and she couldn't help but automatically shift her body slightly so it was positioned slightly before his. It was that movement that sealed her fate. The shadowy creature turned its head—it must have been—to her and she felt the fear grip her like nothing else had ever claimed her before.

It sucked in a deep breath that made the icy atmosphere increase by tenfold. Hope could feel the cold creeping inside of her into her very heart as the thing bent forward and down, closing the distance between her and it. She could feel its stale breath on her skin as it came even closer before her eyes rolled back and she fainted, falling to the floor in a dead faint. The last thing that she remembered was the scream of a woman, a woman begging for mercy.
A bright light flashed before her, shielding her, and then her eyes and ears were closed to the world, unaware of the voices of her friends above her. Or even of the man who had saved her, the man named Remus John Lupin, the man who always watched things unfold from the sidelines. The werewolf.

But she wouldn't know that.
Grim Awakenings

Her skin was cold to the touch and clammy, as if the warmth had left her flesh. She was as pale as death. For one terrifying second, Hermione thought she wasn't breathing, but then, to her silent relief, she inhaled, her chest rising as her lungs expanded.

Remus crouched down beside her, pressing two fingers against the side of her neck, ascertaining her pulse. His eyebrows furrowed slightly.

"What's wrong with her?!" Ron demanded, hovering close but not enough that he would bar Remus from assessing her.

"She'll be fine," Professor Lupin said, "she just faint—"

He was interrupted by someone opening the compartment door with a loud slam. The noise grated on Remus' heightened hearing which was even more sensitive because of the full moon the previous night. Still, he turned to see the figure illuminated in the doorway. He was older by a few years than any of the children in the compartment, but with the same bright ginger hair as two of them and wide blue eyes flooded with concern.

His face went completely white when he saw Hope's condition.

_Boyfriend_, Remus assumed with a light twinge. How old was she now? Thirteen? Her age was a far cry from the age that her parents had been when they had gone out on their first date.

"Hope!"

At his voice the girl roused faintly, her eyelids squeezing shut slightly before fluttering open accompanied by a sigh. Remus tried to keep his flinch toned down at the exact colour of green that Hope shared with her mother that was Hope's eyes.

"She doesn't like people comparing her too much to her parents," Minerva had warned him, "but the similarities are there. Just be careful how you talk to her. She isn't fragile, but try not to bring up the likeness until she knows you better. She's very touchy about them."

Remus couldn't imagine why she wouldn't be.

She strained to sit up, using the new ginger-haired boy's assistance, groaning slightly and pressing a hand to her forehead. "George?" she mumbled, blinking her eyes a few times at him to clear the blur until she could see him plainly. "Weren't you with Fred?"

George, as that must have been his name, chuckled slightly, holding her gingerly in his arms as he pulled her up and onto a seat. "I thought you, being attracted to trouble and all, might be having some problems."

For the first time, Remus saw a smile crack her pale face. "What's the matter, Wizard-boy? Jealous?"

"Only of you, Mystery-girl," he said with a cocky smirk that reminded Remus slightly of his old friend. It was obviously an inside joke, going by how the other occupants of the compartment were sharing looks of bemusement at the pair.

Hope's smile faltered and she pressed a hand to her mouth.
"The nauseas feeling will pass," Remus assured her, which in turn caused her attention to focus on him. He held back a wince. She took in the pallor of his skin, the scars on his face, and the greying of his hair, all in a matter of seconds.

"Do I know you?" she asked suddenly, furrowing her eyebrows together as she frowned. "I could swear I've seen you somewhere before…"

His smile was just a little too tight. "I don't think so, Hope."

"Hm," was all she said, scrubbing a hand at her face. "What were those things? And who was screaming?"

"A dementor," Remus said, deciding to answer her first question. He wasn't even sure that he wanted to address his best friend's daughter's greatest fear at the moment; he might have an emotional overload. "One of the guards of Azkaban."

"Weren't doing much guarding," Hope muttered under her breath, before jumping with everyone else as Remus snapped a bar of chocolate into pieces and giving them each a bit.

"Eat," he told them all, though his eyes rested more on Hope's than anyone else's, "It'll help. I need to speak to the driver, excuse me…"

Hope frowned after him. "I'm really sure I've seen him somewhere before," she mused out loud.

"Never mind that," Hermione said, disregarding Hope's curiosity as she leaned forward, forcing Hope to meet her concerned brown eyes, "are you alright?"

Hope wrinkled her nose in annoyance at the question, and slight confusion. "What happened?"

George squeezed the fingers of her free hand, making her feel a bit warm, but a good sort of warm.

"Well," Hermione began jerkily, her voice ringing with nervousness, "that thing –the dementor– stood there and look around –and it sort of focused on you and Neville, and you kind of pushed him back and then…" she shivered slightly, allowing Ron to take over for her.

"I thought you were having a fit or something," Ron said, his face pale and tense. "You went sort of rigid and fell out of your seat and started twitching—"

Hope gritted her teeth behind her lips, looking very much like she had turned to a statue.

At this point, Hermione found her voice again. "And Professor Lupin stepped over you, and walked toward the dementor, and pulled out his wand, and he said, 'None of us is hiding Sirius Black under our cloaks. Go.' But the dementor didn't move, so Lupin muttered something, and a silvery thing shot out of his wand at it, and it turned around and sort of glided away…"

"Hope? Are you alright?"

Hope looked up, forcing her eyes back into focus as she locked gazes with George's concerned blue eyes, and then she sighed. "It's nothing," she said, hardly trying to assure him, "I'm just feeling a little light-headed, that's all."

She leaned her head against George's shoulder, her eyes closing slightly. The sick feeling she had right now was both having to do with the dementor, but also having to do with shame. Why was it that she was the only one that had collapsed? She opened her eyes a bit more as the compartment door slid open once more as Professor Lupin returned.
"I haven't poisoned that chocolate, you know," he said when he saw that none of them had eaten it.

Hope bit into it tentatively, and she was surprised at how some of the clamminess and nausea left her as the chocolate spread warmth from her mouth all the way down to her toes, but there was still some that remained, but maybe that was just because of her self-loathing.

"We'll be at Hogwarts in ten minutes," Professor Lupin informed them. "Are you alright, Hope?"

It was then that Hope realized that he already knew her name, but at this point, she was feeling too sick to comment. "I'll be fine," she mumbled into George's shoulder, "I'm just going to…rest my…eyes…" and then she fell straight asleep.

"Will she be alright?" Hermione asked the new Defence Against the Dark Arts Professor.

"I'm sure she'll be fine," he tried to assure her, "she's just exhausted, it happens from time to time, she'll need to see Madam Pomfrey when we get to the school, though."

"Good luck with that," Ron said with a snort, making his younger sister and Neville (who had been silent until now) jump at the sound, "Hope hates hospital visits."

The older man's smile was a bit wry. It must have been a family trait.

Professor McGonagall had been worried to start with when Remus had sent an owl ahead informing her of the attack of a dementor on one of her favourite students, and her worries were reinforced when she saw George Weasley step out of one of the carriages with Hope's form braced in his arms.

"Oh, dear," she muttered as she approached one half of the Weasley Twins, "bring her with you, Mr. Weasley, and Miss Granger, you'd better come too."

Hermione had almost forgotten that she and Hope were to have a conversation with their Head of House concerning the Time-turner that Professor McGonagall had finally managed to procure for their studies. Poor Ron didn't have any idea.

"There's no need to look so worried, Weasley," she chastised the youngest ginger-haired son of Arthur and Molly, "I just want a word. Move along there, Weasley."

When they started up the stairs, Hope finally woke up again. "Wazzgoingon?" she slurred her words, wrapping her arms around George's neck in case she fell, which was very likely, seeing as Fred and George spent a majority of their time pranking others.

And then she saw the hospital wing door and her eyes went as wide as saucers. "Oh, no, I don't think so; I'm not going back in there until after term starts!" And she began to struggle in George's arms, but that wasn't necessarily a good thing, seeing as George was much bigger and much stronger than her.

"Oi!" she yelped as the boy switched her position so that she was dangling over one of his shoulders like she was a sack of potatoes.

"What do you think you're doing?!" she demanded, her face bright red.

Hermione stared at George, her mouth gaping, while Professor McGonagall quirked an eyebrow, her lips twitching slightly in amusement. George winked at Hermione.

"I swear, George—!" Hope hissed, embarrassment leaking into her voice. "I swear, I'll—"
"Oh, it's you, is it?" Madam Pomfrey queried as she leaned around so that she could be seen by her long-time patient. "I suppose you've been doing something dangerous again, have you. Put her on the bed," she added to the fifteen year old Gryffindor.

Hope gave another yelp as she was deposited on a spare hospital wing bed. She glared at both George (who was smirking) and Hermione (who was still giggling), before huffing and turning her face away from them.

"It was a dementor, Poppy," Professor McGonagall said as Hope wrinkled her nose at the Matron.

"Setting dementors around a school," she muttered, pressing the back of her hand to her forehead, feeling her temperate. She frowned, removing the hand to move to her potions cupboard, searching for a very particular remedy.

Hope stared at the small cup she had given her. "Er…this is liquid chocolate."

"Yes, it is," Madam Pomfrey said with an arched eyebrow, as if daring her to contradict her, but, thankfully, Hope conceded to gulping the small cup's contents in a few swallows.

"She won't be the last one who collapses," Madam Pomfrey added darkly to Professor McGonagall. "Its lucky she's only clammy. Terrible things, they are, and the effect they have one people who are already delicate—"

"Hey!" Hope snapped, affronted. "I am not delicate!"

"Of course you're not," Madam Pomfrey said in a way that said she was only saying it to please her incredibly resistant patient.

"What does she need?" Professor McGonagall asked as the adults ignored her as though she was in a different room entirely. "Bed rest? Should she spend tonight in the hospital wing?"

"I'm fine!" Hope snapped loud enough that both women turned to look at her with her face set in a frown and her arms crossed.

"Maybe she should have a bit more chocolate," Madam Pomfrey mused, "it's always much more potent in solid form."

"I've already had some," Hope said crossly, "Professor Lupin gave us all some on the train."

"Did he, now?" Madam Pomfrey asked, pleased. "So we've finally got a Defence Against the Dark Arts teacher who knows his remedies?"

"Er…"

"Are you sure you feel alright, Potter?" Professor McGonagall asked Hope, making her shift her eyes from the Matron to her Head of House.

Hope rolled her eyes in irritation, and that was enough of an answer for the Transfiguration Professor.

"Very well. Mr. Weasley, kindly wait outside while I have a quick word with Miss Granger and Potter about their course schedule, then you may go down to the feast."

George tipped an invisible hat to her before sparing Hope a quick wink that made her cheeks ignite. Professor McGonagall reached inside her emerald green robes to pull out something round on a
golden chain. A closer glance told Hermione and Hope that it was the Time-turner that they had been waiting to receive.

"Your request has been approved," she said, handing the time travel device over to Hermione, being the more responsible of the two. "Though I must stress to the two of you to never use this unless to go to your classes, do you understand me?"

"Yes, Professor," Hermione and Hope chimed in agreement.

Hope's eyes narrowed slightly as Professor McGonagall spoke more to her than to Hermione. "Why, Professor," she said slyly, "one would think that you thought I was a troublemaker."

Hermione snorted slightly as she stuffed the chain down the front of her shirt.

George looked up when the door opened once more and Hope and Hermione exited. Hermione immediately headed downstairs, but Hope made her way over to George with a smile.

"You know, you could have gone down instead of waiting," she chided lightly as he threaded his fingers with hers and descended the stairs together.

"Ah, but remember, I am a noble knight," he said solemnly, "and I never leave a lady to walk alone."

Hope rolled her eyes at him for good nature (hadn't Hermione just left without an escort?) before standing on her tip toes to press a kiss to his cheek. "That's really sweet, Georgie."

George's ears burned a red that she had never seen before, and she couldn't help but smirk at it.

The first thing that Hope did when she saw Draco Malfoy the next day was trip him, and Professor Lupin just so happened to be passing by to see it happen.

Hope shifted her leg outward, causing the blond-haired Slytherin to trip over it and crumple to the ground before walking away as if nothing had happened; that was a Lily move, if Remus had ever seen one.

"What a wonderful impression of falling on your arse!" she called behind her, causing laughter to erupt around her.

"I'm not in for a detention, am I?" she asked Remus as she came to walk beside him.

"Detention?" the older man asked blankly.

She rolled her eyes, nodding back to where Malfoy was finally managing to get off of the floor.

"Ah," the man said in understanding, his lips twitching slightly, "I quite certain that I don't have any idea what you're talking about."

A smile split her face and she couldn't help but laugh as she skipped down the stairs.

"Is Malfoy still giving you trouble?" George asked as she slid into the seat next to him, reaching for some grapes.

Hope glanced up in time to see him do another fainting act, much to her annoyance. "A bit, don't worry, I made him fall on his arse a few minutes ago."

Fred snorted into his pumpkin juice while Ron choked on his toast and Hermione scowled at Hope.
"That little git," George said, his voice tipped with venom. "He wasn't so cocky last night when the
dementors were down at our end of the train. Came running into our compartment, didn't he, Fred?"

"Nearly wet himself," Fred agreed with disdain.

"Really?" Hope said in surprise, a pleased smile worming its way onto her face.

"Yup," he said, "don't worry, you weren't the only one had a problem with the dementors."

"But I'm probably the only one that passed out," Hope muttered, swallowing a grape.

"Forget about it," George advised, squeezing her shoulder reassuringly. "Dad had to go out to
Azkaban once, and he came back all weak and shaking…They suck the happiness out of a place,
dementors. Most of the prisoners go mad in there."

Hope frowned slightly. As sad as it was, at least Muggles didn't drive prison inmates insane. But
then, she supposed, the people who were sentenced to Azkaban probably did a lot of bad things, like
murder, for instance.

"Where are you getting all that gold from?" she asked finally, taking note of the growing pile of
money before the twins.

"Oh, the whole school had a betting pool going on for you and George," he said, without actually
realizing what he'd said.

The temperature must have dropped a few degrees at that comment.

"What…did you just say?" Hope demanded dangerously, making the boy who was identical to the
one who gave her heart some very serious problems freeze in his tracks.

"Now, wait a second," he said weakly, trying to backtrack what he had said, "what I meant was—"
But Hope was already pulling out her wand to use on him, and that didn't bode well. "Later!" he
yelled, fleeing out of the Great Hall faster than anyone could say "Screwed" with Hope running after
him shouting obscenities that had Ron pretty impressed and Hermione gaping in shock.

Up at the staff table, Remus was still staring after the two red heads. "Does this happen often?" he
asked a bit bemused.

"Sometimes," Professor Flitwick answered with a cheeky grin and shrug. "Hope can be very…
amusing when she wants to be, she's much like, well, it's best not to say."

Remus smiled slightly as Hope's two friends grabbed her forgotten bag and made their way out of
the hall. Hope joined them before they began to regret carrying her heavy bag, much to their relief.

Their first class, as it so happened, was Divination, but, unfortunately, none of them knew quite
where the North Tower was located. Also unfortunately, they had acquired the help of a rather mad
knight in a painting, and he was, as stated before, quite mad. In the end, Hope was starting to wonder
if the class was even worth it if it was so high up in one of the spires, and Hermione and Ron
couldn't help but agree with her there.

Professor Trelawney was an oddity, and that was putting it in simple terms.

Hope didn't like her mainly because she was sure she was allergic to the perfume that she had used to
fill the room, making her sneeze violently at random intervals.
"Gods, that's revolting!" Hope gagged after she downed the tea, since they were reading tea leaves, and all. "This mud passes for tea?"

Ron couldn't help but agree with her there. "Best get it over with."

"They better be serving something really good at lunch, is all I'm saying," Hope said in disgust as they switched teacups, "I need something to wash down this filth."

Ron sniggered. "Right, what can you see in mine?"

"A load of brown junk that shouldn't be in teacups in the first place," Hope informed him solemnly, "you're sure this isn't poison?"

"No," Ron said, staring into her cup, "but if it's any consolation, if you die, I die."

"How romantic," Hope drawled.

"Broaden your minds, my dears, and allow your eyes to see past the mundane!" Trelawney cried with a dramatic air that was now serving to provide Hope with a great deal of annoyance.

Hope grumbled slightly before finally opening up her *Unfogging the Future* and staring dubiously between the cup and her book. "Okay, so you've got a tilting cross, and that means…you're going to have some 'trials of suffering', my sympathies, mate," Ron sniggered at her inserted commentary, "and you've got a sun here, so... 'great happiness'...so you're going to suffer, but you should be very happy about it."

"Well, I think you need your Inner Eye checked," Ron said, trying to hide a snort before inspecting her cup. "There's a blob a bit like a bowler hat, so maybe you're going to work for the Ministry of Magic...but if you flip it, it looks like an acorn...and that's... 'a windfall, unexpected gold.' Excellent, you can lend me some..." Hope smirked slightly. "...and there's a thing here that looks like an animal...maybe a hippo? No...a sheep?"

"Maybe you need your eyesight checked," Hope said, "if you can't tell the difference between a sheep and a hippo."

"Let me see that, my dear," Trelawney said, swooping over to their table like an overgrown bird and snatching Hope's cup from Ron's grip. "The falcon... my dear, you have a deadly enemy."

"But everyone knows that," Hermione scoffed, making Ron and Hope, and possibly everyone else in the room turn and stare at her. "Well, they do. Everyone knows about Hope and You-Know-Who."

"Hermione," Hope said in a whisper, "I need you to know that I kind fell a little in love with you because you said that to a teacher."

Hermione pulled a Hope and rolled her eyes at her friend, small patches of pink appearing on her cheeks as Trelawney continued with her reading of Hope's tea leaves. "The club... an attack. Dear, dear, this is not a happy cup..."

"That must have been the bowler hat," Ron hissed out of the corner of his mouth to Hermione and Hope.

"The skull," Trelawney continued as though she could not hear them having a whispered conversation in front of her, which was entirely possible, now that Hope thought about it, "danger in your path, my dear."
"Danger's always in my path," Hope grumbled, "you don't need tea leaves to tell me that."

Hermione cracked a smile at that comment, but was interrupted by Trelawney gasping and screaming.

"Oh, what's wrong, now?" Hope demanded, her good mood short circuiting.

"My dear girl…my poor, dear girl…no…it is kinder not to say…no…don't ask me…"

Right, because that was going to keep anyone from asking her, wasn't it? She was practically begging someone to ask her what she had read that was so awful in Hope's tea leaves. Well, Hope wasn't going to do it, so better get used to disappointment.

Unfortunately for her, it was Dean that instead asked, "What is it, Professor?" and then enough people crowded around Hope, Ron, and Hermione's desk that Hope swore she was suffering from claustrophobia.

"My dear," Trelawney said, the drama still obvious and in her voice, "you have the Grim."

This did not have the appropriate effect on her, unlike what Trelawney had hoped.

"What the bloody hell is a Grim?" she demanded, because a large number of the class had pressed their hands to their mouths in horror or had gone white; some had done both.

"The Grim, my dear, the Grim!" Trelawney cried, shaking her hands before her slightly as if hoping shaking them would cause her to understand. "The giant, spectral dog that haunts churchyards! My dear girl, it is an omen –the worst omen– of death!"

And miles away a great black dog raced, his forepaws and hind-paws smacking against the ground as he made for Hogwarts with only one thing on his mind; his goddaughter.
Of Runes and Hippogriffs

Hope was more than a little eager to get out of the North Tower and make her way down to Transfiguration. Professor McGonagall was funnier than usual, though this was mostly due to her disapproval of Trelawney, but it still made Hope feel a bit better when she left Transfiguration for Ancient Runes with Hermione. This was one of the classes that she was really looking forward to, so she hoped that it wouldn't disappoint.

The classroom was a bit awing, that much Hope and Hermione could agree on. There was Egyptian hieroglyphics, Scandinavian Norse, and Ancient Greek as well as a number of other symbols that Hope couldn't even come close to understanding strewn throughout the room.

"This…" Hope said in amazement, "is so cool!"

"No kidding!"

Hope twisted around at the voice and grinned. "Hey, Parv-- oh, sorry, I almost thought you were your sister!"

Padma Patil was identical to her twin sister, much like George was identical to Fred, but the differences were far more obvious with Padma and Parvati than they were with Fred and George. Padma was obviously in Ravenclaw House, so she wore blue instead of the red that Parvati wore. Padma's clothes were a bit loose on her and far more modest than her sister's uniform, and her hair was pulled back in a simple ponytail.

It was like looking at a Ravenclaw, Indian version of Hermione.

"That happens a lot," Padma assured her, before switching her books to her other hand and holding the free one out to shake. "I'm Padma."

"Hope," she said squeezing it with her own.

"Hermione," her friend added beside her when Padma extended her hand to her as well.

"It's nice to meet you," Padma said politely. "My sister's mentioned you two a few times."

Hope smirked. "Anything good?"

"That would depend on the day," Padma said with a slight smile.

"Find your seats!" a female voice called out into the room and Hope and Hermione quickly grabbed one of the seats closest to the front.

The woman who taught Ancient Runes was not a stern-faced woman, like Professor McGonagall was. Her hair was a light brown set in wild curls around her face and her cheeks dimpled as she smiled.

"Hello and welcome to the Study of Ancient Runes!" she called out with a bright grin. "My name is Bathsheda Babbling, we will begin with roll call!"

As soon as she had checked everyone's name down, she smiled warmly once more, sitting on her desk in a fashion that would have scandalized Professor McGonagall. "This is a class that delves into the mysteries of the past and unearths the languages that have been long forgotten," she told them,
"the main focus of your first years in this subject will be translation and eventually we will touch on warding and barrier-erection that you might find in your future occupations. We will begin this semester with Egyptian hieroglyphics. Today you will be given a specific hieroglyph that I want you to research and find its meaning, an ancient text in which it is used, and what it represented to the Ancient Egyptians.

"Now if everyone would open to chapter one in their books we will begin with the first recorded history of the hieroglyphs…"

"I'm sure my hand will recover eventually," Hope said as she and Hermione left the class to meet Ron for lunch (as he had had a free period while they were in Ancient Runes and had mocked them a little about it).

Hermione rolled her eyes at the red-haired girl. "Oh, please, it wasn't that hard."

Hope gave her a dumbfounded expression. "Maybe you weren't in the same class as me, Hermione, but that woman can write and talk at the same time and she does them both pretty fast!"

"Like I said," Hermione continued, her voice tinged with amusement, "it wasn't that hard."

Hope mouthed wordlessly at her before shaking her limp hand at her friend. "Look at it! It's got permanent damage!"

"Have George give it a kiss to make it better!" Hermione fired back.

"What am I kissing?"

Both girls blushed at George's sudden voice.

"Nothing!" they said quickly and Hermione made a quick getaway before Hope could, with George's arm resting over her shoulders.

"Traitor!" she yelled after her friend. "I'll get you, Hermione! Just you wait!"

"Do I want to know what you two were talking about?" George asked in amusement, his arm dropping to wrap around her waist instead, before ducking his head to meet her lips with his, making her cheeks redden again even as he pulled back a second later.

"Probably better to not ask," she admitted, giving him a wink, "ask me no questions and I'll tell you no lies, and all."

"Ooh, you troublemaker," he said with a smirk, "stealing my own words!"

Hope made a circle around her face. "Hello, have you met me? Reformed thief?"

"Reformed?" George laughed. "Who said anything about reformed? You pick-pocket from everyone!"

"You snooze, you lose," Hope refuted, grinning widely. "I can't help if people are practically begging to be stolen from!"

"Sure," George drawled out. "By the way, do you know why Ron looked like something was going to drop dead in front of him?"

"Dunno," Hope said with a frown, "unless he's still freaked out about that Grim thing."
George froze in place, dragging Hope to a stop as well. "What Grim thing?"

Hope glanced up to meet his eyes and was surprised at how uncharacteristically serious his face was. "George? What's wrong?"

"What Grim thing?" he repeated.

"It's just something that Trelawney saw in my teacup, that's all," she said, not quite understanding what the big deal was. "Why?"

A nervous laugh left his lips, startling Hope who had never heard such a sound from him before. "You do know what the Grim represents, don't you?"

"Trelawney said it was an omen of death," Hope said slowly.

"You haven't seen any recently, have you?" he asked her, searching her with his eyes as if looking for signs that she had. "Any great black dogs?"

"Yeah," Hope said, recalling the dog at Privet Drive, "I saw one the night I left the Dursleys'." Her eyes met his. "But it was probably my imagination," she said dismissively, but George didn't look so convinced.

"Our Uncle Bilius saw a Grim once," George said, still serious, "and he died twenty-four hours later."

Hope frowned. Was the Grim really that scary? "But I saw it weeks ago," she reminded him, "and I'm still alive, so don't worry. That one was probably a stray." She stood on her tip-toes to kiss his cheek.

"If you keep worrying about it," she called over her shoulder as she began to walk away, "then I'm not going to want to go on that date!"

She laughed when she heard him splutter.

By the time Hope, Ron, and Hermione made their way down to Hagrid's cabin, Ron and Hermione weren't speaking. From what Ron insinuated, she gathered that it had something to do with the Grim. It seemed that they had a similar conversation to the one that she and George had had. Only Hermione had disregarded Ron's concerns completely, which was a little rude, Hope had to think to herself. It was kind of like saying that his uncle died for no reason.

That was one thing you never wanted to say about anyone.

"C'mon, now, get a move on!" Hagrid called as they milled around the cabin. "Got a real treat for yeh today! Great lesson comin' up! Everyone here? Right follow me!"

"If we're going into the forest again, I'm skiving," Ron muttered in her ear, making Hope smile. They had had to go into the Forbidden Forest just last year to talk to the giant Acromantula by the name of Aragog concerning the Chamber of Secrets, and Hope had been hoping that they wouldn't have to go back quite so soon.

But, luckily, they only went by the edge of the forest (Hope swore she could see the shadow of a centaur within) to an empty paddock.

"Everyone gather 'round the fence here!" Hagrid called, clearly very excited about his first class.
"That's it – make sure yeh can see– now, firs' thing yeh'll want ter do is open yer books—"

"How?" That disgusted drawl could belong to only one person; Hope's archenemy, Draco Malfoy. She was secretly hoping that he would have cooled his heels over the holiday, but that was turning into a vain dream.

"Eh?" Hagrid asked in confusion.

"How do we open our books?" Malfoy said in annoyance.

Hagrid glanced around to all of The Monster Book of Monsters that his students held, noticing how they had them bound in rope or Spellotape or a belt like Hope. "Hasn' – hasn' anyone bin able ter open their books?" he asked, to which he received a unison shake of the head. "Yeh've got ter stroke 'em! Look—"

Using Hermione's book as an example, he tore the Spellotape that bound it shut and ignored the book as it tried to bite him, running a finger down its spine.

Hope couldn't help but gape as the book shivered and fell open in his hand, seeming to have all the bite taken out of it.

"Oh, how silly we've all been!" Malfoy bit out, his lips curling into an unattractive sneer that instantly made Hope want to smack it off his face with her fist. "We should have stroked them! Why didn't we guess!"

"Shut your fat mouth, Malfoy," Hope snapped, "before I—"

"Before you what?" Malfoy smirked as the rest of the class fell silent, waiting on baited breath, wanting to see who came out on top, ignoring the sounds of Hagrid lumbering off to get the 'monster' they were going to study.

Hope's smirk was darker. "I'll let you use your imagination for that one, oh, wait, I forgot that you don't really have one of those!"

The Gryffindor side couldn't help but snigger at that.

"At least I don't faint at the sight of dementors!"

The Slytherins roared with laughter at that comment, but Hope was going to get the last word in.

"Oh yeah," she said in a mock-thoughtful voice, tapping her chin lightly with her finger, "I forgot that you got so scared that you ran into my boyfriend's compartment and nearly wet your pants 'cause you were so scared." She hadn't meant to use the word boyfriend, she wasn't quite sure what she and George were yet, but that mattered little.

For those who hadn't heard that, it was incredibly hilarious. Seamus and Dean in particular were rolling around in the grass laughing until tears came out of their eyes.

Hope's smirk widened at the pale flush that had crept up Malfoy's neck to cover his cheeks, but before he had a chance to give her a verbal retaliation, Lavender distracted them by crying "Ooooh!"

The creatures that Hagrid had chosen for his first lesson were beautiful in an incredibly bizarre and strange way. They had the bodies of horses, front legs, wings, and heads of eagles. Hope had never seen something like them before in her life.
"Hippogriffs! Beau'iful, aren' they?" Hagrid said with a beaming smile, and Hope had to agree with him there.

"Now," he said, beginning his first lecture, "firs' thing yeh gotta know abou' hippogriffs is, they're proud. Easily offended, hippogriffs are. Don't never insult one, 'cause it may be the last thing yeh do." He gestured to the hippogriff with beautiful feathers as grey as storm clouds. "This here is Buckbeak, now who would like to say hello?"

Hope didn't notice how the whole class had taken a large step back, so when Hagrid smiled and said "Well done, Hope, well done!"

Hope gave Ron and Hermione a betrayed look before making her way forward, but very slowly.

"Easy, now, Hope," Hagrid warned once she'd gotten a little close to the hippogriff. "Yeh've got eye contact, now try not ter blink…Hippogriffs don' trust yeh if yeh blink too much…"

Great, Hope thought malevolently to herself, that's just great Hagrid, thanks for letting me know.

Buckbeak's eyes were a fierce and fiery orange and Hope accidentally turned her own eyes to the same colour, making the half-horse, half-eagle cant its head slightly at her, but it made no move to attack her, so that was good.

"That's it," Hagrid said, obviously pleased that she hadn't been attacked (oh, joy), "That's it, Hope… now, bow…"

That didn't seem like such a good idea, to Hope, but she did as he said, bending over slightly at the waist whilst still straining to not blink her orange eyes, which were growing more watery with every passing second.

For a moment nothing happened, and then Buckbeak sank into a bow as well.

"Well done! You can go and pat him now!"

Hope gave him a shaky smile, but she moved forward (though it was much more slowly than she had been originally approaching him). Only her affection for Hagrid would make her do this, she told herself, anyone else and she probably would have told them to screw off.

But she still outstretched her hand towards the hippogriff, taking one step at a time, ready to pull her hand back in case he thought it was his next treat, which it most certainly was not! After a few tentative clicks of his beak, he consented to allow her to press a hand to his face, under his large eye and next to his beak.

She sighed in relief, patting the feathers there gently as applause erupted behind her.

"I reckon he might let you ride him!"

"What?" Hope's face lost all of its colour as Hagrid hoisted her off of the ground. "Wait-hey- Hagrid! This is a bad."

He dumped her onto Buckbeak's back and she barely had any time to right herself.

"Don't pull out any of his feathers," he warned, "'cause he won't thank you for that!" And then he smacked Buckbeak's hindquarters with one of his massive hands. Hope had to clutch violently at
Buckbeak's neck as he rushed forward, flapping his wings under her as he rose into the air, going higher and higher until he was above. That was the point that Hope finally opened her eyes once more and actually looked around her. She had always thought the view from a broom was the best, but this, this definitely topped that.

She laughed out loud as the wind whistled past her body as they flew up and up; circling the spires of the castle before going into a few small dives that made giggles bubble from her lips. This sort of flying was something else entirely, even if it did feel a bit strange. Something about it seemed more…magical than riding a broomstick.

Any glimpse of Hope Sirius regarded as being worth something far more than gold. Sneaking onto the grounds was daring enough, but he just couldn't help himself. It was purely coincidental that she happened to be out at the same time.

She had her bag placed at the trunk of a tree while she rested on a low-hanging branch with her eyes closed and her head cushioned by her hands interlocked behind her head.

Sirius had seen James do the very same thing once in seventh year, even after Lily gave him a firm talking to about falling on his arse and doing damage to himself. "I like living on the edge!" he'd said, and it was clear that his daughter had inherited that desire.

He twisted his head slightly when a new presence made themselves known. It was a young boy, maybe fifteen, with bright red hair, and he was making his way slowly but surely to the true, a crooked smile on his lips.

"Don't people usually sleep in their beds?" he asked her mildly as he came to a stop under the branch.

"There is nothing wrong with taking a nap in the middle of the day when you've finally completed all of your homework," Hope said, smiling from her place on the branch.

"Oh, not at all," the boy agreed, his grin becoming reminiscent of a fox as he reached up and gave the branch a small shake. Hope's eyes shot open and she swore, "Son of—!" and then she yelped as she fell from the branch and into his waiting arms.

"I should hit you," she said with certainty, struggling to right himself in his arms.

Watching the two pained Sirius in his heart, because they reminded him of another couple, a couple that hadn't gotten their fairy tale ending.

"I'm holding you above ground," he reminded her, "Imagine if I…" he gave her a short drop in his arms earning him a glare.

"George Fabian Weasley," she warned him, "you seem to have conveniently forgotten of my terrible temper." So he was one of Arthur and Molly's boys, then? Sirius tried to recall any time the two ginger-haired pure-bloods had mentioned the names of their children, but that was a very long time ago, a very long time ago.

"Ah, but you look beautiful when you're angry," George said sagely.

Hope's cheeks burned a soft pink. "Oh, now I know you're having me on!"

"Would you feel better if I kissed you?" George asked her with a smirk, leaning down to pick her bag off of the ground.
"No," she said bluntly, "but you keep trying to con them off of me."

"Con what?" he asked.

"Kisses," Hope said, arching an eyebrow at him as she kept an arm securely around his neck before swinging down from his arms to interlock her fingers with his, drawing the strap of her bag over her shoulder. "Race you back!"

Sirius could only watch mournfully as she disappeared with her – he growled slightly; she was too young to have a boyfriend! – friend back towards the castle courtyard.

"Hey, look, it's the lovebirds!" Lee called as they approached. "Did you snog while you were out there?"

"C'mere Lee," Hope said sweetly, "so I can punch you."

Predictably, Lee hid behind his own girlfriend, Alicia, who couldn't help but roll her eyes.

She grinned at Hope. "I hear you two earned Fred quite a lot of gold."

Hope's face burned a bright red and she released George's hand to point a menacing finger at the girl. "Don't get me started on him and Angie! As soon as I see him—"

"Hey, guys!"

Hope's Fred-radar dinged and she focused on the ginger-haired twin in question who swore loudly when he saw her and started pelting in the opposite direction.

"I'd start praying to the god of your choice!" she roared as she raced after him, almost running into the passing Professor Lupin. "Sorry, Professor!" she called over her shoulder.

Remus stumbled slightly as he watched her go with a bit of a dumbfounded expression on his face.

"Yeah," Angelina answered his unasked question, an evil grin plastered on her face at how afraid her boyfriend was of his brother's girl (because Hope was George's girl, any way that you looked at it), "Hope can be that ridiculous. It's funnier when it's her and George, though; they're adorable."

"Oi!" George said in affront. "I am not adorable!"

"What if Hope called you adorable?" Alicia quipped with a sly smile, making him open and close his mouth wordlessly, a faint flush dusting his cheeks.

Remus raised his eyebrows slightly and then he chuckled. "Sorry," he apologized, "you just remind me of an old friend I had. He was convinced that he was going to marry his wife, even in first year."

"Did he?" Angelina asked curiously.

"Well, yes," Remus admitted, "after he managed to get her to stop hating him."

Lee laughed at that. "That doesn't sound much like Hope and George," he disagreed, "they've only ever fought once!

"I got him!" a voice called as Hope rounded the corner looking a bit out of breath, her cheeks pink from the run, but a grin was gracing her lips as she tugged Fred forward with a yank to his ear.

"Ow, ow, ow!" He whined. "Woman, you're killing me!"
"This is the price you pay for meddling in people's love lives," Hope chided as she dragged him forward.

"Georgie, control your woman!"

"Yeah, Georgie!" Hope said with a smirk, turning on the twin. "Control your woman!"

George laughed uncomfortably. "Now, er, control might not be a good word to use…"

Hope arched an eyebrow, but she released his twin's ear, all the same. Fred gave an exaggerated moan of agony.

"He's usually less of an idiot," Hope explained to Remus, her eyes twinkling, "but then we put him and Angelina in the same room, and…"

"Hey!" the two in question said.

"Just speaking the truth," Hope said, raising her hands upwards slightly in surrender and then she jabbed her finger in Remus' direction. "And you!"

"Me?" the new professor said flummoxed.

"I know you!" she said fervently. "I know I've seen you from somewhere!"

"That would be hig-" Remus started to say.

"You're going to try to fool me!" Hope said, raising her voice over his. "But it's not going to happen! Just you wait; I'll figure it out sooner or later!" She danced over to George, kissed his cheek, before heading off in the direction of the library.

But then she came back to point at him. "I'm on to you, Mister Dementor-Repellent!" And then she left.

Remus stared at the empty space that she had once been standing in, his mouth gaping slightly.

"Mr. Dementor-Repellent?!" Lee howled with laughter. "Oh, that's pure genius!"

That, Remus had to think to himself, was Lily Evans' wit talking.

And he wasn't wrong.
Malfoy was going to ruin her week, that much Hope was completely certain of. After her short little ride around the grounds, Malfoy had somehow managed to get Buckbeak to attack him (that twitchy little ferret was asking for it, in Hope's opinion, that that didn't really matter), and was apparently still complaining about the slice to his arm, which was a load of dung, if you asked Hope. It was only a small slice, it wasn't anything like Hope's leg had been when she first came to Hogwarts, but he still milked it like he was going to fall over dead any second.

"Can you believe that anyone so irritating was ever born?" Hope growled under her breath as they diced their caterpillars for their Shrinking Solution, not really caring how close Malfoy was to hearing her. In fact, she hoped he heard her; she was feeling a little bit more than vindictive. "I mean, seriously! It's his own fault he's injured!"

The blonde smirked at her over his cauldron and she flipped the bird at him in time for Snape to call out "Detention, Potter."

Hope turned her nose up at the man that was the bane of her existence (and had been officially probably since she had arrived at Hogwarts), making an ugly face at his back once he'd turned away.

Hermione gave her a look that said "You deserved that one." Ron bumped his fist with hers appreciatively, to Hermione's annoyance.

"Seen your pal Hagrid lately?" he asked them in above a whisper, to which Hope snapped snidely back, "Go bother someone else, ferret." She was pleased to see the pale flush appear on his cheeks at the insult. Considering Hope's insults, that one was pretty mild, but in her defence she had been eleven when she'd thought it up first.

"I'm afraid he won't be a teacher much longer," the Slytherin continued, his lips twisted upwards into an empty smile that put Hope on edge. "Father's not very happy about my injury—"

"—he's complained to the school governors," Malfoy continued with a gleeful trill, making Hermione grab Hope's elbow as she clenched her fingers tightly around her silver knife in an effort to stop her from gouging out his eyes. "And to the Ministry of Magic. Father's got a lot of influence, you know ("Father's got a lot of money to throw around," Hope corrected in a hiss). And a lasting injury like this…who know if my arm'll ever be the same again?"

"If the pain is so bad, go to St. Mungo's," Hope seethed, "only, the thing is they can tell the difference between liars and people who are seriously injured. So why don't you take your money and shove it up your arse Malfoy, because sooner or later, you're going to run out of it, and I'm going to laugh when you do."

"Better to have money than to be poor," he said, casting a sneer towards Ron who was twitching.

"Better to be poor with a great personality than to be rich and arrogant," Hope said back.

"Hey, Hope, can I borrow your scales?" Seamus cut through the tense atmosphere like a knife with a lopsided grin that Hope couldn't help but give a smile of extreme relief.

"Sure, Seamus." She lifted the scales from the table to hand them to the Irish boy.
"Did you read the Daily Prophet this morning?" he asked her.

"No, I was too busy, why?" she asked.

"They reckon Sirius Black has been sighted not too far from her," Seamus said, his eyes holding an excited gleam.

Ron glanced quickly to Hope as his dorm mate went back to his table, but Hope gave him a frown in return. She still wasn't quite sure about the whole 'Sirius Black is out to get you' vibe that was apparently encompassing all of the professors who were all being uncommonly wary around her (or any one of the students in general). Surely the dementors would be able to stop him if he ever came close to the grounds, wouldn't they? But then, she thought to herself, they had been so helpful before, hadn't they? If he could escape from creatures that didn't have any qualms about attacking unsuspecting third years, well, then the odds were already in his favour.

Hope wasn't much of a fan of the dementors, in case you couldn't tell.

She bit down slightly on her lip as she concentrated on giving her Infusion of Wormwood a good shake before stopping Ron from adding a drop too many of Leech Juice. She could feel Snape's eyes on her, waiting for her to slip up and somehow cause a massive explosion with a few too many mistakes.

Believe her, it had been done before, with spectacular results. Really. She thought the bright colours looked quite well on the walls of the dreary dungeon, if she did say so herself (which she did). In her defence, she had probably been channelling Fred and George (she typically blamed those two for anything prank-like in nature).

She sighed quietly to herself, counting down the minutes until the class ended. Was it really twenty more minutes in this hell hole? Hope groaned internally. The only consolation was that Defence Against the Dark Arts was next, and she was really looking forward to it.

Nineteen more minutes.

Hope liked Professor Lupin before he'd even done that spell on Peeves. Apart from his distant familiarity (and she still hadn't quite sorted that out yet, but she would), it was because he had a lot of personality. He faked blindness and deafness when pranks happened before his very eyes, and he was very fair about punishments. And to make him seem even better in her eyes, their first lesson was going to be a practical one.

Their lesson took them to the staffroom, in which –unfortunately- Snape was sitting comfortably in a low armchair. His eyes automatically drifted to Hope's, and the Potter couldn't help but scowl fiercely at him.

"Leave it open, Lupin," he directed to the much more shabbily dressed wizard. "I'd rather not witness this."

But his next words made Hope's anger spike, turning her eyes a deep blood red. "Possibly no one's warned you, Lupin, but this class contains Hope Potter and Neville Longbottom. Potter is incapable of following the simplest instructions, and I would advise you not to entrust Longbottom with anything difficult."

Ron and Hermione had to latch onto Hope's arms to prevent her from making her way over to the hook-nosed professor and getting herself into a bit more trouble.
Remus glanced between Hope and his old schoolmate. The animosity was practically palpable. He hid a wry grin; like father like daughter.

"I was hoping Neville would assist me with the first stage of the operation," he said calmly, a light smile gracing his scarred face, "and I am sure he will perform it admirably."

If it was possible to hear a smirk, Remus was certain that would be the case with Hope as he watched his colleague sweep out of the room before ushering the class closer to a wardrobe that trembled and shook as if something inside was dying to get out.

"Nothing to worry about," Professor Lupin assured them as Hope eyed the wardrobe curiously and cautiously. She hoped he wasn't going to pull a Lockhart and give them a bit of 'hands-on' experience without telling them anything like how to defend themselves against an attack. "There's a boggart in there."

Hope frowned slightly. "What's a boggart?" she queried out loud.

Professor Lupin spared her a smile, making her lips twitch reflexively. His smile made his face look years, maybe even a decade, younger. "That is the question, isn't it, Hope?"

Hope's cheeks flooded with heat and few people gave a few chuckles.

"Hermione?"

Of course Hermione had answer; Hermione always had the answers, Hope couldn't help but think fondly.

"It's a shape-shifter," she explained in her no-nonsense voice. "It can take the shape of whatever it thinks will frighten us most." Now Hope and Ron eyed the wardrobe apprehensively.

"Quite right," Professor Lupin hummed in agreement. "So the boggart sitting in the darkness within has not yet assumed a form. He does not yet know what will frighten the person on the other side of the door. Nobody knows what a boggart looks like when he is alone, but when I let him out, he will immediately become whatever each of us fears the most. However, at this point, we have an advantage over it. Have you spotted it Hope?"

Hope sputtered slightly at the sudden question, earning her a few chuckles. "But I don't know anything about boggarts!" she said, making the chuckles transform into laughter.

The flustered expression was Lily's dead-on whenever James had tried to ask her out in the most ridiculous ways.

"Give it a go," he offered with a kind smile.

"Er...well," Hope said uncomfortably, glancing around the room as if doing so would help her come up with some sort of answer to the problem at hand, but luckily, this time it did, "there's a lot of us in the room, maybe it won't be able to tell what we all fear at the same time."

"Well put," Professor Lupin said, nodding his head. "When a boggart is faced with more than one person, he tends to get a bit confused. Which should he become, a headless corpse or a flesh-eating slug ("Makes you wonder who could be afraid of a slug," Ron muttered to Hope and Hermione who had to stifle their giggles)? I once saw a boggart make that very mistake and turned himself into half a slug ("Never mind being afraid of a slug," Hope whispered, "what about half a slug?"). Not remotely frightening."
Ron sniggered.

"The charm that repels a boggart is simple," Professor Lupin continued, his eyes twinkling slightly towards Hope and her friends, making her think that he'd heard their conversation quite clearly, "yet it requires for of mind. You see, the thing that really finishes a boggart is laughter. What you need to do is force it to assume a shape that you find amusing."

"That's it?" Dean called from the left.

Professor Lupin chuckled at the question. "Yes, Dean, just laughter. Now, the charm is *Riddikulus*. Repeat after me, *Riddikulus*!"

"*Riddikulus,*" the class intoned in unison.

"Good." Remus beamed. "But that was the easy part. I'm afraid. You see, the word alone is not enough. And this is where you come in, Neville."

The brown-haired Gryffindor jumped violently as Seamus nudged him slightly forward. He looked so horrified that if it was anyone else, Hope was certain that she would have laughed.

"Now tell me, Neville," Professor Lupin continued in a jaunty way, "what frightens you?"

Neville mumbled a few words that the class could not hear until Lupin asked him to speak up and he uttered two words: "Professor Snape."

Of course laughter ensued at those words, and Neville couldn't help but smile as well.

"Frightens all," Professor Lupin agreed, "and I believe you live with your grandmother?"

"Yes," Neville said, tremors filling his voice slightly at the mention of the formidable woman that had raised him since his first year, "but I don't want the boggart to turn into her either."

Hope smirked slightly as more laughter echoed around them, but Professor Lupin was quick to dissuade his fears, assuring him that that wouldn't occur. His next instructions were whispered into Neville's ear so none of the other students knew what to expect when the wardrobe door flew open.

Boggart Severus Snape was just as darkly impressive as his counterpart and just seeing him increased the amount of annoyance that Hope felt towards the man. He moved forward with that perpetual scowl of his permanently curling his lips into a distasteful frown, and for a moment Hope had thought that Neville had lost his nerve, but then his voice rang out, clear as a bell: "*Riddikulus!*"

The effect had her and Ron roaring with laughter (Hermione didn't find it as funny as they did, but she had to admit that it *was* quite amusing).

Snape, in a green dress, with a fox-fur scarf, with a vulture-topped hat, and a red handbag swinging from his hand. Oh, this would have been perfect blackmail material!

"Excellent!" Professor Lupin cried. "Parvati! Forward!"

There was a scramble to get into line to face off against the boggart, but Hope had a larger concern on her mind; what was it that frightened her most? Honestly, she couldn't say. When she'd told Dr. Samuel about not fearing death, she had been telling the truth. She wasn't trying to be macho or anything, but she had experienced death before, even if it was only for an instant. People generally feared what they didn't understand, but Hope got death.
Her thoughts settled briefly on Voldemort. She had every right to be scared of him, after all, he had killed her parents and had tried to kill her two years in a row, but Voldemort was pushed aside. A chill came over her from the open window and she was reminded of the cold that had spread at the presence of the dementor on the train. She remembered how it had felt when it had drifted close to her, her body growing weaker with every passing breath...

And then she blinked and the memory faded, which was a good thing, because she had somehow made it to the front of the line and the boggart was twisting rapidly before her, searching for an appropriate fear and a second later the same cloaked dementor appeared. But within the next few seconds, Professor Lupin had moved in front of her, allowing the boggart to fix on his greatest fear instead.

Hope's eyes fixed on the full moon hanging in the air. A full moon?

The time it took her to blink, Professor Lupin had turned the moon into a balloon which expelled air rather violently as it flew around the room before returning to the inside of the wardrobe and having the door lock behind him, but Hope's eyes were still fixed on the space where the moon had occupied only moments before.

There wasn't anything particularly frightening about the full moon, Hope knew, unless…

Her eyes widened slightly. Unless you were a werewolf.

Oh, that explained it. Stress that the lycanthrope virus put on the body was enough that it caused the host to go prematurely grey. And the scars made more sense.

She couldn't help but stare at him as their class concluded; he didn't look or seem remotely like any kind of werewolf she'd read about, excluding Michael, of course, but Michael had been pretty amazing all by himself, so he didn't really count.

So she was left with a number of things to ponder as she follow her friends out of the door, casting one last look at the man who had his back to her as he fiddled with the lock on the wardrobe door. He looked much older from behind.

If you've ever had a detention with Severus Snape, then you would know that it was the number one worst detention to ever get. Hope had an awful lot of these detentions (you know her and her smart mouth), and she found them grating, which was her own fault, if you ever asked Hermione about it. At least Professor McGonagall let her work on her homework in complete silence (as all her detention students did; though, Hope didn't get many detentions with Professor McGonagall, she actually liked her). He'd make her scrub at the stains of ruined cauldrons for hours, even though the stains were practically permanent, all the while reading a number of her essays with scorn and pointing out supposed inconsistencies ("Shredded Moonstone doesn't glimmer in complete darkness; it's not a unicorn, Potter."). Hope just thought he was full of a lot of tripe.

By the end of the night, she was tired, hungry, and sore, but she would never let Snape see that as she left the dungeons the same way she entered them, in complete silence.

The first thing she did was find a spare bathroom to wash her hands, thoroughly ridding them of the grime that had accumulated there during the course of her detention, and the second thing she did was find a nice stone bench to rest, because her legs felt a little stiff from standing in the same position for so long.

"Fancy some dinner?"
Hope jumped suddenly at George's voice before smiling as he came to sit down beside her. The moonlight painted silver streaks into his hair and she could see the flames that flickered lowly in the brackets on the walls were reflected in his eyes.

"Dinner was hours ago, Georgie," she said, rolling her eyes slightly, even as he took her hands in his and pulled her, groaning, into a standing position.

"Ah, but there is a table with food waiting for us in the kitchens," George said sagely, pressing a kiss to the corner of her lips.

Her eyes sparkled. "Really?" Heat flooded her cheeks as her stomach made an audible and obvious growl as if voicing its desire for the food George had mentioned.

George barely muffled his laugh, *barely.* "Come on, it'll be fun!"

"More fun than Hogsmeade tomorrow?" Hope asked slyly.

"No, but it's still fun," he said, lifting her completely off her feet and into his arms without her giving much protest; she must have been really tired. "Now all we have to do is dodge a few patrols!"

He didn't have to see Hope's face to know that she had just rolled her eyes at him. "And you would know all about that, wouldn't you, Weasley?"

"As would you, Potter," he said with a conspirator wink. "Don't think Fred and I didn't catch you sneaking out after curfew."

Hope huffed lightly, looping her arm around his neck securely as they descended the stairs. "Stargazing is not the same as causing trouble, George."

"Hm? What did you say? I'm afraid I wasn't listening."

Hope gave him a filthy look. "Keep talking like that and I might have to have words with your mother."

George gazed at her in complete unabashed horror. "You wouldn't!" he gasped out loud.

"Possibly," Hope said in slight amusement as he set her—groaning—onto the floor once more before a painting of a bowl of fruit. "So this leads to the kitchens?"

"Yup," George said, popping the 'p' with a loud smack, reaching out a finger to tickle the pear in the picture.

Hope stared at him in complete and utter bafflement. "What're yo—"

George pressed one finger to her lips, halting her speech and making her blush at the same time. "Has anyone ever told you you ask too many questions?"

"You've told me a number of times," Hope said in a dry manner around his finger.

"Maybe if I kissed you, you wouldn't have all these questions," he mused aloud.

"Right," Hope drawled, her cheeks pinking slightly, "well, you let me know how that goes, alright?"

"Ah, but you'd be the first to know," George said wisely, "you'd be the only person I would test it out on."
"Oh, I'm flattered that you wouldn't kiss another girl," Hope said, rolling her eyes slightly as his lips descended on hers, brushing a faint, chaste kiss to her lips.

Hope blinked dazedly as she was released, glaring lightly at him. "Now I know you're just doing that to mess with my head."

He winked. "But I love messing with your head!" The fire cast a soft glow across her face, making the green of her eyes stand out in the darkness and making the colour of her hair a much brighter, more vivid red.

"I should hit you," she decided, but she didn't as she followed him inside the room.

It was only much later that she remembered that Hope remembered that startling revelation she had had about Professor Lupin. At that time, however, she was barely awake long enough to change out of her clothes, so glancing through the photo album (where the answer to the question of where she had seen Professor Lupin before lay hidden within) was a high impossibility.

That night she dreamed of a shining full moon that was reflected on a pool of water, and she dreamt of inexplicable pain that one would only get from elongated limbs induced by the rays of the moon on that one night once a month. And for the first time in what seemed like a very long time, Hope Potter dreamed of Sir Michael Richmond, the werewolf the world forgot.

The pain faded on swift wings, leaving her only with the feeling of complete exhilaration, as if nothing could pull her down from the high that had been produced. But she would have to wake up sooner or later, and when she did, maybe then she might discover the truth of the relationship between her and the werewolf who taught.
A Little Fun, A Little Chaos

"Come on, hold still!"

"Ow! You just poked me in the eye!"

"I wouldn't have if you didn't keep squirming!"

Hope was glaring mutinously at Angelina, clenching her hands into fists on her bed as the older girl threatened her with dark eyeliner.

"I don't want—" Hope tried to say, but it was far too late for that, as Angelina was practically done.

"Oh, shut up, you look gorgeous," Angelina said dismissively as she steered the thirteen year old red-head to stand before the mirror. To Angelina's credit, the only make-up she was wearing was on her eyes, which was a relief, because Hope wasn't much a fan of cosmetics. The black only made the green of her eyes more prominent.

"I don't suppose you're going to kill me anymore?" Angelina asked in a light drawl.

Hope scowled fiercely. "Just this once you can live to see another day."

Angelina smirked, practically dancing out of the dorm and up the stairs to finish getting ready, leaving Hope in exasperation.

"There goes your future sister-in-law," Lavender said with a giggle, making Hope's cheeks burn a deep red, almost matching her hair as she stared at Lavender before giving her a grunt of annoyance and sitting back down on her bed to look through her album once more, firmly ignoring the three other girls that she roomed with as her eyes fell on one particular photo. It was obviously taken at her parents' wedding because her father was dressed to be the groom and had an arm thrown over the shoulders of a man who must have been one of the groomsmen. His eyes were a clear, light green, she could see a few grey streaks in his brown hair, and the scars were a bit obvious against his face.

She went stock still.

"Hermione?"

Hermione looked up from the book that was in her hands. "Yeah, Hope?"

"If George asks where I am, tell him I went to have a word with Professor Lupin."

Her brown eyes coloured in confusion. "Is something wrong?" she asked.

"No," Hope said, shutting the album and tucking it under her arm as she descended the stairs without a second glance back. The castle was still as much of a maze as it had been in her first year, but Hope had worked out a few safe routes, but that didn't stop her from almost walking into the very man she was looking for as he was about to enter his office.

"Professor! Sorry!" She said in quick apology, her cheeks pinking.

"No harm, no foul, Hope," Professor Lupin said with a calm smile (though she doubted she would have said that phrase to someone who had been raised by wizards, like, say Ron, because they just didn't understand those strange Muggle phrases). "Was it me you were planning on knocking over?"
His lips twitched as she rolled her eyes. "Well, I wasn't planning on knocking you over; I was planning on having a chat with you, if you don't mind?"

"I don't." Professor Lupin directed his attention to the door he was attempting to unlock (and doing a poor job of it, if Hope's smirk was anything to go off) "I would have thought you would be in Hogsmeade with George," he commented mildly.

Hope waved a hand dismissively, twisting his hand over the key and unlocking the door, stifling a few chuckles as he gave her an embarrassed grin. "Oh, we're going in a little bit, when it's closer to ten. The twins are going to show me, Ron, and Hermione around town before lunch."

He saw her tuck a crimson lock behind her ear in a manner similar to Lily's. He didn't think it was a good idea for Hope to be out in the open when Sirius was still on the loose, but given what he had heard of Hope's personality (having the Evans' temper, it seemed), he wasn't sure he would want to see the explosion that he was sure would ensue if he brought the matter up.

"Would you like a cup of tea?" he found himself asking.

"Oh," Hope said, her eyebrows drawing upwards in surprise, "sure."

She watched him move around the room, her eyes drifting to the cane that he could walk without, it seemed, but perhaps it was easier to balance one's weight on it than on two feet; she understood the feeling.

"I'm afraid that I've run out of tea leaves," he continued conversationally, "though I'd think you'd prefer teabags."

He glanced over to her, smiling at how her eye twitched slightly.

"Is that all you professors do?" she asked with barely perceptible annoyance. "Sit around and gossip?"

"When the occasion calls for it," Professor Lupin said, giving a short laugh at her words. "Professor McGonagall told me all about it. You're not worried about it, are you?"

"No," Hope said shortly, as if it was a sign of weakness, but something in her eyes gave her away as she sipped the tea silently.

"What was it that was worrying you?"

Hope frowned slightly, her lips pressing together into a firm line, something she must have adopted from Professor McGonagall. "Why didn't I get a go at the boggart?" she asked him. "Why did you push me out of the way?"

Professor Lupin arched an eyebrow at her. "I would have thought it would be obvious."

"Huh?" Hope said blankly, her mouth going slack. She had been waiting for him to deny the action and come up with some kind of excuse, but that was the opposite of this.

Professor Lupin restrained a smile at how surprised she was. "I assumed that if the boggart faced you, then it would assume the form of Lord Voldemort."

Hope blinked, staring at him. "I did, at first," she admitted, "but then, I thought about the dementor back on the train."
"Ah," Professor Lupin said in a pensive manner, "well, I'm impressed. That suggests that what you fear most of all is fear itself, this is very wise."

" Doesn't feel very wise," Hope muttered under her breath, blushing when he gave a small chuckle at her words (she thought she'd spoken them low enough to not be heard).

"I suppose you've been thinking that I didn't believe you were you capable of facing off with a dementor, haven't you?" he said perceptively.

Hope avoided his gaze, tugging uncomfortably on her hair as she did so. She opened her mouth to speak, but before she could say anything, a knock echoed from the door, silencing whatever she had been about to say.

"Come in."

Hope grimaced as her most hated professor stepped into the room, carrying a toxic looking goblet.

"Ah, Severus. Thanks very much. Could you leave it on the desk for me?"

Snape did so, but she could see his lip curling slightly at the sight of them together.

"What?" Hope snapped, feeling a bit vindictive after her detention.

"We were just talking about the lesson yesterday," Professor Lupin said smoothly.

Snape's scowl deepened, his thoughts, no doubt, drifting to Neville's boggart, which had been the laugh of the school (Snape! In a dress! Who wouldn't find that hilarious?) "You should drink that directly, Lupin."

"Yes, yes," Professor Lupin agreed, "I will."

"I made an entire cauldronful, if you need more." Hope wasn't sure if she should feel glad or irritated that they were both ignoring her.

Professor Lupin smiled slightly. "I should probably take some again tomorrow. Thanks very much, Severus," he said, his voice genuinely grateful.

"Not at all."

And he swept from the room much the same way he had entered; silently.

Hope glanced at the potion that bubbled ominously inside of the goblet. What was that potion that was supposed to help with werewolf transformations? Wolfsblain? Wolfsbane, that was it.

"Professor Snape has very kindly (that's likely, Hope thought) concocted a potion for me," he said when he caught her looking. "I have never been much of a potion-brewer and this one is particularly complex... pity sugar makes it useless."

"Cinnamon and Cocoa don't have sugar," Hope offered.

He looked up in surprise and smiled. "An intriguing thought I will have to look into."

Hope gave him a similar smile, but it faltered. "Professor," she said slowly, "there was something else I came down here to talk to you about."

"Hm?" Professor Lupin quickly downed the goblet, gagging at the taste before picking up his cup of
tea once more, no doubt hoping to drown the potion's terrible taste with the tea.

And then she set her mug down and flipped open the book she had tucked under her arm, all but thrusting the page at him.

Remus felt his heart drop into his stomach at the picture she was showing him. It was one of the last pictures his mother had taken before her death. He still remembered the proud smile on her face when she saw him in his groomsmen robes; she couldn't resist taking a picture of him and James standing side by side.

"I thought I'd seen you somewhere," Hope said in triumph, "and you were trying to convince me that I didn't know you."

"Miss P—" Professor Lupin started to say.

"Hope," she interjected, "is my name, you said it about a minute ago, remember?"

He sighed softly, closing the album quickly, his emotions spiking at the glowing smile that one of his best friend's had worn that day. "Hope," he said slowly, "there are things about me that you are better off not knowing." There weren't many pro-lycanthropy witches or wizards in the world.

Hope pursed her lips in annoyance as she took a slow sip of her tea.

There was something soft about her eyes that reminded him of James when Lily was on his mind.

She tapped her fingers lightly against her mug of tea, speaking in quiet tones.

"It must have been painful," she said, looking him directly in the eye.

"What?" Remus asked a bit flummoxed.

"The monthly transformation."

Remus dropped his cup of tea and it shattered on the ground as he stared at her in a mixture of shock and horror, sputtering incoherently.

Hope's eyes danced, shimmering so many different colours at once.

"My friend Angelina wants to be a healer when she's older," she explained, "she had me help her look up lycanthropy and I recognized the symptoms. And your boggart was a full moon."

A muscle jumped in his jaw, but he couldn't seem to manage to formulate any words to properly say in this kind of situation. He was reminded distantly when James, Sirius, and Peter had cornered him, telling him that they knew about his 'furry little problem' as James had so eloquently put it.

"That," he said finally, "is not the way I would have wanted you to find out."

Hope rolled her eyes, her aggravation seeping through. "Would you have liked me to find out at all? No. I like my way better."

Hope thrust the album into his chest. "Let me know when you're done with that," she all but ordered, "I'm going to want it back."

Remus could only stare wordlessly after her as she tossed him a wave and disappeared through the door, off in search of her friends.
As it happened, Hope and George ended up touring the sights on their own. Fred and Angelina were heading off to do a bit of shopping ("Don't have too much fun while we're gone!" Fred had called out to them as he and Angie made a hasty getaway) and Ron and Hermione decided to leave her and George alone (Aw! Those two just wanted some alone time, didn't they?).

George squeezed their linked fingers, smiling down at her. He'd told her that she didn't need the make-up; she looked beautiful without it, but Hope had said –while blushing at his comment– that it had been Angelina's idea in the first place.

"Anywhere you like," she said with a smile, "since I don't really know my way around, or anything…"

"Well, first up you've got Dervish and Banges over there," he used their interlocked hands to point, "you'll find a lot of strange magical stuff in there, lots of odds and ends, but they also fix stuff too. And over there," he pointed on the opposite side, "is Gladrags Wizardwear, a clothes store, obviously. You want to start in there?"

"Nah," Hope said dismissively, "where's that sweetshop that Ron's been positively raving about?"

"Ah, a woman of class," George said with a smirk, earning him another eye roll, "follow me!"

She laughed as he dragged her through the village, dodging around a number of their classmates to reach Honeyduke's Sweetshop.

"Whoa!" Hope said as they entered. "That's a lot of sugar!"

"And now you know why Ron's such an addict," George said. "See anything you like?"

"You're not paying for everything for me!" Hope said aghast. "What if I decided I wanted to buy the whole store?"

"Then I would be very broke," George said with a smirk, before relenting at her scowl, "oh fine… but your lunch is on me."

"How kind of you," Hope said with a drawl before searching the store with her eyes for something that looked good to eat. The Sugar Quills looked really good, so did the Peppermint Toads, and, of course, the Chocolate Frogs. The Wizochoc would come in handy around the dementors, and the Pumpkin Pasties and Cauldron Cakes were really good.

Five minutes later Hope was whistling a tune as her free hand was weighed down with candy. Talk about a sweet tooth.

"Where's your favourite?" she asked him as they manoeuvred between the students.

"Do you have to ask?" he joked. "Zonko's Joke Shop!"

He made a big dramatic wave to the brightly show-cased store in front of them, making Hope giggle at his antics. Zonko's was the perfect store for him and Fred, she could see. There were enough prank items there to fulfil their wildest imaginations and to inspire some more.

The Nose-biting Teacups and Hiccuph Sweets wouldn't be something that she would fancy anyone giving her, and the Frog Spawn looked a bit revolting, but she couldn't resist buying a few Dungbombs ("Oh, you rebel!" George said), but then George bought some too so he couldn't really say anything about it to her.
"Ah, we should probably head towards The Three Broomsticks," he said almost as an afterthought, glancing at his watch before giving her a foxy smirk. "And here I was having so much fun having you all to myself…"

Crimson pooled over her cheeks even before he bent downwards to kiss her. No matter how many times he kissed her, she knew she wouldn't ever get sick of it. Her eyes fluttered shut and reached up to curl her fingers into the fiery locks at the nape of his neck as George's arms held her to him by wrapping them around her waist. By the time he had released her, she was appropriately flushed and unsurprisingly breathless.

"Are you ever going to stop doing that?" she demanded in a weak sort of gasp, still trying to get the feeling back in her legs which were a bit wobbly from the kiss.

"Never!" George vowed, pressing another kiss to her lips, though this one was much shorter than the previous one, it still made her burn like the sun.

"Stop that!" she snapped, hitting him lightly on the arm. "If you keep this up we'll never meet the others on time!"

"Meh," George said with an uncaring air, "I don't think Fred and Angie would mind…I think their mouths would be a little busy…"

"George!" she complained.

"Oh, alright," he said in an all-suffering voice that earned him yet another eye roll, "I must abide to Milady's wishes, even though kissing her is terrible fun."

"Terrible fun?" Hope repeated a bit bemused as she linked her arm with his and allowed herself to be marched in the direction of the Three Broomsticks. "I'm not sure if you realize just how terrible you are."

"Oh, every day," he said with a wink, "it makes life very fun, didn't you know?"

"Oh, I had no idea," Hope said dryly, waving at Parvati and Lavender across the street who had either been asked by Seamus and Dean, or just so happened to bump into the two third years and were having an excellent time. Parvati and Lavender waved back, but Dean laughed as Seamus cat-called.

Hope took that moment to morph her face into Snape's and scowl at them, kind of freaking them out before returning it to the way she normally looked once more.

"Snape's face on your body," George shivered, "there's just some things you just can't un-see."

"How unfortunate," Hope said as he wrenched the door to The Three Broomsticks open bowing and waving a hand in the 'after you' gesture, "I suppose you'll have to live with that nightmare for the rest of your life."

"It does seem that way, doesn't it?" George said in mourning. "How will I ever be able to look at you without picturing Snape's head in the place of yours?"

"I might give you a bit of incentive," Hope said slyly, making him perk up instantly, but she never elaborated as she dragged him to their group of friends.

Some of those at the staff table were understandably tense. Professor McGonagall hadn't thought it
was a good idea for Hope to even be allowed into Hogsmeade given that Sirius Black was still after her, but Hope had her permission slip signed, so there was little she could say on the matter without denying her something she had earned.

Remus' reasons were a bit more personal, as she was the daughter of one of his friends.

"She came to talk to me this morning," he was telling Professor McGonagall, "she'd apparently figured out what I was."

Professor McGonagall's lips twitched slightly. "That doesn't surprise me; Hope and Hermione are very well read, so you'll have to be careful if you don't want anyone else to take notice."

Remus sighed slightly, but he couldn't help but agree with her there as he relaxed in his seat as Hope re-entered the Great Hall with her friends and boyfriend, plopping down into one of the seats at the Gryffindor Table and helping herself to some dinner.

"Did you go by to see the Shrieking Shack?" Ron asked Hope. "Hermione and I did."

"Oh, no!" Hope bemoaned. That had been one of the things that she had been looking forward to, and it had completely slipped her mind. "I totally forgot about that! Damn George Weasley, distracting me!"

Hermione hid a giggle, but Ron openly sniggered at her.

"Was it as scary in person?" Hope asked.

"A little from the distance," Hermione had to admit, "but I suppose it depends on how you see it."

Hope grunted in agreement before spooning the last of her soup into her mouth and standing up. "I'm going to go drop off my stuff in the dormitory, I'll be back in a few."

So, she left everyone to jog up several flights of moving staircases until she came to a stop in front of the Fat Lady's portrait, behind which was the entrance into the Gryffindor Common Room.

"Ah, hello," the slightly tipsy portrait greeted her, raising a glass of perhaps fine wine (or maybe not so fine, you never knew with portraits), password?"

"Revocate animus," Hope said clearly, and the portrait swung open with an "And to you."

It was strange to see the common room and the dorms so empty, but there were a lot of students in Gryffindor House, so maybe it was just because she was so used to it being full, but the common room looked a little...big.

She shrugged the thought off, before taking the steps two at a time until she reached her year's dorm, before tossing her tricks and treats onto her bed a bit haphazardly and shutting the door with a snap as she bounded down the steps once more.

However, Hope first encountered a problem with the portrait which did not move at her touch like it did for all those students who wanted to leave the common room. Hope pressed against the portrait, but it was like it was jammed, only swinging free once Hope threw her shoulder against the frame, something that she was almost sure had fractured her shoulder in some way, but she didn't have time to dwell on it as she stepped out and onto the landing, surprise, caution, and worry all flashing through her mind at the sight.

Where the Fat Lady was supposed to be, where she had been only moments before, that could be
certain, were three long distinct scratches like a dog or a wolf. A massive dog or wolf. Her mind instantly flashed to that huge black hound that she had seen over the summer, the supposed 'Grim.'

And then she saw it again, looking directly to the left.

The animal bared its teeth at her slightly before turning on its heel and leaping up the stairs.

Without even thinking at all, Hope raced after it, her wand clenched tightly in her hand. The dog was fast and slippery, taking a number of shortcuts and secret passages that she hadn't even known existed, and she was finding it difficult to keep up with him, but he never left her sight, no matter how far ahead he got.

At this point, Sirius was running into a few problems.

First, and foremost, the Fat Lady had refused to let him inside the common room, in which he was certain traitorous Peter lay. He'd admit that his temper got the best of him a little when he slashed up the painting, but it just in his mind. The second problem arose when his little goddaughter forced her way out of the common room and saw him (albeit in his animagus form). And his third problem, and most important problem, was that his goddaughter was now chasing him around the school.

Sirius would have to move fast or she would see him.

So, feeling incredibly guilty, Sirius wound around a corner very fast, transforming quickly back to a human and hiding deep in the shadows there as Hope came to a stop breathing hard, twisting two ways and frowning intently. When she looked in the direction that was opposite to him, he gave her a rough hit to the back of her head.

She crumpled instantly, her world fading into darkness.
Sirius regretted it the instant he did it, catching her limp body mere inches from hitting the ground as he laid he down gently, but there was little he could do now. He grimaced slightly at how much she looked like her mother; he hadn't been so close to her since that night she'd run away from her aunt and uncle's house.

Quite unsure of just what to do, Sirius simply dropped a hand to the top of her head, giving a whispered apology before his body shifted and lengthened into that of a great black dog, lurching into the shadows with barely a glance back to where his goddaughter's body lay.

Unaware of their friend's predicament, Hermione and Ron were finally making their way out of the Great Hall and up onto the main staircase.

"I thought Hope would come back down once she'd finished putting her stuff away," Hermione said with a bit of concern, "she said she'd only be gone a few minutes…"

"You know Hope," Ron said, giving her an easy grin that made her feel warm, "she probably left out one of her books and got a little distracted by it."

It wouldn't have been the first time, that much could be certain. Hope could be very easily distracted just as she could be easily intently focused. They usually blamed George for getting her distracted, but it wasn't always the case.

"What's this?" Hermione questioned at the mass of Gryffindor students amassed around the portrait hole.

"Neville's probably forgotten the password again," Ron said sagely.

"Hey!" said Neville from behind them, sounding slightly insulted no matter the truth to his words.

"Oh, sorry," Ron quickly apologized as his brother made his way through the crowd.

"Let me through, please" Percy ordered. "What's the holdup here? You all can't have forgotten the password –excuse me, I'm Head Boy!"

"Real proud of that fact, isn't he?" Ron muttered to Hermione, making he give him a small smile, which made it all worth it in his mind.

"Get back all of you," Percy said suddenly, dropping the smiles from their faces in an instant. Ron had never heard Percy so serious in all his life, and that was including how he had spoken last year during the basilisk attacks. "No one is to enter this dormitory until it has been fully searched – Somebody get Professor Dumbledore. Quick!"

The person who was the furthest from the portrait just so happened to be Colin Creevey, so he turned and raced down the stairs in search of the headmaster. He must not have been very difficult to find because Colin returned in a matter of moments with the aged, silver-haired wizard trailing close behind him.

"What's going on?" Ginny asked, having just arrived and was now standing on her tip toes trying to see over the heads of the students that blocked her sight, but even that height difference didn't make her tall enough.
But Hermione and Ron couldn't offer her any answer because even they couldn't see through the throng of people, and when some of them finally shifted, Hermione gasped.

The Fat Lady was gone from her portrait, and the canvas that she had once resided upon was ripped as though with a claw.

Hermione didn't even realize that she was now holding onto Ron's hand tightly, and Ron felt no need to inform her of it. Hermione could feel her fear rising as Professors McGonagall, Snape, and Lupin rushed down the hall to Professor Dumbledore.

"Where's Hope?" she hissed to Ron, but she could his same fear reflected in.

"You'll be lucky," a very familiar excessively cheerful voice stated over the group, making a number of them jump in surprise (Ron and Hermione among them, having been engrossed in their worry, too much to notice his presence).

It had been awhile since the pair had seen Peeves the Poltergeist. They actively avoided him, like most students did. Hermione didn't fancy an inkwell emptied on top of her head and Ron didn't appreciate having rugs tugged from under his feet.

"What do you mean, Peeves?" Ron had to commend the headmaster for having such a cool head in the face of Peeves, but he probably had a lot of experience with dealing with the prankster ghost.

Peeves' voice changed to an overly sweet tone when speaking to Dumbledore. "Ashamed, Your Headship, sir. Doesn't want to be seen. She's a horrible mess. Saw her running through the landscapes up on the fourth floor, sir, dodging between the trees. Crying something dreadful. Poor thing…" That last bit was the fakest Ron and Hermione had ever heard.

"Did she say who did it?" Dumbledore asked.

"Oh, yes, Professorhead," Peeves said in a gleeful manner. "He got very angry when she wouldn't let him in, you see. Nasty temper he's got, that Sirius Black."

Hermione could swear that the headmaster's eyes darkened slightly behind his half-moon spectacles.

"All students will make for the Great Hall," he ordered, and the students were quick to comply, except for two.

"Professor McGonagall!"

Hermione lurched forward, dragging Ron by their still-linked hands (and firmly ignoring the butterflies fluttering rapidly in her stomach as if for escape) to their Head of House.

"Miss Granger," Professor McGonagall said sternly, "please follow your—"

"Professor," Hermione said, interrupting her for the first (and last) time in her life, "Hope's missing."

Professor McGonagall went positively white, which was a first, Ron and Hermione had to admit. "Go to the Great Hall," she continued in a would-be calm voice that betrayed her concern for the situation, "we'll find Hope, don't worry."

But Hermione and Ron couldn't help but exchange a look at that, because Professor McGonagall had done something that she had never done before.

She had said Hope's first name.
Now came the real challenge; evading George Weasley as long as possible.

Oh, that was going to be so difficult, Hermione just knew it was.

If there was one thing that Remus Lupin prided himself on, it was knowing Hogwarts for better than any professor.

So he was going to be the one who found James' missing daughter.

And it helped that the full moon was tomorrow, so his senses were heightened, and that meant that he could follow Hope's distinctive scent with ease. He traced it from the left of the Fat Lady's portrait, up a few stairs, through a hidden tapestry.

"Hope!"

The thirteen year old witch was lying sprawled on the ground, her rose-colored hair fanning out around her, her wand still clenched in her fist.

As gently as it could possibly be done, Remus rolled her onto her back, propping her head up with his hand as he checked that she was still breathing, which, luckily, she was. He gave her face a light slap, repeating her name.

Hope's eyebrows scrunched together as she feebly stirred, her eyelids fluttering slightly before opening to reveal those soulful green eyes that had once belonged to Lily Evans.

Naturally the first thing out of her mouth was: "Oh please tell me you didn't give me mouth-to-mouth resuscitation."

Remus was so startled that he laughed out loud. "I can assure you, Hope," he said with a twinkle in his eye, "the last person to have kissed you is George."

"I should hope so," said Hope (firmly ignoring the pun she made on herself, as she always did), giving him a wink, "I've got a thing for gingers."

"I hear it's hereditary," the werewolf said sagely, helping her sit up and moan slightly as she rubbed the spot where she was struck. "Are you alright?"

"What d'you mean?" Hope said, blinking her eyes a few times as if to focus her eyesight.

"You've been missing for about an hour," Remus informed her and she stared uncomprehendingly at him.

"Really?" she said in surprise. "It's been that long?"

"All the professors have been looking for you," Remus added.

"Even Snape?"

Remus almost wasn't surprised at the amount of contempt that her voice held towards the Head of Slytherin House. She was James' daughter after all, and there was some obvious tension between the two. Remus would have thought that Severus would have a bit of a better relationship with Hope because she had her mother's face than if she had been born a boy with her father's looks. But there was also the personality to consider.

Hope was a bit...renowned for her...street smarts as they say. Of course, Hermione Granger was
most definitely the reigning champion grade-wise, Hope was still high up on the ladder. Remus knew that she was a lock-picker, both because of the tools that she wore tucked into her hair or on clothes at all times, but also because the Weasley Twins could often be seen pouring over spare locks using her picks, attempting to unlock them. The swears told him they had yet to succeed. And then there was the whole pick-pocketing thing. Remus wasn't sure where she'd even picked up that skill, and he wasn't sure that he wanted to know, but an awful lot of people pointed their fingers at her when their wands went mysteriously missing.

Remus hadn't wanted to view Ronald Weasley as the Peter Pettigrew of the group (as Hermione was clearly him and Hope was obviously James), and he was right to. Ron's performance in his classes were above average, even though (his colleagues reported) he had started out rather mediocre. The one thing that struck him the most was his steadfast loyalty to the two girls that were his best friends. He would take the laughs at being so close to two girls because there would be no one else who could possibly take his place. Another thing was that he was clever, as was evident in his papers. Maybe not in the way that Hermione was, but he had once mapped out the perfect way to capture a kappa when Hope and Hermione were stumped.

But he was getting off topic.

"Even Snape," he agreed before his concern shined through, "did you hit your head?"

His fingers gently probed the back of her skull for any injuries, feeling a small bump that made her wince.

"Ow!" she complained.

"Let's get you on your feet," he advised, "it might be best to let Madam Pomfrey look at your head."

"I'm fine," Hope said, nettled, "I don't want—"

"You're going," Remus said in a voice that brooked no argument. "How did you find this place anyways?" He kept a tight grip on her elbow when she tripped and almost fell, her movements much more sluggish than he hoped.

Hope screwed up her face in concentration, accidentally turning her hair violet, but it disappeared quick enough that Remus didn't comment on it. "I thought...I saw something, so I chased after it...I think?" she sounded more confused than certain, making Remus worry about that head wound of hers, no matter how small it was.

"You think?" he pressed, helping carefully down the stairs, even as she used the stone rail for assistance.

"It's all...kind of fuzzy," she said in an airy voice that sounded distinctly like one of his second year Ravenclaw student's, Luna Lovegood, if his memory served him. "I was chasing...it...and then I lost it and something hit me from behind."

Remus clenched his teeth together, almost grinding them. Of course, Black wouldn't want to look her in the face, besides, back-stabbing was his specialty...maybe he hadn't wanted to look at the face that was nearly identical to the one that Lily Evans had worn.

"M'Tired," she murmured. "Can we sleep now?"

"We're almost there," he said, steering her towards the hospital wing. "Madam Pomfrey?"

The Matron was at his side in a matter of moments, her eyes fastened on Hope. "Oh, Hope! You are
bad for my heart!"
"That's probably what George thinks too," Hope agreed with a bit of a slur.

Madam Pomfrey didn't smile as she dragged the girl over to the nearest bed and forcefully pushing her down onto it, berating the girl loudly, honestly, some things never seemed to change.

"Miss Potter!"

Professor McGonagall was the picture of relief at the sight of one of her most troublesome students.

"Yo," Hope said, raising a hand in barely a wave as Professor Lupin left to continue the search for Sirius Black.

"What happened to her, Poppy?" Professor McGonagall demanded of the Hogwarts Matron.

"Only a mild concussion," Madam Pomfrey assured her fellow staff member, tapping the afflicted area with her wand.

"Ow!" Hope complained, swatting her wand away with an apprehensive look on her face. "Careful with that thing, you could poke someone's eye out!"

"I can assure you, Miss Potter," Madam Pomfrey said in a clipped voice, "if and only if I wanted to poke your eye out, would I do so."

"You never know," the red-head grumbled, massaging the back of her head as she did so, "even healers can have bad days."

She astutely ignored the filthy look that Madam Pomfrey tossed her way.

"Now, Miss Potter," Professor McGonagall began as Snape entered the room as well, "why don't you tell me what happened?"

Hope was a little more than disgruntled by the kind of questioning her professors had to put her through, and she was far less than keen to talk about it. Mostly because someone had gotten the drop on her and she had never seen their face. Oh they were going to get it, only with her fist to their face, that much Hope was certain.

"Look," she said, her eyes narrowed dangerously (not a good sign), and her arms tightly crossed that it was unlikely that she would tell them anything else, "I told you I was hit from behind, I didn't see whoever did it."

"It seems…curious," Snape said in an oily voice, "that you would be in Gryffindor Tower conveniently when Black demanded entry."

Hope canted her head at the greasy-haired man, arching an eyebrow and speaking with careful control (knowing her, it was probably causing her a lot of strain, considering who she was dealing with). "What are you insinuating? That I'm aiding a criminal? A criminal who apparently wants me dead? Yeah, that's likely," she snapped out the last bit, her irritation edging into her voice.

"Miss Potter," Professor McGonagall warned, but for once, Hope ignored her.

"I think I want to go see my friends now and go to sleep," Hope said in an official sort of voice, her rings bumping together as she fiddled with her hands. Professor McGonagall could almost swear that the snake ring moved.
"I think that's quite enough questioning for my student tonight," said Professor McGonagall to the small group that had gathered. "Miss Potter, if you would follow me…"

"Gladly," Hope muttered.

The walk down to the Great Hall was awkward and silent. Hope was irritated and Professor McGonagall was disapproving.

"Hope!"

Hope was a little surprised by the relief in Percy's voice. The Head Boy strode towards her, his face tense, but his eyes broke the image. A couple of students in purple sleeping bags turned towards her at the noise, but her firm stare made them turn in the opposite direction, though she was sure they were still eavesdropping.

"There you are! Where've you been? The others have been worried sick!" Percy sounded a trifle bit exasperated.

Hope didn't have to guess who he meant by 'others'.

She stood on her tip-toes, searching the mass, but they all looked the same.

"Left side, toward the back," Percy informed her, "I can take you…are you sure you're alright?"

"I'm fine, Percy," Hope said with the barest hint of a smile, "really."

He didn't look convinced.

"Well," she wheedled, "I'm a little tired."

He believed that. Her eyelids were drooping slightly and her lips were twitching for a yawn. So he directed her towards his brothers and their combined friends, and he didn't ask many questions.

The look on George's face was enough.

His questions could wait.

Though Hope had claimed to be tired, that didn't stop her from staying awake well into the night, feigning sleep, because overprotective Percy (now channelling his mother's spirit it seemed, though she was certain Mrs. Weasley was still alive) kept coming back to check on her whenever he was free. But Hope kept her eyes firmly shut, her hand relaxed in George's light grip. She raised her eyes slightly to find that Ron and Hermione were doing the same thing. Oh, she was such a bad influence on them!

They all had to quickly shut their eyes, though, because footsteps approached them.

"Any sign of him, Professor?" Percy's voice could be easily made out, even in a whisper.

"No," came Dumbledore's calm response. Hope kind of wanted to see him lose his temper; it would at least be interesting to watch. "All well here?"

"We have everything under control, sir," Percy assured him.

"Good," Dumbledore said with a miniscule undertone of relief. "There's no point in moving them all
now. I've found a temporary guardian for the Gryffindor portrait hole. You'll be able to move them back in tomorrow."

A temporary guardian? That didn't sound good. What had happened to the Fat Lady? Professor McGonagall had never said.

Percy asked her question for her. "And the Fat Lady?"

"Hiding in a map of Argyllshire on the second floor. Apparently she refused to let Black in without the password, so he attacked. She's still very distressed, but once she's calmed down, I'll have Mr. Filch restore her."

"And what Hope said about the portrait jamming when she tried to get out?" Hope tried not to react to that. Clearly had had been speaking with Professor McGonagall (because she found it very hard to believe that Snape would have told him anything).

"Miss Potter should have been locked inside the tower," Dumbledore said in a thoughtful voice, "the fact that she was able to force her way out…is astounding to say the least. But it is a mystery to ponder another day."

Hogwarts will always answer to its heirs whose blood runs in veins through the entire structure.

Hope had remembered that small part in Salazar's little journal. It hadn't really made sense to her at the time, why would it? The way it was written, it was almost as if Salazar considered the castle to be alive, but then, she had to consider that the castle was made from Blood Magick. So, possibly, it could 'remember' the blood from which it had been forged, because, even though Hope's blood was rather diluted in comparison to her grandfather's, she was still a Slytherin.

"Headmaster?"

Hope almost clenched her hand tightly around George's, but that would be too obvious. She took a calming breath.

Meditation, she thought to herself, is something I need to really look in to. Because, really, she was starting to get a little too mad at the sound of his voice. Though, in her defence, he had accused her of aiding and abetting a person that the Wizarding world practically considered a terrorist.

"The whole of the third floor has been searched. He's not there. And Filch has done the dungeons; nothing there either."

"What about the Astronomy Tower?" Dumbledore inquired. "Professor Trelawney's room? The Owlery?"

"All searched," came Snape's response.

"Very well, Severus," Dumbledore said, heaving a sigh that echoed in the silence, "I didn't really expect Black to linger."

"Have you any theory as to how he got in, Professor?" Snape asked of him.

Hermione and Ron had already told Hope of the theories circling through the students, including apparition (which couldn't be done on the grounds, though Hope had to say she was a bit dumbfounded that a Ravenclaw had suggested that one), disguise (that one was more likely; go Hufflepuff), or flying (which couldn't be done for the same reason as the first theory). It would be interesting to hear what the headmaster thought about the matter.
"Many, Severus, each of them as unlikely as the next," he said. So... a no go with the headmaster's though, then.

"You remember the conversation we had, Headmaster, just before --ah-- the start of term?" he asked, making Hope squint barely in their direction. Oh... it seemed that Percy was still standing close-by, so the potion's professor was trying to block the Head Boy from the conversation.

"I do, Severus." Dumbledore was employing the same voice that Hope used when she was trying to say "I don't want to talk about it" in a fewer amount of words.

"It seems --almost impossible-- that Black could have entered the school without inside help." Hope went stone cold. Was he insinuating that Professor Lupin-?! "I did express my concerns when you appointed—" Oh, he did think it was Professor Lupin. Another great reason for her to hate him; Professor Lupin was awesome, not including being friends with her dad, of course.

"I do not believe that a single person inside this castle would have helped Black enter it," Professor Dumbledore replied shortly.

At least Dumbledore wasn't a git. He could see something good just be looking at the man. Why couldn't anyone else see that about Remus Lupin?
November continued, with the days growing colder and colder, but despite that, Hope found herself leaning against a stone rail of the viaduct. She always found that it was best to think in the open air, but maybe that wasn't always the best thing, especially in this kind of weather. She looked down, but the height didn't scare her (if it had, she would have been a fail as a Seeker).

She would have been sleeping, in fact, she should have been, but she couldn't. Her friends had been practically smothering her since the Halloween incident, and she could only handle so much. All she needed was to get away for awhile.

"Ah, I see you've found my old haunt."

Hope lifted her gaze from the frigid horizon to meet Remus Lupin's pale green eyes. "Hm?" she asked in confusion.

"My old haunt," Professor Lupin repeated, "whenever I needed to get some space, I'd come here." He smoothed a hand fondly over the stone.

Her lips twitched slightly. "From Dad?"

"Sometimes," Professor Lupin admitted. "My friends were a bit..." He struggled for the perfect word to describe them before giving up.

"Can't have gotten up to anything worse than the trouble Ron, Hermione, and I get into?" Hope asked in amusement.

Professor Lupin gave a slight wince. Tales of her adventures had reached his ears. Defeating Voldemort a second time and a third time, fighting a basilisk...yes, she had definitely surpassed James. "Well...maybe not as much trouble—"

She gave a short laugh as he said 'trouble'. "Sorry," she apologized with a grin, "it's just that Trouble is what we call George." A pale pink flush adorned her cheeks at the mention of her boyfriend (should she really call him that? They did kiss a couple of times, but they'd never actually talked about being girlfriend/boyfriend...). "My friends say I attract 'Trouble'."

"How clever of them."

"They seem to think so," she said with a shrug. She eyed his appearance; his robes were hanging loosely on his thin and wiry frame and he was leaning more on his cane and his scars were more prominent.

"Your time of the month is coming up, right?" she asked innocently.

"So eloquent with words," Professor Lupin said, skating over her question, because they both knew the answer to it, "you're very much like your mother in that aspect."

Hope sighed lightly. She had always hated being compared to her dead parents, that was all anyone saw...well, maybe not anyone. Now, she kind of got it. It was better to be James and Lily Potter's daughter than to be the Girl-Who-Lived any day. "Thank you," she said finally, "she must have been a sweet-talker."

Professor Lupin gave a light chuckle. "She could be," he admitted, "she was very good at lying."
Hope lifted her head sharply, an expression of complete and utter surprise splashed across her face. "Really?" she asked in a little bit of awe. "But I thought she was Head Girl."

"Oh, she was," Professor Lupin assured her, "but that didn't really stop her...she was much better at it than James was. That was something that always irritated him. He got into trouble a lot, and he could never really talk his way out of it."

"Sucks for him," Hope sang.

"Did you know that your father fell in love with your mother in first year and proceeded to chase her until seventh year?" Professor Lupin asked her.

"Really?" she said in surprise, her eyebrows drawing upwards. "I didn't know that."

"Lily thought that James was a bit of a toe-rag, too arrogant for her taste," Professor Lupin said, stroking his chin thoughtfully, "but he grew out of that arrogance, and she gave him a chance."

"I've never heard that one before," she said, leaning against the stone to look at him, canting her head slightly, her eyes glimmering a paler green (the colour of his eyes, he noticed) for a second.

"Here's something I want to know," she said in a faux-light voice that was always a bad sign, Professor Lupin winced slightly, "if you were really such good mates with my dad, then why didn't you ever come see me?" Her eyes were now frigid sapphires.

"Ah," Professor Lupin shifted uncomfortably, there was her infamous and sudden temper rearing its ugly head, "well—"

Hope crossed her arms, an unimpressed look on her face.

"I was told that it would be best if I didn't," Professor Lupin admitted.

"Told...right..." Hope turned her furious eyes away from him, her fingers curling into tight white fists. "And who said that?"

"Albus Dumbledore."

"Even better!" Hope snarled.

"I know you're mad at me, and you have every right to be," Professor Lupin said quickly, "but whatever distance I've kept from you was for your own safety."

"Safety? Are you kidding me?" she snapped. "I was ten when I was 'accidentally' pushed in front of a car! My family can't stand the very idea of me! Those so called blood wards are failing! I would be far better protected if I started carrying a Blood Stone around in my pocket!"

The bit about the Blood Stone caught his attention more than it should have. Blood Stones were incredibly rare and incredibly valuable in rune research. They were from a more obscure branch of magic that had come from Druidism. Now he saw what Filius had meant about her being more interested in old magicks.

"You wanted to live with someone else," Professor Lupin said quietly.

"Preferably someone who isn't anti-magic," Hope snipped, rolling her eyes slightly.

"I wouldn't have been able to take you in anyways," he said, trying to keep her as calm as it was possible to be, "I'm sure you're aware of the attitude the ministry has towards werewolves, they have
laws that forbids them from caring for magical or muggle children."

"How kind of them," Hope grumbled, "I wouldn't have minded."

"Wouldn't have minded?" Professor Lupin asked a bit flummoxed. What, being a werewolf? Or living with one?

"I wouldn't have minded being raised by one."

Professor Lupin couldn't but feel a little lost…hadn't she just been mad at him? All he could do was shake his head.

Females.

It was late and the sky was unbelievably black with tiny pin-pricks of silver against the darkness. If Hope had had it her way, she would be out star-gazing, maybe even with George, but maybe she had bitten off more than she could chew with taking three electives.

She raked a hand through her loosely braided hair, exhaling a slow sigh and almost dislodging her wand from where it was tucked behind her ear, its tip being used to illuminate the parchment and the book she had lying open before her.

*The Ankh was a symbol used commonly throughout Egypt, and it is a symbol well known in both the muggle and Wizarding worlds. It symbolizes life, but it is also associated with the Egyptian glyph for magical protection, sa. It is also said that the symbol is one of the sunrise-*

Hope stilled her quill at the sound of something she couldn't decipher. She listened intently for a moment longer, and heard it again, the sound of something not unlike a pebble hitting glass. She replaced her quill and ink on the bedside table as she threw open the curtains that hid her bed from view, grinning and flushing with delight as she padded over to the window, opening in slightly.

George Weasley was hovering on his broomstick outside her dorm.

"What on earth are you doing?" she asked in awe, earning her a grin in return.

"Kidnapping you."

"You do understand the idea of kidnapping, don't you?" she asked in a dry voice. "You don't really tell the person you're kidnapping that you're kidnapping them."

"If I did that, you'd freeze to death," George said conversationally, before changing it to coaxing, "come on, Hope…stargazing…"

Her eyes lit with that manic light at the mention of one of her most favourite pastimes.

"I love you so much right now!" she whispered fervently so as not to wake up her dorm mates, leaning through the open window to give him a quick, firm kiss. "I'm going to get dressed, wait there."

George could only mouth wordlessly at the girl as she grabbed her clothes and disappeared into the bathroom to change out of her pyjamas. His brain was still trying to process that she had said "I love you" to him. Those were three words that the pair had never uttered, but that was a little understandable, they'd only just kissed on the last day of August, and their first date had technically been Halloween, and it was only November.
"Budge over, handsome."

George obediently slid back to accommodate her as she hoisted herself side-saddle onto the broomstick, wrapping an arm around his neck as they shot forward and into the night.

"You know, star-gazing always works better when it's not quite so cold," Hope mentioned in a light voice.

"Ah but I have an ulterior motive," George said, wrapping an arm gently but securely around her waist, pulling her closer to him and enjoying the flush that adorned her face.

"Oh?" she all but whispered.

"If you get cold you have me."

She laughed outright. "Oh my gods, you are completely terrible!"

"I get the feeling you've called me that before," he said in a musing voice.

"It's entirely possible," Hope agreed as he ducked his head to feather a kiss to her lips. Her fingers curled into the collar of his jacket as he took her breath away, only allowing her to breathe after a number of seconds had passed. "Maybe not the best thing to do on a broom, Georgie," she said lightly, her cheeks a dark red (oh, she hoped that he couldn't see it, but then, they were illuminated by moonlight and starlight).

"And why would that be?" His eyes were like two sapphires that had been planted in darkness as he swayed the broom slightly.

"Because I'll kill you," Hope threatened lightly as her grip on him tightened. "If you make me fall, I'll kill you."

George tilted his head back to laugh at her words. "Already forgotten what you said to me first year?"

Hope screwed up her face in thought as she tried to recall exactly what she had said to him, and then she remembered.

"George?" she whispered.

"Hm?"

"Don't let me fall."

He chuckled ahead of her, one hand squeezing hers where they were still locked around him. "Never."

"Oh shut up!" she muttered, "that was a completely different situation, and you know it!"

"Maybe," George sang in an off key voice, before changing the subject a bit abruptly, "There was something that I wanted to ask you."

Hope leaned backwards slightly to look at him in the eye. He looked distinctly uncomfortable and embarrassed, not always a good combination. "What is it?" she asked, both curious and cautious.

She could feel him twisting his fingers.
"Will you be my girlfriend?"

Hope almost laughed, but that would have been mean. She had been expecting it to be something far more serious than asking her that.

"Oh, I don't know," Hope said with a wink, "I've met this really amazing guy."

"Amazing guy?" George repeated with a quirked eyebrow and a grin. "Anyone I know?"

"You might," Hope acquiesced, "see, he's got this pranking thing and he's much cleverer than he seems, sound like anyone you know?"

"Possibly," George said, "and what would you say to this amazing guy if he asked you to be his girlfriend?"

"Hm," Hope pondered lightly, "well, I would say that there would only be one man for the job."

It was only much later that Hope realized that they didn't get much around to star-gazing, but she wasn't too upset in the light of George's question.

The day officially sucked, that was Hope Potter's not so modest opinion. It was five in the bloody morning when she had awoken, the last thing she had wanted to do was be kept awake well into the morning when she could be sleeping, especially since today was the day of the Gryffindor-Hufflepuff match. Her temper was bad enough that it could probably boil over a kettle of tea.

First Malfoy claimed that his arm was still causing him trouble, when the truth was he didn't want to play in the weather that was raging outside…wimp (Madam Pomfrey, bless her soul, was threatening to file an inquiry with St. Mungo's if his pain progressed further than the next week; busted). Secondly, there was the whole waking up earlier than she should have (thus giving her time to complete all of the rest of her homework, but that didn't make Hope feel any better). And thirdly, there was the completely horrible weather outside, she hadn't even wanted to leave the comforts of her bed, but oh well.

Parvati had tied her dark crimson hair into a tightly braided bun so that the wind wouldn't whip it across her face too much, so that was one thing she wouldn't have to worry about, she thought to herself as she sat huddled with her Quidditch teammates. They were all so thickly padded down with clothes and the minimum protective gear allowed during games, that all of them could probably fall about fifty feet and still bounce back.

Oliver was the only one who seemed both very concerned, and very cheerful. Hope had to be commended for only threatening to kill him twice (she didn't want to tally up the threats to Hermione, Ron, Fred, or George, though George was probably holding the record).

"If he gives me any more hints I swear I'm going to take my wand-" Hope muttered under her breath to Angelina who burst into silent giggles as Katie made her lower her wand, for fear of her actually taking up her threat to her boyfriend.

"Calm, Hope, remember?" she asked mildly. "Weren't you practicing meditation, or something to help?"

"I was," Hope admitted, a bit as an afterthought. "I'm not very good at it."

"That's because you have to practice," Katie said bracingly, "deep breaths, alright? Keep the death threats to a minimum, yeah?"
Hope gave her an unlady-like grunt that wouldn't have been amiss with a couple of trolls. "I've only done two today!" she complained.

"And it's a great start," Alicia said, reaching over to pat Hope on the head like she was a child that had finally done something right. Hope whacked her hand away with a sneer.

"Oh, shut up," she snarled as the girls laughed at her. "You all think you're so clever."

"Very clever, yes," Angelina agreed.

Hope hefted a blunt butter knife at the dark-skinned girl. "I'm not afraid to use this on you, Johnson. I've got skills."

"With lock picks," Angelina jibed back, "don't worry, I think I'm safe."

Hope shook her head and mouthed wordlessly at her, completely dumbfounded.

"Wow," Ron said impressed, "I think that's the first time I've seen her at a loss for words."

"I must be imitating you, then," Hope said in irritation, regaining a bit of her inner (and outer) fire.

"Ra-ar!" Fred said, doing a bad imitation himself of a cat. "Wow! I didn't know you could be this… snappish."

"Snappish?" Hope said with a canted eyebrow. "My friend, it seems you are very confused, because this is the wonderful sarcasm that I enjoy employing on a daily basis."

"Do you really?" Fred asked in mock fascination. "I had no idea!"

"That could possibly stem from some serious memory loss that you should talk to Madam Pomfrey about," Hope said in a thoughtful voice, "or maybe if you pulled your lips off of Angie's for five seconds, you would know all this."

There was a collective "Oooh!" from those nearest as Fred's whole face burned brighter than his hair.

"Booyah," Hope said, pointing the butter knife at him know, "you cannot outsmart the master."

"I concede to one greater than I," Fred said solemnly as his twin—who had been surprisingly quiet throughout this whole exchange—sniggered beside Hope, an arm wrapped loosely around her waist. He had known something was different about them, but he didn't mention it. They were much more casual together than they had been before, and that was good. It was hard to imagine one without the other now, even more so than it had when they had first been considered 'a thing'.

It seemed a bit like a fairy-tale to Fred, the pauper getting the princess, but George didn't like her because she was rich, he liked her because she didn't try to change him or censor who he was, like their mother often did, often not knowing how much it hurt them.

"Hey, Pretty-boy," Hope laughed, drawing his attention away from his thoughts and to the black-and-yellow clothed Hufflepuff Seeker and Captain, Cedric Diggory, "ready to lose today?"

"Only if you are," the older boy said in a good naturedly way. "May the best man or woman win."

He held out his hand to her, which Oliver eyed suspiciously, but Hope didn't have the same reservations, grinning as she took it, shaking it once before bumping fists and wiggling her fingers.

"Wait a second," George said, a bit dumbfounded, "you have a handshake?"
"The Seekers do," Hope said with a shrug, "not including Malfoy of course. What? Doesn't anyone else have a handshake?"

"No," they all said.

"Hey, hey, Cho!" Hope yelled over to the Ravenclaw table, making the Chinese girl whom she had bested already on several occasions look up from her seat.

"Yeah?"

"Do the Seekers have a handshake?"

"Definitely," she said with a laugh.

Hope smirked at her boyfriend. "I guess you're not as cool as us, hot-stuff."

She was born ready for this match, and she knew she would have nailed it completely if Malfoy was playing, because she never lost to Malfoy, he was fair game, but Cedric on the other hand, he was going to require a bit more effort, but that didn't scare Hope.

She was used to giving her all during Quidditch matches, and she was going to show Professor McGonagall that she didn't need anybody to watch her be as good as she could be (because the woman had been downright scary, not wanting her to practice with the team if it limited Sirius Black's efforts to attack her; but Hope didn't care if he did attack her, because there was no way she was losing a Quidditch match).

She thought she would've enjoyed trouncing the opposing team more if it was Slytherin, as she was feeling particularly angry towards Snape who had subbed for Professor Lupin recently while the poor man was recovering from his night howling at the moon (speaking figuratively). Snape, being the oh so clever bastard that he thought he was, had assigned an essay on werewolves (she had turned white in anger at how he was trying to get the werewolf to lose his job). It was times like these that Hope really, really hated him.

But she didn't have time to think about that as the whistle blew, barely heard over the raging storm around, and the fourteen players lifted off.

Even with the goggles that repelled the water, Hope was having trouble seeing that glimmer of gold in the ungodly heavenly downpour. It was as if the sky was deciding that it really didn't want Hufflepuff and Gryffindor to play against each other today, and Hope was all for that.

She clenched her hands tightly around the shaft of her broom, attempting to increase her control of it, but even that was difficult.

"Come on!" she scolded herself as she finally caught sight of the tiny ball she had been searching for for almost the whole game (the rest of the game she'd been trying to avoid being hit by Bludgers). She looked up from her goal –something one should never do, especially not against Cedric Diggory– and that was when she saw him. The great black dog from Surrey. The Grim.

"I don't have time for you!" she yelled at him, turning back towards the Snitch, but the overwhelming sense of dread had returned completely from the time on the train and she had to resist the urge to scream at the sight of the amassed dementors under her.

She felt so cold, so very cold, like her insides were being ripped apart by it, and the screaming, the screaming was coming back in full once more.
"Not Hope, not Hope, please not Hope!"

"Stand aside, you silly girl...stand aside, now..."

"Not Hope, please no, take me, kill me instead—"

"Not Hope! Please...have mercy...have mercy..."

She couldn't breathe...

Cedric was inches away from the Snitch when he looked back, something one should never do, especially not against Hope Potter, and what he saw drew him up short and scared the living shite out of him at the same time.

Hope would have caught the Snitch if not for those dementors that were close enough to form a tight ring around her, and then they drew closer and she slipped off the broom, falling towards the earth with no indication of slowing down.

Without giving the Snitch a second thought, Cedric dived after her, a hand outstretched for hers, but it was soaking and the clothes were slippery, it was like trying to grab a hold of an eel.

The ground was getting closer and closer, and Cedric was growing more desperate. A fall from that height could kill someone (ignoring the fact that Hope wasn't exactly ordinary), and if it didn't kill her, it would certainly incapacitate her for awhile.

At the last possible second, he snagged her wrist, barely managing to pull her up a little before they both tumbled to the ground. Cedric's injuries were nothing compared to Hope's though, something he had to repeat to Madam Pomfrey when she tried to look him over as Professor Dumbledore removed the Gryffindor Seeker on a stretcher, and from the distance, he couldn't for the life of him tell if she was dead or alive.
Inheritance From the Father

It looked worse than it was, that much George was certain of. Bandages encircled her head like a flat sort of tiara, and a number of pillows had been propped up behind her so that her head was a bit more elevated than it was when she normally slept.

For a painstaking moment, George had thought that she was dead, but Madam Pomfrey assured him that the pallor of her skin was just an after-effect of the Dementors, which was a relief to say the least. It had been lucky that Diggory had caught her when he did, Madam Pomfrey had told him, or Hope's injuries might be a good deal worse.

Hope stirred faintly, turning her head towards him slightly, but she did not awaken, even when he reached over to cup her clammy cheek in his hand, smoothing his thumb over her flesh. He was a little worried that she wouldn't wake up, but it seemed he didn't have to wait long, even if it had only been about fifteen minutes since the game had concluded and ten since Diggory had left with his team with a fervent thank you from the Gryffindors gathered around Hope's bed.

"Lucky the ground was so soft," Angelina said in a hushed voice, leaning slightly into his twin.

"Lucky Diggory caught her," Fred corrected, "who knows how bad it could have been if he hadn't?"

George knew that Fred wasn't wrong there, but that didn't stop him from wishing that he had been the one that caught her.

"I thought she was dead for sure," Katie squeaked, completely white under the mud, probably not the best thing to say under the circumstances.

"At least she didn't break anything," Alicia said, trying to force her voice to remain calm, "her head's only bruised, so that's good."

Hope shifted again, and this time, her eyes opened fully, much to their relief. "Did anyone get the number of that bus that ran me over?" she said amidst a groan of pain. "What did I do to my head?"

"You just banged it up a little, don't you worry, Miss Potter," Madam Pomfrey said as she bustled over to her most frequent patient's side to tap her wand against the girl's head before removing the bruise paste and bandage that had been tied securely about her head. "It seems that your head is harder than it looks."

"Isn't it always?" Hope said with a wince as she was forced to down a particularly acrid tasting potion. "Gods, what is that? It's revolting!"

"Almost everything I've ever given you is revolting," the older woman said dryly, "you can leave in five minutes."

She strode away to deal with a few students who had gotten cold from the weather outside, allowing Hope the opportunity to get all the details from her friends (because Hermione had a tight grip on one arm and George had the other one in his hand without any sign of actually releasing her any time soon) and teammates.

"So, what happened?"

"Er…do you remember anything?" Angelina asked nervously.
"Yes," Hope said dryly, "a couple Dementors thinking of me as their next meal is something you don't typically forget."

All those gathered around her winced at the bite in her sarcasm; it was never a good sign.

"Well, er," Fred said uncomfortably, sharing a glance with his twin, "you sort of fell of your broom, about fifty feet; Cedric said the Dementors sort of swarmed in on you, he barely managed to catch you in time."

Hope's eyebrows furrowed together, but she must be dead to the world at that point.

"We thought you died," Alicia said, her voice laced with fear, making Hermione quiver and make a small noise as tears welled in her eyes once more.

Hope's mouth set in a firm line. How strange and how different it was now that she had people who actually cared if she lived or died…it was times like these that she wished that the school year never ended so that she wouldn't have to go back to the dreaded Dursleys.

"I'm fine," she said, trying to assuage their fears, "you heard Madam Pomfrey, I'll be out of here in no time…did we lose the match?" That was the thing she dreaded the most. She had never lost a match yet, but—

"Yeah," George admitted by her side, drawing her eyes to meet his. She couldn't help but notice just how pale he was that she could now see each and every freckle that was on his face; and she couldn't help but be flattered by his concern for her. "Madam Hooch decided to void the points of the Snitch since neither of you caught it before the Dementors got onto the field, so the points were whatever was left. We only lost by ten points, so that'll make it much easier."

"Yeah, Hope, it's not all bad," Fred agreed, squeezing her shoulder reassuringly, "if Hufflepuff loses to Ravenclaw and we beat Ravenclaw and Slytherin…"

"Hufflepuff'll have to lose by at least twenty points," George interjected.

"But if they beat Ravenclaw," Fred theorized.

"No way, Ravenclaw's too good…"

Hermione squeezed her hand and she looked up into her eyes. She and Ron had been strangely quiet throughout the whole exchange, and Ron seemed to be hiding something behind his back.

"Ron?" Hope's eyes fastened on what looked like an oddly clumped blanket. "What's that?"

Ron shared a distinctly uncomfortable look with his brothers, but they weren't going to help him with this one, he was on his own. "Er," he began, clearing his throat slightly, "well, it's about your Nimbus…"

"What about my Nimbus?" she demanded.

"Well," Hermione decided to help him with that seeing as the twins weren't going to, "when you fell off, it got blown away in the storm…and it, it hit the Whomping Willow."

Hope didn't know which was worse, that it had been utterly destroyed by the Whomping Willow, or that they had lost the match.

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Hope's whole weekend was shot after that whole incident with her broom, she almost wanted to cry.
She loved that broom! And now it was in bits and pieces, all because of that stupid willow tree that she wanted to have a go at with her fists, until Hermione pointed out that she would probably do more damage than good.

Sometimes Hope really hated Hermione-logic, but Hermione-logic had saved her life a couple of times, so she would bow before its omnipotence.

That being said, she was rather reluctant to go to Defence Against the Dark Arts on Monday, especially if Snape was going to be there. Apparently, the sentiment was shared with Ron—who had had to clean bedpans the last time they had met face to face (though it had been to defend Hermione, which was very sweet).

"If Snape's teaching Defence Against the Dark Arts again, I'm skiving off," Ron decided furiously.

"I'll join you," Hope agreed.

Hermione couldn't help but purse her lips at the rebellious nature of her two friends, but she could do nothing to curb their attitudes, try as she might. She peered through the door, and was pleasantly surprised to see raggedy Professor Lupin placing graded papers in the vacant spots where students would sit soon enough.

"It's alright," she called to her friends, "Professor Lupin's back!"

Ron and Hope tried to get through the doorway at the same time and just ended up collapsing onto the floor, looking up at the older man who quirked an eyebrow at them, his mouth curling upwards into a smile.

"I take it I was missed?" he asked, his voice flooded with humour, barely having time to react as Hope shot up and flung her arms around his waist.

"Professor Lupin, never leave ever again!" she said looking up at him with big green eyes, ignoring the scandalous noise that Hermione made. "Snape was awful!"

Professor Lupin laughed at his friend's daughter's antics as he gently removed her arms from around him. "Was he really?"

"Yes," Ron and surprisingly Hermione had to agree.

"He was a tosspot to Hermione," Hope felt the need to add as they placed all of their things on their desks. "Hey, you gave me an E!"

She flipped through her paper. "Oh…wrong location, my bad."

Professor Lupin spared her a smile. "We all make mistakes, just be more careful next time, the number of points I dock will be more."

"Right-o," Hope agreed, "mistakes, check, but back to Snape. Utter tosspot! You know he called Hermione an insufferable know-it-all?"

"I apologize on his behalf, Hermione," Professor Lupin said sincerely. "That was very rude of him."

Hermione gave him a slight smile. "Thank you, Professor."

"He's not coming back as a substitute is he?" Ron asked, his voice on the brink of horror.

Professor Lupin couldn't help but laugh lightly at that. The class began soon after that, and the three
had to take their seats. This lesson was far more enjoyable than the last one Hope had had in that room, she had to admit, though she was a little confused as to why Professor Lupin kept her behind after the class had ended.

"I heard about the match," he said, sparing her a glance and noticing the frown that marred her lips, "and I'm sorry about your broomstick."

"Me too," Hope muttered, raking a hand through her hair, unintentionally giving it a more windswept look. "I really really liked that broom." Every time she thought about the bits that her once faithful broom had been reduced to, she got irrationally angry. "What's the point of that tree anyways?"

Professor Lupin gave her a tight smile. "They planted the Whomping Willow the same year that I arrived at Hogwarts," he said, "in actuality, the Willow was planted because I came to Hogwarts."

She met his eyes, hers becoming both startled and surprised. "What do you mean?"

"The Whomping Willow was planted over a passageway into a secret…shall we say, area? where I was to transform once every month," Professor Lupin said it with as little emotion as he possibly could; he had hated his time in the Shrieking Shack.

"Oh," Hope said uncomfortably, ducking her head in embarrassment and in shame, "sorry, I didn't —"

"It's alright," Professor Lupin assured her.

Hope cleared her throat, searching for a subject to move away from the professor's lycanthropy, and then she remembered what they had been talking about in the first place. "So, I guess you heard the Dementors using me for their next meal?"

Professor Lupin winced at the imagery and the bluntness of her words. "Yes, I did," he admitted, "I don't think any of us have seen Professor Dumbledore that angry. They've been growing restless for some time…" He glanced to her, but her eyes were not on him, nor were they green. They were a hard black onyx, filled with self-loathing; Professor Lupin recognized the look.

"They do not attack you because you are weak."

Hope's lips drew downwards into a frown, the only acknowledgment until she spoke that she had heard what he had said. "I suppose that it must be my charming disposition, then?" she said, her words tinged with bitterness.

"Not even close," Professor Lupin disagreed fervently. "The Dementors affect you worst of all because there are horrors in your past that the others could scarcely imagine."

"You're saying they're…attracted…to bad memories?" Hope said, her eyebrows furrowing into a contemplative expression.

"Very much so," he agreed. "Get too near a Dementor and every good feeling, every happy memory will be sucked out of you. If it can, the Dementor will feed on you long enough to reduce you to something like itself…soulless and evil. You'll be left with nothing but the worst experiences of your life." Hope's fingers curled up and into a fist. "And the worst that happened to you, Hope, is enough to make anyone fall off their broom. You have nothing to feel ashamed of."

Hope swallowed thickly, turning her face away from him again, only this time he caught what he swore were tears sparkling in her eyes. She bit down hard on her bottom lip, hard enough to break
the skin, but she was too wrapped up in her thoughts to even register the small flash of pain.

"Its," her words were strangled from her lips before she forced herself to start again, the words throaty, but Professor Lupin waited patiently, "it's just that...I think it's my mother that I hear when the Dementors get too close."

She missed the pained look on Professor Lupin's face, but he couldn't restrain himself from placing a gentle hand on her shoulder. "Hope—"

"I'm fine," she said quickly, rubbing at her eyes, "I just really hate Dementors, what's the point of having them as guards if they go after students instead?" There was no need to point out that she was the only student thus far that had been attacked, that would only add insult to injury.

"Imagine they couldn't resist," Professor Lupin said in voice harder than she would have imagined his congenial tone could ever hold, "there were so many people about at the match, it was probably their version of a feast." Her face went white at how he phrased it. "Sorry, I shouldn't have said that, that was tactless."

Hope shrugged her shoulders slightly. "It makes you wonder if someone really deserves to go to Azkaban," she said, continuing their earlier conversation, skating over his apologies, "if they're there."

Professor Lupin tipped his head to her, but she was young and innocent and she did not know of the atrocities that those in the prison had committed.

"That thing you did on the train," she said, bringing him back to the present, "could you teach it to me?"

He blinked, his eyes holding the barest of surprise. "I don't—"

"Please!" Her eyes implored him. "I promise I'll work really hard!"

"It is very advanced," Professor Lupin said, "it might not be—"

"Please," she said again, and he could hear the sincerity in her voice. Besides, it was hardly a good idea to let someone who was clearly a Dementor-magnet wander around without any protection. Mr. Dementor-Repellent indeed.

It wasn't every day that Hope Potter plopped herself down at the Hufflepuff table like she belonged there, and almost never when she was grinning that brightly.

"Hello," she said in a voice that matched her rather sunny disposition, which was a bit surprising; she was usually only this cheerful when she was with either Ron and Hermione or George.

"Hello," he said, arching an eyebrow at her demeanour.

"I've gotten you a thank you gift for saving my life," Hope continued in a manner similar to one who was commenting on the weather, but Cedric supposed nearly dying was practically a norm for her now.

"Oh, you didn't need to do that," Cedric said quickly and courteously.

"Gryffindors always pay their debts," Hope said in a serious manner, "well, this Gryffindor does anyways, I get the feeling you'll like it."
Cedric heaved a sigh. "Alright, what is it?" he said in a despairing voice.

"You ever been to Madam Puddifoot's Tea Shop in Hogsmeade?" Hope asked in a falsely light voice.

"No," Cedric said blankly, he'd never heard of such a place, or maybe he wasn't looking hard enough. "Why?"

"Oh, no reason," Hope said with a grin, "it just so happens that Cho is a fan of the food there."

Cedric could feel his cheeks enflaming at the mention of the Asian Ravenclaw that had long since caught his eye, but he had never had enough nerve to ask her out. Leave daring nerve to the Gryffindors.

"I've paid for a lunch in full for the pair of you, under the name Diggory," Hope said, the grin widening at the sight of the red splotches appearing on his cheekbones. "And I've told Cho that you are going to ask her something in a few minutes."

"Go and turn on that Diggory charm, and don't do anything I wouldn't do!"

Meanwhile, Hope hummed to herself as she skipped down the hallway, pleased at the turnout of her devious little plot. Poor Cedric Diggory just needed a harsh nudge in Cho's direction.

Speaking of relationships, Hope couldn't restrain the yelp in surprise when a pair of strong arms encircled her waist and twisted her around. She had to wrap her arms quickly around George's neck to keep herself from falling.

"George," she couldn't help but gasp his name in surprise, "don't do that! You scared me!"

A pleased grin graced his lips. "Oh, can you still be scared?"

Hope rolled her eyes, though her lips still twitched. "Oh, yes, love, I'm certain there are a number of things I still fear." She grimaced slightly. "I'm pretty sure your mother is near the top of the list."

George couldn't restrain the laughter that bubbled from his lips as well. "Any sane person would have her on their list," he agreed as she stood on her tip-toes in an effort to make herself closer to his height, but that was a hopeless goal, in both of their opinions (he was always going to tower over her). "What were you doing with Diggory?"

She smirked at how overprotective he sounded. "Worried, Weasley?"

"Not quite," he said with a grin of his own, "I know what your type is."

"Oh, really?" Hope said, enjoying their flirty banter as she always did. "And what exactly is my type?"

"Oh, you know," George said vaguely, "there are five ways to tell."

"Only five?" Hope said in amusement.

"One, he's got my eyes, two he's got my prankster attitude, three he's wearing my shirt, four he's holding my girlfriend, and five his name is George Weasley," George said with a wink as he lowered
his head to catch her lips with his own, smothering her laughter.

"You're doing that on purpose!" she accused him, her cheeks appropriately flushed from the heat of the kiss.

"I have no idea that you're talking about," he disagreed, but his smirk told a different story. "Anyways, I came to rescue you, and then kidnap you again."

Hope rolled her eyes good-naturedly, gathering that it was highly unlikely that he would ever understand the concept of 'kidnapping'. "And why are you kidnapping me?"

"Oh, no reason," George said, but then he dragged her quickly around the corner, glancing around quickly as if searching for some hidden enemy.

"George? Is something wrong?" Hope couldn't help but ask, her curiosity piqued.

"No nothing's wrong," he said quickly.

"We just wanted to be sure you weren't followed," an identical voice finished for him, and Hope couldn't help but jump at the sight of Fred.

And then her eyes narrowed slightly. "Alright," she drawled, "what're you two up to?"

The identical affronted looks were adorable, but that wouldn't help them.

Fred took the initiative and placed a bit of folded parchment in her hand with a smile. "Think of it as an early Christmas-slash-Glad-You're-Well gift."

She stared at the parchment and then at the grinning pair before arching an eyebrow. "And what exactly is this bit of parchment supposed to be?"

"Bit of parchment!" Fred squawked.

George on the other hand gave her a beaming smile. "That, there, is the secret to our success."

"The secret to your success?" Hope said, her lips quirking. "And here I thought your success was all your own."

"Shh!" George said, his eyes shining. "Don't tell anyone else that!"

"So, what exactly is it?" Hope asked again.

Fred grinned. "Watch and learn, Princess. I solemnly swear that we are up to no good." He said the words and tapped his wand against the parchment and to Hope's astonishment, ink began to spill and spread over the parchment, criss-crossing and curling until a crest was formed over an image of the castle on the front, proclaiming:

**Messrs. Moony, Wormtail, Padfoot, and Prongs**

**Purveyors of Aids to Magical Mischief Makers**

**Are Proud to Present**

**The Marauder's Map**

Hope parted the folds with interest and her jaw dropped. It was an extensive map of Hogwarts, a
very extensive map of Hogwarts, including the castle itself, the grounds, and what looked like a number of secret passageways. There were hundreds of tiny dots moving around over the parchment, each being connected to a name. She could see Hermione's in the library, Ron's in the common room, and—

"Is that really—?" she started to ask.

"Dumbledore," Fred agreed.

"In his study," George added.

"Pacing," Fred finished.

"He does that a lot," George said, having to get the last word in.

"Seriously?" Hope said in awe. "So, this map shows everything in the castle?"

"Everything."

"Everyone," George corrected.

"Where they are," Fred added.

"What they're doing."

"Every minute—"

"Of every day!"

"Oh, this is brilliant," Hope muttered more to herself than to them. "I doubt you two made it yourselves."

"Oi!" they said highly offended. "I'll have you know we nicked that beauty from Filch's office first year! When have you ever nicked something from his office in your first year?"

Hope had to admit that she had never had the drive to do so; the only person she really got into trouble with was Snape.

"Mmhm," she said, only half listening to them, still completely fascinated by the parchment in her hands.

Fred rolled his eyes at his twin, as if to say 'she's your girlfriend'. "Anyways," he said, grabbing her attention briefly, "don't forget to wipe it after you've used, otherwise anyone can read it."

"Just give it a tap and say 'Mischief Managed' and it'll go blank," George explained, tapping his wand against the parchment to show how the ink faded until it looked like a bit of ratty old paper once more.

"You guys are officially my favourite blokes," Hope said seriously, "but Fred, the next time you call me Princess, get ready for a nice slap."

Fred chuckled nervously as George sniggered beside him, the traitor.
Sometimes Winter really was beautiful, wasn't it? It had a way of making the surrounding wilderness look pure and homely at the same time, if that was possible.

Hope gazed longingly out into the pure white picture of perfection that lay outside the window. In a few hours she and Hermione and Ron would be heading out to Hogsmeade for the last visit of the year, and Hope could hardly wait. Sadly, the twins wouldn't be joining them. Percy had, in a fit of rage, barred them from leaving the castle citing that they needed to make an attempt to study their OWLs which were tests all witches and wizards had to take during their fifth year. Apparently they made Hope's final exams look like a cake-walk.

George wasn't doing much studying for his OWLs, but even if he had been trying, he would have been very easily distracted by his girlfriend. So, basically Percy had to force her to leave (which she did looking a little miffed) him alone in order for him to study, but Hope doubted he'd be doing much of that. Still, it would give her time to search for a Christmas present for him without him snooping around.

"Hope, are you ready?" Ron called over to her, forcing her to drag her eyes from the sight and grin.

"Well, yeah, Weasley! What took you so long?"

Ron's ears burned a dark red. "Sorry," he said, "I lost my gloves, that's all."

Hope smirked. Somehow she didn't think that was the reason. "Alright, Hermione!"

"Coming!" a voice uttered from up the staircase as Hermione skipped down them, somehow managing not to trip (Hope would never have managed it, that much she knew). Hermione grinned brightly at the pair of them, to bothering to smother her glee at having both of her best friends with her for the Hogsmeade visit. She would never admit it, but she was a little jealous of George because of how much of Hope's attention he got, so she was going to enjoy this visit while it lasted. "I'm ready!"

Hope grinned and linked her arms with Hermione and Ron's. "Come on, I want to check out Honeydukes before it gets too packed and empty of sweets!"

"Hear, hear!" Ron said in agreement, making Hermione giggle, something that earned her a grin from the boy, which in turn made her blush a bright pink. Hope astutely ignored them and pretended that she hadn't seen a thing, but even that was difficult to do.

"I already got you guys your Christmas presents," she said conversationally, "I just need to get the twins something."

Hermione nodded in understanding and Ron grinned that she had already gotten them presents before his brothers.

Hope settled on Greek when they went into Dervish and Banges. George had gotten her a cartouche with her name in hieroglyphics for her birthday, so she decided to return the favour by getting him a leather strap bracelet that had the gamma (the 'G' in the Greek alphabet) letter dangling from it. It didn't seem very feminine to her, but she would have to see how he would react to it first before anything else. Fred would be getting a number of Dungbombs and some potions supplies that she had heard him grumbling about being low on. Ron's presents consisted of a number of sweets and a book on Chess strategy that she thought he might like. Hermione's was only two books (but ones that
she had been practically begging Hope to get her in an unsubtle way) and some peppermint toads and sugar quills (which were her favourite).

"We should hit Honeydukes before Three Broomsticks," Ron said as they left the shop, his teeth chattering in the cold. "Come on! Please!"

His blue eyes turned big and enormous, the perfect puppy dog eye, if Hope had ever seen one, using his powers on his two friends. Hope and Hermione gave in, though they weren't much against the idea in the first place, so that helped.

Since they already had sweets gifted to each other, not that they knew that, they settled for merely looking around at all the varieties of snacks offered.

"Would you eat one of these if I dared you?" Ron asked Hope in a surprisingly serious voice as he held out a blood-flavoured lollipop.

"Is that how you see me, Ron?" Hope said with a sly leer. "A blood-sucking maniac?"

("On Mondays," Ron had to admit, making her laugh.

"Nobody likes Mondays, Ron," she said, wagging a finger at him, "not even Hermione." But that was mostly because a good deal of her classes were on Monday, Hope was lucky that she only had to go back in time to do Ancient Runes, because after their first week had concluded, the Study of Ancient Runes and Divination now occurred at the same time, and with Ron none the wiser, or maybe not.

Ron grunted in acknowledgement before holding out a jar of Cockroach Clusters.

"No, Ron."

He gave a small pout and Hermione giggled.

"I meant to ask you," she added as they drifted away from the Unusual Tastes section and to the Hot section, "what was that parchment you were pouring over yesterday?"

"Oh, that," Hope said with a grin, "that was a brilliant gift from Fred and George. It's a complete map of Hogwarts! It shows you where everything and everyone is! It's so cool!" Hermione and Ron couldn't be deaf to the obvious excitement in her voice.

Ron, however, couldn't help but be a little irked. "But I'm their brother!" he complained. "Why wouldn't they give it to me?"

"Maybe because you don't get into as much trouble as Hope does," Hermione said, rolling her eyes slightly at the pair of them, ignoring the indignant "Oi!" from Hope.

"I resent that!" Hope said as they purchased a good bit of chocolate before making their way into the harsh cold December wind, wrapping their scarves tightly about their faces as they battled to get to the Three Broomsticks. The pub was almost completely filled, and it was very noisy, but the trio had no problem with finding a nice seat and a few Butterbeers to sip.

"Oh, heaven," Ron mumbled into his drink.

Hermione rolled her eyes. "It's just a drink, Ron," she said in amusement.

"But it's the best drink in the world!" Ron claimed, raising his arms upwards as if he was exalting the
Hope couldn't smother her sniggers fast enough. "Alright, mister, maybe that's enough for you," she said, reaching over to grab the tankard, but Ron clutched the half-empty mug closer to himself.

"No!"

Hermione pulled a Hope, that is to say, she rolled her eyes, at Ron's ridiculousness. "Really?"

"It's good!" Ron said defensively as a gust of cold air blew across Hope's face and she glanced towards the door.

Professors McGonagall and Flitwick had entered the pub, closely followed by Hagrid and the chubby man she knew to be the Minister of Magic, Cornelius Fudge. It was strange enough to see their professors outside of the castle, but Hope couldn't help but wonder why they would be meeting with the minister.

Apparently Hermione shared the same thought (a downside of being friends with Hope meant that there was a significant increase in one's curiosity), as she had whipped out her wand and uttered a spell. "Mobiliarbus!"

Hope didn't recognize the spell, but she didn't have long to wait as the evergreen tree that had been propped and decorated for the holidays rose a few inches from the ground and drifted to the side slow enough that no one noticed that it was moving, so that they were hidden from the sight of the table, leaving them to peer through the branches and shamelessly eavesdrop.

At first, it seemed like nothing unusual, with the ordering of drinks, but it soon became obvious that it wasn't. There were the typical complaints about the dementors and Sirius Black, and then the minister said something that drew Hope's attention completely.

"All the same," Fudge was saying in reference to the dementors that patrolled the square and thus made for bad business, "they are here to protect you all from something much worse...We all know what Black's capable of..." Hope couldn't help but wonder how they were supposed to protect them from something much worse if they kept getting sidetracked when she was around.

"Do you know, I still have trouble believing it," Madam Rosmerta, who was the woman who owned the Three Broomsticks, said. "Of all the people to go over to the Dark Side, Sirius Black was the last I'd have thought...I mean, I remember him when he was a boy at Hogwarts. If you'd told me then what he was going to become, I'd have said you'd had too much mead." Ron arched an eyebrow at Hope who frowned.

"You don't know the half of it, Rosmerta," said Fudge stiffly. "The worst he did isn't widely known."

"The worst?" Madam Rosmerta asked, "Worse than murdering all those poor people, you mean?"

"I certainly do," said Fudge and Hermione was frowning now as well; what could possibly be worse than murdering innocent people?

"I can't believe that," Rosmerta disagreed. "What could possibly be worse?"

"You remember him at Hogwarts, Rosmerta," Professor McGonagall said in a calm voice. "Do you remember who his best friend was?"

"Naturally," said Madam Rosmerta, a laugh echoed slightly from where they were sitting. "Never
saw one without the other, did you? The number of times I had them in here - ooh, they used to make me laugh. Quite the double act, Sirius Black and James Potter!"

Hope's eyes widened and Hermione had to slap a hand to her mouth to stop her from making any noise that would tell their professors that they were listening in on a very private conversation. Hermione just knew they'd lose mountains of points and get detentions for the rest of their lives.

Sirius Black...now she remembered where she'd heard the name! Her father had mentioned him by name in the letter he had left her!

"Precisely," Professor McGonagall agreed, giving a miniscule nod of the head. "Black and Potter. Ringleaders of their little gang. Both very bright, of course -exceptionally bright, in fact- but I don't think we've ever had such a pair of troublemakers—"

"I dunno." Hope could hear Hagrid chuckling. "Fred and George Weasley could give 'em a run fer their money. Or even Hope on a good day."

"Really?" Madam Rosmerta asked in surprise, but then it seemed she had to remind herself of who they were speaking about. "Black and Potter hardly left each other's sides; I almost mistook them for brothers the first time I met them."

"It would be hard not to," said Fudge agreeably. "Potter trusted Black beyond all his other friends. Nothing changed when they left school. Black was best man when James married Lily. Then they named him godfather to Hope. Hope has no idea, of course. You can imagine how the idea would torment her." Hope's eyebrow twitched at how he automatically assumed how she would react, and well as shock that the wanted mass murderer was her godfather.

"Not many people are aware that the Potters knew You-Know-Who was after them," Fudge continued in a tragic voice. "Dumbledore, who was of course working tirelessly against You-Know-Who, had a number of useful spies. One of them tipped him off, and he alerted James and Lily at once. He advised them to go into hiding. Well, of course, You-Know-Who wasn't an easy person to hide from. Dumbledore told them that their best chance was the Fidelius Charm."

Hope wrenched Hermione's hand off her mouth with a glare before turning back towards the conversation with interest. The Fidelius Charm was a very old spell that Hope had only read about once, but even that was only a reference in passing. It was some sort of protective magic involving the concealment of a location but other than that, Hope had no idea what it was, having missed what Professor Flitwick had said, so she would have to look it up later.

"So Black was the Potters' Secret-Keeper?" Madam Rosmerta asked with her voice barely above a whisper.

"Naturally," said Professor McGonagall, repeating Madam Rosmerta from earlier. "James Potter told Dumbledore that Black would die rather than tell where they were, that Black was planning to go into hiding himself...and yet, Dumbledore remained worried. I remember him offering to be the Potters' Secret-Keeper himself."

"He suspected Black?" Madam Rosmerta guessed.

"He was sure that somebody close to the Potters had been keeping You-Know-Who informed of their movements," said Professor McGonagall her voice turning much darker than Hope would have thought possible. "Indeed, he had suspected for some time that someone on our side had turned traitor and was passing a lot of information to You-Know-Who."
"But James Potter insisted on using Black?" Madam Rosmerta pressed.

"He did," said Fudge agreed in a weighted voice. "And then, barely a week after the Fidelius Charm had been performed—"

"Black betrayed them?" breathed Madam Rosmerta.

"He did indeed," Fudge said. "Black was tired of his double-agent role, he was ready to declare his support openly for You-Know-Who, and he seems to have planned this for the moment of the Potters' death. But, as we all know, You-Know-Who met his downfall in little Hope Potter. Powers gone, horribly weakened, he fled. And this left Black in a very nasty position indeed. His master had fallen at the very moment when he, Black, had shown his true colours as a traitor. He had no choice but to run for it—"

"Filthy, stinkin' turncoat!" Hagrid said, loud enough that a good number of eyes turned towards the group.

"Shh!" said Professor McGonagall barely above a hiss.

"I met him!" growled Hagrid. "I musta bin the last ter see him before he killed all them people! It was me what rescued Hope from Lily an' James's house after they was killed! jus' got her outta the ruins, poor little thing, with a great slash across her forehead, an' her parents dead... an' Sirius Black turns up, on that flyin' motorbike he used ter ride. Never occurred ter me what he was doin' there. I didn' know he'd bin Lily an' James' Secret-Keeper. Thought he'd jus' heard the news o' You-Know-Who's attack an' come ter see what he could do. White an' shakin', he was. An' yeh know what I did? I COMFORTED THE MURDERIN' TRAITOR!" Hagrid roared loud enough that London probably heard him.

By this time, Hermione and Ron become startlingly aware that Hope had somehow disappeared.

"Where'd she go?" Ron hissed.

"I don't know!" Hermione moaned. "She was right here, I swear she was!"

Masked by the raucous that Hagrid had caused with his loud outburst, Hope had slinked out of the inn before anyone could notice her, turning her hair blonde and her eyes blue briefly so they wouldn't know it was her before reverting back to normal once she had reached the safety of the cold outside.

Her legs felt like jelly, so much so that she was surprised that she was still standing as she meandered with difficulty through the village and back to the castle, but she didn't go inside, where she knew that George would be waiting for her, she continued on. Her feet took her to her tree, the one that George had knocked her out of and caught her as she fell. She breathed in and out harshly as she sat down, an out of breath sound that had nothing to do with the distance or the weather.

She was shaking from something that had nothing to do with the cold.

The tears burned her cheeks as they slid from her eyes and all she wanted to do was cry. She cupped a hand over her eyes and bit her lip to both keep herself from sobbing and to keep it from trembling.

Why was it always her? Why did it always have to come down to her? Why couldn't anyone stop trying to kill her for FIVE BLOODY SECONDS?!

She felt angry and sad and utterly confused all at the same time.
"Hey, I saw from the window," a familiar voice said, "why didn't you come inside?"

Hope removed her hand to look up and into George's bright eyes, the curiosity quickly switching to concern when he saw the tears on her face. "Hope? What's wrong? Did something happen in the village?"

He took her hands and pulled her upright, holding her ice-cold cheeks in his gloved hands as he crouched slightly to get a look at her. "Hope?"

But Hope couldn't seem to find the proper words to voice exactly how she was feeling, so she just wrapped her arms around him, hiding her face in his jacket, but that only seemed to make him more concerned, but he still led her back to the castle unaware of the pair of grey eyes that were watching them.

Sirius had wanted to step forward and play the part of the loveable stray, but she had looked so upset that he couldn't bring himself to do so. He couldn't help but be glad when the boy from before came along, doing his job for him. His concern was touching, but Sirius still wasn't sure about him, maybe that was just his overprotective nature talking, though.

A mournful whine escaped him lips as he dug a black paw into the pure white that lay across the castle and the grounds giving it the stereotypical Christmas look, but it was lost in the wind as he watched his goddaughter disappear into the castle once more.

It was very much later that night when George finally managed to get her to open up about what had upset her, and that was after she had spent the rest of the day feigning sleep and hiding behind her bed curtains until Hermione had gone to sleep. However, when she descended the staircase, George was waiting for her, and he steered her to the couch and all but forced her to talk.

"What happened in the village today, Hope?" George asked her, his voice barely above a whisper, and it didn't really need to be, since they were the only ones left in the common room. He was holding one of her hands loosely, his thumb tracing over the back of her hand slowly.

Her pillow-mussed hair was now a neutral brown with her eyes being a similar shade (she looked like she could have been Hermione's sister, now that he thought about it). Her eyes were only slightly rimmed with red, but it was still enough to concern George.

"Ron, Hermione, I went the Three Broomsticks," she finally managed to say, her voice coming out slightly croaky much to her annoyance, "once we'd done all of our shopping. Everything was fine until McGonagall, Flitwick, Hagrid, and Fudge showed up."

"Why?" George asked her, far more gently than he had perhaps ever spoken to anyone, but this was Hope.

"They started talking about how my dad and Sirius Black were best friends in school," Hope said, rubbing at her already raw eyes from how much she had wiped away the tears. She missed the completely dumbstruck expression on George's face as she did so. "They said he was the reason Voldemort found my parents and killed them, and that he's my godfather." She wasn't even sure which part was worse, but she couldn't help but feel like she was missing something.

That night on Halloween, before she'd blacked out, she remembered the distinct feeling that someone had caught her before she hit the ground. If that had been Black, as she and probably every member of faculty had thought it to be, then why hadn't he just killed her then? Quirrel would've, she had to think to herself mutinously as she recalled how hard the former professor or holder of Voldemort had tried to kill her. The closest attempt had only landed her in St. Mungo's, while Sirius Black's attempt
had only sent her to the hospital wing for a matter of minutes.

George wasn't quite sure how to respond to that. Sirius Black, wanted mass murderer…Hope's godfather? He wouldn't have even thought that was possible, but then he remembered, this was the girl that was descended from Slytherin himself.

So, feeling as though there was nothing else that he could possibly do in a situation like this, George simply pulled her into his arms, just holding her and whispering into her ear as she finally relaxed and sleep overcame her, pulling her down into a numbing nothingness that she could appreciate just this once.

For a moment, he simply sat there holding her in his arms, but then, feeling a bit tired himself, he contended to using a trick that he would never divulge to anyone, George took her back up the stairs to the girls dormitory and deposited her gently on her bed, wrapping the covers loosely around her before leaning down to kiss her cheek gingerly and leaving the way he had come.

But Hope did not sleep easily that night. On a number of occasions she found herself waking up and unable to sleep until a certain amount of time had passed. It was only very early in the morning that she fell asleep for a good long while, and once she had woken up once more, she hardly felt well rested at all.

She couldn't even bring herself to flip through the album that she knew must have a picture of a younger Sirius Black within its pages. She was quite done with him and the damages he had caused. Now all she wanted to do was go to sleep and not wake up for quite some time. Maybe even in a world where Voldemort didn't exist and Sirius Black was just the name of a sweet-tempered stray.

Well, a girl could dream.
"Dear Mr. Hagrid,

Further to our inquiry into the attack by a hippogriff on a student in your class, we have accepted the assurances of Professor Dumbledore that you bear no responsibility for the regrettable incident," Hope read aloud from the tear-spotted parchment that had Hagrid so distraught.

"That's good, Hagrid!" Ron said bracingly, but Hagrid continued with his deep gut-wrenching sobs, so Hope turned back to finish reading the letter.

"However, we must register our concern about the hippogriff in question. We have decided to uphold the official complaint of Mr. Lucius Malfoy, and this matter will therefore be taken to the Committee for the Disposal of Dangerous Creatures. The hearing will take place on April 20th, and we ask you to present yourself and your hippogriff at the Committee's offices in London on that date. In the meantime, the hippogriff should be kept tethered and isolated. Yours in fellowship."

Hope gritted her teeth slightly in irritation. When the three of them had come down to see Hagrid (because it felt like ages since she had seen the giant-sized man outside of class), Hope had been hoping to clear her head after the events of the day before. Unfortunately, Ron and Hermione were keeping an abnormally close eye on her, and they had already told her to not go looking for Black, something that Ron's dad had made her promise to not do anyways.

She was angry about the whole situation, of course, irrationally angry. The idea that someone whom her parents had trusted so deeply would just hand them over to Voldemort did make her want to find them and strangle them, but her Romione side warred with those thoughts (this was what she called the side of her that was both logical and peacemaking, which was to say, had both Hermione and Ron's personalities) reminding her that he was undoubtedly the man who had struck her from behind and gently lowered her to the ground as opposed to just killing her.

What kind of person who was supposedly after her would do that? Her other side asked.

Shut up, she told it.

She jumped slightly when Buckbeak nudged her, but then she smiled and raised a hand to pat the feathers that surrounded his face. "Hey, Beaky," she said quietly, "are you being good for Hagrid?" She frowned slightly; he didn't deserve all that Malfoy was milking it to be.

Buckbeak clicked his beak at her and ruffled his feathers slightly as if in agreement.

"I bet you miss flying around outside, don't you?" Hope asked him, only half paying attention to what her friends and Hagrid were saying.

Buckbeak doleful sort of squawk that Hope assumed was a noise unique to hippogriffs, undoubtedly in agreement to what she was saying then too.

"Isn't there some way to prove that Buckbeak was only responding?" Hope asked, turning her ear back towards the conversation once more.

Hermione grinned and snapped her fingers. "Yes! What if we could prove that you told the whole class before Malfoy was injured that you shouldn't insult them?"

Those words didn't seem to faze Hagrid. "Won't make no diff'rence!" Hagrid cried with a roaring
Hagrid blew his nose loudly on tablecloth-sized handkerchief, wiping his eyes profusely with a hand. "I've not bin meself lately," he said mournfully. "Worried abou' Buckbeak, an' no one likin' me classes—"

Immediately, Hope, Ron, and Hermione lied about liking his classes, because although they liked Hagrid, his classes had begun to lack after the first lesson, since Hagrid had lost his confidence after Malfoy's whole incident.

"An' them Dementors make me feel ruddy terrible an' all," said Hagrid, with a violent shudder that shook his whole body as well as the table, upending the cups of tea that Ron had just poured. "Gotta walk past 'em ev'ry time I want a drink in the Three Broomsticks. 'S like bein' back in Azkaban—"

The silence following his words was…loud. Hermione and Ron glanced nervously to Hope, who was highly adverse to the Dementors, but her expression only darkened slightly at the mention of them.

Hermione spoke first, speaking in an almost shy voice, as if afraid how he would react, "Is it awful in there, Hagrid?"

"Yeh've no idea," said Hagrid, his voice so quiet that the trio had to lean forward to hear what he was saying. "Never bin anywhere like it. Thought I was goin' mad. Kep’ goin’ over horrible stuff in me mind... the day I got expelled from Hogwarts... day me dad died... day I had ter let Norbert go...Yeh can' really remember who yeh are after a while. An' yeh can' really see the point o' livin' at all. I used ter hope I'd jus' die in me sleep. When they let me out, it was like bein' born again, ev'rythin' I came floodin' back, it was the bes' feelin' in the world. Mind, the Dementors weren't keen on lettin' me go."

Hermione was aghast at that, and Ron shared a half-startled, half-revolted look with Hope. "But you were innocent!"

That amused Hagrid who let loose a dark chuckle. "Think that matters to them? They don' care. Long as they've got a couple o' hundred humans stuck there with 'em, so they can leech all the happiness out of 'em, they don' give a damn who's guilty an' who's not."

Hope's lips drew downwards into a frown, but she couldn't find anything to say to that.

Hope had spent the whole day doing research for Hagrid, so by the end of it she was more than happy to be nestled snugly in George's warm embrace, swathed in a thick blanket and on the couch closest to the fire.

"Were you and Fred busy today?" Hope murmured as she hadn't seen him for roughly the whole day, resting her head against his shoulder as he drew a line over the flesh of her arm, making goose bumps erupt.

"Mm," George hummed in agreement, pressing a kiss to the top of her head, "something like that."

She smiled slightly. "Causing trouble?" she mused.

"You know me so well."
"Or you're just that predictable," Hope said with a smirk, tilting her head back slightly to smirk up at him.

"I like you knowing me better," George said, kissing her cheek lightly, "it sounds better."

Hope gave a light laugh at that comment. "Right, sure. Whatever makes you happy, Georgie."

She linked her fingers with his free hand, delighting in his warmth. "Have you done much studying for your exams?" she asked.

He snorted. "Psh, you know me, Hope, why would I study?"

"I thought that your OWLs are considered towards whatever career you want to go into?" Hope said with curiosity despite her amusement. "What was it that you wanted to do?"

George contemplated an answer to that. Both he and Fred knew what they wanted to do, and it wasn't a career path that his mother would approve of, that much he knew. He still wasn't sure how his father would react, but he didn't think that he would condemn their dreams like their mother would.

Hope poked him hard in the stomach.

"Ow!" he complained, exaggerating his pain and making Hope roll her eyes at the same time.

"Don't be such a baby!" she said with a grin. "So? What is it? What does George Weasley want to be?"

"Well…Fred and I were thinking of running our own joke shop," he admitted, hoping it didn't seem as foolish as it sounded.

"Really?" Hope said in surprise, before grinning widely, "Well, you two would be good at it, I suppose. It is your vocation after all."

George wanted to kiss her for saying that; he wasn't sure why he restrained himself from doing so. It was times like these that he couldn't help but gaze fondly at Hope and remember just how much she appreciated his pranking streak (possibly because she had a bit of a rebellious streak herself).

"What?" Hope asked suspiciously. "Why are you looking at me like that?"

"Oh, no reason," George assured her with an easy smile. "Your eyes are just so beautiful."

Hope's cheeks reddened, despite having heard that comment a thousand times. "You always say that," she said dismissively.

"Because it's true!"

"You're just a flirt," Hope said with a wide grin.

"That too," he agreed.

"Mm," Hope murmured, closing her eyes again, "will you read to me?"

He recalled her first year when she had read him the *Hobbit*. It was a surprisingly good book, in his not so modest opinion. He didn't mind reading to her.

"What should I read?"
"The Tale of Three Brothers," Hope said automatically, "I liked that one from your book."

George couldn't help but feel a little smug that she liked his gift from her first year, and a little surprised at her choice of favourite children's story; out of all of Beedle the Bard's stories, Ginny had always liked the *Fountain of Fair Fortune* the best.

"Alright..." George searched for it, before spotting it over on the arm rest of the arm chair that she had been sitting in earlier. In a short matter of seconds which involved him stretching his body towards the chair while trying not to jostle Hope too much (and it didn't help that she was giggling at his efforts) before managing to grip it and pull it back with him, flipping to the page that started the story.

"There were once three brothers who were travelling along a lonely, winding road at twilight," he began. "In time, the brothers reached a river too deep to wade through and too dangerous to swim across... However, these brothers were learned in the magical arts, and so they simply waved their wands and made a bridge appear across the treacherous water. They were halfway across it when they found their path blocked by a hooded figure." His voice had grown steadily darker as he tried to bring the story to life with his voice, but Hope merely grinned and rolled her eyes again for good measure.

"Don't hurt yourself," she said in dry amusement, making him pout.

"And Death spoke to them. He was angry that he had been cheated out of three new victims, for travellers usually drowned in the river. But Death was cunning. He pretended to congratulate the three brothers upon their magic and said that each had earned a prize for having been clever enough to evade him." Hope smiled lightly at that, the idea of being cleverer than Death.

"So the oldest brother, who was a combative man, asked for a wand more powerful than any in existence: a wand that must always win duels for its owner, a wand worthy of a wizard who had conquered Death! So Death crossed to an elder tree on the banks of the river, fashioned a wand from a branch that hung there, and gave it to the oldest brother. Then the second brother, who was an arrogant man, decided that he wanted to humiliate Death still further, and asked for the power to recall others from Death. So Death picked up a stone from the riverbank and gave it to the second brother, and told him that the stone would have the power to bring back the dead." Hope's black stone ring felt heavy on her hand, but she dismissed that as her sleepiness catching up with her.

"And then Death asked the third and youngest brother what he would like. The youngest brother was the humblest and also the wisest of the brothers, and he did not trust Death. So he asked for something that would enable him to go forth from that place without being followed by Death. And death, most unwillingly, handed over his own Cloak of Invisibility..."

Hope fell asleep to the sound of George's pleasant timbre, dreaming of a cloak, a ring, and wand, and a pale man with a dark cloak with a gaunt face, extending a hand to her while holding a scythe in the other.

Hope was still half-asleep when she stumbled into the showers the next day, wanting nothing more but to soak in the hot water for hours and hours, but she couldn't. So, sighing mournfully, she turned off the water and dressed in silence before returning to the girl's dorm still towelling her hair dry. She walked right past her bed, but then had to walk backwards when she saw the pile of gifts stacked at the edge of her bed.

Oh, that's right, today was Christmas Day. A grin split her lips at the sight of the presents, but one in question caught her eye. The long, thin package caught her attention first, mostly because of the
shape. She narrowed her eyes at it, not quite able to ascertain what it was (or denying what she knew it was). She slid it out from under the other presents, holding it vertical and staring at it in awe, even though she hadn't unwrapped the gift. It had to be a broomstick!

She removed the brown wrapping as quietly as she could without awakening Hermione who shifted in her sleep, and then she had to stifle a gasp.

It was the broom she had seen in Diagon Alley before the start of term, the one that she had really wanted to buy. It was the Firebolt. Its ebony shaft was sleek and shone, the golden letters at the handle glinting in the sunlight that filtered in through the window, the birch twigs that made up the tail were smoothed together, and the iron-crafted foot grips bent outwards.

It was a work of art, a beautiful work of art. Hope ran an awed hand over its surface, jumping slightly when it vibrated and hovered in the air before her.

"Who sent it?" she had to whisper aloud, still in complete awe as she quietly searched for a card of some sort, but there was none. She frowned slightly. That was a bit suspicious…what if it was cursed?

What if it wasn't?

She thought quietly to herself, before deciding on something that Ron and Hermione would both agree later was a bit stupid and foolish, but on her own head be it, as Hope often felt.

She decided to give it one ride before taking it to either Professor McGonagall or Flitwick.

So she threw own a coat, boots, gloves, and a hat, before racing out of the dorm and the common room without so much as a glance back to see if she had awoken anyone, which thankfully she hadn't.

She didn't meet anyone on the way down to the courtyard for which she was grateful, besides, it was still a bit early. Once there, she mounted the broomstick, and after a moment of brimming excitement, she pushed off of the ground.

Hope almost screamed at the speed it used when it shot into the air. She had never ridden a broom that was so…exhilarating! Even her old Nimbus couldn't possibly compare to the speed of this new baby.

Emboldened by the broom not bucking her off, Hope did a few loop-de-loops as she circled around the castle, but it only moved to her wishes, to her pleasure. She didn't even realize how much time had passed until she noticed that the sun had risen a little higher in the sky, casting a glow over the pure snow that hid the castle and the grounds from view.

"Professor! Professor!" Hope was still breathless from her flight when she caught sight of her Head of House and practically ran to meet her with a bright grin encompassing her face as she almost ran into the older woman (something she would undoubtedly not appreciate one bit).

"Miss Potter," Professor McGonagall said in a voice that was both crisp and stern.

"Professor," Hope repeated, her joy shining in her eyes, turning them a bright hazel, "look what I got!"

And she held out the broom, but, as expected, suspicion clouded the Transfiguration teacher's eyes and she took it cautiously, examining it so intently that Hope swore she could see the wheels turning in her head.
"I understand this broom is quite expensive," she said after a long moment, "who gave it to you?"

Hope blinked a few times in surprise at the blunt nature of Professor McGonagall's speech. "Er…I dunno, there wasn't really a note or anything…"

Professor McGonagall's eye twitched slightly at the foolish nature of Hope Potter. Usually she could count on her overcautious nature, but it seemed that this time around, her pleasure at flying once more outweighed her over-attentiveness. That was James' fault, she had to think to herself.

"I'm afraid I'm going to have to take this."

Hope's jaw unhinged and she gaped at her teacher, even though she had told herself that she was going to have it checked after her first flight anyways, she had been secretly deciding on whether or not to do so. It was just such a good broom!

She sputtered incoherently at the professor, her eyes green pools of horror, but she couldn't fault her for taking the broom, no matter how bitter about it she was.

_Dammit!_ She really wanted another go on that broomstick!

"I can't believe she took it!" Ron bemoaned later that day as the three of them sat before the raging fire with a thick blanket spread over the three of their laps. Hope and Hermione –predictably– had books flung open on their laps, but Ron, having just finished the last of his homework for the holidays, was trying to recover the full use of his hand once more.

"But Sirius Black might have sent it," Hermione added, "imagine if he cursed it!"

"But I flew around on it for about fifteen minutes," Hope interjected in a depressed sort of voice.

"Maybe it had a time delay," she said reasonably, making her two friends stare at her. "What?"

"You can do that?" they both asked with varying degrees of scepticism.

Hermione rolled her eyes. "When are you two going to learn that a lot of things are possible with magic?"

"Hey!"

"Oi!"

"We should do something," Hope decided after a long moment after spending an abnormal amount of time staring at the ceiling (there was a rather fascinating crack that was about the length of two hand spans, and Hope swore it was moving…or was that just her?).

"We could—" Ron started to say.

"No," Hermione said quickly and sternly, shooting down his theorizing of a wizard's chess match, "you always win those." No one dared to utter the words "Sore loser," because they doubted she would react well to the words, no matter how true they were.

"What about—"

"But we're too lazy to move," Hope said, shooting down her suggestion that they go outside, "besides, it's practically a blizzard out there."
Hope turned her head towards the window and Hermione and Ron followed suit, staring at the snow white flurries that swirled so tightly together that Hope swore they looked like a miniature tornado.

"I picked up a few books on duelling and defensive and offensive magic before term started," she said abruptly, having completely forgotten about the books in question until a few days previously.

Hermione brightened a bit; that topic sounded potentially interesting.

Ron grinned slightly; now duelling was something that had always interested him!

So they waited for Hope to pull herself up and into a standing position and stagger in a drunken manner towards the stairs that led up to the girl's dormitory, and after waiting a few seconds, she reappeared once more with two books tucked under her arm as she plopped down between them once more, flipping one book open. Hermione and Ron leaned forward to peer at its contents.

"These look really advanced though," Ron said as he took the book from her and began sifting through it, "is there anything mild that we could learn as third years?"

Hermione snatched it out of his hands. "Let me have a look, hang on."

Hope and Ron shared a look, resisting the urge to laugh at how forward their friend had become in reference to learning new things.

"The Stunning Spell doesn't look too difficult," she admitted finally, "it's only a fourth year spell."

"Stunning?" Hope asked with a frown. "Does it work like Petrificus Totalus?"

"Sort of," Hermione said, looking intently over the section, "only it knocks you out instead. You kind of go limp."

"Sounds like fun."

Hope and Hermione stared at Ron. "What? Was I not supposed to sound so enthusiastic?"

Hermione burst into giggles and Hope cracked a smile.

"I guess we have a volunteer, Hermione," Hope said, the smile transforming into a smirk.

"It seems we do, Hope," Hermione agreed, crossing her arms as the pair stared intently at Ron who cottoned on rather quickly.

"Oh, no!" he said quickly, rolling away from them, "bad idea!"

"What's the incantation for that Stunning Spell?" Hope asked Hermione with a grin that was just a tad feral (and by tad, she looked very feral).

"Hm," Hermione hummed, scanning the page for the incantation in question as Ron feverishly searched for the exit. "It says here its Stupefy... and the countercurse is Rennervate, but it also says to not use it on humans until you have a firm grasp of the spellwork."

Hope cast a smirk Ron's way. "I guess you get to stay conscious this time, Weasley."

Ron exhaled in relief, muttering only word that both girls could discern and only one word that could highly amuse them. "Women!"

Hope and Hermione could only share a laugh at that. Trust Ron to blame their whole gender, that
was so...Ron. And it didn't help when he glared darkly at them for laughing at him, but they couldn't resist.
Only one good thing came from the starting of term once more, and that was the lessons with Professor Lupin to learn the spell to ward off Dementors. George was almost jealous of how excited she was for the lessons, but this was Hope. When wasn't she excited about learning magic? Besides, Professor Lupin definitely wasn't her type. And it did help a little that she'd given him a thorough kiss and a bright smile as she waved goodbye, earning her a goofy grin.

"What do werewolves do on holiday anyways?"

Professor Lupin spared her a wry grin as he pushed aside the desks as she sat on one in the back, her legs swinging back and forth in the free air. "I imagine we do what everyone else does on holiday; enjoy festive cheer."

"Did you spend it with anyone?" Hope pressed, her curiosity rearing its head once more.

"Well, all my close friends are either dead, or on the run, so no."

Hope frowned at him, biting lightly on the corner of her lip. This time she asked a different question. "Why is the ministry so anti-werewolf?"

Professor Lupin froze slightly at that question. It wasn't malicious, and he couldn't fault her in asking it. "Werewolves have a bit of a bad reputation; we're viewed as mindless monsters. People who have discovered of my…affliction have often refused to speak with me afterwards. Werewolves are viewed as monsters, that's why we are required to inform the ministry of our ailment, so they can monitor us at all times."

Hope muttered something vulgar under her breath, making Professor Lupin toss her a smile. "I believe that was Lily's response as well when she figured it out."

Hope's eyes blinked owlishly at him. "Really?"

"Yes," Professor Lupin said in a voice of fond remembrance, "your mother was both singularly gifted and uncommonly kind, and it was in balancing those two sides of her that she comforted me despite the knowledge of me condition." He smiled at Lily's daughter. "You are like her in that aspect."

A pale flush dusted across her fair cheeks. "I think you've got the wrong girl, Professor," she said, "I'm not really that kind, and I'm not really gifted—"

"Oh, really?" Professor Lupin asked, arching an eyebrow as he did so. "I have been hearing tales of your Charms and Transfiguration abilities since September—"

"But those are pretty easy for me," Hope disagreed, "that doesn't make me singularly gifted—"

"And you do not judge people as others would do in your place."

Hope quirked an eyebrow at him in confusion. "Now what are you going on about?"

"There are not many Gryffindors that would go out of their way to find a book for a Slytherin," Professor Lupin said, giving her a look that she couldn't quite read. "Lily didn't approve of school prejudice either; she was more for school unity than anything else."
"And how'd that go?" Hope asked dryly.

Professor Lupin shrugged his shoulders. "She had a number of friends in other houses; she was best friends with Professor Snape up until fifth year—"

Hope was overcome with a coughing fit before managing to choke out "What?!"

She could have sworn that he was smirking at her now. "Yes, I believe they lived near each other at the time."

"Wha-bu-he-w-" Hope sputtered. "If they were friends then why does he hate me so much?"

"Probably because of James," Professor Lupin said in a serene voice, "they were enemies, a bit like you and Mr. Malfoy, but Lily cut ties with him after fifth year."

"Why?"

"I imagine him calling her a Mudblood might have had something to do with it," Professor Lupin said in a voice that was a bit too calm.

Hope scowled fiercely.

"But back to Dementors," Professor Lupin said straightening up and turning back to her as the chest shook violently behind him, and Hope jumped off the desk. "The spell I am going to try and teach you is highly advanced magic, well beyond ordinary Wizarding Level. It is called the Patronus Charm."

"Does it just make a light to ward off a Dementor?" Hope asked, screwing up her face slightly as she tried to remember when he'd used it on the train, but she had been almost unconscious at the time, and that was about as much as she remembered.

"Not quite," Professor Lupin said with a small smile. "It conjures up a Patronus, which is a kind of anti- Dementor, a guardian that acts as a shield between you and the Dementor. The Patronus is a kind of positive force, a projection of the very things that the Dementor feeds upon –hope, happiness, the desire to survive– but it cannot feel despair, as real humans can, so the Dementors can't hurt it. But I must warn you that the charm might be too advanced for you. Many qualified wizards have difficulty with it."

"It is big? Or small?" Hope asked, skating over his worries.

"That will have to depend on the one who produces it," Professor Lupin said with a shrug. "Each one is unique to the witch or wizard who conjures it."

"And how do you do that?" she asked.

"With an incantation," he said in mild humour, earning him one of her many eye rolls, "which will work only if you are concentrating, with all your might, on a single, very happy memory."

Hope closed her eyes at thought hard. The most happy that she had been had always been in the presence of her friends or George.

"Do you have one in mind?"

Hope gave a jerky nod and opened her eyes.

"The incantation is Expecto patronum."
"Expecto patronum," Hope repeated the two words so much under her breath that Professor Lupin almost didn't hear her, "expecto patronum."

"Concentrating hard on your happy memory?"

Hope wrinkled her nose slightly at him as she forced her mind back to her memories of her best friends and George. She recalled how Ron's eyes would attain a glint when he was about to beat her in chess, and how Hermione's whole face would light up when she told Hope and Ron about something new she had just learned, and how George would kiss her just to make her lightheaded and annoyed.

"Expecto patronum, expecto patronum…"

Something startlingly silvery-white rushed from the tip of her wand and she jumped in surprise.

"Impressive," Professor Lupin said with a smile, "not many can get such a response on their first chosen memory. Would you like to try it on a Dementor?"

"Erm, sure," Hope said nervously, her grip on her wand tightening so much that she privately wondered how it hadn't splintered yet.

"We can do some more practice if you like," Professor Lupin added, noticing the anxiety in her voice.

"No," she said quickly; she could do this, "I'm fine, you can open it."

So, Professor Lupin did as she asked, unlocking the extensive locks on the trunk with a wave of his hand, gripping the lid and pulling up.

The Dementor surged from out of it before she had any time to blink, tying her tongue at the sight of its dark billowing cloak that was ratty and ripped and its scabbed grey, fleshless hands. Hope gulped and forced her jaw open, focusing hard on the thoughts of her friends and boyfriend.

"Expecto patronum!" she forced the words out despite the fear that had clenched her throat only moments before. "Expecto patronum!" The silvery mist she had produced before had returned, but it was hardly enough. "Expecto pat...ro..."

The cold was spreading through her body like last time, and even though the boggart wasn't a real Dementor, it was doing a very good impression of one. The world was blurring, and she could hardly see the boggart being forced back into the trunk before the world faded, leaving her only with distant screams. Only this time, the screams were getting closer, and she could make out a man's this time.

"Lily, take Hope and go! It's him! Go! Run! I'll hold him off—"

She could hear the sounds of running feet up a staircase and the sound of what must have been a door being thrown open, and that high-pitched laughter that still gave her nightmares…and then she could hear her mum again.

"Not Hope! Not Hope! please- I'll do anything!"

"Stand aside. Stand aside, girl!"

"Hope!"
A pair of green eyes blinked open, and Professor Lupin gave a relieved smile beside her, ignoring the tears on her cheeks as she scrubbed furiously at them for a second. "Are you alright?"

"Fi—" Hope started to say before closing her mouth abruptly as the bile threatened to rise in it. Professor Lupin gave her a minute for her roiling stomach to adapt and calm.

"I'm fine," she coughed, the back of her throat stinging like acid, so she took the cup of water and chocolate frog that he handed her without any complaints.

"I didn't expect you to do it your first time; in fact, you've done much better than I would have anticipated," Professor Lupin admitted, helping her into a chair.

"How so?" Hope croaked, her throat stinging with pain.

"Most aren't even able to produce that mist that you made," Professor Lupin said easily, "you've done better than most."

"But the mist didn't help much," Hope said in a sullen voice before taking a gulp of the water.

"No," Professor Lupin agreed. "Still, it sets you on the right track of what kind of memory you should be choosing instead."

Hope wasn't sure what was stronger than her love for her friends and George; no one had ever come between that.

"I heard my dad that time," she said, looking up at him, looking into his pained green eyes, not unlike hers in that aspect, "he tried to stall Voldemort, to give Mum time to escape, but..." She bit down on her lip. "And then I heard her begging for Voldemort to spare me...he told her to step aside, but she wouldn't..." If she had looked up, she would have seen the agony that had gripped Remus Lupin's face as he tried not to imagine how his friends had been killed by a monster like that.

"If you don't want to continue with these lessons, I completely understand," he said to her, but then fire filled her eyes as if he was questioning her resolve.

"No! I can do this!" she insisted before deflating slightly, "but maybe next time, I feel...drained."

Professor Lupin could relate to that.

"Professor," she said again, drawing his attention back to her, "do you think Sirius Black deserves to be around the Dementors all the time in Azkaban?"

Professor Lupin gave her a tight smile that was more like a grimace. "Who does deserve it?" Even he had no answer for that question.

However, by February Hope was beginning to grow disheartened at the lack of progress she had made. No matter how hard she tried, she couldn't come up with any memories stronger than the one she'd come up with the first time around.

"Don't worry so much," Professor Lupin admonished and the mournful expression on her face, "you've only been trying this for four weeks, a thirteen-year-old witch, even an indistinct Patronus is a huge achievement. You aren't passing out anymore, are you?"

"No," Hope admitted sullenly, "but I just can't come up with something that's stronger than my happiest memory."
"I have complete faith in you," Professor Lupin said with utter assurance that Hope's lips twitched slightly into a smile.

"What exactly does a Patronus do, if you ever manage to completely form one?" she asked.

"A true Patronus typically charges the Dementors and forces them away," he said, "and even if your Patronus is not fully formed, it can still protect you well enough. If the Dementors put in an appearance at your next Quidditch match, you will be able to keep them at bay long enough to get back to the ground."

"But you said it's harder if there are a lot of them," Hope reminded him.

"Yes, but you will also be having professors attending your games that know the spell," Professor Lupin said.

"You said that the shape is unique to the one who produces them, right?" Hope said, canting her head to the side as he handed her a bottle of butterbeer for which she grinned and thanked him, opening it from where she sat cross-legged on a desk.

"That's right."

"What does yours look like?"

"A wolf."

Hope looked up from her drink in surprise. "You don't like it?"

Professor Lupin shifted uncomfortably. He had always hated that his Patronus had been a wolf and had purposefully made it so that his Patronus was non-corporeal when he was in the presence of others in an effort to hide his condition from them. James and Sirius had always thought he was being stupid, but they could never convince him to form his true Patronus when surrounded by people who didn't know that he was a werewolf.

"Well," she continued, noticing how he didn't want to talk about it, "I think having a wolf Patronus would be cool; wolves are awesome, and so are some werewolves."

Professor Lupin spared her a miniscule smile. "You must not have met many werewolves then."

"Just two," she shrugged, much to his surprise. "What were Mum and Dad's Patronuses?"

"Their Patronuses were what we call complementary," he explained, eager to move away from his Patronus, "meaning that they were a male and female form of the same animal. James' was a stag, and Lily's was a doe."

"Really?" Hope said in surprise. "Does that happen a lot?"

"Only in a few rare cases," Professor Lupin said, "such as soul mates."

She smiled a bit brightly at that.

"What's under a Dementor's hood?" she asked, hardly drinking her butterbeer as she had far too many questions that needed to be answered.

At the question, Professor Lupin paused in drinking to frown in a pensive manner. "Hmmm... well, the only people who really know are in no condition to tell us. You see, the Dementor lowers its hood only to use its last and worst weapon."
Hope's eyes turned apprehensive at that. "What is it? Why is it so bad?"

"It's called the Dementor's Kiss," said Professor Lupin, his lips twisting into a grimace. "It's what Dementors do to those they wish to destroy utterly. I suppose there must be some kind of mouth under there, because they clamp their jaws upon the mouth of the victim and -and suck out his soul."

Hope gagged at that, grateful that she hadn't been drinking any of her butterbeer, or it would have possibly ended up all over her professor, and she might never be able to live that down.

"What?" she said, her mind completely boggled. "Do they kill—?"

"Oh no," Professor Lupin said quickly, "it's much worse than that. You can exist without your soul, you know, as long as your brain and heart are still working. But you'll have no sense of self anymore, no memory, no...anything. There's no chance at all of recovery. You'll just exist. As an empty shell. And your soul is gone forever...lost." He gave a deep sigh, drinking a little more, before adding: "It's the fate that awaits Sirius Black. It was in the Daily Prophet this morning. The Ministry have given the Dementors permission to perform it if they find him."

Hope was staring at him. "But isn't that," she said in a tentative sort of voice, "isn't that a bit inhumane?"

"To some," Professor Lupin agreed.

"Do you think Sirius Black deserves it?" she asked, her words remarkably similar to the question she had posed to him weeks ago.

"Do you really think anyone deserves that?" Professor Lupin asked her with a vague smile. "Even I cannot say."

Hope took a long swig of her drink for a moment. "Would you mind...if I told you something?" she asked him. "I mean, it's a little personal, but...you feel kind of like a surrogate uncle."

"I'm flattered," Professor Lupin said with a grin that made his eyes twinkle, "better than your true uncle?"

"Oh, loads better," she said, scoffing slightly, "maybe you missed the memo when I said as soon as I'm of age, I'm ditching that place."

"I must have missed it," he said with a laugh, "you can tell me anything."

"Okay...er, in first year I got Dad's old invisibility cloak, and I was wandering around under it during the Christmas holiday, and I came across this mirror. It's called the Mirror of Erised...have you ever heard of it?"

Professor Lupin creased his eyebrows together in thought. "I can't say that I have, perhaps in passing."

"Well, it's this mirror that sort of shows you what you want more than anything else in the world," Hope explained, "my grandfather built it hoping that it would convince my grandmother to be courted."

"Your grandfather?" Professor Lupin said blankly, his mind straying to the face of Charlus Potter, James' father, who had already begun to go grey even in James' first year.

"Well," Hope said, waving a careless hand as she did so, "I say grandfather, I should be really saying
ancestor; he was young in the tenth century. He was Salazar Slytherin."

Professor Lupin's jaw unhinged and he stared at her in unabashed surprise. "What?" he finally managed to say. It was too ironic that James who had always been a bit pro-Gryffindor to actually be a Slytherin. Of course, he did have a number of Slytherin traits, now that he thought about it. He was clever, determined, and lacked a care for certain rules, which were all traits that Hope had apparently inherited from him.

"Don't look too surprised or I'll be really insulted," Hope added, giving him a firm look.

"Right-sorry—" Professor Lupin said, realizing how rude his behaviour was.

"Anyways...this mirror could show you whatever your deepest desire was," Hope said, returning back to the point she had been trying to make, "and the first image it showed me was of my parents."

Professor Lupin's breath caught slightly in his throat.

"Do you think that would count as a good memory?" she asked him.

"I think it might," Professor Lupin said with a sad smile, "or perhaps the memory you are focusing on now doesn't have enough focus."

"Is it really that simple?" Hope asked with a quirked eyebrow.

"It might be," Professor Lupin said in an agreeable sort of voice, "but you never know."

Hope nodded in understanding.

"Do you think Sirius Black is as bad as they say?"

"You ask an awful lot of questions," Professor Lupin said, making her shrug.

"I'm highly inquisitive, that's what Professor Flitwick says," she said. "Well?"

"I thought I knew him," he said after a very long silence, "but I should have known better with the family background that he had, I suppose."

"What do you mean?" Hope asked with curiosity.

"Sirius Black came from the Noble and Most Ancient House of Black," Professor Lupin explained, "they were rather vocal about their pro-Dark leanings. The whole family had been in Slytherin, up until him. He was a shame to his parents, being in Gryffindor."

He glanced at Hope, but her expression hadn't changed as he had begun to speak. "Did Sirius ever share his family's stance on Dark Magic?" she asked, aware that she had called him Sirius as opposed to Black, but there were so many things that didn't add up. She felt more confused than anything concerning the man.

"He was very anti-Dark," Professor Lupin admitted, "he had to be to be friends with James. James hated the Dark Arts." He glanced at her. "Don't you?"

She tossed him a sour look. "Don't automatically assume that I'm some pure snowflake, Wolf-man, I'm a far cry, and I've been dead before." He winced slightly at that. "I am the neutral grey area, I'm balanced."

Somehow, he couldn't doubt that.
"You knew what I was talking about when I mentioned dying," Hope added, giving him a flat out stare. "So I guess that makes you 'Moony' doesn't it?"

His smile turned sheepish. "Ah, so that nurse told you I stopped by?"

"Yeah," Hope said, crossing her arms and arching an eyebrow at him, "you should have stuck around."

"That would hardly have been appropriate."

Hope rolled her eyes at him, turning them a bright hazel. "You-are-an-idiot," she said poking him harshly in the arm with every word to emphasize her point. "And I can't figure out if it's just men or men that happen to be werewolves…but it's one of the two."

"Indeed," he said, rubbing at the spot she had poked on his arm…he was certain that it was going to bruise.

"Yeah 'indeed'," Hope mocked him as she jumped off the desk, stumbling slightly as her shoes made contact with the floor and she stretched and yawned. "Well, I'd better get going before George gets too jealous."

"Too jealous?" Professor Lupin asked with a raised eyebrow.

"Don't worry," Hope said with a grin, "he knows you are definitely not my type."

Professor Lupin stared at her, opened his mouth, but then thought better of it and closed it. "I'm not sure if that's a compliment or an insult."

"It's a little bit of both," Hope said with a wink, "so try not to feel too bad."

"Alright," Professor Lupin said slowly, still a bit confused at the direction that their conversation had gone.

"See you at the match," she added, "hopefully I'll have my broom back by then…"

"As a teacher I shouldn't really be taking sides, but, to Gryffindor," Professor Lupin said with a wink, and Hope laughed as she spared him a wave before disappearing out of the room and through the halls of Hogwarts, in search of one person in particular.
The Calming of Furies

They were a bunch of idiots, that much Hope was sure as she scowled at them with her arms crossed and leaning against the shut door…and they were still going at it…great…

She had never seen Ron or Hermione quite so angry as they were now in the three years that she had known them. Their faces were each a bright red and their eyes flashed as they yelled at the other. Hope had stopped understanding a word that they were saying, it was all too much blurred together for her to even begin to comprehend.

The whole night had started to go downhill the moment that Ron, Ron who had always been a bit of a peacemaker, stormed down from his dorm screaming at Hermione that Scabbers had gone and that there was blood and ginger cat hairs on the sheets. And Hope had taken that time when the whole common room had been staring at Ron to forcibly drag the pair to a secluded location, giving silent orders to the first suit of armour she saw with the Slytherin crest to block the door (she was a little pleased that he, or it, did so without question).

"YOU SAID THAT CAT WAS GOING TO STAY IN YOUR DORMITORY!" Ron roared.

"OH, LIKE SCABBERS DOESN'T LEAVE YOUR DORMITORY!" Hermione raged back.
"YOU HYPOCRITE!"

Hope thought they were both being foolish. Ron was overreacting, but Hermione should have kept tighter control of her pet. The problem was, Hermione didn't see it that way, she only saw it as her cat being the victim which was neither here nor there.

Ron's lips twisted upwards into a sneer that he could have easily copied from Snape on a good day (or a bad day), and then he twisted on his heel, stalking towards where Hope stood. She arched an eyebrow.

"Are you going to let us out?" he snapped. "Or am I stuck with her?" He jabbed a finger in Hermione's direction, though he missed the flash of hurt that encompassed the brunette's face.

"No one's stopping you," Hope said, wrenching the door open and inviting them to walk through it, but they didn't, or perhaps it was better to say that they couldn't. Because framed in the doorway was a suit of armour holding a Slytherin shield and blocking the doorway.

"Hope," Ron said through gritted teeth, scowling fiercely at her, but her expression was unwavering and steadfast.

"He's not going to move unless I say so," Hope said, rolling her eyes at him. "And I don't think I want to right now, considering you and Hermione are trying to start World War III all by yourselves. Both of them glared a bit at her for that.

"Have you heard the pair of you?" She asked in irritation. "I'm sure that the Londoners could hear you from here."

"Hope," Hermione warned. "Don't."

"Don't what?" Hope snapped this time. "I like you both, you're my best friends, but the pair of you are ticking off my last nerve!" Her voice had risen gradually as she had spoken.
Ron and Hermione leaned back suddenly at the sudden rage, but they couldn’t respond properly to her.

"You know what?” Hope said finally. "I'm not going to say a single word to anyone until you two make up and admit you've both got pet problems." Peer pressure seemed like the best way to go, she knew that George in particular liked her witty remarks and he wouldn't take too kindly to her silence (she counted on him blaming his brother).

"What?!” Hermione said, a bit dumbstruck. "But you always talk! You always have something to say!"

"Not this time," Hope said, looping her newly released broom over her shoulders as she glared at the pair of them. "Work it out,” she added firmly, "or get used to the silence."

Ron stared after her as she left, not quite sure how exactly he and Hermione were supposed to work it out, especially since it was all her cat's fault! Why couldn't Hope see that? Why couldn't she take sides for once, and how did she think being silent was going to help anything? What was that going to do?

And then it practically brained him across the face. Oh, George was going to kill him…was that what she was hoping for? Death by brother? Ron gulped audibly before following his friend's lead and exiting the room, steering around the suit of armour that was still standing guard of to the side in a silent vigil.

As soon as she was alone, Hermione wanted to burst into tears. She was tired and angry and afraid all at the same time. She ran a hand through her bushy curls and squeezed her eyes shut, trying to staunch the tears before they could fall, but they fell anyways. Her breath shook in time with her shoulders as she tried to control her emotions. Why couldn't Ron see that cats chased rats? Why couldn't he understand that what Crookshanks had was a natural response to its prey? Why couldn't he see how sorry she was?

But all Hermione could do was will the tears to stop and wish for Ron to forgive her soon.

So the next day when she came down to breakfast the next morning, she was a bit unsurprised that Hope had followed through with her threat and was wearing something with words scrawled across it dangling from her neck. She couldn't read it from where she was, but she didn't have to.

"Sorry, my two best friends are being idiots so everyone is getting the silent treatment from me until they make up," George read aloud from what looked like something that used to be a book cover as Hermione walked past, studiously ignoring the blatant glare that Ron gave her as she passed, opting to sit on the far end of the table, as far away from him as possible. "Seriously?"

Hope jerked her head towards where Hermione was sitting, still being subjected to Ron's glare. Angelina and Alicia weren't too impressed with his attitude towards the bookish third year, especially if it was over pets, though they supposed they couldn't fault him for thinking that Crookshanks killed Scabbers. Privately, everyone thought that Crookshanks had killed Scabbers, but none of them were willing to admit it out loud (House of the Brave? That was likely).

"Get your arse over there and apologize to her," George said.

"No!" Ron said affronted. "I haven't done anything wrong! It's her cat!"

"You do know that all cats chase rats, don't you?" Fred asked with a quirked eyebrow.

Ron gave him a venomous glare at that comment, but Hope wrote down onto the paper inside of a
The journal that she had been apparently carrying around for that purpose, holding up the words "I agree with Fred," shortly followed by "You're being an idiot, and so is she."

Ron's cheeks reddened. "Then why aren't you over there complaining to her?"

Hope shrugged. "You're more reasonable. Hermione's very difficult to reason with." No doubt something she had picked up from Hope.

Then she held up the words "You're breaking her heart. Hermione doesn't deserve that." And then he felt a bit ashamed.

"Come on, Ron, you were always saying how boring Scabbers was," said Fred added, guessing that now would be a good time to get in the last word. "And he's been off-colour for ages, he was wasting away. It was probably better for him to snuff it quickly -one swallow- he probably didn't feel a thing."

"Fred!" said Ginny said aghast, gaping at her older brother and slapping him on the arm to which he theatrically winced. "You can't tell him that! That's so mean!"

"I'm telling the truth!" Fred cried indignantly.

"All he did was eat and sleep, Ron, you said it yourself," added George to his twin's argument, ignoring the side-abuse that his sister was doing to Fred while Angelina watched on, nodding approvingly.

"He bit Goyle for us once!" Ron said in a mournful voice that almost made Hope feel sorry for him, but she was still too irritated for that. "Remember, Hope?"

Hope gave him a fierce scowl when he asked her that, despite remembering their first year on the way to the castle where they had been accosted by Malfoy, Crabbe, and Goyle.

"His finest hour," Fred said, unable to keep his lips from twitching slightly. "Let the scar on Goyle's finger stand as a lasting tribute to his memory. Oh, come on, Ron, get yourself down to Hogsmeade and buy a new rat, what's the point of moaning?"

"But it was Scabbers!" Ron whinged. "He's been in the family for thirteen years!"

But that didn't stop him from being dead (possibly) and gone.

Hope rolled her eyes, though she did feel for Ron, she didn't appreciate how he was blaming Hermione for what her pet had done. She stood up, kissing George soundly, smiling as he tried to prolong it as she pulled back with a light laugh and a whisper of "See you at lunch," that only he could hear. And then she tightened her jacket around her and strode silently out of the hall and into the chilly air as she walked down to Hagrid's cabin.

Buckbeak wasn't outside, but that didn't surprise her, because they were still in the cold months of the year and it would have been cruel to just leave him outside.

"Hagrid?" she knocked hard on the door, but for a moment he didn't answer so she knocked harder. "Hagrid? Are you there?" She could hear his heavy footballs within, so he must be.

The gigantic man opened the door with a look of surprise in his beetle black eyes. "Hope! Come in! Where's Hermione and Ron?"

"They're fighting," Hope said, gesturing to the small sign she was wearing around her neck. Hagrid
took a moment to read the thick writing before shaking his head.

"Those two," he grunted, "never met a more stubborn trio o' people than you three."

Hope grinned brightly as if being stubborn was a compliment as Hagrid dumped a plate of rock cakes onto the table (which Hope quickly declined, citing that she'd already had her breakfast and was full), sipping the tea politely.

"We do try hard," she admitted, but then her smile faltered. "I've never seen them so angry," she admitted in a subdued voice that didn't suit her at all. "Do you think they'll ever make up?"

Her eyes implored the man, but he had no answers for her.

"They'll come 'round," he assured her, "don't you worry about that, they just need a sharp hit to the skull an' they'll be sorted."

But Hope wasn't sure how a little brain damage was going to make anything better.

"I got you this too, Hagrid," Hope added, pulling out a couple leafs of parchment and handing it to him. "It's for your hearing," she explained at the blank look on his face, "it's not much, but I'll probably do some more research when I've got less homework and Quidditch practice." Though, she thought to herself, the latter would less likely fluctuate as much as the former. Oliver could be such a pain sometimes.

Hagrid's eyes misted over with emotions as he moved forward to grip Hope in a tight enough hug that Hope could have sworn her ribs had broken, but she weathered it just for him.

The damned rat had evaded him once more; Sirius couldn't resist growling a bit at that. He was thankful for Crookshanks' help, but it had unfortunately yielded no fruits this time around. Crookshanks had attempted to snag Pettigrew when he was in the boys' dormitory, but the rat was quick and small and he had evaded him, making it look as though the cat had killed him in the process.

He was much cleverer than he seemed.

Crookshanks gave a meow of warning and Sirius stepped quickly back into the shadows as a now familiar voice rang through the hall. "Crookshanks? What're you doing out of the Tower?"

His goddaughter lifted the ginger cat up and into her arms with a bemused half-smile. "You clever boy," she hummed, "did you push that portrait open all by yourself?" Crookshanks preened slightly at the veiled compliment. "Does Hermione know you're out here?"

The distressed meow told her all that she needed to know.

"I'll take you back to the common room, then," she said.

"I was wondering if you were going to show your face again." A male voice commented, making Sirius tense and Hope only barely jump before smiling brightly.

Hope blushed slightly as she turned towards the ginger-haired male that Sirius had seen knock her out of a tree months earlier...that would have to be George Weasley. "I just went down to visit Hagrid," she said in a pompous voice, "so I have no idea what you are talking about."

"Mmhm, right," he said in a voice that said "of course you do."
Crookshanks took that time to rub his face affectionately against hers before leaping out of her arms and giving the pair a significant look. Well, no one could say that he wasn't part Kneazle.

Hope pouted briefly before grinning as she wrapped her arms around his neck. "What? Did you miss me and hate being surrounded by all those couples?"

"What's the point of celebrating Valentine's Day if my girlfriend ditches me for the gamekeeper?" George said in a mournful manner, making peals of laughter erupt from the lips of Sirius' goddaughter.

Originally he hadn't liked him on principle. You weren't supposed to like your goddaughter's boyfriend; it was probably a golden rule of some sort. Still, he hadn't seen her smile so much as she did when she was around him, and that smile always made his heart swell at the similarities it shared to her parents'. And clearly she had taken after her father in falling for a red-head.

Sirius only slightly approved of the Weasley, and that was only because he was a prankster.

"Jealous?" Hope smirked. "I mean, you're already jealous of Professor Lupin…" Her eyes glowed amber with mirth.

"Well," George said, a little uncomfortably, "he does get to see you privately every week…"

Hope grinned widely. "You know Professor Lupin isn't my type, besides, he's more like a favourite uncle than anything else." She raked her fingers through his hair at the nape of his neck…it was getting longer and she didn't think that she minded it. "So, what did you get me?"

His eyes glinted, even though she could see that he was hiding something behind his back. "My dear lady," he said in a mock-knight-ish fashion, "whatever makes you think I got you anything to celebrate our courtship?"

"Courtship?" she laughed loudly at that. "Is that what this is? I was assuming you were some kind of stalker with the way you follow me around!"

"I follow you around?" he said in faux-surprise. "Whatever do you mean? I would never stalk such a lovely bird so mercilessly!"

Hope's cheeks burned a red Sirius had never seen before. "Who're you calling lovely, you numpty?"

"Maybe the person I will be giving this to," George offered, bringing the object to the front and revealing what he had been hiding. It wasn't chocolate or jewellery like Sirius had expected; it was a flower. And it wasn't just any flower, it was a blue iris.

He remembered that night well. He had been the first one to arrive on the scene, the first one to see the damage that Peter had done. He had seen how James had been sprawled at the foot of the stairs, his eyes wide and unseeing, undoubtedly having tried to stall the Dark Lord from reaching his daughter. Sirius had had to step around him, forcing the bile down as he raced up the ruined steps and coughing at the smoke, because somehow a fire had started to burn, beginning at the crib.

His heart had fluttered in fear, but then he saw that his goddaughter was not in it.

The back of her sleep shirt had been burned and he could see the burn stretched into her skin as well, marring one shoulder as the little girl cried, patting a hand to her mother's cheek, but Lily did not move.

"Hope!" he had said in obvious relief, racing to her side to gently cradle her in his arms. This only
made Hope cry harder, even though he had been careful to not touch her back, it must have been the shock of everything that happened.

He pulled out his wand and muttered a spell, making the burn morph and blossom into a strange-looking but beautiful flower. Surprised at the lack of pain, Hope had stopped crying, and giving a silent apology to his friends, Sirius had picked her up and carefully carried her down the stairs and out of the ruined house only to be met with Rubeus Hagrid.

The man had insisted that he hand over Hope to him, under the orders of Albus Dumbledore, so that he could take her to her aunt and uncle. But Sirius had remembered all of the stories Lily had told him about her sister who hated magic, and he had no doubt that her husband would be the same. She couldn't go there! He had argued, but Hagrid would not change his mind, so he had to settle for handing over his beloved goddaughter, the last connection to James and Lily, pressing a gentle kiss to her forehead as she looked on in confusion.

"Pa'foo no go!" she whimpered, holding out her hands and curling them inwards like she wanted to grab him.

Sirius had wanted to stay, but he had to go, so he left Hagrid with his motorbike and had gone off to search for his traitorous friend. And then he had lost twelve years in Azkaban.

"You spoil me," Hope said, bringing him back to the present, "I wasn't sure what to get you so I just got a lot of chocolate."

"I don't mind," George said, leaning down to kiss her, and if Sirius squinted hard enough, he could almost imagine that it was James and Lily.

By the end of the week Ron was really regretting his stupidity. Hope was still doing the silence thing when she wasn't alone with George (he gagged, hoping that wasn't too often), and it had already earned her a few detentions with Snape, but she wasn't going to stop until he and Hermione had apologized. Flitwick had been surprised when he had read the sign the first time around, but McGonagall's eyebrow had twitched in irritation. George was pretty annoyed that she couldn't talk to him in public and the scowl he had given Ron had an underlying threat that he was sure involved a cruel prank of some sort.

He glanced over to where Hermione was sitting in the common room in front of the couch with her books and parchments spread around her. He could see the grey shadows under her eyes from where he was and how thin she looked…or was she always that thin?

Hermione raked a hand through her bushy curls, making reds paint across the brown. Ron flushed when he realized he was staring, and shifted his gaze to Hope who was sitting at George's feet, braced against his legs as she did her Ancient Runes homework. The knowing smirk made the red of his cheeks darken further.

She jerked her head in Hermione's direction in a "go on" gesture. And this time, Ron did as she requested. He shut his book and stood, walking over to where Hermione was sitting, working diligently on her Arithmancy assignment.

"Hey," he said, clearing his throat slightly when it came out a little more strangled than he had planned, "mind if I sit?"

Hermione looked at him in startled surprise. "Er…sure, I mean, if you want to." She tried to play off being calm, but her heart was beating too fast for it to work properly.
And he sat down, opening his book again, and for the longest moment, he didn't do anything and Hermione could hardly concentrate on the passage that she was supposed to be writing her essay on, and then she decided to act first.

"Ron, I'm really, really sorry about Scabbers," she whispered.

"I know," he said back, pausing for a second before patting Hermione's hand lightly in a way that said he wasn't quite sure what to do. "And Fred was right, you know. He was old, and a bit useless...and maybe Mum and Dad will let me get an owl now."

He put on a brave face, but she could tell he was still missing his pet; after all, Scabbers had been in their family for more than a decade.

"Does that mean I can start talking again?" Hope interjected quickly, making their heads swivel towards the Potter who was quirking an eyebrow with an annoyed look on her face. "Because I'm really starting to hate this whole silence thing."

Hermione gave a watery laugh and Ron cracked a grin.

"I can't be nearly as snarky silent," Hope complained, snapping her book shut and standing up and stretching before sitting down on George's arm of his chair. "I never thought I would miss my sarcasm so much."

Now Ron and Hermione weren't the only ones laughing.
"Got plenty of special features, hasn't it? Shame it doesn't come with a parachute - in case you get too near a dementor."

Hope was having a positively brilliant morning before that stuck up Slytherin ferret by the name of Draco Malfoy had decided to drop by. Her friends were finally talking, though she suspected it might be a little while before they were completely relaxed in each other's presences as they had been before, as Ron was still getting set off every time that he saw bandy-legged cat. George looked like he wanted to hit Malfoy for the comment, but Hope grabbed his arm before he could.

"Maybe you should get some special features for yours," she said coolly. "Maybe you should attach a dozen arms to yours, that way if you fail, you'll still have a one in twelve chance of catching the Snitch."

The Gryffindors roared at that and Hope smirked as a faint pink rose in Malfoy's cheeks.

"You want to play with fire, Malfoy?" she said, standing up and looping her Firebolt over her shoulder. "Then you'd better be ready to get burned."

And not twenty minutes later the Gryffindor and Ravenclaw teams were out on the field with the students raging above them. It was a beautiful day for flying, and being outside in general, quite the opposite of the weather that they had during the Gryffindor-Hufflepuff match that had only been a few months back.

"Ready to kick some arse?" George asked with a wink to her.

"You know me so well," Hope said with a smirk. "Kiss for good luck?"

"You don't need a kiss for good luck," George said in mirth as she pouted.

"You ruin all my fun, Weasley," she said in a mournful voice as she mounted her broom, kicking off firmly as the whistle pierced the air.

Her broom rocketed farther and faster upwards than any of the others' brooms, a testament to the Firebolt's superiority, and she took a brief second to enjoy how the wind whipped across her face, flinging her plaited hair to the wind, buffeting it like a ribbon caught in a storm. There were a few "Ooh"s and "Ahh"s at the speed of her new broom and she couldn't resist brightly grinning at their responses, but then her face melted into an expression of pure focus.

The bright sunlight was going to make it difficult to see that flash of gold that was the Snitch moving fast against the wind, but Hope was always up for a good challenge. She circled the pitch, turning so sharply that she knew that her old Nimbus wouldn't have been able to keep up.

Cho was marking her again… that was getting so old.

"Let's see if you can handle this," Hope muttered to herself as she urged her broom forward, whizzing past a few red and blue blurs as she suddenly flew downwards into an almost vertical dive with a hand outstretched, as if she already had the Snitch in her sights.

She could hardly hear the screams as Cho chased her, and then suddenly she wasn't faking it, catching a glint of golden as the Snitch raced close to the ground.
Hope cried out in pain as a Bludger collided with her wrist, breaking it on impact, forcing her to pull up and cause Cho's broom to skid in the ground as she pulled up too close.

"Ooh!" Lee Jordan complained into the megaphone. "So close! But a well timed Bludger has put one of Potter's arms out of action, but, ah, the backlash! This is another reminder why you don't mess Beaters' girlfriends!"

George had taken his bat and given it a mighty swing that nicked one of the Ravenclaw Beaters' shoulders with a well aimed Bludger. Hope couldn't help but feel a bit pleased about that.

She grimaced through her pain before using her only able arm now to direct her broom, twisting around violently in search of—

*There it was!*

She sent her broom speeding towards the Gryffindor goal posts, the middle one being her focus. However, by this time Cho had decided to block her by hovering her broom directly in Hope's flight path. Bad move.

Hope's eyes sharpened, the colour fading to a steely grey as she flattened herself to the shaft of her broom and thus increasing her speed.

Her refusing to stop or shy away from the impact startled Cho, she could see it, and the Chinese fourth year shifted her broom at the last possible second at just the right amount that they wouldn't crash, before following her adversary after the tiny golden ball.

Hope lifted her good hand from the broom to outstretch it, hanging on to the broomstick with only her thighs and knees. The metal brushed against the tips of her fingers. *So close!*

And then she saw them. Three tattered cloaks covering hooded faces.

Her first thought was: *Shite! I don't have my wand!*

Her second thought was: *Not this time!*

And what she did next surprised both herself and possibly the whole stadium as she clenched her broken hand into a fist despite the pain that shot up her arm as she drew it back and launched it forward into the face of one of the dementors.

The pain made her give out a small scream, but then the fingers of her good hand curled around the ball and she barely had enough time to direct the broom slightly closer to the ground before she fell off it and rolled into the earth, clutching the hand that still held the Snitch around her arm.

She blinked dizzily as red filled her vision as George hugged her fiercely, cradling her face in his hands as if she was fragile or delicate before leaning in to kiss her so intensely that Hope swore that she saw stars.

She could hear Oliver yelling to anyone that would listen "That's my girl!" and Fred had given her such a tight hug that she could have sworn that he was his mother. Angelina, Katie, and Alicia had each given her a much gentler hug and a kiss to the cheek, being the first ones careful of her injury as she held the arm close to her chest.

Hermione was worried, as usual, her face tight and her eyes darting to Hope's arm every few
seconds, but Ron was just ecstatic, making Hope laugh out loud.

And then she saw Professor Lupin, his handsome scarred face a mixture of amused and annoyed.

He smiled as she walked over to him with a bright grin. "Ever punched a dementor in the face, Professor?" she said, feeling a bit cheeky (which was how she always felt, now that she thought about it) in the high of the win.

Professor Lupin chuckled lightly. "I would hate to be the downer, but..." He escorted her to the edge of the field. "I believe you've damaged Mr. Malfoy a bit."

She stared in surprise as what looked like the entire Slytherin team attempted to disentangle themselves from dark flowing robes, with Draco Malfoy clutching at his face. Hope was darkly pleased that she seemed to have broken the prat's nose. And then she felt angry.

"Those arses," she snarled. "Maybe I should give them each a nice punch to the face."

Professor Lupin arched an eyebrow at her threat of violence. "I don't think that will be necessary," he said, pointing to Professor McGonagall who was red in the face and practically glowing with anger at their deeds.

"An unworthy trick!" she raged. "A low and cowardly attempt to sabotage the Gryffindor Seeker! Detention for all of you, and fifty points from Slytherin! I shall be speaking to Professor Dumbledore about this, make no mistake! Ah, here he comes now!"

George took this time to pull her out and away from the crowd and a bit farther back so as not to be interrupted as he helped her slowly pull off the glove and arm guard, making her hiss slightly in pain.

"Sorry," he quickly apologized.

"S'alright," she muttered, her cheeks burning as his fingers gently smoothed over the flesh of her wrist.

"I don't suppose you've got anything else broken, do you?" he asked in an almost joking manner.

Hope's lips twitched into a smirk and George drank in her appearance. Strands of her dark red hair had escaped her braid and fell around her flushed face in disarray. Her bright eyes and smirking lips made her look much more like a mischief-maker than he or Fred did. "Why, want to kiss it better?" she regretted it the second she said it, because her cheeks burned brighter than the sunset as George gave a loud and bright laugh.

The last thing Hope wanted to do that night was be woken up by a loud scream, but that didn't stop her from wrenching open her curtains to find Hermione staring at her half in worry, half in fear.

"Was that Ron?" she whispered.

And Hope's face went positively white, almost exactly the same shade as Hermione's as they dashed down the stairs, throwing whatever decency they had out of the window as they came into the lit common room, closely followed by the rest of the girls' and boys' dormitories, a throng of voices filling the room as Hope and Hermione weaved through the crowd.

"Are you sure you weren't dreaming, Ron?"

"I'm telling you, I saw him!"
"What's all the noise?"

"Professor McGonagall told us to go to bed!"

"Excellent, are we carrying on?" Fred asked with a bright and eager grin, but it faded as his older brother descended the stairs.

"George!" Hope hissed, drawing her boyfriend to where they were standing. "What happened?"

But George looked as confused as she and Hermione felt. "No idea," he said, easily wrapping an arm around Hope's shoulders and feeling the tension that they held.

"Everyone back upstairs!" Percy barked, his hair mussed with sleep and his pyjamas dishevelled.

But then Ron, for the first time, latched onto the sound of his brother's voice and turned his round eyes to him. "Perce – Sirius Black!" Ron gasped out. "In our dormitory! With a knife! Woke me up!"

Everyone in the common room froze at those words, each person sharing a look with someone else, and Hope could feel George's arm tightening around her, almost painfully, but not quite.

"Nonsense!" Percy snapped, though his eyes betrayed his worry, and Hope could see his eyes doing a quick scan of his brother and his tensed body relax slightly when he saw nothing wrong. "You had too much to eat, Ron – had a nightmare—"

"I'm telling you—" Ron was saying angrily, his temper darkening his words before being pulled up short by the sudden appearance of Professor McGonagall whose face was contorted in annoyance and anger that all of them being down in the common room, obviously believing they had taken to partying once more.

"Now, really, enough's enough!" she said. "I am delighted that Gryffindor won the match, but this is getting ridiculous! Percy, I expected better of you!"

Hope winced slightly at the offended look that Percy was now wearing on his face. It wasn't like it had been his idea in the first place.

"I certainly didn't authorize this, Professor!" said Percy, the perfect picture of indignation. "I was just telling them all to get back to bed! My brother Ron here had a nightmare—"

Ron, who had already been growing redder by the second at how easily his brother had dismissed what he said to be true, finally exploded, his voice almost matching Hope's when she had her explosions (an impressive feat, indeed).

"IT WASN'T A NIGHTMARE!" Ron bellowed, his voice echoing loudly in the silence. "PROFESSOR, I WOKE UP, AND SIRIUS BLACK WAS STANDING OVER ME, HOLDING A KNIFE!"

His outburst made a number of people jump rather violently, but Professor McGonagall was not one of them. However, Hope could feel Hermione's hand winding into one of her own, the worry making it shake just slightly. Hope could hardly bring herself to squeeze it back in reassurance, because she was far too surprised by the turn of events.

Professor McGonagall gave him a look that told Hope she didn't believe him for a second. After all, what were the chances of Sirius Black sneaking into Hogwarts a second time?

"Don't be ridiculous, Weasley," she said, but Hope couldn't help but wonder who she was trying to
convince: them or herself? "How could he possibly have gotten through the portrait hole?"

"Ask him!" Ron all but demanded, his finger shaking as he jabbed it in the direction of Sir Cadogan's portrait. "Ask him if he saw—"

Clearly very irritated, Professor McGonagall did as he had asked (or ordered, depending on how you looked at it; Hope thought it sounded more like an order than anything else), glaring at him as she pushed through the portrait hole to speak with the painting on the other side. "Sir Cadogan, did you just let a man enter Gryffindor Tower?" she asked in a voice that clearly said she had better things to do than listen to the ramblings of a thirteen year old boy.

"Certainly, good lady!" Sir Cadogan agreed, and Hope could hear the clang of metal…he must have fallen off of his horse again, the idiot.

A couple of students goggled slightly at that, having not believed Ron, and Hope was pretty sure that from what little she could see of their Head of House, that the woman was gaping at the painting of the knight.

"You -you did?" she asked, clearly aghast just by the tone of her voice before stuttering out. "But - but the password!"

"He had 'em!" Sir Cadogan agreed, the pride obvious in his voice, as if he thought he'd done something very good and deserved a reward. "Had the whole week's, my lady! Read 'em off a little piece of paper!"

Hope winced. She remembered when Neville had said that he'd convinced Sir Cadogan to tell him the whole week's passwords because he kept changing them…oh, that really sucked…

When Professor McGonagall came back into the common room, her face was so white she could have probably been considered transparent, but then a lot of the Gryffindor students were doing that impression as well.

"Which person, which abysmally foolish person wrote down this week's passwords and left them lying around?" Hope was almost certain that she already knew which student had done so.

Oh, this was going to be a long night.

________________________________________________________________________________

Hope was starting to get a bad habit of pondering things late into the night, but she had an insatiable curiosity.

And Sirius Black is a rather curious enigma that deserved to be pondered.

She remembered clearly what Professor Lupin had told her about him: "He was very anti-Dark; he had to be to be friends with James. James hated the Dark Arts. Don't you?"

If he was so anti-Dark, then how had he ended up working for the darkest wizard in the world? How could he submit to a man like that if he was so against it? These were the questions that older, more experienced witches and wizards should have been asking, but weren't. After wasn't it simpler to believe a white lie than the honest truth? Of course, that was assuming that Sirius Black was in some way, shape, or form, innocent, and Hope wasn't even sure of that either.

Basically, she was just a huge muddle of confusion, and every question she asked had her even more confused than she had been to start with.
She sighed, silencing a groan as her head throbbed slightly at all those unanswerable questions that she was posing. If Ron was awake he would have told her that she was over thinking it, and Hermione would have said that all of her questions were taking her farther away from her original query.

"Lumos," she muttered, her wand tip lighting up and illuminating the darkness so much so that Hope had to blink a few times for her eyes to adjust as she pulled out Fred and George's gift to her: the Marauder's Map. The map itself was a bit of a marvel...the amount of detail that was put into it was stunning to say the least, considering how much of Hogwarts there actually was.

She spread out the parchment on her lap, holding her wand over it as she inspected the dots moving about. The dot baring the name Argus Filch was passing by the Defence Against the Dark Arts classroom, and Peter Pettigrew—

Wait, what?

She turned her eyes to the parchment again, and sure enough, a single dot read Peter Pettigrew. That couldn't be right...either the map was lying, or Peter Pettigrew was in the castle. Either way, Hope was going to have to check it out to be sure.

She slipped into a pair of sturdy boots, pulling a loose sweatshirt around her shoulders as she carefully manoeuvred around her dorm mates, taking her time in descending the staircase and leaving the common room in search of the part on the map at which Peter Pettigrew was said to be.

Hope pulled out the map, frowning into the darkness. It said that he couldn't be more than ten feet away, but there was nothing, nothing at all.

"Oh, shite," she muttered, noticing Severus Snape's dot coming around the corner. "Mischief Managed. Nox!"

Snape was the last person that she would have wanted to meet out and about in the late hours of night, and she had to blink several times at both the brightness of his wand and the ugliness of his mug.

"Potter," he said her surname with so much contempt that Hope scowled fiercely, "what are you doing wandering the corridors at night?"

Hope arched an eyebrow in annoyance and irritation (something that wasn't completely faked). "I've got a mild case of insomnia," she said, crossing her arms, "I go out and meander for a couple of hours about once a month. You can ask Professor Flitwick or McGonagall, they catch me an awful lot."

Snape's lips curled into a sneer. "How extraordinarily like your father you are, Potter," Snape said suddenly, his eyes glinting. "He too was exceedingly arrogant. A small amount of talent on the Quidditch field made him think he was a cut above the rest of us too. Strutting around the place with his friends and admirers...The resemblance between you is uncanny."

"Excuse me?" Hope all but growled. "I don't strut and I'm not arrogant!"

"Your father didn't set much store by rules either," Snape continued, speaking over her and ignoring her, determined to say what he wanted. "Rules were for lesser mortals, not Quidditch Cup-winners. His head was so swollen—"

"Shut the fuck up!" Hope snarled, her eyes glowing the colour the rubies in the darkness. She had never quite felt the need to curse as much as she did right now. She felt as though rage was pumping
through her veins instead of blood.

She could see the malice growing on the Potion's Professor's face, but after two and a half years, she lacked the ability to care about how he felt because he was such a bastard!

"What did you say to me, Potter?"

"I told you to shut up about my dad," Hope retorted icily. "Dumbledore told me all about how he saved your life. You wouldn't even be here if it wasn't for my dad."

She didn't think it was possible, but Snape's had turned a few shades paler.

"And did the headmaster tell you the circumstances in which your father saved my life?" he whispered. "Or did he consider the details too unpleasant for precious Potter's delicate ears?"

"Who're you calling delicate?" Hope bit out, her eyes flashing again when he said something that made her stop cold.

"Turn out your pockets, Potter!"

"What?" Hope said, keeping her voice painfully befuddled with a good bit of difficulty.

"Turn out your pockets," Snape demanded, "or we go straight to the headmaster! Pull them out, Potter!"

So, reluctantly, Hope withdrew the Marauder's Map from her pocket and made an attempt to shrug it off as something that didn't really matter. "It's just a spare bit of parchment."

It was quite clear that Snape didn't believe her for a second. Goody for him.

"Reveal your secret!" he said, tapping his wand to the parchment, but, to Hope's relief, it didn't do anything. "Professor Severus Snape, master of this school, commands you to yield the information you conceal!"

And then words appeared.

"Read it," Snape commanded and Hope resisted sighing, before biting her lip to hide the grin at the words.

"Mr. Moony presents his compliments to Professor Snape, and begs him to keep his abnormally large nose out of other people's business," Hope recited. "Mr. Prongs agrees with Mr. Moony and would like to add that Professor Snape is an ugly git." Mr. Prongs was a genius. "Mr. Padfoot would like to register his astonishment that an idiot like that ever became a professor." Now she had to use an extraordinary amount of force to not grin or laugh. "Mr. Wormtail bids Professor Snape good day, and advises him to wash his hair, the slimeball."

"Why you—"

"Professor?" Hope's face brightened at the sound of Professor Lupin's wane voice as Snape twisted around to shower the man with the light from his wand.

"Well, well, Lupin" he said in his oily voice, "out for a little walk in the moonlight, are we?"

"Now, that's just rude," Hope muttered under her breath, hardly heard as Professor Lupin looked around his colleague for his eyes to meet hers.
"Are you alright, Hope?"

"Oh, just peachy," Hope said, her sarcasm as plain as day (or maybe it would be better to say as plain as night)

"I have just now confiscated a rather curious artefact from Miss Potter," Snape said, ignoring her as he snatched the map from her hand despite her small protest. "Take a look, Lupin. It's supposed to be your area of expertise. Clearly it's full of dark magic."

Hope scoffed lightly at that. A likely story.

"Oh, I seriously doubt that, Severus," Professor Lupin disagreed, making a show of examining it closely, or at least it looked like he was making a show of it. "It looks as though it's a parchment designed to insult anyone who tries to read it. I suspect it's a Zonko's product. Nevertheless," he said, snatching it away before Snape could grab at it (really?), "I shall investigate any hidden qualities it may possess. It is, after all, as you say, my area of expertise. Hope, would you come with me, please? Professor, good night."

Hope followed him at a bit of a sullen pace, liking Professor Lupin well enough, but not particularly liking that it was in the possession of a teacher. She maintained her silence until Professor Lupin opened the door to his classroom.

"I don't want to hear explanations," he said, his voice low and controlled. "I happen to know that this map was confiscated by Mr. Filch many years ago. Yes, I know it's a map. I don't want to know how it fell into your possession. I am, however, astounded that you didn't hand it in. Particularly after what happened the last time a student left information about the castle lying around. And I can't let you have it back, Hope."

Hope sulked slightly at that, but at the same time, she had been expecting it.

"Don't expect me to cover up for you again, Hope," he added. "I cannot make you take Sirius Black seriously. But I would have thought that what you have heard when the dementors draw near you would have had more of an effect on you. Your parents gave their lives to keep you alive, Hope. A poor way to repay them - gambling their sacrifice for a bag of magic tricks."

When he met her eyes, he was astounded at the amount of anger that the held. The normally curious green eyes were the colour of blood; hot and filled with rage. And then he felt the slap, his cheek stinging with the pain of it.

"How dare you," she seethed, "I haven't even left the castle and you all act like I've been running out in the Forest!" Her voice echoed in the empty classroom. "What would you know about me anyways?" she sneered. "No one even cared who I was until I was eleven! And you all think you can run my life!" She could feel the stone cracking under her feet from the outburst that she must have leaked magic into. "What would you know of sacrifice?"

And then she stormed out of the classroom, leaving Professor Lupin speechless.
"Where's Hope?"

Ron looked up from the surprisingly intense game of chess that he was having with Hermione (in an attempt to bridge the tension that was still between them), confusion colouring his eyes as he looked around for that tell-tale head of dark red hair.

"I haven't seen her today," he admitted, his eyebrows furrowing slightly, "but she's usually out and about by now if she isn't waiting for us."

"I think someone upset her," Hermione offered, "she woke me up last night when she came back with all the noise she was making."

George stiffened slightly at the thought of someone upsetting his girlfriend. "Who upset her?" he asked.

Hermione shrugged. "No idea, but you should try the fourth floor where there's no pictures hanging, just say "Give me a place to stand, and I will move the earth," and it'll open."

George stared at her. "I never knew there was a secret room there," he said, half impressed that Hope had discovered a secret room that he and Fred hadn't, and half irritated that he hadn't been told.

"It's her grandmother's room," Hermione said in a no-nonsense voice, "she was the only one who knew about it."

George frowned slightly at that before following her advice and leaving the common room in search of Hope. He knew his way around Hogwarts like he knew the back of his hand, so getting to the fourth floor quickly was no problem, but finding the spot in particular that Hermione was talking about was much more difficult. He ascended the stairs, coming up to a room that he had never entered into before, but he didn't have any time to marvel.

"Get the fuck out before I kill you," a voice pierced through the silence.

"That's nice," George said to the disembodied voice, "threatening your boyfriend."

Hope lifted her body to peer over the couch and groaned before flopping back down. "Did your brother tell you where to find me?"

"Hermione, actually," he said, looping around the couch before kneeling at her head in concern. "Hey, what's wrong?"

"Nothing's wrong," Hope muttered as George squeezed her fingers lightly.

"Then why've you been crying?" He asked lightly.

"I cry when I'm angry, it's not such a big deal," she muttered.

"It is for you," George said, brushing her hair away from her face and wiped the tears from her
cheeks, "come on, love, tell me what's wrong."

She smiled, but barely. "I like it when you call me 'love'."

He spared her a smirk, kissing her cheek. "Then I'll do it more...after you tell me what's bothering you."

Hope groaned. "I've got class in less than an hour."

"Well, I'm not letting you leave until you tell me," George said stubbornly, lowering his voice and repeating his words, "come on, tell me what's wrong."

He waited patiently, far more patiently than many would have been, and after a long silence, she spoke.

"I was looking at the map last night," Hope began, "and I saw the name Peter Pettigrew, he's an old friend of my dad's, but he's been dead since 1981, so I thought that was a little strange."

"And you had to investigate," George said, drawing on the typical pattern of Hope, Ron, and Hermione solving the mysterious occurrences that were happening yearly now since Hope had come to Hogwarts (and George doubted that was a coincidence).

"Well, I got caught by Snape," she admitted with a wince, "He said a few rude things about my dad before Lupin stepped in."

Her voice had darkened noticeably as she said the professor's name. George didn't miss how she didn't add the 'professor' in front of his name; that wasn't a good sign.

"Did you have a fight with Lupin?" he asked slowly, realizing how ridiculous it sounded.

Hope frowned, gritting her teeth slightly. "He said that I-I was wasting my parents' sacrifice by wandering around after dark." Even saying it, she could still hear his voice in her head and it still stung her like the slap that she had given Lupin.

George couldn't help but feel the righteous flare of anger that Lupin had actually said those words to her.

"He's just a git," he bit out taking her hands and pulling her up until she was standing before him, looking much smaller than usual. "And he's wrong."

George lifted her chin with a finger. "Hey, it'll be alright. Just ignore him."

Hope gave him a smile that didn't quite reach her eyes as she wrapped her arms loosely around his waist. "Does anything faze you?"

"Many things," he said, his voice barely above a whisper as he leaned down to capture her lips in a short and chaste kiss that had her tingling afterwards. And it was for her that he found himself storming into Lupin's office twenty minutes before class was to begin, startling the werewolf.

"George—"

"How could you say that to her?" George demanded, his blue eyes alight with fire. "How could you say something that cruel to her?"

Lupin opened his mouth to speak, despite the slight ache of his jaw as he did so, but George didn't give him the chance to speak.
"You don't even know her," he said coldly, "you don't know what she's gone through, but you think you can just insult her like that? What is wrong with you?"

For the very first time in his life, Remus Lupin felt speechless, recalling how James had once defended Lily to several arrogant Slytherins back in the day, even before they had started dating.

"Stay away from her," he added, "she doesn't need any more of your crap."

And he watched him go, regretting his actions immensely but not knowing what he could do about it.

The earth exploded upwards like a geyser, forcing Hope to jump back to avoid the spray of dirt as she, Ron, and Hermione trudged up from Hagrid's hut, all three in surly moods, but it didn't really help that Hope was already in a bad enough mood. Hence why the earth was erupting; no one said she didn't have an uncontrollable temper.

"Careful!" Hermione squeaked, avoiding the dirt as well, and ignoring the glare that was tossed her way.

Hope had barely opened her mouth to retort when a voice distracted the three of them.

"Look at him blubber!"

It was Malfoy (of course it was Malfoy!) who was standing with his two goons behind one of the massive stones just beyond the stone courtyard, watching the whole thing (which had included Hagrid blowing his nose on a large handkerchief as he told them how south the appeal had gone) with avid eyes.

"Have you ever seen anything quite as pathetic?" Malfoy crowed, his shifty eyes meeting Hope's as he smirked. "And he's supposed to be our teacher!"

One would have expected Hope to be the first one to make a move towards the Slytherin trio, but, surprisingly, it was Hermione who was the fastest instead. She had stormed up to the blonde-haired third year and had raised her hand, smacking it as hard as she possibly could across his face, probably hard enough to bruise. Malfoy was forced to stagger backwards in response to the force behind it, much to everyone's surprise.

It seemed as though Hermione didn't realize all of the eyes were on her now, or if she did, it seemed that she didn't really care as she swung her foot back, aiming it forward until the toe of her shoe connected with his shin, making him yelp in pain.

Ron and Hope privately (and not so privately) agreed he deserved it very much.

"Don't you dare call Hagrid pathetic, you foul-you evil—" Hermione seemed to be beyond rage at this point, forcing Hope and Ron to grab her by the arms, both still very stunned by how she had reacted.

"Hermione!"

"Get off me!" Hermione very nearly snarled to the pair, looking very much like Hope in that instant as she yanked herself free from their somewhat loose grips to withdraw her wand and point it at Malfoy.

In all of the anger that Hermione must have been feeling, this was never a stance that she would have
thought that Hermione would ever take. It was much more typical of something that Hope would do.

"Hermione, no!" Ron moaned. "He's not worth it."

And reluctantly, Hermione lowered her wand from Malfoy's terrified face, but just as he thought he was in the clear, she drew her fist back and shot it straight at the cheek she had probably already bruised with her slap.

Malfoy gave a groan of pain before he and his two friends made themselves scarce, leaving Hope and her two friends staring at each other as Hermione breathed in and out heavily.

"Hope, you'd better beat him in the Quidditch final!" Hermione said, her voice higher than usual and edged with demand. "You just better had, because I can't stand it if Slytherin wins!"

"Er…alright," Hope said, glancing down to Hermione's fist which was still clenched tightly. "How's your hand?"

Hermione shook it out with a wince. "It hurts a little, but it was worth it."

"Never thought I'd hear the day where Hermione Granger thought violence was the way to go," Hope said arching an eyebrow, making Hermione flush a little, the colour darkening at Ron's next words.

"It was bloody brilliant, that's what it was," he said, grinning and serious at the same time.

"I'll say," Hope said with a grin.

"We're due in Charms," Ron added, still grinning so brightly that he could have outshone the sun. "We'd better go."

Hope wasn't too surprised that Hermione didn't make it to class on time. Really, the girl had been doing too much with all her classes and with doing research with her and Ron to help Hagrid (to no avail, it seemed), it only made sense that she would accidentally sleep through one of their core classes.

"You go on ahead," Hope said after class had finished to Ron who waited a bit impatiently for her, "there's just something that I want to ask Professor Flitwick about. It won't take long."

"You sure?" Ron asked, shouldering his bag as he eyed her with uncertainty. Leaving Hope on her own usually didn't bode well for anyone, least of all her. "I can stay back if you want me to."

"I'll be fine." Hope's lips quirked upwards into a smile. "You don't need to babysit me, Ron, I'm a big girl."

Ron rolled his eyes at her (really, he couldn't help it, Hope had that effect on people), but gave her a mock salute that earned him an eye roll before leaving her.

"Er, Professor?" Hope said as she moved towards the front desk where the small charms teacher sat behind, grading the parchments before him. "I was wondering if I could ask you about something."

"I did not realize you were having any difficulty with the Cheering Charm," Professor Flitwick said with a polite smile.

"Oh, I'm not," Hope assured him with an embarrassed smile, "it's about something else."

"Another ancient magic you want to research?" Professor Flitwick asked, his eyes twinkling.
"Well, kind of," Hope amended, "I was looking a bit into Duelling Magic—"

Professor Flitwick chuckled. "Ah, that sounds like you."

Hope tugged on the end of her loose ponytail, but she didn't deny it. "Anyways," she said, clearing her throat, "I was wondering about the Stunning Spell. A lot of the magic in the book Ron, Hermione and I were looking in was pretty advanced, and I think the Stunning Spell would be the one closest to our level."

"Worried about your safety?" Professor Flitwick asked with a small amount of concern.

"It's not tha—"

"I hope I'm not interrupting?"

Hope fell abruptly silent at the sound of Remus Lupin's voice, her eyes carefully avoiding his as she shoved the remainder of her things into her bag. "Sorry, Professor, another time."

"Miss Potter?" Professor Flitwick said, startled by her sudden change in mood.

"I've really got to go," she muttered, sliding past the werewolf that blocked her way by jostling him with her shoulder.

"You've insulted her," Professor Flitwick said in a wise voice once she was out earshot. "Coming from you...she will not forgive easily. She can hold a grudge."

Remus didn't bother denying it. She was too much like James, but he still couldn't find the proper words to say what he meant.

The moon was just a bright crescent in the sky with tiny silver pinpricks glistening about in the darkened sky as Hope walked through the silent and empty halls. The next patrol wasn't due to start for another ten minutes, so she could linger longer than she usually dared. The wind from outside wafted through giving her a small chill, but not enough to make her leave.

Everything was so dark except for—

Hope frowned, narrowing her eyes, catching sight of a familiar ginger brush-like tail. "Crookshanks?" she murmured, more to herself than to anyone else. What was he doing out? How did he even make it out of the Tower?

Curiosity piqued, Hope opted to follow him, surprised to find him with that massive black dog that she had seen that night in Surrey.

"Crookshanks?" she said out loud, loud enough for both animals to look up at her. She imagined that Crookshanks face would have been one of annoyance (but then he always looked like he was annoyed with that squashed face of his), but the Grim-like dog had wide grey eyes that betrayed surprise.

"Hi..." Hope cooed softly, extending a hand to the Grim in an effort to coax him forward. For a moment, the dog didn't move, and then it leaned its head forward to sniff her fingers as if doing so, he would be able to ascertain if she was a friend or foe. Hope scratched behind his ears, making him shake them slightly and making her smile.

However, their time was cut short at the sound of footsteps and in the time it took Hope to glance
back to see who was coming and then look back to the dog, he had vanished, and Crookshanks was on the verge of doing so as well.

"Oh, no you don't!" Hope hissed, snagging the cat by his sides at the last second, to which the cat gave a grumpy "Meow!" "You're not running away from me again!"

"Hope?"

"Shite," Hope muttered under her breath at the all too familiar voice of Remus Lupin. She stood up with the cat still squirming in her arms to stare at him.

Remus thought she looked a bit cold and remote, untouchable, with eyes with accused, glowing in the moonlight. He could now see why George never wanted to be on the wrong side of her anger… those eyes…they were just filled with so much intensity of emotions, or none at all.

"Lupin," she said coolly, "I was only looking for Crookshanks, so I think I'll go now—"

"Wait, please," Remus said quickly, almost reaching out to stop her before stalling his hand at the last possible second. He doubted it would be received well. "I'm here to apologize." Well, he was only half telling the truth. He had been examining the Marauder's Map when he had seen her dot right beside a dot that had been labelled "Sirius Black," naturally, Remus had become worried, and that had led him to stand here.

"Are you? Not to claim I'm wasting my parents sacrifice again?" she bit out. It was highly inappropriate for her to be this condescending and insulting to a teacher, but she was still rather stung about the whole situation.

Remus winced. "No, and I am sorry about that. I just didn't want you to go looking for Black—"

"Why is it that everyone thinks I'm going to do that?" Hope demanded. "Do I look deranged to you?"

Remus didn't think it would be a good idea to point out with how the moonlight glinted off her eyes and how her hair was hanging in a wild manner around her face that she looked just a little insane; she probably wouldn't take kindly to it.

"It was wrong, and it was heartless of me," Remus apologized.

She glared at him. "Didn't George warn you to stay away from me?" She was both touched and irritated by her boyfriend's attitude.

"He…might have mentioned it," Remus said carefully, "but I wanted, I needed to apologize."

Hope didn't say anything for a long moment, simply taking that time to look into his eyes, as if the answer she was searching for could be found in the jade depths.

"How's the cheek?" she asked finally, surprising him.

"Oh, well," Remus fumbled a little, startled by the lack of contempt in her voice and relishing in that she wasn't ready to kill him anymore, or, at least that was what it seemed like, "the jaw was a bit worse."

"Sorry about that," Hope said jostling the cat in her arms as she did so, disgruntling the beast. "But this doesn't mean that I'm not still pissed at you," she added, tossing him a light glare, "because I am, you said so many things to me, and I don't think Mum or Dad would have approved of half of them."
She was trying her best to stay in control of herself and everything she was saying wasn't coming out at all the way she wanted them to…*wonderful.*

Crookshanks meowed loudly and Hope sighed. "I should…get going," she said uncomfortably, "Crookshanks and I have to catch up on some sleep…so…" And then, without a look back, she turned on her heel and began to walk away from him.

Remus wasn't sure if that whole short conversation had led to a positive or negative result (he was going to have to say neutral at this time), and he had half the mind to chase her down a second time, but she was her mother's daughter. If Lily didn't want to speak to you, then she wouldn't, and the same could clearly be said about her daughter as well.

Still, Remus couldn't help but wonder if it couldn't have gone better, but he still had himself to thank for her anger in the first place (as well as his bruised jaw), so he should have expected it.

But you know how the saying goes, mending bridges, and all that…

"*Expecto Patronum!*" Hope held her wand aloft in front of her, entirely expecting the silver mist to erupt from the tip, but this time, not even that happened.

She swore. Loudly.

"Come on!" She rapped it on a nearby spare desk as if that could fix the problem, but a short minute later she learned that it did not.

Now she felt irrationally angry (a feeling that was now becoming as familiar as the back of her hand). She had been able to at least accomplish that before, but now, nothing!

"Er, Hope?"

"What?" Hope snapped, before recoiling slightly when she noticed Ron and Hermione standing in the doorway looking very concerned. "So, how long have you been standing there?" she asked, her voice a little uneasy.

"Long enough," Hermione said with a firm stare. "What are you doing?"

"Trying to get This. Bloody. Spell. To. Work!" Hope said, punctuating each word with a sharp rap on wood before Hermione grabbed her arm, a little aghast at her behaviour.

"Hope, you'll break it!" she admonished.

"What spell are you trying to do anyways?" Ron asked, coming to stand beside Hermione. "Was it one of those Duelling spells that we looked up?"

"No," Hope said in disappointment, "but that is next on the list." She had avoided duelling magic since that very short chat she'd had with Professor Flitwick, which Professor Lupin had interrupted. "I'm back to square one with the Patronus Charm," she said glumly.

"You could always go and talk to Lupin," Hermione suggested, trying to keep her tone light. Hope wasn't as angry as before concerning the Defence Against the Dark Arts professor, but that didn't mean that she wasn't still angry. Hermione and Ron had heard the story from George and they thought that anger was very justified, considering what he had said to her. But that didn't stop Hermione from being scandalized that Hope had actually hit a professor, in the face no less!
"I don't need Professor Lupin's help," she said stoutly, "I can manage without him, thank you very much. Now, shush! I need some time to think."

She closed her eyes and thought hard. Her anger was making it difficult to produce a Patronus merely because Patronuses were made from good memories and all she was doing was settling on the bad.

"I need a good memory," she murmured to herself, searching her memories for one that stood out…

There was the time when she first saw the Mirror of Erised.

"Mum?" she whispered faintly, her eyes glazing with tears as her mother's lips widened into a smile that recognized as her own. It was only then that she shifted her eyes to the man who was her father. His hair was messy and black and his eyes were a bright hazel, framed by circular glasses.

And then there was the time where Ron and Hermione had refused to leave her side in going down to find the Philosopher's Stone.

"You can always go back if you want," she said quietly, "I'll understand if you don't want to—"

"Don't be thick," Ron said.

"Of course, we're coming," Hermione added.

Hope glanced at them, her smile touching her eyes. "You two really are the best mates a girl could have."

And there was all of that flirting that she and George had done before he had kissed her before school had even begun, and she remembered how she had felt as though she was floating afterwards.

Keeping the feelings in mind of her parents, her two best friends, and George, she opened her eyes, and said the words.

"Expecto Patronum!"

This time, a creature did burst from her wand, making it vibrate a little in her arm, and stunning her at its appearance. She had honestly been expecting a doe or a stag, which had been her mother and father's Patronuses. But this was not what she had been expecting.

"Bloody hell!" Ron breathed in awe, watching it glide across the room. "Is it supposed to look like that?"

It faded as Hope lost her concentration, though the bright smile remained.

"I have to show Professor Lupin!" She said, completely forgetting about her anger in her moment of success. And she raced out of the room, closely followed by the two until she flung open the door to the Defence Against the Dark Arts room.

"Hope!" Professor Lupin said in stunned surprise from behind his desk where he sat grading their most recent essays. "What—?"

"I did it!" Hope positively crowed as Hermione and Ron gasped for breath behind her. "The Patronus Charm! I got it to work!"

"Ah, you did?" Professor Lupin said, his voice just a little impressed as he circled around the desk as she repeated the incantation and the beautiful creature burst from the tip again.
It was a panther made of that silvery-blue that made it almost look a little like a ghost, only more real. Very much more real. It was not a creature that Professor Lupin would have anticipated that she would have, but at the same time, how could it be anything else?

Panthers were known as symbols of females and were associated with being cunning and understanding death.

Basically, Hope, in a word.

He could find nothing better to say in her time of triumph other than. "That was quite something."

Her beaming smile was all the reward he needed.
Sirius had been lucky that he had been able to make a hasty getaway before Remus had shown up or he was sure that he would have been a goner. Still, he thought he was completely insane by hiding in the highest level of the Quidditch stands where no one was sitting, watching as the red and green players flew overhead, but he couldn't help himself. This was his goddaughter for heaven's sake!

She wasn't too hard to pinpoint, despite there being three red heads on the Gryffindor team, mostly because she was the fastest and with the longest hair. She didn't seem to be having much to do, silently searching for the Snitch while her teammates flitted around her, fighting for the Quaffle or fending off attacks by Bludgers.

"And it's Gryffindor in possession," the familiar voice of the commentator that Sirius had seen with Hope at one point, "Alicia Spinner of Gryffindor with the Quaffle, heading straight for the Slytherin goal posts, looking good, Alicia! Argh, no –Quaffle intercepted by Warrington, Warrington of Slytherin tearing UP the field– WHAM! –nice Bludger work there by George Weasley, Warrington drops the Quaffle, it's caught by –Johnson, Gryffindor back in possession, come on, Angelina– nice swerve around Montague –duck, Angelina, that's a Bludger!– SHE SCORES! TEN-ZERO TO GRYFFINDOR!"

The crowd roared and the Gryffindor section seemed to almost be vibrating with excitement.

"OUCH!"

Sirius winced in his dog form as the girl –Angelina– who had just scored for Gryffindor was almost flung from her broom as a Slytherin player smashed into her. He had to wince again as one of the red-headed twins, probably not George, flew close to the Slytherin, whacking his bat against the back of his head, making it slam into the handle of the broom.

And that was why Gryffindor-Slytherin matches were by far the dirtiest of them all. And if that wasn't obvious—

Hope had to duck suddenly to avoid a Bludger aimed at her head.

"Ooh, nice try! But Potter's faster than that! Better luck next time!"

Sirius was pretty sure that she had flipped the bird at the boy that had aimed the Bludger at her, speeding towards him before pulling up sharply as he shielded himself, making laughter ripple through the crowd.

Other than that, Hope stayed out of relative trouble, so Sirius could train his eyes on the Chasers and the Beaters as they flew past.

"Gryffindor in possession, no, Slytherin in possession -no! Gryffindor back in possession and its Katie Bell, Katie Bell for Gryffindor with the Quaffle, she's streaking up the field– THAT WAS DELIBERATE!"

It seemed that one of the Slytherin Chasers had thought that a Gryffindor Chaser's head was the Quaffle, but Sirius doubted that was the truth.

The piercing whistle blown by Madam Hooch signalled the foul as well as the commentator's voice yelled angrily into his microphone.
"THIRTY-ZERO! TAKE THAT, YOU DIRTY, CHEATING—"

"Jordan, if you can't commentate in an unbiased way—"

"I'm telling it like it is, Professor!"

Sirius gave a dog-like chuckle at how unfazed 'Jordan' was in the face of the fearsome Minerva McGonagall. Obviously the younger generations had a bit more balls than his generation (The Marauders were the only ones who had ever dared to be that light-hearted to their Head of House).

Then the Quaffle came out of nowhere, smacking against Hope's chest. She reeled backwards on her broom, resting a hand to the bruised area, looking a bit winded as her boyfriend flew close, hovering protectively with his bat ready to strike.

Hope's ribs felt bruised under her clothes, which was far better than broken in her opinion. But a few bruised ribs weren't going to stop her from catching that Snitch and winning the Cup. And believe it, it was going to happe—

*The Snitch!*

She saw it fluttering close to the Gryffindor goal hoops, but a glance towards Oliver who gave her a barely perceptible shake of the head told her that they needed a few more points before then, so Hope surged forward towards the Slytherin goal hoops. Luckily for her, Malfoy was as gullible on the field as he was off of it, and he followed.

Unfortunately, so did two Bludgers, but that only served to amuse her as she pulled her elbows inward to avoid being hit by the balls, but then they weren't the problem, because the Beaters, Derrick and Bole were closing in, raising their clubs.

Great, they were going to 'mistake' her head for a Bludger. Arseholes.

A smirk lit her lips as she shifted the broom upwards at the last possible second, leading to the Beaters' bats to make contact with each other, no doubt leading to some broken bones, or at least bruised egos.

"Ha haaa!" She could hear Lee's happy yells over the enthusiastic cheers from three-fourths of the stadium. "Too bad, boys! You'll need to get up earlier than that to beat a Firebolt! And it's Gryffindor in possession again, as Johnson takes the Quaffle—Flint alongside her—poke him in the eye, Angelina!—it was a joke, Professor, it was a joke —oh no— Flint in possession, Flint flying toward the Gryffindor goal posts, come on now, Wood, save—!"

But Hope didn't have any time to see if Oliver had actually managed to save the Quaffle, because another Bludger was shot at her and she had to roll to avoid it.

Five minutes later she was nursing a bruised arm as well as the already bruised ribs she had, but she had expected no less coming from Slytherin.

Thunder boomed overhead as the previously clear day which had been growing steadily darker by the hour, until the rain began to pour from the grey-blue clouds. The weather wasn't as horrible as the Gryffindor-Hufflepuff match, in fact, Hope liked the rain against her face, plastering her hair to her skin.

"Ready to lose, Potter?" Malfoy yelled up to her, earning him a filthy look.

"You first!" She called over the wind.
An echoing ding told her that her team had gained ten more points, putting them at seventy points to ten in favour of Gryffindor, and then luck shined upon her as she caught sight of the golden ball, sparkling from the rain not twenty feet above her.

Grinning in spite of herself, she urged her broom forward, reaching her bruised arm out to catch it when she lost a good bit of speed, much to her surprise. Enraged, she looked back and kicked Malfoy squarely in the face for having the audacity to actually grab her broom.

"You no good sorry piece of shite!" she screamed at him as the Snitch had disappeared once more, making him grin.

"Penalty! Penalty to Gryffindor! I've never seen such tactics!" Hope had to agree with Madam Hooch there as Malfoy slid back onto his broom. She had half the mind to yank her broom out from under him so that he fell a good fifty feet, but she wasn't that mean.

"YOU CHEATING SCUM!" Lee Jordan was pretty angry about the whole matter, if his yells didn't make it obvious. "YOU FILTHY, CHEATING B—"

But the Gryffindor team was fumbling now, their anger causing their movements to become erratic and disorganized. Hope twisted her head around, searching quickly for the Snitch before spotting it fifty feet upwards and to the left. And she shot upward, intent on the ball with Malfoy hot on her trail, but nowhere near as fast as she was.

The Snitch was just out of reach, but she was close, so close to victory that she could practically taste it. She threw herself forward on her broom, somehow managing to snag it by the tips of her fingers before her fingers closed around it completely.

Hope laughed aloud as the rain lightened to a soft drizzle as she thrust her arm up into the air as she aimed her broom downwards to the loudly screaming crowd.

And the only thing better than winning the Cup was George pulling her off her broom and kissing her so hard that she swore she saw stars.

When it was Hope's turn to enter into the obstacle course that was their Defence Against the Dark Arts exam, she wasn't worried at all. Not to sound arrogant or anything, but Hope knew her stuff.

But she couldn't resist canting an eyebrow when she saw how extensive it was from the outside. "You're serious?"

Professor Lupin spared her a smile. "Yes, it is. Now go have fun."

She glared at him before she set one foot on the ground which conveniently sank right into the padding pool. She moved slowly across the pool, just waiting for- Something slimy grabbed her ankle before she had time to even make a sound, pulling her down into the deeper parts of the pool.

Grindylows were in no way nice to look at. They were a sickly green with teeth a similar colour and horns on their heads. Very befitting of a water demon. They also had a nasty habit of strangling its prey. Hope coughed, inhaling seawater as she tugged at the fingers around her throat, clenching her hands around theirs until their brittle bones snapped from the pressure (which was usually the only way to break the grip) Released, she propelled herself upwards with her legs until she could claw her way onto land.

"Lupin!" she yelled over the blood rushing in her head. "I'm going to kill you!" Of course, the situation wasn't life-threatening, considering that Professor Lupin had had to tame the beast a bit
before the exam, but still, she didn't like being soaked to the bone.

Hope journeyed forward once more until she found herself before a series of potholes that no doubt hid a Red Cap. She had barely taken a step when an animalistic cry pierced the air and something small flew at her, but Hope had her wand ready this time.

"Expulso!"

The Red Cap shrieked as it was flung through the air to land not far away, stunned in one of his potholes, leaving Hope to meander on to the next task which was crossing a marsh, and the lantern hanging ominously from a creature made of smoke told her it was the Hinkypunk trying to give her the wrong directions.

She smirked as if to say "Nice try," and went in the completely opposite direction from it until she came across a trunk that unlatched once she came close enough so that a Dementor could fly out of it and hover in the air.

She forced down the fear that was becoming almost a reflex every time that she saw that cloaked creature, uttering the spell with an image in mind. "Riddikulus!"

The black cloak melted into a white sort of straight jacket that caused the Dementor to struggle before falling back into the trunk that shut behind it. It wasn't too terribly funny, but it still brought a smile to Hope's face as she exited.

"Well done!" Professor Lupin beamed. "Full marks!"

"But the Grindylow," Hope started to say.

"You broke his grip on you which is one of the ways to succeed against it," Professor Lupin explained. "Seamus had to do the same."

So she grinned before bidding him farewell, traipsing off in search of a certain red-haired lad who had just finished one of his OWL's. It was because of him that not much later she found herself dragged through the corridors.

"It's raining," Hope said despite the quirk of her lips in amusement, "and I've got my Divination exam in twenty minutes!"

"Come on, Hope!" George complained, dragging her forward with a roguish grin. "I've been taking OWLs all day!"

"Aw!" Hope said in a pitying voice, jutting out her lip in an adorable pout that made George gulp nervously. "Poor Georgie's been working so hard!"

"I have!" George said in a falsely affronted voice. "I deserve something for my hard work!" And then he pulled her into the pouring rain, laughing as she jumped as the initial cold. She shoved him, the water pelting her, already soaking through her robes.

"George!"

He laughed, swallowing her protests as he leaned down to claim her lips. Almost as a reflex, Hope reached up to stand on her tip-toes, tangling her thin fingers into his ginger locks, her mouth melding to his as her heart palpitations accelerated in her chest.

"Well? What do you see?"
Hope blinked, the memory of the kiss fading to the back of her mind as she remembered that she was actually taking her Divination exam. Oops… but in her defence, it was very easy to lose one's focus in a room like Trelawney's (another great reason that she had told Professor McGonagall that she was dropping the class after term ended, something the transfiguration teacher heartily approved of)

"A dark shape," she said, floundering for some kind of image, even though there was none, but Trelawney latched onto it like a lifeline.

"What does it resemble?" she whispered with urgency. "Think, now..."

Hope didn't even want to be here, if her mutinous thoughts hadn't made that clear. Ron and Hermione were waiting for her so that they could head down to talk to Hagrid together. If only this exam would finish sooner!

"Hippogriff," she said, saying the first thing that came to mind, her thoughts focused on Buckbeak's trial.

Apparently this was a good thing to say, because an excited madness had entered her eyes. "Indeed! My girl, you may well be seeing the outcome of poor Hagrid's trouble with the Ministry of Magic! Look closer...Does the hippogriff appear to...have its head?"

Hope felt her stomach turn, feeling a combination of horror and disgust.

"Yes," she said with surety.

"Are you sure?" Trelawney asked insistently. "Are you quite sure, dear? You don't see it writhing on the ground, perhaps, and a shadowy figure raising an axe behind it?"

"No," Hope said, inching backwards slightly, abhorred by her description.

"No blood? No weeping Hagrid?"

"No!" Hope snapped out. "There's no blood, it's fine!" What was wrong with this woman?

That seemed to disappoint her more than anything else, and Hope wasn't quite sure if it was because of her lack of vision or because of the hippogriff itself. "Well, dear, I think we'll leave it there...A little disappointing...but I'm sure you did your best."

All too eager to leave, Hope hastily gathered up her things and had almost reached the door when an echoingly loud, raspy voice spoke from the back.

"IT WILL HAPPEN TONIGHT."

Hope twisted around so violently that she was sure something popped, but her focus was, for once, entirely on Trelawney, because it was she who had spoken. She was now stiff in her chair, her eyes blank, and her mouth loose.

"What?" She said, completely flummoxed even as she took a step backwards as the woman's eyes rolled in their sockets.

"THE DARK LORD LIES ALONE AND FRIENDLESS, ABANDONED BY HIS FOLLOWERS. HIS SERVANT HAS BEEN CHAINED THESE TWELVE YEARS. TONIGHT, BEFORE MIDNIGHT... THE SERVANT WILL BREAK FREE AND SET OUT TO REJOIN HIS MASTER. THE DARK LORD WILL RISE AGAIN WITH HIS SERVANTS AID, GREATER AND MORE TERRIBLE THAN EVER HE WAS. TONIGHT...BEFORE
And then, as swiftly as whatever-it-had-been started, it was over, and Trelawney's head drooped forward before raising again, her eyes only slightly confused.

"I'm so sorry, dear girl," she said dreamily, "the heat of the day, you know...I drifted off for a moment..."

Hope just stared at her, unable to comprehend what had just happened.

"Is there anything wrong, my dear?" she asked her.

Hope opened her mouth, but all she found herself saying was: "Nothing at all, excuse me."

And she beat a hasty retreat out of the room as fast as one could possibly leave down the ladder, her heart hammering in her chest. She didn't even want to begin to interpret what had been said by the woman who supposedly had no memory of it.

Should she tell Ron and Hermione? She wasn't sure. All of them had enough to deal with concerning Hagrid's predicament without adding whatever that was to the equation.

"Are you sure there's nothing we can do?" Hermione implored as she and Hope cleaned up the mess that was the broken milk jug that Hagrid had just dropped. "Oh, Hagrid there must be!"

"Yeah," Ron added, nodding his head fervently, "what about Dumbledore? Couldn't he—?"

"He's tried," said Hagrid, his voice a picture of misery. "He's got no power ter overrule the Committee. He told 'em Buckbeak's all right, but they're scared... Yeh know what Lucius Malfoy's like... threatened 'em, I expect... an' the executioner, Macnair, he's an old pal o' Malfoy's... but it'll be quick an' clean... an' I'll be beside him..."

Hermione glanced to Hope who had been surprisingly silent since they had made the trek down to Hagrid's cabin under the invisibility cloak, and she wasn't at all surprised to see the venomous glare that encompassed her whole face. She wouldn't have been too surprised if her friend sprouted fangs.

"Dumbledore's gonna come down while it --while it happens," Hagrid continued, his voice cracking with emotion. "Wrote me this mornin'. Said he wants ter --ter be with me. Great man, Dumbledore..."

Hermione's eyes were slowly filling with tears, and her hand shook where it was holding a new milk jug. "We'll stay with you too, Hagrid," she tried to insist, but Hope could see it in her eyes; she didn't want to watch.

"Yeh're ter go back up ter the castle," he disagreed. "I told yeh, I don' wan' yeh watchin'. An' yeh shouldn' be down here anyway...If Fudge an' Dumbledore catch yeh out without permission, Hope, yeh'll be in big trouble."

Hope scowled further, but she was distracted by a shriek from Hermione that had made them all jump. "Ron, I don't believe it --it's Scabbers!"

Ron stared at her, not quite understanding what it was that she was saying. "What are you talking about?"

He didn't have long to wonder as Hermione overturned the jug to pour out a very thin, very malnourished rat.
"Scabbers!" Ron said in shock. "Scabbers, what are you doing here?" Not that the rat could have answered either way. He looked rather terrified if the way he tried to lunge out of Ron's fingers was any indication.

"It's okay, Scabbers!" Ron tried to console the rat. "No cats! There's nothing here to hurt you!"

"They're comin'..." Hagrid had gone stark white, his face intent on the figures outside of the window fast approaching the cabin. "Yeh gotta go. They mustn' find yeh here...Go now...I'll let yeh out the back way."

The three followed him, doing as he said, but keeping silent because they could all see how barely held together he was.

"Go on," he said. "Get goin'."

It was only then that Hope finally spoke, her eyes wide and a muddy brown, "Hagrid, we can't—"

"We'll tell them what really happened—" Hermione insisted.

"They can't kill him—" Ron added.

But Hagrid was beyond that, only bidding them to leave, which they did, moving quickly up the sloping lawn until they could look down at the cabin, but Ron and Hermione couldn't stomach looking. However, Hope felt a bit of morbid curiosity and kept her eyes fastened on the scene, but...it was odd...everything seemed a bit blurred from the height. It was hard to tell where exactly Buckbeak was. But that curiosity didn't stop her from wincing her eyes shut when the axe struck downwards.

"They did it!" Hermione said in unabashed horror, her voice choked and her brown eyes wide with horror. "I d-don't believe it– they did it! How–could–they? How *could* they?"

Ron tugged gently on Hermione's arm with the hand that he wasn't using to keep a tight grip on Scabbers with. "Come on, we need to go."

"And do what?" Hope muttered beside him. "How can we leave Hagrid?"

"We have to," Ron insisted before clamping his hand down on his pet. "Scabbers, keep still, what's the matter with you, you stupid rat? Stay still– OUCH! He bit me!"

"Ron, be quiet!" Hermione moaned. "Fudge'll be out here in a minute—"

"He won't-stay-put-What's the *matter* with him?"

"Maybe that," Hope said nodding towards the tell-tale thick ginger tail.

"Crookshanks!" Hermione complained. "No, go away, Crookshanks! Go away!"

"Scabbers –NO!"

The cat was already racing across the lawn before Scabbers had finally freed himself from Ron's grip, and Ron was forced to throw the cloak off himself in order to chase after him. Hope wasn't sure why he'd bothered; Scabbers was nearly impossible to see in this level of darkness and with his small size.

"Ron!" Hope yelled after him, before sharing a look with Hermione as they opted to run after him, the cloak tossed over her shoulder like a towel.
"Get away from him-get away-Scabbers, come here—" Ron lurched to catch the rat by the tip of his tail before saying in triumph. "Gotcha! Get off, you stinking cat—"

Hermione stared in dismay. "Hope, do you realize what tree this is?"

Hope did. She would recognize that tree any day, after all, she'd almost been mauled by it during second year. "I do. Ron, get away from there! Run!"

But when Ron turned to look at her, his eyes fastened on something behind her. "Hope, Hermione! Look out, it's the Grim!"

Hope whipped around in time for the great black dog's front paws to collide with her chest, sending her sprawling as Hermione gave a sharp cry of fear, not able to move fast enough as the beast's teeth latched onto Ron's leg, dragging him quickly to the trunk.

"Ron—!"

"Look out!"

Hermione was thrown to the side by Hope bodily slamming against her in an effort to avoid a thick and thorn-covered branch of the Whomping Willow. Hope barely heard the loud crack of broken bone over the blood rushing in her skull.

"Hope," Hermione gasped as they pulled themselves upright, avoiding another branch, "Hope, we've got to go for help!"

"And leave Ron behind?" Hope demanded angrily, a cut on her left temple bleeding profusely. "No way in hell!"

"But—" Hermione started weakly.

"But—" Hermione started weakly.

"Are you coming or not?" she asked. "Because I'm not leaving Ron to fend for himself."

The fear that clouded her eyes cleared somewhat to be replaced with determination, but then it faltered slightly. "But how do we get in?" she bemoaned.

It seemed that they didn't have long to wait as Crookshanks raced past them, neatly passing by the branches that held the two girls at bay to rest his paws against a knot on the trunk. And, as if a switch had been flipped, the branches seemed to have been turned to stone.

"Well," Hope coughed, "that always works. Let's go before it remembers how to move."

Hermione allowed herself to be pulled forward, still very stunned at what had happened to Ron and what her cat was capable of. Hope slid down into the tunnel that she had fallen into the year previously ("Why didn't I look further?" she scolded herself) before holding out a hand to Hermione. "Come on, we should hurry."

This time, Hermione didn't disagree. "Where do you think this tunnel comes out?" she asked, out of breath.

"Dunno," Hope murmured, squeezing her fingers, "Fred and George say that no one's ever gotten into it, so…" She didn't bother finishing her train of thought as they followed the trail of paw prints and drag marks, and she didn't want to admit that Professor Lupin had told her about the true purpose of the passage and the willow itself. There were only two rooms and the one with an open door had been boarded up with broken furniture thrown in every direction as if they had been ripped apart in a
rage. Or a werewolf transformation.

"Hope," Hermione whispered, making Hope jump a little "I think we're in the Shrieking Shack."

Hope didn't bother to deny it, this time both of them jumping as something moved above them. Hope held a finger to her lips and Hermione gave a resolute nod and they crept slowly and silently up the stairs.

And, abandoning all pretences, Hope thrust the door open to see— "Ron!"

Ron was clutching at his mangled leg with one hand and the frantically trying to escape Scabbers with the other from where he was sitting on the worn sofa.

"Ron –are you okay?" Hermione asked, relief colouring her face.

"Where's the dog?" Hope insisted.

"Not a dog," Ron gasped out despite his pain. "Hope, it's a trap –he's the dog, he's an Animagus!"

And Hope turned on her heel to meet the grey eyes of Sirius Black.
It was his eyes that caught her the most, because they held a soft light as she gazed into them, but also looked pained, like he was used to the eyes belonging to someone else. Was this really Sirius Black? He seemed...fractured. It was as if his time in Azkaban had broken something inside of him, replacing his liveliness with a gaunt mask.

"I thought you'd come help your friend," he said, his eyes only gaining a very subtle light as he spoke with a raspy voice of disuse. "Your father would have done the same for me. Brave of you, not to run for a teacher. I'm grateful...it will make everything much easier..."

Hope's breath caught in her throat at the mention of her father. "I know he would have," she said, eager for his response on the inside while remaining impassive on the outside (not a feat to be taken lightly, mind you). "You were friends, weren't you? The best of friends?"

She ignored how Hermione tried to pull her back from where she was standing protectively in front of her and Ron. She watched as something flickered inside of the depths of storm clouds that were his eyes, a memory, perhaps?

"If you want to kill Hope, you'll have to kill us too!" Ron's sudden words startled her from her intent focus on the wasted man before her and she had to hold tightly to Ron's elbow to keep him from keeling over. Judging by the pallor of his face, though, the movement had caused him a great deal of pain.

"Ron," she tried to say, but this time it was Black that interrupted her.

"Lie down," he said in a voice that was much softer and quieter than before. "You will damage that leg even more."

"Did you hear me?" Ron demanded, somehow keeping his voice level and strong despite his pain, swaying as he kept a tight grip on Hope. "You'll have to kill all three of us!"

Hope watched as the light of memory faded from his eyes to be replaced with a madness and a grin to match. "There'll be only one murder here tonight."

"Crack!"

Hope was breathing hard and her fist was aching from the punch she had just delivered to the man's face (she bitterly hoped that it broke something).

"What the ruddy hell is wrong with you?!!" she demanded as she stalked over to the crumpled man, hoisting him up and onto his knees by the front of his ragged robes. "I've spent months wondering if what everyone has been saying is the truth!"

His eyes widened.

"Because I find it incredibly hard to believe that someone so Anti-Dark just went over to Voldemort's side!" Hope snapped, shaking him violently. "Especially since you only knocked me out on Halloween and didn't kill me, oh, yeah," she added, her eyes gleaming manically as his eyes widened further, "I know that was you!"

"I don't deny it," he said finally, "and I regret it."
"You gave me a concussion," she said spitefully.

Black dipped his head just barely enough, like Hope was a mother scolding her child. "I regret it," he repeated, "but you don't understand—the whole story—"

"Then explain it," Hope growled, her eyes turning so dark that they were almost black as coal. She was so intensely focused on Black that she almost missed the sound of quiet footsteps beneath them, but she certainly didn't miss Hermione's scream.

"WE'RE UP HERE! WE'RE UP HERE—SIRIUS BLACK—QUICK!"

And within seconds the door was thrown open to reveal Professor Lupin standing framed in the doorway. His face was pale, almost snow white, his scars much more prominent, and his wand was held firmly in his hand.

"Hope, Hope let him go."

She glared at him from where she was holding the former prisoner of Azkaban. "The hell I will!" she growled. "I want some fucking answers!"

Hermione whimpered from where she was holding up Ron in Hope's stead.

"Hope—"

"Don't make me slap you again," she snapped, but under his stare, she relented, dropping the man to the floor and moving back to her friends' sides without taking her eyes off Black, though she couldn't help but be confused when Professor Lupin asked the man a decidedly strange question: "Where is he, Sirius?"

And when he pointed towards Ron, her confusion only increased.

"What're they going on about?" Ron whispered to her, but Hermione only hushed him.

"Do you still have your wand?" Hope hissed out of the corner of her mouth, not taking her eyes off the pair before them, and Ron gave a miniscule nod. "Keep it close."

"Why hasn't he shown himself before now?" Lupin was saying. "Unless—unless he was the one...unless you switched...without telling me?"

It seemed almost out of relief when Black nodded, and within seconds he had thrown his arms around Black and hugged him tightly like two recently reacquainted siblings who had had a falling out years previously.

Hope stared at them, not quite sure how to respond to anything. What the—?

Hermione reacted the harsh opposite on any way that Hope possibly could have by screaming: "DON'T BELIEVE IT!"

"You—you—" she gasped as Professor Lupin released Black, glancing minutely to Hope who gave him a flat stare of "You walked into this yourself. You fix it."

"Hermione—" He tried to say.

"—You and him!" she cried, clutching tightly to her land as if it was her lifeline.

"Hermione, calm down—" But Hermione wasn't going to calm down, she was on a roll.
"I didn't tell anyone! I've been covering up for you—"

"Hermione, listen to me, please," Professor Lupin had to shout over her to be heard. "I can explain—"

"We trusted you!" she yelled, "and all this time, you've been his friend!"

"You're wrong," Professor Lupin was quick to disagree. "I haven't always been Sirius's friend, but I am now— Let me explain...

But Hermione was beyond reason, and Hope was actually a little impressed. "NO! Hope, don't trust him, he's been helping Black get into the castle, he wants you dead too – he's a werewolf!"

Hope's eyes were flickering between Professor Lupin and Black and she knew that Black was far more surprised by her lack of reaction to this new knowledge.

"Not at all up to your usual standard, Hermione," he said, an odd calm keeping his voice level, but with obvious strain. "Only one out of three, I'm afraid. I have not been helping Sirius get into the castle and I certainly don't want Hope dead. But I won't deny that I am a werewolf."

"And there's nothing wrong with that," Hope snapped suddenly, glaring at the werewolf. "It doesn't change you." Her glare turned on the two frightened students. "I've known since the first lesson what he was, and that didn't stop me from being in his office with him for our lessons."

She was more like her father than Sirius had originally thought.

"You what?" Hermione demanded.

"I understand what it means to be hated for something you can't control," Hope said, "after all, Parseltongue is the mark of a Dark wizard, isn't it?"

"But that's not the same thing!" Ron disagreed. "Werewolves—"

"You think Remus Lupin goes around biting kids and infecting them in his spare time?" Hope demanded, making the werewolf flinch slightly. "And I for one want to listen to what he has to say."

She waved her hand at him and she could see the gratitude in his eyes as he replaced his wand into his belt.

"If he hasn't been helping Black," Hermione spoke up in a voice that trembled, "then how did he know that he was here?"

"The map, the one I took from Hope," Professor Lupin explained quickly, taking note of the sour expression that had morphed onto Hope's face (she still wanted it back). "The Marauder's Map. I was in my office examining it—"

"How did you figure out how to work it?" Hope asked with an inquisitive eye, smirking when he gave a small sigh.

"Of course I know how to work it," he said with impatience, "I helped write it. I'm Moony—that was my friends' nickname for me at school. The important thing is, I was watching it carefully this evening, because I had an idea that you, Ron, and Hermione might try and sneak out of the castle to visit Hagrid before his hippogriff was executed. And I was right, wasn't I?"

"S'not that hard to figure out," Hope said, rolling her eyes as she crossed her arms.
"You might have been wearing your father's old cloak, Hope—"

"And how would wearing the cloak affect what shows up on the map?" Hope said, arching an eyebrow.

"Even if you're wearing an Invisibility Cloak, you still show up on the Marauder's Map," Professor Lupin said, "I watched you cross the grounds and enter Hagrid's hut. Twenty minutes later, you left Hagrid, and set off back toward the castle. But you were now accompanied by somebody else."

"You're mental," Ron decided from the sofa. "It was just us!"

"I couldn't believe my eyes," their professor continued. "I thought the map must be malfunctioning. How could he be with you?"

"No one was there!" Hermione disagreed.

"And then I saw another dot, moving fast toward you, labelled Sirius Black... I saw him collide with you; I watched as he pulled two of you into the Whomping Willow—"

"One of us!" Ron snapped angrily, his leg very much a sore point.

"No, Ron. Two of you." His eyes met Ron's. "Do you think I could have a look at the rat?"

"What?" Ron said, a little stunned by the sudden change of subject. "What're you talking about? What's Scabbers got to do with it?"

"Everything," said Professor Lupin in an almost breathless manner. "Could I see him, please?"

Hope could see his hesitation, even as he withdrew the frantically thrashing rat from his packet.

"What's Scabbers got to do with anything?" Ron demanded.

"That's not a rat." Hope couldn't resist jumping a little at Black's worn voice. She had almost forgotten he was there.

"What d'you mean --of course he's a rat—" Ron said in a voice that said that he clearly thought that they were barmy.

"No, he's not. He's a wizard," Professor Lupin disagreed, not taking his eyes off of the struggling rat.

"An Animagus," Black continued, "by the name of Peter Pettigrew."

Ron and Hermione were both staring at the pair like they were completely mad.

"You're both mental," Ron decided, "Peter Pettigrew's dead, remember? He's been dead for twelve years, he killed him!" He jerked his head towards the escaped convict.

"I meant to," Black said in a low voice, "but little Peter got the better of me... not this time, though!"

Black bodily threw himself onto Ron in an effort to grab the rat, causing the boy to roar in agony and Hope's face to turn white in anger as Professor Lupin pulled him away. She stepped between them and her friend whose face was still screwed up in pain, her fist poised for another strike.

"You can't do it just like that--they need to understand --we've got to explain—"

But apparently, Black was at his wit's end (if he had any before, Hope wasn't quite sure). "We can explain afterwards!" He barked out, clawing for the rat but being too far away to actually reach him.
as Professor Lupin yanking him away from Ron.

"They've-got-a-right-to-know-everything!" Professor Lupin gasped with the effort it took to restrain his old friend. An impressive feat, no doubt, because werewolves were renowned as one of the strongest magical species in the world. "Ron's kept him as a pet! There are parts of it even I don't understand, and Hope –you owe Hope the truth, Sirius!"

His wild grey eyes met hers, and she was sure that her eyes had turned an identical shade to match… she was still having trouble with accidentally changing her appearance. And after a very long silence, a silence that seemed to stretch on, Black conceded. "Fine," he grunted. "Tell them whatever you like. But make it quick, Remus. I want to commit the murder I was imprisoned for..."

"You're both blooming insane," Ron decided, his voice trembling a little as he looked from werewolf to dog Animagus before looking up at Hope and Hermione. But the contemplative expression on Hermione's face was making him worry. "Hermione?"

"But, er, Professor," Hermione said, more than a hint of nervousness creeping into her voice, "how can Scabbers be Peter Pettigrew? I mean, wouldn't people know if Peter Pettigrew had been an Animagus? We did Animagi in class with Professor McGonagall. And I looked them up when I did my homework –the Ministry of Magic keeps tabs on witches and wizards who can become animals; there's a register showing what animal they become, and their markings and things... and I went and looked Professor McGonagall up on the register, and there have been only seven Animagi this century, and Pettigrew's name wasn't on the list."

"Seriously?" Ron and Hope said at the same time completely dumbstruck.

"You put that much effort into—?" Hope said, her jaw unhinging, making a small flush appear on Hermione's cheeks at the veiled compliment.

"That is very true," Professor Lupin agreed, ignoring Hope and Ron's interjection. "But the Ministry never knew that here used to be three unregistered Animagi running around Hogwarts."

A sudden creak below them forced them all to remain silent for a few moments, as if awaiting the thing that had made the sound, but nothing came as Professor Lupin checked the door and the landing for anything. "No one there," he murmured, almost to himself.

"This place is haunted!" Ron said, his eyes darting around nervously as if waiting for a ghost to materialize through the walls and attack him.

"Actually, it isn't," Professor Lupin disagreed, eyeing the doorway in curiosity. "The Shrieking Shack was never haunted... The screams and howls the villagers used to hear were made by me." He sighed, running a hand through his grey-streaked hair. "That's where all of this starts –with my becoming a werewolf, None of this could have happened if I hadn't been bitter... and if I hadn't been so foolhardy..."

He glanced to Hope who had her lips pursed into a thin line, still standing protectively before Ron as if to fend off another attack. "Hope has heard some of the story," he admitted, "I told some of it to her when she found out about me."

Black was not the only surprised by that, and Hope couldn't help but shift uncomfortably under their gazes.

Professor Lupin's story was a tragic one, from any viewpoint. Hope couldn't imagine having to undergo the pain of a transformation from such a young age.
"...But apart from my transformations, I was happier than I had ever been in my life. For the first time ever, I had friends, three great friends. Sirius Black...Peter Pettigrew...and, of course, your father, Hope–James Potter. Now, my three friends could hardly fail to notice that I disappeared once a month. I made up all sorts of stories. I told them my mother was ill, and that I had to go home to see her...I was terrified they would desert me the moment they found out what I was. But of course, they worked out the truth..."

Professor Lupin's pale eyes lingered on Hope and Hermione, and Hope knew it was because they were the only students who had figured out the truth about him, or at least, that was the way it seemed.

"And they didn't desert me at all," Professor Lupin said with a sad smile of remembrance. "Instead, they did something for me that would make my transformations not only bearable, but the best times of my life. They became Animagi."

Hope choked on air at that new information. "You have got to be kidding me!" she said, completely struck. "What—?"

A rusty chuckle erupted and Hope had a hard time pinpointing where on earth it was coming from before she realized that it was coming from Black.

"But how would that help you?" Hermione asked, enthralled in his tale, "wouldn't you just attack them?"

"A werewolf is only a danger to humans," Professor Lupin explained, "while animals can come and go around them as they please. So in their Animagi forms, they would be safe from me."

"Were they?" Ron couldn't help but ask.

A wry smile wormed its way onto his lips. "There were a few close calls," he admitted, "but we laughed about them later, we were young and thoughtless and I often felt guilty about not telling Dumbledore of how my friends were helping me…" His face darkened slightly into an expression that Hope would never have recognized on his face. "I have been battling with myself all year whether or not to tell Dumbledore that Sirius was an Animagus, but I was too cowardly to admit that I had betrayed his trust during my time at school…I convinced myself that Sirius was getting into the school using dark arts he learned from Voldemort, that being an Animagus had nothing to do with it... so, in a way, Snape's been right about me all along."

Hope couldn't stifle an almost condescending snort. "Oh, that's a load of dung," she snapped, "None of that was your fault, that was just Snape being a git!"

"He has a reason to be."

Three pairs of curious eyes met his at that statement.

"What do you mean?" Hermione asked.

"Severus was quite interested in where I went once a month," Professor Lupin admitted, "our group of friends were stark enemies with him and his friends. Sirius thought it would be…clever to tell him how to get into the Shrieking Shack, and if not for your father, Hope, I do not doubt I would have killed him, or at least bit him."

Hope was glaring now. "That doesn't explain why he's got it out for you!"

"He thought you were in on it," Hermione assumed.
"That's right."

Hope almost gave herself whiplash as she whirled around to see Snape removing the invisibility cloak from him.

Naturally the first thing out of her mouth was a hateful hiss, "Hands off!" But it was ignored because Snape's focus was primarily on Black, his eyes glittering with something that Hope considered just a sliver of madness.

"Ah, vengeance is sweet," he murmured softly. "How I hoped I'd be the one to catch you."

Professor Lupin tried to interject there, but that only drew Snape's attention to him instead, and his eyes narrowed as his lips drew back into a sneer. "Ah, Lupin... I told Dumbledore you were helping your old friend into the castle. And here's the proof."

"Are you completely mental?" Ron had beaten Hope to the punch line, gaping at the potions professor as if he'd never seen anything like him in his life, but apparently the professor had deemed the three third years too insignificant to matter at this point, his attention focused completely on the two men.

"He does realize he sounds a little mad, doesn't he?" Ron asked the girls.

"He probably doesn't care," Hermione said a bit sagely.

"Two more for Azkaban tonight," said Snape, his eyes a bit wild. "I shall be interested to see how Dumbledore takes this... He was quite convinced you were harmless, you know, Lupin... a tame werewolf—"

Hope had to commend Professor Lupin for his lack of reaction to the jibe, as he instead said: "You fool. Is a schoolboy grudge worth putting an innocent man back inside Azkaban?"

Before either party had time to blink, Hope had thrown herself between him and Snape as his wand had snapped up and made a sharp bang that had thrown her back against the wall and into unconsciousness, snake-like cords binding her tightly like a trussed-up criminal.

Hermione screamed and Ron gave a startled yell, but that was nothing compared to Black, who had given a roar of rage as his goddaughter slid unmoving to the floor.

"Expelliarmus!" Ron and Hermione looked at each other, both startled that the other had enchanted their professor, though Ron couldn't help but be impressed by Hermione's nerve as the force of their charm sent Snape flying and crashing into the landing where he didn't move.

Ron gripped his wand tightly as he pointed it at the two men that had been making towards Hope. "Don't move," he warned, "I've got a great Bat Bogey Hex I can use."

Hermione used this opportunity to approach her fallen friend, struggling to break the ropes that bound her before finally managing to rip them away. "Hope? Hope, can you hear me?"

For a moment, there was nothing, and then Hope's eyes fluttered lightly before opening to reveal a pair of hazel eyes instead of her typical green. "My head," she groaned, "that complete and utter—"

She then used a word that impressed Black, by the look of his smirk, and scandalized Hermione, by the look of horror on her face.

"Maybe you've gotten another concussion?" Hermione said in a voice tinged with worry, her fingers probing at her friend's scalp, but Hope quickly slapped her hands away.
"Ow!" She complained. "I'm fine, it's just a bruise. Help me up, would you?"

"Oh, sure." Hermione gripped her hands and pulled her up so fast that Hope got a little dizzy as she stared from Professor Lupin to Black.

"The rat," she said, drawing attention back to the task at hand, "there's a spell that's painless that can reveal whether or not one is an Animagi, isn't there?" Professor McGonagall hadn't gone into much detail about it, only enough for her classes to know that it did exist.

"There is," Professor Lupin agreed, "I'd be more than happy to prove it to you."

She met his eyes head-on and after a very long moment, she nodded. "Ron, give him Scabbers."

"What? Why?" Ron demanded, curling his hands protectively around his pet.

"Ron, if he's just a rat, it won't hurt him," Hermione explained, "just give it to him."

Ron looked between Hope and Hermione, before holding out the thrashing rodent to his professor. "But, he's been in my family for ages," he disagreed, "how could he be—?"

"Twelve years," Professor Lupin said with a pained grimace, "but he's not looking too good is he?"

"It's 'cause of that batty cat," Ron said, tossing a glare to Crookshanks who was licking his paws and watching the proceedings with interest.

"No it's not." Hermione's eyes had drifted a bit out of focus as she said those words.

"What are you talking about?"

"Remember when the three of us were in Diagon Alley?" she implored the other two. "You were going to get some rat tonic for Scabbers because you thought he'd gotten something while you were in Egypt."

The idea that Scabbers had been terrified since Black had escaped from Azkaban was hard to believe of a common garden rat. However, if he was more than that, if he was a wizard in hiding, that would make much more sense.

And the whole deal with Crookshanks being out to get him now made much more sense, seeing as he was part-Kneazle, which was a species well known for their intelligence. It didn't surprise Hope too badly that he had been helping Black all year try to get to the rat.

So, it really hadn't been Neville's fault that his list of passwords had been found by Black. Poor Neville, getting the brunt of the blame for something that wasn't his fault.

"Ready, Sirius?"

Hermione's grip on Hope's arm tightened, though Hope couldn't be sure of why, but she couldn't take much more of the stalling.

"On the count of three. One–two–THREE!"

The bright flash of light that erupted from their combined wands blinded Hope and she had to raise an arm up over her eyes to block the light. Spots filled her vision and she had to blink several times, and then they widened to an almost comical size. Because there was now a third man in the room.

This man was far less impressive than Black and Professor Lupin were. For one, he was short,
hardly half a head taller than Hope or Hermione, his skin was patchy and grimy, the exact colour of Scabbers' fur, even his eyes were like a rat's, darting toward the exit every few seconds.

This man was the person responsible for her parents' murder?

Disgust curled her lips.

"S-Sirius, R-Remus, my old friends!" he stuttered out, attempting a weak smile at their presence, but it fell flat very quickly, and he twisted around, his eyes latching onto Hope as he came close.

"Hope! L-look at you, you look so much like your moth—"

Hope launched her fist for the second time that night, slammed it into his grubby cheek and sending him reeling backwards clutching at the cheek that was no doubt throbbing now.

"How dare you!" Black snarled, his voice much darker than before. "How dare you speak to Hope! How dare you talk about Lily in front of her!"

"You sold James and Lily to Voldemort, didn't you?" Professor Lupin demanded of the rat Animagus from where he was huddling behind a ruined table.

"I didn't mean to!" he whimpered.

"Like I'd believe that!" Hope snapped, struggling as Hermione kept a firm arm wrapped around her waist and Ron –not wanting to be left out– had looped his arm around her leg at the knee (which was the only part of her that he could restrain without doing more injury to himself).

"The Dark Lord! You have no idea the weapons he possesses! Sirius, what would you have done?"

Hope could practically see the fire burning in his eyes as Pettigrew ducked under the table, scurrying across the floor.

"I would have died!" he raged. "I would have died rather than betray my friends! And you should have realized, Peter, that if Voldemort didn't kill you, we would! Together!"

"Stop!"

Hope had drawn all the attention to her by uttering a single word, but her eyes had found Bla-Sirius'. "Don't kill him, he's not worth it!"

"Hope, this man murdered your mother and father," Professor Lupin told her, slightly out of breath.

"I know what he did," she said, "and he's vile and traitorous, but don't kill him." Her eyes were still focused on Sirius' pale ones. "Please," she added for good measure, and he relented, his face softening a fraction as he lowered his wand.

Her eyes could have cut glass as she glared at Pettigrew who was now thanking her profusely. "I'm sure the Dementors could do with a snack."

The terror in his eyes made her feel a little better as she finally freed herself from her two friends and strode over to stand before Sirius who was still staring silently at her. She shifted her weight from foot to foot, twisting her fingers uncomfortably.

"I, er, I wanted to say, I'm kind of sorry for hitting you in the face," she said, before adding almost as an afterthought, "but you did kind of deserve it."
He cracked a grin. "It was a good punch."

"Thanks," she muttered, her cheeks pinking. "You aren't as bad as your reputation suggests."

A rusted chuckle escaped him. "Aren't we all?" he mused.

"Oh, I dunno," Hope said with a hint of a smile, "mine's pretty accurate."

"Ferula." Hope turned away from Sirius to look on as Professor Lupin's spell bound Ron's broken leg into a makeshift splint. In a short few moments, Ron and Professor Lupin had Pettigrew chained between them and the group made their way slowly but surely out into the summer night air.

Hermione nudged Hope, and nodded towards Sirius where he had come to a stop, just staring up at the castle as if it was the most beautiful thing in the world, which it could be considered. "You go, I'll stay with Ron."

"You're sure?" Hope glanced at the grimace of pain that was marring her friend's face. "I can—"

"Go," Hermione said with a smile, "you're probably the only one that he wants to talk to."

Hope squeezed her shoulder tightly for a moment before heeding her advice and walking to stand beside him.

"Do you miss it?" she asked. "Being in the castle, I mean?"

"Sometimes," he said wistfully, "it was always a wondrous place. But I missed my friends much more." He glanced to the side. "That was a noble thing you did, but he doesn't deserve it."

Hope shrugged. "But he's not worth going back to prison."

Feeling a bit impulsive, Hope reached over to clasp his thin hand with her own, making him look up from his musing in surprise. "You'll be free soon," she said, "you'll be able to walk those halls as a free man."

He grinned and it was bright and infectious, and Hope could see a glimpse of the man he was before. And then it faltered.

"What's wrong?" she asked.

"Well…your parents appointed me your godfather and guardian, if anything happened to them…"

Hope's eyes widened slightly. Could he be saying—?

"I understand, of course," he added quickly, "if you want to stay with your aunt and uncle. But, well, once my name's cleared…if you wanted a-a different home…"

"I could come and live with you?" Hope asked completely stunned.

"Of course, I thought you wouldn't want to," said Sirius, disappointment leaking from his face to his voice. Hope had never seen anyone look so much like a kicked puppy. "I understand, I just thought I'd—"

"Shut up," she advised, "you are completely bloody mental! I've been telling my friends for years as soon as I can get out of there, I'm done!" She was grinning brightly. "Do you have a house? How soon can I move in?"
"You want to? Seriously?" he asked like he couldn't believe that she would want to live in the same house as him.

"Actually, you'd be Sirius…"

He couldn't resist giving a bark of laughter. "Ah, now that's James' wit talking."

"You're welcome," Hope said impishly with a grin to match the shining full moon. Wait—

"Oh, no!" she gasped.

"What is—" And then he saw it to and his eyes grew. "Run. Run, now!"

"But, Ron, Hermione—" Hope battled against him to reach her friends, but Sirius tossed her aside.

"Leave it to me, just RUN!"

Watching Professor Lupin transform was probably the worst thing that Hope had seen by far, mostly because she knew how much pain it was (well, she knew from the way he had described it). It was like watching some type of sped up growth. The fur sprouted all over his body which was growing and lengthening. He had focused his attention on Hope where she had fallen and for a moment, she found herself quite unable to move. A true fear had gripped her entire body when Sirius had leapt over her in his dog form, his teeth fastening onto Lupin's throat as he dragged him away from Ron and Hermione, both who looked quite terrified.

"Bang!"

The sudden noise rang out and echoed, and for a moment Hope had thought she had been shot (though where would the gun have come from?), but then Ron was thrown back a little, slumping limply to the ground.

"Expelliarmus!" Hermione screamed.

But that had given Pettigrew ample amount of time to transform, and Hope and Hermione could only watch wordlessly as her shrunk into the form of a rat once more and disappeared into the grass.

Hope swore loudly, and then she heard the whimpers of pain. "Sirius! Sirius!"

"Hope, no!" But Hope had slipped from Hermione and was already racing through the ferns and down the hill to the lake where the sounds must have been coming from.

"Sirius!" Hope screamed, skidding on the pebbles as she ran to his side. He had phased back to his human form, but he was trembling and his eyes were wild with terror and pain. "Noo…nooo, please."

The heaviness of the air had grown thicker and colder, and the lake was beginning to turn to ice, much like Hope's blood in her veins.

"No," she repeated, "no, no, no!" Her fingers fumbled with the butt of her wand before she finally managed to grasp it and pull it out. "Think of something happy," she muttered feverishly to herself, "something happy."

George's face flashed before her eyes, his smile, his laugh, his kiss.

"Expecto Patronum!" Only a bit of silver mist emitted from the end of her wand. "Expecto Patronum!" But the longer she tried the incantation, the less it seemed to work. "Come on!"
"Expecto…" she gasped, her world going fuzzy as a Dementor gripped her by her neck. "I swear on Merlin's grave," she muttered with difficulty, "I'm going to give you the worst case of indigestion ever!"

She could hardly see the Dementor as if lowered its hood, her mother's screams vibrating in her ears before something bright rammed into it, forcing Hope from its grip and sending her sprawling.

The last image that she saw was something she wouldn't have guessed; a sleek panther sending off waves of blue-white light that forced the Dementors back, and after that, Hope knew no more.

Everything was of muddle of blurred voices that Hope couldn't make heads or tails of; the only thing that she was really aware of was the dull ache of her body. What on earth had she fallen on?

She opened her eyes after a long silence at the sound of a sharp bang, forcing her to sit up in her hospital bed and reach for her wand.

"Easy, Hope."

Her eyes, wild for a moment, met Madam Pomfrey's, and it was then that she realized that the woman was holding a hammer which she was using on a large slab of chocolate to break into smaller pieces.

"How's Ron? Is he alright?" Hermione asked, surprising Hope who hadn't even realized was awake.

"He'll live," Madam Pomfrey said darkly, and she would have said more if not for Hope throwing off her covers and standing up. "Hope, what are you—"

"Where's Sirius?"

Madam Pomfrey started slightly at the familiarity Hope used towards the man who supposedly wanted her dead. "He's locked away upstairs, in the highest towers. The Dementors will be performing—"

Hope grabbed the older woman's shoulders, the wild look returning to her eyes. "But they can't do that! He's innocent!"

"It's true, Madam Pomfrey," Hermione insisted at her side, "Ron and I were both there. It was Peter Pettigrew who betrayed Hope's parents, not Sirius. He's an Animagus, he's been Ron's rat—"

"It's the truth, Poppy!" Hope insisted as the Matron looked them over. They certainly didn't appear to be Confunded as Severus had claimed, but what they were saying was ludicrous!

"I—"

"I would like to speak to Hope and Hermione alone."

Three pairs of eyes looked up to see Albus Dumbledore standing in the frame of the doorway, his face uncharacteristically serious.

"Headmaster!" Madam Pomfrey said, half stunned, half indignant. "They need treatment, they need rest—"

"This cannot wait," said Dumbledore. "I must insist."

It was only when Madam Pomfrey had gone that Hope and Hermione burst into speech.
"Headmaster, you've got to stop them! They've got the wrong man!" Hermione insisted.

"Sirius is innocent!" Hope added. "We saw Pettigrew, he was there!"

"—he escaped when Professor Lupin turned into a werewolf—"

"You've got to believe us!"

"I do," Dumbledore said calmly, much more calmly than the two thirteen year olds in front of him appeared to be. "I do, Miss Potter. But I'm sorry to say the word of two thirteen-year-old witches and one wizard will convince few others."

"So what do we do?" Hope demanded. "We can't just sit here and let the Dementors suck out Sirius' soul!"

A hint of a smile curved Dumbledore's lips, hardly noticeable behind his white beard, but then his eyes weren't on theirs anymore, but on the clock in the corner of the hospital wing.

"Mysterious thing, time," he mused in a vague voice that wouldn't have been out of place with Luna Lovegood. "Powerful. And, when meddled with... dangerous. Sirius Black is in the topmost cell of the Dark Tower." His blue eyes flickered between the pair. "You must tread carefully, you know the laws, you must not be seen. Three turns should do it. If you succeed, more than one innocent life may be spared."

Both girls' eyes widened in the realization of what he was referencing, and then they had to scramble to hook the long golden chain of the Time-turner around both of their necks before disappearing as Hermione turned the tiny hourglass thrice.

Time travel had always been a funny thing to Hope, even after using the Time-turner to get to some of her classes all year, but it was remarkably much stranger when you were actually following your past self around.

The first thing that became apparent to them as they trailed after themselves, was that Buckbeak was that "more than one innocent life may be spared" part of Dumbledore's cryptic words.

"This is going to be impossible!" Hope bemoaned in a harsh whisper from where they were crouching behind a couple of relatively harmless-looking shrubs (but looks could be deceiving, and Hope eyed them suspiciously). "There's no way we're going to have enough time to get him out without our other selves seeing us or the Minister seeing us."

"We can do it," Hermione said resolutely ("What 'we'?" Hope grumbled, "I'm the one who's going to be doing everything.").

"In one minute?" Hope demanded incredulously before falling abruptly silent as Past-Hope, Ron, and Hermione left, and barely a few seconds after they had disappeared under the cloak, the Minister, the Executioner, and the Headmaster had appeared, striding down the lawn and into the cabin. She could only hope that Hagrid or Dumbledore would delay them a bit as she walked cautiously out of the foliage and into the sunlight.

Buckbeak saw her instantly and Hope couldn't help but be relieved that he only ruffled his feathers slightly upon seeing her. Taking a deep breath, and being very wary of the voices coming from the cabin, Hope bent forward, keeping her eyes on his orange ones. This time, Buckbeak bowed seconds after hers, much to her silent relief as she undid the rope that was keeping him to the fence, clicking her tongue the way that Hagrid had during the lesson (had it really been that long ago?). "Come on, Buckbeak, come on..."
Almost, reluctantly, Buckbeak followed, until they were well into the forest and Hope could allow herself to breathe properly.

"Like I said," she added, her heart still beating in her throat, "impossible."

Hermione cracked the first grin in probably hours. "Come on, we should go towards where the Whomping Willow is."

Unsurprising, a good bit of their night was spent in silence, waiting for their other selves to leave the willow, but it was very boring work, Hope had to admit. She probably would have given up entirely, if not for the fact that they were doing all of it for Sirius, to rescue him.

"What're you thinking about?" Hermione asked amidst a yawn.

"The Patronus," Hope admitted honestly. "The one that saved me, it was a panther."

"So?" she asked tiredly.

Hope's eyebrow twitched slightly in annoyance, but she couldn't really fault Hermione for not seeing what she saw. "So, Patronuses are special to each person and the panther is mine, so I'm going to have to assume that I saved myself from the Dementors…no matter how insane that sounds."

But Hermione had grown up since first year, and she was well used to Hope saying insane things that sometimes turned out to be true.

"We have to go," Hope said, standing up suddenly, and hoisting Hermione up, making her rub her eyes several times to get the fog to clear from them, "Professor Lupin's probably going to be running around here, and we need to get to the lake, come on!"

Hermione became more lucid after she tripped over the first root, for which Hope was grateful; it wasn't any fun to lug around a half-asleep girl.

"There!"

The Dementors were already amassed around the lake as well as Sirius and Past-Hope.

"Something happy, something happy," she murmured feverishly to herself. Laughing with Ron and Hermione, kissing George, her parents smiling down on her—

"Expecto Patronum!"

Hermione couldn't help but gasp at the power behind the spell as a fluid panther burst forth, sailing across the air to race through the Dementors forcing them back by the merest touch.

"Hope, hide!"

Snape was coming around the bend and Hope quickly ducked until he disappeared again with her and Sirius in tow. "How long do we have to sit here?" she hissed to Hermione who checked her watch.

"Thirty minutes."

And for Hope, those thirty minutes were a torturous hell, dragging on for ages, until Hermione said, "We should go now."

"Righty, then, come on."
Hope mounted Buckbeak without too much difficulty, but Hermione couldn't help but eye the
hippogriff with a nervousness that was rarely present on her face. "Are you sure—?"

"Trust me," Hope said, rolling her eyes and holding out a hand to her, "it'll be fine."

But that didn't stop Hermione from screaming as they soared upwards and towards the castle, in
search of that highest lone tower. "There!"

"Alohamora!" Hermione cried, and the cell door actually blew open at the force of her spell, leaving
Sirius staring wordlessly at the pair. "What-how?"

"Later," Hope said, jerking a finger towards the back. "Get on." And he did wordlessly as they few
down to the courtyard, allowing Hope and Hermione to dismount, leaving the reins to Sirius.

"You should go, you've probably got a minute or so of a head start," Hope said, fixing the reins in
his grip, and glancing up when his hand tightened briefly over hers.

"How can I thank you?" he rasped.

Hope leaned forward and upward to kiss his wasted cheek with a smirk. "Don't get caught."

Another grin broke across his face. "You really are James' daughter, aren't you?"

"Go!" they both said, and this time, he listened.

"Need a ride?"

Hope blinked, looking up from her book to stare at her former professor. After Sirius' miraculous
escape, Snape had spread the rumour about Professor Lupin's monthly illness and the man had
resigned before anyone could force him to. It was rather unfair in Hope's opinion, seeing as he was
probably the best Defence Against the Dark Arts teacher that they'd had to date. But it wasn't like
Hope could have changed his mind, anyways. Stubborn old wolf that he was. The only going away
present that she could think to give him was Sirius' old motorbike, which she had gotten from Hagrid
who was still in a joyous mood since Buckbeak's disappearance.

"Professor?" Hope said a little startled by the fact that he was wearing a bike helmet (they didn't
seem much like his style).

"Ah, Hope, you needn't call me professor anymore," the werewolf said, sitting down beside her on
the bench before Platform 9 at Kings Cross.

"Should I just call you Remus, then?" Hope asked sarcastically.

"If you like."

Laughter bubbled from her lips at that. "I guess you got the bike working again."

"I did," he agreed. "So, do you fancy a ride?"

She eyed him up and down. "Alright, then," she finally decided, "but if you're a reckless driver, I'm
off."

Remus laughed and held out a hand to her, which she took without any reservations.
Lyall Lupin was very careful with watching his son from afar. Lyall remembered all too well how his son had reacted after his mother, Hope's, death, and he didn't much want a repeat of the whole situation. But that didn't mean that he didn't know where his estranged son was, or that he stopped caring about him, but there was only so much he could do before Remus got suspicious.

But Lyall had to admit, he'd never seen the girl before.

She was young, an early teenager at best, and Lyall was pretty certain that she was remarkably identical to the late James Potter's wife, Lily Evans. She appeared to be as fiery as her mother, from what little he had seen of her, and combining that with a motorbike didn't seem like a very good idea.

"I am not letting you drive that thing cross-country until you've shown me you can actually handle it," Remus was saying seriously to her, his arms crossed and his face moulded into a resolute frown.

"Come on, Remus," she wheedled, a wild grin on her face, "this is me we're talking about!"

"Which is why I'm so worried," he said with an arched eyebrow. "You have your father's personality, Hope; it's not entirely a good thing."

"You take all the fun out of life!" she bemoaned. "Fine! I'll give it a spin around the neighbourhood, but then will you let me drive it to Ottery St. Catchpole?"

"Not until you've driven it at least a little bit on a busy street."

Hope scowled fiercely at him. "Come on! You are such a spoilsport!"

"You'll live longer if I am," Remus said, his lips twitching lightly in amusement. "Now, you know where the accelerator is, and the brake—"

"Remus, I've got this!" Hope said as she clipped her helmet onto her head, fixing her goggles over her eyes, looking very…Lyall wasn't quite sure what word he could use to describe her. But her ridiculousness brought a smile to Remus' face, so he couldn't help but be thankful for that.

"Be careful," he warned, "or you'll be going to the Weasleys tomorrow covered in scrapes."

"Please," Hope scoffed, "I'm always careful, this is me we're talking about!" Her smile faded slightly. "Are you sure you'll be alright on your own?" She had been dropping by his house for a good portion of the summer, thus giving her the excuse to avoid the Dursleys.

Remus spared her a fond smile at her concern as he dropped a hand to her shoulder and squeezed. "Don't worry, I have lived this long without you keeping a close eye on me."

"Well, someone needs to," Hope said derisively, "I mean, look at you!" She gestured to his whole body. "It's like you'll snap like a twig!"

Remus' laughter echoed briefly. "I don't need to be looked after, Hope, but you on the other hand…" He gave her a look that only she could decipher.

A smirk twisted her lips and she waggled her eyebrows suggestively to the older man over the top of her goggles. "I know just the man for the job."

Remus smiled as well. "Still as thick as thieves, I see?"
Hope rolled her eyes, even though he couldn't see them behind the goggles, he knew that was what she was doing. "Of course! Who else am I supposed to flirt and snog?" When she caught his look, she said quickly, "Not that we have snogged...just a thought..."

"I'm not very worried about you and George," Remus said as she fiddled with the special buttons that Sirius had added when he first got it more than a decade previously. "You're good for each other...and I'm glad."

"Have you ever been in love, Remus?" she asked curiously, her cheeks a little red at his words.

"Hm?" Remus said, a little surprised by her line of questioning. "Why?"

The green of her eyes faded into the pale green that was the colour of his eyes. "You seem very lonely," she decided in an almost blunt manner, "I was just wondering if maybe you'd lost someone in the war."

It was times like these that Remus was forcefully reminded that there was more to Hope than her quick wit and sharp tongue (as Remus had been on the receiving end of both, as well as her fist). She could be very kind and compassionate, just like her mother.

"No, there's never been anyone for me," he admitted. "I've never really been close to anyone at school apart from my friends...I worried that if I did meet someone, they would become afraid of me because of my...condition."

Hope wrinkled her nose in disdain. "If they did, then they didn't deserve you in the first place," she said decisively, leaning up to kiss his cheek. "I have to approve of your choice of girlfriend," she added before winking, "or boyfriend if that's how you swing."

Remus' cheeks flooded with a bit of heat as he said in a dry voice, "It's not."

She shrugged. "Just saying...now I'm going to go see if I can manage to not wreck this." The engine revved.

"Hope, be careful—" Remus warned, but she was already speeding through the enclosed wood towards where the street was with a shout of laughter.

"That girl is going to be the death of me," he grumbled under his breath as he reached over to grab his cane and amble after her, pausing at the scent he recognized quite clearly. His eyes narrowed; his father had been here?

Well, he was long gone by now. The scent was already being washed away.

He sighed and followed after his niece in all but blood, quickly forgetting about Lyall Lupin's presence.

Hope's dream was dark that night, and in a bit of a haze, the focus moving in and out. It was about a man that she did not recognize. He was an elderly man with thinning white hair and blue eyes that were probably more used to glaring than anything else. His name was Frank Bryce, she discovered as he wandered around in her dream in a place called Little Hangleton, judging by an old signpost.

She wasn't stupid, though, and she had a feeling when he went inside the Riddle House, he wouldn't be coming out. Wasn't that what happened in all the horror movies to all the people who went into the scary mansions?
It was only when she heard the voice that she recognized that she realized how much in deep shite Frank was in. "There is a little more in the bottle, My Lord, if you are still hungry." She very nearly growled at the sound of Peter Pettigrew's traitorous voice. Running back to old masters, wasn't he?

"Later." Hope's blood ran cold at the second voice, because she remembered that voice from her first year when it had come from the back of Quirrel's head. It was that high pitched and cold voice that came from her darkest nightmares. "Move me closer to the fire, Wormtail."

Frank peered through the crack between the door and the frame, and so did Hope, scowling as she watched Wormtail only too eager to help the man that had killed her parents. Bastard!

"Where is Nagini?" Curiosity filled Hope at that name, a name she did not recognize. A woman?

"I-I don't know, My Lord," he stuttered with uncertainty. "She set out to explore the house, I think…" So, a woman, then?

"You will milk her before we retire, Wormtail. I will need feeding in the night. The journey has tired me greatly." Okay, so it wasn't a woman…

Wormtail glanced around the room nervously and Frank had to lean back to avoid being sighted. "My Lord, may I ask how long we are going to stay here?"

"A week. Voldemort's voice echoed rather loudly to Hope's ears, but it also sounded strained, like he was fighting to make it sound stronger than it was. "Perhaps longer. The place is moderately comfortable, and the plan cannot proceed yet. It would be foolish to act before the Quidditch World Cup is over."

"The- the Quidditch World Cup, My Lord?" Wormtail said, wincing slightly as if awaiting injury. "Forgive me, but –I do not understand– why should we wait until the World Cup is over?"

Voldemort didn't take too kindly to being questioned. Big surprise. "Because, fool, at this very moment wizards are pouring into the country from all over the world, and every meddler from the Ministry of Magic will be on duty, on the watch for signs of unusual activity, checking and double-checking identities. They will be obsessed with security, lest the Muggles notice anything. So we wait."

"Your Lordship is still determined, then?" He was really layering on the flattery wasn't he? Hope couldn't help but gag.

It seemed that Voldemort had a similar thought (imagine having a similar thought with a psycho killer like that), as his voice grew more frigid and darker. "Certainly I am determined, Wormtail."

She could see that something about what Voldemort wanted had set Wormtail ill at ease. "It could be done without Hope Potter, My Lord."

Hope's heart stuttered wildly in her chest.

"Without Hope Potter?" he said in a dangerous murmur. "I see…"

"My Lord, I do not say this out of concern for the girl!" Wormtail felt the need to say so as not to be seen as going soft. "The girl is nothing to me, nothing at all! It is merely that if we were to use another witch or wizard –any witch or wizard– the thing could be done so much more quickly! If you allowed me to leave you for a short while –you know that I can disguise myself most effectively– I could be back here in as little as two days with a suitable person—"
"I could use another witch," Voldemort interrupted smoothly, "that is true…"

"My Lord, it makes sense," Wormtail said, so obviously pleased that he wasn't going to be punished for speaking out. "Laying hands on Hope Potter would be so difficult, she is so well protected—"

"And so you volunteer to go and fetch me a substitute? I wonder…perhaps the task of nursing me has become wearisome for you, Wormtail?" Voldemort was keeping his voice surprisingly mild. It irritated and disgusted Hope how similar they could be, yet so different. "Could this suggestion of abandoning the plan be nothing more than an attempt to desert me?"

Wormtail's eyes bugged out slightly. "My Lord! I-I have no wish to leave you, none at all—"

"Do not lie to me!" he snarled. "I can always tell, Wormtail! You are regretting that you ever returned to me. I revolt you. I see you flinch when you look at me, feel you shudder when you touch me..."

"No!" Wormtail was quick to disagree, his head shaking violently as he shook it from side to side. "My devotion to Your Lordship—"

"Your devotion," she could hear the sneer in Voldemort's voice, "is nothing more than cowardice. You would not be here if you had anywhere else to go. How am I to survive without you, when I need feeding every few hours? Who is to milk Nagini?"

"But you seem so much stronger, My Lord," Wormtail said weakly.

"Liar!" He hissed. "I am no stronger, and a few days alone would be enough to rob me of the little health I have regained under your clumsy care. Silence!"

Wormtail fell abruptly silent, bowing his head submissively.

"I have my reasons for using the girl, as I have already explained to you, and I will use no other. I have waited thirteen years. A few more months will make no difference. As for the protection surrounding the girl, I believe my plan will be effective. All that is needed is a little courage from you, Wormtail –courage you will find, unless you wish to feel the full extent of Lord Voldemort's wrath—"

That was a threat if Hope had ever heard one (though she was usually the one giving them).

"My Lord, I must speak!" Wormtail said hardly above a whimper. "All through our journey I have gone over the plan in my head –My Lord, Bertha Jorkin's disappearance will not go unnoticed for long, and if we proceed, if I murder—"

"If?" Voldemort said, his voice low. "If? If you follow the plan, Wormtail, the Ministry need never know that anyone else has died. You will do it quietly and without fuss; I only wish that I could do it myself, but in my present condition...Come, Wormtail, one more death and our path to Hope Potter is clear. I am not asking you to do it alone. By that time, my faithful servant will have rejoined us—"

Faithful servant? That didn't sound too good to Hope.

"I am a faithful servant," Wormtail said, a bit stung.

"Wormtail," Voldemort said in a snide voice, "I need somebody with brains, somebody whose loyalty has never wavered, and you, unfortunately, fulfill neither requirement."

Hope frowned slightly as Wormtail continued on a vein. What was the importance of Bertha Jorkins?
What information did she have that was so valuable?

Her thoughts were interrupted by Voldemort's high laugh. "We could have modified her memory? But Memory Charms can be broken by a powerful wizard, as I proved when I questioned her. It would be an insult to her memory not to use the information I extracted from her, Wormtail."

She could practically hear his smirk, if such a thing was possible. "One more murder," he said with obvious pleasure, "my faithful servant at Hogwarts…Hope Potter is as good as mine, Wormtail. It is decided. There will be no more argument. But quiet…I think I hear Nagini…"

It became clear to Hope that Nagini wasn't just a female but also a snake once the strangled hissing left the chair from which Voldemort's voice had been originating. So she wasn't surprised when Frank trembled at the sight of the massive twelve foot long green snake. Hope didn't think that she'd ever seen a snake that big, and that was including that Boa Constrictor that she had set loose in the zoo back before her eleventh birthday.

It slithered across the floor, over Frank's feet, and right through Hope as it made its way towards its master. It wound up one of the legs of the armchair until its head hung in the air like a cane, hissing out a response to him.

"Nagini has interesting news, Wormtail," he said after the hissing ceased from the snake.

"In-indeed, My Lord," Wormtail said, his stuttering returning in full.

"Indeed, yes," Voldemort mocked briefly, "According to Nagini, there is an old Muggle standing right outside this room, listening to every word we say."

Hope gave a soundless cry of alarm as the door was thrown open by Wormtail who, once ordered by Voldemort, Frank was grabbed and pulled inside, but all he found himself staring at was the armchair, and Hope could only move as far as he could, so seeing around the armchair to the man (and that was using the term loosely) that was sitting there was a no go.

"You heard everything, Muggle?"

Hope had to admire his guts as he snapped, despite his fear, "What's that you're calling me?"

"I am calling you a Muggle," Voldemort said in disdain. "It means that you are not a wizard."

"I don't know what you mean by wizard," he said, making Hope palm her face. This was when people got just plain stupid and got themselves killed, and it didn't take much for Hope to see the outcome to this. "All I know is I've heard enough to interest the police tonight, I have. You've done murder and you're planning more! And I'll tell you this too, my wife knows I'm up here, and if I don't come back--"

It was a weak lie, even Hope could see that in her hazy vision, and she wasn't surprised that Voldemort saw through it, after all, he saw through that lie she told him back at the end of first year.

"You have no wife. Nobody knows you are here. You told nobody that you were coming. Do not lie to Lord Voldemort, Muggle, for he knows...he always knows..." She wasn't sure if that was arrogance or honesty.

"Is that right?" Frank asked in a gruff voice. "Lord, is it? Well, I don't think much of your manners, My Lord. Turn 'round and face me like a man, why don't you?"

Hope let out a low breath, ooh, he would not like that…
"But I am not a man, Muggle," Voldemort said with scorn as if saying the word Muggle revolted him, which wouldn't surprise Hope if it was true. "I am much, much more than a man. However...why not? I will face you...Wormtail, come turn my chair around."

And the last thing Hope saw was a flash of green before she shot up in her bed. Her heart throbbed painfully in her chest. She swore that she felt the Killing Curse graze her skin, but that was impossible, it had been just a dream.

She breathed in and out deeply, throwing the blankets off her bed, making Hedwig give a soft hoot of concern.

"It's nothing, Hedwig," she said, "I'm fine." She cupped her forehead in her hands, her stomach roiling. It was times like these that she really wished she wasn't imposed into exile with her only communication being a mirror that one connected to Angelina's and through letters, but at least she would be seeing her friends tomorrow.

And George...George...

She slapped her cheeks to clear her head. "Tomorrow," she told herself, "you're going to see him tomorrow. Focus."

"I should tell someone," she told herself after a pregnant pause. "Remus is too busy, Dumbledore is —" She made a face at the mention of the headmaster, he made her uneasy with those eyes of his. "And Sirius—" She paused. That could actually be a good idea...

Hope roared with laughter at the sight of the red-haired, freckled Weasleys covered in a white cloud of dust that made them all look prematurely aged. "Gods! You all look terrible!"

She reached up to ruffle George's hair, sending white particles flying everywhere before throwing her arms around his neck to whisper into his ear, "But you look really handsome."

"Oh, really?" he said, his lips twisting upwards before she leaned up to press her lips firmly to his, unaware of the disgusted look on Petunia's face at the very idea of her niece seeing someone at the age that she was dating someone at the age he was (even though he was only a little more than two years older than her).

"Yep," she said once she pulled back to grin at her friend. "Hey, Ron, enjoying the show?"

"I think I threw up a little in my mouth," Ron said, miming puking, earning him an eye roll.

"Hello, Hope!" Mr. Weasley said with an easy smile after taking the time to greet her aunt, uncle and cousin (which wasn't reciprocated, big surprise). "Got your trunk ready?"

"Yeah," Hope jerked her head upwards, "I've got everything packed upstairs, I can—"

"We'll get it," Fred offered, giving her a saucy wink, his eyes flickering between her and his twin with a knowing grin. George gave her a quick kiss before following his brother up the stairs as Hope exhaled a slow sigh.

"Shut up, Ron," she added.

"I didn't say anything!" Ron insisted.

"Right," she said dryly. "When you turn into a sap, I'm making fun of you."
"I'll keep that in mind."

"Do that," Hope said with smirk, contemplating her friend's appearance. "Nice hair." Ron, like his brothers, had opted to grow his hair out. From what Hope had heard, Mrs. Weasley was quite disapproving of the matter.

"Thanks." Ron's eyes fastened on the single purple streak in her dark red hair. He raised an eyebrow.

"I got bored," Hope said defensively, having to turn her attention to his father as he spoke.

"Ah, this is your cousin, is it, Hope?" he asked.

"Er, yeah," Hope said, a little confused, "that's Dudley." She had to bite her lip from laughing and firmly avoided Ron's eye as he took in how Dudley was gripping his bottom so tightly that Hope was certain tendons were popping with the effort.

"Having a good holiday, Dudley?" he asked, keeping his tone polite and light, but Dudley seemed quite beyond speaking as Fred and George descended the stairs, grinning identically at the sight of her cousin… ooh, she sensed a plot…

One Incendio later and Fred had entered the fireplace (after purposefully dropping some questionable sweets) and disappeared.

"Right then, George," Mr. Weasley directed his other twin son into the fireplace, "you and the trunk."

George winked at Hope as he situated the trunk beside him. "See you soon, love."

Ron was overcome with coughs as his older brother vanished, but the coughs quickly turned to groans of pain once Hope elbowed him sharply in the ribs.

"I'll kill you," she warned.

"You've been saying that for years," Ron said in a despairing sort of voice that made Hope grin as he entered the fire next, vanishing as he cried "the Burrow!"

"All set, then?" Mr. Weasley asked.

"You have no idea," Hope said in such obvious relief. This was the only thing that she had been looking forward to for weeks, Remus could attest to that. In fact, she was certain that she was irritating him by talking so much about going to the Burrow and seeing the Quidditch World Cup.

"Aren't you going to say goodbye?" Mr. Weasley asked in a bit of confusion.

Mr. Weasley probably didn't understand how someone would actually want to leave their family, but Hope was a rare case. She held more connection with those she called friends than those who were named family. She considered Remus Lupin to be more of her uncle than Vernon Dursley ever could have been.

"I'm sure they won't care either way, Mr. Weasley," Hope assured him, trying hard to ignore the stunned expression on Mr. Weasley's face as she stepped into the fireplace, "but goodbye."

She was barely in the flames when a scream echoed through the air, Petunia's scream. She stared, a little struck, as something long and purple spilled out of Dudley's mouth and onto the floor where Dudley kneeled, gagging.
Was that...his tongue?

Hope had to stifle her amusement as Mr. Weasley attempted to help, but was quickly rebuffed by Petunia and Vernon who would refuse to let someone who used magic near their son. Unfortunately, Mr. Weasley could probably help with whatever had been in that brightly coloured wrapper that was now empty on the floor, but the Dursleys were both stubborn and foolish.

So Hope opted to just remain in the fireplace and leave it to Mr. Weasley to take care of as she said very clearly, "the Burrow!" and was whisked away.
Hope almost fell over herself when she exited the fireplace, but thankfully she fell right into a pair of strong arms. She blushed at the closeness of her face to George’s. It was a little annoying that she still blushed like that even after dating him for almost a year.

"Er, hi," she murmured as he pulled her upright, her feet barely brushing the floor.

"Hi," he said with a grin before giving her a sound kiss that was much better than the one she had given him a couple minutes previously. It left her completely breathless as he placed her on her feet again, making her knees buckle a little.

"I hate you," she said with a grin.

"No, you don't," George disagreed moving his arm so that it was wrapped around her waist instead.

"That's debatable," she laughed.

"So, did he eat it?" Fred interrupted, clearly bursting, and having politely waited for them to get a proper kiss before asking the question that was eating at him.

"He did," Hope said, grinning brightly. "Another one of your inventions, I suppose?"

"Ton-Tongue Toffee," Fred said proudly. "George and I spent the whole summer working on them. Any critiques?"

"Maybe make it so that it doesn’t choke the person whose tongue is growing," Hope offered, "but other than that, it was very impressive."

Hope's attention was drawn away as laughter echoed around the kitchen.

"Come on," George said, tugging her forward by the arm he had loosely wrapped around her waist, "I'll introduce you to our older brothers."

"Ah, so this is George's girl," the nearest one said, grinning at her. Hope was surprised by how muscled his arms were as opposed to his brothers whose bodies were leaner than anything else, but the burns told her it could only be one person. Charlie Weasley, the one that worked with dragons in Romania.

Hope couldn't resist laughing at that. "That would be me, yes, I prefer that to my many other titles."

Charlie grinned and shook her hand. "I'm Charlie."

"I'd gathered," she said with a grin. "How's Norbert?"

"We call her Norberta now."

Hope stared. "Wait…Norbert's a girl?"

"Yeah," Charlie said in mirth, "it's pretty easy to tell, but you shouldn't have gotten too close at eleven anyways."

"Good to know," Hope said as the second brother stood up. "That must make you Bill."
"That's me," the second one said with an easy smile. Hope couldn't help but be impressed by the oldest Weasley boy with his ponytail and fang earring. "I've heard the stories."

"Nothing too outrageous, I hope," she said, grinning brightly as she leaned into George's arm. "George and Ron know a lot of stories about me."

"I've only heard a few," Bill said, "but you weren't what I was expecting."

"A nose ring? Tattoos?" Hope offered. "I do have a tattoo, if you want to see it."

"Wait, what?" Ron said, a little stunned. "You have a tattoo?"

"On her shoulder," George said, earning a few stares. "What?"

He was saved from mentioning how and when he had seen her burn-turned-tattoo by the flare of the fire as it disgorged Mr. Weasley, his face hot with anger.

"That wasn't funny Fred!" he yelled to the twin. "What on earth did you give that Muggle boy?"

Fred's grin was just a tad on the devilish side, not much different from Hope's evil grin, she noticed. "I didn't give him anything, I just dropped it...It was his fault he went and ate it, I never told him to."

But his son's acts had thrown Mr. Weasley into a bit of a rage. "You dropped it on purpose! You knew he'd eat it, you knew he was on a diet—"

Clearly lacking any sense, and being much too excited about how well their new sweet had done, George piped up: "How big did his tongue get?"

"It was four feet long before his parents would let me shrink it!" Mr. Weasley said in irritation, only making laughter explode from his children and Hope. "It isn't funny! That sort of behaviour seriously undermines wizard-Muggle relations! I spend half my life campaigning against the mistreatment of Muggles, and my own sons—"

"We didn't give it to him because he's a Muggle!" said Fred, his voice a little insulted.

"No, we gave it to him because he's a great bullying git," said George. "Isn't he, Hope?"

"He is, Mr. Weasley," said Hope honestly, "Believe me; he's done a lot to deserve a prank or two."

Fred high-fived her.

"That's not the point!" Mr. Weasley snapped. "You wait until I tell your mother—"

"Tell me what?"

Hope could swear that the room temperature dropped several degrees at the sudden entrance of Molly Weasley.

"Mrs. Weasley," Hope said in an attempt to distract her from the possibility of murdering her boyfriend and his brother, "it's so good to see you!"

Mrs. Weasley smiled, her cheeks dimpling and her brown eyes twinkling as she embraced the fourteen-year old witch. "Oh hello, Hope, dear, it's so lovely to see you again." But once she had released the girl, her eyes went instantly to her husband. "Tell me what, Arthur?"

Hope could see the uneasiness flicker across Mr. Weasley's face once he was faced with his wife,
whom she doubted he had actually intended on telling about the incident, preferring to use Mrs. Weasley as an empty threat. She winked to the two girls that had come in behind Mrs. Weasley. Hermione merely shook her head, a small smile playing across her face, while Ginny's cheeks pinked.

"Tell me what, Arthur?"

"It's nothing, Molly," Mr. Weasley said, just a trifle bit nervous, and understandably so, "Fred and George just— but I've had words with them—"

"What have they done this time?" Mrs. Weasley demanded. "If it's got anything to do with Weasleys' Wizard Wheezes—"

"Why don't you show Hope where she's sleeping, Ron?" Hermione suggested.

"She knows where she's sleeping," said Ron, a little confused by the subject change, "in Ginny's room, she slept there last—"

"We can all go," said Hermione, giving him a significant look.

"Oh," Ron said, his eyes widening slightly in realization. "Right."

"Yeah, we'll come too," said George, all too eager to get away from his mother, but she snarled, "You stay where you are!"

"Help!" George mouthed to Hope who came to stand in front of him with a smirk as she straightened the collar of his shirt.

"Just be honest, Georgie, and maybe she won't kill you," Hope said, leaning up to press a chaste kiss to his lips, "and if you run, she'll probably kick your arse."

"You are such a loving girlfriend," George called after her, his eyes dropping lower to her bum which so nicely accentuated by her shorts.

"I can feel your eyes, love," she called after him, giving him a saucy wink as she disappeared upstairs with her friends.

Charlie whistled lowly. "How on earth did you snag her?"

George found himself quite unable to formulate a response to that.

When Hope came down the stairs, Mrs. Weasley was grumbling about her boyfriend and his brother and Hope had to stifle her amusement.

"Mrs. Weasley?" She cut through the subdued rant. "Do you need any help?"

Mrs. Weasley, who had been walking out the door balancing a bowl of soup on her arm, only caught her words at the last second. "Oh, thank you, Hope," she called over her shoulder. "Would you be so kind as to cut that loaf of bread for me? And bring it outside once you're finished?"

"Sure, Mrs. Weasley," Hope yelled after her, as she had already gotten a bit far (how did she move that fast?), searching for a knife and pulling the loaf towards her, jumping as a pair of arms wrapped around her waist. "George," she said, her voice starting a little as he dropped his head to rest on her shoulder, "your mother is coming back, and your brothers could walk in any second."
She could feel his smile against her skin and she steadied her hands to slice the bread.

"Everyone knows we're dating—"

"And Fred won't be seeing his girlfriend until term starts," Hope added, turning her head to the side so she could look at him with a quirked eyebrow, "try not to shove it down his throat."

George gave her a pout, but Hope was unrelenting. "Play nice, alright?"

"Fine," he conceded, before swooping down, faster than a cheetah to kiss her again, leaving her quite flustered.

"You have got to stop doing that!" she called after him as he ran out the door before she could do anything else, almost running into his eldest brother as he did so. Bill raised an eyebrow at her, his lips twitching.

Hope rolled her eyes. "Trust me, he's a lot worse."

"Is he?" Bill said in surprise, leaning against the doorway. "I've never known the love-struck George."

"What was he like in Egypt, then?" Hope asked with a laugh.

"Ah…not as much love-struck," Bill said, grinning, "maybe a little distracted…"

Hope bit her lip, but that didn't keep her from smiling. "So," she said, changing the subject, "Ron said that you're a Curse-breaker. You deal with old magic."

"Have you ever considered going into Curse-breaking?" he asked her as she placed the bread into a basket and headed outside.

"Curse-breaking or being an Auror," Hope said, "I'm not quite sure which yet, but we're not supposed have our mind made up until fifth year, right?"

"Fifth year is when you meet with your Head of House to discuss the possible classes to take towards your ideal career," Bill agreed as Hope placed the bread on the long table, "but anyone with an interest in Ancient Magicks…they are well sought after."

"Really?" Hope said, impressed. "I thought the Ancient Magicks were always viewed as Dark, that's why they're pretty much banned around here."

"Gringotts doesn't care what the Ministry of Magic thinks is bad," Bill said with a laugh. "The Ministry is very restrictive on magic they consider to be dangerous in any way."

"W-o-w, talk about being lame," Hope said, grinning over to where George was loping over to them. She blew him a kiss. "I'll keep that in mind."

"Hey, ditching me for Bill already?" George asked with a quirked eyebrow as he came to stand beside her.

"Aw, it's so cute how jealous you get when I hang out with other men," Hope said in an almost mocking voice as she patted his cheek.
Bill hid a smile, but not for long. "You two act like a married couple."

"We do not!" They said, their voices affronted as if marriage was something horrible to consider, but that didn't surprise Bill. Most kids thought the prospect of marriage as a bit oppressive, and clearly Hope was a bit free-spirited. But if she saw the way George looked at her…

"Oi!" Hope called over to the other members of the large Weasley clan plus Hermione. "Dinner time!"

And if that didn't attract them to food like moths to flame, Hope wasn't sure what would, so it was a good thing that it worked.

"Try not to start a food fight in front of me," Hope told George whose grin had widened at the prospect of such an act. "If you do, I'll kill you."

Bill raised an eyebrow, but George grinned. "What's life like without a few death threats from my lovely girlfriend?"

Hope smiled sweetly and kissed his cheek. "I love you."

"I should hope so!"

She smiled in a way she hadn't since the summer had started. It was a smile that told anyone who looked that she was home.

"Who wakes up this early in the morning anyways?" Ginny bemoaned, dressing half-awake and half-asleep, mussing her hair with her movements. "How are you so awake?"

She was talking to both Hermione and Hope who were already dressed and wide awake.

Hope shrugged, looping the cartouche George had given her last year for her birthday around her neck as well as the new purple Celtic tree of life pendant that hung close to her throat (her fourteenth birthday present). "I'm used to waking up early. Oliver is all about early Quidditch practice, and I do a lot of early reading."

Hermione's answer was much less complicated. "I got up early a lot to study."

Ginny shook her head at the pair, completely struck. "You two are completely mental."

"You sound like Ron," Hermione said as Hope tied her hair high up on her head.

"I'm going to go and see if I can scare Ron, Fred and George into wakefulness," Hope said brightly, leaving the two behind staring at each other.

"Am I the only one who thinks she's very mad?" Ginny asked out loud.

"Mad's just how she functions," Hermione sighed before smiling fondly in the direction she had left. "But that's the way we like her."

Hope turned the doorknob to Ron's room that Ron, Fred and George were currently sharing slowly before slamming it open so loudly that the three boys shot up in bed, looking around wildly for the source of the noise. The true terror on their faces told her that they thought she was their mother, making her burst out laughing.

"You lot should see your faces!" she gasped.
Ron groaned, flumping back onto the mattress. "Merlin's Beard, Hope! Don't do that!"

"You need a good shock to wake you up," Hope disagreed, flashing him a wide grin. "You'll thank me later."

"'S'time already?" Fred asked in a sleep-slurred voice.

"Yup," she said from the doorway as George rolled over and tried to muffle her voice with his pillow, but she raised it. "And if you go back to sleep, George, I will make your life very difficult." His groan was his only response, but it made Hope smile. "See you all downstairs."

She descended the winding staircase two steps at a time and grabbed the first roll that she saw, but she had to stop mid-chew to stare at Mr. Weasley, because he looked like he had been dressed by a colour confused person. He was wearing a worn golf sweater with a very shabby pair of jeans that were a little too big for a man of his size. Hope arched an eyebrow, swallowing thickly.

"What exactly are you wearing, Mr. Weasley?" she managed to ask.

Mr. Weasley rubbed his hands nervously over the front of his sweater. "Is it too bad? We're supposed to go incognito—do I look like a Muggle?"

Hope nodded with a contemplative smile. "Yeah, you look pretty good. I'd be more worried about what you say, though."

"I'll be extra careful," Mr. Weasley promised, looking uncharacteristically serious as his sons stumbled into view.

"Where're Bill and Charlie and Per-Per-Percy?" George asked between a yawn, almost running into Hope who had to steady him with an arm around his waist.

"You alright?" she asked in a bit of concern.

"Mm, just tired," George said, rubbing at his eyes as he practically fell into an empty seat at the table.

"Well, they're Apparating, aren't they?" Mrs. Weasley said, answering George's question as she slid a bowl of porridge in front of each of her nearly-asleep sons. "So they can have a bit of a lie-in."

"It's slightly more noisy and less dangerous than Flashing," Ron told her, a bit more lucid now that he had something in his stomach, noticing the confusion on her face.

"Oh… Flashing is still better," Hope disagreed, even though it wasn't, and the eye rolls from Hermione and Ron told her they still remembered the events of their second year.

"So they're still in bed?" Fred complained. "Why can't we Apparate too?"

"Because you're not of age and you haven't passed your test," snapped Mrs. Weasley as she disappeared upstairs.

"Why do you need to pass a test to Apparate?" Hope asked.

"Because Apparition isn't easy," Mr. Weasley said, placing the tickets into his pocket. "The Department of Magical Transportation had to fine a couple of people the other day for Apparating without a license. When it's not done properly it can lead to nasty complications. This pair I'm talking about went and splinched themselves."

"Splinched?" Hope asked, not understanding the term but assuming the worst at the winces from
"That's when you leave part of yourself behind when you Apparate," Mr. Weasley explained, bringing the treacle closer to himself. "So, of course, they were stuck. Couldn't move either way. Had to wait for the Accidental Magic Reversal Squad to sort them out. Meant a fair old bit of paperwork, I can tell you, what with the Muggles who spotted the body parts they'd left behind..."

"That doesn't sound pleasant," Hope said, "does it hurt?"

"Very rarely," he assured her, "this couple only got a heavy fine, and I don't think they'll be trying it again in a hurry. You don't mess around with Apparition."

"I'll keep that in mind," Hope said with a grimace as Ginny finally descended the stairs, still rubbing at her eyes.

"Why do we have to be up so early?" she complained.

"We've got a bit of a walk."

"Wait," Hope said, frowning, "is the World Cup that close?"

"No, no, that's miles away," Mr. Weasley disagreed, smiling easily. "We only need to walk a short way. It's just that it's very difficult for a large number of wizards to congregate without attracting Muggle attention. We have to be very careful about how we travel at the best of times, and on a huge occasion like the Quidditch World Cup...is everyone ready?"

There were a few grunts of assent as they all stood up, only to jump at Mrs. Weasley's sudden voice. "George!"

"What?" He said in a faux-guiltless tone.

"What's that in your pocket?" She demanded, her eyes flashing dangerously.

"Nothing!" George insisted.

"Don't you lie to me!" She warned, and then she went so far as to pull out her wand and point it at George's pockets. "Accio!"

Her instincts turned out to be right as a number of small brightly coloured candy-sized packages soared out of his pockets and into Mrs. Weasley's hands, despite George's attempts to snatch them out of the air. "Hey!"

"We told you to destroy them!" said Mrs. Weasley, her anger quite apparent, as Hope cupped her forehead in her hand. She had heard from Fred and George that their mother wasn't as...pleased with their choice of a future career, but Hope couldn't find anything wrong with it. She couldn't see either of the twins spending their lives working for the Ministry, that would probably bore them to bits.

She shot a look to Fred as if to say "Seriously?"

He shrugged and rolled his eyes, true annoyance obvious on his face.

"We told you to get rid of the lot! Empty your pockets, go on, both of you!" Mrs. Weasley snapped, but Hope had the feeling that 'We' was just Mrs. Weasley. "Accio! Accio! Accio!"

This time her wand was directed at both Fred and George, and Hope winced as the Ton-Tongue Toffees flew into the air from their pockets and linings of their clothes. Hope couldn't help but be
silently impressed by the number of secret hiding places they had come up with for their merchandise. Hope's mouth dropped open when Mrs. Weasley threw away the toffees and she couldn't help but feel insulted on George's behalf that she would actually do that, toss out the twins' hard work as if it wasn't worth anything.

"We spent six months developing those!" Fred shouted in genuine anger, a rare sight. Hope had to say that was possibly the first time that she had ever seen him quite so mad.

"Oh a fine way to spend six months!" she responded in a shrill voice. "No wonder you didn't get more O.W.L.s!"

"Oh-kay!" Hope said stepping in between the mother and her sons, both parties which looked quite ready to explode. "Why don't we call it a day and just get going before someone says something they might regret, alright?"

She glanced between Mrs. Weasley and Fred and George, and the three relaxed slightly, enough for everyone to say their goodbyes.

Mrs. Weasley gave Hope a quick hug. "Take care of them, won't you?" she asked.

"I always do," Hope promised, stepping away for George to grab her hand tightly as he glared at his mother, who glowered back even as she kissed her husband goodbye. Hope had to hold onto her bag tightly as he all but dragged her out house in his haste to get away from his mother who called after them, "Well, have a lovely time, and behave yourselves."

They were about fifty paces away when Hope cleared her throat. "Well, it's a good thing she didn't try to search me..." George had convinced her to hide a few Weasley Wizard Wheezes amongst her things, knowing that his mother wouldn't go through her things because she generally had a positive disposition towards Hope. "Why is she still throwing such a fit?"

Fred gave a despairing sigh. "Because she's Mum, that's why. She doesn't need a reason. She didn't approve of Bill or Charlie's lines of work either, they're much too dangerous."

"Danger is what makes life a little fun," Hope said, squeezing George's hand which had thankfully loosened since they had left the house or she was afraid that she might have broken something. "I think you'll make a great business out of prank items, and I'm not just saying that because I'm in love with George," she added, making a pleased flush erupt on said boy's cheeks and a smirk appear on Fred's lips. "I'm saying that because it's the honest truth. You two could really make it work and one day she'll see it too."

Fred gave her a true smile, the first since his mother had taken away all of his and George's hard work. "If I wasn't afraid of how hard George would hit me, I would kiss you."

George rolled his eyes as he threw his arm over her shoulders, kissing the side of her head. "I love you."

She grinned. "I know, and you'll love me even more." She withdrew and held out a few of the Ton-Tongue Toffees that Mrs. Weasley had thrown away but she had rescued when her back was turned.

"Oh, definitely," George agreed with a vibrant smile, "you beautiful, beautiful girl!"

"I do try," Hope said, pleased by the compliment.
George didn't like Amos Diggory, especially at how rude he had been about his son supposedly beating Hope in that Quidditch match that the dementors had swarmed onto the field. Hope kept her face blissfully blank, but George glared fiercely at the man even as Hope gave him a discreet nudge.

Cedric tossed an apologetic look Hope's way but she gave no indication that she saw it, feeling incredibly grateful when Mr. Weasley spoke up.

"Must be nearly time. Do you know whether we're waiting for any more, Amos?"

"No," Mr. Diggory assured him, sounding a little relieved to not have to look into the dark eyes of one of Arthur's twin sons (clearly he was with Hope Potter if the interlocked fingers between the two), "the Lovegoods have been there for a week already and the Fawcetts couldn't get tickets," said Mr. Diggory. "There aren't any more of us in this area, are there?"

"Not that I know of," Mr. Weasley said, nodding his head in agreement. "Yes, it's a minute off... We'd better get ready..." He turned towards Hermione and Hope who were the only ones of the very large group that had never dealt with a portkey. "You just need to touch the Portkey, that's all, a finger will do—"

"What's he talking about?" Hope muttered to George, but he didn't have time to answer her as they were running low on time and within moments the group had crowded around a manky old boot in the middle of the field.

Hope and Hermione, though thoroughly confused, did as the others did and pressed a finger to the boot. The look Hermione gave her told her nonverbally: "Am I the only one who thinks this is very strange?"

Hope merely rolled her eyes, her lips quirking slightly upwards.

"Three…two…one…"

Hope almost lost her grip as something tugged her around the middle as the boot shot into the air taking the nine wizard-folk far away from Ottery St. Catchpole to travel miles upon miles away only for her to slam into the ground once they reached their destination in a matter of seconds.

Hope groaned, her voice muffled in the grass. "This is the worst possible way to travel." But she still pulled herself up and into an upright position as a clear voice said: "Seven past five from Stoatshead Hill."

Hope blinked a few times, her vision still a little blurry from the speed that they had been moving at, to stare at the field which had suddenly shifted at a moor that was covered in a light mist that could be easily seen through. And then she had to stifle her laughter with Hermione at the three wizards that had met them, because their attempts to blend in with Muggles had left them hopelessly mismatched. It was as if they had been dressed by a child.

Mr. Weasley spoke to the one that was wearing a rather loose kilt paired horribly with a poncho. "Morning, Basil."

The man said nothing for a moment, taking that time to receive the boot that they had used a Portkey and toss it into a box with a number of miscellaneous items that must have been Portkeys as well.
"Hello there, Arthur," the man named Basil said, his voice matching his face in tiredness. Hope had to wonder how early the man had been up because he looked to be on the brink of falling asleep where he stood. "Not on duty, eh? It's alright for some... We've been here all night... You'd better get out of the way; we've got a big party coming in from the Black Forest at five fifteen. Hang on, I'll find your campsites... Weasley... Weasley..." He consulted his parchment list. "About a quarter of a mile's walk over there, first field you come to. Site manager's called Mr. Roberts." He glanced to Mr. Diggory and his son before looking at the parchment once more. "Diggory... second field...ask for Mr. Payne."

So the Weasleys set off in the direction that Basil had said and Hermione piped up, "Er, Mr. Weasley, is the site manager a Muggle or a wizard?"

"Oh, he's a Muggle," Mr. Weasley said with a fond smile.

"Then perhaps Hope and I should do the talking," she offered, knowing how prone the man was to slip up around Muggles because of he often was around her own parents. He wasn't very subtle, to say the least.

"You're probably right," Mr. Weasley agreed, his ears burning a light shade of red as Hope took the money from him, "The tent are under Weasley, they were only booked a few days ago."

"Right-o," Hope said, screwing her eyes a little so that her hair darkened to the same colour as Hermione with slightly more controlled curls and eyes the exact shade of brown as her friend's. Hermione grinned as it appeared as though they were siblings.

"Shall we, sister?" Hope asked with a quirked eyebrow as she offered her elbow.

Hermione beamed. "We shall." They ignored the laughter that echoed behind them as they yanked Ginny along for the ride despite her protests as they strode up to a middle-aged man who was standing at a table that had a number of papers being held down by some heavy rocks so they wouldn't blow away in the wind.

"Morning!" Hermione called to him as they came to a stop in front of him, recognizing him easily to be a Muggle.

"Morning," the man said, failing to hide a yawn, looking as tired as the three clothing-confused wizards from before.

"Are you Roberts?" Hope asked, as forward as ever, if the sigh from Hermione was any indication of resign.

Mr. Roberts looked up in surprise to see that it was a trio of girls asking the questions. Two looked remarkably similar, sisters no doubt, but the third couldn't be more different with her ginger hair.

"That's me," he said, "may I help you ladies?"

"We're here for a tent booked under Weasley," Hope said, pulling the money from her pocket, "how much do we owe you?"

Mr. Roberts quoted the price still staring at her as if she was the strangest thing he had seen and Hope was quick to hand over the appropriate notes to the Muggle who quickly avoided her eyes as
he took the money and went searching for some change. She knew that people said she had intense eyes, but still…

"Never been this crowded," Mr. Roberts said, glancing behind him where Hope, Hermione, and Ginny could see hundreds of tents already set up. "Hundreds of pre-bookings. People usually just turn up... People from all over. Loads of foreigners. And not just foreigners. Weirdoes, you know? There's a bloke walking 'round in a kilt and a poncho."

"Is he not supposed to?" Ginny asked, a little flummoxed. Hope could tell that Muggle fashion was still rather strange to her.

"It's like some sort of...I dunno...like some sort of rally," he said, still lost in thought. "They all seem to know each other. Like a big party."

None of the three had any time to come up with an appropriate response to that when a loud crack echoed through the air as a wizard appeared rather suddenly, no doubt through Apparition.

"Obliviate!" the man said, pointing his wand at the Muggle, making a blank and dreamy expression appear on the man's face, reminding Ginny of her friend Luna a little too much.

Both Hope and Hermione couldn't help but scowl fiercely at the man. Both girls had rather bad experiences with memory modification. Hope's was mainly because Gilderoy Lockhart had tried to erase her memories back in second year, but had unfortunately missed, due to Ron's wand backfiring on him instead, while Hermione's was just because Lockhart had used his memory charms as a way to steal other witches and wizards work and sell it as his own, which was practically the death sentence in Hermione's eyes.

"A map of the campsite for you," Mr. Roberts said, his voice soft and calm, seeming to be in a bit of a day dream. "And your change."

"Thank you…" Hermione said, feeling a little disjointed.

"Come on," Hope tugged on her arm, the disapproval clear on her face as the three walked back to the group.

"You've been ages."

Hope jumped violently at the sound of George's voice. In retrospect, she really shouldn't have, seeing as she had known where he was in the first place, but she had been so engrossed in not spilling the water that the suddenness of his voice had caused her to slop half of her water down her front, subsequently making George snigger and smirk.

"Come over here, love," she said sweetly, "so I can kick your arse."

"I'd love to oblige," George said with a grin, "but you'd probably spill the rest of your water."

A small laugh left her lips at that and she simply shook her head, setting down the water and airing out her now-water shirt, ignoring George's eyes which were still on her no doubt, eyeing how the material clung to her skin.

"You've not got that fire started yet?" Ron asked, ignoring his brother and his best mate as best as he could.

"Dad's having fun with the matches," said Fred.
They all turned to stare at Mr. Weasley where he was standing inside a circle of matches, saying "Oops!" every time he managed to light a match only to drop it.

Hermione sighed. "I'll handle this," she said striding over to the man and showing him how to light a match without dropping it.

"What do you think of the tent?" Fred asked his twin's girlfriend, noting how she was still gazing around at it in wonder.

"It's very impressive," she said, arching her neck back in an attempt to see it all completely. The drapes were gold and silver hanging loosely against the walls, there was a small sitting room with worn sofas as well as a small dining room. The bedroom towards the back had bunk beds and had been claimed by the girls, while the bedroom off to the side had been forced upon the boys, to the girls' mirth. "I've never seen anything like it…well, not including my trunk, I guess." She dug out the small pocket mirror that Angelina had given her the last year for her birthday and handed it over to Fred who blinked and stared.

"Er-I don't—"

"It's so you can talk to Angelina," Hope said, rolling her eyes, "believe me, you don't need a mirror." She tossed it to him and he struggled to catch it, but the smile on his face made it worth it as he moved towards the semi-privacy of the boys' bedroom.

"Thanks for that," George whispered into her ear, wrapping an arm around her waist, his hand cupping her hipbone.

Hope shrugged her shoulders, bumping slightly against his chest as she did so. "I missed you when I was at the Dursleys, and Angie definitely feels the same way about Fred."

"Definitely?" George asked with a grin.

Hope twisted slightly so she could tangle her fingers into her hair, smiling sweetly. "It must be that infamous Weasley charm."

"Must be…” George murmured, bending his head to brush his lips lightly against hers, parting quickly as Ginny moved past, throwing Hope a significant glance as she did so.

"Or it might be because you are very attractive," Hope added with a saucy wink, leaning upwards to kiss him firmly for a few seconds before parting completely from him. "Maybe we should save this until we get to school and have some privacy."

George gave a low groan of disappointment, making her flush a pale pink as she rejoined her friends where they were out with Mr. Weasley who was telling them who some of the people were that walked past them and what their job was. It seemed to bore Ron, but Hermione was listening intently.

"That was Cuthbert Mockridge, Head of the Goblin Liaison Office...Here comes Gilbert Wimple; he's with the Committee on Experimental Charms; he's had those horns for a while now...Hello, Arnie...Arnold Peasegood, he's an Obliviator —member of the Accidental Magic Reversal Squad, you know...and that's Bode and Croaker...they're Unspeakables..."

"What're Unspeakables?" Hope asked, hijacking the conversation.

"Oh, they're from the Department of Mysteries, top secret, no idea what they get up to," Mr. Weasley said, though it left her a bit confused, even as she watched his eldest three sons meander around tents
Fred rejoined the group soon after, his cheeks a little pink from his conversation with Angelina, but much happier than he had been when the day had first started out. He handed over the small mirror to Hope.

"Do you mind if I borrow that to talk to her later on?" he asked her, not really expecting her to deny him, but being polite nonetheless (something his mother had probably ingrained in him).

"Sure," Hope said easily, sparing him a smile, "besides, she'd probably fancy talking to you more than me."

Fred couldn't help but laugh as well. "It's my charm."

"Must be inherited," she commented with an arched eyebrow, nodding towards George. "Oh, and we've decided to tone it down about in your presence so you don't feel too uncomfortable."

"It would take a lot to make me uncomfortable, Hope," he said, rolling his eyes, "but thanks anyways."

She tried hard not to smirk at that as Percy, Charlie, and Bill finally reached them.

"Just Apparated, Dad," said Percy, his eyes directed towards his brothers, but while Ron gazed on enviously, George only rolled his eyes. "Ah, excellent, lunch!"

"Yeah, you're welcome," Hope added in a snippy voice, balancing the plate of eggs and sausage on her hand, "Ginny, Hermione, and I cooked that, so maybe a thank you wouldn't hurt." She cocked an eyebrow at Percy whose ears reddened and he gave a quick apology, to which Hope offered him the plate, sharing a grin with Hermione and Ginny behind his back while Ron stifled his laughter.

"Enjoy," Hope said sweetly and George resisted the urge to flat out kiss her completely in front of his whole family as they all settled down into their lunch, but it seemed as though Hope had hardly eaten two sausages and a spoonful of eggs when Mr. Weasley called out "The man of the moment! Ludo!"

Ludo just so happened to be someone known as Ludo Bagman who was apparently an important person in the ministry, being the Head of the Department of Magical Games and Sports, and clearly he hadn't gotten the memo of not drawing any attention to the Wizarding folk, because he was wearing rather obvious bright yellow and black robes that depicted a large wasp. He wasn't very impressive to Hope's eyes, but, then, she was being rather biased towards George, as always.

"Ahoy there!" he cried as loped over to them, practically bouncing on the balls of his feet, practically oozing excitement as if he was absorbing to from the surrounding area and people. "Arthur, old man, what a day, eh? What a day! Could we have asked for more perfect weather? A cloudless night coming...and hardly a hiccough in the arrangements...Not much for me to do!"

Hermione tossed Hope an irritated look, and it didn't take much for Hope to guess why. He was saying that there wasn't much for him to do, yet his robes were drawing attention from Muggles and there were frequent and obvious uses of magic going on around that he seemed blind to. A firework had gone off ten minutes ago and had yet to disperse, a few witches had used their wands to create a number of pale doves that were flying perpetually in a circle, and someone had started a magical fire the colour of lavender that shot off sparks every few seconds.

"Not very focused, is he?" Hermione muttered in a low voice making Ron roll his eyes in good nature to his friend
"You think he could catch everything?" Ron said, only slightly defensive.

"No," Hope amended, "but this is flat out ridiculous." She almost missed Mr. Weasley introducing them all, only tuning in at the last second.

"—and Ron's friends, Hermione Granger and Hope Potter."

Hope scowled a bit as Bagman did what most people did when they saw her: their eyes flickered upwards towards where her scar was located on her forehead. She opened her mouth to say something rude when George squeezed her shoulder from where his arm was thrown over her shoulders, so she acquiesced to remain silent.

"Everyone," Mr. Weasley said, speaking with a bright grin, "this is Ludo Bagman, you know who he is, it's thanks to him we've got such good tickets—"

But Bagman just shook off the compliment. "Fancy a flutter on the match, Arthur? I've already got Roddy Pontner betting me Bulgaria will score first—I offered him nice odds, considering Ireland's front three are the strongest I've seen in years—and little Agatha Timms has put up half shares in her eel farm on a weeklong match."

"Eel Farm?" Hope mouthed to Ron who had to duck to hide his laughter.

"Any takers?"

"They're a bit young to be gambling," Mr. Weasley said, his voice a little nervous, "Molly wouldn't like—"

Apparently counting very quickly, Fred spoke, "We'll bet thirty-seven Galleons, fifteen Sickles, three Knuts that Ireland wins—but Viktor Krum gets the Snitch. Oh and we'll throw in a fake wand."

Hope actually let out a small laugh at that, unable to restrain herself. Percy may have been channelling his mother's disapproval, but Hope was nowhere near, finding it all quite humorous. You wouldn't catch her gambling, she wasn't much of a gambler to begin with, but Fred and George were planning on opening up a business, so anything helped, and she was all for that.

She didn't like Bagman much, even watching as he took the fake wand from Fred, giving it a quick wave and exploding with laughter as it transformed into a rubber chicken. She wasn't quite sure where they had come up with the idea, but she suspected their father had once taken them to Muggle magic shop because some of their designs seemed to originate from some basic magic tricks she'd seen in store windows as a child.

"Excellent! I haven't seen one that convincing in years! I'd pay five Galleons for that!" Bagman cried, but Hope couldn't help but hear a false ring in his voice. Or maybe that was just her; after all, she could be overly cautious if she felt the need to.

Mr. Weasley was both unimpressed and a little worried. "Boys," he said with a soft, almost unperceivable, sigh, "I don't want you betting…That's all your savings…Your mother—"

Would doubtlessly not approve, but when had Fred or George ever followed what she had wanted? They were as much free spirits as Hope was, and that was saying something.

"Don't be such a spoilsport, Arthur!" Bagman chided lightly, beaming brighter than the sun. "$They're old enough to know what they want! You reckon Ireland will win but Krum'll get the Snitch? Not a chance, boys, not a chance…I'll give you excellent odds on that one…We'll add five Galleons for the funny wand, then, shall we..."
It was only after he had taken their names down in his little notebook and given each twin a slip of parchment for which they could use to collect their riches should their wager actually end up coming true (something Hope found highly unlikely, but she wasn't going to comment on the way the twins made their money, not when she had so much in her vault to begin with), that he turned his eyes onto Hope Potter.

Of course, everyone knew the tale of the Girl-Who-Lived. Being the only child of a Lord of an Ancient and Most Noble House, she was considered nobility, despite having a Muggle-born for a mother (not that Ludo had anything against that, it was just the way the Ancient Houses worked). It was hard not to see it when you looked at her, the cheekbones by themselves would have made it quite obvious, even without the soft features that most heiresses bore.

But it was not her features that caught him the most, it was her wealth. It was a well known fact that the Lady Potter (or simply Miss Potter, since she would not be able to take the title of Lady until age fifteen) owned several vaults through her father's ancient line and the gold was all that Bagman desired.

For, you see, Bagman had fallen into a bit of trouble with the goblins of Gringotts, and what he needed was a good bit of money, and by a good bit, he meant a large amount. He'd made some bad investments and often gambled away money he didn't have. In his words, he was down on his luck, but in reality he just had a gambling addiction.

"And what about you, Miss Potter?"

Her eyes met his and immediately he knew she would not be someone to easily swindle, but he could not resist, she was a gold mine after all. Her eyes narrowed ever so slightly, not enough for the man to notice, but her friends were far too used to her nonverbal cues to not take it into account.

Instead, she merely gave him a disarming smile. "I'm afraid not, Mr. Bagman," she said calmly, "I never gamble my money, only my life."

Touché. Bagman had to concede for the time being, perhaps another time he would manage to grab some of that gold he sought from her when she wasn't looking.
The Quidditch World Cup

"Do you know how beautiful you look in green?" George asked Hope as he watched her tie an Irish scarf around her neck, making her cheeks flush.

"I'll keep it in mind," she promised with a laugh, hardly heard over the loud cheering of the stadium as they sat in their seats waiting for the game to begin. The stadium was awe-inspiring, Hope had to admit as she looked about. She had never seen anything quite so big in all of her life; it easily outdid the Quidditch stadium at Hogwarts.

Her eyes fell onto the small house-elf that was sitting with a pair of empty seats beside them. Initially, Hope had mistaken her (for it was a female) for Dobby, the house-elf that had formerly belonged to the Malfoy family before she had set it free at the end of her second year. It was understandable, given the androgynous appearances that house-elves tended to have with only slight differences between genders. It was clear from the brief conversation with Winky (which was her name) that she thought Dobby would have done better if had just stayed with the Malfoys, even with the abuse (now there was something very wrong with that line of thought, if you asked Hope), but Hope couldn't agree. It would be like telling her to stay with the Dursleys after she reached majority. That would be literal hell.

"We can switch seats with Bill and Charlie," George added, noticing how her eyes had fallen on the house-elf.

Hope spared him a smile. "Don't worry about it," she said, "it's just the way that she talked…Dobby wasn't quite like that." They both had to quiet themselves as Bagman pulled his wand free and pointed it to his throat, saying, "Sonorous!" Obviously, it was a spell that enhanced one's voice so as to be heard over a massive crowd, such as this one, which apparently could seat a hundred thousand.

"Ladies and gentlemen…welcome!" He called over all of them, his voice reverberating around them as it bounced across the stadium. "Welcome to the final of the four hundred and twenty-second Quidditch World Cup!"

Hope cheered with the Weasleys and Hermione, though her cheering was far more enthusiastic than her friend's, but then Hermione had always spent more Quidditch matches worrying about her than actually just enjoying the match.

"And now, without further ado, allow me to introduce…the Bulgarian National Team Mascots!"

Hope cheered with the Weasleys and Hermione, though her cheering was far more enthusiastic than her friend's, but then Hermione had always spent more Quidditch matches worrying about her than actually just enjoying the match.

"Ah, Veela!" she heard Mr. Weasley say off to the side, so that must have been what they were. Hope had never seen anything like them. They were obviously very beautiful, that much Hope could tell quite easily. There was also something very alluring about their appearance in how their white-gold was brushed gently by the wind and their skin would shine as if starlight had been brushed onto them. Hope would have been jealous, if not for the fact that she wasn't a person who cared much about her looks (she changed them too often).

However, it became rather clear that the Veela had a more substantial effect on the men rather than the women.

Fred and George were both rubbing circles into their foreheads as if they were overcome with an
intense headache, and Ron seemed on the verge of standing up, though the dazed expression told Hope he was more confused than anything else.

"Are you alright?" Hope asked with concern, leaning so she could be more easily heard by George as she interlocked their fingers.

He spared her a smile, kissing her cheek fondly. "Don't worry about it," he said, "it's just a dizzy spell."

"Alright," Hope conceded, though she could see it clearly wasn't. The faster they danced, the more confused Ron seemed to become until he was actually standing up with a rather flummoxed look on his face.

"Ron, what are you doing?" Hermione demanded, taking hold of one of his arms while Hope grabbed the other as they forced him back into his seat amidst laughter from his brothers.

Hope snapped her fingers in front of her eyes, making the lanky boy blink a few times, trying to clear the fog that had covered his eyes.

"Huh?" he said, still muddled. "What happened?"

"A mild enchantment," Hope said in a tone of amusement as the Veela ceased their dancing.

Hermione made a noise of irritation that Hope could hardly hear. "Honestly!" she said as if he was a young child that needed to be closely monitored.

"And now, kindly put your wands in the air...for the Irish National Team Mascots!"

The next second Hope was blinded by something quite reminiscent of a green and gold comet that burst through to the stadium and then to circle around the stadium before then breaking into two smaller green and gold comets that spun off in opposite directions to encircle the goal posts on each end a few times.

Hope joined in the applause when a rainbow appeared, joining the two together, laughing as it transformed into a massive shamrock that was far larger than anything Hope had ever seen (not including the stadium, of course). She was a bit bemused as gold galleons rained down on them from the shamrock (which was now seen to actually be made up of little leprechauns, even as Ron forced a few coins into her hand, paying her back for purchasing the Omnioculars for him earlier.

"And now, ladies and gentlemen," Bagman said, clearing his throat loudly, "kindly welcome- the Bulgarian National Quidditch Team! I give you –Dimitrov! Ivanova! Zograf! Levski! Vulchanov! Volkov! Aaaaaaand –Krum!"

One by one, Quidditch players donning the scarlet robes of Bulgaria shot out into the free air, some did a few tricks, one in particular, the Seeker, it must have been, actually flipped his lower body off of the broom, holding on with only his hands. Hope couldn't help but watch in fascination.

"I get the feeling that you're going to want to try that move as soon as possible," George commented dryly beside her.

"Nah," Hope said, tossing her hand carelessly. "I'm reckless enough without throwing in suicidal."

George chuckled, but she could hardly hear it, but she could still feel the goosebumps that erupted on the back of her hand where he was slowly tracing a small circle.
"I'm not going to be able to focus on the match if you keep doing that!" she complained, nudging him away from her and freeing her hand as she did so.

George grinned, loving how her eyes would light up in that way that always told him she wasn't ever being completely serious about him staying away.

"Stop looking at me like that!" she said, but she was smiling. "I won't be able to concentrate!"

"Sounds like I'm very distracting," George said, waggling his eyebrows suggestively at her, making heat rise in her cheeks.

"Oh, shut it!" Hope complained, placing the Omnioculars firmly over her eyes and fiddling with the dials.

"And now, please greet –the Irish National Quidditch Team! Presenting - Connolly! Ryan! Troy! Mullet! Moran! Quigley! Aaaaaand –Lynch!"

Seven players swept onto the playing field, only they were wearing green. Hope was slightly put out that none of the Irish players were willing to partake in dangerous stunts…ah, well, you get what you get.

"And here, all the way from Egypt, our referee, acclaimed Chairwizard of the International Association of Quidditch, Hassan Mostafa!"

It took the Chairwizard a surprising amount of time to make his way out and onto the field and release the four balls and give the sharp whistle that instigated the beginning of the game as each player surged after their prospective ball.


Watching for the Quaffle wasn't nearly as fun as searching for the Snitch or watching the Beaters batter the Bludgers back and forth between them. The Bulgarian Beaters in particular were quite aggressive. They reminded her a little of the Slytherin Beaters, only not quite as underhanded as they were; the match had nothing to do with the House rivalry that often took place on the Quidditch field (at least, during the Gryffindor-Slytherin match).

Vulchanov gave a vicious smack to the Bludger closest to him, sending it spinning in the direction of the Irish Keeper, Barry Ryan, who had to roll on his broom to avoid it. A smirk wormed its way onto Hope's lips as she closed in briefly on the Keeper, taking note of his crimson face and the fist he was shaking in the direction of Vulchanov, both exchanging some rude hand gestures that Hope might want to use on a later date (undoubtedly against Snape…she needed some new ones). She twisted the dials quickly, bringing it back up to speed as she focused on Moran briefly as he dodged wildly in an effort to avoid the barrage of Bludgers that Vulchanov and Volkov threw his way, but one of the Bludgers grazed him across the ribcage.

"Ooh…" Hope winced sympathetically behind her Omnioculars. That had to sting, but it was still better than having a few broken ribs for his trouble. Hope would know all about that.

Luckily for Moran, the injury didn't seem too substantial because he was back in action within a matter of minutes after taking the appropriate time to gauge just how much of his limbs he could still completely use. And then he was back in the game, flying ahead of Mullet before doubling back suddenly and feinting, tossing the Quaffle to Troy, who ducked under Ivanova. But then he had to drop the Quaffle to avoid a Bludger, thus giving Bulgaria possession through Levski.
Levski almost ran head long into Moran in his effort to remain focused on the Quaffle, so he barely caught it. It was lucky for Ireland, then, because Troy had taken his loss of concentration on everything but the ball and had used his fist to punch it right out of his hands, catching it once it was in the free air and racing off towards the goal posts, ducking past the Keeper easily to score the first goal of the game.

"TROY SCORES! Ten-zero to Ireland!" Bagman hooted with excitement as Troy flew a few laps around the stadium at the small victory, but it must not have been quite as small in the big leagues as it was during school.

Hope put down her Omnioculars briefly so that she could join in with Hermione and Ron who had leapt up once the points had been scored, cheering loudly and brightly. She didn't think that she had ever been so excited about a Quidditch match before, but then, this match didn't involve her performing in it, so that might have been it.

The game progressed rather quickly after that first goal, but that didn't mean that it didn't go well into the night, because it certainly did. Hope's eyes could hardly keep track as the Quaffle passed from Chaser to Chaser and as Bludgers made contact with bats as the Beaters moved to block the hits from their fellows (this tactic led to a few broken fingers). Before hardly any time had passed, Ireland had scored twice more, being up now by thirty points and resulting in some very surly red-clad fans.

Hope watched with avid fascination as the game progressed into a much more serious replication of one of the Gryffindor-Slytherin matches that she had played in, because she could compare nothing else to how vicious the Bulgarians were becoming, especially the Beaters. Hope winced every time they struck the Bludgers with their bats as if she could hear the sound of the crack when they connected.

When the Bulgarians finally scored their first goal, the Veela had to celebrate, but the boys listened to their father this time around, deafening the sound by stuffing their fingers into their ears. Hope tapped George's knee when the coast was clear, smiling behind her Omnioculars, the Veela having no effect on her.

Dimitrov of Bulgaria was in possession. He passed to Levski, who passed it back to Dimitrov, who then passed to Ivanova, who—oh!

Hope aimed her Omnioculars away from the Bulgarian Chasers, because at that moment, Seekers Krum and Lynch had plunged into a deep vertical dive that Hope would have never been able to pull off. At least, not with a good deal of practice before hand to keep her from snapping her neck. Hope's eyes went to the ground, but there was no Snitch—

"They're going to crash!" screamed Hermione, her shrill tone echoing in Hope's ears.

However, only Lynch actually connected with the ground, as Krum had pulled up at the last second, leaving him virtually unscathed if not for the windburn they had both undoubtedly gained for going at break-neck speeds. It was a very impressive feint.

"It's time-out!" Bagman called over the noise, "as trained mediwizards hurry onto the field to examine Aidan Lynch!"

"Hey, Hope?"

"Hm?" The pair of Omnioculars perched on Hope's nose as she turned her face towards Fred made her look a little like Luna Lovegood (if Luna had been a red-head).
"Do me a favour and don't ever try that," he said seriously, leaning over his brother so she could hear him. "I don't think George could survive the heart attack."

"Oh, shut up, Freddie!"

Hope grinned behind the Omnioculars. "I'll keep it in mind."

Hope wouldn't be trying that move, though, no matter how beautiful and deadly it was, it required a certain skill with the broom, that much Hope could see quite clearly, and it was a skill that she had yet to achieve in the air. But Viktor Krum was clearly a natural; it looked almost as if he didn't even need a broomstick.

She twisted a few dials, focusing in on Krum, smirking when she saw how he was scanning the area with his eyes, using the time to look for the Snitch. "Oh, he is *good*…"

"Who?" George asked with a raised eyebrow.

"Krum…how good is he, do you think, compared to the Seekers of the other teams?" she asked, withdrawing the Omnioculars to actually look her boyfriend in the face.

George's eyes grew distant as he thought. "Er…probably the best…why?"

"Just wondering," Hope sang, giving him a bright smile as she curled one of his loose fiery locks behind his ear. "Do you know how cute you look when you're thinking?" She dutifully ignored the sound of Ron's groan on her other side.

George's smile turned just a tad roguish. "Just cute? Not hot or sexy?"

"Oh, I don't know," Hope said with a long sigh, "perhaps…" She eyed him up and down.

"You are making it very hard for me to not kiss you," George said in a very serious voice.

She smirked, settling the Omnioculars onto her eyes once more. "Oh, I know." The smirk widened as she heard George mutter something along the lines of "tempting little she-devil."

In a matter of fifteen minutes after Lynch had returned to the game, Ireland had scored enough goals to be leading by a hundred and twenty points ahead of Bulgaria. Unfortunately, as it often was with an intense game like Quidditch, the more one team pulled ahead, the more fouls took place, and the more injuries occurred. This became clear when Mullet streaked towards the goal posts only to be spun off course by Zograf using a move that Hope had never seen a Keeper use before, but she only caught about half of it, they were just moving so fast, too fast for her to see.

The piercing whistle announced the foul.

"And Mostafa takes the Bulgarian Keeper to task for cobbing –excessive use of elbows!" Bagman yelled. "And –yes, it's a penalty to Ireland!"

Hope did her best to ignore the team mascots who were now seeming to be having a bit of a match of their own, making fun of each other from opposite sides of the field. It was…pretty ugly…and the Veela had seemed to have done something to influence Hassan Mostafa, the referee.

Hermione had been reduced to giggles at the sight of the man jumping off of his broom to stand before the Veela smoothing his moustache and flexing his nonexistent muscles as if they were something to behold.
"Now, we can't have that! Somebody slap the referee!" Bagman cried through his laughter.

Hope and Hermione laughed with the rest of the Weasleys as one of the mediwizards that had assisted Lynch earlier came pelting across the field to kneel the man rather painfully in the shin. Mostafa fell to the ground clutching at his probably throbbing leg before stumbling into a standing position and shouting angrily at the Veela…and they didn't look too pleased with him either.

"And unless I'm much mistaken, Mostafa is actually attempting to send off the Bulgarian team mascots!" Bagman called. "Now there's something we haven't seen before...Oh this could turn nasty..."

Hope shook her head and laughed, turning her attention towards the game once more.

"Two penalties for Ireland!" shouted Bagman, and anger seemed to practically vibrate from the Bulgarian fans located around the stadium. "And Volkov and Vulchanov had better get back on those brooms...yes...there they go...and Troy takes the Quaffle..."

Hope winced briefly behind the Omnioculars as Moran was nearly thrown off her broom by Dimitrov, causing the Irish-fans to demand for a foul.

"Foul!" Bagman agreed with them. "Dimitrov skins Moran– deliberately flying to collide there– and it's got to be another penalty– yes, there's the whistle!"

Hope stared in awe at the anger of the Veela. She had never seen anything like it (yes, she was thinking that rather a lot today, but it was true) but the strangely beautiful women had changed in their anger. Hope was used to this, being a metamorphmagus, her appearance often shifted on impulse when her rage reached astronomical levels, but this, this was something else entirely. Their mesmerizing faces had warped and elongated, giving him an appearance that would have been more closely related to a bird (making her think of Sirens from Greek myths with the faces of beautiful women and the bodies of birds that could entice sailors to their deaths…) and they seemed to be throwing fire across the pitch to the leprechauns.

"Whoa!" Ron said, stunned. He lifted his eyes to stare at Hope. "You don't do that too, do you?"

Hope scowled fiercely at her friend before knocking him upside the head. Honestly! How could he possibly think that Veela and Metamorphmagi were closely related at all?

"And that, boys, is why you should never go for looks alone!" Mr. Weasley yelled to his sons as the whole group watching in fascination as the Ministry workers attempted to separate the team mascots with little avail.


Hope lifted her eyes from the fascinating competition going down between the Veela and the leprechauns in time to see Quigley give a savage swing at the Bludger, sending it rocketing in Krum's direction. Without the appropriate time to duck, Krum was hit flat in the face.

An "Ooh!" of sympathy rippled through the crowd.

"Time-out! Ah, come on, he can't play like that, look at him—"

"Look! Lynch!" Hope cried out suddenly as the Irish Seeker had gone into a steep dive, intent on the Snitch that could barely be seen where it was close to the ground. It was only then that the crowd seemed to realize what exactly was happening, and the Irish fans had begun to cheer anew, even as Krum sped after him until he was matching his speed as they drew nearer and nearer to the ground,
closer and closer to the Snitch.

"They're going to crash!" Hermione shrieked in a shrill voice, clutching at her face hard enough to leave nail indentations in her cheeks.

"They're not!" Ron yelled over the noise.

"Lynch is!" Hope disagreed. They all had to wince as Lynch collided with the ground for the second time that game, but Hope's eyes replayed the few movements leading up to the crash on her Omnioculars, seeing how Krum snagged the Snitch just a few seconds before Lynch slipped off his broom and crashed into the grass.

"The Snitch, where's the Snitch?" bellowed Charlie, having missed the catch without the use of the Omnioculars.

"It's Krum!" Hope yelled, leaping up to cheer at the spectacular catch, not at all caring that he hadn't been on the team that she had been cheering on the whole time. "Krum caught it!" A small figure in red robes could be seen dismounting onto the grass with his fist raised high; Hope recognized it as the same move she did every time she caught the Snitch (perhaps it was a Seeker thing).

Ron burst out into laughter. "Check out the scoreboard!!"

Hope did, and she couldn't help but laugh as well. The finally total was Bulgaria with one hundred and sixty points and Ireland with one hundred and seventy points. Ireland had won but Krum had caught the Snitch. What a load of bad luck for the Bulgarians, eh?

"IRELAND WINS!" Bagman shouted, sounding about as stunned by the victor and the end of the match as everyone in the stadium. Hope doubted anyone had seen that coming.

"KRUM GETS THE SNITCH –BUT IRELAND WINS– good lord, I don't think any of us were expecting that!"

"I think you and Fred need to try for the Divination position once you graduate," Hope yelled to George as he and Fred did a little happy dance that one could only do if they were about to get paid.

"What did he catch the Snitch for?" Ron roared, jumping up and down with a beaming smile on his face. "He ended it when Ireland was a hundred and sixty points ahead, the idiot!"

Hope shook her head again. Sometimes she thought explaining the inner workings of Seekers was far too complicated for her friends to understand. So she opted to keep her silence, merely basking in the glory of Ireland's win.
Hope didn't sleep well that night. She dreamt of a crazed werewolf that looked nothing like Remus did during the full moon. She dreamt that she was running faster than she had ever run before, but for every pump of her legs, he matched her stride and when she turned to look at him, he lunged.

She could feel his teeth at her throat when she sat up suddenly in bed, breathing hard with her heart beating so fast that she thought it would burst in her ribcage. She rubbed at her eyes, glancing down at herself in surprise. She must have been really tired earlier if she had fallen asleep in her clothes. She would have made a joke, if someone else was awake, but then she heard the shouting. "Get up! Ginny, Hermione, Hope, come on, this is urgent!"

She sat up so quickly that she probably would end up with a massive bruise on her head later on before she managed to roll out of the bed. "Wazzgoingon?" she slurred, yawning widely.

"No time to explain," Mr. Weasley said as his daughter and Hermione roused themselves into wakefulness. "Just grab a jacket and get outside—quickly!"

Hope's sluggish movements sharpened as she threw on her jacket and shoes, joining the others outside of the tent, shock encompassing her face at the sight beyond. The screams of fear filled the air as scores of people rushed past them, almost bowling them over as they did so. They were running from a hooded group, whose faces were shrouded with masks that looked so very much like skulls. When Hope caught sight of a flash of green she had to do a double take, but thankfully it hadn't been aimed at anyone in particular. They were chanting and laughing as they used their wands to shoot pellets of flames out and into the chaos, some managing to catch fire to tents, others hitting a few people, leaving smouldering clothes behind in their wake.

"We're going to help the Ministry! You lot—get into the woods, and stick together. I'll come and fetch you when we've sorted this out!" Mr. Weasley yelled over the noise. "Fred, George, Ginny is your responsibility. Go!" Both twins took a hand from their sister as they barged through the crowd even before Mr. Weasley, Bill, Charlie, and Percy had gone.

They were already being swept away when Hermione screamed Hope's name, forcing her feet to move as she struggled towards her and Ron. But the crowd was in a pandemonium, it was like trying to battle waves when you were so far out at sea. Hope was pushed to and fro, stumbling to reach where Hermione's voice was coming from, but it was a fierce battle. "Hermione! Ron!"

And then something hot collided with her back sending her sprawling to the ground moments before rushing feet collided with her head, sending her into a world of blackness.

_Hope was eleven again, in the confines of Ragnok's large office. She was so perpetually small compared to the poufy armchair that she had sank into the second she had been invited to sit._

"Your father asked that we give you these once you came here for the first time, if he was unable to."

_Hope's face was a picture of confusion as she took the small chest that had been offered to her, opening the lid slowly to see the two rings that lay within. Hope couldn't bite back a gasp; they were beautiful. One was made of silver, melded so that it coiled around the finger, the design matching that of a snake with two emerald eyes as the only gem. The other had an ancient, golden base, set with a glossy black stone with a symbol she did not recognize carved into it._

"They're beautiful," she whispered, holding them in her hands gently as if they were made of a
breakable substance. "My father left these for me?"

"He did," Ragnok agreed, "he trusted me to pass it on if he could not."

"Thank you," Hope whispered, her voice low and reverent as she slipped on the snake ring onto her ring finger, the coils tightening until it was no longer quite so loose on her finger. However, the second ring did not magically fit her as the first did, so she simply rested it onto her largest finger, her thumb. She had no way of knowing the power imbued with the black stone.

Hope stirred faintly, feeling as though she had been run over by a car once again. Her head ached and her lower back throbbed. Hope forced her body up so that she was sitting, reaching a hand behind her to touch at the area where fire had burned across her flesh. She hissed as she touched the burn, but it didn't seem as bad as she had originally thought, much to her relief. It was only about the size of Neville's Remembrall, so that was good.

Hope rubbed a hand over her eyes and squinted into the darkness. Smoke was still rising into the air, but all the fires had been put out. Hope could see from where she was that only a few of the tents had actually burned down. The masked people had been more about causing chaos than actual harm; how kind of them.

Hope needed to find Ron and Hermione. Knowing them, they were probably worried sick about her —

"Hope!"

The still somewhat dazed girl was pulled up and into a standing position as she was embraced harshly. "H-Hermione?" Hope asked in between a hiss of pain.

"Oh my gosh, I'm so sorry!" she quickly apologized as Hope strained to see the two people standing in front of her. "We saw that you'd been hit—"

"We tried to circle around," Ron added, and Hope didn't need her sight to tell her that he was as white as a sheet, "but there was just so much—"

"It's fine, I'm fine," Hope said, "it's just a small burn—"

All three fell silent very quickly at the sound of sluggish footsteps. Crouching down close to the ground as if they were one entity, they listened intently, focusing their eyes in the direction of the noise.

"Hello?" Ron called out in a shaky voice, grunting in pain as both Hermione and Hope hit him. "What was that for?" he hissed.

"You don't know who that is!" Hermione whispered shrilly.

"It could be Dad looking for us," he whispered back heatedly.

"Then wouldn't he have been calling our names by now?" Hope asked, to which her only answer was silence. She stood up. "I'm going to go check it out."

But she was dragged back down by both of Ron and Hermione's arms.

"Are you mental?" Ron demanded.

"It could be a Death Eater!" Hermione hissed.
So that's why that skull-like mask that the members of that group had been wearing seemed so familiar. She was sure she'd read it in one of the books that had been written about Voldemort's rise to power. The Death Eaters were his followers and one of the reasons why Voldemort had become so powerful in the first place.

"Only one way to find out."

Hope wrenched herself free, despite how Hermione and Ron tried to grab her back and started making her way towards the direction the noises the person had been making had come from. But she had hardly taken two steps before they linked arms with her anyways.

"You're not going anywhere without us," Hermione said resolutely, Ron nodding fervently from her other side, to which Hope could only sigh as they took a few more careful steps forward. None of them could see the figure that had walked through the area that had been the most desecrated by flames, what with the night being as dark as it was. So they all jumped when a voice pierced through the night.

"MORSMORDRE!" It couldn't have been anything other than a spell, because after the incantation had been cast, the night sky above them twisted and shifted.

"What the—?" Ron gasped out, recoiling a little at the sight of the image not unlike a constellation. It was a skull, a massive skull with a snake protruding from the mouth. It was more than a constellation, Hope now saw, it looked rather more like the Aurora Borealis with the way it shifted in the sky, the green smoke moving as the snake bared its teeth, flowing further into the sky.

The forest behind them exploded into screams at its sight.

"Okay, now we should really leave," Hermione insisted, tugging her and Ron backwards. "Come on, move!"

However, they hardly had time to comply to her demands before twenty wizards popped into existence, surrounding them in a circle with their pointing at the trio.

"GET DOWN!" she yelled, gripping them by the back of their necks and forcing them to the ground a split second before they cast their spells.

"STUPEFY!"

They missed them, but only just, the spells crossing in midair and shooting off and into the darkness beyond.

"Stop! STOP! That's my son!"

Hope almost melted in relief as she finally made out Mr. Weasley's thinning mop of ginger hair as he approached them, jostling a few wizards to the side in his haste (Hope couldn't figure out if that was accidental or on purpose) to reach them.

"Ron– Hope– Hermione- are you all right?" He sounded out of breath and unsteady after the events of the past few seconds.

"Hope's been—" Ron started to say, but he was cut off by one of the wizards Mr. Weasley had nudged aside. He was an older man dressed far more impeccably than even Percy could have ever looked. Hope remembered him from earlier, back at the tent before the match. He was Barty Crouch, Percy's boss. She had attained an instant dislike for the straight-laced man and it hadn't changed.
"Out of the way, Arthur." Mr. Crouch pointed his wand to each of the fourteen year olds in turn.
"Which of you did it? Which of you conjured the Dark Mark?"

"You are barking mad," Hope said, staring at him like she had never quite seen anything like him.
Did he think that students just going into their fourth year would be able to perform that kind of
magic? "We didn't do that!"

"We didn't do anything!" Ron added in a sullen voice. "What did you want to attack us for?"

"Do not lie, sir!" Mr. Crouch cried, his eyes wild. "You have been discovered at the scene of the
crime!"

"Definitely mad," Hope decided, making the man turn his wand on her and Hermione hiss, "Hope, shut up!"

"Barty," said a tired-looking witch, the only other one who seemed to have sense, "they're kids,
Barty, they'd never have been able to—"

"Where did the Mark come from, you three?" Mr. Weasley asked, ignoring Mr. Crouch.

"Over there," Hermione said, gesturing off to a point in front of them. "There was someone behind
the trees...they shouted words—an incantation—"

"Oh, stood over there, did they? Said an incantation, did they? You seem very well informed about
how that Mark is summoned, missy—" Mr. Crouch turned on Hermione who seemed a bit stunned.

Hope cleared her throat loudly. "Can we be interrogated by someone a bit saner?"

"Hope," Mr. Weasley said in a voice filled with warning.

"What? It's a legitimate question."

"Yes! We got them! There's someone here! Unconscious! It's— but— blimey..." Mr. Diggory's voice
called out from the spot that Hermione had been roughly pointing towards.

"You've got someone? Who? Who is it?"

Hope wasn't the only one whose jaw unhinged as Mr. Diggory returned to the circle of nineteen
witches and wizards holding their lit wands aloft. Mr. Diggory was carrying the stunned form of the
house-elf Winky from the Cup stadium. Wait...wasn't Winky Mr. Crouch's house-elf?

"This-cannot-be," Mr. Crouch said, his words disconnected. "No—"

"There's no one else there," Mr. Diggory called after him as the man went off to search the place
where they had found Winky, but he ignored him.

"Bit embarrassing," Mr. Diggory said to Mr. Weasley, nodding to the elf. "Barty Crouch's house-
elf...I mean to say..."

"Come off it, Amos, you don't seriously think it was the elf?" Mr. Weasley inquired in a low voice.
"The Dark Mark's a wizard's sign. It requires a wand."

"Yeah," Mr. Diggory agreed, "and she had a wand."

"What?" Mr. Weasley said, stunned by that knowledge.
"Here, look." Mr. Diggory held one out for Mr. Weasley to see, but it was too dark for Hope to make out. "Had it in her hand. So that's clause three of the Code of Wand Use broken, for a start. No non-human creature is permitted to carry or use a wand."

"Ron, could you help me over to that stump?" Hope asked, wincing as each movement jarred her back.

"Yeah, sure," Ron said quickly, looping her arm over his shoulder, carefully leading her hardly three and a half feet from where she was standing.

"Ron said you were…injured?" Mr. Weasley asked in confusion, since Ron had been cut off before when he had tried to explain.

"A bit of fire," Hope mumbled, her face heating up before she winced again as Hermione pulled back the charred spot of fabric that was covering the burn, holding her wand aloft to see the extent of her injuries.

"Oh, that's not so bad," Mr. Weasley said in obvious relief. "Molly'll fix you right up once we get back."

"Yay," Hope said without enthusiasm, turning her attention to the Ministry officials who had just begun to question the recently roused Winky who was sobbing very heartily at the sight of the Dark Mark still hanging in the sky.

"Elf! Do you know who I am?" Mr. Diggory demanded of the house-elf, making her sob even harder. "I'm a member of the Department for the Regulation and Control of Magical Creatures! As you see, elf, the Dark Mark was conjured here a short while ago. And you were discovered moments later, right beneath it! An explanation, if you please!"

Winky gulped at the air. "I-I-I is not doing it, sir," she said amidst whimpers, "I is not knowing how, sir!"

"You were found with a wand in your hand!" the man snapped, waving said wand in front of her eyes, the light glinting off the wood. She easily recognized the twisted base, darker than the rest of the wand. She felt her pocket quickly in stunned surprise; her wand wasn't there.

"That's, er, actually my wand," she said a little awkwardly, turning all the attention back to her once more.

"Excuse me?" Mr. Diggory said, stunned.

"My wand," Hope said slowly as if speaking to a five year old, "I must have lost it—"

"You lost it? Is this a confession? You lost it after you conjured the Mark?"

Hope stared at him like he was barmy.

"Amos, think who you're talking to!" Mr. Weasley bit out. "Is Hope Potter likely to conjure the Dark Mark?"

Mr. Diggory back-pedalled slightly in realization. "Er– of course not. Sorry…carried away…" And then he turned back to Winky, his eyes glittering in the darkness. "So, you found this wand, eh, elf? And you picked it up and thought you'd have some fun with it, did you?"

But all his words did was frighten her more as more tears fell from her bulbous eyes. "I is not doing
magic with it, sir! I is...I is...I is just picking it up, sir! I is not making the Dark Mark, sir, I is not knowing how!

"It wasn't her!" Hermione snapped, speaking up after a stretch of silence, making Ron and Hope jump suddenly at her voice. "Winky's got a squeaky little voice, and the voice we heard doing the incantation was much deeper! It didn't sound anything like Winky, did it?"

"No," Hope agreed, "the voice was definitely much deeper than hers."

"And human," Ron added.

"We can easily see the last spell this wand performed," Mr. Diggory grumbled, taking his wand and placing its tip to Hope's. "Prior Incantato!"

Hope could only watch in fascination as a smaller version of the skull-and-snake image in the sky appeared from the end of her wand, ominous and ghostly.

Hope let out a low hiss as she sank into one of the couches in the tent, waiting to be told of when they could leave. It had hardly been ten minutes since the Dark Mark incident, but she wanted more than anything to go back to the Burrow so that Mrs. Weasley could have a look at her burn.

"I'll probably be a few more hours until we're allowed to leave," George whispered into her ear, rubbing her shoulder soothingly where his arm was thrown securely over her shoulder.

"I know," she sighed, "I just want to relax without having to flinch every time I move."

"Wouldn't that be a first?" he joked, kissing her temple as a smile broke across her face.

"Not really," she said in a low chuckle, her eyes drooping with each word she said. She leaned further into him, appreciating the warmth of his body as she drifted slowly off and into oblivion.

However, after what seemed only like seconds to Hope, she was roused. Only a couple of hours had passed and the sky was still dark, though it was lighter than it had been previously. Everyone dressed and packed in silence, too tired to complain, much less speak. In a matter of minutes the tent was fixed up and they headed through the small crowd so that Mr. Weasley could speak to Basil and grab the first Portkey out to Stoatshead Hill.

Hope wasn't sure if she would prefer it with the sun up or with the bit of darkness they were dealing with at present, as Hope kept tripping over her feet and would have surely fallen if not for George's arm around her keeping her vertical.

"Mm, are we nearly there?" she mumbled, blinking the sleep out of her eyes even as she rubbed them in an effort to awaken herself more fully.

"Nearly."

At first, she doubted that Mrs. Weasley would be awake, considering how early in the morning it was (Was it three? Four? She couldn't be certain), but when she saw the light in the windows she found herself corrected. The door flew open when they were barely a few meters from it and the soft glow of a lit fire spilled out, framing Mrs. Weasley's figure as she all but flew out of it, still dressed in her night things.

"Oh thank goodness," she cried, "thank goodness!"
She all but threw her arms around Mr. Weasley's neck, one hand still clutching a rather early edition of the Daily Prophet. "Arthur– I've been so worried– so worried—" She kissed him fiercely and her children looked away quickly as the paper fell to the ground, showcasing a photo of the Dark Mark in its glory. "You're all right, you're alive...Oh boys..."

Hope could hardly stifle her amusement as the woman hugged both of the twins at the same time, but she was distracted by the second person who had exited the Burrow.

"Remus?" She said hardly above a whisper before she was rushing towards him, hugging the man she viewed as a surrogate uncle tightly around the middle with the werewolf responding in kind. "What are you doing here?" she asked. "The full moon was only a few days ago, you should be resting!"

Remus spared her a small smile, pressing a fatherly kiss to her forehead. "Mrs. Weasley fire-called me as soon as she heard; I came because I was worried about you."

Hope blushed red with embarrassment. "That's-er-I mean, thanks," she muttered.

"Molly, you might want to look at Hope's back," Mr. Weasley added.

"Your back?" Remus' eyes sharpened and he inhaled a little. "You smell like smoke..."

"Big surprise," Hope muttered as she was steered inside so that Mrs. Weasley could work her magic. It was a good thing that the burn was rather mild, because they were rather easy to treat according to Mrs. Weasley, who had it healed in a matter of seconds and had Hope nestled on the couch in the sitting room not too long afterwards.

"We should all get a few more hours of sleep—" Mrs. Weasley said, but her husband and of-age sons were quick to disagree, citing that they should go and help out.

Remus squeezed Hope's fingers comfortingly. "I'll stop by in a few hours to check on you, alright?"

"You don't have to," Hope tried to say.

"Why don't you join us for brunch around ten?" Mrs. Weasley said. "That gives them some time to catch up on their sleep."

"Thank you," Remus said politely, giving Hope one last wave before disappearing out the door to Apparate back to his house.

Hope groaned. "Now, he's going to be a mother hen."

Ron sniggered lightly. "What did you expect?"

"Alright! To bed!" Mrs. Weasley all but ordered her brood plus Hope and Hermione and they conceded, their loud feet echoing as they made their way upstairs.

"George?"

George and Hope hadn't moved.

"I'll be up in a minute," George called back, earning him a pointed look from his mother.

"Don't worry Mrs. Weasley, Georgie is in safe hands," Hope promised, tugging sharply on her boyfriend's ear.
"Ow!" He complained as his family laughed bidding each other good night, leaving Hope and George alone in the glow of one solitary light. Hope wasn't surprised when he moved his body so he was trapping her to the couch, only with her legs linking onto his, like they were two snakes twisted together.

"I think my ear deserves a few kisses for your abuse, don't you?" George asked with grin. Hope's eyes sparkled like emeralds in the lighting. "Oh, is that what this is about? I thought you wanted me all to yourself..."

"That too," George admitted, his mouth a little dry at her words, feeling goosebumps rise as she curled a lock of his hair behind his ear, drawing him forward by that hair so that her lips could rest against the shell of his ear, a pressing soft kiss where she had yanked it as well as adding a kiss a little above and a little below. She couldn't help but be pleased when he shivered.

"I get the feeling you like this position," she whispered, hardly feeling the need to speak normally, especially with his face so close to her that she could feel her cheeks heating up on impulse.

"Hm..." he murmured, "I might."

One would have thought with his arms looped under her it would be painful, but it wasn't. It felt...safe.

"Tell me what you're thinking about," Hope said, but it was more of a suggestion than an order. She could see that something had made him uncomfortable.

"You don't think we're moving too fast, do you?" He asked her, much to her surprise. "I don't want to push you—"

Hope pressed a finger quickly to his lips, giving a small laugh. "Love, this is the perfect speed for me. Believe me, if I didn't like it, I would have told you by now," Hope promised, her fingers moving to cup his chin, pulling him forward. "Now shut up and kiss me."

George was only too happy to oblige, their lips meeting in that perfect combination of gentleness and firmness that always took her breath away. She sighed against him, her hands raking through his hair the way she knew he liked.

"It's dangerous being alone with me, love," he mentioned, his voice husky once they parted, both straining for breath but not wanting to move. "You always seem so breathless afterwards..."

A soft chuckle left her lips as she rasped, "I enjoy danger, Georgie, you know that, so we're a good match."

He only answered her in another kiss that took her breath away.
"What do you think Mrs. Weasley meant by she didn't think we would want to come home over the holidays?" Hermione asked.

It had been about a week since the events of the Quidditch World Cup, but the article was still being run over and over again as if they had new information each time. The week had passed slowly for Hope, who had been rather eager to get back to Hogwarts if nothing else than to take her mind off Sirius…and maybe for some time alone with George, that would be very nice indeed.

"Dunno," Hope mused, flipping through the magazine in her hands bearing in large letters, the title: *The Quibbler*. Third year Luna Lovegood had been passing them out in the aisle and had offered her one for a few Knuts. Curious, and having nothing better to do, Hope had paid her and taken it, and she had to admit, it was quite enthralling. She found she liked it far better than the Daily Prophet, mostly because the Quibbler covered a wide range of topics. She wasn't certain if any of them were quite true, but that didn't stop it from being enjoyable to read.

"Wish Bagman had told us when we were at the World Cup," Ron grumbled, crossing his arms and staring out of the window in annoyance, "he was going to, just a second longer—"

"Shh!" Hermione hissed suddenly as an all too familiar drawl made itself known from a good bit outside of their compartment.

"...Father actually considered sending me to Durmstrang rather than Hogwarts, you know. He knows the headmaster, you see. Well, you know his opinion of Dumbledore - the man's such a Mudblood-lover - and Durmstrang doesn't admit that sort of riffraff. But Mother didn't like the idea of me going to school so far away. Father says Durmstrang takes a far more sensible line than Hogwarts about the Dark Arts. Durmstrang students actually learn them, not just the defence rubbish we do..."

It wasn't until he'd passed that the three spoke once more.

"I would've rather he gone to Durmstrang," Hermione grumbled, "maybe then we might've gotten some peace and quiet."

Ron stared at her and Hope smirked, but she didn't notice either. Three years together and she was already picking up Hope's rebellious attitude.

Hope cleared her throat lightly to get her attention. "So, Durmstrang is another Wizarding school?"

"Yes," Hermione huffed in agreement, rolling her eyes in annoyance, "and it's got a horrible reputation. According to *An Appraisal of Magical Education in Europe*, it puts a lot of emphasis on the Dark Arts."

"I think Dad mentioned it once or twice," Ron said, screwing his face up as he tried to recall the details of the conversation and ultimately failed, "but I don't remember where it was...What country is it in?"

"Well, nobody knows, do they?"

"They don't?" Hope asked in confusion. "Why not? Everyone knows where Hogwarts is, don't they?"

"Well, yes," Hermione admitted, "but Hogwarts has always been very...open about its location.
There's traditionally been a lot of rivalry between all the magic schools. Durmstrang and Beauxbatons like to conceal their whereabouts so nobody can steal their secrets."

"Are they really that paranoid?" Hope asked in surprise.

"I guess they'd have to be," Ron mused, "it wasn't uncommon for Wizarding institutions to steal from each back in the fourteen hundreds." He'd accidentally read one of Hope's books on Wizarding history and had been too bored to put it down. "But...Durmstrang's got to be about the same size as Hogwarts-- how are you going to hide a great big castle?"

"How do you think Hogwarts is hidden?" Hermione asked rhetorically.

"Huh?" Ron asked in confusion.

"Hogwarts is hidden," Hermione repeated for his benefit. "Everyone knows that...well, everyone who's read *Hogwarts, A History*, anyway."

"Just you, then." Ron ignored the glare she threw his way while Hope sniggered, her eyes barely visible over the top of the magazine. "So go on-- how d'you hide a place like Hogwarts?"

"It's bewitched," she said dryly. "If a Muggle looks at it, all they see is a mouldering old ruin with a sign over the entrance saying DANGER, DO NOT ENTER, UNSAFE."

"Really?" Hope said in surprise, dropping the magazine to her lap for a second. "Must be a powerful enchantment to hold for so long and cover such a wide area."

"It must," Hermione agreed with her there.

"So Durmstrang'll just look like a ruin to an outsider too?" Ron asked, drawing her attention back to him, his ears reddening at the knowing look Hope cast towards him.

"Honestly, I have no idea," Hermione admitted. "It could, or it might have Muggle-repelling charms on it, like the World Cup stadium. And to keep foreign wizards from finding it, they'll have made it Unplottable—"

"You mean like if someone looked for it on a map they wouldn't be able to find it?" Hope asked, canting her head slightly to the side.

"Exactly," agreed Hermione, thrumming a finger against her chin as she thought, "but I think Durmstrang must be somewhere in the far north," said Hermione thoughtfully. "Somewhere very cold, because they've got fur capes as part of their uniforms."

"Poor them," Hope said sympathetically. The winters in Scotland were as cold as it was; she couldn't imagine going to school somewhere colder than where Hogwarts was located.

"Ah, but think of the possibilities. It would've been so easy to push Malfoy off a glacier and make it look like an accident...Shame his mother likes him..."

Hermione and Hope shared a laugh at Ron's thought.

By the time the three actually made it into the Great Hall, they were completely soaked and Hope's head was hurting from over thinking Malfoy's words when he had come to visit them during the train ride.

"Are you going to enter? I suppose you will, Potter? You never miss a chance to show off, do
you? Don't tell me you don't know? You've got a father and brother at the Ministry and you don't even know? My God, my father told me about it ages ago...heard it from Cornelius Fudge. But then, Father's always associated with the top people at the Ministry...Maybe your father's too junior to know about it, Weasley...yes...they probably don't talk about important stuff in front of him..."

Enter? What on earth was he talking about? Enter into what?

Ignore him, Hope told herself. He's just a prat and is trying to tick you off, like always.

She ducked her head as a water balloon collided with the top of her head, exploding on impact and completely dousing her in water. She gasped in shock at the cold, her hair clinging to her face and turning a dark ink black as she glared up at Peeves who had the decency to look slightly apologetic (being Slytherin's granddaughter gave her a small amount of respect in his eyes, but not much) before an evil smirk made its way completely onto his face.

"Peeves!" she snarled through curled lips, but George was quick to pull her away before she could attempt to see if committing ghost homicide would actually work against someone who was already dead.

"Easy," he said lowly, running his fingers along the wet skin of her arms making the flesh tingle where he touched her, "killing anyone before term even starts won't win you any points with McGonagall."

"Who says I need to?" she asked with a quirked eyebrow, tilting her head back and smirking as they sat at the Gryffindor table. "McGonagall likes me enough."

Their lips were inches away from touching when Ron and Hermione sat down opposite Hope and she regretfully turned away to listen as Ron complained to Nearly Headless Nick who had floated over to greet them. And then she tried to focus as Colin Creevey, a third year Gryffindor with a camera obsession, came over to talk excitedly about his younger brother coming to Hogwarts. Hope was surprised as he walked away.

"I always thought that Muggle-borns were usually only one to a family," Hope said in surprise.

Hermione shrugged, not too irritated by the line of questioning as it was an honest one, but she didn't offer an answer.

"Where's the new Defence Against the Dark Arts teacher?" Hermione asked, drawing their attention towards the staff table, where the spot that Remus had sat last year was empty.

"Well, the position is practically cursed," Ron said rolling his eyes, "Maybe they couldn't get anyone!"

They didn't have any time to speculate further as the doors at the entrance to the hall swung open as Professor McGonagall led a group of frightened and awed first years inside. They looked very small to Hope.

"Was I that short when we first met?" she whispered to George, who spared her a grin of amusement.

"Is there any way to answer that without getting into trouble?"

A smirk broke across her lips as the Sorting Hat began to sing.

A thousand years or more ago,
When I was newly sewn,
There lived four wizards of renown,
Whose names are still well known:
Bold Gryffindor, from wild moor,
Fair Ravenclaw, from glen,
Sweet Hufflepuff, from valley broad,
Shrewd Slytherin, from fen.
They shared a wish, a hope, a dream,
They hatched a daring plan
To educate young sorcerers
Thus Hogwarts School began.
Now each of these four founders
Formed their own house, for each
Did value different virtues
In the ones they had to teach.
By Gryffindor, the bravest were
Prized far beyond the rest;
For Ravenclaw, the cleverest
Would always be the best;
For Hufflepuff, hard workers were
Most worthy of admission;
And power-hungry Slytherin
Loved those of great ambition.
While still alive they did divide
Their favourites from the throng,
Yet how to pick the worthy ones
When they were dead and gone?
Twas Gryffindor who found the way,
He whipped me off his head
The founders put some brains in me
So I could choose instead!
Now slip me snug about your ears,
I've never yet been wrong,
I'll have a look inside your mind
And tell where you belong!

The last bit amused Hope, because it hadn't been able to tell her where she belonged at all, it was ultimately her choice, but perhaps the Hat had known all along where she was best suited to go. She listen patiently as the Hat sporadically called out the House names, dutifully ignoring as Colin pointed her out to his younger brother Dennis, until there were no longer any more students to sort and Dumbledore stood to say his piece.

"I have only two words to say to you. Tuck in."

Which was a good thing, because Ron looked quite like he had been starving himself for days and if he didn't get a bit of food into his stomach, he might actually die of starvation.

"You're lucky there's a feast at all tonight, you know," Nick told them solemnly as the food appeared on the table like magic, like it always did. "There was trouble in the kitchens earlier."

"What? Why?" Hope asked confused.

"Peeves, of course," Nick said, in a voice that said "Who else?" "The usual argument, you know. He wanted to attend the feast— well, it's quite out of the question, you know what he's like, utterly uncivilized, can't see a plate of food without throwing it. We held a ghost's council— the Fat Friar was all for giving him the chance— but most wisely, in my opinion, the Bloody Baron put his foot down."

"Probably best," Hope mumbled into her potatoes.

"Must've been why he was tossing those water balloons about," Ron said sagely, earning a glare from the girl that had been one of the recipients of the balloons onto her head. "So what did he do in the kitchens?" he asked quickly.

"Oh the usual," said Nick in a tired manner. "Wreaked havoc and mayhem. Pots and pans everywhere. Place swimming in soup. Terrified the house-elves out of their wits—"

The look of completely stunned disbelief on Hermione's face spelled trouble.

Hope doubted that Hermione's hunger strike was going to last long, but she didn't really understand why she was doing it either. Hope had been down to the kitchens loads of times with George, but maybe Hermione was still angry about the whole Winky incident with Mr. Crouch.

"So!"

The tables instantly quieted as Dumbledore stood for the second time that night.

"Now that we are all fed and watered," the Headmaster began, "I must once more ask for your attention, while I give out a few notices. Mr. Filch, the caretaker, has asked me to tell you that the list of objects forbidden inside the castle has this year been extended to include Screaming Yo-yos,
Fanged Frisbees, and Ever-Bashing Boomerangs. The full list comprises some four hundred and thirty-seven items, I believe, and can be viewed in Mr. Filch's office, if anybody would like to check it." His eyes lingered on Fred and George who whistled with innocence that they had never had. "As ever, I would like to remind you all that the forest on the grounds is out-of-bounds to students, as is the village of Hogsmeade to all below third year. It is also my painful duty to inform you that the Inter-House Quidditch Cup will not take place this year."

"You can't be serious!" Hope said, actually standing up at his words.

"I can assure you, Miss Potter, I am quite serious," he assured her with a faint twinkle in his eye as she reluctantly sat down once more, allowing Dumbledore to continue his speech.

"This is due to an event that will be starting in October, and continuing throughout the school year, taking up much of the teachers' time and energy— but I am sure you will all enjoy it immensely. I have great pleasure in announcing that this year at Hogwarts—" But his words were stalled and overtaken as the night sky above them up on the ceiling flashed and boomed as thunder and lightning made their presences known. And then a third presence was added to the mix as the doors were thrown open.

The man who stood at the threshold was quite impressive to say the least. Hope knew she wasn't the only one craning her neck to catch a glimpse of him.

He limped heavily, leaning a bit on his staff, his face shrouded by his travelling cloak as he made his way to the front, finally shaking back his hood, but all Hope could see was shaggy, dark grey hair. It was only when he turned towards Dumbledore that they actually got a look at his face. The scars were plenty; he was missing a part of his nose and the rest of his face was marred, though not as much as his nose. And his eyes...they were by far the strangest. One was normal, well, as normal as it could be on a face like his, but the other was much larger and rounder, about the size of a Sickle perhaps and it was a bright blue. And it was staying forward like the other one, it was gazing to the side, and then out of the back of his head.

Creepy...and kind of cool. Hope wasn't sure which one it was more of as the man shook Dumbledore's, sharing a few words of quiet conversation that no students in the hall would have been able to understand or even hear.

It was only once the man had taken the seat to the right of Dumbledore that the Headmaster spoke once more. "May I introduce our new Defence Against the Dark Arts teacher? Professor Moody."

Whispers flitted through the hall at the name Moody. Hope could have sworn that she'd heard it recently...hadn't Mr. Diggory mentioned the name Mad-Eye Moody just this morning when he fire-called to have a word with Mr. Weasley.

"Moody?" She said, her eyebrows furrowing a bit, glancing between George and Ron. "Like Mad-Eye Moody? That bloke your dad had to go help this morning? The one who had a problem with policemen?"

"Don't see how it could've been anyone else," George said, staring at the scarred man in fascination. "Wonder where he got all those scars from..."

Hope's lips twitched.

"What happened to him?" Hermione asked, completely stunned by his appearance. "What happened to his face?"
"Dunno." Ron was staring at him in unabashed awe as he thrust his hand into his cloak and pulled out a small hip flask, taking a long drink from it. Hope's eyes dropped to the floor, widening in surprise at what she saw. Because instead of having a leg made of flesh, he had one made of wood with a clawed foot.

"As I was saying," Dumbledore started again, smiling as he was well aware of the attention that was directed to Moody, "we are to have the honour of hosting a very exciting event over the coming months, an event that has not been held for over a century. It is my very great pleasure to inform you that the Triwizard Tournament will be taking place at Hogwarts this year."

This meant absolutely nothing to Hope, but clearly it meant something to a lot of people as even Fred spoke up, excited and surprised. "You're JOKING!"

At that comment, laughter filled the hall and Hope tried to ignore how Fred's cheeks turned a faint pink.

"I am not joking, Mr. Weasley," he disagreed with a small chuckle, "though now that you mention it, I did hear an excellent one over the summer about a troll, a hag, and a leprechaun who all go into a bar." A sharp look from Professor McGonagall sent him in the right direction. "Er– but maybe this is not the time...no...where was I? Ah yes, the Triwizard Tournament...well, some of you will not know what this tournament involves, so I hope those who do know will forgive me for giving a short explanation, and allow their attention to wander freely.

"The Triwizard Tournament was first established some seven hundred years ago as a friendly competition between the three largest European schools of wizardry: Hogwarts, Beauxbatons, and Durmstrang. A champion was selected to represent each school, and the three champions competed in three magical tasks. The schools took it in turns to host the tournament once every five years, and it was generally agreed to be a most excellent way of establishing ties between young witches and wizards of different nationalities– until, that is, the death toll mounted so high that the tournament was discontinued."

*Of course, Hope thought wryly. It couldn't be considered very challenging if there wasn't threat of death.*

"There have been several attempts over the centuries to reinstate the tournament," Dumbledore said over the continuing whispers of excitement, "none of which has been very successful. However, our own departments of International Magical Cooperation and Magical Games and Sports have decided the time is ripe for another attempt. We have worked hard over the summer to ensure that this time, no champion will find himself or herself in mortal danger."

*Where was the fun in that?*

"The heads of Beauxbatons and Durmstrang will be arriving with their short-listed contenders in October, and the selection of the three champions will take place at Halloween. An impartial judge will decide which students are most worthy to compete for the Triwizard Cup, the glory of their school, and a thousand Galleons personal prize money."

"I'm going for it!" Fred said with enthusiasm that Hope couldn't share. Though she had to admit, the thousand Galleon reward would definitely help them down the road towards that joke shop they were cooking up.

"Would you try for it?" George asked, nudging her hip with his.

She spared him a short laugh. "Georgie, this is me we're talking about," she said in amusement, "I
think I'd like to at least have one year where I'm not worrying about something that could possibly kill me."

Ron and Hermione laughed from their spot across the table, but she wasn't wrong; a break would be nice.

"Eager though I know all of you will be to bring the Triwizard Cup to Hogwarts," he said, nodding to them in turn, "the heads of the participating schools, along with the Ministry of Magic, have agreed to impose an age restriction on contenders this year. Only students who are of age—that is to say, seventeen years or older—will be allowed to put forward their names for consideration. This is a measure we feel is necessary, given that the tournament tasks will still be difficult and dangerous, whatever precautions we take, and it is highly unlikely that students below sixth and seventh year will be able to cope with them. I will personally be ensuring that no underage student hoodwinks our impartial judge into making them Hogwarts champion."

The ire of many at the missed chance to prove themselves was shared by George and Fred who yelled out "That's rubbish!"

"I therefore beg you not to waste your time submitting yourself if you are under seventeen. The delegations from Beauxbatons and Durmstrang will be arriving in October and remaining with us for the greater part of this year. I know that you will all extend every courtesy to our foreign guests while they are with us, and will give your whole-hearted support to the Hogwarts champion when he or she is selected. And now, it is late, and I know how important it is to you all to be alert and rested as you enter your lessons tomorrow morning. Bedtime! Chop chop!"

Students fell in together and merged in their haste to leave the Hall, leaving the trio and Fred and George as the only ones at the Gryffindor table, the aisles completely filled.

"They can't do that! We're seventeen in April, why can't we have a shot!" George complained as Hope took his hand and dragged him out of his seat to stand.

"Sometimes life just sucks, Georgie," she said, rolling her eyes and kissing the corner of his mouth, "now come on, we're getting left behind."

"They're not stopping me entering," Fred said mulishly. "The champions'll get to do all sorts of stuff you'd never be allowed to do normally. And a thousand Galleons prize money!"

"Yeah," Ron said dreamily, no doubt thinking what he could buy with that kind of money. "Yeah, a thousand Galleons…"

Hermione and Hope shared a look of annoyance as they dragged their boys (well, Hermione couldn't really say that Ron was hers per say…) towards the entrance hall, and up after all the others had gone before them. The stairs didn't take so long to climb today and in no time they found themselves in front of the Fat Lady who asked automatically: "Password?"

"Balderdash," George said shortly, allowing the others to pass in front of them before grinning and gripping Hope's hand as he tore off in the opposite direction.

"George?" Hope said, both bewildered and out of breath at the same time when they came to a stop about fifty feet away, out of sight from passing Gryffindors. "What're—?"

Her eyes fluttered shut as his lips made contact with hers, stalling her words and stealing her breath from her. Hope threw her arms over his shoulders, standing as high as she could on her tip-toes, feeling as warm as she had that time he had kissed her in the early morning after the Cup. It made her
feel as though she was the only person in the world that he saw, it made her feel…loved.

When he released her, her lips tingled and she knew that her cheeks were flushed.

"What was that for?" she said in a voice that she hardly recognized as her own; she had never sounded so breathless in her life.

"Do I need a reason?" he asked with a smile.

Hope laughed, giving him his answer. "Come on, we'd better get back before people start thinking that we're snogging in some cupboard—"

"I could find a cupboard," George promised, bending down to brush a chaste kiss to her lips.

"Oh, Georgie," Hope smiled, "I'm a girl of class, did you really think you could romance me into a cupboard on your best day?"

The expression on his face told her: Challenge Accepted.
Hope could put up with a lot of things. She could put up with people making fun of her and George when he sometimes walked her to class because it was the gentlemanly thing to do, she put up with people saying she wasn't like her mother at all, but she could not put up with Malfoy's insults to Ron's parents, and she had been incredibly glad when Professor Moody had stepped in when he did and turned the blonde-haired miscreant into a ferret. There was no other animal more suitable, in her opinion, and that was what had excited her towards their first Defence Against the Dark Arts class, but, like all things, it didn't quite go the way that she had hoped.

They had entered the classroom and had pulled out their books, only to be told they wouldn't need them. This was a good sign, because Remus had preferred a more practical way of teaching, and clearly Professor Moody was like-minded.

"Right, then," he grunted as he concluded roll call and fixed them all with a stare (with both eyes), "I've had a letter from Professor Lupin about this class. Seems you've had a pretty thorough grounding in tackling Dark creatures—you've covered Boggarts, Red Caps, Hinkypunks, Grindylows, Kappas, and werewolves, is that right?"

He received a few nods in response.

"But you're behind—very behind—on dealing with curses," Professor Moody noticed, his eyes scanning over them, the blue one swirling oddly in its socket. "So I'm here to bring you up to scratch on what wizards can do to each other. I've got one year to teach you how to deal with Dark—"

"Only one year?" Ron demanded suddenly, cutting off the scarred ex-Auror. "You're not staying?"

His mouth snapped shut as both eyes zeroed in on him. It was quite disconcerting if he had to say so himself. And then his ruined lips curved into a smile.

"Ah, so you'll be Arthur Weasley's son, eh?" he asked, no doubt recognizing the bright ginger hair that all of Mr. Weasley's children had inherited from him and his wife. "Your father got me out of a very tight corner a few days ago...Yeah, I'm staying just the one year. Special favour to Dumbledore...One year, and then back to my quiet retirement."

He chuckled but none of the rest of the class joined in. Hermione shared a look with Hope had told her she wasn't quite sure how good of a teacher this ex-Auror would be.

"So—straight into it. Curses. They come in many strengths and forms. Now, according to the Ministry of Magic, I'm supposed to teach you countercurses and leave it at that. I'm not supposed to show you what illegal Dark curses look like until you're in the sixth year. You're not supposed to be old enough to deal with it till then. But Professor Dumbledore's got a higher opinion of your nerves, he reckons you can cope, and I say, the sooner you know what you're up against, the better. How are you supposed to defend yourself against something you've never seen? A wizard who's about to put an illegal curse on you isn't going to tell you what he's about to do. He's not going to do it nice and polite to your face. You need to be prepared. You need to be alert and watchful. You need to put that away, Miss Brown, when I'm talking."

Eyes went to the half-blood in question and Hope's eyebrow twitched as the girl blushed a faint pink, quickly stuffing what looked like a horoscope back into her bag. Hope eyed Professor Moody, impressed that that eye of his could even see through wood.

"So...do any of you know which curses are most heavily punished by Wizarding law?" he asked
them all, his voice echoing in the silence of the classroom.

Hope stiffened in her seat, knowing where he was going with his questioning. She had learned about the three Unforgivable Curses back in first year when she had looked up how her godmother Alice and her husband Frank had come to be in the situation that they were in, being clinically insane in St. Mungo's. The one that done the damage was known as the Cruciatius Curse, the torture curse.

"You, Weasley."

Ron glanced at Hope, but her mask was in place. She hardly noticed Moody's eye swivelling towards her as the other fixed her friend in a stare. "Er..." Ron gulped nervously. "My dad told me about one...Is it called the Imperius Curse, or something?"

Hope bit down on her lip. The curse which caused the victim to do whatever the caster wished of them. It was also a plausible excuse for Death Eaters to use for what they had done in the First Wizarding War. She gritted her teeth. *Cowards.*

"Ah, yes." Moody nodded in agreement with Ron's answer. "Your father would know that one. Gave the Ministry a lot of trouble at one time, the Imperius Curse."

He stumped over to his desk and coaxed a large black spider from a glass jar. Ron leaned back quickly once he saw what it was that Moody was bringing out of the jar. Hope knew that if she looked at him, she would see his eyes wide. Moody moved around his desk so that he was standing in front of all of them, as he had been before, holding the spider still in his hand before muttering "Imperio!"

The class watched in fascination as the spider spun through the air, doing a series of acrobatics that it would have never been able to of its own free will. It did a few twists like a ballerina before doing a series of cartwheels, the arachnid version of handstands, and then a tap dance.

The others in the class thought it was funny, but Hope couldn't, not when you thought about the lack of control that the spider had. Hope knew that if someone had control of her body like Moody did, she would probably be screaming inside of her head.

"Think it's funny, do you?" Moody demanded of them, the blue eye swirling around oddly in its socket. "You'd like it, would you, if I did it to you?"

The silence that fell was rather abrupt, and Hope couldn't help but be grateful. How could that be considered funny?

"Total control," Moody said in a low voice, but Hope knew that everyone caught each word that he said. "I could make it jump out of the window, drown itself, throw itself down one of your throats..."

Ron didn't like that idea very much.

"Years back, there were a lot of witches and wizards being controlled by the Imperius Curse," Moody said and Hope didn't have to guess what time he was referring to. "Some job for the Ministry, trying to sort out who was being forced to act, and who was acting of their own free will. The Imperius Curse can be fought, and I'll be teaching you how, but it takes real strength of character, and not everyone's got it. Better avoid being hit with it if you can. CONSTANT VIGILANCE!"

Everyone (Hope included) jumped at the last two words as Moody replaced the spider into the jar.

"Anyone else know one?" He growled out, making Hope think that was just the way his voice was.
"Another illegal curse?"

There weren't many hands that went up this time, in fact, there were only two: Hermione and Neville. Hope swivelled around in her seat to stare at the generally shy Gryffindor, shocked at his daring. She couldn't help but notice that his cheeks were paler than usual.

"Yes?"

"There's," Neville's voice faded a little before he barrelled on, "There's one— the Cruciatus Curse."

She couldn't be sure if Neville was aware of how many eyes were on him, including both of Moody's. "Your name's Longbottom?"

He gave a jerky nod, his face sombre, no doubt waiting for Moody to mention his last name's connection to the torture curse, but the moment never came.

"The Cruciatus Curse," Moody said, as he placed a second spider on the desk, "needs to be a bit bigger for you to get the idea." He pointed his wand at a spider a second time that class period. "Engorgio!"

The spider bulged, looking almost as if it had eaten too much, that is, if the rest of him hadn't grown with the stomach as well, only stopping once it was the approximate size of a tarantula. Ron, true to his arachnophobia, almost fell out of his chair in his haste to get away from the spider while still remaining sitting.

"Crucio!"

Hope flinched, her knuckles turning white as she clenched her hand on the desk into a tight fist. She watched horrified as the spider's legs bent inwards, and then it rolled and twitched. Then it began to jerk more violently and Hope's eyes found Neville's. What little colour he had was now gone and he looked almost as if he was in genuine pain watching that spider. Hope wondered if he was imagining his parents in the stead of the spider.

"Stop it!" She hadn't even realized it was her voice until after she spoke. She glared at Moody, her eyes burning the colour of blood. "Stop it! Can't you see what you're doing?!"

Moody looked up and both eyes rested on her, before switching to Neville, who she was still staring at, only just now relaxing now that the spell had stopped.

Moody picked up the spider and stomped over to where Hope was sitting, making her recoil a little as he dropped it before her on her desk.

"Pain," he said quietly. "You don't need thumbscrews or knives to torture someone if you can perform the Cruciatus Curse...That one was very popular once too...Miss Potter, perhaps you want to give us the last curse?"

Hope was much paler than even a ghost, knowing what it was. Her heart thudded painfully in her chest and her throat was closed. She shook her head and she was almost certain that her hand (the unclenched one under the table) was trembling.

His blue eyes fixed on someone outside of Hope's periphery, her attention focused entirely on the Defence professor before her. The tension that hung in the air was almost palpable.

"Yes?" he inquired of them.
It was only when they spoke that Hope realized the person who had offered to give the answer in her stead was Hermione.

"Avada Kedavra," she said, so quietly that it could be mistaken for a gust of air blowing through the open window.

"Ah," Hope's eyes narrowed at the wry smile that his face bore. "Yes, the last and worst. Avada Kedavra...the Killing Curse."

Without any warning, he raised his wand and pointed it at the spider cowering on Hope's desk. "Avada Kedavra!"

Hope flinched violently at the flash of green that erupted from his wand tip, connecting with the spider, making it slump against the wood and move no more. She watched in silent revulsion as he swept it from the table and onto the floor, as if it had been nothing.

Hope stood up suddenly, wrenching her bag up and onto her shoulder, striding to the back of the classroom, the door bursting open without her touching it, disappearing into the corridor, unaware of the stares she left behind, or the person that was following her fast pace.

All she could hear was the blood pounding in her ears, until—

"Hope! Wait!"

She turned on her heel, her fingers colliding with the butt of her wand when she met Neville's startled eyes. Hope relaxed slightly.

"Neville," she murmured distractedly, releasing her tight hold on her wand, "sorry."

She knew that Neville was quite possibly the only one who could understand what she was going through. They were the only ones that had lost their parents to two of the Unforgivable Curses.

"S'alright," Neville said thickly. He was still very pale. "Did it make you sick to your stomach too?" There was almost a tinge of desperation to his voice, like he needed to know someone was affected the way he had been.

"A bit," Hope admitted, "when you think how one spell can do so much damage." She gave a sharp intake of breath at the sound of the bell as students flooded the halls. It took Ron and Hermione less than thirty seconds to find them.

"Hope!" Hermione called out her name in obvious relief. "Are you alright?" She felt silly for asking the question because Hope looked only slightly better than the time before the beginning of term the previous year after a dementor had attacked her.

"M'fine," Hope said, but she sounded tired, like the class had sucked her of her life force.

Ron gripped her elbow, concern brimming in his eyes. "Are you sure you don't want to sit down?"

"I'm fine," Hope insisted, having regained a bit of herself once more, while Hermione questioned Neville, asking if he was alright as well.

"You alright, are you, Potter?"

Hope stiffened at the sound of Moody's voice. She scowled up at him. "I'm fine," she said hotly for the third time, her defiance and irritation peaking in her voice.
His lips curled. "Atta girl," he growled in approval, but the smile quickly fell of his face. "You've got to know. It seems harsh, maybe, but you've got to know. No point pretending."

His magical eye swivelled to Neville who recoiled a little.

"Why don't you come up to my office? Come on...we can have a cup of tea...come on, Longbottom, I've got some books that might interest you."

Neville looked as though he'd rather spend a night in the dungeons than have tea with Moody.

"Oh, and Potter?"

Hope looked up.

"That was quite an impressive show of magic." He spared her a grin.

Hope could feel her cheeks reddening at the compliment, amusing Ron and Hermione to no end.

"Come on," Hermione said once they had gone, "I want to start working on my house-elf research."

Ron didn't even bother stifling his groan at her words. "She's gone completely barmy," Ron told Hope once Hermione was about ten feet away.

"I can hear you!"

He winced as he and Hope raced after, realizing they wouldn't be able to change her mind or even get some rest until much later. This was an apt assumption and Hope practically fell right asleep after her homework was completed.

Hope was dozing softly against the couch when George finally sat down beside her that evening. Her books were piled on the floor close to her feet and her picture album that held photos was open on her lap, a worn piece of parchment folded under her hand. George had seen the suspicious glance she had given him earlier in the evening when she saw him and Fred whispering together. George wanted to tell her about what they were doing more than anything, but it would be better if she didn't get involved. Ludo Bagman had already proven to be quite capable of remorselessly stealing money off of minors and George hadn't been blind to the way he had eyed his girlfriend at the Cup, no doubt thinking of how much money he could con off her.

Very gingerly, he pulled the bit of parchment from her grasp to read the hastily scrawled words:

*Hope- I'm flying north immediately. This news about your scar is the latest in a series of strange rumours that have reached me here. If it hurts again, go straight to Dumbledore –they're saying he's got Mad-Eye out of retirement, which means he's reading the signs, even if no one else is.*

*I'll be in touch soon. My best to Ron and Hermione. Keep your eyes open, Hope.*

*Sirius*

George knew startlingly very little about Hope's godfather. He knew that she adored him, of course, despite how little she had seen of him, and that she had written to him often over the holiday. In the letters that she had sent George she had worried that she was sending him too many letters, seeing as he was on the run, but as far as George knew, the convict never complained. Hope had told him that Sirius was innocent of his crimes, if the Ministry just looked past their circumstantial evidence, they would have seen it too, but that was the Ministry for you (in Hope's exact words, not his). George believed her, but then she had been practically daring him to disagree with her.
"Hope?"

He gave her a small nudge and her eyebrows wrinkled together slightly in a small amount of confusion and then her eyes finally opened and she breathing in sharply. "George?" his name was hardly whispered from her lips, but her voice was low and husky with sleep, sending a small shiver down his spine.

"Yeah, love, it's me." He bent down to kiss her cheekbone. "You fell asleep on the couch again."

"Again?" she asked in a small amount of dismay as she pulled herself up, slamming the album shut on the letter and scrambling to collect her things. "I, er, should probably head upstairs," she muttered, more to herself than to him. She leaned up quickly to kiss his cheek on the spot where he'd kissed hers. "Goodnight," she whispered, leaving him wondering what it was that had upset her so much when she had first entered the common room hours previously.

He shook his head.

Tomorrow.

Remus–

Hope had inked a paw print next to his name like she had in all of the letters they had exchanged. She tapped the quill against her inkwell, thinking intently of what she should write to him.

School's been fine, well, pretty normal, I guess, considering how un-normal my past three years have been. Ron and Hermione are fine, no serious fights yet, so that's good for my hearing. You know how damaged it gets when they start yelling at one another. Hermione has decided to start an organization known as SPEW, standing for Society for the Promotion of Elvish Welfare. Ever since the Cup she has been positively raving about the rights of elves. She even fasted for two days once she found out that Hogwarts had house elves! Snape is as insufferable as always and George hasn't managed to get me into a broom cupboard yet, so you can stop worrying! Moody is a bit of strange teacher. His first lesson was on the Unforgivable Curses and I didn't really enjoy it too much, but hopefully today will be better.

Missing you like a blind man misses the stars, you old wolf!

Hope

Hope barely had time to fold the letter and stuff it into her Transfiguration book before the bell rang signalling the end of class.

"Miss Potter, a moment please."

Hope sighed, ushering her friends on ahead of her to Defence Against the Dark Arts while she stayed behind for a word with the cat Animagus.

"You've been a little distracted these past few weeks," Professor McGonagall noticed. "Is there something you want to tell me?"

Hope grimaced slightly. It had only been a few weeks since Sirius had sent his letter telling her that he was heading towards Hogwarts, and every single day she had been checking the Daily Prophet to see if he'd been caught yet, but thankfully there was nothing yet.

"No," she said, feeling very much like when she had been twelve and Dumbledore had asked her pretty much the same question, "I'm just getting used to the workload again is all, Professor, I'm fine."
Professor McGonagall eyed her suspiciously for a few moments, but then she conceded. Hope had, after all, inherited the stubbornness of both of her parents. She wrote out a note for her to give to Moody and sent her on her way.

The first thing she heard when she entered the classroom was Hermione's voice, filled with anxiety. "But— but you said its illegal, Professor. You said— to use it against another human was—"

"He's putting us under the Imperius," Ron told her in a low whisper as she eased over to where they were standing, dropping her bag next to the wall like everyone else had, standing aside so that Moody could clear the room of desks.

Hope frowned slightly as she took her slip up to the scarred man who grunted in acknowledgement, quickly returning to her spot beside Ron.

"Dumbledore wants you taught what it feels like," he said, giving her an unnerving stare. "If you'd rather learn the hard way— when someone's putting it on you so they can control you completely—fine by me. You're excused. Off you go."

A faint pink flush adorned Hermione's cheeks at his words as he pointed at her, and she fell abruptly silent as the first student was called forward to have the curse cast upon them. In retrospect, Hope knew that having the Imperius placed upon you would make you more likely to be able to combat it at a later date, and you'd be able to recognize the signs if you saw it.

Moody's requests were a bit mild, she had to admit, and she was grateful. She watched as Parvati sang first soprano, despite her voice being more suited for lower tones, Dean hopped around the room singing Britain's national anthem off-key, Lavender did an impressive imitation of a squirrel, and Neville did some acrobatics that were more suited for someone of a lither frame.

"Potter, you next."

Hope leaned off of the wall to make her way to the centre, well aware of the whispers that had begun now that she was going to have her shot. She barely had time to tense her body before Moody jabbed his wand at her.

"Imperio!"

Hope wasn't quite sure how to describe it, but…it kind of felt like she was floating on Cloud Nine, inexplicably happy for no reason what-so-ever. It felt like a dream…

_Dance for us…dance…_  

Her hands uncurled at her side, raising slightly and positioning outwards. _Dance…_  

_Why are you listening to him?_ A voice in her head demanded, reminding her a bit of the Romione logic she had concocted the year before, her voice of reason. _That's stupid? Who're you dancing for?_ _Dance…_  

She was unaware of the class watching her in fascination as her hair cycled through every colour known to man, her blank, vacant eyes matching each colour.  

_No, thanks, but no_, she found herself agreeing with the voice, _I'm not much of a dancer, I don't want to._  

_Dance! NOW!_
Her knees buckled and she crumpled to the floor, practically feeling the bruises forming on her forehead from the collision. She sat up, holding her head with a muffled groan. "Oh, hell—"

"Now, that's more like it! Look at that, you lot!" Moody's voice sounded very loud to her as she dragged herself into a standing position. "Potter fought! She fought it, and she damn near beat it! We'll try that again, Potter, and the rest of you, pay attention—watch her eyes, that's where you see it—very good, Potter, very good indeed! They'll have trouble controlling you!"

Hope wondered who he was referring to, but she cared more about finishing this quickly so that she could head to the hospital wing before any more permanent damage occurred to her head. Merlin knew how much had been inflicted upon it already.
"They totally think we're in a broom cupboard," Hope said in amusement.

They were, of course, not in a broom cupboard, as George had yet to convince her to enter into one willingly, much to Remus' continued relief. Zeus knew that man worried too much. The fire crackled in the fireplace as Hope sat with her back to George's chest, resting between his legs on the couch in her grandmother's room. It had peace and quiet, and that was most appreciated.

"Ah, I blame you for monopolizing my time," George murmured into her ear, his breath tingling her ear.

"I think it's the other way around, love," Hope said, playing with his fingers where they were at her waist. It was almost possessive, how he held her, but in a way that she approved of. She wasn't a possession by any means, but she was his, just as he was hers. Balance, that was always what it came down to. She turned so that her back was against the back cushions, wrapping an arm securely over his shoulders.

"Perhaps," George hummed in agreement, tilting his head to the side so that their lips were almost touching as he traced his fingers over the scar that was barely hidden by her rose-colored fringe. She shivered at the delicate touch even before he traced down her jaw to catch her chin, "but you are tempting."

"Tempting?" Her head was fuzzy from his touch and a fog had settled over her eyes. "Me?"

"Of course, you!" His finger traced the curve of her lips. "Beautiful with a love for pranking."

Hope curled her fingers into his hair. "Well, I might have forgotten to mention that Prongs was my father," she admitted, smirking when he jolted.

"You are kidding me!" he said, completely stunned. "No, you're pulling my leg!"

"Dad was an unregistered Animagus," Hope said, the smirk widening, "his form was a stag, so his friends called him Prongs." She brushed her lips against his cheek as he mouthed wordlessly, completely stunned. "Impressed?"

"Very," he promised, "and you are very distracting, did you know that?"

A bright smile illuminated her face. "Really?" She never really considered her to be such; she was more of the one who was distracted. And then they heard the distant sound of the bell ringing. Hope removed herself from his arms, standing up and straightening her robes. "Come on, we'd better get going if we want any food to be left."

George didn't even try to hide his groan of disappointment, making her smile and her cheeks flush, though it was barely visible.

"C'mere you."

Hope squeaked in surprise as she was pulled flush against him, a kiss descending upon her lips, only to release her more out of breath than when she had started.

"You're terrible," she told him with a serious look, linking her fingers with his as she dragged him towards the trap door.
They took a short cut to get to Great Hall and George parted with her to go and speak with his twin as she met up with Ron and Hermione.

Hermione's eyes widened. "What have you been doing?!" The loose waves of her cherry-coloured hair were wild and in a mess and her eyes were a bit bright, turning the colour of hazel.

"Nothing!" Hope said defensively, allowing Hermione to straighten the mess that was her hair while Ron gagged, no doubt imagining what she had been doing.

"Oh, shut up, Ron!" she demanded, sitting down beside where George was, whispering fervently to Fred. "We were doing rather a lot of sitting, I will have you know!"

"That's better," Ron said, pale in relief. It was just too weird that his best mate was dating his brother, even if it had been a year.

"It's a bummer, all right," George's sombre voice floated over to them. "But if he won't talk to us in person, we'll have to send him the letter after all. Or we'll stuff it into his hand. He can't avoid us forever."

"Who's avoiding you?" Ron asked as he and Hermione sat opposite the twins and Hope.

"Wish you would," Fred said in genuine aggravation that showed in his eyes.

"What's a bummer?" He pressed on, switching gears to George, but he might as well have just quit because the twins could be very secretive if they wanted to, and it was immensely difficult to get anything out of them; Hope had tried once, to little avail.

"Having a nosy git like you for a brother," George told him shortly.

"Did you ever ask Professor McGonagall about the tournament?" Hope asked, dragging him away from the clearly one-sided conversation.

"I asked McGonagall how the champions are chosen but she wasn't telling," George said in a mournful manner as he settled his hand comfortably at her waist. "She just told me to shut up and get on with transfiguring my raccoon."

"Wonder what the tasks are going to be?" Ron muttered thoughtfully.

"Probably something very dangerous," Hope said dryly.

"You know, I bet we could do them, Hope. We've done dangerous stuff before..." Ron winked at her and she rolled her eyes at him for good measure.

"Not in front of a panel of judges, you haven't," Fred said, agreeing with Hope. "McGonagall says the champions get awarded points according to how well they've done the tasks."

"D'you know who the judges are?" Hope asked.

"Well, the Heads of the participating schools are always on the panel," said Hermione, who had been very quite since they had sat down, having nothing to properly say until now, "because all three of them were injured during the Tournament of 1792, when a cockatrice the champions were supposed to be catching went on the rampage."

"Really?" Hope was staring at her like she had never quite seen anything like her before. "Don't tell me this was in *Hogwarts, A History!*"
"It is," she admitted, "Though, of course, that book's not entirely reliable. A Revised History of Hogwarts would be a more accurate title. Or A Highly Biased and Selective History of Hogwarts, Which Glosses Over the Nastier Aspects of the School."

Hope sighed, pressing a hand over her eyes and trying to block out Hermione as she went on another tangent about house elves. She almost missed Hedwig swooping down to sit before her, nipping sharply at her fingers.

"Ow! Oh, hey Hedwig." She hooted tiredly, holding out leg, on which Hope could see a letter. She took a good chunk of Hope's food when she wasn't looking, but it didn't seem that Hope cared. The food seemed to brighten the owl who took flight immediately afterwards.

Hope grimaced, seeing that it was in Sirius' handwriting. She had sent him a letter a few weeks back that had told him she had probably been imagining the pain in her scar, but clearly he hadn't taken the bait.

Nice try, Hope.

I'm back in the country and well hidden. I want you to keep me posted on everything that's going on at Hogwarts. Don't use Hedwig, keep changing owls, and don't worry about me, just watch out for yourself. Don't forget what I said about your scar.

Sirius

She folded it up and placed it in her pocket after showing it to Hermione and Ron who shared a glance of worry before sinking mournfully into her lunch.

The arrival of the two schools had been impressive to say the least. Beauxbatons had come in a carriage pulled by winged Abraxans, dragged through the sky, while Durmstrang had literally popped right out of the Black Lake. Of course, Hope didn't doubt that they were trying to show off. It didn't help that Durmstrang had Victor Krum still as a student, as Ron had noticed in unabashed awe.

Hope wasn't too impressed; they seemed like just a bunch of kids to her, the same as Hogwarts. It must have been odd for them to uproot their life wherever they were to come here for a year.

"Good evening, ladies and gentlemen, ghosts and –most particularly– guests," Dumbledore said, causing the raucous to settle down almost immediately, his eyes twinkle as he smiled at all of them. "I have great pleasure in welcoming you all to Hogwarts. I hope and trust that your stay here will be both comfortable and enjoyable. The tournament will be officially opened at the end of the feast. I now invite you all to eat, drink, and make yourselves at home!"

Hope had to say it. She was rather impressed with the variety of the food the house elves had cooked up. There was the usual British and Irish treats that they almost always had (usually only changing on special holidays), but there were a new number of foreign foods that Hope was more than happy to put on her plate. She tried what looked like braised chicken and something that looked an awful lot like lamb. It was delicious! She pulled a bowl towards her, spooning into it what looked like shellfish stew.

"What's that?" Ron asked her, leaning forward to scrutinize it closely.

"No idea, but it looks really good."

"Bouillabaisse," Hermione supplied, to which Ron said, "Bless you."
She gave him a filthy look for his trouble. "It's French," she said, "I had it on holiday summer before last. It's very nice."

Hope sipped it, testing the taste, and she couldn't find anything to complain about; French food was pretty good.

"I'll take your word for it." Ron, however, stuck with the usual, spooning black pudding onto his plate.

"Excuse me, are you wanting ze bouillabaisse?"

Hope's first thought that the girl was very beautiful, and she wasn't wrong. Her hair was long and silvery-blonde and her blue eyes very dark. Completely by accident Hope's appearance changed to match, making her gasp in surprise.

"'Ow did you do zhat?" She asked in awe.

Hope's eyebrows furrowed as Hermione used this moment to snap her fingers under Ron's nose in an effort to pull him out of a daze, and then she realized her eyes were on her hair and a pink flush adorned her cheeks; she had thought she had learned to control her Metamorphmagus abilities by now, but clearly not.

"Oh, er, I'm a Metamorphmagus," she explained, eyeing the girl speculatively, "you look an awful lot like a Veela, if it's not rude to say."

Her smile was blinding. "Eet iz not rude," she said thickly, watching in fascination as Hope's hair faded to its typical red tresses once more with her bright eyes turning green.

"Je m'appelle Hope Potter," Hope said, her French wasn't very good, but she could hold a conversation very well if she had to. (My name is Hope Potter)

"Enchanté," Hermione said, Ron echoing her. (Nice to meet you)

Hope searched for the appropriate word in French. "Un peu," she said. "Mon accent doit être terrible." (A bit. My accent must be terrible)

She laughed. "Pas du tout. Il est très bon." (Not at all. It is very good.) She extended a fair hand.

"Fleur Delacour."

Hope shook it with a smile. "Nice to meet you," she said, switching back to English. "These are my friends, Hermione Granger and Ron Weasley."

"Enchanté," Hermione said, Ron echoing her. (Nice to meet you)

"Would you like to join us?" Hope asked kindly, noticing the stares their little group was getting.

Fleur glanced back towards the Beauxbaton's lot over at the Ravenclaw table, but they didn't seem to notice she had gone. As she turned back, Hope caught a glimpse of sadness in her eyes.

"I would love to."

If Hope had looked up from the conversation as Hermione began to inquire about the French-speaking girl of Beauxbatons, she would have seen Professor McGonagall nodding approvingly at the international magical cooperation that was already occurring.
Fleur had only just finished telling them at Beauxbatons was more of a school for academics than for sport, leaving Ron stunned that anyone would want to go to a school that didn't have Quidditch when Dumbledore called for quiet once more.

"The moment has come." Dumbledore smiled at all of them. "The Triwizard Tournament is about to start. I would like to say a few words of explanation before we bring in the casket just to clarify the procedure that we will be following this year. But first, let me introduce, for those who do not know them, Mr. Bartemius Crouch, Head of the Department of International Magical Cooperation—" He gestured to the man had accused Hope of conjuring the Dark Mark just over the summer— "and Mr. Ludo Bagman, Head of the Department of Magical Games and Sports." The boyish-faced man beamed at them all as they applauded, waving wildly. "Mr. Bagman and Mr. Crouch have worked tirelessly over the last few months on the arrangements for the Triwizard Tournament, and they will be joining myself, Professor Karkaroff, and Madame Maxime on the panel that will judge the champions' efforts."

Dumbledore must have realized now that all of the attention was on him, but he paid them no heed, turning instead to Filch. "The casket, then, if you please, Mr. Filch."

They all watched attentively as the caretaker approached carrying a wooden chest into which jewels had been melded. It was beautiful, and ancient.

"The instructions for the tasks the champions will face this year have already been examined by Mr. Crouch and Mr. Bagman and they have made the necessary arrangements for each challenge." Dumbledore's half-moon spectacles reflected the light of the torches. "There will be three tasks, spaced throughout the school year, and they will test the champions in many different ways...their magical prowess– their daring –their powers of deduction –and, of course, their ability to cope with danger. As you know, three champions compete in the tournament, one from each of the participating schools. They will be marked on how well they perform each of the Tournament tasks and the champion with the highest total after task three will win the Triwizard Cup. The champions will be chosen by an impartial selector: the Goblet of Fire."

Hope watched in silence as he removed a roughly wooden carved cup that was large enough to be Dumbledore's height when resting on top of the chest it had been inside. Everyone 'Ooh'ed with excitement when blue and white flames burst into being at the brim, reaching at least a foot above it.

Dumbledore tapped a wrinkled hand against its base, saying clearly to the rest of them: "Anybody wishing to submit themselves as champion must write their name and school clearly upon a slip of parchment and drop it into the goblet. Aspiring champions have twenty-four hours in which to put their names forward. Tomorrow night, Halloween, the goblet will return the names of the three it has judged most worthy to represent their schools. The goblet will be placed in the entrance hall tonight, where it will be freely accessible to all those wishing to compete." Excited whispers sprung forth at his words. "To ensure that no underage student yields to temptation, I will be drawing an Age Line around the Goblet of Fire once it has been placed in the entrance hall. Nobody under the age of seventeen will be able to cross this line."

Was she imagining it or were his eyes flickering to her spot? She felt affronted; did she look like someone who wanted to seek out fame and glory when they were already known as the Girl-Who-Lived (which was a horrible title really)?

"Finally, I wish to impress upon any of you wishing to compete that this tournament is not to be entered into lightly. Once a champion has been selected by the Goblet of Fire, he or she is obliged to
see the tournament through to the end. The placing of your name in the goblet constitutes a binding, magical contract. There can be no change of heart once you have become a champion. Please be very sure, therefore, that you are wholeheartedly prepared to play before you drop your name into the goblet. Now, I think it is time for bed. Good night to you all."

"Are you going to enter?" Hope asked Fleur, scrutinizing her. "Are you seventeen? You look seventeen."

"I am, to both," Fleur said, smiling.

"Good luck," said Ron, completely serious, "my older brothers are going to try to fool the Age Line into thinking they're a few months older."

Hermione rolled her eyes. "Well, it's not going to work, is it?"

"We can laugh at their misfortune," Hope said with a grin, winking at George as he pulled her out of her seat by both of her hands. "Hey, handsome."

Ron made a groaning noise and Fleur arched a pale eyebrow.

"That's George Weasley," Hermione supplied for her. "He and Hope have been dating since last year; Ron thinks they're too sappy."

"How would you feel if your friend was snogging your brother?" Ron grumbled mutinously at her side.

Fleur had to stifle a giggle at that.

"Oh, and Fleur, we can give you the grand tour tomorrow if you like," Hope said, dragging her attention away from her boyfriend temporarily.

"Zhat would be lovely," Fleur said in her throaty voice, grateful for the kindness the three had shown her. They had no way of knowing that she was very much an outcast in Beauxbatons with her Veela blood. She was quite grateful for their companionship, even if her Allure annoyed Hermione a little and made Ron slightly dazed.

She would be writing home later to her Maman and Papa and little Gabrielle telling them of how she was now looking forward to the year ahead with very much excitement.

The two foreign schools apparently had places to sleep all set up in their ship and carriage, so they wouldn't be rooming in the castle (Ron mourned the loss of Victor Krum). The Durmstrang lot seemed to be quite eager to leave the hall, so much so that Karkaroff, the Headmaster of Durmstrang, reached the entrance with his students at the same time as Hope did. Hope took a quick step back, allowing them to leave first.

"Thank you," he said, barely glancing at her, before freezing and staring. Hope raised her chin in defiance, her eyes narrowing slightly as George's fingers tightened over hers. She had no idea that the shift she had made had thrown her scar more into the light than before.

Hope could feel the eyes on her from the Durmstrang students, but she didn't glance down to them, keeping her eyes firmly on Karkaroff, an eyebrow rising slightly. "Can I help you, Headmaster Karkaroff?" she asked coolly, making him jump slightly.

"N—"
"Yeah, that's Hope Potter." Hope shifted her eyes to see Moody stumping towards them, leaning heavily on his roughly whittled staff, eyeing him with that uncomfortable stare of his that none of his students ever wanted to be on the receiving end of. Hope watched in morbid fascination as Karkaroff's face went from off-white to completely transparent in a matter of seconds, anger and fear flooding his eyes.

"You!" he said, completely stunned, as though he had never expected to see Moody in a school setting (that set Hope wondering just what Moody was like when he was in school...strange thought). Well, Moody was a weird teacher, she had to admit it, but he was good, he told you what you needed to hear, not what you wanted to hear. He wasn't afraid of upsetting his students if it meant that they would be better prepared in the future.

"Me," Moody said with a cold smile that sent even a shiver down Hope's spine. "And unless you've got anything to say to Potter, Karkaroff, you might want to move. You're blocking the doorway."

It was only then that Hope realized just how many people were waiting to leave and wanting to know what was causing the traffic jam.

Karkaroff gritted his teeth, sparing Moody one last venomous glance as he led his students out of the hall.

"Hope, this way!"

"Huh?" was all Hope managed to say as George led her out to the courtyard in the completely opposite direction of the Gryffindor common room. "George, where're we—?" He didn't answer her, simply pulling something out of his pocket and muttering: "Engorgio!"

Hope barely blinked when the broomstick grew from its shrunken form to hover in the air before them. She laughed. "You do realize that we'll be breaking curfew soon, don't you?"

"Was that statement supposed to mean something?" George asked with a grin. "This is us, we're talking about."

Hope's breath hitched a little as he said 'us', as if they were a single unit. He had never said 'us', it was always 'you' or 'me'.

"Did I say something wrong?" George asked, suddenly apprehensive at her sudden silence, when she lifted her head to give him a blinding smile.

"No," she promised, her voice pleased, "you didn't say anything wrong at all." She positioned herself side saddle on the broom as George mounted it, wrapping one arm securely around his neck as they took flight. Normally, Hope didn't really prefer this way of flying. One could easily fall off, which was why it was taught to have the broomstick positioned between the legs rather than under both of them, but she preferred this way so she could hold onto George and see him rather than just having her back to him; that was hardly romantic.

"So, how are you planning on getting past the Age Line?" Hope asked as they passed over the Black Lake, too high up to be seen by the Durmstrang lot.

"Oh, we're thinking an Aging Potion," George said with a conspirator smile that Hope had probably worn at one point or another.

"Uh-huh, and if that doesn't work?" Hope asked, her lips curling into a smile, amused by his and Fred's nerves.
"Ah, well," George shrugged, his shoulder moving against her, "then we'll just have to deal with someone else as the Hogwarts Champion, won't we?"

"Maybe they won't be that bad," Hope admonished, kissing his cheek fondly. "Maybe it'll be someone you like."

Oh, if only she knew just how right she would be.
"The Astronomy Tower's got the best view," Hope said, sparing Fleur a smile as the older girl trailed after them, taking in as much as she could as they ascended up until they were standing outside with nothing but the wind and the sky. "Of course, it's much better at night; it's the best place to stargaze from—"

"And we all know how often you do that," Ron said, rolling his eyes slightly.

Hope looked affronted at his comment. "I will have you know that I haven't star-gazed at all this term!" The yet was silent.

"Which is astonishing by itself," Hermione told Fleur who gave a short laugh as Hope said in a voice of indignation "Oi!"

"Well, that's probably everything," Hope admitted once they were back inside, "well, obviously not everything. I mean, it's not like we know where everything is in Hogwarts…Fred and George probably know more, they know everything about Hogwarts, secret passages and all that."

Hermione burst into giggles at the mention of the Weasley twins.

"What?" Hope and Ron asked flummoxed.

"I suppose you didn't go down to the Great Hall for early for breakfast, then?" Hermione said, her lips twitching. "After the Durmstrang students put their names into the goblet, Fred and George tried to enter using an Aging Potion."

"How much did it backfire?" Hope asked in delight, her imagination running wild.

"They had rather impressive white beards, I have to say."

Hope and Ron positively howled with laughter, startling a few stray students as they passed them by.

"Miss Potter, Mr. Weasley!"

"S'not our fault, Professor!" Hope gasped, hardly recovered from her fit. "It's Hermione's fault!"

Hermione shot them a glare while Fleur watched on in obvious amusement. "I was just telling them about what happened to Fred and George when they tried to cross the Age Line, Professor," she said calmly.

Professor McGonagall resisted smiling, but only just. "Ah, yes, I've heard they are now clean-shaven, courtesy of Madam Pomfrey."

"That's good," Hope said, finally having calmed down a bit to introduce their new friend, "this is Fleur Delacour, by the way, from Beauxbatons. Fleur, this is our Transfiguration professor, Professor McGonagall."

"How are you enjoying your stay, Miss Delacour?" Professor McGonagall asked kindly.

"Eet iz…'ow do you say eet?" She glanced to Hope for help.

"Fascinant?" Hope offered helpfully. (Fascinating)
"Oui," Fleur said smiling, "I 'ave never seen anyzing like eet." (Yes)

"I'm glad," Professor McGonagall said honestly.

"Zhanke you for ze tour," she told the three, "I 'ave to get back to Madam Maxime, but may I join you for déjeuner?" (lunch)

"Sure, we're not expecting anyone," Hope assured her as they all waved goodbye.

"Think she'll be picked for Beauxbatons?" Ron asked as they began to walk towards the Great Hall once more.

Hermione shrugged. "We'll just have to wait until tonight to find out, won't we?"

But the hours that led up to the Halloween feast were much longer than the three had anticipated. However, they did manage to visit Hagrid down at his hut briefly before the start of the feast which was a welcome relief because they hadn't been to see him since term had started, not counting the times they'd seen him in Care for Magical Creatures.

They were almost late to the Great Hall, but that didn't mean that there wasn't still room at the Gryffindor table for the trio and Fleur, who had apparently been running late as well.

Hope laughed when she saw Fred and George, as clean-shaven as Professor McGonagall had said they would be. "So, boys, how was it to have an elderly man's beard."

"Enlightening," they both said.

"Hope it's Angelina," Fred said, his eyes twinkling at the mention of his girlfriend. "If only the feast could end sooner..."

A few laughs were tossed his way at that comment.

"Oh, shut up, you!" Angelina complained, a dark flush appearing on her already quite dark cheeks. "Don't go saying things like that! It's bad luck!"

"Is it?" He waggled his eyebrows at her, swooping in for a kiss that she laughed through.

"Oh, Fleur, I hadn't realized we hadn't introduced you!" Hope said suddenly sheepish, gesturing to the sixth year sitting beside her. "This is my boyfriend, George Weasley, and that's his twin over there, Fred, with Angelina, and Lee and Alicia."

A chorus of hellos descended upon the Veela, whom the boys had to blink several times at to clear the fog over their eyes that her Allure created. She couldn't help but be relieved that it didn't affect them quite as badly, but then, they did seem to be in serious relationships with the girls they were with.

"Is that one French?" Ron asked once dinner had appeared before them, referring to a dish to his right.

Fleur inspected it. "Oui. It's chicken with muchroom sauce?" She threw a glance to the girls.


"It eez good," she said with a throaty laugh, "you should try it."

Ron eyed it apprehensively, making Hope and Hermione laugh.
Hope elbowed him in the ribs. "Come on! It's not like it's going to eat you!"

Halloween dinner dragged on longer than usual. Hope couldn't be sure if that was normal because something had always happened on Halloween, either cutting it short, or she had skipped it all together. In first year, the troll in the dungeon had come after they were barely into desert, second year she had eaten with Ron and Hermione in the hospital wing, and third year she'd been knocked out by her loving godfather on the way back down to the dinner.

It seemed like it had been hours upon hours when all the foods and silverware and plates had vanished, leaving behind a sudden silence and quiet excitement.

Dumbledore called them all to turn their attention to the goblet which wasn't really necessary as they were all staring at it rather avidly. "Well, the goblet is almost ready to make its decision. I estimate that it requires one more minute. Now, when the champions' names are called, I would ask them please to come up to the top of the Hall, walk along the staff table, and go through into the next chamber" –he waved a hand off to the side to indicate the antechamber the champions would be going through shortly— "where they will be receiving their first instructions."

He waved his wand slowly around the room, reducing the light of every candle so that they appeared to be barely lit, giving the room an almost ominous feel as the blue flames were the brightest thing in the hall.

"Any second," Hope could hear Lee whisper to Alicia as the blue flames turned swiftly to a pinkish-red colour, sparks being thrown from it until it disgorged a bit of parchment that Dumbledore was quick to catch, paying no heed to the sound of gasps at the sudden appearance of the parchment.

Dumbledore held it gingerly in his hands (Hope wondered if it was hot from the fire) before reading off: "The champion for Durmstrang…will be Viktor Krum."

An explosion followed his words. Hope wasn't too surprised there, he was, after all, a quite famous Quidditch player, much better than she could have ever hoped to be.

"No surprise there!" Ron called over the noise, his laughter lost amongst it as Viktor disappeared through the door that Dumbledore had only indicated moments earlier.

"Bravo, Viktor! Knew you had it in you!" Hope didn't even have to glance to where the Durmstrang lot was sitting at the Slytherin table to know that it had been Headmaster Karkaroff who had spoken.

Because it hadn't been clear that he favoured Krum at all, had it?

Hermione was apparently thinking the same thing, because once the noise had died down a little she had rolled her eyes and made a derisive noise.

The goblet had turned red again and they all turned their attention to it once more, gasping a second time when a second bit of parchment was expelled.

"The champion of Beauxbatons…is Fleur Delacour!"

Hope applauded loudly with her friends, a beaming smile on her face, as Fleur blushed faintly before rising and following Viktor.

"Oh look, they're all disappointed!" Hermione said, nodding to the students of Beauxbatons, as most were clustered at the Ravenclaw table. Disappointed didn't seem to cover it. A number of the girls had burst into tears that they had not been chosen as champion. That was a little ridiculous, if you asked Hope.
"Think they know how dangerous it is?" Hope mused.

Ron snorted. "Please, that's a minor thing. You know how much danger we've been in since we've known you?"

Hope's cheeks pinked as Fred, George, and Lee picked up on her comment. She threw all three a filthy look, and it hardly assuaged as George kissed her cheek.

Silence fell one last time. This was it. The Hogwarts champion was the last one to be chosen…who would it be?

Flames burned red and a last piece of parchment was thrown from it.

"The Hogwarts champion," Dumbledore said, reading from the burnt and yellowed paper, "is Cedric Diggory!"

Hope jumped to her feet and applauded until her hands stung, joining in with the Hufflepuffs who could have probably left hairline fractures in glass by the level of the noise that they were making in their excitement. His grin was wide as he stumbled out of his seat and Hope laughed, sparing him a wink as he walked past, sitting as soon as he followed Fleur.

"Excellent!" There was a twinkle in Dumbledore's eye as he half-heartedly attempted to quiet the Hufflepuff table. "Well, we now have our three champions. I am sure I can count upon all of you, including the remaining students from Beauxbatons and Durmstrang, to give your champions every ounce of support you can muster. By cheering your champion on, you will contribute in a very real—"

Dumbledore's voice abruptly faded, and Hope knew why. Everyone in the hall had turned their heads to where the goblet rested, red once more. What the-?

A fourth parchment was spat into the air, and Dumbledore caught it instantly, reading the name without speaking for at least a few seconds, after which he read the name: "Hope Potter."

An ice-cold fist clenched around Hope's heart and all she wanted to do was stay where she was frozen, shocked to the core. It was named the Tri-wizard Tournament for a reason, three wizards, three schools! Besides, Hope was much too young to partake in it, even if she had submitted her name willingly, and she hadn't!

"That-That's not—" she stuttered as Ron and Hermione turned to her in the stunned silence that had followed the proclamation. "You know I didn't!" her words were desperate, but they didn't seem capable of responding. Fear enveloped her; did they really think it had been her?

"Hope Potter! Hope!" Dumbledore's eyes found hers. "Up here, if you please!"

Hope didn't think that her legs would hold her up, but Hermione gave her a small push. Her brown eyes met Hope's and she could see the same fear reflected there.

"Owl Remus as soon as you can," Hope whispered.

"I promise," Hermione said, "now, go on."

Hope stood slowly, the heaviness of the air threatening to strangle her with every breath as she walked so very slowly to the front, feeling as though the distance was much longer than she originally thought until she was standing before the headmaster who handed her the smoking paper.

Hope took it, her gaze falling upon the lettering that was her name albeit in a script that she did not
recognize. She looked up from it, lacking comprehension, as if her mind had suddenly been numbed to what had just happened.

"Well…through the door, Hope."

Hope swallowed thickly but she did as he had said, passing through the doors right before the outbursts began, worse and more derogatory than she would've ever thought. Hope's shoulders sagged as she descended the stairs coming out into a chamber not unlike the Trophy Room with portraits covering every wall and a lovely fire roaring against the wall, around which the three champions were crowded.

Her heart fell into her stomach and Fleur turned around, her eyes widening slightly.

"Ope?" she uttered. "Que fais-tu ici?" (What are you doing here?)

Hope opened her mouth to explain, but her tongue didn't seem to work as the sound of many feet on the staircase. She stepped back quickly as Bagman appeared, shying away from the attention of all the eyes on her, but had little choice as Bagman gripped her by the elbow, pulling her resultantly forward.

"Extraordinary!" he breathed, his hand still on Hope's arm much to her aggravation. "Absolutely extraordinary! Gentlemen…lady…May I introduce –incredible though it may seem– the fourth Triwizard champion?"

Complete stunned surprise overtook Fleur's face as she stared at her first ever friend. She seemed to be a combination of lost and angry. Would she have really put her name in the goblet?

"You cannot be serious," Fleur said thickly, her eyes flickering between Hope's and Bagman's, "'Ope eez only fourteen, she eez too young! Zis must be a joke!"

"Joke? No, no, not at all!" Bagman insisted. "Hope's name just came out of the Goblet of Fire!"

The three champions shared a look.

"This wasn't my idea," Hope grumbled, "I was all for having a nice, normal, stress-free year, but noooo!"

Fleur stifled a giggle, a fleeting grin appeared on Cedric's face, and even Krum's lips twitched.

"But she cannot compete!" Fleur insisted. "She 'as not learned enough! She eez too young!"

Well, there was no denying that.

"Well, it's amazing…" Was he even listening to a word Fleur was saying, she had to wonder. There was someone with their head on straight. "But, as you know, the age restriction was only imposed this year as an extra safety measure. And as her name's come out of the goblet… I mean, I don't think there can be any ducking out at this stage…It's down in the rules, you're obliged…Hope will just have to do the best she—"

"Do the best I can?" Hope demanded, irritation sharpening her voice. "Are you completely mental?!"

However, Bagman did not get the opportunity to form a rebuttal to her statement as a number of other people descended the stairs as well, including: Mr. Crouch, Headmaster Karkaroff, Madame Maxime, Professor McGonagall and Snape.
"Professor!" Hope instantly beseeched her Head of House. "Professor, Bagman is saying that I'm obliged to compete, that I'll have to do the best I can!"

"Two Hogwarts champions?" Karkaroff snapped out instead, eyeing Hope with distaste. "I don't remember anyone telling me the host school is allowed two champions - or have I not read the rules carefully enough?"

"C'est impossible," Madame Maxime agreed, her eyes glittering like onyx opals, not unlike the ones resting on her large fingers. "Ogwarts cannot 'ave two champions. It is most unjust."

"We were under the impression that your Age Line would keep out younger contestants, Dumbledore," Karkaroff added snidely. "Otherwise, we would, of course, have brought along a wider selection of candidates from our own schools."

"It's no one's fault but Potter's, Karkaroff," said Snape softly. His black eyes were alight with malice. "Don't go blaming Dumbledore for Potter's determination to break rules. She has been crossing lines ever since she arrived here—"

"Here's a great idea," Hope said coldly, "why don't you shove your—"

"Hope!" the rebuke from Hope's professor made it clear, but there was also resignation present there. It was quite clear to Professor McGonagall that it would take something astronomical for those two to ever get along, and going at the rate that they were, that was likely to never happen.

"Hope." Hope's eyes –now hazel like her father's– reflected the tongues of flames in the fireplace as she turned them upon Dumbledore who had remained mostly silent and patient, two qualities she lacked in spades. "Did you put your name in the Goblet of Fire?"

"No," Hope said sincerely, "I wasn't kidding when I said I wanted to enjoy a quiet year." An eyebrow twitched in irritation at how Snape made a noise of disbelief. "I don't want anything-I don't need fame or wealth, Professor."

"And you did not ask an older student to put it into the Goblet of Fire for you?" the Headmaster implored.

"No," Hope said.

"Ah, but of course she is lying!"

Hope clenched a fist tightly at Madame Maxime's words; had none of them listened to a word she just said?

"She could not have crossed the Age Line," Professor McGonagall said with a bit of heat. "I am sure we are all agreed on that—"

"Dumbly-dorr must 'ave made a mistake wiz ze line."

"It is possible, of course," Dumbledore agreed graciously, but Professor McGonagall wasn't going to take that.

"Albus, you know perfectly well you did not make a mistake!" Professor McGonagall snapped with fire. "Really, what nonsense! Hope could not have crossed the line herself, and as Professor Dumbledore believes that she did not persuade an older student to do it for her, I'm sure that should be good enough for everybody else!"
"Mr. Crouch...Mr. Bagman," Karkaroff had turned instead to the impartial judges, it seemed, of the matter, "you are our –er– objective judges. Surely you will agree that this is most irregular?"

Hope resisted crossing her arms, waiting for Mr. Crouch's say on the matter.

"We must follow the rules, and the rules state clearly that those people whose names come out of the Goblet of Fire are bound to compete in the tournament."

Hope's face had gone pale at the thought. She could hear Hermione's voice in her head, whispering "death toll". There wasn't a doubt in her mind that the tasks would be dangerous. Now there was only the question of whether or not she would actually live through them.

"I have half the mind to leave now!" Karkaroff's voice jolted her out of her thoughts, but he was swiftly interrupted by the craggy voice of Mad-Eye Moody.

"Empty threat, Karkaroff," his gruff voice commented from the bottom of the stairs. "You can't leave your champion now. He's got to compete. They've all got to compete. Binding magical contract, like Dumbledore said. Convenient, eh?"

"Convenient?" Karkaroff seemed to barely control a shiver in the scarred man's presence. Hope didn't blame him there; Moody was very impressive looking.

"Don't you?" Moody's face twisted slightly into a smirk. "It's very simple, Karkaroff. Someone put Potter's name in that goblet knowing she'd have to compete if it came out."

"Evidently, someone 'oo wished to give 'Ogwarts two bites at ze apple!" Madame Maxime added with passionate anger, to which Karkaroff was quick to agree, informing them all that he would be filing a complaint with the Ministry.

"If anyone's got reason to complain, it's Potter," Moody commented, "but... funny thing... I don't hear her saying a word..."

"They're quite convinced that I'm a spoiled, attention-seeking brat," Hope said, rolling her eyes off to the side, pushing herself off of the wall. "Now I'm going to bed before any of you turn my headache into a migraine." And then she turned on her heel and left the chamber, unaware of the outrage and disapproval she left behind.

She wasn't too surprised to find that the Great Hall had long since emptied, it was honestly a relief. She would have been perfectly fine with rooting for Cedric as the Hogwarts champion, but then the Fates just had to throw her a wicked curveball. Now all she wanted to do was hide in her dorm until the storm passed, but obviously that was never going to happen.

The Hufflepuffs were going to be awful, she just knew it. She sighed morosely as she slowly ascended the staircase. It was going to be a flashback to second year, with everything that Ernie had said to her...she gritted her teeth together just thinking about it. The Next Dark Lady, wasn't it (perhaps even the first)? Of course, that was the only possible reason for her to have survived the Killing Curse as a child, wasn't it?

Hope sighed again. She really shouldn't be dwelling on it, all that had happened two years ago, but Hope got the feeling that it might be dredged up sooner or later, given recent events.

When she finally reached the portrait hole, someone was waiting for her.
Ron grinned at her as she approached, but it seemed a bit forced. "So, Congratulations."

"Congratulations?" Hope said a bit flummoxed. "What d'you mean, congratulations?"

"Well, no one else got across the Age Line," Ron said in an almost mocking voice that Hope quickly found she couldn't stand when it was aimed at her rather than Malfoy. "Not even Fred and George. What did you use— the Invisibility Cloak?"

"It doesn't work like that," Hope said numbly, because, to her shocked disbelief, it seemed that Ron actually thought that she was the one who had entered into the tournament on her own. "You heard Hermione, invisibility charms and cloaks don't work on Age Lines. What's wrong with you?"

"What's wrong with you?" Ron demanded incredulously, neither aware of the hole opening as the common room listened in on the impending fight. "What's wrong with you?! You're the one who entered into the stupid tournament!"

"I didn't," Hope seethed dangerously, her eyes and hair turning darker than the starless midnight sky, "put my name in that bloody goblet, I don't want glory or wealth—"

"Oh, yeah? And who would've done it then?"

"I don't know!" Hope snapped out, "but it wasn't me!"

"Right," he drawled, sounding a little like Malfoy to her aggravation, "of course not."

How could he not see it? How could he not understand after all that they had been through that this wasn't something she would do? Traitorous tears pricked her eyes as she tried to force them down, but they were going to fall soon, against her will.

She didn't stop Ron as he turned his back on her, striding back into the common room.

"Hope—"

She could hear the voice that she loved so dearly, but George could not help her. She was already on the verge and her anger exploded.

"For once in your life, leave me alone!"

And she turned and raced down the hall as the tears began to fall, giving her no chance to see the hurt expression on George's face.
"Hope! Hope! Wait!" George tore after her faster than it would have seemed possible, especially given how fleet-footed she could be. It was by pure chance that he managed to snag her wrist and jerk her around and into him. She stumbled, automatically wrapping an around his waist to steady herself, fully aware of just how close they were.

Her eyelashes were strung with water, her cheeks wet with tears, angry tears at the words of his youngest brother.

"I'm—I'm—" Hope's voice was choked, "I'm sorry I-I snapped at y-you." She rubbed harshly at her cheeks with her free hand until they were a raw-looking red. George was the softer of the twins, she knew, and she loved that about him, so it must have upset him even a little. She buried her face into his chest, wanting to block out the world entirely. The only sound she could hear was the stutter of her heart, only looking up as George drew his arms around her.

"C'mere you," he murmured, dropping his head to her shoulder as he waited out her tears, waiting for her shoulders to stop shaking. "Good?"

"Alright," Hope admitted at long last, pulling back so she could look him in the face with eyes a neutral grey, "do you believe me?" she asked, her voice barely above a whisper.

George cupped her cheek and she bit her lip. "Of course I believe you," he said, and he meant it. Hope had said that she wanted a nice quiet year, and she had been quite serious about it, that much he knew. There was always something dangerous that she found herself involved in; it was like she was attracted to danger. "This is you we're talking about," he added, kissing her cheek softly. "I know you better than most people."

Her eyes lightened to a soft brown.

"Come back to the common room," George added, taking her hand in his, but she pulled herself free quickly, an expression of unease flickering across her face. "Hope?"

"I think," her eyes focused suddenly on the ground, "I think I'm going to sleep in my Gran's room tonight…I-I don't really want to go back there…I mean…" Her voice fell away and she winced. George didn't have to think hard to know that she was thinking about what Ron had said to her.

"I'll find you in the morning," George promised, kissing her cheek again, "alright?"

"Alright," Hope said in more of a murmur as she watched him go down the hall as took a fork to the corridor that led to the Gryffindor common room portrait hole. She only turned away once she could no longer see him.

Getting to the secret room took longer than she thought and by the time she collapsed onto the couch before the fire she felt as though her body was lead. Hope pressed her palms into her eyes. The whole night had been a complete mess.

"Er…could I speak with a house elf?" she said awkwardly after a few moments of silence.

"Hope Potter, miss?"

The familiar squeaky voice jolted her hands from her face and she found herself staring at the house elf before her. He, as it was a male, had large green eyes and a thin nose, and he was wearing a
strange assortment of jumpers, shorts, and socks, none of which matched.

"Dobby?" she gasped in surprise, thrown back slightly into the couch by the force of the house elf's hug.

"Hope Potter, miss!" Dobby cried in joy into her midsection. "Hope Potter! It is Dobby! Dobby had been hoping to see you when Hope Potter's voice asked for a house elf!"

"I-er-I wasn't sure if that would work," Hope admitted, scratching her cheek as he released her, a beaming smile across his face. "I guess you work here now, then."

Dobby nodded so fast that his already bat-like ears flapped from the motion. "Dobby works mostly in the kitchen! But they isn't too picky where Dobby works as long as he works!"

Hope spared a smile to the house elf who had once gone to enormous lengths to protect her in her second year. "I'm glad…have you been working here long?"

He shook his head quickly. "No, Dobby started work yesterday," he said in obvious excitement. "Dobby came to see Professor Dumbledore, miss. You see, miss, it is difficult for a house elf who has been dismissed to get a new position, miss, very difficult indeed."

Hope shifted uncomfortably, knowing she was the cause of his dismissal, though he did seem to be much happier dismissed than he had as the Malfoys house elf.

"Dobby has travelled the country for two whole years, miss, trying to find work!" the house elf continued in his high pitched voice. "But Dobby hasn't found work, miss, because Dobby wants paying now!"

"I'm guessing many witches and wizards don't want a house elf if they have to pay them for their services," Hope mused.

Dobby nodded in agreement. "Dobby likes work, but he wants to wear clothes and he wants to be paid. Hope Potter... Dobby likes being free!"

"I'm glad," Hope said tiredly, yawning widely, "sorry, Dobby, it's been a long night...would you do me a huge favour and move my things from Gryffindor Tower to here...I don't want to go back there for a while-"

Dobby snapped his fingers and her trunk, clothes, and Hedwig's cage appeared.

"Thank you," she said in a bit of relief. "I'll see if I can't drop by the kitchens soon to see you, Dobby."

Dobby beamed. "Dobby would be delighted!"

She smiled as he disappeared with a loud pop.

It was worse than Hope thought. She wasn't sure how she had created the image of attention-seeking and needing to be in the tournament for fame's sake.

She understood why the Hufflepuffs were so angry, after all, she was stealing all of Cedric's well-deserved glory, but that didn't mean that she liked it any. The Slytherins, well, they liked any excuse to hate her. But the Ravenclaws seemed to think that she had entered her name of her own accord as well, and only a select few Gryffindors believed her.
She counted to ten in her head as she passed by any of the three houses attempting to keep her terrible temper in check. So far it was working, which was a great relief to her because it seemed to get worse every year.

"Remus!"

The shabbily-dressed wizard was the first person she saw the morning several days after the Goblet of Fire incident. Relief shone her eyes amber and she threw her arms around the man and embraced him so tightly that she was sure she cracked rib or two.

"Hope! Are you alright?" He inspected her face closely; now that he was near he could see that there were light grey crescent moons under her ever-changing eyes and stress lining her face.

"I've been worse," Hope admitted with a half grin as they wandered but mostly empty halls to sit on the stone bench. "I guess you got Hermione's letter, then?"

"I did," Remus agreed, "she said your name came out of the Goblet of Fire?" She could hear the incredulity in his voice at the thought of such an occurrence.

Hope laughed without feeling. "Yeah, Moody reckons that someone over the age limit submitted my name under a fourth school." He had told her the theory a day or so before as she had walked out on the debating group in the antechamber on Halloween.

Remus fell silent for a moment digesting the information. "And the goblet is a magical binding contract," he murmured, "very clever…"

"What are you talking about?" Hope asked a bit flummoxed, "what's clever?"

"Well, if you enter your name into the goblet, you forfeit your right to withdraw," Remus explained, "those who enter know the risk of doing so. No one's ever broken a magical contract before, but I've heard it's…unpleasant."

"How unpleasant?" Hope had to ask to which Remus said rather vaguely, "Let's just say that it's not recommended."

Hope heaved a heavy sigh, raking her fingers through her hair giving off the impression that she had just been flying. That was a James move if he had ever seen one. Though, while James has done it for attention, it was clear that it was one of the many nervous habits that Hope had developed over the years.

"So I'm basically screwed," she said in an abysmal voice, "that's just bloody fantastic!"

"Hope, you understand just how dangerous these tasks will be?" he asked in concern.

"I've heard," Hope muttered, "Remus…" her voice faltered slightly. "Remus, I'm scared."

It was the first time she had said it aloud. Putting on a brave face could only last so long.

"I would expect you to be," he told her honestly. "These tasks feed off of fear; they're designed to test you in very brutal ways. At the very least you should be looking into advanced spells, offensive, defensive—"

"But I'm not sure I can do those kinds of spells!" Hope grumbled.

"Hope, you need to be on the same level as three seventh year students," he insisted, "and your first
task is only weeks away! You should start researching and taking extra time with your professors. Your friends can help you there."

Hope dropped her head twisting her fingers in her lap. "Ron and I…Ron and I aren't really talking."

"You're not?" Remus asked in surprise, his eyebrows rising. "Why?"

Hope's lips drew downwards into a frown. She glared off into the distance. "He thinks that I put my name into the goblet…Hermione thinks it's because he's jealous, but…" Hope bit down on her lip. It had hurt her, he could tell that just by looking.

He dropped the subject quickly. "Talk with Minerva and Filius, I'm sure they can give you some help…just try to keep out of trouble, will you? And whatever you do, try to avoid a reporter named Rita Skeeter, she'll twist whatever you say."

Hope grunted in agreement, even if she was a little confused about the last bit, as he squeezed her hand and kissed the top of her head, sparing her a quick goodbye before striding off and back to the castle in search of the youngest male Weasley. He wasn't too difficult to find.

"Hello, Ron."

Ron looked up from his porridge, which he had hardly touched, swirling it around in his bowl with disinterest. His eyes widened slightly. "Professor Lupin! What're you doing here?"

Remus gave him a swift and tired smile as he sat opposite him, well aware of the stares and whispers they were receiving. "I'm hardly your professor now, but I came to visit Hope." He watched Ron's face with interest. "She misses you."

Ron flinched, ducking his head. He did regret it after he'd said the words, but the damage had been done. He had never insulted her so much before; how could he have said those things? How could have not believed her? She was his best mate! He knew he was one of the reasons she looked so miserable these days.

"She does?" His voice sounded small.

Remus smiled. "She'll forgive you eventually…maybe you both need a little time apart, maybe then you'll both understand each other a bit more."

"Maybe…" Ron frowned slightly, but he couldn't deny that he missed her.

"Do you know what this meeting is for?" Hope asked Fleur as they descended the stairs, heading for the classroom that they had been told to enter into.

"No," she said in her throaty voice, watching Hope carefully, and she knew why. Hope had almost exploded (it was a very near thing) only a few hours earlier when Hermione had been hit with a spell that had caused her front teeth to grow past her chin. All because of stupid Malfoy. "'Ow eez 'Ermione?"

Hope exhaled a long, slow sigh. "Much better than she was before…she had Madam Pomfrey go a little further on her teeth so they're now the size she wants them to be."

"Zhat's good," Fleur said as they pushed open the door.

"Ah, there they are!" Bagman beamed as they entered, the smile completely encompassing his face
and making him look much younger than he was. "Champions three and four! In you come, ladies, in you come...nothing to worry about, it's just the wand weighing ceremony, the rest of the judges will be here in a moment."

"Wand weighing ceremony?" Hope said in confusion. "What've we got to have out wands weighed for?"

"Oh, it's nothing like that!" Bagman chortled. "We have to check that your wands are fully functional, no problems, you know, as they're your most important tools in the tasks ahead. The expert's upstairs now with Dumbledore. And then there's going to be a little photo shoot. This is Rita Skeeter. She's doing a small piece on the tournament for the Daily Prophet..."

Hope's eyes fell upon the woman whom he had gestured at. So this was Rita Skeeter, it was nice to put a name to a face. She felt an instant dislike towards the woman in magenta robes. Her pale blonde hair was set in tight curls upon her head and her jewelled spectacles hardly matched. Ever since Remus had mentioned the name, Hope had done some research, and it wasn't pretty. She had written an article in response to her parents' engagement announcement, speculating why a Lord of an Ancient House was marrying so young and to a woman of lesser class (obviously thinking her Mum was pregnant). Hope was still angry about it and that had been over fourteen years ago.

"Maybe not that small, Ludo," the witch commented, eyeing Hope in speculation as the girl narrowed her own. "I wonder if I could have a little word with Hope before we start? The youngest champion, you know...to add a bit of colour?"

"Certainly!" Bagman was surprisingly eager to agree. "That is—if Hope has no objection?"

"I'm not going near that woman without Godric Gryffindor's sword in my hand," Hope said firmly, "and I'm certainly not telling you anything."

"Dear," Rita said in a sickly sweet voice, clearly not used to rejection, "I'm afraid you don't quite understand the point—"

"You slandered my mother's name months before her wedding," Hope said coldly, "keep talking, it won't get you anywhere."

And then she practically steered Fleur to Cedric who had been watching the exchange with interest.

"Did she really?" he asked lowly.

"I read the article," Hope said wryly, "believe me, if you had, you'd be impressed with my restraint."

Cedric had to crack a smile there. "Well done."

"Oh, don't mock me!" Hope laughed. "I work very hard on that temper of mine!"

"Do you really?" Fleur asked in fascination as she had yet to see one of Hope's explosions. "I didn't know."

"Then you must've just missed her," Cedric said, "second year was a nightmare...I don't think she and Ernie MacMillan are ever going to get along..."

"That's not my fault," Hope said with a derisive snort, examining her nails. "He's the one who thought I used dark magic at the age of one to kill Voldemort...but I can see why he wasn't in Ravenclaw."
Fleur smothered her giggles. She had quickly learned of each of the traits that each house was known for. Gryffindors were brave, Hufflepuffs were loyal, Ravenclaws were intelligent, and Slytherins were cunning.

Cedric tried not to grin, as she was speaking of a member of his house.

A clearing of a throat had all four champions, including Viktor who had been brooding in a corner it seemed, turning towards the sound. It had been Dumbledore who was now standing behind what must have been the judges' table (though why there needed to be judges, Hope didn't know, because it wasn't like they could just say "Oh, we hate your wand, get a new one."), which included himself, Professor Karkaroff, Madame Maxime, Mr. Crouch, and Ludo Bagman.

"May I introduce Mr. Ollivander?" Dumbledore said, smiling at them all. "He will be checking your wands to ensure that they are in good condition before the tournament."

Hope was surprised that Mr. Ollivander was the expert. Of course, there was no denying he knew his craft, if how he remembered each wand he'd ever had was any indication, but she had been expecting someone a bit more…maybe official-looking. Hope had bought her wand from him the day of her birthday, and she remembered that day very well, and what he had said to her in that cryptic voice of his.

"Mademoiselle Delacour, could we have you first, please?" Mr. Ollivander asked as he stepped into the light, making his pale hair seem much wilder than it was.

Fleur arched a pale eyebrow, but she still moved forward to give him her wand.

He held it gingerly, as if the wood was very delicate, before winding it in his fingers, pink and gold sparks bursting from the tip. "Ah, yes," he said, intently focused on the wand, "nine and a half inches…inflexible…rosewood…and containing…dear me…" He sounded very surprised, heightening Hope's curiosity towards her new friend's core.

"An 'air from ze 'ead of a Veela," Fleur explained with a hint of a smile. "One of my grandmuzzer's." So, that would make her only a fourth of a Veela. Hope couldn't help but be relieved that she wasn't a full Veela; the Allure must be a menace.

"Yes," Mr. Ollivander agreed, "yes, I've never used Veela hair myself, of course. I find it makes for rather temperamental wands...however, to each his own, and if this suits you…"

"It does," she said firmly, her eyes glinting as if daring him to say otherwise.

He hummed in agreement, examining with the tips of his fingers rather briefly before saying an incantation, "Orchideous!" A dozen beautiful orchids burst forth, which he handed to Fleur graciously with her wand. "Very well, very well, it's in fine working order. Mr. Diggory, you next…ah, now, this is one of mine, isn't it?"

He seemed to brighten visibly at the familiarity of a wand of his own creation. "Yes, I remember it well. Containing a single hair from the tail of a particularly fine male unicorn...must have been seventeen hands; nearly gored me with his horn after I plucked his tail. Twelve and a quarter inches... ash... pleasantly springy. It's in fine condition...You treat it regularly?"

Hope arched an eyebrow and stared. When had anyone ever said that they needed to clean their wand? She looked down at her own but doubted it would have made a difference with its rough texture.

Murmuring a soft spell after Cedric had agreed to his question, Mr. Ollivander jabbed the wand and a
Looking as surly as ever (seriously, Hope was wondering if he ever smiled, because it really didn't seem like his face was capable of looking pleased), Viktor Krum shoved his wand at the wand-maker in a get-it-over-with manner.

"Hm," she could hear the awe in his voice as he took it from the Quidditch player, "this is a Gregorovitch creation, unless I'm much mistaken? A fine wand-maker, though the styling is never quite what I...however..." He fell silent briefly as he inspected it. "Yes... hornbeam and dragon heartstring?" he shot at Krum, who nodded. "Rather thicker than one usually sees...quite rigid...ten and a quarter inches...Avis!"

Hope winced at the blast of noise the wand created, which was strange, considering the spell created about seven small birds that fluttered around them before escaping through either the door or the cracked window.

"Good," he said, returning the wand to Viktor, "very good...Which leaves...Miss Potter."

Hope inclined her head as she moved to stand before him, murmuring, "Mr. Ollivander." He smiled once her wand was in his hand once more. His fingers automatically roved over its surfaces as if searching for differences from when he'd given it to her to the condition it was in currently; Hope could only hope that it passed inspection.

Mr. Ollivander's eyes seemed almost like two silver moons in his eye sockets. "Ah, yes," he said quietly, "yes, yes, yes. How well I remember."

Hope bit slightly on her lip. She remembered it too. She remembered how small and nervous she had been, her two rings sliding on her thin fingers. She remembered that she went through over a dozen wands before this one chose her as its master. She had seen the wands in the display cases and the ones she had tried and none of them looked the type for her. In other words, they were too clean cut, too delicately carved, and Hope, that wasn't really her style.

She had been more than relieved that the wand that had chosen her more closely resembled a branch that had been roughly and haphazardly carved.

She remembered clearly the look of surprise on Mr. Ollivander's face when the silver sparks had erupted from its tip. She had asked him about it, of course, and had been shocked to discover that the phoenix tail feather in her wand had come from the same phoenix as Voldemort's. Of course, that was nothing compared to finding out she was actually related to the bastard. She shivered mentally, some things people could do without knowing. She had never told anyone about that, she had never felt the need and she wasn't sure that she ever would.

"Holly," he murmured, "eleven inches, phoenix feather core...very resistant, hard to find a wand so loyal to its master."

Hope could feel her cheeks heating up at the compliment; she had always thought when he had said it the first time that he had made it that way, but clearly not.

He gave it a twirl and a few fireworks erupted from the tip painting a short explosion of reds, blues, and purples across the air.

"In perfect condition," he assured her pressing it into her palm with a kind smile only a man like him could possess. "Do take care of it, Miss Potter."
"Don't worry, I will," she assured him, watching him leave with a bit of a bemused smile. He really was a rather strange old man, wasn't he?

"Thank you all." Hope blinked a few times, directing her attention towards Dumbledore as he stood, sweeping around the table, his eyes twinkling. "You may go back to your lessons now—or perhaps it would be quicker just to go down to dinner, as they are about to end—"

Hope was all for that, but then Bagman had to go and bring up the damned photos! Could the day get any worse? Hope silenced a groan at the predatory gleam in Rita Skeeter's eyes.

*Probably.*
Hope felt as though her brain had already turned to mush from the sheer amount of studying she was doing and that was before she had seen the dragons. She had been cutting close as it was because Sirius was going to be fire-calling her soon, but Hagrid had insisted that she come. She hadn't understood why until she had seen the massive creatures in the cage, and then her jaw had dropped, however she was thankfully under the Invisibility Cloak so no one saw it.

Four dragons, each in their own cage, and one in particular looked incredibly volatile. Hope stumbled back in horror. How on earth was she going to be able to get past that? She was going to have to devote most of her time to water spells if she wanted to even escape unburned…she was so screwed!

Hope checked her watch feverishly as she ran back to the castle. She might not make it…it would be close. She tripped, falling into someone in her haste.

"Who's there?"

Hope held her breath and didn't move as Karkoroff surveyed the area before muttering to himself and striding towards Durmstrang's ship. Hope glared after him. First Hagrid had invited Madame Maxime so obviously she was going to tell Fleur, but now Krum was going to know too. Poor Cedric was the only one that wasn't going to know at this rate.

She waited in silence for a few moments more before dusting herself off and racing off towards the castle once more.

By the time she reached Morea Slytherin's secret room, which had been her abode for weeks now, she was out of breath, flinging herself before the fireplace. "Sirius!" she rasped, beaming at the sight of his familiar face. To her relief, she noted that the face wasn't quite as gaunt as before, as if being on the run suited him better than Azkaban, which was very good because the prison didn't seem very pleasant to her. "You look great!"

"You look like hell," her godfather told her.

Hope's cheeks flushed. "I've been doing a lot of research, that's all; it was Remus' idea."

"I could've guessed," the man said dryly before becoming very serious. "How are you?"

"I'm still alive," Hope said, rubbing at her eyes, "so that's something, but everything's a mess…I wish you and Remus could be here. I feel like I've only got Hermione and George to talk to and it's driving me insane."

"Sorry, kiddo," Sirius said regretfully.

"And Sirius, the first task, its dragons," Hope added, her eyes wide and terrified, "how on earth am I supposed to get past a bloody dragon?"

"Dragons we can deal with, Hope, but we'll get to that in a minute," he assured her, "I haven't got long here…I've broken into a Wizarding house to use the fire, but they could be back at any time. There are things I need to warn you about."

"What're you talking about?" Hope asked, her eyebrows furrowing in confusion, her shoulders sagging just barely. "I doubt there's anything worse than facing a dragon."
"Karkaroff is definitely worse," Sirius assured her, "he was a Death Eater. You know what Death Eaters are, don't you?"

"Yes, but-you're sure?" Hope asked, her mind racing, "I mean, he's a headmaster now—"

"Oh, I'm sure," Sirius said, his voice a little cold, "his cell was near mine in Azkaban, but he got released. I'd bet anything that's why Dumbledore wanted an Auror at Hogwarts this year—to keep an eye on him. Moody's the one that caught Karkaroff, you see, he's the reason why he was thrown in Azkaban in the first place."

"That must be why he looks so terrified of him every time they're in the same room," Hope mused, "but how did he get released? I didn't think that was possible."

"It's very rare," Sirius admitted, "but he claimed that he's seen the errors of his ways and then he gave the Ministry names of known Death Eaters…it made him quite unpopular. And you'll want to keep an eye on Durmstrang's champion; those students have been learning the Dark Arts since he became headmaster."

Hope wrinkled her nose. Viktor didn't seem too bad, granted, they hadn't actually talked much to begin with. "Okay, keep an eye on Karkaroff, keep an eye on Viktor, anything else?"

"You mustn't take this likely, Hope," Sirius warned, "these tasks are dangerous, even more so now with devils within the walls."

"I know, I get, I really do," Hope assured him, though slightly annoyed that so many people were telling her the same exact thing. "Remus has already given me the whole talk about staying alive."

"Good on him, then," Sirius grumbled, "someone's got to."

"Hey!"

"Anyways, I've been trying to keep an eye on the Daily Prophet, Hope—"

"Isn't everyone?" Hope muttered in irritation. Rita Skeeter had found out about her and George's relationship and was throwing things way out of context because he was a couple years older than her (which was ridiculous really, because some people married others who were at least a decade younger than them and Hope was only a bit more than two years younger).

"—and reading between the lines of that Skeeter woman's article last month," Sirius said, speaking over her, "Moody was attacked the night before he started at Hogwarts. Yes, I know she says it was another false alarm, but I don't think so, somehow. I think someone tried to stop him from getting to Hogwarts. I think someone knew their job would be a lot more difficult with him around. And no one's going to look into it too closely; Mad-Eye's heard intruders a bit too often. But that doesn't mean he can't still spot the real thing. Moody was the best Auror the Ministry ever had."

"You think it was Karkaroff, then?" Hope asked. "But why? Why would he want to kill me?"

Sirius paused, contemplating his words. "I've heard some strange things," he admitted, "about the Death Eaters…they've been more active than usual. Why else would they have shown themselves so callously at the Quidditch World Cup? And-did you hear about that Ministry of Magic witch who's gone missing?"

"Er…" Hope racked her memory. "Bertha Jorkins, wasn't it?"

"Yes. She disappeared in Albania, and that's definitely where Voldemort was rumoured to be
"Yeah, but what are the chances that she actually ran into Voldemort there?" Hope tried to reason.

"Listen," Sirius said lowly, "I knew Bertha Jorkins. She was at Hogwarts when I was, a few years above your dad and me. And she was an idiot. Very nosy, but no brains, none at all. It's not a good combination, Hope. I'd say she'd be very easy to lure into a trap."

Hope pressed her hands into her face.

"I know this isn't what you really want to hear," Sirius said awkwardly, "but you've got to know."

"No, I get it," Hope said, looking into the fire, into his eyes, "and you're the first person who hasn't treated me like a child. That's the first bit of information anyone's given me yet."

"The more you know, the better prepared you'll be," Sirius said reasonably, "but I can't help thinking the tournament would be a very good way to attack you and make it look like an accident."

"Death by dragon seems like a good plan," Hope said with a wide yawn.

"Right, these dragons, don't be tempted to try a Stunning Spell," Sirius warned, "dragons are too strong and too powerfully magical to be knocked out by a single Stunner, you need about half a dozen wizards at a time to overcome a dragon—" He fell silent quickly. "Someone's coming, I've got to go—"

"Sirius!"

But he had gone, leaving Hope with a smouldering fireplace.

She didn't sleep at all that night, she was kept far too busy researching water-based magic into the early hours of the next day, only to leave the room rather early, intent on the Hufflepuff common room, fortunately coming across Cedric leaving early to meet Cho.

"Cedric!"

He looked back in startled surprise. "Hope, what're you doing here?"

"The first task," Hope gasped as she came to a stop beside him, "it's dragons, Cedric."

"It's— what?" Cedric asked, stunned.

"Dragons," Hope repeated, probably looking as ill as she felt, "one for each of us. I saw them in the forest. You're the only one that doesn't know; Madame Maxime and Karkaroff were there, so they'll have told Fleur and Viktor by now."

Cedric hesitated. "But why'd you tell me?"

Hope gave him an annoyed glance. "Well that wouldn't be fair, know would it?" Irritated from lack of sleep and Cedric's response, Hope strode off in a huff.

"Hermione!" she grabbed her friend before she descend the stairs. "Hermione, I need your help!"

"I've been trying to help," Hermione said, sounding as tired as Hope felt, "but you've been cooped up in that room for weeks—"

"Hermione I need to learn some water spells," she said. "Please, Hermione, I really need your help,
and I'm sorry I've been such a jerk, I've just been so worried and—"

Hermione threw her arms around Hope, giving her a quick squeeze, "I understand," she murmured, "I'd be going mental if it was me... come on, let's go find a good classroom."

The relief and gratitude that shone in Hope's eyes made Hermione smile.

"Look at me, you'll be fine."

Hope looked at George, who could see how pale her face was, her fear leeching into her hair and eyes as well, turning her eyes silver and her hair a strawberry-blonde. He'd never seen her look so scared before.

"Sure," she said, her voice a higher pitch than normal, "of course, I mean, what could possibly go wrong?"

"Hope, calm... down..."

"I am calm," she said, "very calm! Why wouldn't I be?" But she wasn't, she was very far from calm as she could possibly be. She had spent the past two days practicing a number of spells some of which were far more advanced than she was used to, and she could probably do them all in her sleep now.

"You should eat something," Hermione added, "you like you're about to fall over!"

"I'm not hungry," Hope tried to say, but Hermione had shoved a few grapes into her hand and forced her at wand-point to eat them, much to George's humour, which was cut short abruptly by Professor McGonagall's sudden appearance. Hope had been expecting her as Fleur had been led out only minutes before by Madame Maxime.

"Potter, the champions have to come down onto the grounds now... You have to get ready for your first task," she told her.

"A-allright," Hope stood, feeling weak in the knees.

"Good luck, Hope. You'll be fine!" Hermione promised with a weak smile. Hope nodded jerkily, glancing down the table to where Ron was sitting. He gave her a small smile, making Hope's spirits lift a little.

"Hey, come here."

Professor McGonagall looked politely away as George swept his girlfriend into his arms, planting a fiery kiss on her lips that spread heat throughout her body. They parted to the applause and cat calls of the Gryffindor. Hope blushed bright red into the roots of her hair, returning it to its natural colour once more.

George smirked. "That's my girl."

"I'm killing you after this," Hope warned, though she had been emboldened by his kiss, following Professor McGonagall out and onto the grounds.

"Now, don't panic," she said in a would-be calm voice, "just keep a cool head... We've got wizards standing by to control the situation if it gets out of hand... The main thing is just to do your best, and nobody will think any the worse of you... Are you alright?"
"Professor, I-I kind of know what I'm doing," Hope assured her with a half-smile, "I'll be fine."

"Of course you will," Professor McGonagall agreed as they stood outside the tent. "You're to go in here with the other champions and wait for your turn, Potter. Mr. Bagman is in there...he'll be telling you the- the procedure...Good luck." And then she surprised Hope immensely by giving her a swift hug.

"Er, thanks," Hope said, a little stunned as she released her and left rather quickly.

Fleur met her eyes and gave her a small, weak smile as she entered. A glance around the tent told her that Cedric was pacing back and forth and Viktor was glaring at the ground.

"Hope! Good-o!" Hope bit back a sigh of exasperation as Bagman spoke. "Come in, come in, make yourself at home!" He ushered her inside with haste, a hand on her shoulder that she was itching to throw off. "Well, now we're all here—time to fill you in! When the audience has assembled, I'm going to be offering each of you this bag" –he held a small purple bag aloft—"from which you will each select a small model of the thing you are about to face! There are different—er—varieties, you see. And I have to tell you something else too...ah, yes...your task is to collect the golden egg!"

Hope gulped nervously.

"Ladies first," he said offering the purple bag at Fleur who reached in and withdrew a model of a Welsh Green with a number two.

"Hope?"

Hope swallowed thickly and thrust her arm into the bag, pulling out, to her horror, the Hungarian Horntail with a number four.

Hope could feel her fear coming back in full as she stood in numb shock as Cedric removed a Swedish Short-Snout with the number one and Viktor pulled out a Chinese Fireball with a number three.

"Well, there you are!" said Bagman with a beaming grin, seemingly unable to comprehend the serious nature of the situation they were all in. "You have each pulled out the dragon you will face, and the numbers refer to the order in which you are to take on the dragons, do you see? Now, I'm going to have to leave you in a moment, because I'm commentating. Mr. Diggory, you're first, just go out into the enclosure when you hear a whistle, all right? Now...Hope...could I have a quick word? Outside?"

"Alright," Hope said in confusion, sparing Fleur a look that told her that.

"Feeling all right, Hope? Anything I can get you?" he asked her once they were far enough away.


"Got a plan?" he asked. "Because I don't mind sharing a few pointers, if you'd like them, you know. I mean," Bagman continued, lowering his voice still further, "you're the underdog here, Hope...Anything I can do to help..."

"No," Hope said, her eyes narrowing a little in suspicion, "no, I'm pretty sure I know what I'm doing, thanks, I've got to go—" She practically ran back to the tent, jumping violently at a sound of a shrill whistle, almost running into Cedric as he left to face his dragon. Hope went inside and sat beside Fleur, waiting with her heart hammering as the crowd screaming and yelled and "Ooh"ed beyond.
The minutes passed by slowly until fifteen had gone by and Bagman finally said: "Very good indeed! And now the marks from the judges!"

Fleur rang her hands waiting until- "One down, three to go! Miss Delacour, if you please!"

Hope squeezed Fleur's hand in what she hoped was a reassuring manner, but she could do nothing else, let alone speak. So she sat immobile as time passed around her, listening and waiting.

"Oh I'm not sure that was wise!...Oh...nearly!...Careful now...good lord, I thought she'd had it then!" Ten minutes passed much like that until the third whistle blew and Viktor left, leaving Hope to her racing heart once more.

There were three schools out there, three schools waiting to see her fail. Inhale…exhale…inhale…

"Very daring!...That's some nerve he's showing-and-yes, he's got the egg!"

The applause echoed loudly in her ears and then the piercing whistle rang out a fourth time. Hope's heart stuttered as she stood. "Okay, Hope," she told herself, "just remember everything you've learned, remember those spells and you'll do fine…I mean, you faced a basilisk once and that was with your eyes closed, so maybe this won't be as bad."

Or maybe it would be just as bad.

"Shut up," she told herself viciously as she tightly gripped her wand and entered into the rocky arena. Her eyes were first drawn to the bright, multi-colours of the audience high up in the stands, chanting her last name loudly, much to her surprise. What had happened to that month of ridicule that she had had to put with? Irritation filled her at that. The roar directed her attention quickly to the beast she would be facing. She was much more impressive up close than when she had seen her in darkness of the forest the first time around. There were a number of spikes covering its black, scaly body and a pair of yellow eyes stared at her.

Hope's feet blurred to action as she raced to avoid a blast of fire. She flicked her wand as she ran, aiming expertly at the still fire-breathing dragon.

"Aqua Eructo!"

A thick jet of water burst from the tip, dispersing the fire in seconds and soaking the head of the dragon.

"Oh! This is something we haven't seen yet!" Bagman cried. "Not sure if it'll work!"

Hope leapt onto a rock, spreading her feet evenly, performing a complicated twist with her hand. "Rigo Flagellum!" she breathed and what looked like a line of blue-white fire erupted from the tip, but was really something quite like flexible ice. Hope gave a sharp jerk and it cracked in the air.

"I don't believe it!" Bagman yelled in awe. "She's using a whip made of ice! Very impressive!"

Hope's nerve reared its ugly head as did her stupidity as she raced at the dragon, flinging the wand so that the whip wrapped twice around the dragon's snout. Steam issued from her nostrils and she reared back, yanking Hope completely off the ground as she gave a subdued roar.

There were screams, but Hope hardly heard them, more focused on keeping her focus on the spell but also on the golden egg, which was still out of reach.

She screamed as she was jerked around, being whipped through the air.

Her eyes fell on the egg—it was so close! Now!
Hope dropped the spell, falling to the ground and scrambling to the massive egg. "Bombarda!" she yelled with as much power as she could muster as the dragon opened her mouth to scorch her with more of her dragon-fire. The attack did little but blow the Horntail back a little, but that didn't matter. Hope had the golden egg in her possession, the task was done, and several wizards rushed forward to restrain the beast.

The crowd thundered around her, screaming and yelling in euphoria, but Hope was still in a bit of a stage of shock as she stumbled to stand before the noise, it was only then that it truly dawned upon her that she had actually done it! She had gone against a dragon and collected a golden egg…it seemed so ridiculous, but she had done it!

"Look at that!" Bagman's voice blared over the crowd. "Will you look at that! Our youngest champion is quickest to get her egg! Well, this is going to shorten the odds on Miss Potter!"

Professor McGonagall, Moody, and Hagrid were moving swiftly towards her with beaming smiles on their faces. Hope was more surprised when Professor McGonagall hugged her for the second time in a single day; the stars must have been aligned…or something…

"That was excellent, Potter! Very advanced magic for your age!"

Hope flushed with pleasure at the compliment.

"You'll need to see Madam Pomfrey before the judges give out your score-"

"Why?" Hope asked in confusion, but then the wave of pain hit her as her adrenaline rush wore off. "Ow! Son of-!"

Professor McGonagall gave her the barest of smiles while somehow managing to look reproachful at the same time, a feat few could manage. "Over there, Potter."

"Yeh did it, Hope!" Hagrid said in obvious happiness. "Yeh did it! An' agains' the Horntail an' all, an' yeh know Charlie said that was the wors'-"

"Thanks, Hagrid," Hope said quickly before following Professor McGonagall's instructions and headed to the medical tent.

"Dragons!" Madam Pomfrey cried, sweeping her patient inside. "I swear, you are just attracted to the worst things, Hope Potter—"

"I'll tell George you said so," Hope said in a dry manner, though she was grinning, her eyes a bright hazel and her hair a sky-blue.

"Oh, you know what I mean!" the woman complained as she sponged some cream onto her bare shoulder and her skin began to smoke immediately, but the pain lightened considerably so Hope couldn't really complain. "Last year dementors, this year dragons, what are they going to bring into this school next? You're very lucky…this is quite shallow…Now, just a few seconds more…alright you can go…"

Relief burned in Hope's eyes as she eagerly leapt to her feet and exited the tent, beaming wildly when she saw George's tall figure making his way to her. She ran to meet him, jumping to meet him, laughing as he swung her around.

"You were absolutely amazing!" he told her, before whispering into her ear. "And also very hot."

Hope's cheeks burned with heat, her hair and eyes returning to their typical colours. "You're pulling
my leg, I know you are!

"I most certainly am not! Besides," he smirked, "who wouldn't think you were hot with that whip?"

"George!"

"Hope!" Hope's vision was obscured by a large amount of bushy brown curls. Hope laughed, throwing her arms around her waist, lifting her bookish friend off her feet, but just barely, nothing like George's. "You were absolutely brilliant," Hermione said breathlessly, but Hope could see the indentations in her cheeks from her nails. "It was so amazing! You were amazing!"

"Thanks!" Hope said, but her eyes were drawn to the figure behind Hermione.

It was Ron.

Hope wrapped her arms around his waist as well, her arms tight around him. She could feel him jump in surprise at her action, but he responded fairly easily.

"I'm really—"

"Shut up," she advised, "we're good, alright?"

He relaxed. "Alright."

Hermione exploded into tears, making Ron and Hope part and stare. "You two are so stupid!" And then she stormed off, still crying.

"Barking mad," George and Ron said, watching her go in slight surprise.

"Come on, then, they'll be putting up your scores," Ron added as Hope picked up her golden egg from where she had dropped it to the ground, walking with George's hand linked in her free one while Ron kept her up to date beside her. "You were the best, you know, no competition. Cedric did this weird thing where he Transfigured a rock on the ground...turned it into a dog...he was trying to make the dragon go for the dog instead of him. Well, it was a pretty cool bit of Transfiguration, and it sort of worked, because he did get the egg, but he got burned as well- the dragon changed its mind halfway through and decided it would rather have him than the Labrador; he only just got away. And Fleur tried this sort of charm, I think she was trying to put it into a trance- well, that kind of worked too, it went all sleepy, but then it snored, and this great jet of flame shot out, and her skirt caught fire—she put it out with a bit of water out of her wand. And Krum— you won't believe this, but he didn't even think of flying! He was probably the best after you, though. Hit it with some sort of spell right in the eye. Only thing is, it went trampling around in agony and squashed half the real eggs—they took marks off for that, he wasn't supposed to do any damage to them."

They came to a stop at before five raised seats, waiting for the judgment of how well or poorly she'd done.

"It's marks out of ten from each one," Ron explained as Madame Maxime held her wand up, a large eight erupting from its tip. "Not bad! She might have taken off for the burn to your shoulder, I suppose, not that it affected you any…"

"I didn't actually notice until afterwards," Hope said with a laugh as Mr. Crouch awarded her a nine.

"Looking good!"

Dumbledore followed with a nine as well and Hope couldn't help the widening of her grin. Then
Bagman gave her a ten.

"What's that all about?" Hope demanded. "I got hurt! Shouldn't he at least take off for that?"

"Oh, quit complaining!" Ron yelled, jumping up and down in euphoria, before yelling in anger when Karkaroff gave her a four. "What? Four? You lousy, biased scum-bag, you gave Krum a ten!"

Hope smiled at his anger for the sake of her, it made her heart swell in her ribcage. Even without Charlie coming to meet them to tell her that she was tied with Viktor for first place, Hope felt as though she could have produced an unbelievable Patronus.
November passed quickly into December, far more quickly than Hope would have ever thought possible, but maybe that was because everything seemed to have gone back to normal. She had moved back into Gryffindor Tower, the school no longer hated her guts (notwithstanding the Slytherins, of course), she was trying to ignore the golden egg on her bedside table next to her Hungarian Horntail model that she had grown strangely fond of, and George was still trying to get her into a broom closet.

The only thing that seemed to have changed the atmosphere was the impending Yule Ball. Hope had already had five older students ask her, all of which she had said no to, being in a rather serious relationship, though she was a little anxious that George hadn't asked her yet.

"You should be working on the egg!" Hermione complained the first day of the holiday. "Not worrying about George!"

Hope pouted, making Fleur giggle. "But he hasn't asked me yet! What if he doesn't?"

"Well, he's coming this way," Ron noted, rolling his eyes as he did so, "maybe he'll ask you now so you can stop worrying."

Hope gave him a filthy look in return, her quill returning to her Ancient Runes essay on the Celts interpretation of Runes. Ron, who was still playing with his Exploding Snap cards recoiled slightly as they exploded, singeing his eyebrows while Hermione hid her laughter in her pudding.

"Nice look, Ron," an amused voice commented, "go well with your dress robes, that will."

Ron scowled at his brothers, feeling his eyebrows gingerly for any lasting damage. George sat down beside Hope and proceeded to do two things that made her face burn as red as a cherry: he dropped a hand to her thigh, and then he pressed a kiss to the side of his neck.

Consequently, Hope found it very difficult to breathe and jumped violently, nearly upending her inkwell.

"Ron, can we borrow Pigwidgeon?" George asked, smirking at her response, while Hope's three friends were watching her face in fascination.

"No, he's off delivering a letter," Ron said, eyeing his brother curiously, both for Hope's reaction and his question. "Why?"

"Because George wants to invite him to the ball," Fred said sardonically, rolling his eyes for good measure. "Which is a comfort for Hope, I'm sure."

The girl in question scowled fiercely, slicing a finger across her throat and pointing at him, making his smirk widen.

"Because we want to send a letter, you stupid great prat," George continued.

"Who d'you two keep writing to, eh?" Ron asked, his inquisitive nature spiking.

"Nose out, Ron," Fred warned, lifting his wand in an unfavourable way, "or I'll burn that for you, too."
"So...," George said slowly, casting a look at Hope out of the corner of his eye, amused by the colour that had yet to assuage from her cheeks, "you lot got dates for the ball yet?"

"We know you don't have one," Hermione muttered lowly to herself.

"Nope," Ron said.

"Well, you'd better hurry up, mate, or all the good ones will be gone," Fred said with a manner of warning.

"Don't tell me you've already asked Angelina?" Ron asked with a derisive snort.

"Good point," Fred conceded, glancing down the table for his dark-skinned girlfriend. "Oi! Angelina!"

Angelina looked up from the Charms demonstration that Alicia was doing. "What?"

Fred pointed to her, mimed dancing, and then pointed to himself. A bright smile spread across her face. "Of course, you git."

Fred winked. "And that, dear little brother, is how you do it."

"So, how 'bout it?"

George's voice was a low whisper in her ear sending a shiver down her spine. "The Ball? You and me?"

Hope turned towards him slightly, looking him up and down. "Oh, I don't know, Weasley, I do have a boyfriend and he's a very jealous bloke."

A smirk spread over George's lips. "Hm, I don't think he'll mind if I steal you away for a night… besides, he has a right to be jealous doesn't he?"

Hope blushed violently. "Alright, then…but I've promised my god-brother a dance, so my boyfriend shouldn't be too jealous…"

"Wait-god-brother?" Hermione asked flummoxed. "Who's your god-brother?"

"Neville." Seeing as his mother was her god-mother, that could possibly make them god-siblings.

"Really?" Ron stared at her in surprise, to which she merely rolled her eyes, smiling at George.

"See you later, handsome."

"Most definitely," he agreed.

"Are all couples as sappy as you?" Ron asked gagging.

"I zink it eez sweet," Fleur said with a small smile, having been silent throughout the exchange.

"So," Hope coughed a little, her colour returning to normal, "who's going to be your date, Fleur?"

"I don't know," the French champion said in a bit of misery, "Zere eez no one I want to ask zhat won't be affected by my Allure…"

"Maybe you should ask someone who has similar interests to you?" Hermione offered. "That way at
"Maybe..." Fleur still appeared downtrodden. "Do you know anyone who 'as an interest in Curse-breaking?"

The grin that bloomed on Hope's face was oddly feral. "Actually I do."

"That's a bad idea!" Ron said catching on quickly, shaking his head. "He'll probably be too busy!"

"Oh, you don't know that," Hermione admonished, knowing where Hope was going with her thoughts.

"Fleur how do you feel about a man with a ponytail and a fang earring?"

"Nothing, really—" Fleur blinked a few times, because Hope had left the table to beseech her Head of House at the staff table.

"Professor, could I borrow your fireplace later?"

Professor McGonagall eyed her student suspiciously, making Hope grin. That's what happened when you had the last name Potter and were dating one of the Weasley twins. "Why?"

"I just need to take Fleur to Gringotts for something important," Hope said with a congenial smile. "Ca-May we?"

Professor McGonagall's eyes were filled with speculation, but finally she said, "I will allow you in fifteen minutes."

"Yes!" Hope pumped her fist. "Thanks so much, Professor!"

She practically skipped back to the table. "Alright, we've got fifteen minutes until she says we can use her fireplace, so I'm going to get rid of some of these books, coming Hermione?"

"I don't understand," Fleur said in complete confusion.

"Just go with it," Ron and Hermione advised as the two fourth year girls gathered up their things and left in search of the library.

"Trying to set Bill up with Fleur?" she asked with an arched eyebrow. "Really?"

Hope shrugged with a grin. "Why not?"

"Oh, I do—"

"Excuse me."

Both girls looked up in surprise to see Viktor Krum standing before them looking slightly uncomfortable. His eyes were on Hermione for a change. "May I haff a vord?" he asked her thickly.

"Oh, you most certainly can," Hope said with a bright grin, elbowing Hermione slightly. "She is all yours!"

"Hope!" Hermione hissed as her friend left her behind before blushing slightly as her eyes met Viktor's. She did her best to ignore Hope's cackles in the distance as she made off towards the library, now alone.
And then, fifteen minutes later, Hope and Fleur were spat out of the emerald fire, stumbling into Gringotts.

"Miss Potter, what a surprise."

Hope was used to the cold and craggy drawls of the goblins and she smiled down at the one who had spoken. "Hello, Griphook. How are you today?"

It was rare for wand-carriers to greet the goblins like this, but Griphook had grown used to the way that Hope Potter spoke. "I am well," he said, "Is there something I may assist you in?"

"I'm looking for William Weasley," Hope said, scanning the lobby for a familiar head of red hair. "Is he here?"

"He is. Shall I tell him he has a visitor?"

"That would be most kind," Hope said with another blinding smile as the goblin walked away, muttering unintelligible words in Gobbledegook under his breath.

Fleur arched a pale eyebrow.

"He's the one who usually takes me down to my vault," Hope admitted, "I talk more with Gornuk, though, he's nicer." If a goblin could actually be viewed as nice. "Ah, there is!"

Fleur had to admit, her breath left her slightly at the sight of the person Hope wanted her to meet. He was red-haired with a ponytail and a fang earring dangling from his lobe just as Hope had described, but she had forgotten to mention how ruggedly handsome he was.

"Give me a second, would you?" But Fleur hardly heard her as the girl ran to hug the ginger around the waist.

"Heard you did quite well against the dragon from Charlie," Bill told her as she released him.

Hope blushed, "Oh, it wasn't very impressive."

"Of course not," Bill said with humour. "You're not here about George are you?"

"No," Hope said perplexed. "Why?"

Bill smirked. "He might have mentioned something about a broom cupboard…"

Hope groaned, pressing a hand into her forehead as heat poured into her cheeks for what felt like the thousandth time that day. "I'm going to kill him."

"Hopefully without witnesses," Bill said in a dry manner.

"Definitely, but I need your help for something," Hope added, "You see that blonde back there?"

Bill's eyes flickered towards Fleur who reddened a little. "Yeah."

"That's Fleur Delacour, the champion of Beauxbatons," Hope explained, "and she needs a date for the Yule Ball, but she doesn't know who to ask because she's got Veela blood."

"Ah…” Bill nodded in understanding. "But why'd you ask me?"

"It wouldn't be your devilishly good looks," Hope said sarcastically, "she actually has an interest in
Curse-breaking, so I figured you would at least be able to talk about something you're both passionate about.

"Possibly," Bill said, eyeing the girl—though girl wasn't the appropriate word really, because she was more a woman than a girl—over Hope's head. She was very lovely, but that was to be expected with having Veela blood, but she also looked incredibly nervous. "I'll talk with her," he said, "but no promises."

But Hope couldn't help but think he walked surprisingly fast towards the seventeen year old French witch.

"I'm Bill Weasley," he introduced himself smoothly, "Hope tells me you're having a bit of a crisis?"

Fleur blushed again, forcing her hands to remain at her sides. "Yes," she said in her throaty voice, "Ze Yule Ball eez days away, and…" She bit her lip, conveying her nervousness. She had never acted like this in a man's presence before.

Bill smiled, forcibly remembering the Veela from the tournament and noticing how very different she was from them. "Do you want to get a Butterbeer?" he asked her.

She was surprised, but pleased all the same.

"I can wait," Hope offered to the pair who had apparently forgotten of her presence, "or you can just take the Floo back to Professor McGonagall's Office."

"Oh!" Fleur gave her an embarrassed smile. "You don't 'ave to wait for me, 'Ope."

"Don't worry," I'll get her back to school, no problem," Bill added with a wink, to which Hope rolled her eyes.

"Now you two, behave yourselves!" Hope called after them. "We don't want an international incident on our hands!"

Obviously, they ignored her, making Hope feel as though she'd picked a good choice. Who knew what kind of person Fleur would have gone with if she hadn't suggested the apparently Allure-resistant Bill? Probably someone who hung onto her, being far more interested in how she looked than what she said, something she doubted Bill would do. True, she hadn't known him long, but there were some traits that one could pick up on automatically.

They looked very lovely together. Two points to Hope! First Cedric and Cho, now Bill and Fleur, she was on a roll! Or she would be, if everything worked out the way she hoped it would.

Later, an exuberant Fleur would thank her so very much, her smile brighter even than the moon, grateful to have met someone like Bill Weasley who cared more about what she said than how she looked.

Hope gazed at herself in the mirror…now that she had everything on…she wasn't so sure.

The dress was a greenish-blue, made of a loose material that fluttered when she moved and was both modest and flattering. It was of a Greek style, the collar stooping just a little, held up by round carved silver on each shoulder, which were bare, with one flimsy sleeve that was connected to her only at the wrist. Hope had curled her hair for the occasion, holding most of it up and loosely at bay, a single dark red curl brushing against her neck as she moved. Her sandals were golden and flat (she would probably get a few looks for that, but it was a Greek gown), her rings were gone from her fingers, a
thick silver chain holding an emerald at the centre had been tightly locked around her throat (that had belonged to her grandmother's mother, apparently), and—if one looked closely—she was wearing basilisk scales for earrings. She had picked up a few when she, Ron, and Lockhart had gone down during her second year and she had found them over the summer and given them to Remus, not really knowing what to do with them, but Remus had sent them back to her as earrings.

"You look…amazing!"

Hope turned to find Hermione staring at her in awe. She smirked. "Like you don't?"

Hermione was stunning in a way that Hope had never seen her before. Her dress was more of a blue than Hope's, much darker and much more flattering. The dress was more fitted at the top, the material being much looser from the waist down. But Hope had to say that she was much more impressed with how she had calmed her bushy mane of hair (though she had to admit that the longer Hope knew her, the more the bush seemed to become less pronounced into more messy curls) into an elegant knot.

Hermione blushed. "Oh, its—"

"I've actually got something for you," Hope added, holding out a necklace of a blue amethyst flower. That one had been her grandmother's.

"Oh, I couldn't!" Hermione insisted, her eyes bulging at the sight of it. "It's so—"

"Just shut up and take it," Hope said, rolling her eyes as she clipped it behind Hermione's neck. "There, perfect. Now, don't cry, or you'll ruin everything," she warned, as Hermione did indeed look as though she was about to cry.

"Did Ron ever manage to find date?" Hermione asked, trying to distract herself.

"Oh, yeah," Hope laughed, "Little Luna Lovegood flat out asked him…Honestly, I think he was more surprised than anything when he said yes…I think Ginny put her up to it, so that she would have a third year friend going."

A smile spread over her face at that. Of course, she had been hoping that Ron would take initiative and ask her before Viktor had, but he hadn't. She was disappointed by that.

"I convinced George to spell Ron's robes black," Hope added, "so now they don't look as terrible… until you get close…"

"Hope! You are terrible!"

"I am," Hope had to agree, "I'm going to go meet George now, see you in the Great Hall."

George forgot to breathe when she came down the steps, her dress floating around her legs (which, unfortunately, he could barely see), smiling brilliantly at him. The dress…her…wow…

Fred smirked. "Hope, I think you broke my twin."

Hope pouted. "Oh, that won't do, you owe me a dance, Weasley."

George swallowed thickly, still looking her up and down.

"And Neville?" She turned to the nervous boy who was waiting for Ginny to come down. "Come and find me later, I owe you a dance, too."
Neville smiled weakly as Hope steered her boyfriend out of the common room.

"You look...beautiful," George finally managed to say, "I'm not quite sure if I want to let you out of my sight."

His voice had lowered to a timbre that sent a shiver down her spine and her cheeks flushed brilliantly as she hooked her arm around his. "I'm sure you'll have to...and look very dashing." She leant up to kiss his cheek and run her fingers through his hair with a wry smile. "Though I can see you put zero effort into your hair."

"I spent hours on my hair!" he said in faux-offense.

"Don't worry, I like it," she assured him, appraisal twinkling in her eyes, making him, for a change, blush.

"And it seems I'm escorting the prettiest girl," he added in a despairing voice, "I feel sorry for the other blokes."

Hope laughed as they descended the main stairs.

"Wait-is that Bill? With Fleur?"

Hope stifled her laughter as George gaped at his older brother who was getting a few glares for managing to get the Veela. He hadn't dressed up much for the occasion, but it didn't seem that Fleur minded; dragon-skin, after all, was quite sexy. Fleur on the other hand was absolutely glowing as she spoke, gesturing with her hands. She was wearing a flattering silver dress that clung to her shape, flaring out a little at the hip.

Cedric and Cho smiled at her and waved from where they stood, Cho wearing a Chinese-styled dress that suited her and Cedric wearing simple black dress robes.

"Come on," Hope said as Hermione almost bowled over her date in excitement as she made over to Viktor's side. "We have to get into line."

Within a matter of minutes, the four champions and their significant others entered into the Great Hall to great applause, situating themselves at the front table with the judges. However, instead of Mr. Crouch, Percy was there. George insisted that she sit beside him because...it was Percy.

Hope arched an eyebrow, to which he said, incredibly pleased, "I've been promoted," Percy said with an air of superiority."I'm now Mr. Crouch's personal assistant, and I'm here representing him."

"Is he still sick?" Hope asked in surprise. The Daily Prophet had been fuelling a few wild rumours about the Head of the Department of Magical Cooperation for weeks now. She bit back a smile at the sound George gagging beside her at his brother's smugness.

"I'm afraid so," he agreed in a sombre manner. "Mr. Crouch isn't well, not well at all. Hasn't been right since the World Cup. Hardly surprising - overwork. He's not as young as he was - though still quite brilliant, of course, the mind remains as great as it ever was. But the World Cup was a fiasco for the whole Ministry, and then, Mr. Crouch suffered a huge personal shock with the misbehaviour of that house-elf of his, Blinky, or whatever she was called (Hope imagined that if Hermione had been listening, she would have probably blown a gasket). Naturally, he dismissed her immediately afterward, but - well, as I say, he's getting on, he needs looking after, and I think he's found a definite drop in his home comforts since she left. And then we had the tournament to arrange, and the aftermath of the Cup to deal with - that revolting Skeeter woman buzzing around - no, poor man, he's having a well earned, quiet Christmas. I'm just glad he knew he had someone he could rely upon to
take his place." He met her eyes. "I hear you did some fairly advanced magic in the First Task, I'm sorry I missed it."

Hope flushed. "Oh, it was just a bit of water and ice magic."

"Still, they far above your year," he conceded.

Dinner passed surprisingly quickly once they ordered their food, and the most amusing thing she heard was from Dumbledore saying: "Oh I would never dream of assuming I know all Hogwarts' secrets, Igor. Only this morning, for instance, I took a wrong turning on the way to the bathroom and found myself in a beautifully proportioned room I have never seen before, containing a really rather magnificent collection of chamber pots. When I went back to investigate more closely, I discovered that the room had vanished. But I must keep an eye out for it. Possibly it is only accessible at five-thirty in the morning. Or it may only appear at the quarter moon - or when the seekers have an exceptionally full bladder."

Hope and George had to hide their laughter in their pumpkin juice, but Hope would have sworn in from of the whole school that Dumbledore had winked.

The part of the evening she was dreading the most was the opening dance that all the champions and their dates participated in, and they were the only ones on the floor, and the last thing Hope wanted to do was trip over the hem of her dress. Dragons she could handle, tripping mid-dance, not so much.

"Don't worry," George said with a smirk, "I've got you."

"You better," she said with a smirk of her own as the music began and she rested a hand on his shoulder and the other in his while his free one dropped to her waist. "You're the one who's going to be lifting me soon."

George led her in the dance, keeping her close and switching the hand that rested on her waist to the hand that held hers, and lifting her at the appropriate time. Hope spared a glance to where Fleur was, still with a smile on her face, no doubt happy that her date wasn't falling over himself as he would have been (possibly) if he had been anyone else who was affected by her Allure. Applause erupted when Professors Dumbledore and McGonagall took to the stage, and soon after that, more and more students piled in with their dates.

The whole night was rather amazing in Hope's opinion. She lost count of the number of dances and people she danced with, though she recalled that Neville had stepped on her toes and that Lee jumped around an awful lot, and dreamy Luna had pulled her into a strange little twirl. Despite his irritation at Hermione going to the dance with Viktor, Ron did manage to smile and laugh a few times, but he only danced twice, once with Luna and once with Hope.

At one point it was just Ron and Hope, George having gone to speak in low tones to his twin (why, Hope wasn't quite sure she wanted to know). "Want to get some air?" Ron asked, eyeing the crowd suspiciously.

"Sure," Hope said, only realizing that he wanted to leave because Percy was headed their way.

"You could've asked Hermione for a dance, you know," she added once they walked into the stone courtyard. "Viktor wouldn't have killed you."

Ron screwed up his face as she called him "Viktor" making her laugh.

"So, how mad for her are you?"
Ron turned bright red and began to splutter in indignation. "Mad? I-you-wait—!"

Hope smirked. "That bad, huh?"

"Oh, shut up," he grumbled under his breath before falling quickly silent as another voice made itself known, a voice Hope could honestly say that she hated.

"...don't see what there is to fuss about, Igor." So he was talking to Karkaroff, was he?

"Severus, you cannot pretend this isn't happening!" Karkaroff's voice was low, a would-be whisper if not for the shrillness of his tone. "It's been getting clearer and clearer for months. I am becoming seriously concerned, I can't deny it—"

"Then flee," Snape told him shortly, clearly irritated. "Flee— I will make your excuses. I, however, am remaining at Hogwarts."

The two came around the corner and caught sight of Ron and Hope immediately. "And what are you two doing?" Snape demanded with a sneer.

"We're walking," Ron said with a hint of sarcasm. "Not against the law, is it?"

"Keep walking, then!" Snape bit out as he moved past them with Karkaroff close at his heels.

"What's got Karkaroff all worried, do you reckon?" Ron asked her.

Hope could only shrug her shoulders. "Dunno…maybe Sirius'll know something…"

"Maybe," Ron agreed in a dejected manner. "I think I'm going to head up to the Tower, tell everyone goodnight from me."

"Alright," Hope said, watching him go, before standing in silence, her head tilted backwards to look up at the sky, the stars twinkling brightly above her…Sirius was the brightest. She smiled, but it faded quickly. Where was her elusive godfather? When was she going to see him?

She barely jumped when a pair of arms wrapped around her waist.

"Were you hiding from me?" he asked, faintly amused.

Hope smiled as she rested her head against his shoulder. "I tried so hard," she said, her eyes shifting to the colour of his, "because you are so terrifying, love."

"My apologies." He hardly spoke, his lips grazing hers until Hope twisted in his arms and kissed him fervently.

"You made this night perfect," she whispered once they parted.

"Milady." George bowed clumsily making Hope laugh.

"Come on, you oaf," She said with a bright grin, "you're getting one last dance out of me before the night is over!"

And George allowed himself to be tugged inside by his girlfriend with a bemused expression on his face.
The Mermaid's Song

Hope smoothed her fingers continuously over the surface of the golden egg, her eyes staring into the fire, her lips moving wordlessly.

"Hope, thinking so intensely about it isn't going to change anything," Hermione said with a wide yawn as she finally slid her Arithmancy book shut. "It's eleven o'clock, Hope, you should go to bed."

"When I'm in bed I think more," Hope muttered, her eyes still on the fire, "take it with me to the bath…"

"What're you going on about?" Hermione asked in confusion.

"Cedric, he gave me a hint for the Second Task after Yule," Hope said, rubbing her eyes, "I completely forgot about it after all that happened with Hagrid…" She was speaking of how Rita Skeeter had managed to discover that their friend was half-giant, half-human, something that Hope hadn't known but something that had also in no way lessened her affection towards the large Gamekeeper and Professor. "Maybe the egg doesn't scream in water like it does in air," she reasoned as she stood.

"What are you doing?" Hermione asked in resignation.

"I'm going to grab the cloak and the Map," Hope said, "and then I'm going to go for a midnight bath."

"That sounds like a horrible idea," Hermione told her, "what if someone walks in on you?"

"Well, I'm not going to be completely naked!" Hope called back, leaping up the stairs to the girls' dormitory to grab the two things she'd need before returning to the common room to grab her egg. "Go to bed, Hermione, I'll let you and Ron know how it goes in the morning, alright?"

"You'll be careful?" Hermione insisted.

"Yeah, yeah," Hope said in a careless manner, waving her hand a little as she threw the invisibility cloak over her as Hermione opened the portrait hole for her.

Night-time wanderings had given her a unique knowledge of the castle, but she had never been to the Prefect's Bathroom, so in that aspect, the Marauder's Map was very much needed. Hope had to carefully sidestep Professor Flitwick as he made his rounds, but he almost caught her as she found the statue of Boris the Bewildered, searching for the door and whispering "Pine fresh," as loudly as she dared, slipping inside and shutting the door silently before whipping off the cloak.

"Wow," she said lowly, unable to help herself even as her voice bounced off the walls. The bathroom was quite impressive, Hope wouldn't have minded taking a bath in there every day…of course, being a prefect also meant being one of the people who upheld rules, not broke them, so that was out. Crap.

But the bathroom was amazing; it even had a chandelier dangling high above! And the bath was more like a swimming pool than anything, including having a diving board. Hope shook her head, focusing her attention on filling the bath as quickly as possible.

"This is completely mad," Hope told herself, "how on earth is a bath going to help?" But Hope still
slipped into the water with the barest of clothes on, if someone did interrupt her, they wouldn't be seeing much. She kept a grip on the side, her feet barely making contact with the floor of the bath.

"Let's get this over with," Hope grumbled to herself, reaching for the egg but fumbling with it, her fingers slick with water, dropping it to the bath. "Shite!" Hope dove under to grab it, before freezing…could the screams not be heard underwater? She reached out twist the opening at the top, allowing it to split open three ways, but instead of the shrieking sound that she had heard the first time she opened it, instead she heard…singing…

"Come seek us where our voices sound,

We cannot sing above the ground,

And while you're searching, ponder this:

We've taken what you'll sorely miss,

An hour long you'll have to look,

And to recover what we took,

But past an hour- the prospect's black,

Too late, it's gone, it won't come back."

Hope's head burst through the surface and she clutched the side again, coughing and spluttering out water that had seeped into her mouth. What was that? What could sing in the water but scream on land? That limited whatever she was going to face to something that lived in the water….and, wait, what were the words again?

Hope ducked under a second time to hear the words before hoisting the closed egg onto the marble floor, pulling herself out as well, bundling a towel around her body as she sat and thought.

"Come seek us where our voices sound, we cannot sing above the ground," Hope recited, "so obviously underwater…We've taken what you'll sorely miss…so, something is going to be stolen from us?...An hour long you'll have to look…the task must be timed…but past an hour prospect's black…so we'll only get an hour."

She frowned. "Does that mean I'm going to have to find some way to breathe underwater for an hour?" Hope scrubbed hard at her eyes, flopping back onto her. "Oh, I can't think right now! Who cares about the bloody tournament anyways?"

Hope pulled on her clothes with surprising difficulty, checking the Map for anyone walking around. Hardly anyone was moving about, well, apart from Peeves, but Peeves was practically on a twenty-four seven sugar rush every day, so that wasn't very surprising…but there was something odd about a dot moving about in Snape's office. It was so strange, because it wasn't Snape; it was labelled as Bartemius Crouch.

What the—? That couldn't be right! Wasn't he ill? Hope narrowed her eyes suspiciously.

"No," she told herself, "you don't want to go down and investigate, that never ends well with Snape, and you know it!"

That was when you knew you were really mad, when you started talking to yourself, actually, when you started arguing with yourself.
"Oh, who am I kidding?" Hope grumbled to herself as she left the bathroom, turning in the opposite direction from Gryffindor Tower and heading down towards Snape's office, mentally cursing, because who actually wanted to voluntarily spend more time near that man?

While she was mentally berating herself, Hope's ankle sank into the trick step that was halfway down one of the staircases that Neville always got stuck in.

"Shite!" The egg and map slipped from her grasp, the egg screeching loudly as the latch hit the ground, causing it to fly open. Hope muffled a second swear, gripping the folds of the cloak tightly so that she wouldn't be seen and forcing her mouth shut even as a voice made her jump violently.

"PEEVES!" Filch's voice roared over the noise. "What's this racket? Wake up the whole castle, will you? I'll have you, Peeves, I'll have you, you'll... and what is this?"

Filch had appeared at the foot of the stairs and she couldn't help but gulp nervously as he shut the egg, glancing nervously to the un-wiped Marauder's Map. He'd know she was here and she'd be so screwed!

"Egg?" Filch murmured quietly before glancing gleefully down to Mrs. Norris where she was standing by his feet, her yellow eyes fixed on where Hope stood, reinforcing Hope's belief that her eyes were like Moody's, seeing through anything. "My sweet! This is a Triwizard clue! This belongs to a school champion! PEEVES! You've been stealing!"

But silence was his only answer.

"Hiding, are you?" he asked, a wide yellow grin warping his face. "I'm coming to get you, Peeves...You've gone and stolen a Triwizard clue, Peeves...Dumbledore'll have you out of here for this, you filthy, pilfering poltergeist..."

Hope's heart accelerated and she had to lean away, against the stone railing as Filch drew nearer…and nearer…

"Filch? What's going on?"

Hope wasn't sure if she should be relieved or even more terrified as Filch returned to the landing to the person who had spoken, which consequently happened to be Snape.

"It's Peeves, Professor," Filch informed him. "He threw this egg down the stairs." Hope thanked whatever gods there were that Peeves was such a troublemaker, or else, she'd probably be much more screwed. Though she'd probably be waist deep in utter crap if they found out she was there. Which could possibly be quite soon at the rate her bad luck was going at.

"Peeves?" Snape seemed a bit confused. "But Peeves couldn't get into my office…"

Did he think Mr. Crouch was Peeves?

"This egg was in your office. Professor?" Filch asked, equally confused.

"Of course not," Snape bit out in irritation. "I heard banging and wailing—"

"Yes, Professor, that was the egg—"

"—I was coming to investigate—"

"—Peeves threw it. Professor—"
"—and when I passed my office, I saw that the torches were lit and a cupboard door was ajar! Somebody has been searching it!"

"But Peeves couldn't—"

"I know he couldn't, Filch!" Snape snarled to the caretaker who took a few steps backwards. "I seal my office with a spell none but a wizard could break! I want you to come and help me search for the intruder, Filch."

"I- yes, Professor- but- the thing is, Professor," Filch said, looking longingly up the stairs past where Hope was standing petrified, "the headmaster will have to listen to me this time. Peeves has been stealing from a student, it might be my chance to get him thrown out of the castle once and for all-"

"Filch, I don't give a damn about that wretched poltergeist; it's my office that's—" Snape insisted before being cut off by the sound of wood hitting stone as Mad-Eye Moody clunked his way into view.

"Pyjama party, is it?" he grunted to the pair, and Filch was quick to explain.

"Professor Snape and I heard noises, Professor. Peeves the Poltergeist, throwing things around as usual - and then Professor Snape discovered that someone had broken into his off—"

"Shut up!"

Hope arched an eyebrow; why wouldn't Snape want Moody to know there had been someone in his office?

Hope gulped suddenly as Moody's fake eye fastened on her. She pressed a finger to her lips and then both of her hands together. Please don't say anything.

Moody smirked before returning his attention to Snape and Filch. "Did I hear that correctly, Snape? Someone broke into your office? Who'd want to break into your office?"

"A student, I daresay," Snape said frigidly, "it has happened before. Potion ingredients have gone missing from my private store cupboard…students attempting illicit mixtures, no doubt…" Hope couldn't help but blush at that comment, remembering how Hermione had stolen from his private store cupboard back in second year when they were making Polyjuice Potion. They were only very lucky that they hadn't gotten caught.

"Reckon they were after potion ingredients, eh?" Moody asked in a cool voice. "Not hiding anything else in your office, are you?"

"You know I'm hiding nothing, Moody," Snape retorted in a dark voice, the muscle in his jaw twitching, "as you've searched my office pretty thoroughly yourself. Despite what you think, Dumbledore trusts me."

This seemed to amuse Moody as his mouth twisted upwards a bit grotesquely into a grin. "Course Dumbledore trusts you. He's a trusting man, isn't he? Believes in second chances. But me - I say there are spots that don't come off, Snape. Spots that never come off, d'you know what I mean?"

Spots? What on earth was he talking about? And why did Snape grip his left arm as though he'd been burned?

"Prowl away," Moody said, eyeing the man with distaste. "I look forward to meeting you in a dark corridor some time...You've dropped something, by the way..."
Hope shook her head fervently under her cloak, pointing at herself, her eyes wide and fearful. If Snape took one look at the map and saw her dot where they were, he'd know she'd been listening in on them the whole time. And she'd be so dead.

"Accio parchment!" Moody was quicker than Hope expected, but then, he had been an Auror, it was probably a requirement to have quick reflexes like that. The map zipped through the air, through Snape's grasp and into Moody's scarred fingers. "My mistake," he corrected himself, "It's mine - must've dropped it earlier-"

But the damage was already done, that much Hope could see as she gave a mental groan. Snape had clearly recognized it as the bit of parchment that Hope had been carrying around with her when she had been out at night the previous year, wandering about and had run into him only to have the map insult Snape before Remus had shown up.

"Potter," he said, his voice low. Hope winced under her cloak.

"What's that?" Moody demanded.

"Potter!" Snape whirled around, his eyes fastened on the darkness of the staircase, roving over where Hope was twice. "That egg is Potter's egg. That piece of parchment belongs to Potter. I have seen it before, I recognize it! Potter is here! Potter, under her invisibility cloak!"

Hope leaned back against the railing as Snape reached out his hands, searching for her, but Moody was quick to intervene.

"There's nothing there, Snape!" Moody snapped, scowling fiercely at Snape in a way that threw his scars into sharper relief. Hope really wouldn't want to meet him on her own late at night. "But I'll be happy to tell the headmaster how quickly your mind jumped to Hope Potter!"

"Meaning what?"

"Meaning that Dumbledore's very interested to know who's got it in for that girl!" Moody growled. "And so am I, Snape…very interested…"

Hope held her breath and prayed that Snape's fingers, which were so close to making contact with her elbow, waiting until…

"I think I will go back to bed," Snape said finally, his lips curled in annoyance as he descended the stairs and down in the direction of his office with only a single furious glance back.

"Best idea you've had all night," Moody grunted as he turned to Filch who still had Hope's egg.

"No!" he said immediately, clearly against it, still wanting to get Peeves on something. Hope barely resisted smacking her face with her hand. "Professor Moody, this is evidence of Peeves' treachery!"

"It's the property of the champion he stole it from," said Moody with surprising patience, his hand still extended for the egg. "Hand it over, now."

It was with great reluctance that Filch did so, he and his strange cat that still eyed where Hope was standing with the deepest suspicion before going off in another direction, leaving Hope and Moody alone in the silence of a few moments as both waited for the sound of perhaps a door shutting…ah, there it was.

Hope's cloak fell off and she gulped in fresh air eagerly as Moody moved up the stairs to where she
"Close shave, Potter."

"Tell me about it," Hope complained, her lungs still recovering from how long she had held her breath. "I thought I was a goner."

"What is this?" Moody asked, drawing her attention to the map and away from pulling her leg out of the trick step which was turning into a rather impossible task.

"Er, it's a map of Hogwarts, it shows where everyone and everything is," Hope explained with a wince as her foot sank in farther as Moody opened the map in fascination. "Look, er, Moody could you help me? My leg's—"

"What? Oh! Yes...yes, of course..."

With a mighty yank, Hope came free, much to her relief as she flexed the leg back and forth with a sigh of relief.

"Potter..." he said carefully.

"Hm?"

"You didn't happen, by any chance, to see who broke into Snape's office, did you? On this map, I mean?" Moody asked gesturing to the parchment in his hands.

"Oh, that," Hope said a little relieved, perhaps more than normal, "yeah, Mr. Crouch."

"Crouch?" He said in shock. "Crouch? You're-you're sure, Potter?"

"It said Bartemius Crouch," Hope said with a shrug, "and the map never lies." Or so Remus and Sirius said, but she wasn't going to mention that.

"Well, he's not here anymore," Moody mentioned, sounding just a trifle disappointed that he wasn't. "Crouch...that's very- very interesting..."

So when he asked Hope to borrow the map, she was more than willing if it meant that she wasn't going to be in any trouble for the whole debacle, because none of it really was her fault. However, she had been pleased when he had said that she would have made a fine Auror, and that was possibly the highlight of the night.

"I am so screwed!"

It was strange to see Hope so worried, raking her hands continuously through her hair so much so that it was starting to look like a perpetual mess, and her eyes had attained a wild look.

"Calm down, Hope," Ron tried to say, reaching out a hand to her, but she leapt out of reach, knocking over the pile of books she had borrowed from the library that day in the hope of finding something that would help her breathe under water for over an hour.

"I will not calm down!" Hope said, her voice a little higher than usual. "You try not breathing under water for an hour and see where it gets you! Drowned, that's what happens!"

Ron tossed a glance Hermione's way who was watching them with fascination from the armchair closest to the fire of the common room.

"Hope, we're trying to help," Hermione tried to say, "but you're going to drive yourself mad!"
"The task is tomorrow!" Hope cried, clutching at her face. "What the ruddy hell am I going to do?" Freaking out was putting it mildly for how Hope was right now.

"What's wrong?"

Hope could only groan at George's voice as she flopped back onto the couch, her legs dangling over the arm. "I'm going to die tomorrow during the task."

"Really?" George arched an eyebrow. "That'll be disappointing; I've grown rather attached to you."

"Ha-ha," Hope intoned sarcastically, "You're so sweet, love, I do wonder where you get it."

George bowed lowly. "I'm actually here for Hermione," he admitted, "You and I have to go down to McGonagall's."

"What? Why?" Hope demanded, on her feet once more, her expression fiery. "You can't leave! I'm going to die tomorrow and you're just helping me along!"

George looked over her head to his brother as if to ask: "Is she being serious?"

Ron could only nod as he rubbed a circle into his forehead. "She's been like that all night."

"You're not going to die," George assured her, cradling her cheeks in his hands. "You'll think of something." He kissed her until she was breathless, but that didn't make her agree with him any.

"Hermione, c'mon."

Hermione stood reluctantly and squeezed Hope's arm in the hope of conveying good luck, but it seemed to just fly Hope by as they left her with Ron.

"Hey, guys."

"Hey, Neville," Hope and Ron intoned dully.

"Is something wrong?" Neville asked, furrowing his eyebrows in confusion.

"Just about everything," Hope grumbled, hiding her eyes behind her hand, "unless you can find a way for me to breathe under water for over an hour."

"Well...you could always try Gillyweed."

Hope's eyes fastened on him. "What the ruddy hell is Gillyweed?" she asked in a bleak voice.

"Oh, it's a plant," Neville said with a bright grin, "it can allow you to grow gills and webbing between your fingers and toes."

"Really?" Hope had leapt up once more, gripping Neville's shoulders tightly, her eyes attaining a manic gleam that slightly worried Neville. "How long does it last? Can it last for an hour?"

"Er...easily—" He blushed as Hope swooped forward to kiss both of his cheeks.

"Brilliant!" she cried. "Where can I find some?"

"Er..." Neville glanced to Ron in terror, but the boy only chuckled at his predicament, "I'm not sure...maybe in the greenhouses, maybe in Snape's private stores..." He shivered; he would never want to go there.
Hope's face fell abruptly before an evil grin formed. "Oh, I've got just the elf for the job…" And then she ran off.

Ron stared after her in complete confusion. "I have no idea how to respond to that."

The next morning, Ron almost dislodged the food he'd only just eaten. "That's Gillyweed? It looks toxic!"

Hope rolled her eyes, shoving the slimy looking clump of what looked faintly like rat tails back into her pocket. "You're not the one who's going to be eating it, genius, I am." Though she looked a little green at the thought of it.

"Where's George and Hermione?" she asked, glancing around, forcing a smile onto her face as people passed by her, offering her the best of luck.

"I haven't seen George," Ron said, "but Fred seems a little lost without him, doesn't he?"

Fred's eyes hardly left the entrance to the Great Hall for more than a few seconds as if he was hoping his twin was going to stroll through the doors.

"Don't worry," Ron added, noticing her anxiety. "I'm sure they're fine, they're probably just running late."

"Right," Hope agreed half-heartedly, "that's probably it."

But the mermaid's song echoed in her ears: "…we've taken what you'll sorely miss…" Did that mean that George was at the bottom of the Black Lake? A ghostly fear overwhelmed her quite unlike that that she had experienced in the face of the dragon; this was different, this was personal.

"Hope, we have to go."

Hope jerked out of her intense thoughts and blinked owlishly before she realized that the task was in about seven minutes. "Shite!" she swore, tearing out of the hall and out onto the grounds. As soon as she stepped out of the castle, the Black Lake Flashed before her mind and so did she. Though Dumbledore still had the castle anti-Flashing after she had flashed her and Ron from London to just outside the Great Hall in her second year, it didn't stop her from flashing across the lawn, despite never having the need to do so before.

She skidded in the mud, clenching a hand around the Gillyweed in her pocket and removing it as she made her way onto the dock, dressed similarly to Cedric, with a red shirt bearing her House's crest and black shorts that made her legs look so perpetually white.

"Welcome to the Second Task!" Bagman's voice uttered over the noise of the crowd, making her wince. "Last night something was stolen from each of our champions, a treasure of sorts. These four treasures, one for each champion, now lie at the bottom of the Black Lake. In order to win, each champion need only find their treasure and return to the surface. Simply enough, except for they will have one hour to do so, and one hour only, after that, they'll be on their own." Hope shoved the Gillyweed into her mouth and chewed furiously, pressing a hand to her mouth to keep her from spitting the Gillyweed back up, because Merlin was it revolting. "You may begin at the sound of the cannon—"

The cannon blew early and four distinct splashes of bodies hitting water could be heard.

Hope felt like she was burning, a sensation that started at her core and spread outward, enveloping her whole body and forcing her to open her mouth and gasp. But the gasp that led to her inhaling
water was just like if she had been above land breathing air…it felt natural. Hope lifted a hand to her neck, awe flooding her face as she felt the protruding gills on the sides.

"Wicked," she said, but only bubbles escaped her as she held up her hands to see the webbing between the fingers and how her feet had thinned into something akin to flippers. "Excellent."

And she beat her legs back and forth, propelling herself forward and into the deepness of the lake. The rushing of the water as she moved past it was the loudest sound she heard and she could hardly see more than fifteen feet in front of her, and it wasn't doing her much good.

She soon discovered that the Black Lake was aptly named; the darkness could have easily been compared to night above ground. The dark seaweed grew upwards from the bottom almost entangling her, but Hope swam above it, careful to not touch it. She almost passed over a deep ravine before changing her mind and going straight down, following the direction of the fish.

And then something had grabbed a hold of her leg and she had to reach to her opposite one, where her wand was strapped and point it at the Grindylow that had a tight grip on her.

"Expulso!" Bubbles escaped her mouth a second time, but that didn't stop the spell from working. A red flash shot at the Grindylow, sending it flying off as Hope practically flew in the direction she had been aiming for. If Grindylows were attacking her, that might mean she was getting closer, right?

"How are you getting on?"

Hope let out a startled yell at the sudden voice, turning to stare wildly at the speaker. Moaning Myrtle giggled at her, amused at how she'd startled the girl. Hope hadn't seen her since second year and the spirit hadn't changed much other than not looking quite as downtrodden as usual, but that could possibly change in an instant.

"Myrtle!" Hope complained, clutching at her heart. "Come on!"

Myrtle giggled louder at that before pointing to her left. "You want to try over there. I won't come with you…I don't like them much, they always chase me when I get too close…"

Though curious how Myrtle actually knew she was going to be here, but then, she had probably heard some professors talking and had accidentally flushed herself down here, Hope gave her a grin, heading off in the direction she had indicated.

But maybe she had been wrong to do so. Bubbles left her gills, rapid with frustration as she kicked continuously for more than twenty minutes. She was just about to contemplate circling back when she caught a whisper of a tune:

"...An hour long you'll have to look, And to recover what we took..."

She twisted her head and caught sight of a mermaid swimming through the bunches of seaweed and Hope practically launched herself in her direction.

"...your time's half gone, so tarry not
Lest what you seek stays here to rot..."

Hope hardly had time to glance over the beauty of the clearing, stone arches and towers completely covered in algae and other strangely coloured water plants that Neville would probably know better. She kicked harder as she twisted around the structures, searching until she found them.
There were four of them, all hanging immobile in the water, fastened by a rope to the ocean floor. George, Hermione, and Cho she could easily make out, along with a little girl who could only be Fleur's little sister, Gabrielle.

"George!"

Hope's webbed hands clutched at her boyfriend's face, her own attaining a light pallor, because she had mistaken him for being dead, however the steady stream of bubbles that left his lips clearly indicated that he was still alive.

She swam slightly downwards, her fingers slipping as she fiddled with the tie on his leg. No sooner than she had freed him did Cedric swim forward with what looked like a bubble over his head. He withdrew his wand and fired a spell at the rope binding Cho before glancing to Hope. "Get lost," he said, his voice a bit distorted by the bubble. "Fleur and Krum're coming now!"

Hope nodded, watching him up and disappear towards the surface, turning back at the sound the Merpeople screeching and her eyes bugged. She had to push back suddenly as a half-shark, half-man…thing…approached, and it could only be Krum as he turned his head sideways, ripping through the binding that held Hermione and dragging her away by the arm. That only left Fleur…but where was she?

Hope pulled out her wand and recited the incantation to reveal the presence of humans. "Homenum Revelio." But nothing happened. The lake was empty of human presences except for the three of them. Hope pointed the tip at Gabrielle's bindings. "Relashio!"

She then seized them both by the arm and pointed her wand towards the lake floor uttering the banishing charm, giving them a boost to the surface, but Hope still had to pump her legs the rest of the way, her gills and flippers fading fast and all but gone by the time three heads broke through the water into the air.

Hope gulped the air greedily.

"What the ruddy hell?"

George seemed to have awakened and a bit struck dumb by his situation. He looked at her. "What happened?"

Hope couldn't find anything to say, so she settled for gripping his sopping head and kissing him deeply for a few seconds, ignoring the cat-calls echoing above them, before releasing him (leaving him so stunned that he almost sank) and turning to Gabrielle who had only just awakened. "Gabrielle, nagé." (Gabrielle, swim)

Gabrielle took Hope's hand as the three approached the dock that had been constructed in the middle of the lake, where Fleur, distraught Fleur was already reaching out a hand to her. " Gabrielle!"

"What'd I miss?" George asked, having recovered from Hope's kiss. Hope could only shake her head, her lungs and throat still burning as they reached the edge of the dock where Fred and Ron were standing, relief more prevalent on Fred's face than Ron's.

"You alright?" Ron asked as he pulled his friend out of the water, slinging an arm over his shoulder as she wheezed. "You look terribl-ow!" Hope had vented her feelings by a punch to the arm which was surprisingly strong considering how much her arms and legs were shaking from the strain, but she was smiling like never before, despite having returned last ("Second to last," Hermione corrected, "Fleur couldn't even get past the Grindylows.")., somehow wrangling second place at
forty-five points for refusing to leave Gabrielle behind.

Now, if she could only sleep for the rest of her life, she'd be set.
Hope was breathless from George's kiss, her heart beating frantically in her rib cage once he released her. "I'm never going to get tired of that," she promised in a voice much lower than normal, but she was willing to blame that on George.

"Good," he said with a smirk, "because it always gives my ego a boost."

"I'm sure," she said in a dry manner, "but I was going to tell you something but you interrupted me." She didn't seem too vexed by the interruption of sorts.

"And what were you going to tell me?" he asked slyly

"Ron, Hermione, and I are going to meet Sirius…" Hope was finding it difficult to focus when his arm was wrapped loosely around her waist, his fingers resting on the flesh of her hip from where her shirt had ridden up under her jacket. "I would take you with me if I could," Hope said regretfully, "but…it's Sirius." She said that like it explained everything, but George just gave her a strange look.

"He's overly cautious and he doesn't know you," Hope explained, "that and you're my boyfriend so he doesn't like you much for that."

George smirked, waggling his eyebrows to her as he pulled her against his chest. "Like that's a bad thing."

"He's obligated to hate you," Hope said, rolling her eyes and allowing him to bestow another kiss upon her, "he's my godfather…so, have fun with Fred!" She spun around, almost dislodging the food she had swiped from the Great Hall by doing so, when George pressed a kiss to her neck like the time before he'd asked her to the Yule Ball. Hope's knees buckled slightly and she glared at him, her face a bright red.

"Will you stop doing that?!" she bemoaned.

"You like it," George said in a smug voice that only made Hope's face hotter as she strode away grumbling to herself.

"I don't want to know," Hermione and Ron intoned in unison when they saw the bright flush on her face.

"Shut up," she growled, forcing them to strain to hide their amusement. "If you mention my love life to my godfather, I will kill you."

"Duly noted," Hermione said brightly, "but you won't kill us, you'd find the world far too boring without us."

Hope scowled but didn't disagree.

"So…think Padfoot's going to be able to eat all this food?" Ron queried as they strolled off towards and through Hogsmeade. It was the first Hogsmeade weekend since Christmas holidays, so of course it was packed, but thankfully hardly anyone spared the three a glance as they moved towards the outskirts.

"This is Padfoot we're talking about," Hope said in amusement, "he's probably dying for this food."
An eager, muffled bark agreed with her words, and Hope looked down to grin at the shaggy, black-furred dog who in turn was grinning at her around the newspaper secured in his mouth.

"Aw!" Hope cooed. "Aren't you such a clever boy?" She petted his head affectionately, enjoying the affronted expression immensely before shaking her hand off his head and racing off, turning back in a way of beckoning them forward.

"Ah, my godfather," Hope mused to her friends, "a man of few words."

Ron couldn't resist snorting at that comment as they hiked up and into the mountains, moving higher and higher, until long last when they finally reached a narrow cave. Getting inside was an easy trial and there were two people waiting for them. One was Buckbeak, the Hippogriff Hermione and Hope had rescued at the end of last year that Sirius had rode off with, but the other was the recently changed-back-to-his-human-self Sirius.

"Sirius!" Hope, who had been positively bursting to see her godfather, was more than happy to throw her arms around his shoulders and laugh when he lifted her clear off the ground with a laugh of his own.

"Ah, you're getting so big, Hope! What've you grown? A foot?"

Hope stifled her laughter. "As if that were possible! No, you old dog, I've hardly grown!" Her own hands reached up to cup his cheeks. While his appearance didn't look quite as wasted as the last time she had seen him, he was nowhere near being close to looking healthy.

"You look better," she opted to settle on, "I'm guessing you're hungry?"

A spark lit his grey eyes at the prospect of food. "Starving," he said in a raspy voice, his mouth watering as Hope and Ron and Hermione withdrew the food from their bags, throwing a chicken leg to Buckbeak in the process who seemed quite pleased at the food he was being given.

Sirius was just about to reach for a drumstick when Hope slapped him harshly alongside the head.

"Ow!" he complained, massaging the spot she had just hit. "What was that for?"

"What do you think it was for, you idiot!" Now that their heartfelt greeting was out of the way, Hope could vent her feelings about her godfather's stupidity. "You're going to get yourself thrown back in Azkaban, Imbecile!"

"Thanks for the vote of confidence!"

"Hello! You are about a mile away from Hogwarts, Sirius! Remember the last time you were so close? You broke in!"

"That wasn't my fault! I was trying to find Peter!"

"And gave me a concussion along the way!"

"Well, how was I supposed to know that you were going to chase me?"

"That's not the point!"

"Uh, guys!" Godfather and goddaughter turned away from their heated and somewhat childish argument to look at Hermione who was rubbing her temple. "Seriously? You're going to do this now?"
Sirius took this opportunity to rip off a piece of chicken from the drumstick he had been deprived of before as Hope crossed her arms in irritation.

"Where's Lover Boy?" was the first question out of his mouth once he'd swallowed.

Hope's cheeks reddened and she scowled at him. "His name," she bit out, "is George, and he's out with Fred and Angie...I told him I wasn't sure if you'd like him."

Sirius muttered something crude under his breath, earning an "Oi!"

"Don't worry," Ron added, rolling his eyes for good measure, "he hasn't gotten her into a broom cupboard yet."

"Ron!"

But this seemed to assuage Sirius' suspicions towards George, despite never meeting him except for at a distance.

"So," Hope added, her cheeks still flooded with colour, "why are you here, in spite of the threat of being thrown to the Dementors if you're ever found?"

Sirius ignored that jibe, grinning at her in a manner that was quite dog-like. "What d'you think? Fulfilling my duty as godfather, don't worry about it, I'm pretending to be a lovable stray."

Hope scowled more fiercely, the lines of tension appearing more prevalent on her face, something Sirius was quick to pick up on. "I want to be on the spot," he told them in a strangely serious voice. "Your last letter...well, let's just say things are getting fishier. I've been stealing the paper every time someone throws one out, and by the looks of things, I'm not the only one who's getting worried."

"Sirius..."

"Hope..."

"Don't mock me!" Hope snapped, "I'm really worried here! These past few months have been hell, in case Remus hasn't told you!"

Her eyes flared a fiery orange and Sirius recoiled a little, giving Ron an opportunity to change the subject.

"Mystery Illness of Bartemius Crouch...Ministry Witch Still Missing- Minister of Magic Now Personally Involved," he read aloud, "shouldn't they have been doing this weeks or months ago?"

"Maybe Mr. Crouch's illness wasn't as serious then," Hermione mused before her eyes darkened, "getting his comeuppance for sacking Winky, isn't he? I bet he wishes he hadn't done it now - bet he feels the difference now she's not there to look after him."

Interest coloured Sirius' face. "Wait...Crouch sacked his house-elf?"

"At the Cup," Hope explained, "she was found with a wand that was used to make the Dark Mark appear; he sacked her on the spot."

"Whose wand?" Sirius asked, leaning forward as he downed a bit of pumpkin juice.

"Mine," Hope said coolly, still annoyed about the incident, and she had to duck as Sirius did a spit-take, dousing the rocks near Buckbeak with the juice.
"Hm…that is odd…when did you realize it was gone?" Sirius asked.

"When I saw it," Hope said, feeling a little shamed.

"But you had gotten knocked out a bit before, though, remember?" Hermione added from where she was petting Buckbeak's feathers softly.

"Wait-what?" Sirius gaped at her.

"Thanks for that, Hermione," Hope said in a wry voice before turning to Sirius again, "one of the Death Eaters nabbed me with a flame spell to the back."

Worry flashed across his face.

"I was fine," she insisted, "it was hardly more than a small burn; don't get your knickers in a twist!"

It seemed like they'd been talking for hours when they finally decided it would be best to head back to the castle, however, Hope stayed behind, her eyes fixed on the entrance, her wand held tightly in her hand as Ron and Hermione disappeared with barely a glance back.

She was hardly aware of Sirius' eyes on her.

"You look more and more like your mother every day," he said softly and Hope bit at the corner of her lip, her stance relaxing as she slowly sat down beside him. "But James is all that attitude."

A smile twitched Hope's lips. "Professor McGonagall tells me I have Mum's witty tongue."

"Well, she's not wrong," Sirius grumbled in agreement, throwing an arm over Hope's shoulder and drawing her close. "Tell me honestly: how are you?"

"I've seen better days," Hope admitted, "the Second Task was exhausting."

"Bet George didn't like playing the damsel," Sirius said, sporting a toothy grin.

"He didn't mind actually," Hope mused, "didn't fancy being cold and wet in February, though. He's not the bad guy, Sirius." She twisted to look at him, her eyes blue with sincerity. "He's a really good guy, great, even, with a love for pranking. You would like him." If he could get past that whole hating goddaughter's boyfriend phase he was apparently currently in. "He and Fred want to open a joke shop," she told him, "their mother doesn't approve, but that's hardly stopping them."

Sirius chuckled. "Ah, but when did oppressive mothers ever stop pranksters from being who they really are?" His mother couldn't have stopped him on his worst day.

Hope's lips curled upwards and she leant her head onto his shoulder, exhaling a low sigh. "I missed you, Sirius."

"I missed you, too," Sirius assured her, tilting his own head slightly to press a slanted kiss onto her forehead.

"Oh, I almost forgot." Hope reached into her pocket to withdraw a moving picture and hand it to her godfather. "That was from the Yule Ball. Cedric enchanted my camera for me and it was zooming around taking pictures of a lot of people during the ball."

It was just of her smiling and laughing, arm in arm with her two best friends. Ron was looking a little sheepish in his thread-bare dress robes, but Hope and Hermione were the picture of loveliness. Hope…she looked so much like Lily that it almost hurt.
Hope kissed his cheek. "It's yours. Take care, Sirius." She stood, brushing the grated rock from her clothes before leaving the way she had come, down all the way back onto the roads of Hogsmeade. The wind was starting to get much chillier, and in her haste to return to the castle, she almost knocked over Fleur in the process.

"Fleur! Oh, I'm so sorry!" Hope was quick to apologize, rushing to pick up the books her friend had dropped. "I wasn't really watching where I was going."

"It eez alright," Fleur assured her with a bright smile. "I 'ave not seen you in a while. 'Ave you been busy?"

"Sort of," Hope admitted, curling a lock of her hair around a finger, "Gryffindor Tower has been crazy, it's like they didn't think I was going to get this far, and I'm not sure if I should be insulted or not."

Fleur gave a throaty laugh at that. "You are younger than ze rest of us, it does not surprise me."

"I'm not sure if I should be insulted or not about that either," Hope added in a wry voice, her eyes glancing over Fleur's items. A new quill and parchment, along with some books on Curse-breaking… "So, I take it you and Bill have become quill-pals, then?"

Fleur's cheeks pinked at Hope's words. "Yes, eez zat a bad zing?" she asked a little defensive.

"Not at all," Hope said with an evil grin, "but I, of course, claim full credit for pushing you towards him."

Fleur huffed in indignation. "You are terrible!"

"It has been said," Hope agreed in amusement. "Did he kiss you?"

Fleur reddened further. "It was not like zat!" she insisted. "It was on my cheek. It was sweet!"

"Uh-huh," Hope said, waggling her eyebrows suggestively at her friend. "Right…"

"Silence," Fleur grumbled in annoyance. "'Ave you started getting ready for the Third Task?"

"A little," Hope admitted, "I probably should be doing a bit more, but it's not until June."

"And zen you will scramble to prepare," Fleur said wisely. "As you 'ave the last two times."

"Oh, shut up," Hope said, sticking her tongue out at the French champion. "That's just the way I function."

"It won't do to be running on lack of sleep for the next task, zough," Fleur said agreeably, earning her a frown.

"You know I hate it when you make sense," Hope told her before switching the topic so quickly that Fleur stared. "So, how is your little sister?"

"It eez funny you should ask about 'er," Fleur with a secret smile, "because she 'asn't stopped talking about you, according to my mother."

Hope couldn't even stifle a groan that time. "Oh, no, that's the last thing I wanted."

"You are 'er 'ero," Fleur told her, "she is very grateful to you for rescuing 'er in ze Second Task."
Hope opened her mouth to say that Gabrielle hadn't really been in any danger, despite the morbidity of the song in the golden egg, but she gave it up as a waste of time.

"My parents wish to meet you," Fleur admitted.

"Huh? Why?" Hope asked flummoxed.

"You are my first friend," she explained, "ze wanted to know if you wanted to come to France for a few weeks after ze end of school."

"Really?" Hope asked a little struck. "That would be…amazing! Of course…I'd probably have to give a few people the slip…but the Dursleys would be happy to see less of my face…"

Fleur, through pleased by her response, was confused as to why she would have to give people the slip.

The next few months seemed to fly by faster than Hope would have thought possible and it seemed like every day she was spending all of her time not on school work on researching new spells until May was upon her, leaving her only a bit more than a month left to prepare.

"Exactly how many spells are you planning on learning for the Third Task?" Ron asked, a little aghast as Hope poured over a thick tome on offensive magic, having finished her Transfiguration work early.

"Not really sure," Hope said, only half paying attention to what he was saying as she mouthed the incantations, making the movements with her wand, "better to over-prepare than to under-prepare, I guess."

"Stunning Spell…Reductor Curse…Conjunctivitis Curse," Hermione read aloud from the book. "You aren't playing around."

"Er, 'death toll,' anyone?" Hope asked with a slightly irked expression as the bell rang for the end of class.

"Miss Potter, a moment please."

"Shite!" Hope muttered under her breath, making Ron smirk and Hermione toss her a look of disapproval. "So, Professor, how can I help you?" she asked in a jaunty sort of voice.

Professor McGonagall's eyes momentarily fell to the title of the book in her arms, relieved that she was taking the last task much more seriously than the previous two.

"You are to meet Mr. Bagman and the other champions at the Quidditch field tonight at nine o'clock," she told the young witch, "then Mr. Bagman will tell you all about the Third Task."

"Wonderful," Hope muttered to herself, repeating the words hours later in the presence of Cedric as they walked down to field together. "Most likely to die? That would probably be me."

"Oh, come on," Cedric said, nudging her shoulder as he did so, "you handled the other tasks pretty well."

"Yeah, well," Hope wrinkled her nose, "that was different." She had already known (even if it was a bare minimum) what to expect.

"Fleur thinks it's something to do with underground tunnels and treasure," Cedric mentioned, making
"Yeah, she told me, but I doubt it's that," Hope disagreed, "I told her most of the tunnels are actually inside the castle."

"Which you would know all about."

Hope beamed shamelessly as they walked across the lawn before they both had to stop and stare in horror.

"What have they done?" Hope demanded, aghast, running to examine the field that was no longer smooth, as if only a small amount of the field had been allowed to grow.

"They're hedges," Cedric said, leaning forward as well, "but why—?"

"Hello there!" Hope had to hide a groan of irritation as they moved towards the three shadows amidst the hedges, because it was Ludo Bagman who had spoken, and he was turning into a real thorn in her side. "Well what d'you think? Growing nicely, aren't they? Give them a month and Hagrid'll have them twenty feet high."

Fleur smothered a giggle at how Hope seemed to be at a loss for words, too abhorred at how the Quidditch pitch had been ruined.

"Don't worry," he said quickly, taking in their expressions with obvious amusement that they couldn't share, "you'll have your Quidditch field back to normal once the task is over! Now, I imagine you can guess what we're making here?"

Hope arched an eyebrow, sharing a confused look with Fleur.

"Maze," a low voice said, and it took Hope a second to realize that Viktor had been the one that had spoken. He spoke so little, so it was understandable.

Hope sagged at the thought. Riddles, sure she could do. A dragon? No problem. Rescuing boyfriends from the Black Lake? Definitely. But a maze? Oh, she was horrible at those, and not being able to see it from the top would prove disastrous.

"That's right! A maze. The third task's really very straightforward. The Triwizard Cup will be placed in the centre of the maze. The first champion to touch it will receive full marks."

"I'm guessing it's not as simple as it sounds," Hope queried, expelling a slow sigh.

"Very good, Hope!" Hope thought that if he was any more excited then he would be floating. "There will be obstacles. Hagrid is providing a number of creatures...then there will be spells that must be broken...all that sort of thing, you know. Now, the champions who are leading on points will get a head start into the maze." He nodded towards Hope and Cedric. "Then Mr. Krum will enter...then Miss Delacour. But you'll all be in with a fighting chance, depending how well you get past the obstacles. Should be fun, eh?"

Hope hid her face in her hands. Hagrid was going to be supplying the creatures? Now she knew she was so very much dead.

"Very well..." He glanced around to the four as Hope removed her hands from her face, the grimace remaining on her lips. "If you haven't got any questions, we'll go back up to the castle, shall we, it's a bit chilly..."
He had started to move towards Hope, to her eternal annoyance, when Viktor captured her attention.

"Could I haff a vord?" he inquired.

Hope's eyebrows rose. "Er, sure."

She waved goodbye to Fleur and Cedric, telling the ever-irritating Bagman to leave her, as he seemed insistent to speak with her and she really couldn't care less.

"Vill you valk vith me?" he asked.

"Er…alright," Hope asked with a touch of suspicion as she walked with the Bulgarian Seeker, side by side along the Forbidden Forest. It seemed like a very long time before either one spoke. Viktor glanced at her out of the corner of his eye. Of course, even Bulgaria had heard the tales of Hope Potter, but he had been expecting someone a bit…more. She appeared quite ordinary, maybe a bit sarcastic and free-spirited, but he had been anticipating her to look more like a hero. But she didn't really have to.

He had seen her performance with the dragon, the fire that had reflected in her eyes when she cracked the whip around the snout of the dragon, the expression of determination on her face. He had watched her bring up two hostages instead of one.

"So," Hope said awkwardly, "what is this really about?"

"Hermy-own-ninny."

Hope stifled her chuckles at how Viktor pronounced Hermione's name.

"I vont to know if there is anyone she has…" He cut himself off looking a little embarrassed, making Hope feel a bit relieved.

"Dated?" Hope offered. "No, Hermione's never really had any one show her that much interest." Ron wouldn't really appreciate that, but it was Hermione's life, it wasn't as though he could tell her how to run it.

"She talks about you and that-Ron- often," he said as Hope bent down to reach a hand out to a stray snake slithering in the lush green.

"Yeah, she would," Hope said, rolling her eyes, "we're all friends." She looked up at him, deadly serious. "And if you hurt her, I will find you and kill you."

Viktor gazed upon her with a new light, his eyebrows arched.

She held the snake's head to her ear, frowning as she listened intently to its hiss…could she really understand that?

Her wand was in her hand in a matter of seconds.

"Someone's out there," she said, her voice surprisingly calm. "Lumos!"

The light that erupted from her wand was so bright that it made the person stagger away from the trunk of an oak tree that he had been hiding behind. Hope almost dropped the snake in surprise. "Mr. Crouch?"

His robes were loose and ragged, his hair wild, much like his eyes as he spoke to the air as if it was a person.
"Vosn’t he a judge? Isn’t he with your Ministry?" Viktor asked, taking a step back at the untamed appearance of the man, but Hope ignored him.

"Mr. Crouch?" Hope said softly, the snake curling around her arm as she stepped forward, but Viktor grabbed her arm.

"Is he safe?"

"Only one way to find out," Hope reasoned as she approached further, close enough now to hear what he was saying.

"...and when you’ve done that, Weatherby, send an owl to Dumbledore confirming the number of Durmstrang students who will be attending the tournament," Mr. Crouch was saying, "Karkaroff has just sent word there will be twelve..."

He was talking like it was before Halloween when the champions had been chosen…that couldn’t be a good sign.

"Mr. Crouch?" she repeated, but he didn’t seem to hear her, or he was feigning ignorance, it was difficult to tell.

"...and then send another owl to Madame Maxime, because she might want to up the number of students she’s bringing, now Karkaroff’s made it a round dozen... do that, Weatherby, will you? Will you? Will...

He stumbled away and Hope reached out a hand to steady him, but he recoiled. "Mr. Crouch?" she said in concern. "Are you alright?" Because it was clear that he wasn’t. "Should I get Madam Pomfrey?"

He didn’t answer her, and a glance to Viktor told her that she wasn’t the only one who was apprehensive about his condition.

"Vot is wrong with him?" he asked in alarm.

"He’s acting... a little crazy," Hope said wincing as she said the word 'crazy', recalling Neville's parents, Alice and Frank Longbottom locked up in the long-term ward in St. Mungo’s. "I should grab —"

"Dumbledore!"

Hope yelped as he pulled her by her robes towards him. Viktor raised his wand to fire a spell, but Hope held up a hand. "It’s alright, I was just a little surprised, that’s all." She turned her eyes towards Mr. Crouch. "Mr. Crouch… do you need to see Dumbledore?"

He nodded fervently, his eyes rolling. "I need... see... Dumbledore… I’ve done... stupid... thing… must... tell... Dumbledore..."

"Mr. Crouch," Hope said with more patience than she had ever exhibited previously, "I can take you to Dumbledore, but you’re going to have to walk on your own."

It was as if her voice had finally penetrated his ears and he looked at her in a haze of confusion.

"Who... you?" he breathed, curious like a child in a strange world.

"I-I’m a student here," Hope said, befuddled by the question.
"You're not his?" he asked in a feverish manner.

Hope didn't have any idea who he was talking about, but she decided it would be better to just go with: "No."

"Dumbledore's?" he asked, his eyes reflecting the moon, bright and wide and just a little terrifying.

"Yes." Hope's knees almost buckled when he pulled more tightly on her robes, throwing more weight on her than she had ever been used to.

"Warn…Dumbledore…" He rasped, clutching her shoulders so hard Hope was sure she was going to get bruises, and then it was like a switch had been flipped and he was talking to air again. "Thank you, Weatherby, and when you have done that, I would like a cup of tea. My wife and son will be arriving shortly, we are attending a concert tonight with Mr. and Mrs. Fudge." In fact, he was talking to her like she was 'Weatherby' (which was also the name she knew he called Percy by) "Yes, my son has recently gained twelve O.W.L.S, most satisfactory, yes, thank you, yes, very proud indeed. Now, if you could bring me that memo from the Andorran Minister of Magic, I think I will have time to draft a response..."

"Mr. Crouch, I'm going to need you to let me go," Hope said calmly, "so I can go and get Dumbledore—" The snake tightened over her arm, rearing its head as if to bite.

"Don't...leave...me!" he whispered, his mouth gaping and his eyes the size of saucers.
"I...escaped...must warn...must tell...see Dumbledore...my fault...all my fault...Bertha...dead...all my fault...my son...my fault...tell Dumbledore...Hope Potter...the Dark Lord...stronger...Hope Potter..."

"You need to let me go, Mr. Crouch," Hope insisted. "So I can get Dumbledore!" She barely managed to wrench herself free before turning to Viktor. "Watch him," she told him, "don't let him out of your sight, alright?"

"Alright…just hurry, von't you?" Viktor said as he moved to take her place, his wand pointed at the man, giving Hope the opportunity to sprint, Flashing to a spot just before the stone steps that led up to the castle, and thus the edge of her ability to flash at Hogwarts.

She raced up them without hardly a glance back.
A Mysterious Disappearance

Hope could blame Snape for a lot of things, and she could definitely blame him for detaining her as she skidded to a stop before hidden staircase that led up to Dumbledore's office that Hope had only been to once in her lifetime (thankfully).

"Sherbet lemon," she gasped, out of breath, but the stone gargoyle remained immobile. "Oh, come on!" she complained. "It's an emergency!"

The gargoyle was still staring blankly at her.

"Er…Acid Pops?" Hope offered. "Cockroach Clus—"

The gargoyle hopped aside, the wall splitting behind her as a figure stepped out. Hope's face fell; it was Snape.

"Potter," he said in a cool voice. "What on earth are you doing here?"

Hope tried to dodge around him before the gargoyle moved back into place, but Snape set himself firmly between her and her goal, much to her annoyance.

"I need to see Professor Dumbledore," Hope said through gritted teeth.

"The Headmaster is very busy."

A muscle jumped in her jaw. Was he purposefully being this annoying, or was that just his personality? Probably the latter. "Look," she snapped, jabbing a finger in the direction she had just come from, "Mr. Crouch is out there and he wants to talk to Dumbledore!"

"What are you going on about?" he demanded.

"Mr. Crouch!" Hope yelled, her temper spilling over as he refused her entry, "The judge! He's out there and he wants to see Dumbledore! He's gone ment—"

The gargoyle moved aside and Hope wondered just how loud she had been as Dumbledore exited, surveying them with calm eyes. He was obviously quite familiar with the tension between the Gryffindor and the Potions master.

"Professor—" Hope started, but the snake cut her off with a hiss. "Yes, I was getting to that," she told it to the incredulity of her audience. The snake, who had no name, was ordering her to hurry up; the man it had seen in the forest was terribly unstable and it wasn't wise to leave him alone with only the other boy. "Mr. Crouch-forest-wants you!" she said jerkily, her words slurring together in her haste.

Dumbledore's eyes widened a fraction behind his half-moon spectacles, and, thankfully, instead of asking more questions, he simply said: "Lead the way."

And Hope tore back in the direction that she had come. "He's really out of it," Hope told him between breaths, "he was saying something about Voldemort getting stronger."

"Indeed." Hope stumbled as Dumbledore matched her fast pace. "Did you leave him?"

"With Viktor Krum," Hope said a bit nervously. Maybe that hadn't been her best idea.
Dumbledore cast her a glance that she missed. "Was there anyone out with you?" he asked. "Someone who might have seen Mr. Crouch?"

Hope screwed up her face, colouring her hair a dark grey. "No, I'm pretty sure it was just us. Bagman and the other champions had already gone-

"Where did you leave them?" Dumbledore asked.

"Not far," Hope said as they passed the Beauxbatons carriage, heading slightly into the forest. The snake coiled tightly around her arm hissed, seeing the heat of a human ahead. "This way!"

Hope almost tripped over the Durmstrang champion. "Viktor!" She knelt quickly by his side, resting her ear against his chest to check for a heartbeat, but thankfully there was a constant thrum and she leaned back in relief. "He's alive!"

Dumbledore bent down as well, only he examined Viktor's eyes beneath the closed lids. "Stunned," he said, recognizing the symptoms.

"Madam Pomfrey is probably still—" Hope started to say, but Dumbledore cut her off. "No, Hope, remain where you are."

Hope fell abruptly silent as he cast a spell towards Hagrid's cabin before pointing his wand to Viktor and softly uttering the spell, "Ennervate," to awaken him from his stunned state.

His opened instantly, but they were clouded in confusion. "What—?" His eyes fell on Hope's concerned ones. "I vos only looking to see vare you had gone. I had only glanced away, but he attacked me from behind!"

"He had a wand?" Hope asked in surprise. It hadn't seemed like he had before.

"He must've," the Bulgarian grumbled as Hagrid astride with Fang came into view.

"Professor Dumbledore! Hope-what—?"

"Hagrid, if you would kindly fetch Professor Karkaroff from the Durmstrang ship, his student has been attacked. After, would you alert Professor Moody—"

"There's no need for that, Albus," a voice in the darkness grunted as the scarred ex-Auror came into view. "Snape said something about Crouch—"

"Crouch?" Hagrid's voice was one of confusion.

"Karkaroff, please, Hagrid!" Dumbledore's voice on the other hand could have sliced through granite.

"Right, yes," Hagrid stumbled in his haste to comply the elderly headmaster's commands, disappearing once more into the darkness.

Once he was gone, Dumbledore instead turned his attention towards Moody. "I don't know where Barty Crouch is," he told him in a low voice, "but it is essential that we find him."

Moody grunted in affirmation, shuffling off and into the forest in search of the missing and deranged man.

"What is this?!"
Hope jumped at Karkaroff's sudden voice, and stood suddenly, the snake on her arm slipping from her to slither back into the forest once more. "What's going on?"

"I vos attacked," Krum explained in a sullen voice, taking Hope's hand when she offered it, pulling him into an upright position, though thoroughly confused, as if he had a concussion. "Mr. Crouch or votever his name—"

"Crouch?" Karkaroff barked, shock lining his already quite weary face. "Crouch attacked you? The Triwizard judge?"

"Igor—"

"Treachery!" Karkaroff roared, his eyes blazing and his voice echoing rather loudly in the silence. "It is a plot! You and your Ministry of Magic have lured me here under false pretences, Dumbledore! This is not an equal competition! First you sneak Potter into the tournament, though she is underage! Now one of your Ministry friends attempts to put my champion out of action! I smell double-dealing and corruption in this whole affair, and you, Dumbledore, you, with your talk of closer international Wizarding links, of rebuilding old ties, of forgetting old differences- here's what I think of you!"

Hope was surprised when he spit into the grass near where Dumbledore's feet were, but she was more surprised by Hagrid's reaction than anything else, because the half-giant man had thrown and held the man against a nearby tree. "Apologize!"

"Hagrid, no!"

It was only with great reluctance that Hagrid released Karkaroff who slumped to the ground, hacking and coughing, trying to regain the usage of his throat.

"Kindly escort Hope back up to the castle, Hagrid," Dumbledore said in voice that brooked no argument, cutting across Hagrid when he tried to disagree. "Take her straight to Gryffindor Tower. And Hope—" Hope lifted her head to look at him to indicate that she was listening. "I want you to stay there. Anything you might want to do—any owls you might want to send— they can wait until morning, do you understand me?"

"Yes," Hope said quietly. She had been considering writing to Sirius or Remus to tell them about Crouch, but that would have to wait, she supposed.

The walk back up to the castle was silent and—on Hope's part— quite irritating. Hagrid was apparently against foreigners now (Hope blamed Madame Maxime for that) and didn't want her or the others to spend as much time with Viktor or Fleur (which wouldn't be happening). He was taking a page out of Moody's book and becoming over-paranoid, so Hope was sure to slam the portrait extra hard on her way in.

"Hope?"

Said girl jumped violently away from the voice, swearing before she realized it was just Hermione whose expression told her that she was less than pleased with the vulgarity she had just spewed.

"Are you alright?" Ron asked as Hope approached them, flopping unceremoniously before the flickering fire. "What's the next task?"

Hope blinked owlishly a few times. "Oh…it's a maze, but that's not the problem. Mr. Crouch showed up."

"What?" Hermione said aghast.
"You mean the same Mr. Crouch who's been ill?" Ron asked dubiously.

"Yeah," Hope rubbed at her eyes. "He looked like he'd really lost it...he was talking to a tree like it was Percy, but he said he had to talk to Dumbledore, so I left him with Viktor—"

"You did what?" Ron asked horrified, a bit angry towards the Bulgarian for reasons.

"Yeah," Hope agreed, "and by the time we got back, Crouch was gone and Viktor had been knocked out."

"What?!" Hermione asked in shock. "Mr. Crouch knocked Viktor out?"

"Must not've been very impressive if a madman got the jump on him," Ron muttered, earning himself a venomous glare from Hermione.

"I didn't even realize he still had his wand," Hope said, "he was really really out of it."

"What'd he say?" Hermione asked. "Anything?"

"Well..." Hope racked her brains for her memory. "He mentioned something about doing something bad, and Voldemort, and me, and Voldemort getting stronger..."

The nervous and anxious expressions that Hermione and Ron shared didn't really help Hope's mood. She hardly slept after that, falling into a doze in her chair until the sun barely broke across the horizon and the three snuck out of the common room to head for the Owlery.

"Maybe you should tell Lupin too," Hermione suggested as they walked towards the spire that held the school and student owls.

"Today's the full moon," Hope said in an exhaustive manner. "I don't want to worry him."

"Oh, yeah, poor guy," Ron uttered, hiding a yawn with difficulty.

"Tell us again what Mr. Crouch said," Hermione told Hope, making her friend's shoulders slump slightly.

"I've told you a hundred times!"

"Then make it a hundred-and-one!"

Hope gave a long sigh. "Alright, he was pretty insistent on seeing Dumbledore and he said he'd done something stupid...something about it being his fault that Bertha Jorkins was dead, something about his son, and Voldemort getting stronger."

Ron flinched as Hope said the name of the most feared wizard since Grindelwald. "But, he was mental, it wasn't like he even knew what he was saying when he said that."

"You weren't there," Hope said in a cool manner, looking ready to collapse to the ground. "He sounded pretty sane when he talked about Voldemort."

"But he was insane!" Hermione added.

Hope glared. "Thank you, I hadn't quite figured that out for myself."

"Whoa, easy!" Ron stepped between them before a rare fight could break out. "We all need to calm down!"
Each girl took a calming breath and fell silent as Hope tied the letter to a grey-feathered owl, grateful that Hedwig was still out hunting and wouldn't see her using someone else instead of her (curse that owl for being so bloody prideful!).

"We need to see Professor Moody," Hermione said at long last, "maybe he found Mr. Crouch."

"Moody has the Marauder's Map," Hope said sullenly, watching the owl fly away, "it wouldn't have been that hard."

"You say that like he would still be on the grounds," Ron said, rolling his eyes, "the map only shows up to the boundaries, and he could've—"

"Shh!"

He fell silent as two familiar voices grew steadily closer, arguinglowly, but still echoing off the stone all the same.

"—that's blackmail, that is, we could get into a lot of trouble for that—"

"—we've tried being polite; it's time to play dirty, like him. He wouldn't like the Ministry of Magic knowing what he did—"

"I'm telling you, if you put that in writing, it's blackmail!"

"Yeah, and you won't be complaining if we get a nice fat payoff, will you?"

Fred and George stared at the three fourth years who had clearly heard what they had just been saying.

"What're you doing here?" Ron said at the exact same time as Fred.

"Sending a letter," George and Hope said (Hope in a bit of bemusement, and George defensively).

"What, at this time?" Hermione and Fred demanded.

"Fine," Fred said, clearly trying to downplay the situation, but George looked much too tense for Hope to believe his act, "We won't ask you what you're doing, if you don't ask us."

"Who're you blackmailing?" Ron asked in suspicion.

George forced a smile onto his face, but it was clearly faked. "Don't be stupid, I was only joking."

"Right," Ron said in a voice that told him he didn't believe that for a second, "and Hope doesn't actually want to end up in a broom cupboard with you."

Hope's cheeks burned bright red at that, redder when George flashed a smirk her way.

"I've told you before, Ron," Fred said, dragging the conversation away from Hope, to her relief, "keep your nose out if you like it the shape it is. Can't see why you would, but—"

"It's my business if you're blackmailing someone," Ron said stoutly, glowering at them like his mother. "George's right, you could end up in serious trouble for that."

"I was joking," George insisted. "You're starting to sound a bit like our dear older brother, you are, Ron. Carry on like this and you'll be made prefect."
"No I won't!" Ron looked as though he had never been quite so insulted in his life as George released the barn owl with their letter outside.

"Well, stop telling people what to do then. See you later." He tried to follow Fred but Hope barred his exit, staring him down with a fierce frown. He sighed. "What? Going to judge me too?"

Hope's eyebrow twitched. "I thought you knew me better than that, Georgie." She took his arm and tugged him in the opposite direction, leaving their friends (and brothers) behind. "I'm not going to ask about the blackmailing thing," she said shortly, "because I really don't want to know what you're up to when I have other things I should be dealing with."

George pulled her short, his hands resting on either side of her waist, sending butterflies jumbling around in her stomach, as usual. "Whoa, what's going on? You look like hell."

"Thanks," Hope said dryly, "I was accosted by a mentally ill man yesterday, but how are you?"

"Wait-what?" George asked, his eyes flaring a darker blue (or was that her imagination?). He lifted a hand to cradle her jaw. "Are you alright?"

"I'm fine," Hope said, "I just didn't get a lot of sleep, that's all..." She eyed him, biting her lip slightly. She hadn't seen much of him for the past few weeks; she had been busy with preparing for the task and he was probably up to his eyes in trouble with Fred.

George noticed her eyes immediately and he smirked. "So...what was Ron talking about that broom cupboard for?"

Hope's cheeks burst with colour again. "I haven't the faintest idea," she told him, taking a step back, but he stepped with her.

"Really?" George asked in amusement. "'Cause it sounded an awful lot like you wanted to snog in a broom closet..."

Her cheeks had now bypassed cherry and had gone straight to beet. "D-don't know where he came up with that idea," she said, somehow finding herself backed into the wall, and that darkened her cheeks further.

"Mm-hm..." George's lips grazed hers as he hummed in agreement and Hope felt like she was melting even if it was hardly a kiss yet. "He could have made it up, I suppose."

"He could have," Hope said, hardly more than a whisper, her heart beating rather fast as his lips ghosted over the line of her jaw before returning to her lips again.

"But I don't think so," George murmured against her, his fingers tangling in her hair as he placed a fiery kiss upon her lips. Hope's eyes slid shut as her fingers did the same, trying to pull herself up to a more accessible height. His teeth tugged on her lower lip and—

"See! Told you they were off for a snog!"

"Ron!"

George broke away from Hope to glare at his younger brother. "We're in the middle of something over here." He glanced over his girlfriend in appreciation, immensely enjoying the dazed expression in her eyes, paired with the wild mess of her hair and the pinkness of her cheeks which flushed hotter at his words.
Hope sighed. "We should probably go." She stood on her tip toes and did something she had never
done before, and kissed the side of his neck like he had done twice previously to make her blush. A
flush rose in his cheeks, but not quite as pronounced as hers, but pleasing all the same, as she ducked
out of his arms to jog to her friends side.

"Seriously," Ron said disgusted, "there are things a bloke could go without seeing!"

George watched in amusement as Hope punched him harshly in the arm. "Ow!"

"Oh, shut it! If you didn't want to see that then maybe you shouldn't have followed us! And one
more word and I'm tossing you over the next balcony!"

George sniggered as his brother fell abruptly silent.

"Hope? Are you trying to memorize every spell in the library by June?" Hope peered around her
massive pile of books to Fred who was staring at her with an incredulous expression and Angelina
eyeing the pile with surprise.

"Don't be ridiculous," she scoffed, "just the offensive and defensive ones…where's your better half?"

Fred clutched his chest, appealing to his girlfriend. "Angie! Did you hear what she just said to me?"

"Don't look at me," the dark-skinned girl said, grinning widely, "You're on your own."

Fred gaped at her in dismay and Hope laughed. "Ooh! If that's not a burn I don't know what is!"

"That's just playing dirty," Fred grumbled, "two against one."

"You snooze, you lose," Hope chirped behind the pillar of books that was so tall that only her
currently violet hair could be seen. "So, where is he?"

"Do I look like his minder?" Fred asked with an arched eyebrow.

Hope threw him a roll of eyes. "Oh, please! You two are each other's best friend! You're, like, a
single entity."

"Huh?" Fred asked blankly.

Hope gave him an aggravated look, probably because he was distracting her from Third Task
preparation. "Come on, it's either Fred and George, or the Weasley twins, you two aren't apart
much."

Fred opened his mouth to retort, but closed it looking a bit confused…was that a compliment…?

"Hope, look out!"

He snapped out of his thoughts abruptly when Hope's feet fumbled and she went tumbling down the
staircase in a mess of books and limbs to collapse on the landing below. Unmoving.

Angelina scaled the steps in seconds closely followed by her horrified boyfriend. "Oh my Merlin!
Hope! Hope!"

But Hope didn't even move apart from stirring slightly at the sound of her name.

"George definitely going to kill me," Fred bemoaned as Angelina ran a simple diagnostic spell over
her young friend.

"Cranium bruising," she murmured to herself, "pretty good considering her track record." She met Fred's eyes. "We should probably get her to Madam Pomfrey, but it's not really serious."

"If you say so," Fred said, eyeing the downed girl nervously, "but you're the one who breaks the news to George, not me."

Angelina scowled at him. "You are such a baby!"

"No," Fred was quick to refute, "I've just seen him angry, and it isn't pretty." George was the quieter and the softer of the two twins, it didn't take much to see that; it was undoubtedly a quality that Hope loved. It might've been hard to see him get mad, but it had been done, and was perhaps even more disastrous than Hope when she exploded. "Let's go."

He lifted her gently from the floor, freezing as she groaned in pain, before lifting her completely once it had subsided. They walked in silence with Fred silently hyperventilating about how George would react.

"He's not going to kill you, Freddie," Angelina said softly, "it wasn't your fault."

Fred could only gulp as they entered the hospital wing.

"What's she done this time?" Madam Pomfrey said in dismay as she swooped in on them, directing Fred to a spare cot, onto which he carefully deposited the girl.

"She fell down the stairs," Angelina said with a wince as Madam Pomfrey murmured a few spells, her wand tip hovering over the damaged area.

"Good as new," she said in a matter of short seconds. "She'll have to sleep it off, of course, but she'll be fine once she wakes up."

Fred exhaled loudly in relief. "Thank Merlin! George won't have to kill me now!"

Angelina made an exasperated noise as they left to find the boy in question, leaving Hope to her dream that was so very strange. She was floating, faintly reminded of the out-of-body experience she had undergone after the hit-and-run she was involved in, the one that had momentarily killed her. She was faintly startled, because she had no idea where she was until she realized where the wind was pulling her towards. It was a broken down manor on a hill, exactly like the one from the dream she had had before school had started.

She flowed, following a barn owl from door to corridor until she was in the same room as before, the one that Voldemort had killed a man named Frank Bryce in. She shivered, recalling the flash of green and the colour of blood that Voldemort's eyes had been. The chair that she was certain held him had its back to her, the snake from before coiling around one of the foot pegs, and there was a whimpering man sprawled on the floor.

Hope didn't bother suppressing a growl, recognizing the man to be Peter Pettigrew. He was grovelling like a coward, sobbing into the rug, tense as if expecting something, what exactly, Hope couldn't be certain. Death? Pain?

"You are in luck, Wormtail." Hope couldn't fight back a shiver at his cold voice, it always seemed to terrify her more than the man (if he could be considered a man) himself. "You are very fortunate indeed. Your blunder has not ruined everything. He is dead."
It was in relief that Wormtail gasped out: "My Lord, I am...I am so pleased...and so sorry..."

"Nagini." It took Hope a moment to remember that that was the snake's name. "You are out of luck. I will not be feeding Wormtail to you, after all...but never mind, never mind...there is still Hope Potter..."

Hope cast a nervous glance towards the snake who she was sure would be smiling if its face had allowed it to do so.

"Now, Wormtail," he continued in a snide voice, "perhaps one more little reminder why I will not tolerate another blunder from you..."

Fear shone in his eyes. "My Lord...no...I beg you..."

"Crucio!"

As much as she hated Wormtail, she knew that she would never want to subject him to the Torture Curse, she would never sink to that level. And as he screamed, she flinched backwards until her scar burned white hot against her forehead and then her eyes snapped open and she fell off the bed, breathing hard.

"Hope?"

A sea of red assaulted her eyes and she had to blink a few times for that vision to clear into George's concerned face. "George?" she said faintly, feeling a little light-headed that had nothing to do with him.

George helped her stand. "Are you alright? Should I go get Madam Pomfrey? She only just left—"

"Dumbledore," Hope said suddenly, her eyes a bit wild, "I need to see Dumbledore."

"Huh?" George stared at her in surprise, but followed her as she left the hospital wing. "Wait-why?"

"Because," Hope said shortly, a hand still on her forehead where the scar was still spiking with pain. It took her less time than usual to find Dumbledore's office, using the last password she had tried the last time (Cockroach Cluster) which, thankfully, was indeed the password. George followed her in spite of the scowl that told him that she didn't need to be constantly watched, no matter what her friends said.

She raised a hand to knock on the door when she heard the distinct voice of Cornelius Fudge who she was finding she liked less and less.

"I'll reserve judgment until after I've seen the place where he was found, but you say it was just past the Beauxbatons carriage? Dumbledore, you know what that woman is?" he was saying with a bit of anxiety.

"I consider her to be a very able headmistress—and an excellent dancer," Dumbledore said so softly that Hope almost missed it.

"Dumbledore, come!" Fudge snapped. "Don't you think you might be prejudiced in her favour because of Hagrid? They don't all turn out harmless—if, indeed, you can call Hagrid harmless, with that monster fixation he's got—"

Hope's blood boiled at the slight towards Hagrid, and George wondered if she was going to blow the door open.
"I no more suspect Madame Maxime than Hagrid," Dumbledore said in that serene calm that he always seemed to possess. "I think it possible that it is you who are prejudiced, Cornelius."

"Can we wrap up this discussion?" Moody's voice uttered lowly.

"Yes, yes, let's go down to the grounds, then," Fudge agreed.

"No, it's not that." Hope was sure that his magical eye was on them. "It's just that Potter wants a word with you, Albus. She's just outside the door with Weasley."

Hope gritted her teeth and knocked loudly before opening the door.

"Sorry, professor," she apologized quickly, "I thought you were alone."

Dumbledore smiled congenially. "It is fine. I am always grateful for interruptions."

"Hope! How are you?" Fudge asked brightly, bouncing on the balls of his feet not unlike Bagman often did.

Hope gave him a strange look, tightening her grip on George's hand. "Fine," she said shortly, turning her attention towards Dumbledore. "Professor, I was wondering if I could have a word? Maybe when you're not busy?"

She was under the impression that he was reading her mind when he gave her a long glance. "Wait here for me, Hope. Our examination of the grounds will not take long…and Mr. Weasley?"

"Hm?" George said, meeting his eyes as he had been gazing around the room (as he always did when he found himself in the office, which was rather rare, now that he thought about it).

"You might find a few books to your liking on the third shelf," Dumbledore said, his eyes twinkling as he pulled the door shut behind him, leaving the pair in silence.
"He has pranking books?" George noted in surprise, checking the shelf that Dumbledore had indicated only after the three men had left. "Wow…"

Hope rolled her eyes. "That would impress you." Her eyes, instead, were drawn to the Sword of Gryffindor where it rested in a glass case. Her fingers tingled, twitching to hold it a second time, but she knew the rules. You had to first prove your worth to get the sword, like she had in the Chamber of Secrets. Being brave was kind of the whole idea.

She squinted her eyes slightly at what was being reflected on its metallic surface. Where was that blue glow coming from? Hope twisted around, barely noticing that George was still immersed in one of the books (rather shocking, wasn't it?), her eyes intently on where the silvery-blue light was originating, through a crack of a closed door. Curious as ever, Hope pulled the door open, gazing in awe at what lay within. It was a shallow stone basin into which a number of strange runes had been carved, only one of which she recognized, the Norse rune for remember.

"What'cha looking at?" George chimed from her side as she gazed into the basin which held swirling silvery-blue strands that were giving off the luminescent glow.

"M not sure," Hope hummed, leaning forward when George grabbed her arm.

He arched an eyebrow, grinning at her. "Poking your nose where it doesn't belong, Potter?"

She smirked. "Always, Weasley." And she leaned further forwards and then suddenly her feet weren't on the floor of Dumbledore's office. She was falling fast, like a rock dropped from the Astronomy Tower, and then she was sitting.

"What in the name of Merlin?"

And she had apparently taken George along for the ride.

The first thing she noticed was that she had no idea where she was. The room was circular with many levels of seats, most of which were already filled, like the seat beside her in which Dumbledore himself was sitting.

Hope jumped violently and then waited for him to take notice of her and George.

"Professor?"

George gave her a look. "Does he look a bit younger to you?"

Not by much, but his long hair and beard wasn't as light nor as long as it had been minutes previously. Hope was having flashbacks to Tom Riddle's diary from second year.

"Wait a second…" Hope drew a hand back and shot it into Dumbledore's arm. George gaped as it sank right through.

"Okay…" he said slowly, "that is definitely not normal."

"It's a memory," Hope said in awe, "haven't been in one of these for two years."

"You've been in a memory?" George said, a little astounded.
"Details, details," Hope said with an idle wave of her hand, her eyes focused ahead of them where a single chair sat at the centre with chains on the arms…not something Hope would want to sit in anytime soon. Both jumped at the sound of the door opening and three figures entered. Hope recoiled automatically, as two of them happened to be Dementors.

"Easy…." George's hand tightened over her clenched one. "They aren't going to be able to see you."

That didn't stop her from holding tightly to his arm (which he didn't seem to mind one bit), feeling exceptionally powerless, her other hand holding her wand tightly as if ready to perform the Patronus Charm as the Dementors glided forward to deposit a man in the chained arm chair.

"Hang on…isn't that Karkaroff?" George said in surprise as the man at the chair lifted his head. "What's he doing here?"

"Sirius said he was a Death Eater," Hope mentioned, earning herself a dry stare. "Oh…did I forget to mention that?"

"Possibly."

"He still doesn't like you, by the way," she added.

"What?" George said aghast. "Look at me! I'm totally likeable!"

"Ron told him you wanted to snog in a broom cupboard," Hope said with a shrug, "that kind of negated any positive feelings he had towards you as my boyfriend."

"Wonderful," he grumbled, reminding himself to hit Ron the next time he saw him, the git.

"Igor Karkaroff." The voice was vaguely familiar and Hope's eyes widened in surprise as a younger Mr. Crouch stood from the mass of seats. He looked nothing like the babbling man she had seen in the forest, appearing far less tired than the first time they had met at the Quidditch World Cup and just as proper. "You have been brought from Azkaban to present evidence to the Ministry of Magic. You have given us to understand that you have important information for us."

Karkaroff shifted uncomfortably in the seat, which Hope could understand; those chains didn't look too pleasant. "I have, sir." His voice was trembling with fear. "I wish to be of use to the Ministry. I wish to help. I- I know that the Ministry is trying to- to round up the last of the Dark Lords supporters. I am eager to assist in any way I can..."

"I'll bet," Hope grumbled, "anything to stay out of Azkaban." George squeezed her hand.

It seemed that someone agreed with her with a distinct growl of "Filth" it could only be one person.

Both George and Hope looked past the headmaster to see a younger Moody.

"Weird seeing him with both eyes," George muttered, quickly followed by a muffled complaint once Hope elbowed him in the side.

"That's just mean," she said back, leaning close to listen to what Moody was saying to Dumbledore.

"Crouch is going to let him out," Moody grunted in true annoyance. "He's done a deal with him. Took me six months to track him down, and Crouch is going to let him go if he's got enough new names. Let's hear his information, I say, and throw him straight back to the Dementors."

Dumbledore made a strange noise at the mention of the creatures, one Hope couldn't quite decipher.
"Ah," Moody said in a voice of cold amusement, "I was forgetting…you don't like the Dementors, do you, Albus?"

"No," Dumbledore replied. "I'm afraid I don't. I have long felt the Ministry is wrong to ally itself with such creatures."

"But for filth like this…" Moody gestured towards Karkaroff as if to say that certain people deserved that kind of treatment.

"You say you have names for us, Karkaroff," Mr. Crouch's voice drew them back to the man at the centre. "Let us hear them, please."

Karkaroff stumbled over his words. "You must understand that He-Who-Must-Not-Be-Named operated always in the greatest secrecy…He preferred that we- I mean to say, his supporters- and I regret now, very deeply, that I ever counted myself among them- we never knew the names of every one of our fellows- He alone knew exactly who we all were—"

Moody gave a dark chuckle. "Wise move, wasn't it? Preventing someone like you, Karkaroff, from turning all of them in."

"Yet you say you have some names for us?" Mr. Crouch demanded, patience clearly wearing thin.

"I-I do," he stuttered, the chains shaking on his arms as he flexed them slightly with a wince. "And these were important supporters, mind you. People I saw with my own eyes doing his bidding. I give this information as a sign that I fully and totally renounce him, and am filled with a remorse so deep I can barely—"

"That's likely," Hope said bitingly, "he shouldn't have joined him in the first place."

"Hope."

"What?" she demanded. "Do you know how many Death Eaters put on this kind of act to stay out of Azkaban?"

"Still," George said, pressing a finger to his lips, "you're going to miss—"

"There was Antonin Dolohov. I - I saw him torture countless Muggles and –and non-supporters of the Dark Lord."

George had completely frozen.

"George?" Hope slid away from him slightly at the undisguised hatred that George's eyes held at the mention of the name. "George? Do you know that man?"

"Doesn't everyone?" George said coldly. "Antonin Dolohov is the man who killed my uncles Fabian and Gideon."

"Oh, I'm sorry," Hope said quickly. She had never known that he had any uncles apart from Bilius, the one who had died a day after seeing the Grim.

"It's fine," George said, his voice a little strangled. "I was a little kid when it happened. I only remember that Mum didn't stop crying for months."

Hope felt a rush of sympathy for Mrs. Weasley despite the difference in views they often shared.

"Any others?" Mr. Crouch asked.
"Why, yes," Karkaroff said quick, his tongue fumbling, "there was Rosier. Evan Rosier."

"Rosier is dead," Mr. Crouch said coolly. "He was caught shortly after you were too. He preferred to fight rather than come quietly and was killed in the struggle."

Karkaroff was beginning to become quite frantic now; his names were proving to be quite useless. "No- no more than Rosier deserved. But, there was Travers- he helped murder the McKinnons! Mulciber -he specialized in the Imperius Curse, forced countless people to do horrific things! Rookwood, who was a spy, and passed He-Who-Must-Not-Be-Named useful information from inside the Ministry itself!"

This time there was not a resigned silence, instead mutterings broke out at the name "Rookwood". This must have been someone within the Ministry.

"Rookwood?" Mr. Crouch repeated. "Augustus Rookwood of the Department of Mysteries?" Hope remembered over the summer when Mr. Weasley had talked about Unspeakables: "They're from the Department of Mysteries, top secret, no idea what they get up to."

"The very same!" Karkaroff cried, excitement pouring off him at giving a name that they hadn't known. "I believe he used a network of well-placed wizards, both inside the Ministry and out, to collect information—"

Mr. Crouch cut him off again. "But Travers and Mulciber we have. Very well, Karkaroff, if that is all, you will be returned to Azkaban while we decide—"

This prospect terrified him, as it should, Hope thought a bit viciously. "Not yet!" he yelled out, his anxiety peaking. "Wait I have more! Snape! Severus Snape!"

"What?!" Hope said completely aghast. It was no secret that she and Snape hated each other, but that he was a Death Eater…was that really believable?

"Snape has been cleared by this council. He has been vouched for by Albus Dumbledore." Hope stared at the headmaster as if she had never quite looked at him properly. Why would he pardon a Death Eater?

"No! I assure you! Severus Snape is a Death Eater!" Karkaroff cried out, attempting to stand despite the chains that bound him.

"I have given evidence already on this matter," Dumbledore said as he stood, addressing the group as a whole. "Severus Snape was indeed a Death Eater. However, he rejoined our side before Lord Voldemort's downfall and turned spy for us, at great personal risk. He is now no more a Death Eater than I am."

Moody didn't seem to share agreement with his words.

"Very well, Karkaroff, you have been of assistance. I shall review your case. You will return to Azkaban in the meantime..."

"What's going on?" George asked as the voice began to fade.

"Another memory, probably," Hope mused as the world around them cleared, only this time they were sitting beside Dumbledore who sitting much closer to Mr. Crouch than the across the room seating they had been in before, and this time, Ludo Bagman was the one in the centre chair, but it did not bind him like it had Karkaroff.
"Ludo Bagman," Mr. Crouch's voice silence the soft titters echoing around the room, "you have been brought here in front of the Council of Magical Law to answer charges relating to the activities of the Death Eaters. We have heard the evidence against you, and are about to reach our verdict. Do you have anything to add to your testimony before we pronounce judgment?" 

George couldn't help but stare. Of course, he knew that Bagman was a ruthless bastard, after all, he had stolen all of his and Fred's savings during the Cup, but he found it hard to believe that he of all people was a Death Eater.

"Only, well- I know I've been a bit of an idiot—" Bagman said a bit weakly.

"You never spoke a truer word, boy," Moody grunted, close to Dumbledore in this memory as well (Hope suspected that the only reason he had come was to make these interjections to Dumbledore). "If I didn't know he'd always been dim, I'd have said some of those Bludgers had permanently affected his brain..." Hope couldn't help but snigger at that.

"Ludovic Bagman, you were caught passing information to Lord Voldemort's supporters," Mr. Crouch said with a look of intense dislike. "For this, I suggest a term of imprisonment in Azkaban lasting no less than—"

A good number of witches and wizards didn't seem to approve of the decision.

"Lock him up, I say," George said, leaning back in his seat, crossing his arms as he did so. "Good riddance."

Hope arched an eyebrow at that, but refrained from commenting as Mr. Bagman spoke up.

"But I've told you, I had no idea!" he cried. "None at all! Old Rookwood was a friend of my dad's...never crossed my mind he was in with You-Know-Who! I thought I was collecting information for our side! And Rookwood kept talking about getting me a job in the Ministry later on...once my Quidditch days are over, you know...I mean, I can't keep getting hit by Bludgers for the rest of my life, can I?"

Mr. Crouch didn't find his comments to be amusing at all. "It will be put to vote," he said frigidly. "The jury will please raise their hands...those in favour of imprisonment..."

No hands were raised, though many did applaud the man for his Quidditch performances.

"Despicable!" Mr. Crouch shot over to Dumbledore where the man sat impassively. "Rookwood get him a job indeed...The day Ludo Bagman joins us will be a sad day indeed for the Ministry..."

The dungeon shifted for a third time and Hope hoped that it was the last as six Dementors entered guarding four people, binding them in four chairs as opposed to one as it had been previously. The man on the furthest right was more thickly set than the others, but his eyes seemed to be void of anything (reminding Hope of the expression worn when under the Imperius Curse). Beside him was a man perhaps his opposite in size and appearance, thin and ferret-like. The third held a woman with flowing dark hair and heavily lidded eyes, an amused smile dancing across her lips.

"Bellatrix Lestrange," the name twisted in Hope's mouth as she was filled with the intense desire to move down to where she was sitting and smack her around a bit, despite knowing that this would have no affect on her.

"You know her?" George asked a little surprised at the slightly wolffish expression Hope's face bore, but she did not answer him.
"You have been brought here before the Council of Magical Law," Mr. Crouch said, the malice in his tone echoing in the silence, "so that we may pass judgment on you, for a crime so heinous—"

"Father…Father…please…" Hope had overlooked the fourth figure, a boy who looked to be barely out of school with straw-coloured hair and a complexion so light that he was almost transparent. Was this Barty Crouch Jr.? He didn't look like much, but looks could be deceiving.

"—that we have rarely heard the like of it within this court," Mr. Crouch continued, speaking over his son's pleas. "We have heard the evidence against you. The four of you stand accused of capturing an Auror –Frank Longbottom– and subjecting him to the Cruciatuus Curse, believing him to have knowledge of the present whereabouts of your exiled master, He-Who-Must-Not-Be-Named—"

"Oh, Merlin," George said, his voice horrified. He had originally thought it was a joke when Hope had called Neville her god-brother, but if his mum was her god-mother…that would explain why she looked ready to spit fire. What kind of person would subject another to that kind of torture?

"Father, I didn't! I didn't! I swear it! Father, don't send me back to the Dementors—" the boy cried beseechingly.

"You are further accused," Mr. Crouch continued, raising his voice more, "of using the Cruciatuus Curse on Frank Longbottom's wife, when he would not give you information. You planned to restore He-Who-Must-Not-Be-Named to power, and to resume the lives of violence you presumably led while he was strong. I now ask the jury—"

"Mother!"

A witch in the crowd beside Mr. Crouch, his wife, obviously, could only sob in the face of what her child had done, what he had been accused of doing.

"Mother, stop him. Mother, I didn't do it, it wasn't me!" he insisted.

"I now ask the jury," Mr. Crouch bellowed to be heard, "to raise their hands if they believe, as I do, that these crimes deserve a life sentence in Azkaban!"

There were no hands that were not in the air and that only made the boy scream worse.

"No! Mother, no! I didn't do it, I didn't do it, I didn't know! Don't send me there, don't let him!"

Bellatrix cackled, her dark humour growing in the face of Mr. Crouch's son's fear. "The Dark Lord will rise again, Crouch!" she called with a smile that bared her teeth. Throw us into Azkaban; we will wait! He will rise again and will come for us, he will reward us beyond any of his other supporters! We alone were faithful! We alone tried to find him!"

"I'm your son!" Barty Jr. called up to his father. "I'm your son!"

"You are no son of mine!" Mr. Crouch roared in return. "I have no son!" Hope saw a flicker of the man she had seen in the forest, of a man driven mad. "Take them away! Take them away, and may they rot there!"

"I think," a voice uttered to her side, "it is time you return to my office."

Hope felt as though she was falling upwards and then she fell onto the floor of Dumbledore's office, the Sword of Gryffindor surprisingly clutched in her hand. Hadn't it been in a glass case? A glance behind her told her that it was empty. She stared at the sword.
"Okay, I know there wasn't anything heroic going on," she told it, "your maker must've screwed you up or something."

A soft chuckle drew her away and her cheeks reddened once she realized that it was Dumbledore and she had been snooping around in his things. "Oh, Professor, I'm sorry, the door was open and —" Her embarrassment was making her stutter.

"I understand," Dumbledore murmured, shutting the cabinet door that held the basin, "curiosity rules many." By the time he had turned around Hope had been pulled into a standing position.

"What is it?" Hope asked, her eyes still fastened on the door that hid it from view, "I thought it was a bit like Tom Riddle's diary…"

"Oh, no," Dumbledore assured her, "the diary was quite different…this is a Pensieve. I sometimes find, and I am sure you know the feeling, that I simply have too many thoughts and memories crammed into my mind. At these times," Dumbledore indicated the cupboard with a flourish of his hand, "I use the Pensieve. One simply siphons the excess thoughts from one's mind, pours them into the basin, and examines them at one's leisure. It becomes easier to spot patterns and links, you understand, when they are in this form."

That only left Hope wondering what exactly the diary had been to hold memories of a similar nature.

"I was using the Pensieve when Mr. Fudge arrived for our meeting and put it away rather hastily," Dumbledore continued, his eyes twinkling behind his spectacles as he surveyed her. "Undoubtedly I did not fasten the cabinet door properly. Naturally, it would have attracted your attention."

"Er…sorry," Hope said quickly, fiddling with the sword in her hand.

He spared her and George a serene smile. "Curiosity is not a sin. But we should exercise caution with our curiosity…yes, indeed…and I believe you had something you wanted to speak with me of?"

"Oh!" Hope had forgotten of it and her cheeks pinked as George rolled his eyes at her. "Er, yes, earlier I had a bit of an accident on the staircase– I fell down a flight of stairs and knocked myself out, and I had this dream."

"Indeed," Dumbledore said. "I imagine this dream was of importance for you to come to me."

"Well, it was about Voldemort," Hope said, "in this house with Wormtail, he was torturing him and then he said something about his blunder not ruining everything and he wasn't going to feed him to the snake, but me, and then he used the Cruciatius Curse on him and my scar burned."

Dumbledore pondered her, his eyes resting on her scar as if it was a curiosity rather than something to be ogled at. "I see…and has your scar hurt at any other time this year, excepting the time it woke you up over the summer?"

Hope opened her mouth but then shut it quickly, a suspicious frown marring her features. "I only told Sirius about that."

Dumbledore glanced to George.

"Oh, don't mind me," the prankster said quickly, "he doesn't like me much."

Amusement flickered in his eyes at that before coming more serious. "You are not Sirius' only correspondent. I have also been in contact with him ever since he left Hogwarts last year. It was I
who suggested the mountainside cave as the safest place for him to stay."

"Oh," Hope said a bit lamely. "Er…well, do you know why my scar's been bothering me?"

Dumbledore stared at her intently. The differences between her and Tom were becoming more evident as she grew, he had noticed. While Hope still retained many of Salazar Slytherin's qualities, she carried Godric Gryffindor's just as strongly. As Tom had grown older her had become increasing cold and detached, but Hope, though sometimes bitingly sarcastic, was a creature of compassion and understanding and prided herself on the ties she had to her friends.

"I have a theory," he said finally, "no more than that…It is my belief that your scar hurts both when Lord Voldemort is near you, and when he is feeling a particularly strong surge of hatred."

Hope frowned in irritation. "But that doesn't make any sense! How can a scar hurt when he's not here?"

"Because you and he are connected by the curse that failed," said Dumbledore simply. "That is no ordinary scar."

Hope bit on her lip slightly. "Do you think he's getting stronger?"

"Voldemort?" Dumbledore needn't have asked for confirmation, but Hope nodded anyways. "Once again. Hope, I can only give you my suspicions."

"Just that?" Hope couldn't help but inquire.

Dumbledore gave a soft sigh, one that revealed his fatigue. "The years of Voldemort's ascent to power were marked with disappearances. Bertha Jorkins has vanished without a trace in the place where Voldemort was certainly known to be last. Mr. Crouch too has disappeared…within these very grounds. And there was a third disappearance, one which the Ministry, I regret to say, do not consider of any importance, for it concerns a Muggle. His name was Frank Bryce, he lived in the village where Voldemort's father grew up, and he has not been seen since last August. You see, I read the Muggle newspapers, unlike most of my Ministry friends." Dumbledore's eyes seemed dark with the gravity of the situation. "These disappearances seem to me to be linked. The Ministry disagrees– as you may have heard, while waiting outside my office."

Hope flushed. "Er…sorry about that."

The twinkle had returned and he smiled. "Not to worry…and Mr. Weasley, I trust you found the books enlightening?"

George grinned a bit brightly. "Yeah, it's given me a few ideas…"

"Sorry for the interruption," Hope said before adding, "Can I borrow this?"

She was still holding the sword.

"For the task? If you wish." Though through bravery was the common way the sword was summoned to a person, it had been shown to be partial to a person even if they had only touched it once.

"Thanks," she called over her shoulder as she pulled George towards the exit quickly and down the stairs into the empty hall.

"That was…intense," George said after a long moment.
"Welcome to my life," Hope said dryly, trying not to remember Bellatrix Lestrange's mad laughter which was still echoing in her ears as she tucked the sword into the belt loop of her skirt, being extra careful so that it wouldn't hit her or break the fabric. "That's why I've got you." She jostled him with her shoulder, trying to lighten the situation.

"Hm?"

"You make life just a bit more fun and distract me from all that chaos," Hope said, leaning up to kiss his cheek, making him grin. "So, tell me, why is it that people automatically assume that when we're together that we're in a broom cupboard."

"Oh, that," George uttered with a laugh. "That's just Hogwarts Assumptions."

"Hogwarts Assumptions?" Hope repeated the words as if they were foreign to her.

"Basically," he leaned down to whisper in her ear, pulling her closer to him and making her shiver, "if you're a couple, you must be snogging in a broom cupboard."

"Lovely," Hope hardly breathed, looping her arms up and over his shoulders, "but you must know, I'd much prefer snogging in an empty room than a broom cupboard."

"Oh?" George's eyes sparkled, glinting a reflection of the firelight. He ducked his head to kiss her neck like before, pressing another along the side of her neck. "How about here?"

"H-Here's fine," Hope said a little strangled, her voice coming out lower and huskier than she had intended. Her mind was flooded with fog induced from his kisses. "Diffic-cult to think," she rasped.

"Who needs to think?" he asked in a voice much like hers, one that sent shivers down her spine as he claimed her lips. She had already been rather breathless to begin with, and this was not helping, but she couldn't bring herself to stop as George's teeth grazed her lip.

She couldn't resist the soft moan that left her lips at his actions, but then George pulled away quickly with a muffled complaint. "Why is it whenever I want a nice snog, someone is always interrupting?"

Hope blinked, the fog clearing slightly as George tugged her through a hidden tapestry just as Snape rounded the corner. They both held their silence briefly after he had gone on before laughing aloud. It was a bit unfortunate that they didn't find any more time after that to go off on their own.
"You'll be great, Hope," Alicia said with surety, smiling at the younger girl where she was feverishly looking over spells, "no offense, Fleur."

The French champion gave her a slight smile. "None taken. It would be somezing if ze youngest champion were to win, no?"

Hope groaned into her hands. "Don't say that! It'll make me more nervous!" She eyed Fleur suspiciously. "Unless, that's what you're trying to do…"

Fleur smile became disarming. "Why would I do zhat?"

"Ooh! You conniving little—"

"Hope!" Hermione warned as the other Gryffindors plus one Beauxbatons student laughed at her. "You can't just insult everything!"

Ron snorted into his eggs. "Er, you do know how Hope functions don't you?"

"I can still hear you," Hope commented in a mildly threatening voice before appealing to her boyfriend, "Georgie, do you hear what they're saying about me?"

George found himself subjected to a pair of big sad eyes.

"Ah, no!" Fred said, covering his twins eyes quickly. "Don't fall for it, George! She'll use her evil girlfriend powers on you!"

"Evil girlfriend powers?" Hope repeated nonplussed. "What on earth are you going on about?"

"I know your secret!" Fred cried dramatically, still hiding his brother's eyes from view. "You will not corrupt my twin!"

"Newsflash," Hope said in a dry manner. "Your brother has been corrupted since the day he was born. You're probably the one that corrupted him in the first place!"

Fred paused briefly. "Fair point," he conceded, removing his hands from George's eyes.

"Evil girlfriend powers," Hope scoffed, still a bit irritated from the article in the Daily Prophet by Rita Skeeter: *Hope Potter "Disturbed and Dangerous"*. "What a load of tripe," she muttered, re-reading the article, "*any witch who could speak Parseltongue as "worthy of investigation"*…ha! I'd like to see them try! And I do not regularly faint! Where is she getting this falsified information?"

"Hope…" Alicia mimed breathing in and out slowly and Hope scowled at her.

"What? I'm being insulted over here and being branded an evil-doer for an *inherited skill!*" Hope said, her eyes flaring the colour of blood. "I have a right to be upset!"

"Just don't blow anything up," Lee offered sagely.

"Thank you, Lee, for those wise words of wisdom," Hope said in a dry voice.

"You're welcome."
"I have an idea!" Hermione said suddenly very excited. "I think I know...because then no one would be able to see...even Moody...and she'd have been able to get onto the window ledge outside the hospital wing...but she's not allowed...she's definitely not allowed...I think we've got her! Just give me two seconds in the library-- just to make sure!"

"Do you think she's ever going to tell us anything?" Ron demanded of Hope as Hermione raced through the doors of the Great Hall, jostling a pair of Hufflepuff second years as she did so.

"Doubtful," Hope said abysmally, momentarily distracted by Professor McGonagall coming up to her.

"Potter, Miss Delacour, the champions are congregating in the chamber off the Hall after breakfast," she told them.

Hope blinked owlishly. "But...I thought the task wasn't until tonight!" She did a frantic double take that would have been quite comical if she had been joking.

"I'm aware of that, Potter," Professor McGonagall said in a bit of a deadpan. "The champions' families are invited to watch the final task, you know. This is simply a chance for you to greet them."

Fleur stood up eagerly, heading off in the direction the professor had indicated, leaving Hope horrified.

"What if it's the Dursleys?" She asked stricken. "My gods, I'd sooner kick the bucket!"

"Maybe it's not," George said, kissing her so deeply that her cheeks burned and a few cat-calls were tossed their way and pulling her up into a standing position, swatting her behind in the direction of the chamber, making her squeak in surprise. "Have fun."

She scowled at him, making the entire table laugh before stalking towards the door in a huff. The three of the other champions were already greeting their own parents, so where—

A smile split across her face. "Remus!" She practically threw herself at the werewolf who looked just as grey-haired and shabbily-dressed as ever. "You're here!"

"Surprise!" Mrs. Weasley added from behind Remus and Hope hugged her too and Bill, who was with her (winking inconspicuously to Fleur over his mother's shoulder, making her giggle). "Thought we'd come and watch you, Hope!"

"I was kind of worried it would be the Dursleys," Hope said with a relieved laugh, kissing Remus' cheek affectionately.

"Minerva made sure it wasn't," he assured her, examining her closely. "I wouldn't have thought it possible...but I think you've grown."

"Ha-ha!" Hope said dryly. "I've hardly grown!"

"That must be a lie," Remus claimed.

"You are terrible!" she bemoaned, before something small latched onto her waist. She looked down hardly surprised to find little Gabrielle Delacour with her arms wrapped around her, smiling angelically upwards. Gabrielle was as fond of Hope as she had been the day she pulled her out of the lake. Hope didn't mind too badly; the girl was rather a sweetheart.

"Gabrielle," she said, swinging the small girl up and into her arms, making a faux-groan as she did
so, "Vous êtes trop grand! Bientôt vous serez aussi grand que Fleur!" (You are too big! Soon you will be as tall as Fleur!)

"Et vous!" Gabrielle chirped happily as Hope's group watched on in surprise. They had hardly, or not at all, heard her speak French, let alone so much in a single setting. (And you!)

"Let's take you back to your mum, alright?" Hope asked, switching abruptly to English as she returned the eight year old to the floor, taking her hand and leading her towards the willowy, blonde-haired woman that Hope was right in assuming was Fleur and Gabrielle's mother. Both Fleur and her mother had been watching their exchange in interest and amusement.

"You must be 'Ope," the woman who could have only been her mother said with a kind smile. "Fleur 'as told us so much about you."

Hope shook her hand with a grin. "I hope not! I've got a reputation to uphold!"

Fleur laughed. "What reputation?"

"The one where I cause much trouble and mayhem," Hope said, giving a dramatic bow, "I've got to get back to them, they'll think the French are monopolizing my time, and I haven't seen Remus in a while…”

Fleur watched in a bit of bemusement as Hope returned to her group, throwing an arm around the shoulders of the older man.

"I'm glad you came," Hope said with a bright grin that was slightly apologetic for the interruption, "really."

Mrs. Weasley spared her a fond smile. "We don't mind, dear."

"Are you staying all day, then?" Hope asked. The others were all doing their final exams, but Hope was exempt from them so most of her time she had spent holed up in the library doing extra research. "That's really nice of you." Her cheeks flooded with heat. "I wasn't really expecting anyone."

"Nonsense," Remus chuckled, "why would we miss you competing?"

Hope gave him a dry expression. "Oh, I don't know Remus, it might have something to do with you being an incessant worry-wart."

Bill and his mother shared a laugh as Remus gave her a look.

"I do not—"

"Best you give up," Hope offered in a mild voice, "I am the master."

"Very modest," Bill agreed.

"Only when it matters," Hope said buffing her nails on her shirt and grinning.

"You should have seen George when I pulled him out of the water!" Hope laughed at dinner, surrounded by all of her friends and family and feeling happier than she had in a long while. "He looked so put out!"

"Hey!" George complained as they erupted into laughs. "You think I liked being at the bottom of the lake?"
"I could have left you there," Hope sang.

"Ah, but if you had, imagine the expression on Fred's face," Angelina added, "He looked so lost without George!"

"Ha-ha!" Fred complained while Alicia and Lee snickered. "I was not! You lot are making this stuff up!"

"I call it like I see it," Hope grinned. "Don't worry, Mrs. Weasley, they haven't been up to too much trouble."

Mrs. Weasley eyed her sons who were now wearing faux-innocent expressions. "Hm…"

"So, you ran into a few Grindylows?" Remus asked, turning her attention back to what she'd done in the Second Task (he had been impressed with her spells of choice for the First).

"Only a few," Hope said, swallowing a bit of potatoes. Her plate was more empty than usual, her nervousness sending butterflies fluttering in her stomach. "They weren't that difficult to deal with."

"They weren't that difficult to deal with." She nudged his shoulder with a grin. "And it's all because we learned from you last year."

"I'm sure you would have figured something out even if I hadn't taught you," Remus said in a mild voice.

Hope's eyebrow twitched lightly and she lifted the Sword of Gryffindor from the table (from where it had been constantly admired since she had brought it from her room for the Third Task). "I will seriously run you through with this if you don't take my compliment."

"I could actually see that happening," Ron laughed while Hermione tossed her a reproachful look.

"Hope…" she said with a sigh. "You are a terrible person, you know that?"

"It's the way I function," Hope said with a shrug, smirking, "George doesn't mind."

"Well, of course not," Hermione said in an unimpressed voice, "it's George."

"Should I be insulted or not?" George whispered to Ginny who found herself overcome with giggles and had to duck to hide them.

"What's that supposed to mean?" Hope demanded.

"That George clearly is mad for you," Hermione said in a bit of a despairing voice, making Hope's cheeks flush.

"Well, we all knew that," she grumbled more to herself, standing and looping the sword into a reinforced belt loop that wasn't going to tear from the sharpness of the blade. "Anyways, I've got to go…I'll see you lot in stands…" Hope swept down to kiss George swiftly before sparing them a jaunty wave as she linked arms with Fleur and headed down to the Quidditch pitch.

"Your uncle seemed very nice," Fleur complimented, "'e loves you very much."

Hope blushed. "Yeah, well, he's Remus," she said in an off-hand manner, "he's pretty awesome… your mom was nice too, sorry I couldn't stay longer to chat."

"Don't worry about it," Fleur assured her, "you can talk to 'er more after ze task eez over."

"And won't that be a relief," Hope said with a nervous laugh, tapping her fingers against the hilt of
the sword at her hip and turning her plaited hair a pitch black. It seemed like hours before everyone started to show up and fill the stands.

"We are going to be patrolling the outside of the maze," Professor McGonagall as she came up to the four champions, gesturing to herself as well as Hagrid, Moody, and Professor Flitwick. "If you get into difficulty, and wish to be rescued, send up red sparks into the air, and one of us will come and get you, do you understand?"

They all could only nod.

Professor McGonagall and Hagrid both gave her whispered wishes of luck, but she could hardly hear them as she moved to a spot before the maze, jittery with nerves.

"KICK SOME ARSE POTTER!"

She jumped at the sound of Fred and George's yell, glancing back into the crowd to see the Weasleys all together with Remus and Hermione. She couldn't help but beam up at them as Hermione jumped up and down, cheering with them; if she could only see her face…she'd be so embarrassed. Remus gave her a proud nod and grin that made her blush; she imagined her father might have done the same thing if he was here…or at least, that was what she hoped.

"Ladies and Gentlemen!" Bagman's voice grew and echoed around the stadium. "The third and final task of the Triwizard Tournament is about to begin! Let me remind you how the points currently stand! Tied for first place, with eighty-five points each– Mr. Cedric Diggory and Miss Hope Potter, both of Hogwarts School!"

The explosion of cheers made Hope blush and she blew a kiss in George's direction, laughing as the Weasley males joked as to who it was for. *Obviously* it had been aimed towards Ron, not George…or at least, that was how he took it; she barely saw his wink from where she was.

"In second place," he continued, "with eighty points– Mr. Viktor Krum, of Durmstrang Institute!"

The applause that followed was not as pronounced as Cedric's or Hope's.

"And in third place– Miss Fleur Delacour, of Beauxbatons Academy!" The Beauxbatons students applauded loudly with a few select other students.

"So…on my whistle, Hope and Cedric!"

Hope tensed, turning back to the maze, readying to run into it, her wand held tightly in her hand. "Three-two-one—" The whistle pierced the air and Hope shot inside.

"Lumos!" she hissed, following the path on swift feet until she came to a fork, almost crashing into Cedric in the process.

"Sorry," he quickly apologized, "you take left, I'll take right?"

"Sure," Hope said, racing off in the direction he had offered, she had moved no more than about thirty feet when she happened across her first obstacle.

Hope went stark white at the sight.

It was huge, with a dragon's tail that swished back and forth, the body of a grey-furred goat, and with teeth bared from a lion head.
As much as Hope enjoyed Greek myths, the Chimaera was not a beast that would have ever wanted to face. Hope moved very slowly to replace her wand in her fore-arm holster and to unsheathe the sword at her waist.

The Chimaera watched her every movement.

"Ooh-kay," Hope mumbled lowly, "please put a known-wizard killer beast in here, yes, very logical…maybe it's not into fourteen-year old witches…" But she had to roll to avoid it as it pounced, twisting back into a standing position and slicing the blade at it, but the most she did was slice off a few hairs before the sharp dragon tail grazed her side, ripping open the skin a little.

Hope bit back a cry of pain as she pressed a hand against the cut, ignoring the flare of that shot over her skin. It wasn't so bad…considering…it didn't seem that deep, thankfully.

Hope yelped in surprise as it leapt at her, barely bringing up the sword in time to jab it through its underbelly. She watched in startled surprise as the Chimaera gave a roar of pain, the wound steaming as it fell to the ground. After a few more seconds, its movements stilled and Hope could only stare at the amazement at the sword before she returned it to her waist, drawing her wand again as she hit a fork in the maze doing her best to ignore the stabbing pain in her side.

"Point Me!" The spell was a rather simple one in which the wand was used as a compass of sorts, and once held over a flat surface (such as Hope's hand), it would point in the direction of what it was that you sought. It spun in a complete circle twice before pointing right…but the best way to head in that direction was probably to take the left and then the first right…

She headed into the left fork, following it much tenser than she had the first time around, eager to not run across another dangerous obstacle, and this time the path was deserted, much to her surprise, or at least it was until Hope rounded the corner and came face to face with a Dementor.

"Shite!" Hope stumbled backwards, snapping her wand up: "Expecto Patronum!"

She thought of Ron and Hermione, and George, and everyone out on the stands cheering for her, what it would be like to celebrate winning the Triwizard Tournament with them.

A panther exploded from the tip to soar through the air and take a protective stance before her, its haunches rose as if poised to strike when the Dementor fell on its back as if severely startled. Hope too was so startled that her spell fell.

"You're not a Dementor!" she said suddenly. "Riddikulus!"

The boggart gave a small pop and erupted into confetti like a twisted party favour, and then Hope was off again, taking the next left, then a right, and another right—

She was so distracted by the strange noises that she walked right into her next obstacle which was a cloud of golden mist. She yelled as the world twisted and suddenly it was as if she was on the sky—which was the earth—and she could fall into the bottomless pit that was the sky. Hope stood frozen, a bit terrified of moving when a sudden scream pierced the air.

"Fleur!?"

But there was no answer.

Hope steeled her nerves, screwing her eyes shut as she lifted one foot with difficulty from the grass, and she fell—to the ground once the world had returned to normal. She gasped for breath, not particularly enjoying the enemy that hadn't been something she could fire a spell at.
But she had to get moving so she hoisted herself, pausing at yet another fork in contemplation. That was the direction that Fleur's scream had come from, she was sure of it. But Fleur and Hope had agreed to not come to each other's aid in the maze, they wanted a fair match, so if one was taken down, then the other had a higher chance of winning. So she turned in the opposite direction, following it by wand-light.

"What are you doing?!"

Hope froze at Cedric's voice, harsh and angrier than she would have ever thought it could have been. She started towards his voice, without really meaning to. "What the hell d'you think you're doing?"

"Crucio!" Viktor's voice incanting the Torture Curse made her blood run cold even without Cedric's pained yells shattering the night.

"Reducto!" The hedge before her blew out from the force of her spell and she ran through pointing her wand. "Stupefy!" Her blindly cast spell struck true and Viktor was thrown off his feet, his spell cancelling as he made contact with the ground, unmoving.

"Cedric!" Hope, forgetting that she shouldn't have been assisting Cedric like she had agreed not to for Fleur, raced to his side, pulling him upward with difficulty, her hand still slick from the blood from her side. "What happened? Are you alright?"

"Yeah," Cedric rasped, his voice strained from the brief torture. "Yeah… I don't believe it… he crept up behind me… I heard him, I turned around, and he had his wand on me…"

"Maybe he's been cursed," Hope offered weakly, making Cedric scoff lightly. "Did you hear Fleur scream?"

"Yeah, you don't think Krum got her too?" Cedric asked, eyeing the fallen Durmstrang champion with disgust.

Hope remained silent. She didn't want to say what she was thinking as she raised her wand and sent up a shower of crimson sparks. "We should go," she said finally.

"Right… see you…"

Hope took the left and followed it on quick feet, but her Four-Point Spell was much less direct than before and Hope found herself wandering out of a few dead ends before she came to a stop once more, this time with awe splashed across her face.

She was beautiful and strange at the same time, and she was a sphinx, having a lion body and a woman's head. She was must prettier than the Great Sphinx of Giza.

"You are very near to your goal," she said, her voice low and almost guttural. "The quickest way is past me."

Sphinxes were riddle-masters, she wouldn't possibly just step aside, but Hope flooded with excitement. A riddle! Oh, this was going to be brilliant!

"The only way to pass is to answer my riddle," she continued. "Answer on your first guess- I let you pass. Answer wrongly– I attack. Remain silent- I will let you walk away from me unscathed."

Hope breathed in and out deeply. "Alright, let's hear it."

The sphinx stilled her rapid pacing to face her and recite the riddle for Hope to solve:
"First think of a person who lives in disguise,
Who deals in secrets and tells naught but lies.

Next, tell me what's always the last thing to mend,
The middle of middle and end of the end?
And finally give me the sound often heard
During the search for a hard-to-find word.

Now string them together, and answer me this,
Which creature would you be unwilling to kiss?"

Hope blinked a few times. That was probably the longest riddle she had yet heard...she was going to have to split it up if she had any hope for solving it. "Er...okay, can I get the first bit?" Her eyebrows furrowed into a frown as the words were repeated. "So...someone who lies," she murmured to herself, "but also someone who disguises themselves...like a spy or an assassin...The next clue, please?"

"Next, tell me what's always the last thing to mend,
The middle of middle and end of the end?" the Sphinx recited.

"Last thing to mend?" Hope muttered. "Middle or middle? End of end?" But some riddles weren't that difficult and were rather simple if one looked at them properly. The middle of middle was a d, and was the end of end, and the last letter of mend. "So that's the letter 'd'...next?"

"And finally give me the sound often heard
During the search for a hard-to-find word.

Now string them together, and answer me this,
Which creature would you be unwilling to kiss?"

"The sound...hard to find word?" That one stumped Hope. "Er...hang on! Er!" She was bouncing on the balls of her feet now in excitement. Now put them together and- "Spy-d-er-Spider!"

She beamed as the sphinx let her pass, her wand spinning on her hand, directing her to the right, grinning broadly at the sight of the shining Triwizard Cup not a hundred yards away! She raced forward at the same time a second dark figure did, and it didn't take much for her to guess that it was Cedric.

"Cedric! Look out!" she screamed as something dark and massive started towards him, but the only thing her scream did was make him stumble and trip, his wand flying out of his hand and leaving him defenceless as the great spider approached him.

"Stupefy!" Hope roared, racing forward, but the spell only glanced off its body, serving to turn its attention to Hope instead; oops.

"Impedimenta! Diffindo! Expulso!" Nothing seemed to work. Perhaps it was because the spider was magical that her spells didn't affect it, or perhaps it could have been that her spells were coming out weaker (which she wasn't quite sure if they were).
She screamed as if lifted her into the air, one of its pincers connecting with her leg, making pain blossom around her and leaving her a little dazed as she said: "Expelliarmus!"

The good news: the spider let her go, dropping her to the ground. The bad news: she fell on her pincer-stabbed leg and collapsed in a pained heap on the ground, her wand still clutched tightly in her hand and the sword reflecting the light of the Cup.

She barely caught Cedric's eye, but that didn't stop her from raising her wand and crying in unison with him: "Stupefy!"

This time it worked, the combination of the spells sent it flying into a hedge where it did not move.

"Hope? You alright?" Cedric called around the hedge to where Hope had thrown her arms protectively over her head and was only now pulling herself with difficulty into a standing position, but that wouldn't last long. Her leg buckled each time she put her weight on it. So much for being the Viktor.

"M fine," she said with difficulty, "you should take it, you deserve it."

"No," Cedric insisted, making towards her, surprising her, "you take it. You should win. That's twice you've saved my neck in here."

"You're barking mad!" Hope snapped. "You know these things don't work like that! You're closer and you've—"

"You told me about the dragons," Cedric interrupted, pulling her arm across his shoulders, "I would've gone down in the First Task if you hadn't told me what was coming."

"Someone told me about the dragons too," Hope said in irritation, "all I did was tell you, besides, you gave me that clue for the egg, so we're even."

"I had help on the egg in the first place," he added.

"We're still even," Hope said stubbornly. "Just take the bloody Cup!" She was so angry at him. She just wanted to hit him so badly; when was Hufflepuff House going to get another chance like this to prove themselves?

"No."

Hope gazed at him, half in exasperation, half in admiration. He was willing to throw it all away, the honour, the glory, the fame, because it was the right thing to do. Would she have done the same?

"Let's both do it."

"What?" he asked, a little surprised by her suggestion.

"The Cup," she said in a feverish manner, "we can both take it. We're already tied! Hogwarts can take the win!"

"You, you're serious?"

Hope could have made a very appropriate joke about her godfather, his lucky charm from breakfast (which was little more than a muddy footprint on parchment but was beyond price to Hope) still deep in her pocket. "Absolutely," she promised.

And he led her back to the Cup, one of each of their hands hovering inches from its handles. "On
They both grabbed it and Hope felt a sudden jerk as they were lifted off the ground only to slam down again in a matter of seconds, sending Hope sprawling in a haze of confusion and pain. "—the hell?" she moaned, struggling to right herself. They weren't in Hogwarts at all. She had been expecting the Cup to take them to the point where the stands were located, but it had taken them somewhere else entirely.

Creepy was one word she would use to describe where they currently were, because it was a graveyard. It was dark and cold with tombstones that looked as though they had seen better days, most overtaken by moss and vines. Hope squinted into the distance, seeing hardly anything but a hill and what looked like a mansion perched on top...it looked a little familiar—

"Did anyone tell you the Cup was Portkey?" Cedric asked her, pulling her attention back to where they were at present.

"No," Hope admitted, "unless, you think, this is a second part of the task?" It could have been for all they knew, the Third Task was supposed to be the most difficult, so it only made sense it could have two parts.

"Could be," Cedric reasoned, but his voice was a little shaky.

"Someone's coming!" Hope hissed suddenly, twisting around to stare into the darkness. She had heard something, she knew she had! There it was! Her fingers gripped her wand tightly as the stouter figure drew closer, her heart racing so fast that she thought that Cedric would have been able to hear the palpitations.

It was holding something...was that a baby?

Hope took a tentative step forward on her good leg, but she quickly crumpled to the ground with a choked cry of agony as her scar burned like nothing she'd ever felt before. She half wanted to use an Aguamenti Charm on her head, the pain was so excruciating.

"Hope?" Hope could hardly hear the tone of concern in Cedric's voice over her own pain, but she did hear a clear, cold voice utter the words: "Kill the spare."

She gave a pained cry of alarm, lifting her eyes to Cedric's as a flash of green hit him in the chest, making him fall backwards.

"No!" she screamed despite her pain, the tears welling in her eyes as she crawled to his side. "No! No! You can't be dead! Cedric! Cedric!" Her eyes stung as the tears poured quick and hot from her eyes, but Cedric did not move. His grey eyes were open and glazed, sightless in death, and that only made the tears fall faster.

"No!" she yelled again as she was dragged away from his body by the man, the man that she now recognized to be Wormtail as he bound her tightly to a marble headstone bearing the name Tom Riddle. "How dare you?! You bastard! How could—"

Wormtail stuffed some black material in her mouth, making her gag and effectively silencing her. She glanced terrified back to where Cedric lay, with her wand nearby. Her only hope was to somehow grasp the sword and perhaps then she could free herself.

She stopped struggling briefly as Wormtail came back into view, only with a large cauldron in tow, much larger than any cauldron Hope had ever seen until it was at the centre, before her, an immense snake slithering close as he lit a fire under it.
"Hurry!" Hope jumped violently at the sound glancing down to a spot just beyond where her feet could reach to the bundle that Wormtail had been carrying that Hope had thought closely resembled a baby, but it couldn't be.

"It is ready, Master," Wormtail said after a short moment of silence.

"Now..." the voice hissed and Wormtail knelt to open the robes on the ground and Hope reeled backwards, her cry of alarm and horror silenced by her gag. It was thin and without hair but with a scaly appearance, the colour being a dark red-black. That...that couldn't be human!

Hope watched as Wormtail lifted it and placed it into the cauldron and all Hope could wish for was that it would drown, drown and perish.

"Bone of the father, unknowingly given, you will renew your son!"

The ground of the grave upon which Hope was tied to splintered under her and a cloud of dust arose and entered the cauldron which turned a dark, ominous blue in return.

Then Wormtail withdrew a thin knife, his voice shaking with fear of what was to follow. "Flesh- of the servant- w-willingly given- you will- revive- your master."

Hope winced her eyes shut as the knife sliced through his wrist, wincing further as Wormtail screamed, a sound quite unlike anything Hope had ever heard before and something she hoped to never hear again.

"Don't you touch me you traitorous swine!" She spat out the gag to deliver this insult once she opened her eyes to glare at the rat Animagus as he approached her with his knife. "You hear me! Keep away!"

But he ignored her, loosening the bindings around her arm to pull it through (unfortunately tightening the ropes after doing so) and dragging the dagger down the inside of her arm, making Hope grit her teeth and bite her tongue to refrain from making any noises other than a pained subdued pained moan.

"B-blood of the enemy...forcibly taken...you will...resurrect your foe." He collected her blood into a vial, before limping in pained exhaustion to the cauldron to pour it inside. Hope quickly forced her eyes away as it glowed bright white. By the time Hope had opened her eyes once more, there was a ghostly mist hanging in the air, and to her great fear, a silhouette of a man could be seen from within, leaving the cauldron.

"Robe me," the voice from before demanded, and though in pain, Wormtail was quick to comply, taking the robes from before and pulling them over his master's head as the mist dissipated and Hope was left staring into the face of the man she had long since feared. The man of her nightmares, Salazar Slytherin's other heir. He was pale like the moon and he had eyes as red as freshly spilled blood and his nose was flat and had snake-like slits for nostrils.

This was Lord Voldemort.
The Face of Evil

Hope felt a flicker of fear as his eyes remained trained on her for a second longer before he examined himself; he had been without a body for over thirteen years, it must have been strange to suddenly have one again. Hope took this opportunity to squeeze her cut arm back into the bindings, struggling to reach the sword. If she could just get free, get to her wand and Cedric and the Portkey, she'd be safe, but that was a lot of 'if's.

Her fingertips barely brushed against hilt when she had to freeze as he turned his scarlet eyes on her once more. High, cold laughter filled the air as he withdrew a wand, thin and white like his fingers and used it to throw Wormtail to a gravestone not far from Hope.

"My Lord…" he whimpered, "my Lord…you promised…you did promise…"

"Hold out your arm," he said, his voice uncaring, but relief sparked in Wormtail's eyes.

"Oh Master…thank you, Master," he cried, holding out the arm that was still bleeding quite profusely from him cutting off the hand at the wrist, but Voldemort laughed a second time at that.

"The other arm, Wormtail."

The whimpers returned. "Master, please…please…"

But Voldemort ignored him, forcing the sleeve of Wormtail's left arm away and revealing a tattoo of some sort there, a skull with a snake spilling from its mouth, like the Dark Mark that had appeared in the sky at the Quidditch World Cup.

"It is back," he said, his voice softer than Hope would have ever thought he could possibly sound like. "They will all have noticed it…and now, we shall see…now we shall know…" And then his finger made contact with the mark, burning it black and making Hope's scar ache with new pain as she managed to grasp the hilt firmly.

"How many will be brave enough to return when they feel it?" he mused, gazing upwards to the sky above as if searching for something amongst the stars. "And how many will be foolish enough to stay away?"

His eyes fastened upon her, dark, glittering rubies in the night. "Ah, Hope Potter…so long it's been…"

"Not long enough," Hope seethed, regaining the use of her tongue.

He seemed to be amused by her retort. "You stand, Hope Potter," he continued, "upon the remains of my late father. A Muggle and a fool…very like your dear mother. But they both had their uses, did they not? Your mother died to defend you as a child…and I killed my father, and see how useful he has proved himself, in death…"

The headstone she was tied to cracked in her rage at his insult to her mother.

"Struck a nerve, have I?"

"Don't you dare say a thing about my mother," Hope seethed, "you piece of utter shit!"

His laugh sent a chill down her spine. "Ah, so proud to be the child of a Mudblood…pity…You see
that house upon the hillside, Potter?” Hope briefly redirected her attention to the mansion from before that must have been the place he was hiding out in, the one from her dreams. "My father lived there. My mother, a witch who lived here in this village, fell in love with him. But he abandoned her when she told him what she was…He didn't like magic, my father…He left her and returned to his Muggle parents before I was even born. Potter, and she died giving birth to me, leaving me to be raised in a Muggle orphanage…but I vowed to find him…I revenged myself upon him, that fool who gave me his name…Tom Riddle…”

And what a disappointment he had become, Hope thought viciously.

"Listen to me, reliving family history…why, I am growing quite sentimental…But look, Hope!" Hope's eyes involuntarily drifted in several directions where cloaked figures were melting out of the shadows. "My true family returns…"

Hope watched in disgust as each of them fell to their knees and kissed the hem of his robes before forming a circle around him, a circle of reverence.

"Welcome, Death Eaters," he spoke with that quiet voice that demanded silence. "Thirteen years…thirteen years since last we met. Yet you answer my call as though it were yesterday, we are still united under the Dark Mark, then! Or are we?" His cold eyes swept over them, inhaling deeply. "I smell guilt. There is a stench of guilt upon the air…I see you all, whole and healthy, with your powers intact- such prompt appearances! And I ask myself…why did this band of wizards never come to the aid of their master, to whom they swore eternal loyalty?"

Silence followed his question. No one was brave enough, or foolish enough to step forward and speak. The loop holding the sword snapped silently under her bindings and she attempted to bring the sword up with difficulty.

"And I answer myself," Voldemort continued, "they must have believed me broken, they thought I was gone. They slipped back among my enemies, and they pleaded innocence, and ignorance, and bewitchment…And then I ask myself, but how could they have believed I would not rise again? They, who knew the steps I took, long ago, to guard myself against mortal death? They, who had seen proof of the immensity of my power in the times when I was mightier than any wizard living?"

Hope scoffed loudly, earning her a few head jerks from the followers who didn't seem to have noticed her before, but Voldemort didn't turn back to her.

"And I answer myself, perhaps they believed a still greater power could exist, one that could vanquish even Lord Voldemort…perhaps they now pay allegiance to another…perhaps that champion of commoners, of Mudbloods and Muggles, Albus Dumbledore?"

The Death Eaters hissed and muttered, quick to shake their heads and disagree.

"It is a disappointment to me," Voldemort said, his voice ringing with danger. "I confess myself…disappointed…"

At this comment, one of the followers threw himself before Voldemort, begging and pleading: "Master! Master, forgive me! Forgive us all!"

"Crucio!"

The Death Eater screamed in pain, pain that rocked his body and left him trembling once it had subsided.

"Get up, Avery," Voldemort commanded in his soft voice. "Stand up. You ask for forgiveness? I do
not forgive. I do not forget. Thirteen long years…I want thirteen years' repayment before I forgive you. Wormtail here has paid some of his debt already, have you not, Wormtail?"

Wormtail was still snivelling at the loss of his hand and the pain from doing so.

"You returned to me, not out of loyalty, but out of fear of your old friends."

Hope snorted. He deserved that fear, every second of it.

"You deserve this pain, Wormtail. You know that, don't you?" Voldemort said quietly still.

"Yes, Master!" Wormtail was quick to agree despite his obvious pain. "Please…Master…please…"

"Yet you helped return me to my body," Voldemort's voice echoed in the silence that not even a gust of wind could disrupt. "Worthless and traitorous as you are, you helped me…and Lord Voldemort rewards his helpers…"

He did little more than a small twitch of his wand, molten silver bending into existence and melding to Wormtail's wrist to form a new hand.

No longer in pain, Wormtail gazed upon his new hand in awe. Hope, feeling a little irritated, hoped it weighed as much as silver (though that was very doubtful). "My Lord, Master…it is beautiful," he breathed, "thank you…thank you…"

"May your loyalty never waver again, Wormtail." It sounded, to Hope, more like a threat than anything else.

"No, my Lord…never, my Lord," Wormtail promised, backing away to take his place in one of the empty spaces left in the circle, leaving Hope with a sinking feeling that there were more still to come.

"Lucius, my slippery friend."

Hope started slightly. Malfoy's father? Well, that figured.

"I am told that you have not renounced the old ways, though to the world you present a respectable face," Voldemort said to the hooded man. "You are still ready to take the lead in a spot of Muggle-torture, I believe? Yet you never tried to find me, Lucius…Your exploits at the Quidditch World Cup were fun, I daresay…but might not your energies have been better directed toward finding and aiding your master?"

"My Lord," Lucius Malfoy's voice did not tremble in fear like the others' had, "I was constantly on the alert. Had there been any sign from you, any whisper of your whereabouts, I would have been at your side immediately, nothing could have prevented me-"

Voldemort interrupted him swiftly. "And yet you ran from my Mark, when a faithful Death Eater sent it into the sky last summer? Yes, I know all about that Lucius…You have disappointed me…I expect more faithful service in the future."

"Of course, my Lord," Lucius agreed, bowing deeply, "of course…You are merciful, thank you…"

"The Lastranges should stand here," he said to the group, referencing a space for three beside Lucius. Hope hissed angrily at the mention of Bellatrix, Rodolphus, and Rabastan Lestrange who had participated in Frank and Alice Longbottom's torture.

"They got what they deserved," she hissed, only earning her another amused smile from the man
who had murdered her family (and at the same time was her family, as twisted as it sounded). It grated on her nerves that he didn't rise to the bait.

"But they are entombed in Azkaban," he continued, unfazed by Hope's comment. "They were faithful. They went to Azkaban rather than renounce me...When Azkaban is broken open, the Lestranges will be honoured beyond their dreams. The Dementors will join us...they are our natural allies...we will recall the banished giants...I shall have all my devoted servants returned to me, and an army of creatures whom all fear..."

He continued on. "Macnair...destroying dangerous beasts for the Ministry of Magic now, Wormtail tells me? You shall have better victims than that soon, Macnair. Lord Voldemort will provide..."

Macnair was the one who had been sent to decapitate Buckbeak, Hope remembered, and her hatred grew.

"And here we have Crabbe...you will do better this time, will you not, Crabbe? And you, Goyle?" He sounded vaguely like a reproachful father to his dim-witted sons.

"Yes, Master..."

"We will, Master..."

"The same goes for you, Nott," he said passing another shadow which tried to profess him as most faithful before pulling up short once he was cut off by Voldemort himself.

"And here we have six missing Death Eaters," he passed, stopping before a prominent space, much more prominent than the Lestranges. "Three dead in my service. One, too cowardly to return...he will pay. One, who I believe has left me forever...he will be killed, of course...and one, who remains my most faithful servant, and who has already re-entered my service. He is at Hogwarts, that faithful servant, and it was through his efforts that our young friend arrived here tonight..."

"What're you looking at?" Hope barked as several pairs of eyes flashed towards her.

"Yes," Voldemort called out. "Hope Potter has kindly joined us for my re-birthing party. One might go so far as to call her my guest of honour."

Hope muttered something unsavoury under her breath as another Death Eater spoke, Lucius. "Master, we crave to know...we beg you to tell us...how you have achieved this...this miracle...how you managed to return to us..."

The Sword of Gryffindor was slowly but surely breaking through the bindings.

"Ah, what a story it is, Lucius...And it begins-and ends-with my young friend here." Hope scowled fiercely at Voldemort, their eyes meeting again as he approached her. "You know, of course, that they have called this girl my downfall? You all know that on the night I lost my powers and my body, I tried to kill her. Her mother died in the attempt to save her—and unwittingly provided her with a protection I had not foreseen——"

Another thing he had not foreseen was Hope breaking free and swinging a ruby-hilted sword through the air in a wide arch. Her eyes glowed silver like the blade in the moonlight, and covering in blood and grime, Hope, for once, looked an imposing figure.

"Shut your fat gob before I shut it for you, Tom!" she snarled.

His eyes flared at her using his true name, and he caught her arm as she swung the sword a second
time. But she wasn't scared; she smirked. "I warn you, if you wish to test which of Salazar's
descendants are more worthy of his blood, it will be me."

His eyes widened, but barely. "You lie."

"Hardly," Hope scoffed, ignoring his strong and tight grip on her wrist that would sooner cut off her
circulation before she let go of the sword. "I have inherited Morea's Will, as you have inherited
Adrian's Madness!" She said the last bit with such scorn. "And you are a despicable piece of life!"

He smirked this time. "It matters not." She struggled to free her hand, but for a previously nearly-dead bloke, he had a very firm grip. "Her mother left upon her the traces of her sacrifice," he
continued, speaking to the others. "This is old magic, I should have remembered it, I was foolish to
overlook it…but no matter. I can touch her now."

She took a step back, but he still had her wrist and that didn't stop him from pressing a pale finger to
her face, making her head explode with pain for what felt like the fiftieth time that night. He released
her, and Hope fell in a haze of pain to slump on the ground, the world around her bleary but
becoming clearer. The only thing she was completely certain of was the cool hilt still tightly gripped
in her hand.

"I miscalculated, my friends, I admit it," Voldemort conceded. "My curse was deflected by the
woman's foolish sacrifice, and it rebounded upon myself. Aaah…pain beyond pain, my friends;
nothing could have prepared me for it. I was ripped from my body, I was less than spirit, less than the
meanest ghost…but still, I was alive. What I was, even I do not know…I, who have gone further than
anybody along the path that leads to immortality. You know my goal -to conquer death. And now, I
was tested, and it appeared that one or more of my experiments had worked...for I had not been
killed, though the curse should have done it. Nevertheless, I was as powerless as the weakest
creature alive, and without the means to help myself... for I had no body, and every spell that might
have helped me required the use of a wand…"

"I remember only forcing myself, sleeplessly, endlessly, second by second, to exist…I settled in a
faraway place, in a forest, and I waited...Surely, one of my faithful Death Eaters would try and find
me...one of them would come and perform the magic I could not, to restore me to a body…but I
waited in vain..." The jibe was clear for all to hear, and Hope winced her eyes shut, opening them
again, the blurry vision clearing, using her sword to pull into a sitting position, wincing and biting her
lip as the movement jarred her almost-but-not-quite-broken leg, still in pain from the spider's attack.

"Only one power remained to me. I could possess the bodies of others. But I dared not go where
other humans were plentiful, for I knew that the Aurors were still abroad and searching for me. I
sometimes inhabited animals –snakes, of course, being my preference– but I was little better off
inside them than as pure spirit, for their bodies were ill adapted to perform magic...and my possession
of them shortened their lives; none of them lasted long...

"Then...four years ago…the means for my return seemed assured." Relish filled his voice at the
memory. "A wizard -young, foolish, and gullible- wandered across my path in the forest I had made
my home. Oh, he seemed the very chance I had been dreaming of...for he was a teacher at
Dumbledore's school...he was easy to bend to my will...he brought me back to this country, and after
a while, I took possession of his body, to supervise him closely as he carried out my orders. But my
plan failed. I did not manage to steal the Philosopher's Stone. I was not to be assured immortal life. I
was thwarted...thwarted, once again, by Hope Potter..."

Hope breathed in and out harshly, still recovering from the bout of pain, unaware and uncaring of the
eyes that fell upon her.
"The servant died when I left his body," Voldemort said in an off-hand way, as if he hadn't cared much about Quirrel to start with, other than to further his own goals, which seemed very likely, "and I was left as weak as ever I had been. I returned to my hiding place far away, and I will not pretend to you that I didn't then fear that I might never regain my powers...Yes, that was perhaps my darkest hour...I could not hope that I would be sent another wizard to possess...and I had given up hope, now, that any of my Death Eaters cared what had become of me..."

A few Death Eaters shifted awkwardly.

"And then, not even a year ago, when I had almost abandoned hope, it happened at last...a servant returned to me. Wormtail here, who had faked his own death to escape justice, was driven out of hiding by those he had once counted friends, and decided to return to his master. He sought me in the country where it had long been rumoured I was hiding...helped, of course, by the rats he met along the way. Wormtail has a curious affinity with rats, do you not, Wormtail? His filthy little friends told him there was a place, deep in an Albanian forest, that they avoided, where small animals like themselves had met their deaths by a dark shadow that possessed them...

"But his journey back to me was not smooth, was it, Wormtail?" Voldemort said in quiet amusement. "For, hungry one night, on the edge of the very forest where he had hoped to find me, he foolishly stopped at an inn for some food...and who should he meet there, but one Bertha Jorkins, a witch from the Ministry of Magic. Now see the way that fate favours Lord Voldemort. This might have been the end of Wormtail, and of my last hope for regeneration. But Wormtail - displaying a presence of mind I would never have expected from him- convinced Bertha Jorkins to accompany him on a night-time stroll. He overpowered her...he brought her to me. And Bertha Jorkins, who might have ruined all, proved instead to be a gift beyond my wildest dreams...for -with a little persuasion- she became a veritable mine of information."

His eyes glittered in the darkness like almandine. "She told me that the Triwizard Tournament would be played at Hogwarts this year. She told me that she knew of a faithful Death Eater who would be only too willing to help me, if I could only contact him. She told me many things...but the means I used to break the Memory Charm upon her were powerful, and when I had extracted all useful information from her, her mind and body were both damaged beyond repair. She had now served her purpose. I could not possess her. I disposed of her." A cruel smile warped his features that would have been ill-suited for a kindly one.

"Wormtail's body, of course, was ill adapted for possession, as all assumed him dead, and would attract far too much attention if noticed," he continued his narration that was both illuminating and repulsive to Hope as she etched a symbol on her palm in her own blood. She had memorized several Blood Spells, the ones that weren't quite as dangerous or dark. The one she had painted onto her hand was one for shielding. "However, he was the able-bodied servant I needed, and, poor wizard though he is, Wormtail was able to follow the instructions I gave him, which would return me to a rudimentary, weak body of my own, a body I would be able to inhabit while awaiting the essential ingredients for true rebirth...a spell or two of my own invention...a little help from my dear Nagini."

Hope's eyes flashed to the snake that sat on the grass, watching her carefully even though her master did not. Hope sneered at it, hissing a low insult that didn't faze her.

"—a potion concocted from unicorn blood, and the snake venom Nagini provided...I was soon returned to an almost human form, and strong enough to travel." His lazy eyes went from follower to follower. "There was no hope of stealing the Philosopher's Stone anymore, for I knew that Dumbledore would have seen to it that it was destroyed. But I was willing to embrace mortal life again, before chasing immortality. I set my sights lower...I would settle for my old body back again, and my old strength. I knew that to achieve this -it is an old piece of Dark Magic, the potion that
revived me tonight— I would need three powerful ingredients. Well, one of them was already at hand, was it not, Wormtail? Flesh given by a servant...

"My father's bone, naturally," he said, his voice remarkably cool, "meant that we would have to come here, where he was buried. But the blood of a foe...Wormtail would have had me use any wizard or witch, would you not, Wormtail? Any wizard or witch who had hated me...as so many of them still do. But I knew the one I must use, if I was to rise again, more powerful than I had been when I had fallen. I wanted Hope Potter's blood. I wanted the blood of the one who had stripped me of power thirteen years ago...for the lingering protection her mother once gave her would then reside in my veins too..."

"Bastard," Hope growled, which he, again, ignored.

"But how to get at Hope Potter? For she has been better protected than I think even she knows, protected in ways devised by Dumbledore long ago, when it fell to him to arrange the girl's future. Dumbledore invoked an ancient magic, to ensure the girl's protection as long as she is in her relations' care. Not even I can touch her there...Then, of course, there was the Quidditch World Cup...I thought her protection might be weaker there, away from her relations and Dumbledore, but I was not yet strong enough to attempt kidnap in the midst of a horde of Ministry wizards. And then, the girl would return to Hogwarts, where she is under the crooked nose of that Muggle-loving fool from morning until night. So how could I take her?"

Hope bit back another spiteful retort at his rhetorical question.

"Why...by using Bertha Jorkins's information, of course. Use my one faithful Death Eater, stationed at Hogwarts, to ensure that the girl's name was entered into the Goblet of Fire. Use my Death Eater to ensure that the girl won the tournament -that she touched the Triwizard Cup first- the cup which my Death Eater had turned into a Portkey, which would bring her here, beyond the reach of Dumbledore's help and protection, and into my waiting arms. And here she is ... the girl you all believed had been my downfall..."

Hope struggled into a standing position, but it mattered little, because the next spell brought her to her knees.

"Crucio!"

The pain was agonizing, as if she was burning from the inside out, as if hundred of white-hot pokers had been thrust into her skin. She was screaming like she never had before, a scream that was so blood-curdling that she would have thought would come running (but she would only think that later, once the pain had faded), screaming until her throat felt so raw, too raw to speak...

But as abruptly as it had come, it had gone, and Hope was lying, shaking on the grass, the laughter of the Death Eaters echoing in her ears.

"You see, I think, how foolish it was to suppose that this girl could ever have been stronger than me," said Voldemort, gesturing to the fallen girl. "But I want there to be no mistake in anybody's mind. Hope Potter escaped me by a lucky chance. And I am now going to prove my power by killing her, here and now, in front of you all, when there is no Dumbledore to help her, and no mother to die for her. I will give her her chance. She will be allowed to fight, and you will be left in no doubt which of us is the stronger...Now, Wormtail, give her back her wand."

Hope stood uneasily, using the sword as a crutch of sorts before considering for a moment what it would be like to run Voldemort through with it and then finally putting it through an un-ripped belt loop. It wasn't as though she was going to get close enough to stab him...that was a fantasy for
another time.

Her injured leg shook terribly from the weight she put on it, but she tried not to let it show on her face, unlike the pain of the Cruciatus Curse which had been as clear as day. She took her wand when it was thrust at her by the man who had betrayed her parents. It warmed at her touch and she felt a little braver.

"Have you been taught to duel, Hope Potter?" Voldemort asked quietly.

Hope briefly recalled the travesty of the Duelling Club of her second year. It seemed lifetimes ago. That had been for practice, but this was real life, this was kill or be killed, and she was going to be killed if she wasn't fast enough.

"Yes," Hope bit out frigidly, her throat aching from speaking the words.

"We bow to each other, Hope," Voldemort said as the Death Eaters jeered to her. "Come, the niceties must be observed…Dumbledore would like you to show manners…Bow to death, Hope…"

"I'd rather bow to him than to you," Hope said, her voice capable of cutting ice.

But this did not cease Voldemort's smile. "I said, bow."

Hope tensed her body, fighting against the weight bearing down on her forcing her forward. She missed the flicker of surprise that coloured Voldemort's eyes at her ability to even slightly resist his Imperius Curse. But then it pushed her harshly into a bow.

"That's it."

Hope glared venomously, her eyes a brighter green, the colour of the Avada Kedavra curse as she lifted her wand and returned to a vertical position. "And now you face me…straight-backed and proud, the way your father died…"

It amused him when her wand tip glowed green with murderous intent.

"And now– we duel."

Hope had flung herself to the side before his Cruciatus Curse could make contact with her for a second time, flinging a Reductor Curse at him as she went, ducking behind a tombstone that cracked from his spell. She barely had time to see that it had ripped through his robes, leaving only a small cut on the bare skin of his side. Hope relished that small victory.

"We are not playing hide-and-seek, Hope," Voldemort called softly into the night. "You cannot hide from me. Does this mean you have already tired of our duel? Pity…I had expected more…"

"Diffindo!" She shot the spell over the gravestone, moving quickly to another, ducking as a flash of light shot inches above her.

"Come, Hope," he was very nearly purring in a way that completely horrified and terrified her as she pulled herself into a standing position to face him, "it will be quick…it might even be painless…I would not know…I have never died…"

Both of their wands moved at the same time.

"Avada Kedavra!"

"Expelliarmus!"
The red and green jets of light did something Hope had not been expecting; they connected in midair. Hope's wand shook dangerously in her hand as the light that connected the two wands turned a bright, luminescent gold. Hope gave a startled cry as her feet were lifted off of the ground, along with Voldemort, their wands still strangely connected. The combination of spells was moving them away from Tom Riddle Sr.'s gravesite, to an empty clearing within the cemetery, one that lacked gravestones and bodies.

The Death Eaters were scrambling, not knowing what to do.

"Do nothing!" Voldemort barked to them, trying to force his wand away, but it did not work. "Do nothing unless I command you!"

A haunting, trilling melody filled the air, and Hope recognized it in an instant, despite it having been nearly two years since she had last heard it: the song of a phoenix.

*Don't break the connection*, the melody told her, soft and gentle, already filling her with strength.

Hope knew that, somehow it seemed like the best idea, even as she gripped the wand tightly as it bucked in her hand, to keep it from escaping her. There were now beads of light escaping the golden centre, moving through the air towards her. The closer the beads of light got to her and her wand, the hotter her wand grew. She faintly wondered if it was trying to make her let go of it as soon as it burned her. She narrowed her eyes fiercely, willing the bead of light from her and towards Voldemort's instead.

And at long last, they connected with his wand, and from it, Hope could hear faintly screams of pain, followed by a smoky hand, Wormtail's hand, and then more screams. Hope wondered if any of the screams belonged to her.

But what happened next completely stunned her, because out of the smoke came a head and slowly the body of Cedric Diggory.

"C-Cedric!" She sobbed his name, his death still fresh and creating a stinging pain in her heart that she had been too preoccupied with staying alive to properly come to terms with his sudden demise. The shade of Cedric came close to her, a small smile on his face as he reached out to touch her shoulder, even though Hope didn't even feel it.

"Don't let go, Hope, you've got this."

Hope choked a laugh, recalling the last time he had told her that was when she'd been having trouble with the Silencing Charm and he'd offered to help her. He'd said those words to her when she'd been just about to give up.

More screams from Voldemort's wand signalled another arrival, and this time it was the Muggle man from Hope's dream during the summer, Frank Bryce. Frank seemed vaguely surprised at the situation he had appeared within, leaning heavily on his smoky walking stick.

"He was a real wizard, then?" he asked in a gruff voice. "Killed me, that one did…You fight him, girl…"

He was closely followed by a woman that Hope didn't recognize but knew instantly to be Bertha Jorkins.

"Don't let go, now!" she said, her eyes wide as she gazed back to where Voldemort stood. "Don't let him get you, Hope- don't let go!"
She joined the others, circling her and Voldemort, their encouraging words making Hope's feeble willpower ignite and burn just a little brighter.

Hope was crying profusely once another head emerged, a head she greatly recognized.

James Potter with his untidy hair and circular glasses met her eyes.

"Dad," she whispered, dazed at his presence but welcoming it all the same. "Dad…"

His eyes softened and brightened at the same time, despite his shade visage, as if he had waited so long for her to call him that, and it was something that he would treasure more than all the gold in the world (despite him being dead).

"Hope." Her heart accelerated as she heard her father's voice say her name with so much love and affection. "Hang on, just stay strong. Your mother's coming…she wants to see you…it will be alright…"

Hope didn't have to wait long for her mother to appear, and it was like looking into a mirror of herself only several years older. They were so similar in appearance that they might have been sisters instead of mother and daughter.

"Mum," she choked and her mother smiled much like her husband had, with that same happiness at a title she may not have felt she deserved.

"It's alright, Hope," she hummed her name, "we're here, but you have to listen, sweetheart, alright?"

Hope gave a quick, jerky nod.

"When the connection is broken, we will linger for only moments…but we will give you time...you must get to the Portkey, it will return you to Hogwarts...do you understand, Hope?"

Hope nodded again, hardly able to speak.

"Hope…” Cedric's shade came close to her a second time, "take my body back, will you? Take my body back to my parents, and tell Cho—"

"I promise," Hope said, her voice strained with the agony of her grief and from the pain of her torture.

"Do it now," her father whispered into her ear, "be ready to run…do it now…"

Hope took a deep breath and pulled her wand away, shattering the golden threaded dome that had surrounded them as she flashed, skidding to a halt beside Cedric, reaching for the Cup.

"Stun her!"

Hope raised the hand she had painted the sigil onto, intoning a single word that made it glow red in the darkness: "Protect."

A wall of almost transparent blue erected before her and Hope could hear Voldemort's scream of rage as she summoned the Cup to her, the spell only cancelling as she and Cedric left the graveyard, swirling in colour, back towards Hogwarts.
The Aftermath and Loss

The first thing Hope heard was screams as she reappeared at Hogwarts, still clutching Cedric's lifeless body, her tears still falling and mingling with the sweat and grime that clung desperately to her face.

"Cedric!" she sobbed, her sorrow renewed as she heard Cho's scream from the crowd, gouging a knife through her heart. Cedric had always been like a sort of distant older brother to her, like one you didn't see too often, like Bill to his younger siblings. Cedric had always been kind and patient, and he listened. She almost didn't want to accept the reality of his death, despite seeing it herself. How could someone so good and so true fall?

The tears blurred her vision and someone tried to pull her from the body but she clung desperately to him. "No! No! Cedric—!"

"Hope! What happened?" Dumbledore's voice could hardly be heard over the eruptions of horror from the stands.

"Cedric," Hope gasped, "Voldemort, he—" Her breath caught in her throat. "I couldn't leave him there!" she wept, her tears coming now thick and heavy.

"What's going on? What's happened?" Hope could hardly focus on Fudge as his voice appeared out of thin air, her sorrowful eyes now a pale blue and fastened on Dumbledore's. "My God- Diggory! Dumbledore- he's dead!"

The words were echoed, but Hope couldn't listen to that either.

"Hope, let go of him." She was sure it was Fudge trying to pry her from Cedric's body, but she gripped him tighter still as if by claws.

"Hope," Dumbledore's gentle voice pierced the hazy fog that had infested her brain. Dimly she thought that Luna Lovegood had told her that was what Wrackspurts did, during the Yule Ball. "You can't help him now. It's over. Let go."

"He wanted me—," Hope's words were choked from her still screaming-raw throat, "He wanted me to bring him back, bring him back to his parents- You don't understand—!"

"I do understand," he promised, "you did a good thing…just let go now…"

Hope's grip on Cedric's shirt loosened and she hardly felt it when Dumbledore pulled her off of the ground to stand on her own two feet, something that caused her great pain from the injuries she had sustained. Her body ached from the Crucius Curse, her head was pounding and stinging from the pain that Voldemort had caused upon it, her leg felt as though it had been stabbed, and her side burned.

"What's happened?"

"What's wrong with her?"

"Diggory's dead!"

These yells only made Hope feel worse and all she wanted was someone she knew, someone who would just hold her; Ron, Hermione, George, Fred, Fleur, anyone. She felt weak and frail standing
where she was, the only survivor.

"She'll need to go to the hospital wing, she's ill," Fudge was saying loudly, making it sound as if there was something mentally wrong with her, "she's injured- Dumbledore, Diggory's parents, they're here, they're in the stands…"

A voice that rang with familiarity but that Hope couldn't quite place it in her memory. "I'll take Hope, Albus, I'll take her—"

"No, I would prefer," Dumbledore started to say before his attention was diverted.

"Dumbledore, Amos Diggory's running…he's coming over…Don't you think you should tell him—before he sees—?"

"Hope, stay here—" Dumbledore said and Hope nodded miserably, mopping her eyes on her sleeve, but that seemed to do little to staunch the flow of tears, and then she was being pulled away, the pain of using both of her legs make her cry out a little.

"It's all right, girl, I've got you…come on…hospital wing…"

"Dumbledore said to stay," Hope said weakly, hardly protesting; a visit to good old Madam Pomfrey would made her body feel better if nothing else. Grief, after all, wasn't a physical ailment; it wasn't something she could heal with a flick of her wand.

"You need to lie down…Come on now…"

Laying down sounded perfect right about now…some rest…to get away from everything that happened…

The only sound Hope heard was the constant thunk of wood on stone, so it must have been Moody, then. Hope was lulled into a doze despite her pain and that she was walking, jerked abruptly from it when he finally spoke.

"What happened, Hope?" he asked.

"Cup didn't take us back," she mumbled, her words hardly discernible. "Took us to a graveyard…Vo-oldemort…" Her voice cracked on his name.

"The Dark Lord was there?" Moody asked suddenly. "What happened then?"

Why was he asking Hope all of these questions? She just wanted to forget that the night even happened.

"Cedrie," she rasped his name with difficulty, "…they-they killed—" Her eyes were welling with tears again.

"And then?"

Hope was numb with pain and sorrow. "Potion…brought his body back…"

"The Dark Lord got his body back? He's returned?" Hope must have imagined the note of relief in his voice.

"Death Eaters…Voldemort an' me…duelled…"

"You duelled with the Dark Lord?"
"Mm," Hope bobbed her head in agreement. "Wasn' long…"

"In here, Hope…in here, and sit down…You'll be alright now…drink this…"

Hope retrospectively recognized that she was not in the hospital wing, but the only thing she currently cared about was to get off her leg.

"Drink it…" Moody repeated, pouring something peppery down her throat, a potion of some kind, "you'll feel better...come on, now, Hope, I need to know exactly what happened..."

Hope didn't want to speak, so at first she only blinked a few times, her vision clearing a bit, before forcing herself to look into Moody's eyes.

"Voldemort's back, Hope?" he pressed. "You're sure he's back? How did he do it?"

"Bone of the father…flesh of the servant…blood of the foe," Hope intoned numbly, recalling Wormtail's words as she took each, her eyes fell away to vertical slice in the inside of her arm. She was sure if she checked that it would be the exact place of where the Dark Mark was one the Death Eaters.

Moody hissed softly, examining her arm for a moment. "And the Death Eaters?" he insisted. "They returned?"

Hope could do little more than nod.

"How did he treat them? Did he forgive them?"

What an odd thing to ask, but Hope had more pressing matters to attend to. "He said…he said he had a Death Eater at Hogwarts." In light of this horror, Hope tried to stand but was pushed back into her seat. "He-he put my name in the Goblet-!

"I know who the Death Eater is," he told her, stunning her.

"If you know who he is, why haven't you done anything?" Hope demanded.

"That would be," Moody said with a faintly amused smile, "because it is me."

It took a few seconds for his words to sink in. "What?" she asked weakly.

"He forgave them, then?" Moody asked, pointing his wand at her. "The Death Eaters who went free? The ones who escaped Azkaban?"

Hope just stared at him, unable to comprehend what was happening. This couldn't be Moody, this couldn't be the man that had fought so hard against the Dark, it just couldn't be!

His wand tip lifted her chin; one spell and he could possibly rip through her throat.

"I asked you whether he forgave the scum who never even went to look for him. Those treacherous cowards who wouldn't even brave Azkaban for him. The faithless, worthless bits of filth who were brave enough to cavort in masks at the Quidditch World Cup, but fled at the sight of the Dark Mark when I fired it into the sky."

Hope's eyes widened, her lips parting in surprise. "You—? That was you?"

"Who put your name in the Goblet of Fire, under the name of a different school? I did. Who frightened off every person I thought might try to hurt you or prevent you from winning the
"tournament? I did. Who nudged Hagrid into showing you the dragons? I did." He spared her an insane smile that gave her zero comfort. "It hasn't been easy, Hope, guiding you through these tasks without arousing suspicion. I have had to use every ounce of cunning I possess, so that my hand would not be detectable in your success. Dumbledore would have been very suspicious if you had managed everything too easily. As long as you got into that maze, preferably with a decent head start -then, I knew, I would have a chance of getting rid of the other champions and leaving your way clear. But, unfortunately, I had to contend with your foolish, noble heart." He sneered the word noble as if it was something foul. "The second task...that was when I was most afraid we would fail. I was keeping watch on you, Potter. I knew you hadn't worked out the egg's clue, so I had to give you another hint—"

"That was- That was Cedric—" Hope started to say before remembering what Cedric had said before they grabbed the Cup together: "I had help on the egg in the first place."

"Who told Cedric to open it underwater? I did," Moody smirked devilishly, and while the look itself might've been handsome on George, it was quite far from on Moody, twisting his features horribly. "I trusted that he would pass the information on to you. Decent people are so easy to manipulate, Potter. I was sure Cedric would want to repay you for telling him about the dragons, and so he did. But even then, Potter, even then you seemed likely to fail. I was watching all the time...all those hours in the library. Didn't you realize that the book you needed was with your dear godbrother? Magical Water Plants of the Mediterranean. I almost thought you wouldn't ask him, but I suppose you came through for me in the end, didn't you?"

Hope gritted her teeth as the wand tip aimed lower, at her heart. Hope glanced over his shoulder to see his Foe-Glass on the wall. It was remarkably like a mirror, but Moody had once told her, Ron, and Hermione that it was used to show the reflections of the enemies of the possessor, and there were some foggy images now being reflected in its surface.

"You were so long in that lake, Potter, I thought you had drowned. But luckily, Dumbledore took your idiocy for nobility, and marked you high for it. I breathed again. You had an easier time of it than you should have in that maze tonight, of course," said Moody. "I was patrolling around it, able to see through the outer hedges, able to curse many obstacles out of your way. I Stunned Fleur Delacour as she passed. I put the Imperius Curse on Krum, so that he would finish Diggory and leave your path to the cup clear."

Hope leaned away as Moody leaned in close to her, but there wasn't much space for her to move.

"The Dark Lord didn't manage to kill you. Potter, and he so wanted to," breathed Moody, his breath brushing against her cheeks. "Imagine how he will reward me when he finds I have done it for him. I gave you to him -the thing he needed above all to regenerate- and then I killed you for him. I will be honoured beyond all other Death Eaters. I will be his dearest, his closest supporter...closer than a son..."

Hope slammed the heel on her good foot down onto his toes, kicking him backwards. "You're barking!" she snarled. "You completely lost it! Dumbledore– McGonagall! They would notice!"

"Perhaps," Moody conceded, "but we will so who is mad, now that the Dark Lord has returned, with me at his side! He is back, Hope Potter, you did not conquer him -and now- I conquer you!"

Two distinct things happened as he raised his wand. The first was that the door was blasted open, throwing Moody back, and the second was that the bluish shield had been erected around Hope a second time, only this time appearing more dome-like in appearance.

Professor McGonagall started in surprise at the sight of the barrier, but it fell within seconds, once
she had fainted. "Hope!" She reached her student's side in a flash, pointing her wand at the girl and muttering: "Rennervate!"

Hope stirred, her eyes opening, and she reeled back quickly once she realized there was someone close to her.

"It's alright," Professor McGonagall said swiftly, "it's just me."

Her eyes cleared and she glanced feverishly around to see Dumbledore and Snape with their wands on the now unconscious Moody. Hope gripped her Head of House's wrist, her eyes wide in horror.

"He was going to kill me," she whispered throatily. "He was going to kill me."

Professor McGonagall swallowed thickly and if Hope had been focusing intently, she would have seen the tear clinging to a corner of her eye. And then she did something she had never done before: she swept Hope out of the chair and into a firm hug and Hope was crying again, more silently than the last time, her shoulders shaking something fierce.

"Shh," Professor McGonagall murmured soothingly, patting her head softly, making Hope wonder if she had ever had children of her own, "its alright, you're safe." She pulled an arm securely over her shoulders. "Come along…hospital wing…"

"No." It took Hope a moment to realize that it had been Dumbledore who had spoken. His voice almost unrecognizable: harsh and cold and sharp enough to cut through stone.

"Albus," Professor McGonagall said in a voice of reproach, "she ought to –look at her!– she's been through enough tonight—"

"She will stay, Minerva," Dumbledore countered tersely, "because she needs to understand. Understanding is the first step to acceptance, and only with acceptance can there be recovery. She needs to know who has put her through the ordeal she has suffered tonight, and why."

Hope's voice trembled when she spoke. "He-he said he was the Death Eater at Hogwarts, but how could he be? I thought—"

"This is not Alastor Moody," said Dumbledore softly. "You have never known Alastor Moody. The real Moody would not have removed you from my sight after what happened tonight. The moment he took you, I knew -and I followed." He leaned over the body to remove that little hip flask that Moody always seemed to be drinking out of. "Severus, please fetch me the strongest Truth Potion you possess, and then go down to the kitchens and bring up the house-elf called Winky. Minerva, kindly go down to Hagrid's house, where you will find a large black dog sitting in the pumpkin patch. Take the dog up to my office, tell him I will be with him shortly, then come back here."

Tears welled in Hope's eyes again (as it was, the most constant thing tonight were her tears). Sirius! Now she just wanted to hug him, hold him, the man who valued her health and happiness indeed over his own. She hardly felt Professor McGonagall's arm squeeze as she left her alone with Dumbledore and the Fake-Moody. Hope jumped at the sound a trunk lid being thrown open and glanced to the trunk with seven locks, into which Dumbledore was gazing. Hope limped closer and looked down into it, staring at what lay within, deep, deep down.

It was Moody, the real Moody, looking a little worse for wear…but was he alive?

Dumbledore climbed inside, dropping to the floor beside the man.

"Stunned," he said, and Hope breathed a little easier. It made her feel better that Moody hadn't
actually been the bad guy. "Controlled by the Imperius Curse- very weak. Of course, they would have needed to keep him alive. Hope, throw down the imposter's cloak - he's freezing. Madam Pomfrey will need to see him, but he seems in no immediate danger."

Hope was nervous about approaching the Fake-Moody, but she finally threw it down and moments later Dumbledore had returned to stand beside her, upending the hip flask he had taken from Fake-Moody over the desk. Hope recognized the thick, mud-like appearance of Polyjuice Potion in an instant from when she, Ron, and Hermione (though, mostly Hermione) had brewed it in second year.

"Polyjuice Potion, Hope," Dumbledore told her and she didn't feel the need to admit that she and her friends had once brewed it illegally. "You see the simplicity of it, and the brilliance. For Moody never does drink except from his hip flask, he's well known for it. The imposter needed, of course, to keep the real Moody close by, so that he could continue making the potion. You see his hair...The imposter has been cutting it off all year, see where it is uneven?" Hope couldn't from where she was, but she nodded. "But I think, in the excitement of tonight, our fake Moody might have forgotten to take it as frequently as he should have done... on the hour... every hour... We shall see."

It seemed as though the time waiting for Fake-Moody to return to his normal visage was long, but it could have hardly been more than a few minutes before the scars on Fake-Moody's face faded, the marred flesh becoming smooth. The nose became smaller and whole. The grey hair shot back towards his skull, becoming short and straw-coloured. The wooden leg fell away as a real one grew into place, and the magical eye was forced from its socket as a real one returned.

Hope stared at the face of Mr. Crouch's supposedly deceased son. Hope didn't even turn at the sound of Snape and Professor McGonagall returning with Winky in tow, but she did hear Snape's startled surprise.

"Crouch! Barty Crouch!"

"Good heavens!" Professor McGonagall cried, struck at the sight of the man. But Winky shrieked in alarm once she saw her unconscious former charge.

"Master Barty, Master Barty, what is you doing here?" She threw herself on top of him as if to shield him from anything further happening to him. "You is killed him! You is killed him! You is killed Master's son!"

"He is simply Stunned, Winky," Dumbledore corrected politely. "Step aside, please. Severus, you have the potion?"

Snape stepped forward with a small bottle that could have been holding water, but Hope found that unlikely. She could just make out the name: Veritaserum. Fred and George were trying base some sweets off it that once consumed you would tell nothing but the truth for ten minutes. As far as she knew, they had yet to succeed.

Barty Crouch Jr.'s mouth was pried open and three drops of the potion were dropped into the gaping mouth before Dumbledore revived him. His eyes flickered open, but instead of focusing on Dumbledore, who was directly before him, his eyes went to Hope's and he leaned forward as if intent on getting to her again, but three wands aimed at him, preventing him from doing so and Professor McGonagall stepped quickly between her student and the Death Eater.

"Can you hear me?"

Barty Crouch's eyes drifted back towards Dumbledore. "Yes."
"I would like you to tell us how you came to be here," Dumbledore said clearly. "How did you escape from Azkaban?"

The Veritaserum was apparently fast acting and withdrew the emotion from the voice at the same time. It was a bit disconcerting to Hope. "My mother saved me. She knew she was dying. She persuaded my father to rescue me as a last favour to her. He loved her as he had never loved me. He agreed. They came to visit me. They gave me a draft of Polyjuice Potion containing one of my mother's hairs. She took a draft of Polyjuice Potion containing one of my hairs. We took on each other's appearance."

"Say no more, Master Barty," Winky begged, "say no more, you is getting your father into trouble!"

But Barty did not cede to her warning.

"The Dementors are blind," he continued flatly. "They sensed one healthy, one dying person entering Azkaban. They sensed one healthy, one dying person leaving it. My father smuggled me out, disguised as my mother, in case any prisoners were watching through their doors. My mother died a short while afterward in Azkaban. She was careful to drink Polyjuice Potion until the end. She was buried under my name and bearing my appearance. Everyone believed her to be me."

"And what did your father do with you, when he had got you home?" Dumbledore asked him.

"Staged my mother's death," he replied. "A quiet, private funeral. That grave is empty. The house-elf nursed me back to health. Then I had to be concealed. I had to be controlled. My father had to use a number of spells to subdue me. When I had recovered my strength, I thought only of finding my master . . . of returning to his service."

"How did your father subdue you?" Dumbledore queried.

"The Imperius Curse."

Hope bit down on her lip, remembering how it felt to be forced to bow to Voldemort.

"I was under my father's control. I was forced to wear an Invisibility Cloak day and night. I was always with the house-elf. She was my keeper and caretaker. She pitied me. She persuaded my father to give me occasional treats. Rewards for my good behaviour."

Winky's hands were pressed firmly into her eyes, but even that could not muffle her voice or her sobs. "Master Barty, Master Barty…You isn't ought to tell them, we is getting in trouble..."

"Did anybody ever discover that you were still alive?" Dumbledore asked. "Did anyone know except your father and the house-elf?"

"Yes," Barty murmured, blinking his eyes lazily as if he was tired. "A witch in my father's office. Bertha Jorkins. She came to the house with papers for my father's signature. He was not at home. Winky showed her inside and returned to the kitchen, to me. But Bertha Jorkins heard Winky talking to me. She came to investigate. She heard enough to guess who was hiding under the Invisibility Cloak. My father arrived home. She confronted him. He put a very powerful Memory Charm on her to make her forget what she'd found out. Too powerful. He said it damaged her memory permanently."

"Why is she coming to nose into my master's private business?" Winky cried, rocking forward and backward like Dobby once had. "Why isn't she leaving us be?"

"Tell me about the Quidditch World Cup."
In the same dullness as before, Barty continued, "Winky talked my father into it. She spent months persuading him. I had not left the house for years. I had loved Quidditch. Let him go, she said. He will be in his Invisibility Cloak. He can watch. Let him smell fresh air for once. She said my mother would have wanted it. She told my father that my mother had died to give me freedom. She had not saved me for a life of imprisonment. He agreed in the end…It was carefully planned. My father led me and Winky up to the Top Box early in the day. Winky was to say that she was saving a seat for my father. I was to sit there, invisible. When everyone had left the box, we would emerge. Winky would appear to be alone. Nobody would ever know…"

"But Winky didn't know that I was growing stronger. I was starting to fight my father's Imperius Curse. There were times when I was almost myself again. There were brief periods when I seemed outside his control. It happened, there, in the Top Box. It was like waking from a deep sleep. I found myself out in public, in the middle of the match, and I saw, in front of me, a wand sticking out of a girl's pocket. I had not been allowed a wand since before Azkaban. I stole it. Winky didn't know. Winky is frightened of heights. She had her face hidden."

Hope's face paled as the monologue grew more and more detailed as she listened to how he had used her wand to create the Dark Mark, to cause fear within those Death Eaters that had abandoned his master as well as those who feared him. His sickly smile when he spoke of Voldemort had found him sent another shiver down her spine, how he had given him a job, an honourable job, to be placed at Hogwarts, to assist Hope on her way through the tasks of the Triwizard Tournament. He explained how he and Wormtail had attacked Moody and locked him in the trunk, taking him with him as he journeyed to Hogwarts. Hope's map had almost given everything away; it was sheer luck that he and his father shared the same name. She listened as he talked about killing his father, her face twisting in revulsion as Barty Crouch Jr. finished his ghastly tale.

"My master's plan worked," he said, an insane light brightening his eyes. "He is returned to power and I will be honoured by him beyond the dreams of wizards."

Hope felt faint was Barty was tied and secured, the words around her blurring together in ways that she couldn't decipher. It was only when Dumbledore appeared before her that the nonsensical noises parted and began to make sense.

"Hope?"

She lifted her eyes from the madman, jerking slightly as he touched her shoulder, leading her away from him and down the darkened hallway. Hope didn't even realize that her body was trembling until she looked down at herself.

"I want you to come up to my office first, Hope," he said gently. "Sirius is waiting for us there."

"Sirius?" Hope hardly mumbled his name.

"Yes, Sirius," Dumbledore agreed as he took her up the stairs to his office, where Hope's godfather was waiting, looking as white as she felt. Hope's tears renewed as she threw her arms around the still quite thin man and sobbed heartily into his shoulder.

"Shh…shh, I've got you," he whispered, "I'm here." His presence was as comforting as Remus'. "It's alright." But Hope could feel him shaking in fear for what had happened to her.

"Where's Remus?" Hope whispered once they had parted, smudging her wet cheeks with her hand.

"He is waiting for you with the Weasleys," Dumbledore assured her.
"What happened?" Sirius directed his question more to Dumbledore, who explained at a length what Barty Crouch had told them, but all Hope wanted to do was sleep…and forget.

Fawkes, Dumbledore's phoenix, flew across the room to settle on Hope who automatically reached up a hand to stroke the feathers of his chest.

"I need to know what happened after you touched the Portkey in the maze. Hope," said Dumbledore, seeking to draw her attention away from the bird, but Hope shook her head fervently. She didn't want to recall any of the memories of the night.

"We can leave that till morning, can't we, Dumbledore?" Sirius insisted, his fingers rubbing a soothing pattern into the tattoo on her shoulder hidden under her robes. "Let her have a sleep. Let her rest."

"If I thought I could help you," Dumbledore said much softly than before, "by putting you into an enchanted sleep and allowing you to postpone the moment when you would have to think about what has happened tonight, I would do it. But I know better. Numbing the pain for a while will make it worse when you finally feel it. You have shown bravery beyond anything I could have expected of you. I ask you to demonstrate your courage one more time. I ask you to tell us what happened."

"I don't want to," Hope whispered, her miserable and wet eyes turning on Sirius. "Please don't make me," she begged him. "I-I don't—" She burst into tears once again, crying into her hand, trying to hide her face from view.

"I know," Sirius whispered, taking her face in his hands and feathering a kiss to her brow like Remus sometimes did, "I know it hurts, and it's hard…but…" But they needed to know from Hope's own mouth.

Fawkes sang a short note that hardly gave her any comfort.

"We-we took the Cup together," she whispered, her voice hardly above a rasp, "it took us away from Hogwarts…to a graveyard. We thought it might've been the next part of the task when Wormtail showed up."

Sirius squeezed her hand.

"And then—" Hope's voice choked. "C-Cedric was dead and he was dragging me to a tombstone and tied me there while he brought this huge cauldron up…He-he used…" Hope closed her eyes remembering the words for the second time that night. "Bone of the father, flesh of the servant, and blood of the foe." She turned her arm outward, showing the long slice along the flesh, earning her a strangled noise from Sirius. "And when he came out of the cauldron…" Fear shone in Hope's eyes. "He talked to me…he insulted Mum, and he told about his Muggle father…and then the Death Eaters showed up."

Hope breathed in and out shakily. "At one point, while he was doing his speech, I managed to use the sword to rip through the ropes," she said, "I tried to swing at him, but he caught me."

Sirius' eyes blazed, dropping to the wrist she was fingering where a dark purplish-blue bruise was forming.

"He used the Cruciatius on me," she whispered, "and I wished I was dead…I've never wished for death so badly…"

Sirius clenched his teeth together hard to restrain himself from speaking out.
"He gave me my wand back and we duelled… and our wands connected, and everything was golden —"

"The wands connected?" Sirius asked, capitalizing on her brief silence following this revelation. "Why?"

"Priori Incantatem," Dumbledore said softly. "Hope's wand and Voldemort's wand share cores. Each of them contains a feather from the tail of the same phoenix. This phoenix, in fact."

Hope stared in surprise at the phoenix she had yet to stop petting.

"So what happens when a wand meets its brother?" asked Sirius.

"They will not work properly against each other," Dumbledore informed him. "If, however, the owners of the wands force the wands to do battle...a very rare effect will take place. One of the wands will force the other to regurgitate spells it has performed—in reverse. The most recent first...and then those which preceded it...Which means that some form of Cedric must have reappeared."

Hope's lower lip wobbled dangerously as she nodded.

"Diggory came back to life?" Sirius asked in a stunned voice.

"No spell can reawaken the dead," Dumbledore's voice gained a mournful tone and Hope looked up. She had never considered of the sorrow a headmaster felt at losing a student in their charge. "All that would have happened is a kind of reverse echo. A shadow of the living Cedric would have emerged from the wand...am I correct, Hope?"

"H-He wanted me to bring his body back to his parents... and to tell Cho—" Hope swallowed thickly.

"I am guessing other such forms appeared... less recent victims of Voldemort's wand..." Dumbledore offered.

"The old man, Frank Bryce... Bertha Jorkins..." Hope's throat constricted once more.

"Your parents?" he asked, more softly still.

"Dad, and then Mum," Hope whispered and Sirius choked.

"Mum told me to run once the connection was broken, she told me to run to the Portkey... they almost got me but I—" Hope's hand fell open, the remnants of the dried sigil still on her palm, and she found she could no longer speak, even as Fawkes dropped a few tears upon her nearly broken leg. The cuts sewed together and sealed, the bone straightening under her skin.

"I will say it again," said Dumbledore as the phoenix left her. "You have shown bravery beyond anything I could have expected of you tonight, Hope. You have shown bravery equal to those who died fighting Voldemort at the height of his powers. You have shouldered a grown witch's burden and found yourself equal to it—and you have now given us all we have a right to expect. You will come with me to the hospital wing. I do not want you returning to the dormitory tonight. A Sleeping Potion, and some peace... Sirius, would you like to stay with her?"

Before she could even blink, Sirius had changed into a dog once more, sticking to her side, his heat comforting against her leg as they began the slow trek to the hospital wing.
Remus saw her first, which wasn’t too surprising, even given the large group that was accosting Madam Pomfrey. He didn't announce it as he came to her, cradling her face in his hands. His eyes were soft and understanding and Hope went limp in his arms.

She barely heard Mrs. Weasley's barely silenced scream at the sight of her as Remus tightened his grip on her, murmuring soothing words into her ear.

"Hope! Oh Hope!"

Hope couldn't see her, or anyone else for that matter, but she could still hear Dumbledore as Remus led her to a spare bed that Madam Pomfrey had prepared for her.

"Molly, please listen to me for a moment. Hope has been through a terrible ordeal tonight. She has just had to relieve it for me. What she needs now is sleep, and peace, and quiet. If she would like you all to stay with her, you may do so. But I do not want you questioning her until she is ready to answer, and certainly not this evening."

Sirius trotted over to rest his head on the bed and Hope pet his ears softly as Madam Pomfrey eyed the dog suspiciously, but did not comment, running her wand over her. "Your injuries, Miss Potter?"

Fawkes had healed her leg, but that wasn't all she had sustained during the night. Hope silently drew her shift upwards slightly to reveal the slice the Chimaera had given her. "Chimaera," she said shortly. She extended her arm to where Wormtail had cut her. "Knife."

They were healed in seconds and Madam Pomfrey pulled the screens around her so she could change, removing them once she had done so. Hope took George's hand, once he extended it, still swaying a little on her two feet from blood loss, allowing him to help her into bed.

He kissed her cheek, but she felt so numb that it didn't register as Madam Pomfrey returned with a potion that she hardly tasted as she downed it, curling onto her side, holding tightly to Remus' hand as if he was going to vanish and feeling Sirius nose her with his wet one before her slumber overcame her and the world faded.

George stroked his girlfriend's hair softly, his face set in a mournful mask. Sirius realized the Diggory boy might have been in the same year as him, he might have known him personally, as Hope did. She wasn't sleeping as well as Madam Pomfrey would have liked if the frown on her face when she had last checked on her was anything to go by. Hope's tears still fell, even in her sleep, and Sirius couldn't help but wonder if she had stopped crying since the boy's death.

She must've liked him, he must've been a friend, a good friend.

Ron and Hermione hovered a little bit away, both scared and upset and cautious of Hope, like they were afraid of her snapping.

"Will she be alright?" George asked Remus who sighed sadly.

"Perhaps…eventually," Remus admitted, "but loss is loss, and we all deal with it differently…There is no way of telling how Hope with deal with it."

Hope stirred, her eyes slivers of black as they barely opened as Fudge threw open the door of the hospital wing closely followed by an irate Professor McGonagall, turning immediately on Mrs. Weasley, who, in turn, didn't take it too well.

"Where's Dumbledore?"
"He's not here," she snapped out angrily. "This is a hospital wing. Minister, don't you think you'd do better to—"

"What has happened?" Hope blinked a few times and sat up on her bed as Dumbledore swept into the room. "Why are you disturbing these people? Minerva, I'm surprised at you- I asked you to stand guard over Barty Crouch—"

"There is no need to stand guard over him anymore, Dumbledore!" she cried in an anger Hope had not yet seen on her Head of House. "The Minister has seen to that!"

Snape spoke up next, having followed the pair that seemed intent on waging World War III (but Hope was betting on Professor McGonagall). "When we told Mr. Fudge that we had caught the Death Eater responsible for tonight's events, he seemed to feel his personal safety was in question. He insisted on summoning a Dementor to accompany him into the castle. He brought it up to the office where Barty Crouch—"

"I told him you would not agree, Albus!" Professor McGonagall was quite red in the face now, her eyes sparkling in her rage. "I told him you would never allow Dementors to set foot inside the castle, but—"

Hope's breath hitched at the mention of Dementors.

"My dear woman! As Minister of Magic, it is my decision whether I wish to bring protection with me when interviewing a possibly dangerous—" He barked out.

"The moment that-that thing entered the room," she shrieked over him, "it swooped down on Crouch and—and—"

Hope felt sick to her stomach, which she was sure was churning at the thought of Barty Crouch, soulless, courtesy of the Dementors.

"By all accounts, he is no loss!" Fudge cried "It seems he has been responsible for several deaths!"

"But now he cannot give testimony, Cornelius. He cannot give evidence about why he killed those people," Dumbledore said, calmer than Hope would have spoken.

"Why he killed them?" Fudge's eyes popped, bulging in the sockets. "Well, that's no mystery, is it? He was a raving lunatic! From what Minerva and Severus have told me, he seems to have thought he was doing it all on You-Know-Who's instructions!"

"Lord Voldemort was giving him instructions, Cornelius. Those peoples' deaths were mere by-products of a plan to restore Voldemort to full strength again. The plan succeeded. Voldemort has been restored to his body."

Fudge sputtered, his tongue not seeming to function properly. "You-Know-Who...returned? Preposterous. Come now, Dumbledore..."

"As Minerva and Severus have doubtless told you," Dumbledore said in a quiet voice, "we heard Barty Crouch confess. Under the influence of Veritaserum, he told us how he was smuggled out of Azkaban, and how Voldemort -learning of his continued existence from Bertha Jorkins- went to free him from his father and used him to capture Hope. The plan worked, I tell you. Crouch has helped Voldemort to return. When Hope touched the Triwizard Cup tonight, she was transported straight to Voldemort. She witnessed Lord Voldemort's rebirth. I will explain it all to you if you will step up to my office, but I am afraid I cannot permit you to question Hope tonight."
"You are -er- prepared to take Hope's word on this, are you, Dumbledore?"

Hope's blood ran cold; he thought she was lying.

George stiffened and Sirius growled beside her as Remus pushed his head down to silence him.

"Certainly, I believe Hope," said Dumbledore, his voice much cooler now. "I heard Crouch's confession, and I heard Hope's account of what happened after she touched the Triwizard Cup; the two stories make sense, they explain everything that has happened since Bertha Jorkins disappeared last summer."

"You are prepared to believe that Lord Voldemort has returned, on the word of a lunatic murderer, and a girl who...well..."

"Reading Rita Skeeter?" Hope commented in a lazy manner that was hardly her style.

"And if I have?" he demanded.

Hope's eyes narrowed, still a coal-black. "One would have thought the Minister," she said his title with so much scorn, "would be able to tell the difference between truth and gossip...but I must have been fooling myself, after all, you're the one who accepted all those bribes from those Death Eaters to keep them out of Azkaban."

"Listen here, girl—"

Hope stood, her eyes flashing dangerously. "No, you listen," she spat, "people are dying left and right and you don't know why, the first answer you get now cannot tell anyone else why he did what he did, but that must have been your plan all along! Crouch was already tied up with two guards when you brought your Dementor so there really was no point!" She had the entire room's attention.

"You can't say that C-Cedric's death was an accident, not if you examine the body, and you can't say I'm the one who killed him, because then who would have been able to Cruciate me, then?"

There were a few gasps at that.

"For once, look at the facts!" Hope demanded.

Fudge had turned a bright, brick red. "I will not be spoken to by a Parselmouth!"

Hope's eyes flared crimson. "How dare you! Parseltongue is a language not unlike the one you speak, granted your vocabulary doesn't seem to be very large—" Fred and George stifled their amusement "and just because my family speaks it does not mean that we are Dark! Grindelwald didn't need Parseltongue to commit the crimes that he did! Just because it has been used by someone Dark does not make it so!"

She hadn't realized how loudly or how passionately she had spoken until Dumbledore said quietly. "Well put, Hope."

"Mad...insane," Fudge breathed as Hope glowered at him before turning back to Dumbledore, "but I have heard enough. I have no more to add. I will be in touch with you tomorrow, Dumbledore, to discuss the running of this school. I must return to the Ministry."

He paused to dump a large bag of gold onto the bed closest to the door, apparently too scared of Hope to approach her. "Your winnings, one thousand Galleons. There should have been a presentation ceremony, but under the circumstances..." He disappeared faster than Hope could even blink.
"There is work to be done," Dumbledore said with a soft sigh. "Molly...am I right in thinking that I can count on you and Arthur?"

"Of course you can," Mrs. Weasley, still glaring at the spot Fudge had left from as George caught Hope, her feet still unsteady, keeping her from hitting the floor.

"You should get some more sleep," George said softly in her ear as he placed her on the bed once more.

Hope shook her head. "I don't want to," she said thickly, "every time I close my eyes—" She swallowed before whispering. "I see his face."

"Then I'll stay right here with you, all night," George promised, "and the first thing you'll see is me, me and my ugly mug."

"You aren't ugly," Hope was quick to protest, her lips twitching slightly. A small Viktory.

"Sirius Black!" Mrs. Weasley's scream distracted her as her godfather returned to his human form.

"Mum, shut up!" Ron yelled over her, gripping his mother's shoulders tightly. "He's a good guy! He's innocent!"

"Sirius, Remus, I need you to set off at once." Hope's heart fell. "You are to alert Arabella Figg, Mundungus Fletcher, Dedalus Diggle— the old crowd. Sirius, lie low at Remus' for a while; I will contact you there."

"Wait, you can't—" Hope needed them! Her overbearing and sweet uncles, they couldn't just leave her.

Remus kissed her forehead and Sirius cupped her cheek.

"You'll see us soon," Remus promised.

"But we have to do what we can, understand?" Sirius asked her.

Hope sulked. "Yes."

"Love you."

"Love you too," Hope said, her face falling into the lines of misery once more.

"Watch her," Remus told George, "you know how she is."

"I'll do my best," George promised with a small grin before repeating his words, "but you know how she is."

Remus spared her a smile before following Sirius, now in his dog form once more, out the door, and Hope felt so very alone despite being surrounded by her friends.
Apolline Delacour hadn't known what to expect when she met Fleur's new friend (and first friend). She had heard the stories from Fleur, of course; rebellious, sarcastic, witty…but at the same time, Hope Potter surprised her.

There was something refreshing about the girl, the way she talked, the way she moved, the way she smiled.

But she hadn't been doing much smiling lately, since the death of the other Hogwarts champion. Fleur had mentioned that they held the same position on their respective Quidditch teams, so they saw each other rather often, and his death had hit her hard.

So Apolline didn't have to look hard when she went searching for her daughters only to find them in the hospital wing with her. Hope looked a little tired, light grey crescents dusting under her eyes, but she had a small smile on her lips as Fleur gestured wildly, telling her about France.

"It eez beautiful during ze summer," Fleur insisted, "Zere are so many places you must see!"

"Sounds lovely," Hope said as Gabrielle swung her legs back and forth, sitting on the end of Hope's hospital bed, her toes barely dragging on the stone. "I mean it, getting away…from all this…that sounds like the best idea I've heard yet."

"Good!" Fleur said, bouncing excitedly in her seat. "Papa eez eager to meet you." She blushed delicately. "I may 'ave told my parents a leetle about you."

Hope gave a soft laugh, but it turned into a hacking cough, her throat still sore from screaming. She hastily gulped some water from the glass Madam Pomfrey had placed on her bedside table. "That's alright, I don't mind."

"Maman!" Fleur said suddenly as her mother stepped forward to enter into the room, earning two bright smiles from her daughters and a slight one from the Metamorphmagus (Apolline had been in for quite a shock when Hope had first changed the colour of her hair and eyes).

"Madame," Hope said respectfully.

"Ope," she said kindly, "I was wondering who 'ad keednapped my daughters."

"It's my animal magnetism," Hope said with a small wink as Apolline approached. Unwittingly, her eyes fell to the thin scar on the inside of her left forearm. It was the only scar she had from the tournament, but the cut, she had heard, was rather shallow, but it had been cut with a cursed knife that intended to scar.

Fleur laughed. "We were just talking about 'er trip to France," she explained, though she didn't really need to, "she can still come?"

"Of course," Apolline agreed, "you seemply must!"

"It's probably the only thing I'm looking forward to," Hope smiled a little wider then. "Fleur's promised me a good time."

"Hey, love, you busy?"
Apolline glanced to the door where Hope's boyfriend, a slightly older boy with ginger hair called George, stood with his twin in tow.

Fleur gave her friend an obvious wink that had her blush for the first time in what seemed like a long time. "We'll see you…later?" Hope's smile fell slightly; Dumbledore would be giving a speech later on concerning Cedric, a eulogy, and Hope wasn't sure that she wanted to be there for it.

"Maybe," Hope decided as she waved to Gabrielle who waved back with a toothy smile. "It was nice to see you again, Madame Delacour," she added to the woman who smiled, giving the typical French farewell as she and her daughters left Hope to the mercy of the twins.

"Ah! A smile!" Fred cried in euphoria. "At last!"

Hope resisted chuckling as they sat in the two vacated chairs beside Hope's bed.

"You look loads better," George said in relief, handing her a single blue iris, earning him a soft kiss on the cheek.

"I still ache," Hope admitted, playing with the stem of her flower, "still get nightmares, but Madam Pomfrey thinks that'll get better."

"That's good," George said, tucking a loose strand behind her ear.

"Did you hear that Mum tried to get you to come straight to the Burrow?" Fred asked her.

"Yeah." Hope yawned. "Ron told me that Dumbledore said no, probably something to do with the wards…anyways, I'm going to tell you two something."

"Hm?" They hummed identically and she smiled.

"I'm leaving town for a few weeks, going on holiday somewhere nice for a bit, but nobody else knows…and if they think I've been kidnapped…" Hope gave an uncaring shrug. "Well, that's they're problem."

"Our lips are sealed," George promised, before becoming a little confused, "but what if we just told people you were on holiday, and we didn't know where…it's not like they would actually know where to find you, it's not like you've told us." He waggled his eyebrows and Fred grinned beside him, making Hope chuckle softly.

"Thank you," she said, her eyes shining with sincerity. "I've just got to get away for a bit…clear my head…" Her eyes drifted out of focus. "Oh, I do want to know, though, who you were trying to blackmail."

Her eyes fell on Fred who scowled in a much more sinister way than Hope would have thought possible, but it was George who spoke, his voice reflecting Fred's expression.

"Oh. That."

"It doesn't matter," Fred said, giving a careless wave of his hand. "It wasn't anything important. Not now, anyways."

"It was important to you," Hope said in a relentless manner than Fred had to cede to.

"Fine," Fred grumbled with a look towards his brother that plainly said "Your girlfriend is a menace." "It was Ludo Bagman."
"What?" Hope had to cough violently as she said the word, hastily taking another gulp of water. "He was involved in—?"

"Nah," George said in genuine disappointment. "Nothing like that. Stupid git. He wouldn't have the brains."

Hope arched an eyebrow and Fred sighed. "You remember that bet we had with him at the Quidditch World Cup? About how Ireland would win, but Krum would get the Snitch?"

"Yeah…" Hope said, not really understanding where they were going with it.

"Well, the git paid us in leprechaun gold he'd caught from the Irish mascots."

"Bastard!" Cue another coughing fit.

George gave a very bitter laugh. "Yeah. We thought if we just wrote to him, and told him he'd made a mistake, he'd cough up. But nothing doing. Ignored our letter. We kept trying to talk to him about it at Hogwarts, but he was always making some excuse to get away from us."

"In the end, he turned pretty nasty," Fred said with a bit of scorn. "Told us we were too young to gamble, and he wasn't giving us anything."

"But that was all of your savings," Hope said aghast. "You worked so hard to save it up!"

"Tell me about it," George said. "Course, we found out what was going on in the end. Lee's dad had had a bit of trouble getting money off Bagman as well. Turns out he's in big trouble with the goblins. Borrowed loads of gold off them. A gang of them cornered him in the woods after the World Cup and took all the gold he had, and it still wasn't enough to cover all his debts. They followed him all the way to Hogwarts to keep an eye on him. He's lost everything gambling. Hasn't got two Galleons to rub together. And you know how the idiot tried to pay the goblins back?"

"Don't tell me," Hope said, her eyes slightly wide, feeling a pattern, considering how many times Bagman tried to offer her help.

"Yup. He put a bet on you, mate," Fred nodded. "Put a big bet on you to win the tournament. Bet against the goblins."

"So, did he pay you back?"

"Nope," said George, sighing sadly. "The goblins play as dirty as him. They say you drew with Diggory, and Bagman was betting you'd win outright. So Bagman had to run for it. He did run for it right after the Third Task."

"Pathetic," Hope muttered, to which they both made noises of agreement. "But I have something for the both of you."

Both eyed her suspiciously and she grinned, pulling out the bag of Galleons that had been the prize money for winning the Triwizard Tournament. The Diggorys had refused it and she didn't really need it.

She dropped it into George's hands. "This is for the two of you, towards your joke shop. Take it."

George seemed to be beyond words as Fred said in a stunned voice, "What?"

"I don't need or want it," Hope said, rolling her eyes at how slow on the uptake they were. "It's
"You're mental," George decided, probably not the best thing to say, if her eyebrow twitch was anything to go by. "I-I mean—" he tried to back-track.

"Take it and use those inventing brains of yours," Hope said, "seriously, it's a brilliant idea and I get the feeling we're all going to need a few laughs. If you want, you can think of it was an investment of sorts."

"She is mental," Fred said, gazing at her in awe as George weighed the bag in his hands, still stunned.

"Hope…there's got to be a thousand Galleons in here."

"Probably," Hope agreed. "Just don't tell your mum where you got it…although she might not be so keen for you to join the Ministry anymore, come to think of it..."

"Hope—"

Hope gripped her wand and pointed it at Fred. "For Hecate's sake, Fred, just take it, or better yet, don't, so I can hex you."

George chuckled.

"Just do one thing for me and buy Ron some dress robes that aren't so bad and say they're from you."

Fred stared at her. "You are going to be the best sister-in-law ever," he told her vehemently, making both Hope and George burn bright red.

"Shut up!"

"You will write, won't you?" Hermione insisted, hugging Hope tightly as she sat on her motorbike. Hermione still didn't approve of her riding it especially at fourteen, but Hope's logic was so strange that she just gave up.

"As long as you write to me," Hope agreed, "that means you too, Mr. Masculine!"

Ron rolled his eyes as he came to join them, hugging Hope just as tightly. "I'm pretty sure that was an insult."

"Maybe," Hope sang. Her voice was still a little hoarse, but it would fade in a matter of days. She settled her riding goggles over her eyes as George came up as well.

"First the whip, now the motorbike? Seriously, Potter, are you trying to kill me?" he asked her with a lopsided grin.

Hope's cheeks flushed with heat, standing up to throw her arms around his neck. "Is it working?" she asked in a low voice that she knew made him blush or shiver depending on the mood. This time he blushed.

"Yes…"

"Good!" She tilted her head back, smiling up at him. "Now give me a kiss to remember you by!"

"Happy to oblige, milady," George muttered as he claimed her lips, pulling her in deeper and deeper
before releasing her abruptly and leaving her eyes dazed behind her goggles.

"Yeah, that'll do it," Hope gasped, attempting to right herself as she clipped her helmet into place, revving the engine of her bike. "Later, kiddos, don't miss me too badly!"

And the last image they had of Hope Potter for months was of her on that motorbike disappearing into the traffic.
Dementors Roam

Number Twelve Grimmauld Place was, in a word, grim. That had been George's first thought when the entire Weasley family had been relocated there for "safety purposes," and it hadn't changed much, not even with all the cleaning that they were doing.

"George." The boy turned to survey the man who had said his name, it twisting oddly in his mouth. "Hope's boy."

Sirius Black was an imposing figure, much like his goddaughter in that aspect, especially when one considered that George was dating his goddaughter and had been quite seriously for some time. Impressing him would be difficult. He hadn't been around much the first few weeks they'd been there; George's mum said he was sulking.

"That's right," George said, straightening his spine and staring Sirius right in the eye while Fred's eyes flickered between the two men.

"Hope's told me an awful lot about you," Sirius said, eyeing him in contemplation. She had a combination of her parents' types: pranksters and red-heads.

"She would," George said, arching an eyebrow, "we've been together for two years."

Sirius crossed his arm and leaned against the threshold, canting his head slightly to the side in a dog-like manner. "You've been requested downstairs."

Fred stood, but Sirius waved him down. "Just George."

Fred and George shared a glance and Sirius was amused to note that they weren't surprised as George followed him down into the darkly lit kitchen to sit where he could be interrogated by the Order of the Phoenix; it wasn't a truly pleasant thought.

They stared him down, but Hope's words echoed in his ears: "They might try to scare you, but don't let it look like it gets to you; look as relaxed and at home as you can."

George lounged in the chair, leaning a cheek on his hand. "So, what's this all about?"

Annoyance flashed over his mother's face, but his father smiled. However, the sentiment was not shared.

"As you no doubt know, George," Remus spoke first, "Hope has gone missing."

George arched an eyebrow and Sirius stifled a snort. "Missing? Or maybe you've just lost track of her." His airy comment drew unwanted attention to him, but he kept up his Hope-façade.

Remus did not smile. "Hope hasn't been seen for weeks, and you and her friends are the only correspondence she's kept up…do you know where she is?"

"I knew she was leaving," George said shortly, repeating his rehearsed response, "she told Fred and me she was getting out of town for a bit, to get away from everything, after what happened with Cedric."

"She didn't tell her friends?" Remus asked.

"Nope," George said popping the 'p'. "She probably thought we'd hold up better under
interrogation." His eyes narrowed, but barely.

"And you don't know where she is?"

"We don't really talk about where she is," George said smirking slightly, "more like pranks, memories, funny things she's seen, nightmares, flirts, that kind of stuff." George traced a circle into his temple. "I shouldn't be too worried though...she told me she was coming back soon in her last letter..."

"You held up well," Sirius commented, following him upstairs once they realized they wouldn't be able to get anything out of him, "reminded me a little of her; did she tell you to act like that?"

"A bit of it, yeah," George admitted. "Hope's better under stress than I am, though."

Sirius snorted. "That explains so much about her personality...she really didn't tell you anything, did she?"

"No, not really." George grinned widely. "She's saving all of the good stories for when she gets back." And she would be back, perhaps sooner than he would expect. For in a completely different country, Hope Potter slept in yet another fitful bout of sleep, green flashing before her eyes, Cedric falling to the ground, his eyes glassy.

"Espoir!" (Hope!)

Hope jerked awake as a small body was thrown on top of her.

"Oh! Gabby!" she moaned. "My spleen! My spleen!"

"Gabby!" a reproachful voice commented. "You were supposed to let 'er sleep in! 'Ope 'as a plane to catch later."

"You're leaving?" Gabby asked sadly, her accent much thicker than her parents' or her sister's.

"Sorry, kiddo," Hope grunted, patting her back from where she had latched onto her. "Some foolish people seem to think I've gone missing, it just wouldn't do to remain with my would-be kidnappers."

Fleur and Gabby laughed and Gabby removed herself from where she was squashing the red-head, allowing Hope to sit up in her bed.

"Go get dressed, Gabby," Fleur said, "We're eating out for breakfast." She smiled at Hope. "After zat we'll swing by ze Pont des Arts before you leave."

Pont des Arts was a bridge in Paris, crossing over the River Seine, and it had possibly hundreds of padlocks attached to it. Fleur said that people would lock away their secrets and throw their keys into the river.

"Don't lovers go there?" Hope asked, rubbing the sleep out of her eyes. "Wouldn't want to give people the wrong impression..."

Fleur laughed. "Ha-ha, vairy funny, believe me, you'll like it, it eez quite a lovely view." She glanced around the guest room that Hope had been using for the past few weeks while staying with her family. It been a nice few weeks, and she knew that Hope had greatly enjoyed the break. It was an added bonus that France was beautiful, but all good things must come to an end, and Hope would be leaving that very day to head back to her relatives in London, something she didn't seem too pleased about.
"Did you have anozer nightmare?" she asked taking a few steps closer.

Hope's smile fell and Fleur wanted to hit herself for wiping it from her face. She had never asked Hope to tell her what had happened in the graveyard, what had happened to Cedric, for that she had to be commended, but that didn't mean she had a bit of morbid curiosity as to the details of that night.

"It wasn't so bad," Hope said thickly, "at least I don't scream every time I get one now." Her smile was rueful. She'd awakened the Delacours up on more than one occasion; Fleur had even taken to sleeping in the room with her until the nightmares became more manageable. "I'll be fine," she assured her, throwing the covers off her bed and pulling herself upright, stretching so far upwards that her sleep shirt rid up.

"All packed?" Fleur inquired.

"Mm-hm," Hope nodded, "and I'm going to go take a shower now, see you in a few."

"We'll be downstairs!"

Hope watched her go with a bounce in her step. Fleur was actually going to be joining her in London, only a few days later. She had been accepted into Gringotts as a trainee Curse-Breaker, but it was also to help her improve her English, which wasn't all that bad when you considered just how terrible some people spoke English. Another positive thing was that she and Bill were still going strong, and Fleur had told her that she'd never actually felt butterflies in her stomach until she met Bill, a man who actually listened when she talked. Hope knew the feeling.

The hours passed by in a blur until Hope and Fleur were kneeling on the bridge, setting a padlock in place, locking it, and throwing the key out and into the river.

"It's a bit sad, isn't it?" Hope asked as she linked arms with Fleur. Her eyes were blue and her hair so silvery blonde that she could be mistaken as Fleur's sister. "Throwing the key away and leaving your secret locked away."

"Perhaps," Fleur said thoughtfully, "but it eez also...'ow would you say it?"

"Liberating?" Hope offered and Fleur nodded quickly, sending blonde locks in several directions.

"Oui," she agreed before grinning. "So, what eez it like being fifteen and Lady Potter?"

On Hope's finger rested a signet ring that was given to the Head of the Family on their fifteenth birthday if their predecessor was deceased.

Hope eyed it in her finger, imagining a ring of a different sort lying there one day and then wanting to smack herself for thinking such thoughts. "It's not that different from when I was fourteen, the only difference is that I'm now a Lady and have a seat in the Wizengamot." She frowned slightly.

"What's wrong?" Fleur asked. "Eez it Ron and 'Ermione?"

"It's them and other stuff," Hope said with a sigh. "I know they're together, wherever they are, because they keep saying 'we', but they literally tell me in every single letter: Sorry can't tell you where we are or what we're doing, but where are you and who are you with?" Hope rolled her eyes in annoyance. "At first I was just irritated that they wanted me to open up about the graveyard, and you know my feelings about that."

Indeed Fleur did.
"But then they started getting really insistent about where I was, so I've just become annoyingly vague," Hope said with a derisive noise. "Just wait until I see them, then I'll bring the fire!"

Fleur was slightly worried for Ron and Hermione. *Slightly.*

Privet Drive hadn't changed that much Hope mused as she kicked a pebble from the earth, muttering darkly under her breath. Hardly back in-country for a few hours and she already wanted to be gone. She'd fiddled with the Blood Wards (not particularly wise, considering her age and mediocre talent in the area), strengthening them slightly, even if she hated her family, the idea of Voldemort trying to come to the house made her skin crawl. Her aunt had assumed she'd spent the past few weeks with a boy, and while that was incredibly flattering, it was a fantasy for another time, so Hope opted to vent her feelings by kicking pebbles across the road.

"Thought you were gone for good," a voice grunted and she turned, smirking in a dangerous way that would even make Sirius take a few steps back.

"Aw, Diddikins, hoping Big Bad Hope wasn't going to come back?" she mocked, twirling her wand between her fingers, making him eye it nervously as they took a shortcut between Magnolia Crescent and Wisteria Walk. "Does she *scare* you?"

"Shut up!" he hissed. "I am not scared!" Hope arched an eyebrow, her grin widening. "You think you're so big, don't you, carrying that thing?"

"Bigger than you," Hope said, looking him up and down, "which is admittedly *very* hard to do considering the size of you…perhaps I'll show you a little of what I can do, Popkin…"

He flinched at both his mother's nickname and at the hinted offer to turn into something…possibly unpleasant. "You're not allowed," he said instantly, trying to steel himself and not quite pulling it off the way Hope could, making it look effortless. "I know you're not. You'd get expelled from that freak school you go to."

Hope's smile had a cold light. "You sure about that, Big D?" she murmured. "Sure they haven't changed the rules?"

"They haven't." Dudley didn't sound as if he could even convince himself, and Hope chuckled.

"You haven't got the guts to take me on without that thing, have you?" Dudley asked, clenching his fists.

"Mm, right," Hope nodded in a condescending way, "because it's the same as having four of your mates with you when you beat up a ten year old."

"You wait till I tell Dad you had that thing out—" Dudley started.

"Running to Daddy now, are you? Still haven't changed, have you, Duddikins? When're you going to learn to fi—"

"At least I've got a dad!" Dudley's eyes bulged slightly as he realized what he had said. If there was one thing that you never wanted to mention to Hope Lily Potter, it was her lack of parents, because that could flip a switch between mocking to angry faster than anything he had ever seen. "Don't you point that thing at me!"

Her eyes burned a hot molten crimson as she pointed her wand at Dudley's neck. She would give anything to hex him so badly that he wouldn't be able to sit for a week, or blow op his head like a
balloon to match the rest of him in size.

"Don't you *dare*," she seethed, her hair darkening to a midnight black as she glared venomously at her cousin, "don't you *dare* say a word about my dad! Do you understand me?"

"Point that thing somewhere else!"

"I *asked* you a question!"

"Point it somewhere else!"

"DO YOU UNDERSTAND ME?" Hope demanded, her eyes on fire.

"GET THAT THING AWAY FROM—"

Hope knew instantly something wrong. It was quiet, too quiet, and cold, very cold. The darkness was oppressive now with no lights to illuminate the darkness. Hope took a step forward. There was something out there.

"W-what are you d-doing? St-stop it!" Hope wasn't sure if he was stuttering from the cold or from fear. "I c-can't see! I've g-gone blind! I—"

"For once in your life, Dudley, shut up!" Hope snapped. This did not bode well. They hardly ever left Azkaban! How could they be in Little Whinging? Hope's heart raced in her chest as she heard it, the hoarse breaths that seemed to suck in the warmth of the air, leaving it chilly.

"C-cut it out! Stop doing it! I'll h-hit you, I swear I will!" Dudley stuttered.

"Dud—" Hope was knocked off her feet by the hit to the side of her head, making her ear ring, and her wand clatter to the ground somewhere that could not be seen.

"DUDLEY!" Hope screamed, hoping for once that he would listen to her. "COME BACK! YOU'RE RUNNING STRAIGHT INTO IT!"

The cold was creating ice behind her. "Shite!" More than one, that wasn't fun. Where was her — "*Lumos!*"

She honestly hadn't been expecting it to work, but was highly pleased when it did, and she snatched it up, aiming at the Dementor feet from her, its ragged cloak swaying in the wind and its hooded face leaning close.

"*Expecto Patronum!*" George, Sirius, Remus— The panther erupted from her wand tip, prowling around Hope before bearing down on the Dementor, forcing it back and up into the sky. Hope pointed her wand in the direction that she had last heard Dudley from, and the panther followed her silent command, racing ahead of her as she ran down the alleyway to where her large cousin was curled into a ball, the Dementor leaning down, perhaps to kiss him.

"Get him!"

The panther didn't need to be told twice as it surged forward, its ghostly teeth sinking into the Dementor, making it jerk away and fly upwards in the same fashion that the other had done only moments ago.

Hope exhaled loudly, breathing out deeply as the lights returned and the stars twinkled once more overhead. "Dudley…get up you lug, I've got to get you back to your paren—"
Hope was cut off quickly as little Mrs. Figg, who had babysat Hope as a child, came into view, a shopping bag filled with what could have only been cat food banging against her leg as she walked. Hope was in enough trouble as it was so she moved to return it to the arm holster that Fleur had given her for her birthday, but Mrs. Figg interrupted her.

"Don't put it away, idiot girl!" she cried. "What if there are more of them around? Oh, I'm going to kill Mundungus Fletcher!"

Hope could only gape uncomprehendingly at her.

What the fuck?

By the time Hope had reached Number Four and deposited Dudley to his parents, she found she quite hated life once more. The revelation that Dumbledore was having her followed not only annoyed her, it pissed her off! Hell, she was probably safer in France than she was here! But by all means, be the puppet master behind the curtains leaving your puppet without a clue! Hope gritted her teeth. What right did he have anyways to watch her every move?

Her aunt and uncle already seemed to think she had been the one responsible for Dudley's current condition, because, as a Muggle, he couldn't have seen the Dementors. This belief only worsened when a screech owl vaulted through the open window to deliver a sealed envelope upon her lap.

"OWLS!" Vernon roared. "OWLS AGAIN! I WILL NOT HAVE ANY MORE OWLS IN MY HOUSE!"

Per usual, Hope ignored him, breaking the seal and reading the contents feverishly:

Dear Miss Potter,

We have received intelligence that you performed the Patronus Charm at twenty-three minutes past nine this evening in a Muggle-inhabited area and in the presence of a Muggle. The severity of this breach of the Decree for the Reasonable Restriction of Underage Sorcery has resulted in your expulsion from Hogwarts School of Witchcraft and Wizardry. Ministry representatives will be calling at your place of residence shortly to destroy your wand. As you have already received an official warning for a previous offence under Section 13 of the International Confederation of Warlocks' Statute of Secrecy, we regret to inform you that your presence is required at a disciplinary hearing at the Ministry of Magic at 9 a.m. on the twelfth of August.

Hoping you are well,

Yours sincerely,

Mafalda Hopkirk

Improper Use of Magic Office

Ministry of Magic

Hope stared at it, numb at the words. *Destroy her wand*?! For protecting herself? Doing magic in the presence of a Muggle, who consequently already knew that she had magic? What the *fuck* was wrong with the Ministry (other than the obvious: bad Minister, corruption, that sort of thing)?

She looked up suddenly at the sound of a second owl, this one crashing into the window that Vernon had shut moments before.
It bore an untidy scrawl:

_Hope_

_Dumbledore's just arrived at the Ministry and he's trying to sort it all out. DO NOT LEAVE YOUR AUNT AND UNCLE'S HOUSE. DO NOT DO ANY MORE MAGIC. DO NOT SURRENDER YOUR WAND._

_Arthur Weasley_

Dumbledore would sort it out, yes that sounded so comforting, Hope thought spitefully. Currently her feelings towards the Headmaster of Hogwarts weren't too pleasant at the moment; he was the one condoning her stalking, after all.

"Go on, son," Vernon was saying to his son. "What did she do?"

"Tell us darling."

Hope's anger bubbled.

"Pointed her wand at me," Dudley muttered. "All went dark. Everything dark. And then I h-heard… things. Inside m-my head."

"He's not insane," Hope said shortly, knowing that would be where their minds would stray. "If any —" She drew up short at the glare both adults tossed her way.

"How come you fell over, son?" Vernon asked, determined to steer the conversation away from Dudley's possible insanity.

"T-tripped." Dudley's voice shook dangerously. "And then—" He choked a little, not quite understanding how to describe it. "Horrible. Cold, really cold. Felt…felt…felt…as if…as if…"

"You'd never be happy again," Hope intoned in careless manner.

"Yes," Dudley's voice had faded even more.

"So! You put some crackpot spell on my son so he'd hear voices and believe he was- was doomed to misery, or something, did you?"

Hope scoffed loudly. "If I wanted to do that, I would just force him to look in a mirror, genius. I didn't do that—" She gestured distastefully towards his son. "—that was a Dementor."

"A-what's this codswallop?"

"De-men-tors," Hope said slowly as if speaking to a dull-witted child, examining her black painted nails (courtesy of Fleur). "Two of them."

"And what the ruddy hell are Dementors?" Vernon demanded.

"They guard the wizard prison, Azkaban."

Hope's mouth opened slightly in shock, because it was not her who had spoken, it had been Petunia.

"And how the bloody hell would you know that?" Hope asked.

"I heard –that awful boy- telling her about them –years ago," Petunia cast a regretful glance to her
husband.

"Use their names!" Hope barked.

"So-so- they –er- they actually exist, do they –er- Dementy-whatsits?"

Hope rolled her eyes. Muggles seeking comfort from Muggles; she was the one who lived in the same world as them every day, she would know the most about them in the room!

Hope didn't speak until another owl zoomed through the window to drop another letter.

Dear Miss Potter,

Further to our letter of approximately twelve minutes ago, the Ministry of Magic has revised its decision to destroy your wand forthwith. You may retain your wand until your disciplinary hearing on the twelfth of August, at which time an official decision will be taken. Following discussions with the Headmaster of Hogwarts School of Witchcraft and Wizardry, the Ministry has agreed that the question of your expulsion will also be decided at that time. You should therefore consider yourself suspended from school pending further enquiries.

With best wishes,

Yours sincerely,

Mafalda Hopkirk

Improper Use of Magic Office

Ministry of Magic

That hardly made Hope feel better.

"Well?" Vernon demanded. "What now? Have they sentenced you to anything? Do your lot have the death penalty?"

Hope looked at him in revulsion. "Yes," she said with heavy sarcasm, "they are absolutely going to have me killed for using a Dementor-Repelling Charm to save your son." Her expression filled with contemplation. "Actually, it sounds like something they would do."

"Dementoid-Repelling—? Now what are you going on about!" He yelled.

"SHUT UP!" Hope roared, her magic spiking and making the lights flicker and her aunt and uncle share an uneasy glance.

"Dementors," she said coolly, "are one of the darkest creatures in this world, when they approach the surrounding areas grow cold and ice forms, and they suck the happiness from you, if you're lucky, that's all they get, if you're not, you lose your soul."

"His soul?" Petunia cried out in alarm. "They didn't take- he's still got his—"

"He wouldn't be talking if he didn't have his soul!" Hope said, more than a trifle bit exasperated, distracted as a fourth owl made an appearance, this one entering the house through the fireplace.

"FOR GOD'S SAKE! I WILL NOT HAVE OWLS HERE, I WILL NOT TOLERATE THIS, I TELL YOU!"
Hope was irritated to see Sirius’ words that offered her no comfort what-so-ever.

Arthur has just told us what's happened. Don't leave the house again, whatever you do.

*What a load of tripe,* she thought viciously to herself. The only way this was going to work was her way, and if she stepped on a few people's toes along the way, well, she found she rather didn't care at this point.

It was rather late into the night, when she was still burning with questions and irritation that she finally got around to doing what she had been planning on doing since the first letter and what was only struck home when she received the last one. Not including, of course, the howler that Petunia had received once Vernon had attempted to throw her out, resulting in Hope sulking in her room for a few hours.

She pulled a roll of parchment from her trunk and a quill with ink and began to write:

*Master Ragnok*

I find myself rather in need of your services sooner than I would have anticipated. My night has been rather—in a word—busy, and not the good kind of busy. Two Dementors in Little Whinging is hardly what I would call a good omen. Breaking the Decree of the Reasonable Restriction of Underage Sorcery to perform the Patronus Charm has left me with the impending threat of expulsion from Hogwarts and the snapping of my wand. As you know, young witches and wizards are given a warning before taking drastic measures and even then there are certain grey areas, such as protecting oneself. I have been told thus far that others are sorting it out, but I cannot rely on them. I must appear for a disciplinary hearing on the twelfth of August; would it be too much to ask for one of your dignified goblins to represent me?

*Hope Potter*

Hope re-read it several times. It sounded very formal and complimentary, but he would appreciate that she hadn't added her title to the signature. Hope bit her lip in contemplation before giving her work an approving nod and sealing it inside an envelope.

"Hedwig, you up for a late night delivery?"

The snowy owl gave her a beady stare that told her she didn't like the slight towards her abilities.

Hope chuckled as Hedwig hopped forward to allow Hope to tie the letter neatly to her leg, before sailing out of the window and into the night like a white ghost.

The days passed silently for Hope without Hedwig. She found that she missed her company more having to do with the pair of them being miserable together than anything else. But at least when Hope vented, Hedwig would listen, blink, and nod, as if she completely understood the turmoil of her mistress (she practically had a degree in therapy by now). As it was, she had probably been subjected to a little too much intimate knowledge of George Weasley, but Hope didn't bother pointing out that, it would just make her crave his company more.

Her door opened and she stared fuzzily from her pillow. "What?” As curious as it was for Vernon to even enter her room, what was even curioser was that he was rather well dressed in his best suit…if you could even call it that.

"We're going out."
"Huh?" Hope said, staring at him in a haze of confusion.

"We," Vernon repeated, "that is to say, your aunt, Dudley, and I –are going out."

"Okay…" Hope said in an "and I should care why?" voice.

"You are not to leave your bedroom while we are away," he continued.

"Mm-hm," Hope said, rolling her eyes.

"You are not to touch the television, the stereo, or any of our possessions."

"Right."

"You are not to steal food from the fridge."

"Sure."

"I am going to lock your door."

Hope laughed. "You can try."

He scowled at her as if trying to ascertain if she would actually get off her lazy arse and lock-pick her way out of the room, but eventually he gave it up as a waste of time, pulling the door shut behind him and locking it securely. Hope smirked into her pillow. They just never learned, did they? She waited in silence for them to leave before withdrawing her torque and wrench and fixing them into the keyhole, twisting them until the cogs clicked and the door swung open.

"Ha-ha, success!" Hope congratulated herself, though it wasn't quite as impressive as if maybe Fred or George tried it (they were still beginners bowing to the master aka her). "Hope…probably over a hundred…Dursleys.zer0."

Hope skipped down the stairs, her wand still secured in her wand holster as she raided the fridge, stealing one of her aunt's vanilla cupcakes that she had apparently cooked for some party at Vernon’s firm. Oops. Hope felt appropriately rebellious as she wiped the crumbs from her shirt and twisted on her heel in the sitting room contemplating just what she should do next when she tensed.

Because Hope had just heard something that would put anyone on edge, and it was the whisper of "Alohamora!"

Hope ducked to stand in front of the fireplace, noiselessly lifting a poker and hefting it in her hand like it was a blade, crouching down and sparing a quick glance around the corner where she could see several figures entering into the house, all wearing the robes of wizards.

Hope's heart beat dangerously fast against her ribcage and she leaned closer to the opposite wall, towards where they seemed to be gathering in the kitchen.

"We should go over the plan again." The voice was low…and slightly familiar.

"Dammit, Ma—" The second person who spoke must have slipped and Hope winced at the sound of something breaking. She breathed in and out shallowly as someone approached close to where she was hiding with her weapon. They wouldn't see her coming, but that would only be if she moved quick and had the element of surprise on her side, which was entirely possible. They were coming closer…it was now or never. Her heart beat faster still, and then she took a chance and she sprang to action, startling the person just around the corner.
Remus Lupin was not one for being pinned against walls, especially not by irate brunettes with pokers to his neck...so obviously it was Hope (she must have changed her hair colour, but the eyes remained the same).

Her eyes widened slightly. "Remus?" And then they narrowed. "How do I know you're not impersonating him?"

Hope glowered at the man, ignoring the harsh chuckling behind her of "I like her" and the multitude of wands pointed to her. "You're going to answer five questions about me," she decided, "get them right, and you're Remus, get them wrong..." She let that hang in the air.

"Five?" Remus' eyes widened slightly. "Surely one—"

"First question," Hope said talking over him, "How old was I when you first saw me?"

"Ten," Remus answered automatically.

"My stance on Blood Magick?"

"Pro."

"Dark, Light, or Grey?"

"Grey," Remus said, leaning back a little as the poker was pressing into his neck.

"How long was I dead?" That question earned her a few whispers.

"Sixty-seven seconds."

"Patronus?"

"Panther."

"You pass," Hope conceded, removing the poker from his throat with a bit of disappointment. "I was kind of hoping to use this."

"Very funny," he said, massaging his neck. "Why the paranoia?"

"Take a wild guess," Hope said in a dry manner, raking a hand through her hair and returning it to its dark rose-colored waves.

"Told you!" an excited voice exclaimed. "It was her!"

Hope blinked and stared at the young woman amongst the sea of witches and wizards she did not know, save for maybe two or three. This woman had dark eyes that twinkled in the semidarkness and bright violet hair.

"Hey, you're that Metamorph," Hope said suddenly, "back from my second year, with that weird box...Tonks wasn't it?"

"Right in one," the woman said with a grin, "Wotcher Hope."
"Looks just like her Mum," one of the witches in the back commented.

"Potter." Hope jumped at Moody's voice, going automatically for her wand, as the last person who had spoke to her with that voice had been a Death Eater. "I suppose you are the real Hope Potter, then?"

"Believe me, no one else would try to throttle Remus for coming around a corner too fast," Hope said in a deadpan before scrutinizing a taller dark-skinned man with a gold ring in his ear. "And you're that bloke from the Auror Office too…Kingston?"

"Kingsley," he corrected her in a deep voice, smiling as he shook her hand. "Kingsley Shacklebolt. A pleasure to see you again."

She smiled before jabbing Remus sharply in the arm. "Ow! What was—?"

"Adults," Hope hissed, "should make it clear what the ruddy hell is going on."

"Why're you blaming me?"

"Because I know you best out of everyone here –no offense," she added to the group, "you know how much I hate being in the dark." She fingered her wand dangerously.

"Sorry," Remus apologized, "but my hands are tied."

"Uh-huh," Hope said in a sarcastic manner. "So, are we leaving or are we just going to be exchanging pleasantries all night?"

Moody chuckled again. "Really like her," he said gruffly.

"Almost at once," Remus assured her, "we're just waiting for the all-clear."

"And where exactly is this place that I'm not supposed to know about?"

Remus winced a little. Ooh, she was really irritated, wasn't she?

"We've set up Headquarters somewhere un-detectable. It's taken a while..."

"Why aren't you asking me where I was for the past few weeks?" Hope asked, arching an eyebrow at him as she shrugged on her leather jacket from her trip to France (it was just so beautiful and worked well with her whole Biker-Chick persona).

"We'll get to that later," Remus said slightly awkwardly. "But introductions…This is Alastor Moody (Hope nodded, having recognized the scarred ex-Auror quite easily), you seem to already know Nymphadora—"

"Don't call me Nymphadora, Remus," Tonks said with a delicate shudder, "it's Tonks."

"—Tonks," Remus said, a smile twitching his lips, "and Kingsley Shacklebolt, but this is Elphias Doge," he gestured to a wizard with a rather sickly complexion that might have had something to do with those hacking coughs he was giving a few moments ago, "Dedalus Diggle." Hope recognized that one, he had a nasty habit of bowing to her in shops when she was younger, "Emmeline Vance," He gestured to a witch with a green shawl wrapped securely around her shoulders, "Sturgis Podmore," A thick-jawed man light hair gave her a roguish wink, "And Hestia Jones." The woman by the toaster smiled and waved.

"A surprising number of people volunteered to come and get you," Remus commented.
"You don't say."

"Yeah, well, the more the better," Moody grunted. "We're your guard, Potter."

"Guard?" Hope sputtered. "Who the hell says I need a guard?"

"Dumbledore."

Hope's eyes darkened to a black, but only Remus noticed as he furrowed his eyebrows in confusion.

"We're just waiting for the signal to tell us it's safe to set off," he told her. "We've got about fifteen minutes."

"Very clean, aren't they, these Muggles?" Tonks mentioned, eyeing the kitchen before pausing at a sudden sucking sound as Moody removed his eye.

"Dammit!" he cursed. "It keeps getting stuck –ever since that scum wore it."

"Mad-Eye, you do know that's disgusting don't you?" Tonks told him, but he ignored her.

"Get me a glass of water, would you, Hope?"

Hope rolled her eyes slightly walking over to the cupboard and sink to withdraw a glass and fill it, before handing it Moody who dropped his eye into it with a "Cheers."

"I want three hundred and sixty degrees visibility on the return journey," he told them all.

"And how exactly are we getting to this mysterious place that I can't know about?" Hope asked, crossing her arms and looking so much like her mother that it was actually slightly scary

"Brooms-or, it might be better—"

"Please," Hope scoffed, "the only way you're going to get me to let go of that beauty is to peel it from my cold, dead hands."

"Hope had Sirius' old motorbike," Remus explained to the group, "it's better protected than her broom."

"More protection the better," Moody agreed, "you fly it well?"

"Better than Sirius," Hope said in a defensive manner.

"Anyways, you'd better go and get packed, Hope, we want to be ready to go when the signal comes."

Hope muttered something under her breath about not really unpacking in the first place, crying out in surprise "Hey!" as an over-excited Tonks pulled her up the stairs to help her.

"There's not much," Hope said as they entered her room and Tonks was stunned to find it remarkably empty. A few books were thrown around the room that Hope quickly collected, leaning deeply into the trunk to place them in the library section.

"Whoa! How deep does that go?"

"Not really sure," Hope said, "I never really tried to find out." Hope stuffed Hedwig's cage into it, as she had yet to return before locking the trunk.
"You know, I don't think violet's really my colour," Tonks mused, ruffling her hair as she stared at it in a mirror. "D'you think it makes me look a bit peaky?"

Hope scrutinized her thoughtfully before shrugging. "Depends on the lighting."

"Hm," Tonks agreed, screwing her face up and turning it bubble-gum pink. Hope replicated it in a matter of seconds as she pulled the riding goggles over her eyes.

Tonks grinned wildly. "You have no idea how cool it is to have another Metamorph around!" she said practically bouncing up and down.

Hope shared a laugh with her, clipping her helmet into place and lifting the miniaturized motorbike from the desk.


Hope watched as her trunk was lifted into the air and forced slowly out of the room and down the stairs.

Remus smiled at them when they made their appearance, not even commenting on the nearly identical looks they were sporting. Though, Hope could have sworn his eyes lingered more on Tonks.

"Excellent. We've got about a minute, I think. We should probably get out into the garden so we're ready. Hope, I've left a letter telling your uncle and aunt not to worry-"

"As if that were possible," Hope scoffed.

"-that you're safe."

"Debatable."

"-and you'll see them next summer."

"Do I have to?"

Remus gave her a small smile, but he didn't tell her that she had to. "The Invisibility Shield still works on the motorbike, doesn't it?"

"Still works-? Of course it still works!" Hope sputtered indignantly as they left the kitchen to step outside and Hope enlarged the motorbike with a tap of her wand (which thankfully didn't really count as magic usage). She sat astride and turned the ignition, revving the engine.

"Right, you," Moody directed towards Hope who blinked at him behind the goggles, "we're going to be flying in close formation. Tonks'll be right in front of you, keep close on her tail. Lupin'll be covering you from below. I'm going to be behind you. The rest'll be circling us. We don't break ranks for anything, got me? If one of us is killed-"

"You say that like you aren't as impressive, Mad-Eye," Tonks said as she fastened Hope's trunk to her broom, "talking about getting killed an' all."
"I'm just telling the girl the plan," Moody barked. "Our job's to deliver her safely to Headquarters and if we die in the attempt-"

"No one's going to die," Kingsley said calmly.

"Mount your brooms, that's the first signal!" Hope zipped her jacket up and tightened her grip on the handlebars, flipping a small silver switch that turned her invisible in seconds. "Second signal, let's go!"

Hope flared forward, having to gather speed down the street in order to lift off before rejoining them.

"Still with us Potter?" Moody roared.

"You can hear a motorbike can't you?" Hope yelled back, earning her some laughs.

"Hard left, hard left, there's a Muggle looking up!" Hope followed Tonks, swerving to the side so far she almost unseated herself; that would have been embarrassing. "We need more height... give it another quarter of a mile!"

Hope aimed the motorbike upwards slightly, soaring after Tonks. Right about now she was rather grateful that she had the goggles on, because the cold air probably would have teared-up her eyes.

"Bearing south! Town ahead!" Moody's voice shouted over the noise of Hope's bike. "Bear southeast and keep climbing, there's some cloud ahead we can lose ourselves in!"

"We're not going through clouds!" Tonks snapped. "We'll get soaked, Mad-Eye!"

Well, she wasn't wrong. Hope was already rather cold that she doubted it would have made a difference, thought she was infinitely glad that she'd put on a jacket before they'd left.

"We ought to double back for a bit, just to make sure we're not being followed!" Moody yelled after an amount of time had passed in relative silence.

"ARE YOU MAD, MAD-EYE?" Tonks raged from where she was still positioned in front of Hope, her trunk shaking ominously under her broom. "We're all frozen to our brooms! If we keep going off-course we're not going to get there until next week! Besides, we're nearly there now!"

Which was a relief to Hope who had never flown the motorbike in such cold weather before, or that high up.

"Time to start the descent! Follow Tonks, Hope!" Remus' voice uttered somewhere off to her right. And Hope followed the steep dive that Tonks had gone into, something she was sure she was doing on purpose, but Hope was always up for a challenge. She followed her easily, touching down lightly and removing the key and flipping the visibility switch as she removed her helmet, shaking her hair loose and returning it to its typical colour.

"Sure this is the place?" she asked Tonks, eyeing the apartments they had come to a stop in front of. They weren't rather nice to look at, that Hope was sure of. Dark peeling paint and broken lights and windows did not a nice impression make.

Tonks chuckled. "Definitely."

Moody pulled loose something that looked a bit like a cigarette lighter (no judgment here!), but when he clicked it, it did not create a flickering flame, but sucked in the lights of the lamps on the street.
"Borrowed it from Dumbledore," Moody told her once he noticed her watching, "That'll take care of any Muggles looking out of the window, see? Now come on, read and memorize."

He shoved a scrap of parchment into Hope's hand bearing the words: *The Headquarters of the Order of the Phoenix may be found at Number Twelve, Grimmauld Place, London.*

Hermione hadn't known what to expect when Hope opened the door.

She looked great, better than Hermione would have thought. Her hair was a little wilder than usual and her eyes a darker emerald than she was used to, and she had donned a leather jacket that with her expression gave her a rebellious teenager look, which was entirely accurate.

"HOPE! Ron, she's here, Hope's here!" Hermione threw her arms around Hope, hugging her fiercely before releasing her just as quickly. "We didn't hear you arrive! Oh, how are you? Are you alright? Have you been furious with us? I bet you have, I know our letters were useless—but we couldn't tell you anything, Dumbledore made us swear we wouldn't, oh, we've got so much to tell you, and you've got things to tell us—the Dementors! When we heard—and that Ministry hearing— it's just outrageous, I've looked it all up, they can't expel you, they just can't, there's provision in the Decree for the Reasonable Restriction of Underage Sorcery for the use of magic in life-threatening situations."

"Let her breathe, Hermione!"

Hermione and Ron knew at once they were in trouble because Hope had gained an oddly closed-off expression, studiously ignoring the pair in front of her, trailing her fingers over the walls, gazing around at the worn-down furniture and dulled wallpaper.

"Dumbledore," she said coldly, "made you swear to not say anything to me, did he?" She would have been more surprised if frost had not formed in the wall where she touched it, considering how dark and cold her mood and voice had grown.

"He seemed to think it was best," Hermione said a little weakly.

"He thought you were safer with the Muggles," Ron added, but Hope only gave a humourless laugh.

"Safe?" she said with scorn. "The day I come back I'm attacked, it doesn't seem as safe as he thinks it is, and if he thinks those Blood Wards are a suitable protection, he's dead wrong."

Dimly, Hermione recalled back to first year when Hope had mentioned that Blood Wards were the type of warding that surrounded her aunt and uncle's house.

"Seemed pretty insistent on keeping me isolated," Hope continued.

"Hope, that's not-" Hermione started to say.

"DO YOU KNOW WHAT ITS LIKE?!!" Hope bellowed, the dam bursting, her eyes burning scarlet like her hair. "TO GO TO SLEEP EVERY NIGHT AND WATCH CEDRIC GET KILLED?! TO SEE VOLDEMORT'S FACE IN MY DREAMS?! BUT BY ALL MEANS LOCK AWAY LITTLE HOPE WITH RELATIVES SHE HATES EVERY YEAR AND HOPE FOR THE BEST! I DESERVE TO KNOW WHAT'S BEEN GOING ON! I'M THE ONE WHO WAS THERE! I'M THE ONE WHO WATCHED HIM KILL CEDRIC, I'M THE ONE WHO HAD THE CRUCIATUS CURSE PLACED ON THEM, I'M THE ONE WHO FOUGHT HIM! BUT NO! LET'S KEEP HOPE IN THE DARK WONDERING WHY HER FRIENDS CAN'T TELL HER ANYTHING, WONDERING WHY VOLDEMORT WANTS TO KILL HER SO
BADLY! AFTER ALL, IT'S NOT LIKE SHE'S AN ADULT! IT'S NOT LIKE SHE CAN DEAL WITH THIS KIND OF STUFF!

Hermione suddenly burst into tears and threw herself at Hope who was so startled that her yells fell short. "We're so sorry, Hope!" she wailed. "You're completely right, I would have been just as mad if it was me!"

Hope breathed in and out shallowly, seeming to have expended her anger. "Where are we?" she asked once she had finally regained her breath.

"Headquarters of the Order of the Phoenix," Ron said quickly, "it's kind of secret group, working against You-Know-Who."

"So?" Hope demanded as Hermione finally released her. "Voldemort! What's he been up to?"

"We don't really know," Hermione admitted, "they don't really let us in on meetings."

Hope gave her a blank stare. "You mean to tell me neither of you how found away to listen in on them?"

They both blushed.

"Fred and George actually have," Ron admitted, "they've invented Extendable Ears, but we've had to stop using them lately because Mum found out and went berserk. Fred and George had to hide them all to stop Mum binning them. But we got a good bit of use out of them before Mum realized what was going on. We know some of the Order are following known Death Eaters, keeping tabs on them, you know."

"Some of them are working on recruiting more people to the Order-" Hermione started.

"Something about guard duty-" Ron added.

"They talked about you a lot, too," Hermione added, "some of them thought you'd been kidnapped by You-Know-Who's supporters because you never went back to your aunt and uncle's, but George said you just skipped town."

"Where did you go?" Ron asked curiously. They had been trying to get it out of her for weeks, pressured by several Order members, but to no avail.

"To France for a change of scenery," Hope said, "I'll show you the pictures later…you said in your letters you were…cleaning…?" That was as much as she got from them.

"We have," Hermione nodded, eager to keep this even-temper that Hope was currently sporting while it lasted. "We've been decontaminating this house, it's been empty for ages and stuff's been breeding in here. We've managed to clean out the kitchen, most of the bedrooms and I think we're doing the drawing room tomo- AARGH!"

Two loud cracks filled the air and Hope grinned as an arm pulled her against a chest. "Hello, Wizard-boy."

George laughed at her. "Mystery-girl," he said, "you've been extra mysterious for the past few weeks."

"Have I?" Hope asked slyly, pulling him down by the front of his shirt to kiss him for what felt like hours but was only seconds.
Ron gagged. "Please, not where I can still see it."

"Thought we heard your dulcet tones," George said once they parted, still beaming.

"You don't want to bottle up your anger like that, Hope, let it all out," Fred said, grinning just as brightly.

"Thank you, Fred," Hope said rolling her eyes, 'I'll keep that in mind next time."

"As you should," he agreed in a mock-diplomatic manner that earned him a few giggles. "Oh, and do you have-" Hope had already tossed him the small mirror. "Thanks!" He tucked it in his pocket, planning on calling his girlfriend the first chance he got.

George held up what looked like a flesh-coloured string for Hope to see. "We're trying to hear what's going on downstairs."

"And how's that working for you?" Hope asked as he wormed his arm possessively around her waist, blushing as he lowered his mouth to whisper in her ear, "You look very hot in leather."

"Well..."

The door opened this time and a smaller figure entered with long ginger hair. "Hi, Hope!"

Hope gave Ginny a hug as best as she could with George's arm still around her. "It's a no-go with the Extendable Ears," she added to her brothers, "she's gone and put an Imperturbable Charm on the kitchen door."

Both Fred and George's faces fell a bit at that.

"How d'you know?" George asked in disappointment.

"Tonks told me how to find out," Ginny told him. "You just chuck stuff at the door and if it can't make contact the door's been Imperturbed. I've been flicking Dungbombs at it from the top of the stairs and they just soar away from it, so there's no way the Extendable Ears will be able to get under the gap."

Fred gave a long slow sigh. "Shame," he lamented. "I really fancied finding out what old Snape's been up to."

"Snape's here?" Hope asked as George shut the door with a wave of his wand and sat down onto a stooping armchair, pulling Hope with him with a small yelp.

"Yeah, giving a report," he told her. "Top secret."

"Git," Fred felt the need to add.

"He's on our side now," Hermione said in a voice of reproach.

"Now being the operative word," Hope muttered as George kissed the edge of her jaw.

"Doesn't stop him from being a git," Ron said rolling his eyes, "you have seen the way he looks at us, haven't you? And how much he likes Hope?"

"Is there a number less than zero for that?" Hope asked and they all laughed. "Is your whole family in the Order, then?" she directed the question to the Weasleys.
"Yeah. Bill's working a desk job at Gringotts so he can help out more and Charlie's still in Romania trying to make contacts on his days off," George explained. "Dumbledore wants as many foreign wizards brought in as possible."

"What about Percy?"

The atmosphere darkened at the mention of the third eldest Weasley son, surprising Hope.

"Whatever you do," Ron said lowly, "don't mention Percy in front of Mum and Dad."

"Why?" Hope asked curiously.

"Because every time Percy's name's mentioned, Dad breaks whatever he's holding and Mum starts crying," Fred said coldly.

"It's been awful," Ginny agreed.

"I think we're well shot of him," George said in a frigid voice, a dark scowl marring his face.

Hope glanced from Weasley to Weasley, waiting for one of them to tell her the whole story.

"So, Percy and Dad had a row," Fred finally said. "I've never seen Dad row with anyone like that. It's normally Mum who shouts."

"It was the first week back after term ended," Ron said. "We were about to come and join the Order after being interrogated about where you were." Ron gave her a significant look. "And Percy came home and told us he'd been promoted."

"That's…odd," Hope decided.

"Yeah, we were all surprised," George added, curling a red lock of Hope's hair around his finger, "because Percy got into a load of trouble about Crouch, there was an inquiry and everything. They said Percy ought to have realized Crouch was off his rocker and informed a superior. But you know Percy, Crouch left him in charge, he wasn't going to complain."

"So why promote him?"

"That's what we were wondering too," Ron said with a nod. "He came home really pleased with himself -even more pleased than usual, if you can imagine that- and told Dad he'd been offered a position in Fudge's own office. A really good one for someone only a year out of Hogwarts: Junior Assistant to the Minister. He expected Dad to be all impressed, I think."

"Only Dad wasn't," Fred said darkly.

"Because Fudge wants an insider," Hope realized. It had been clear to her in the first Daily Prophet that she had read after the Tournament had ended that Fudge cared more about his position than the truth, if the smear campaign he had begun against Hope and Dumbledore was anything to go by. "Someone who'll tell him what's going on."

"Right in one," George agreed, "Dad says Fudge has made it clear that anyone who's in league with Dumbledore can clear out their desks. Dad told Percy that Fudge only gave him that position to spy, and well…"

"Bet he didn't take it well," Hope said with a wince.

"He went completely berserk," Ron agreed in a flat voice. "He said -well, he said loads of terrible
stuff. He said he's been having to struggle against Dad's lousy reputation ever since he joined the Ministry and that Dad's got no ambition and that's why we've always been -you know- not had a lot of money, I mean--"

"The cad!" Hope gasped.

The Weasleys all nodded in agreement as Ron continued. "And it got worse. He said Dad was an idiot to run around with Dumbledore, that Dumbledore was heading for big trouble and Dad was going to go down with him, and that he -Percy- knew where his loyalty lay and it was with the Ministry. And if Mum and Dad were going to become traitors to the Ministry he was going to make sure everyone knew he didn't belong to our family any more. And he packed his bags the same night and left. He's living here in London now…Mum's been in a right state, you know -crying and stuff. She came up to London to try and talk to Percy but he slammed the door in her face. I dunno what he does if he meets Dad at work -ignores him, I s'pose. And, er, your name got dragged into the row," Ron added almost as an afterthought, "he said the only evidence was your word and…I dunno…he didn't think it was good enough."

"Sorry," Hope said, feeling a little guilty for being responsible for the split, but the others shot her down.

"It's not our fault he believes everything the Daily Prophet prints," Ginny spat angrily.

Hope rolled her eyes. "If the Daily Prophet printed the truth all the time it would have been run out of business a long time ago."

There was a murmur of agreement at that before Ginny stood up. "I forgot, dinner should be ready about now."

That got them moving.

Hope had barely left the room when George pulled her back with his typical: "Come here, you."

"People are going to wonder where we are," Hope murmured, his lips barely brushing hers.

"They'll know," George said in amusement, threading a hand into her thick and long mane of hair. "It's us."

"Not really helping, Georgie," Hope whispered as his lips finally met hers in the kiss she had been aching for for weeks now. A fire ignited under her skin and suddenly she was clutching him to her as if afraid he was going to disappear and this was the last kiss she would ever receive from him. His free hand traced down her spine, making her shiver and gasp as he nipped her lower lip with his teeth and when he pulled away Hope was a little disappointed.

"That was…er…" Hope tried to come up with a perfect adjective to describe it, but nothing really came to mind, "well, you know!" Her cheeks burned bright red the longer he stared at her with that cocky grin of his spread across his lips. Hope diverted her eyes quickly. Dammit! Why was he so distracting?! It just wasn't fair.

"No, I don't really," he mused lightly, tracing a finger lightly over her jaw line, "want to tell me?"

"Er, no, not really," Hope said, attempting to straighten her mussed hair and batting his hand away when he tried to help, "I want to go downstairs and not look…besotted!"

"Besotted?" George grinned. "Don't you always?"
Hope scowled fiercely at him. "I don't usually see your parents after I've just been snogged by you, that's something different!"

"Oh, love…you're not even close to having been snogged by me," George murmured lowly into her ear, making her redden further.

"I'm killing you when all this is over," Hope told him as the colour assuaged from her cheeks, descending the stairs feverishly in an attempt to escape him. "Mrs. Weasley won't be getting any grandbabies from you!"

"What a strange conversation we seemed to have walked into, Molly, dear."

Hope's cheeks flooded with heat again, only this time because of George's father who was standing with his mother in the doorway leading into the kitchen.

"That was, er, actually, I'd rather not say." Hope said finally as Mr. Weasley's eyes glittered like sapphires and Mrs. Weasley's smile widened.

"Hope Potter."

Hope could feel the smile spreading so widely across her face that she actually feared that it might strain the muscles in her cheeks as the two stepped aside so that Hope could see the man beyond.

Sirius was beaming as well, holding his arms open and Hope rushed into them embracing him tightly.

"Sirius! I've missed you!"

"Ah, old Padfoot?" Sirius laughed. "You flatter me too much."

But they had made too much noise and a sudden screaming jolted the reunion to a halt.
The portrait had been a bit stunning to Hope. She could see why they had wanted to be quiet in that hall. But she didn't have much time to think on it before she was dragged away to dinner.

"How was your little holiday?" Sirius asked her once they were about half-way through the stew.

"It was nice," Hope admitted, swallowing thickly, "the cuisines were great and the sights were amazing." She searched her pockets before pulling out a bent photograph that Fleur had taken for her. "That's for you."

Sirius took it and smiled. She was smiling, leaning against railing with the Eiffel Tower directly behind her. Emotion clogged Sirius' throat not unlike the time he had been given a similar photo the year previously. He'd missed so much of her life.

"What's wrong?" Hope asked in concern and Sirius' eyes cleared.

"Oh, it's nothing," he assured her, "You've just…grown."

"Not by much," Hope scoffed. "I'm still not as tall as this lug." She flicked George's cheek.

"Hey!" George complained, blushing lightly when she kissed the spot and this time, Sirius could only roll his eyes. "You will never be taller than me!" he cried dramatically.

"I might if I stand on the table," Hope mused, making to stand up when both Sirius and George pushed her down again.

"Just give up," George said in amusement.

Hope could only roll her eyes. "My knight in shining armour," she said dryly.

"Always eager to please, milady," George said with a roguish wink that made Hope's cheeks ignite.

"Nearly time for bed, I think," Mrs. Weasley commented once she realized half of her children seemed to be nearly asleep.

"Not just yet, Molly."

Sirius turned his attention to Hope whose eyes reflected curiosity so like Lily's once had. "You know," he said mildly, "I'm surprised at you. I thought the first thing you'd do when you got here would be to start asking questions about Voldemort."

"Oh, I did," Hope said, her eyes flickering hazel, "but-"

"That's enough!" Mrs. Weasley barked. "You're too young."

Hope looked at Mrs. Weasley in a way she never had before: angered.

"I think I've got a right to decide that for myself, thanks."

Mrs. Weasley ignored her and glared at Sirius, who retorted in kind, "Since when did someone have to be in the Order of the Phoenix to ask questions? Hope's been asking questions for weeks now. She's got the right to know what's been happen-"
"Hang on!" George leaned around Hope a little stunned, something that morphed into anger on his twin's face.

"How come Hope gets her questions answered?" Fred demanded. "No offense, Hope." But Hope didn't mind.

"We've been trying to get stuff out of you for a month and you haven't told a single stinking thing!" George added.

"You're too young, you're not in the Order," Fred said in a surprisingly good impression of his mother. "Hope's not even of age!"

"It's not my fault you haven't been told what the Order's doing, that's your parents' decision," Sirius told them. "Hope, on the other hand-"

"It's not down to you to decide what's good for Hope!" Mrs. Weasley snapped. "You haven't forgotten what Dumbledore said, I suppose?"

Hope was sure she wasn't the only one who could feel the tension in the air. Exactly how many fights had Sirius gotten into with Mrs. Weasley concerning Hope?

"Which bit?" Sirius asked with forced calm, his body tensed.

"The bit about not telling Hope more than she needs to know," Mrs. Weasley said in an insistent manner, unaware that they were now the centre of attention.

"Yeah, only there's a bit of difference between telling someone something and telling them nothing," Hope bit out in irritation, but –per usual, these days– she was ignored.

"I don't intend to tell her more than she needs to know, Molly, but as she's the one who saw Voldemort come back, she has more right than most to-"

"She's not a member of the Order of the Phoenix!" Mrs. Weasley said tensely. "She's only fifteen and-"

"And she's dealt with as much as most in the Order," Sirius ground out, "and more than some."

"No one's denying what she's done!" Hope ground her teeth together as Mrs. Weasley's voice echoed off the walls. "But she's still-"

"She's not a child!" Sirius snapped.

"She's not an adult either! She's not James, and she's certainly not Lily!"

Ron and Hermione's eyes focused on Hope's, sharing a glance at the oddly closed off expression, though the clenching of her fists gave her away. Oh, this wasn't going to be pleasant.

"I'm perfectly clear who she is, thanks, Molly," Sirius said, clearly attempting to keep his voice as steady as possible.

"I'm not sure you are!" Mrs. Weasley insisted. "Sometimes, the way you talk about her, it's as though you've got your old friends back, and no matter how much Hope looks like Lily and acts like James, she isn't them! She's still in school and adults responsible for her shouldn't forget that!"

"Are you calling me an irresponsible godfather?" Sirius stood, his legs vibrating with tension.
"I'm saying is that you've been known to act rashly before, Sirius! Dumbledore must have his reasons for not wanting Hope to know too much, and speaking as someone who has Hope's best interests at heart-"

"She's not your daughter."

"She's as good as! Who else has she got?" Mrs. Weasley demanded.

"She's got me!" Sirius placed his palms on the table and leaned forward, perhaps hoping to appear menacing, but it did little good.

"Yes," Mrs. Weasley said in a snide voice, "the thing is, it's been rather difficult for you to look after her while you've been locked up in Azkaban, hasn't it?"

Sirius reeled back as if he had been slapped when a voice cut through the air like a dagger.

"Enough."

It took Hope only a few seconds to realize it was her voice, because she hardly recognized it; it was cold and dark and harsh.

Sirius turned to look at his goddaughter and he had to admit he was a little stunned, because she looked rather etched from stone, her eyes a serious slate-grey as she stared inexpressively at Mrs. Weasley. She stood slowly and suddenly her lack of height only made her much more imposing.

Sirius had never seen her like this, this cold anger that James had radiated when he had discovered that Sirius had let slip to Snape where Remus could be found on the full moon.

"Sirius Black's name is the one in my parents' will," Hope said coolly, "he's the one they chose to look after me in the case of their demise, so, obviously," her lip curled a little, "he has first say in what's good for me." The grey orbs became much icier. "He didn't go to Azkaban for kicks Mrs. Weasley, he went there for something he didn't deserve and he, as well as I, would appreciate you not blaming him for not being there for me as a child."

"Hope-" Mrs. Weasley was appropriately stunned. Hope had never talked to her like this! What had happened?

"While flattering as it is that you consider me one of your own," Hope continued, "my family consists of one prison escapee and one werewolf, and as far as I'm concerned, they're the only ones who get a say in anything I do."

Her eyes flickered to Remus who gave her a barest smile. "That being said, seeing as no one has told me anything...some information would be nice." She put a hand on Sirius' shoulder and they both sat down together amidst completely silence, Hope astutely ignoring Mrs. Weasley's bright face.

Remus coughed uncomfortably, breaking the silence. "I think," he said quietly, "Hope has as good of a right as any to be entitled to some information, not much, but some."

"Fine!" Mrs. Weasley snapped, embarrassment and anger evident in her voice. "Ginny – Ron – Hermione – Fred – George – I want you out of this kitchen, now."

Noise exploded at these words.

"We're of age!" The twins roared as one.
"If Hope's allowed, why can't I?" demanded Ron.

"Mum I want to hear!" Ginny cried.

"NO!"

Hope pressed a few cool fingers to her forehead, the bedlam giving her a headache.

"Molly, you can't stop Fred and George. They are of age," Mr. Weasley said, wiping his glasses and speaking in an exhaustive voice.

"I – oh, alright then, Fred and George can stay, but Ron –"

"Hope'll tell me and Hermione everything you say anyway!" Ron said stoutly.

"There really isn't much of a point to forcing them upstairs," Remus agreed.

"Fine! Fine! Ginny – BED!"

Most of the table missed the wink Hope tossed Ginny's way, but that didn't stop the girl from acting the part as she banged her way up the stairs.

"I've been checking every paper I can find," Hope said to Sirius, "Muggle and Magical, but there haven't been any unusual deaths, I would've thought that was right up his alley."

"Oh, they would be," Sirius chuckled darkly, "but he doesn't want to draw any attention to himself. It would be dangerous for him. His comeback didn't come off quite the way he wanted it to, you see. He messed it up."

"Or rather, you messed it up for him," Remus gave her a small smile.

"Didn't make much of a difference," Hope muttered, "the world still thinks I'm mental."

"Didn't make much of a difference?" Bill sputtered.

"You made all the difference in the world!" Sirius disagreed, squeezing her fingers tightly. "If you hadn't gotten away when you did, no one would have known! Thanks to you, Dumbledore was able to recall the Order of the Phoenix about an hour after Voldemort returned."

Hope frowned. "And his followers, the Death Eaters…there can't have been just the few that were there that night."

"Most of them are in Azkaban," Sirius conceded. "In the old days he had huge numbers at his command: witches and wizards he'd bullied or bewitched into following him, his faithful Death Eaters, a great variety of Dark creatures. You heard him planning to recruit the giants; well, they'll be just one of the groups he's after. He's certainly not going to try and take on the Ministry of Magic with only a dozen Death Eaters."

Hope thought hard about her next question. "And do you know what Fudge's deal is with me and Dumbledore?"

"Fudge thinks Dumbledore's plotting to overthrow him," Mr. Weasley said. "He thinks Dumbledore wants to be Minister for Magic."

Hope arched an incredulous eyebrow.
"Of course, he doesn't," he added in agreement with her expression. "He's never wanted the Minister's job, even though a lot of people wanted him to take it when Millicent Bagnold retired. Fudge came to power instead, but he's never quite forgotten how much popular support Dumbledore had, even though Dumbledore never applied for the job."

"Deep down, Fudge knows Dumbledore's much cleverer than he is ("That's not saying much," Hope muttered, "a fish is cleverer than Fudge."), a much more powerful wizard, and in the early days of his Ministry he was forever asking Dumbledore for help and advice," Remus explained. "But it seems he's become fond of power, and much more confident. He loves being Minister for Magic and he's managed to convince himself that he's the clever one and Dumbledore's simply stirring up trouble for the sake of it."

Hope slumped in her chair, sighing slowly. "So he's basically convinced an entire nation that I'm an attention seeking brat…well, I can't say I'm not used to it by now." She pinched the bridge of her nose. "What a mess."

Several noises of agreement were echoed down the table.

"I guess it goes without saying that Voldemort has spies inside the Ministry," Hope said, removing her hand from over her eyes to stare ahead, "the Minister is in Lucius' pocket."

Sirius made a low noise in his throat that Hope couldn't quite decipher.

"They're not the only ones," Tonks said with an easy grin.

"Tonks here," Mr. Weasley smiled kindly to the woman, "was one of the people we've managed to convince, she's too young to have been in the Order of the Phoenix last time, and having Aurors on our side is a huge advantage -Kingsley Shacklebolt's been a real asset, too; he's in charge of the hunt for Sirius, so he's been feeding the Ministry information that Sirius is in Tibet."

"Comforting," Hope said dryly, "but his followers, aren't you worried he'll get more? You said he had an army before, so what's stopping him from doing that now? Won't it be obvious that he's back if he starts recruiting?"

"Voldemort doesn't march up to people's houses and bang on their front doors, Hope," Sirius said, shaking his head slightly, sending his dark hair flying in different directions. "He's well-practiced at operating in secret. In any case, gathering followers is only one thing he's interested in. He's got other plans too, plans he can put into operation very quietly indeed, and he's concentrating on those for the moment."

"Like what?" Hope glanced between Remus and Sirius whose eyes had met for less than a few seconds.

"Stuff he can only get by stealth," Sirius said, "Like a weapon, something he didn't have last time."

Hope screwed her face up a little, opening her mouth to ask another question when Mrs. Weasley made her reappearance and sent them all up to bed, only to be interrupted by the indignant hoot of an owl.

"Hedwig!" Hope cried as the snowy owl soared towards her. "Do you have a reply for me?"

Hedwig docilely held out her leg that held a letter sealed from Gringotts. Hope took a moment to break the seal, reading the contents swiftly and smiling.

"Good news?" Sirius asked.
"The best." But Hope never elaborated on the matter.

"Hope, exactly how long have you been up?" Ginny asked her the next morning, a little struck as she entered the kitchen.

Hope had removed all of the cutlery, plates, and assorted pots and pans and had set to work on the counters and cupboards, cleaning them out and rubbing them until they hardly looked as they used to.

"An hour or so," Hope said in a dismissive manner, "it's not that impressive, is it?"

Ginny stared at her. "Mum tried to have a go at it when we first got here but she gave up after about fifteen minutes."

"Ah, well," Hope fiddled with the rag in her hand, "I've just got some fairy dust, that's all."

"Fairy dust?"

"It's an old-fashioned cleaning solution," Hope explained, "it's the best way to clean but it's also incredibly difficult to find. Fairies inhabit small forests and they leave these clumps behind when they fly about and you can ground them up to make dust –must've found about a hundred of those babies out by Remus' place."

"Wow!" Ginny stared at the kitchen. It looked amazing for being so grimy and dingy looking. She hadn't even known the counters were made of marble. "Are you doing this to avoid Mum, Hope?"

Hope flinched at the sudden question. "Well…kind of…want to help?"

"Sure," Ginny said. She hadn't much been a fan out doxies to begin with, and that was what the drawing room was infested with. "Mum was wrong to insult Sirius like that, but she's just…"

Slightly overbearing didn't sound like something nice for Ginny to say about her own mother, no matter if it was or wasn't true.

"Yeah, well," Hope made an irritated noise as she filled the sink with hot water, soap and some fairy dust, "she didn't have to go that far."

Ginny conceded to that, balancing a large pile of dirty plates in her hands and bringing them beside Hope.

"Did you hear about Fred? That he's thinking of proposing to Angelina?"

"That's great!" Hope said, a true smile morphing onto her face. "Has he got a ring?"

"Not yet," Ginny said, drying the plate that Hope handed her. "I think he's waiting until they're out of school and have the you-know-what started up; they're moving in together."

"Sounds like they've got everything sorted out," Hope said with a laugh, unaware of Sirius pausing briefly outside the door into the kitchen, listening briefly.

"What about you and George?"

"What about me and George?" Hope asked a little flummoxed. "We haven't been dating nearly as long as Angie and Fred."

"No, but you're serious," Ginny added with a grin. "You should have seen him moping around the
house. He's been sighing an awful lot. And then you show up and suddenly he's all sunshine and daisies."

Hope's cheeks flushed with heat. "Oh, really?"

"Mm-hm," Ginny gave her a look. "He'll ask you to move in with him, just you wait. Maybe not propose just yet, but-"

"N-Now you are definitely pulling my leg!" Hope's cheeks flushed darker.

"He hasn't talked to you about your future together?" Ginny asked making a kissy face at her.

"The nerve! It's like this shy little girl I used to know has turned into an eavesdropping demon overnight!"

"I'm just quiet," Ginny said with a shrug. "It's not my fault people don't see me when they spill all their devious plans."

"I will drop all of this water on yo-"

"Morning, ladies."

Both red-heads glanced up from their small mock water fight to see Sirius.

"Sirius!" Hope said, eyeing him suspiciously because he was holding a bag of dead rats. "Morning, we were just, uh…" Ginny smiled innocently and Hope stared. "Seriously, you took that from me didn't you?"

"I have no idea what you're talking about," Ginny said slyly. "I'm the innocent party here."

"I'm impressed," Hope admitted grudgingly, "you have learned well, my protégé. Now wipe."

Ginny giggled as she took the sopping plate from her.

"You've done a great job," Sirius said nodding to the kitchen, "I doubt it's ever looked that good."

Hope bowed. "We do aim to please."

"Sure you don't need any help?"

"No," both girls said quickly.

"Be gone!" Hope said in a faux-commanding voice. "We have girl talk to continue."

They waved him off until he was gone, his laughter still echoing in the halls.

"But, anyways, George," Ginny continued, "you do know he's completely mad for you, don't you?"

"Well, of course I do!" Hope said a little affronted. "I mean he's- well- he's…" Hope bit her lip. "Oh, you know what I mean!" she grumbled when they were interrupted yet again.

"…smells like a drain and a criminal to boot, but she's no better nasty old blood traitor with her brats messing up my mistress's house, oh, my poor mistress, if she knew, if she knew the scum they've let into her house, what would she say to old Kreacher, oh, the shame of it, Mudbloods and werewolves and traitors and thieves, poor old Kreacher, what can he do …"
The person who had been speaking was a house-elf by the name of Kreacher. He was pretty ugly as house-elves went, especially considering he always seemed to be covered in grime. He was the Black Family's house-elf and as such was partial to his former masters' pro-Dark stance.

"Hello, Kreacher."

Fred and George had appeared in the doorway holding two extra masks for de-doxy-ing the drawing room and Hope's shoulders sagged. She did not want to do that this early in the bloody morning! But, of course, cleaning out the kitchen was a different matter.

The house-elf turned around and gave a fake bow to the Fred, who had spoken. "Kreacher did not see young master." Then he muttered lowly, but in a tone they could all hear, "Nasty little brat of a blood traitor it is."

"Sorry?" George said with an airy smile. " Didn't catch that last bit."

"Kreacher said nothing," the house-elf said before muttering, "and there's its twin, unnatural little beasts they are…and there's a new girl, Kreacher doesn't know her name. What is she doing here? Kreacher doesn't know…"

He eyed her in a cool manner and Hope found it quite strange to be scrutinized so darkly.

"Ignore him," George advised, holding up a mask, "we've been recruited to collect you, Mum says we need some extra help with the doxies."

Hope groaned as she and Ginny dried their hands. "You have got to be kidding me!"

"Not really, no," Fred said with a grin as the two joined them. "It's sure to be fun!"

Both girls gave a groan at that.

Griphook, Hope decided, was the perfect person to represent her. He had hardly asked more of her then her own signed statement of what had occurred. The others were less than trusting towards the idea of Hope choosing to be represented by a Goblin, but Hope had her own opinions and as the Head of the Potter Family, she had every right to hire whoever she wished to represent her, so here she sat at the seat in the centre, the seat she knew Igor Karkaroff had once sat in, but thankfully the chains did not bind her to it as she seat straight-backed against the chair, forming her face into an impassive mask.

"Allow me to do the talking first," Griphook had said, "look to me before you speak. The Ministry is very good at twisting words."

"Goblin, state your name for the record."

"Griphook of Gringotts, retained as Lady Hope Potter's representative in the matter of Hope Potter vs. The Decree of the Reasonable Restriction of Underage Sorcery," Griphook said with only a slight sneer. Hope knew he despised the Ministry on a level she would never be able to fathom.

Hope didn't even give Dumbledore, who had swept inside moments previously as a Witness for the Defence, a single glance.

"The charges," Fudge coughed, "yes…The charges against the accused are as follows: That she did knowingly, deliberately and in full awareness of the illegality of her actions, having received a previous written warning from the Ministry of Magic on a similar charge-"
Hope leaned to the side to whisper to Griphook. "Wasn't that expunged back in second year?"

Griphook scoffed. "They'll still try to use it against you, even if it was proven you weren't responsible."

"-produce a Patronus Charm in a Muggle-inhabited area, in the presence of a Muggle on the second of August at twenty-three minutes past nine, which constitutes an offence under Paragraph C of the Decree for the Reasonable Restriction of Underage Sorcery, 1875, and also under Section 13 of the International Confederation of Warlocks' Statute of Secrecy."

"You are Hope Lily Potter, of Number Four, Privet Drive, Little Whinging, Surrey?" Fudge demanded, glowering at her, clearly irritated by how unfazed she was.

Hope glanced to Griphook who gave a nod.

"Yes," she said.

"You received an official warning from the Ministry for using illegal magic three years ago, did you not?"

Hope fell silent at that.

"Miss Potter, I asked you a question."

"The incident in which you are speaking of, Minister," Griphook said coolly, "has been expunged from Lady Potter's record and has proven her to be not at fault. The only crime you could possibly accuse her of is having been in close proximity to a house-elf."

There were a number of mutterings at that and Fudge's ruddy face reddened and he spluttered briefly before continuing with his interrogation.

"And you conjured a Patronus on the night of the second of August?" he asked.

"Yes," Hope repeated. This was starting to feel very one-sided.

"Knowing that you are not permitted to use magic outside school while you are under the age of seventeen?"

"Yes."

"Knowing that you were in an area full of Muggles?"

"Yes."

"Fully aware that you were in close proximity to a Muggle at the time?"

Griphook interrupted before Hope could speak. "The Muggle to whom she was in close proximity to was one who knew of her magic, her cousin."

"You produced a fully-fledged Patronus?"

The voice and question caught Hope's attention, and she glanced around the room until she found the one who had spoken. It was an older witch wearing a monocle over one of her eyes.

"Yes," Hope said.
"A corporeal Patronus?" she pressed.

"I-I beg your pardon?" Hope asked in complete confusion.

"Your Patronus had a clearly defined form? I mean to say, it was more than vapour or smoke?"

"Yes," Hope said for what felt like the twentieth time. "It's a panther, every time."

"Every time?" she repeated her words. "You have produced a Patronus before now?"

"Yes," Hope said, "ever since third year when I had an…adverse reaction to the dementors." Her eyes narrowed slightly at Fudge, but he didn't blink.

"And you are fifteen years old?"

"Yes," Hope said in a bit of confusion, glancing to Griphook. What did her age have to do with anything? Griphook only smirked…that must have been good, right?

"You learned this at school?" she queried.

"Yes, Professor Lupin taught me."

"Impressive," she hummed, "a true Patronus at her age…very impressive indeed."

Fudge seemed to notice that he was losing some votes if by how some were now nodding with agreement to what the witch—who was probably Madam Bones, the woman who was known for being fair—and he was quick to return order to the court (which was far too big for a disciplinary hearing, that much Hope was certain of).

"It's not a question of how impressive the magic was," Fudge said coldly, "in fact, the more impressive the worse it is, I would have thought, given that the girl did it in plain view of a Muggle!"

"It should be more of a question of why it was needed to be performed to save two lives," Griphook said equally as coldly, raising two parchments into the air. "I have the signed statements of Dudley Dursley and Lady Hope Potter dictating the event in question."

"May I?" Madam Bones inquired and the parchments were sent back to her where she was. There was a moment of tense silence and then—"It says in your cousin's statement you were threatening his with your wand so he thought it had been something you had done."

Hope winced a little, but Griphook gave her a minuscule nod. "I had said something about Dudley running back to his dad, and he had told that at least he had one…I did not react very well, as you can imagine."

"May it be known to the court," Madam Bones said loudly, "that the description of the event by a Muggle, no less, confirms the presence of dementors. The lights going out, the cold, and happiness seeming to disappear from the world are all signs of the presence of dementors."

"Ah, but Muggles can't see dementors!" Fudge had grasped firmly to that very thin thread. "Highly convenient, highly convenient…so there are no witnesses to having seen."

Dumbledore cleared his throat and Hope had to resist jumping; she had forgotten the headmaster was there, he had been silent until now.

"We do, in fact, have a witness to the presence of Dementors in that alleyway," he said calmly, clasping his hands behind him, "other than Dudley Dursley, I mean. I may be wrong, but I am sure
that under the Wizengamot Charter of Rights, the accused has the right to present witnesses for his or her case? Isn't that the policy of the Department of Magical Law Enforcement, Madam Bones?” He directed the last bit to Madam Bones who nodded approvingly.

As it turned out, the person he had brought along was Mrs. Figg, and Hope felt just a sliver of hope at the possibility that the squib had seen the dementors. Though her descriptions weren't exactly what Hope was hoping for, they seemed to have changed the mind of some of the witches and wizards on the bench, so Hope was grateful for that.

Hope kept her eyes facing forward in a flat stare that didn't give away her complete boredom of the argument that seemed to have sprung up between Dumbledore and Fudge on the possibility of someone sending the dementors after Hope when a girlishly high giggle brought her back down to earth.

Stranger still, it had been uttered by a woman who could have been a half-sibling to a toad.

"I'm sure I must have misunderstood you, Professor Dumbledore. So silly of me. But it sounded for a teensy moment as though you were suggesting that the Ministry of Magic had ordered an attack on this girl!” She gave a light and high laugh following this statement.

"That would be disturbing indeed, Madam Undersecretary," Dumbledore agreed kindly, "which is why I'm sure the Ministry will be mounting a full-scale inquiry into why the two dementors were so very far from Azkaban and why they mounted an attack without authorization…” He took a step forward. "Of course, there is someone who might be behind the attack…Cornelius, I implore you to see reason. The evidence that the Dark Lord has returned is incontrovertible."

"He is not back," Fudge seethed quietly in his seat.

Griphook cleared his throat loudly, earning him the attention of the room (some of which still looked quite revolted, like old Toad-Face). "In the matter of Lady Hope Potter vs. the Decree for the Reasonable Restriction of Underage Sorcery, the law clearly states that magic may be used before Muggles—even ones that know of magic— in life-threatening situations. I ask you to now cast a vote for my client."

Hope smile turned to one of relief as those who wished the charges to be dropped far outweighed those that didn't.

Freedom never tasted so sweet.
The euphoria of Hope getting off of the charges set against her lasted for days afterwards (and Hope could still hear the ringing of "She got off!" in her ear courtesy of Ginny, Fred, and George), but now there was something new to celebrate. Ron and Hermione had been named Gryffindor Prefects, and a small party was going to be held later in celebration.

However, Hope and George were currently holed up in her room. Hope was the only one who had a room to herself, half because Sirius was her godfather and said if she wanted her own room, then she would get her own room, but she was also still having nightmares, so it helped that she didn't have to wake others up with her thrashing.

"George?"

"Mm?"

Hope didn't open her eyes, she was much too tired and much too liking the position she in, which was slumped across George's lap with her head resting on his shoulder, his fingers curling a lock of her hair.

"Do you ever think about us?"

George smirked, trailing the finger of his free hand over her arm. "Only every day."

Hope's heart stuttered a little. "I mean...you're leaving after this year..."

"Is that what you're worried about?" He murmured into her hair, "me ditching you?"

"A little," Hope admitted.

"Well fat chance of that," George said with a soft snort, "you're stuck with me for life, Potter, get used to it."

A smile dusted across Hope's lips as she snuggled a bit more into his arms and shut her eyes, slipping deeper and deeper until dreams overtook her...

She was in the long dark hallway again, the walls made of smooth black stone, a similar black door just out of reach, but when she reached for it, the corridor faded and she was left with Voldemort's voice whispering into her ear: "Come, the niceties must be observed...Dumbledore would like you to show manners...Bow to death, Hope..."

She jerked awake, breathing hard, and gave a small jump at a low groan from underneath her.

She had fallen asleep on George, and he apparently had fallen asleep as well...and was still asleep, thankfully. Hope gently removed his arm from around her and stood, shaking out the pricks one would get from remaining in one position for too long before bending down to press an almost-not-there kiss to his cheek with a whisper of "I'll be right back."

Hope slipped quietly out of the room. The house was surprisingly silent considering they were getting ready for a party later, and Hope was contemplating on perhaps going down to help out when something caught her eye. An open door.

Hope pushed it open and entered a little surprised to see that the room was mostly empty except for a
worn and hole-spotted tapestry pasted to the wall. In very fancy and old thread had been sewn the words: The Noble and Most Ancient House of Black "Toujours Pur."

"Always pure," Hope murmured, tracing the words with a finger, glancing over the names until she found- "Charlus Potter."

"Your granddad."

Hope jumped violently at Sirius' sudden voice and the man spared a laugh. "Sorry, I couldn't resist."

"Bet you could," she grumbled, "How come Dad's not on here?"

Sirius snorted walked to where she was. "That's probably because he married a Muggle-born."

"Oh…” Hope frowned. "Well, why aren't you on here either?"

"I used to be there." Sirius tapped a finger to a small burn on the tapestry under Orion Black and Walburga Black. "My sweet old mother blasted me off after I ran away from home –Kreacher's quite fond of muttering the story under his breath."

"You ran away?" Hope said stunned, turning on him with round eyes. "Why?"

Sirius chuckled darkly, waving a hand around. "Shouldn't that have been obvious?"

Hope's cheeks pinked.

"I'd had enough," Sirius continued. "I just packed up my things and left."

"Where'd you go?"

Sirius' smile this time around actually gained a bit of life, even if it was one of sad remembrance. "Your dad's place. Your grandparents were really good about it; they sort of adopted me as a second son. Yeah, I camped out at your dads in the school holidays, and when I was seventeen I got a place of my own. My Uncle Alphard had left me a decent bit of gold - he's been wiped off here, too, that's probably why - anyway, after that I looked after myself. I was always welcome at Mr. and Mrs. Potter's for Sunday lunch, though…Charlus somehow always managed to rope me into a game of chess one way or another…"

Hope grinned. "Sounds a little like Ron. He has to wheedle games out of us now, he's just too good." Her eyes followed a golden thread to a name below Sirius'. "Regulus Black," she read out loud, "brother?"

Sirius grunted in agreement. "Idiot. He was younger than me, the perfect Pure-blood son," he said in scorn, "he joined the Death Eaters."

Hope looked vaguely startled at this new information. "And you went in the completely opposite direction."

Sirius gave her a dog-like grin. "What can I say? I was the black sheep of the family, or so they say."

Hope noticed the death date...he was young when he died, barely considered an adult. "How did he die?" she asked softly.

Sirius gave a soft sigh, clenching his hands slightly into fists before relaxing them quickly before Hope could notice. "He was murdered by Voldemort. Or on Voldemort's orders, more likely; I doubt Regulus was ever important enough to be killed by Voldemort in person. From what I found out
after he died, he got in so far, then panicked about what he was being asked to do and tried to back out. Well, you don't just hand in your resignation to Voldemort. It's a lifetime of service or death."

Hope reached out a hand to squeeze his comfortably.

"I haven't looked at this for years," Sirius said, his voice slightly hoarse. "There's Phineas Nigellus...my great-great-grandfather, see?...least popular Headmaster Hogwarts ever had...and Araminta Meliflua...cousin of my mother's...tried to force through a Ministry Bill to make Muggle-hunting legal...and dear Aunt Elladora...she started the family tradition of beheading house-elves when they got too old to carry tea trays...of course, any time the family produced someone halfway decent they were disowned. I see Tonks isn't on here. Maybe that's why Kreacher won't take orders from her - he's supposed to do whatever anyone in the family asks him -"

"Wait, Tonks is related to you?" Hope asked a little stunned.

Sirius snorted. "She's related to you too. Metamorphmagi are hardly born outside the Black bloodline. Her mum was a Black and so was your gran."

Hope blinked owlishly. She hadn't known that, she thought it just had something to do with some sort of mutation of magical DNA...if at even made sense.

"Anyways, Tonks' mother Andromeda was my favourite cousin, but you won't find her on here either, see?"

He gestured to another burn much like Sirius', only it was between two names, Bellatrix and Narcissa.

"She married Ted Tonks, a Muggle-born, so obviously she was disowned-"

"You're cousins with Bellatrix Lestrange?" Hope demanded.

"Does it matter if she's my cousin?" Cold fury burned in Sirius' eyes. "As far as I'm concerned, they're not my family. She's certainly not my family. I haven't seen her since I was your age, unless you count a glimpse of her coming into Azkaban. D'you think I'm proud of having a relative like her?"

"No," Hope said, surprised by his vehemence, so much so that she had to take a step back, "nothing like that."

"Forget about it," Sirius said in a gruff voice, glaring darkly at the tapestry as if it was the cause of his misery. "I never thought I'd be stuck in this house again...Its ideal for Headquarters, of course. My father put every security measure known to wizard-kind on it when he lived here. It's Unplottable, so Muggles could never come and call -as if they'd ever have wanted to- and now Dumbledore's added his protection, you'd be hard put to find a safer house anywhere. Dumbledore is Secret Keeper for the Order, you know -nobody can find Headquarters unless he tells them personally where it is- that note Moody showed you last night, that was from Dumbledore-"

A loud noise under them drew attention away from the tapestry and to the floor.

"Er, shall we go see if the party's started, then?" Hope asked, hoping to pull him out of his funk, if nothing else.

"Sure." Sirius didn't spare a single glance back as he strode out of the room.
For once, Hope was content to not be the centre of attention as she sipped her butterbeer silently listening to the many conversations around her, livened in the face of the celebration.

Hermione had, at first, considered the thought that Hope was jealous that she had been named prefect and not Hope, but Hope had never cared for those kinds of titles, besides, Hermione was higher up in class than she was, and she had a thing for rules; Hope, on the other hand, had a thing for breaking them.

"I was never a prefect myself," Tonks said, throwing an arm over Hope's shoulders, lengthening and darkening her hair until it fell down her back and was the same colour as Hope's. She nudged her shoulder affectionately. "My Head of House said I lacked certain necessary qualities."

Hope remembered that Tonks had once said that she was in the Hufflepuff House, but she couldn't imagine Professor Sprout telling someone they lacked any specific qualities.

"What kind?" Ginny and Hope asked at the same time, sharing a glance of amusement as Tonks laughed as well.

"Like the ability to behave myself."

Laughter erupted from Hope and Ginny at that, but Hermione didn't seem to quite know how to respond. In the end, she choked on her butterbeer, making Hope only laugh harder and Ginny pound her roughly on the back until she seemed to have regained herself.

"What about you, Sirius?"

Hope scoffed and Ginny's question, jerking a thumb in her godfather's direction. "Ginny, you have seen Sirius, haven't you? No one in their right mind would give that lug a prefect badge unless their life depended on it."

Sirius grinned in agreement. "I'm going to take that as a compliment and not an insult, but I caused far too much trouble at school. Too many pranks, too many detentions with James. Remus was the good boy, he got the badge."

"I think Dumbledore might have hoped I would be able to exercise some control over my best friends," Remus admitted with a wry smile, his eyes distant as if he was recalling something from the past. "I need scarcely say that I failed dismally."

"I'm not surprised in the least," Hope said dryly, "how very hypocritical of you, Remus, always telling me to keep my head down when you were a troublemaker at this age too."

Remus' scarred cheeks reddened as the group shared a few chuckles at his expense.

"She's got you there you old wolf!" Sirius slopped some of his butterbeer down his front as he laughed.

"I'm just trying-!" Remus tried to defend himself but that laughter drowned him out and Hope politely excused herself to place her plate and cup in the sink.

"You alright, Potter?" Moody's voice came out of the blue. It seemed these days that one of his favourite pastimes was trying to see just how much she could jump at the sight of his presence.

"Fine," Hope said shortly, ignoring him for the most part (and she knew that eye of his was swirling and eyeballing her from the side) and rinsing out her cup. Her trepidation towards the following morning had been growing the whole day. Hope half didn't want to go back to Hogwarts
considering all the lies that the Daily Prophet had printed on her.

*Don't be a coward,* she told herself. *You handled last year with the Hufflepuffs well enough, you can handle this.*

"I've got something that might interest you," he said with a grunt, thrusting a photograph into her hands. "Original Order of the Phoenix. Found it last night when I was looking for my spare Invisibility Cloak, seeing as Podmore hasn't had the manners to return my best one…thought people might like to see it."

Hope's breath caught at the sight of her parents, so young and smiling so brightly. She bit the corner of her lip. They looked happy, pleased that they were doing something good for the world, fighting against Voldemort.

"There's me," Moody said, beginning to list off each of the members of the original group, "and there's Dumbledore beside me, Dedalus Diggle on the other side…that's Marlene McKinnon, she was killed two weeks after this was taken, they got her whole family. That's Frank and Alice Longbottom-" Hope's eyes grew forlorn as she gazed at Neville's parents; nobody deserved what they had been put under. "-poor devils. Better dead than what happened to them...and that's Emmeline Vance, you've met her, and that there's Lupin, obviously...Benjy Fenwick, he copped it too, we only ever found bits of him..." Hope's eyes widened slightly. They only found bits of him? "That's Edgar Bones...brother of Amelia Bones, they got him and his family, too, he was a great wizard...Sturgis Podmore, blimey, he looks young...Caradoc Dearborn, vanished six months after this, we never found his body...Hagrid, of course, looks exactly the same as ever...Elphias Doge, you've met him, I'd forgotten he used to wear that stupid hat...Gideon Prewett, it took five Death Eaters to kill him and his brother Fabian, they fought like heroes-"

"Mrs. Weasley's brothers?" Hope asked in surprise.

"That's right, how else do you think she got into the Order in the first place?" Moody asked with a small smirk. "That's Dumbledore's brother Aberforth, only time I ever met him, strange bloke...that's Dorcas Meadowes, Voldemort killed her personally...Sirius, when he still had short hair...and...there you go, thought that would interest you!"

Hope didn't have a chance to reply when Sirius called Moody over, allowing her to dart upstairs for a breather, her heart hammering in her chest. More than half of the people in that photo were dead or hadn't been seen since; how on earth was that supposed to be interesting? It was more depressing!

Hope sighed, exhaling slowly out of her mouth before taking a few steps in the direction of the room considering heading to bed early when the distinct sound of someone crying caught her and made her pause.

Should she check it out? True to her character, Hope followed the sound to its source: the drawing room.

When she pushed the door open, her blood ran cold.

Ron was lying on the floor, his body stiff, and his eyes open and unblinking. Dead.

Hope choked on a scream. That couldn't be-!

"R-riddikulus!" Hope hadn't realized that there was one other person in the room, Mrs. Weasley. Ron's body changed in a loud crack into Bill's, and then Mr. Weasley's, and then Fred and George (in a tangle of limbs their empty eyes frightening Hope more than anything she had seen yet), and then Percy, and finally Hope herself briefly before Hope pushed Mrs. Weasley out of the way.
placing herself in the boggart's path.

Her body twisted and shifted until a dementor was bearing down on her. Boggarts didn't have the same strength of that which they imitated, so while the dementor before her did create a chill and make her feel dizzy, there wasn't a threat to her soul, but-

Hope didn't have time to yell for help as its scabbed hand lifted her into the air by the throat with such a tight grip that Hope soon found herself lacking air. She clutched at the hand, her wand stuck and tangled in her sleeve. Spots danced before her eyes as she swung her legs forward to kick at it, forcing it to release her. The bad news, however, was that instead of simply dropping her, it flung her so that she crashed into a bookcase, sending it toppling on top of her.

She missed the door flying open and Remus dealing with the boggart as Sirius pulled the bookshelf and assortment of books off her.

"Hope, are you alright?" he asked in concern as Hope sat up, wheezing, her body aching. "What happened?"

Hope could only mime a hand around her throat and Sirius understood, if his darkening expression was anything to go by. He hooked one of her arms over his shoulders and one of his at her back and under her legs, lifting her bridal style. "Come on, I'll get you into bed and bring some water up, alright?"

Hope nodded, her throat feeling like sandpaper, but two minutes later she was gulping down the water, her throat feeling much better as Ron leaned against the bed closer to her feet and Hermione sat on crossed legs at the opposite corner.

"I didn't know that boggarts could do that," Ron was saying a bit aghast. "It was like it tried to kill you or something!"

"What a shocker," Hope croaked. Most things seemed to want to kill her these days.

"I heard Moody saying that it's been here for too long," Hermione said, "something about boggarts turning vicious once they've deprived of a food source for so long."

"Sounds like dementors if you ask me," Ron said shaking his head. "What's that tell you about going off on your own, eh, Hope?"

She gave him a scowl that made both of her friends laugh before she climbed off the bed and bid her good night, closing the door behind them as they went, leaving the room only lit by the light of the streetlamp outside. She threw back the covers and sat up, swinging her legs over the side when she fumbled to grab her wand from the side table and aim it at the person who had Apparated into her room.

"Easy, love."

Hope relaxed involuntarily at the sound of George's voice, replacing the wand as he sat beside her. Her eyes fluttered shut at the feel of his fingers ghosting over the area where bruises had previously been, but had been quickly healed by Mrs. Weasley once she had regained her wits.

"How are you?"

"Hoarse," Hope said in a voice that reflected that. "Your mum'll probably realize you're in here," she added in a rasp that sent a shiver down his spine as he pulled her closer to him.
"Fred's running point," he murmured, his breath dusting her neck.

"George..."

"Mm," he said, centimetres away from her lips now, "I love it when you say my name like that."

"Like what?" Hope asked faintly, his thumb rubbing a smooth circle into her hip.

"Like you know what," George said with a smirk before their lips finally connected. To Hope, it seemed like every kiss was a new experience, maybe that was just because George was such a good kisser, she wasn't sure-

Hope broke away suddenly as Mrs. Weasley stopped outside her door, listening intently before moving away.

"Your Mum's going to find us in a rather compromising position if you keep this up," she hissed, but George was unfazed.

"I thought I owed you a proper snog?" he asked her with an arched eyebrow, his smirk widening as she flushed with colour.

"I-I don't think now-" Hope started to disagree but then he kissed her again and she found herself not quite knowing what her argument against him was. Her heart beat a little faster as she felt his tongue trace the shape of her lower lip. She raked her hands through his hair, pulling herself, if possible, even closer. She hardly noticed as he hooked one of her legs around his waist, far too distracted even as his lips left hers to trail down the side of her throat to the junction of where it met the shoulder and then Hope found it rather difficult to breathe. She couldn't force back a low moan when he paid particular attention to that one spot.

"T-That's hardly f-fair," she gasped with difficulty.

"Mm?" He hummed into her skin and she shivered, but she pushed him away with an evil grin, leaning forward to whisper into his ear, "I can't let you have all the fun, Georgie."

George made a low noise in his throat and tightened his hold on his as she pressed soft kisses against his own, emboldened by the sound. It didn't take her long to find that he had a 'sweet spot' per se, right under the edge of his jaw.

"Remember when I called you a tempting she-devil?" George said, his voice oddly strained as she leaned up to meet his lips with hers.

"Maybe..." Hope murmured against him.

"I was completely right," he groaned, parting from her and standing, "One of these days you will be responsible for killing me."

"In a fit of passion?" Hope asked, her eyes twinkling stars in the darkness.

"Perhaps," he drawled, stooping for one last kiss before straightening and disappearing in a loud crack, leaving her looking –to use her word from a few days before– besotted.

Hope had a scarf tied to her neck the next day, making Fred grin and waggle his eyebrows at her. She glared and blushed, which kind of ruined the glare.

"How was last night?" he asked her conversationally as they walked down the street intent on King's
Hope's scowl deepened. "One word, Fred," she threatened, being mindful of her overprotective godfather listening in as he trotted beside them in his dog-form.

"And you'll what?" he grinned devilishly in a way that irritated Hope, because she was so used to seeing it on George's face than Fred's.

"I'll tell Angie you're planning on proposing before you have a suitable ring," she said lowly, for his ears only.

The expression was wiped from his face faster than one could blink and George had to stifle his mirth.

Fred gazed at her in horror. "You wouldn't dare!"

"Wouldn't I?" Hope asked archly. "You forget who I am, Freddikins."

Fred's jaw unhinged as he gaped at her, quite at a loss as George –the traitor– roared with laughter beside his girlfriend. He spluttered indignantly. "Freddikins?! Wha-?"

"And this is why you don't try to outsmart me," Hope whispered into George's ear.

"And don't I know it," he replied, kissing the corner of her mouth.

Ron made a disgusted sound behind them. "Hermione! Now they're back to being lovey-dovey again!" he complained.

Hermione made an exasperated noise. "They're a couple, Ron, that's what couples do."

"Yeah, but-"

"Aw, Ron," Hope turned around to give the lanky red-head her attention, batting her eyes just a little too much, "are you jealous?"

Ron's face reddened at the insinuation and then he gagged. "You're kidding me, right?"

Hope wasn't sure if she should have been annoyed that viewed the idea of kissing her as disgusting or pleased at the half-glance he spared towards Hermione. She settled for the latter.

They soon came to a stop at their destination and were then forced to meander casually at the barrier that led to the hidden platform from which they would depart on the Hogwarts Express. They had to meander because Moody and Remus had taken an alternate route with the luggage, but they appeared in a matter of minutes after their arrival and soon after that they were through the barrier and stowing away their luggage with Moody grumbling mutinously under his breath, "I'll still be reporting Sturgis to Dumbledore. That's the second time he's not turned up in a week. Getting as unreliable as Mundungus."

Hope gathered that Sturgis had been supposed to help him but had apparently not shown up for duty.

"Well, look after yourselves," Remus told all of them before hugging Hope tightly and whispering, "You too, Hope. Be careful."

"I am careful," Hope nettled, "I'm careful to the point of paranoia."

Remus laughed and Moody grunted in agreement. "Saves lives, paranoia does," he growled as he
shook Hope's hand. "Keep your head down and your eyes peeled. And don't forget, all of you – careful what you put in writing. If in doubt, don't put it in a letter at all."

"It's been great meeting all of you!" Tonks added, embracing the girls and sparing Hope a wink. "See you around, cousin."

Hope rolled her eyes. "You know we aren't really cousins, right? So-

"Ah, don't ruin the moment!" Tonks complained, ruffling Hope's hair (currently a spiky teal).

They had to clamour quickly aboard as the warning whistle echoed and Hope knelt quickly to kiss Sirius' nose and embrace him around the neck. "I'll miss you," she whispered. "Take care."

Sirius barked in acknowledgment.

"Hope, the train!"

Hope grabbed Hermione's hand as the train started to move and allowed herself to be pulled inside, watching Sirius chase the train until it was moving too fast and he was left behind.
Luna Lovegood was in the first free compartment Hope, Ginny, and Neville (who they had picked up along the way, with Ron and Hermione heading towards the Prefect's compartment and Fred and George going off to search for Lee) found.

The first thing Luna said was "Hope Potter," closely followed by "what a lovely love bite."

Hope blushed, Ginny laughed, and Neville astutely averted his eyes.

"Thank you, Luna," Hope said dryly. "How was your summer?"

"It was lovely," Luna said in the same dreamy manner that she had spoke in the first time that they had met back in Luna's first year when she had gotten a bit lost. Her eyes drifted to Neville and she surveyed him longer than it was strictly necessary to do so. "I danced with you at the Yule Ball," she recalled.

"Er, yeah," Neville said blushingly; he'd probably stepped on her feet at one point or another.

"In case you've forgotten, or he didn't tell you," Ginny said, sparing the shy Gryffindor a smile. "His name is Neville Longbottom."

Luna nodded wisely. "The tobblerkews made me forget your name, but they are gone now, so I will remember it."

Neville blinked a few times, not really understanding. "Er…okay…"

"You'll get used to it," Hope said with a smile, "Luna's special."

Luna beamed. Hope hadn't seen much of her over the few years, but this, she knew, was a compliment.

"Are you, er, a Gryffindor?" Neville asked a bit nervously. "I haven't seen you around."

"I'm a Ravenclaw," Luna said airily rising into a pleasant soprano, "Wit beyond measure is man's greatest treasure."

"Indeed," Hope agreed in a wise manner, taking the extra magazine of the Quibbler Luna offered her in a heartbeat. "Have you or your dad found any Crumple Horned Snorkacks yet?"

"Not yet," Luna said a bit sadly before brightening, "but we'll try again next summer, maybe we'll find them then."

"Maybe," Ginny agreed, biting her lip to keep from smiling too much.

"Want to guess what I got for my birthday?" Neville asked Hope after a short stretch of silence.

"A book on some kind of magical plant?" Hope offered, knowing Neville's love for the subject.

"No," Neville said, though he was still smiling brightly, so-

"An actual magical plant?" she guessed.

"Yup!" he said with a beaming smile, thrusting a hand into his bag to pull out something that looked
remarkably strange to Hope, and Hope had seen a lot of strange things. It had the appearance of a potted cactus, only instead it a solid grey colour with a number of boils and it was moving slightly, almost as though it was breathing.

"What's that?" Hope asked, slightly wary. The Triwizard Tournament taught her to consider everything that she didn't know to be the enemy. And so had Crouch.

"Mimbulus mimbletonia," he said with obvious pride, clearly pleased with the gift. "They're really, really rare. I don't know if there's one in the greenhouse at Hogwarts, even. I can't wait to show it to Professor Sprout. My Great Uncle Algie got it for me in Assyria. I'm going to see if I can breed from it."

Hope was still eyeing it apprehensively making Ginny have to stifle her giggles. "Does it do anything particularly interesting?" That would certainly make up for its unappealing appearance.

"Loads of stuff!" Neville said eagerly. "It's got an amazing defensive mechanism. Here, hold Trevor for me…"

Hope took the toad without question as Neville bent down a second time, this time withdrawing a quill and sharply jabbing one of the boils. The effect was rather immediate and Hope was the unlucky ones who didn't have the opportunity to shield her face in time as sour-smelling green liquid blew out from each boil, dousing them all quite effectively.

Hope scowled at Neville as best as she could while looking like she'd fallen into mucky sewage.

"Sorry," Neville said, somehow managing to blush under the green liquid so much that it was actually noticeable. "I haven't tried that before...didn't realize it would be quite so...don't worry, though, Stinksap's not poisonous."

"That's very comforting, Neville," Hope said dryly.

"Oh, don't be like that," Ginny admonished, "we can get rid of it easily. Scourgify!"

Hope was grateful when the Stinksap had gone either way, because no matter what Ginny would later say, it did not go well with her eyes. It seemed like ages before Hermione and Ron rejoined them, by that time, Hope had gotten completely through her copy of the Quibbler (smothering a laugh at the article considering Sirius to be a member of Wizarding band and bemusement at the article concerning Fudge's stance on the goblins…cooking them in pies? Not likely.) and had taken to staring aimlessly out the window. She was, however, quite grateful to see them.

"So, how boring was it?" She asked as Ron threw himself into the empty seat beside her in obvious exhaustion.

"Why on earth I was picked for this job, I've got no idea," he said lowly as Hermione gave Hope a dark look for automatically assuming it was boring.

"There are two fifth-year prefects from each house," Hermione explained, sitting opposite of Hope who allowed her friend's glare to go right over her head. "Boy and girl from each."

"And guess who's a Slytherin prefect?" Ron asked, slumping in his seat as if all he wanted to do was sleep.

"Mr. Wait-Till-My-Father-Hears-About-This?" Hope offered dully.

Ron sniggered at her choice of words. "Right in one."
"Who's the girl?"

"Daphne Greengrass," Hermione said in relief. "I was worried that it was going to be someone like Pansy Parkinson, but Daphne didn't seem too bad, maybe a little quiet."

"I haven't heard her talk much either," Hope admitted, "but she's nice enough; better to be on patrol with her than Malfoy."

Both prefects made a noise of agreement at that.

"Who got picked for Hufflepuff?" Hope asked.

"Ernie Macmillan and Hannah Abbott."

Hope frowned at the mention of Ernie. He was always the first one to accuse her of anything whether it was because petrifications were occurring or because her name had come out of the Goblet of Fire, making it so that the Hogwarts glory would have to be shared between the Gryffindor and Hufflepuff Houses.

"And Anthony Goldstein and Padma Patil for Ravenclaw," Hermione added.

Hope didn't know Anthony too well, so she couldn't judge, but Padma was perfect material for a prefect, like Hermione.

"We're supposed to patrol the corridors every so often," he explained, "and we can give out punishments if people are misbehaving. I can't wait to get Crabbe and Goyle for something…"

The others laughed, but Hermione did not share in the amusement. "You're not supposed to abuse your position, Ron!"

"You say that like Malfoy's not going to be doing the same thing," Ron said in a You-know-its-true sort of voice that had been expertly copied from Hermione herself who blushed slightly, knowing whom he had stolen it from.

"So you're going to stoop to his level, Ron? Really?"

"I'm just trying to nab his mates before he nabs mine! Is that too much to ask?"

"Ron!" Hermione groaned and he grinned widely.

"I'll make Goyle do lines," he said, apparently having given this some thought, "it'll kill him, he hates writing." He then did a rather impressive impersonation of Goyle straight down to the grunt and look of pain. "I…must…not…look…like…a…baboon's…backside."

Hermione, this time, laughed with them, but none of their laughter combined could possibly compare to Luna whose laughter echoed much more loudly in the compartment than any of theirs. She laughed so hard, in fact, that tears actually fell from her eyes.

"Are you alright, Luna?" Hope asked, a little concerned at her reaction and how long it was lasting.

"That was funny!" she gasped, clutching her side. "Baboon's…backside!"

"Well, well, well," a voice drawled, "the gang just gets bigger and bigger, doesn't it? More blood traitors to add to the mix."

The smile fell off of Hope's face faster than one could even blink as Draco Malfoy made himself
known. He hadn't changed much in the last year other than height and unpleasant demeanour.

"Can we help you?" she asked frigidly. "Because we certainly don't want your company."

Malfoy's sneer became more prominent. "Manners, Potter, or I'll have to give you a detention. You see, I, unlike you, have been made a prefect, which means that I, unlike you, have the power to hand out punishments."

"When are you going to learn," Hope said, "tsk"ing in a mocking manner, "that rules and I don't even remotely get along? Detentions are far from frightening, but nice try."

Malfoy scowled darkly as the occupants of the compartment didn't bother to hide their amusement. "You'd best be watching yourself, Potter," he warned, "because I'll be dogging your footsteps in case you step out of line."

"Threatening those of a higher status than you already, Draco, dear?"

Daphne Greengrass stepped forward, her pale blue eyes narrowed as she took in the scion of the Malfoy line. Daphne had aged in elegance, in a manner that few could. Her blonde hair was held at bay by a loose French braid that pushed Pure-blood protocol and her robes hardly hid her figure. The Ice Queen of Slytherin House…well, she wasn't given that name for nothing.

"Greengrass," Malfoy regarded her coolly.

"One should really take in their surroundings," she mocked in a similar voice, "then one would not miss the signet ring Lady Potter is wearing."

Several pairs of eyes fastened on thick ring on her finger that bore the Potter family crest. Hope did her best to shift under the attention.

Malfoy sneered. "You? The Head of the Potter family?"

Hope's eyes were frigid emeralds. "That is generally what happens when you are the last of your line, yes, but I doubt your family will ever come to that…after all, cowards do float."

Malfoy's cheeks pinked at the slight on his family and he angrily opened his mouth to retort when Daphne interrupted him swiftly with a "You're excused, Draco."

She arched a light eyebrow as he stormed off like an insulted child before giving a slight inclination of the head to Hope. "My apologies. Such a display is unseemly."

"It has been for years," Hope said dryly and Daphne's lips twitched as she turned on her heel to continue her rounds.

"And that, Ron," Hope said, turning her attention to her slightly impressed friend, "is why we don't judge Slytherin House as a whole."

He had to agree with her there.

Though confused as to where Hagrid was (and why he had been replaced by Professor Grubbly-Plank a second time, as she had once taken over his position as Care of Magical Creatures professor in the days that followed Rita Skeeter's article on him being half-giant), Hope found herself rather distracted by something she couldn't quite explain.

The carriages that they always took to school had always been horseless, but…now they weren't.
She stared in awe and shock at the creature before her. It was both strange and beautiful, but in a way that few could appreciate it. They could be considered horses, but they were too skeletal, their white eyes staring ahead, and their bat-like wings folded into their sides.

Hope reached out a hand to the first one she saw and it lifted its head slightly to survey here, sniffing at her in interest.

"Er, Hope, what're you doing?" Ron asked in a bit of confusion and a small amount of worry.

"Can't you see them?" Hope asked, turning back to face him. "I always thought the carriages pulled themselves…"

Hermione was now looking at her as though she had gone mad. "Nothing's pulling the carriage, Hope, it's pulling itself like always."

Hope patted the side of its neck; it was solid.

"No," she decided, "it's definitely not."

"It's alright, you're not going mad or anything," Luna assured as she seemed to materialize beside Hope, making the others jump. "I can see them too."

Though Hope couldn't figure out why on earth Hermione or Ron couldn't sit them. They were right there! Standing right in front of them! So why hadn't they been able to see? Hope pondered on this all the way into the Great Hall and then her heart stopped cold.

It was that toad-like woman from before, from her hearing, the one who'd laughed at the idea of someone within the Ministry sending dementors after Hope. Hope had felt instant dislike towards the woman, and that wasn't likely to change any time soon.

"What the ruddy hell is she doing here?" Hope said in surprise.

"Who?"

George had slid into the seat beside her, wrapping a loose arm around her waist as always.

"You see that woman up there?" Hope asked as Ron and Hermione sat opposite her. "The one in pink?"

Ron sniggered as his eyes followed hers to where she was looking in horror. "Nice cardigan…she's a little bright on the eyes, isn't she?"

Fred and George didn't bother stifling their amusement, because he wasn't wrong. The sheer amount of pink she was wearing made her the brightest of the witches and wizards sitting at the staff table.

"But she works for Fudge," Hope said, tapping lightly on the table, "don't tell me she's the new Defence Against the Dark Arts professor!"

"Seems like it," Hermione had to admit grudgingly. The woman was sitting in the seat for the subject.

They didn't have any more time to speculate as the Sorting Hat began its song for the new year:

'In times of old when I was new
And Hogwarts barely started
The founders of our noble school
Thought never to be parted:
United by a common goal,
They had the selfsame yearning,
To make the world's best magic school
And pass along their learning.
'Together we will build and teach!'
The four good friends decided
And never did they dream that they
Might some day be divided,
For were there such friends anywhere
As Slytherin and Gryffindor?
Unless it was the second pair
Of Hufflepuff and Ravenclaw?
So how could it have gone so wrong?
How could such friendships fail?
Why, I was there and so can tell
The whole sad, sorry tale.
Said Slytherin, 'We'll teach just those
Whose ancestry is purest.'
Said Ravenclaw, 'We'll teach those whose
Intelligence is surest.'
Said Gryffindor, 'We'll teach all those
With brave deeds to their name,'
Said Hufflepuff, 'I'll teach the lot,
And treat them just the same.'
These differences caused little strife
When first they came to light,
For each of the four founders had
A house in which they might
Take only those they wanted, so,
For instance, Slytherin
Took only pure-blood wizards
Of great cunning, just like him,
And only those of sharpest mind
Were taught by Ravenclaw
While the bravest and the boldest
Went to daring Gryffindor.
Good Hufflepuff, she took the rest,
And taught them all she knew,
Thus the houses and their founders
Retained friendships firm and true.
So Hogwarts worked in harmony
For several happy years,
But then discord crept among us
Feeding on our faults and fears.
The houses that, like pillars four,
Had once held up our school,
Now turned upon each other and,
Divided, sought to rule.
And for a while it seemed the school
Must meet an early end,
What with duelling and with fighting
And the clash of friend on friend
And at last there came a morning
When old Slytherin departed
And though the fighting then died out
He left us quite downhearted.
And never since the founders four
Were whittled down to three
Have the houses been united
As they once were meant to be.
And now the Sorting Hat is here
And you all know the score:
I sort you into houses
Because that is what I'm for,
But this year I'll go further,
Listen closely to my song:
Though condemned I am to split you
Still I worry that it's wrong,
Though I must fulfil my duty
And must quarter every year
Still I wonder whether Sorting
May not bring the end I fear.
Oh, know the perils, read the signs,
The warning history shows,
For our Hogwarts is in danger
From external, deadly foes
And we must unite inside her
Or we'll crumble from within
I have told you, I have warned you...
Let the Sorting now begin.'
"Unite within her?" Ron repeated bleakly. "How's it expecting us to unite with these century-long prejudices?"
"It's a hat," Hope said bluntly, "do you really think it knows that well enough?"
"Well, maybe not," Ron conceded, "but fat chance of us getting along with the Slytherins." He was quick to amend his statement at the scowl forming on Hope's face. "I mean, obviously they're not all bad, but they're not all good either. It's not like we're going to suddenly be buddy-buddy with Malfoy."
"The world would have to end first," Hope agreed and they jokingly toasted their empty goblets together while Hermione rolled her eyes, muttering something along the lines of her friends never changing. They all fell silent again, though, once Professor McGonagall's eyes swept over them, her eyes narrowed slightly as she waited for all conversations to conclude so that she could begin sorting. Even then, it seemed to Hope to drag on longer than usual and she leaned her cheek on her fist, her stomach growling softly, waiting at long last for Dumbledore to at last say: "To our newcomers, welcome! To our old hands - welcome back! There is a time for speech-making, but this is not it. Tuck in!"

Hope still eyed him in a scrutinizing manner. At the hearing she hadn't thought much of it…but he was determinedly avoiding looking at her. That was odd, it was like he was afraid of looking at her for too long would permanently damage his retinas. But after a few moments she dragged her eyes down to her plate, mutely filling it, doing her best to ignore the whispers, pointing fingers, and stares that had followed her the moment she had entered the hall that had nothing to do with the shade of blue that her hair was.

"You alright?" George hummed in her ear, an action that sent a shiver down her spine, a reaction she suppressed harshly, which would normally make him smirk, but not today.

"Fine," she muttered back, falling to her typical response once more.

However, it didn't fool George if the incredulous eyebrow was anything to go by, but she was saved from coming up with a suitable answer by taking this opportunity to fill her mouth with potatoes. Hope kept her eyes on her plate, maintaining her silence until it and everyone else's plates were empty and Dumbledore spoke once more, beaming down at all of them.

"Well, now that we are all digesting another magnificent feast," he said, his long silver beard moving slightly as he spoke. "I beg a few moments of your attention for the usual start-of-term notices… First-years ought to know that the Forest in the grounds is out-of-bounds to students - and a few of our older students ought to know by now, too."

Three in particular were given a number of stares, as stories of their adventures had been cycling through the Hogwarts grapevine of gossip for years, becoming more heroic with each re-telling.

Hope was pretty sure she didn't battle off a centaur in second year when she and Ron had entered into the Forbidden Forest to speak with Aragog the Acromantula.

"Mr. Filch, the caretaker," Dumbledore continued, making a small gesture to the bitter man in question, in case people had forgotten who he was or just simply did not know, "has asked me for what he tells me is the four-hundred-and-sixty-second time, to remind you all that magic is not permitted in corridors between classes, nor are a number of other things, all of which can be checked on the extensive list now fastened to Mr Filch's office door. We have had two changes in staffing this year. We are very pleased to welcome back Professor Grubbly-Plank, who will be taking Care of Magical Creatures lessons; we are also delighted to introduce Professor Umbridge, our new Defence Against the Dark Arts teacher."

"But how long is that Grubbly-Plank woman staying?" Ron asked in a low mutter, to which his friends could offer no response, because they hadn't the faintest idea either.

"Tryouts for the house Quidditch teams will take place on the-"

"Hem, hem."

Every single head in the room turned to look at Umbridge as if she was out of the world. No one had ever dared to interrupt Dumbledore before, and Hope could see from a glance to Professor
McGonagall told her that her Head of House was less than pleased by the disruption.

Umbridge stood, but it didn't make that much of a difference as she was rather short to begin with.

"Thank you, Headmaster, for those kind words of welcome," she said in the same high-pitched voice that she had spoken in at Hope's trial, leaving Hope wonder how on earth she could be taken seriously with such a voice. "Hem, hem...well, it is lovely to be back at Hogwarts, I must say! And to see such happy little faces looking up at me!"

Hope wasn't the only staring at her like she was mad. None of the others seemed to like being talked to like they were children, but Umbridge took little notice.

"I'm, sure we're all going to be very good friends."

"That's likely," Fred and George said in unison, earning a few subdued snorts from those closest to them.

"The Ministry to Magic has always considered the education of young witches and wizards to be of vital importance. The rare gifts with which you were born may come to nothing if not nurtured and honed by careful instruction. The ancient skills unique to the Wizarding community must be passed down the generations lest we lose them forever. The treasure trove of magical knowledge amassed by our ancestors must be guarded, replenished and polished by those who have been called to the noble profession of teaching."

She took a brief moment to give a short bow to the members of the staff at the table, none of which who responded in kind.

"Every headmaster and headmistress of Hogwarts has brought something new to the weighty task of governing this historic school," she continued in her girlish voice, "and that is as it should be, for without progress there will be stagnation and decay. There again, progress for progress's sake must be discouraged, for our tried and tested traditions often require no tinkering. A balance, then, between old and new, between permanence and change, between tradition and innovation..."

"What?" Hope muttered a little stunned, tapping Hermione's hand with a finger. "Is she saying what I think she's saying?"

Hermione shushed her.

"...because some changes will be for the better," Umbridge said with what she could possibly consider an encouraging nod but Hope just thought made her head look as though it was going to fall off, "while others will come, in the fullness of time, to be recognized as errors of judgment. Meanwhile, some old habits will be retained, and rightly so, whereas others, outmoded and outworn, must be abandoned. Let us move forward, then, into a new era of openness, effectiveness and accountability, intent on preserving what ought to be preserved, perfecting what needs to be perfected, and pruning wherever we find practices that ought to be prohibited."

"Alright, what the ruddy hell was that all about?" Ron demanded of Hermione and Hope as Umbridge sat down, who were now sharing glances of displeasure.

"Basically, she's a plant," Hope said bluntly.

"A plant?" Ron didn't understand. "Like a literal-?"

"No!" Hope said rolling her eyes. "She's the Minister's eyes and ears inside of Hogwarts."
Hermione nodded in agreement. "Like when she said "progress for progress' sake must be discouraged" and "pruning wherever we find practices that ought to be prohibited"."

"But what's that mean?" Ron demanded.

"It means that the Ministry's interfering at Hogwarts and we can't do a thing about it," Hermione said coolly as she stood with Ron to help lead the first years away as Dumbledore concluded his speech.

Hope moved to follow when a voice stopped her.

"Er, Hope? Can we have a word?"

It had been Lavender Brown who had spoken, much to Hope's surprise, because the voice was rather tentative at best and that was not something Hope was used to.

George's eyes narrowed suspiciously, but Hope waved him off.

"Alright, then," she said, sparing her boyfriend a kiss on the cheek. "I'll see you tomorrow, love."

"If you're sure," he said, pressing a lingering kiss to her lips before parting and leaving her with Lavender and Parvati.

Lavender wasn't as brainless as she let on, and she remembered the expression of utter shock on Hope's face when her name came out of the Goblet of Fire the previous year as well as the distraught at the end of the Third Task when she had brought back Cedric Diggory's corpse.

"I know…" Lavender paused, trying to articulate the words she wished. "I know the Daily Prophet's been saying a lot of bad stuff about you." To her credit, Hope only flinched a little. "But I wanted to say that we-" She gestured to herself and Parvati. "-believe you."

The expression on Hope's face was one of scarce disbelief.

"Attention-seeking isn't really your forte," Parvati said, having remained silent until now, "you wouldn't say something unless it was true."

"Well…" Hope gave a small grimace; she was a rather capable liar.

Parvati rolled her dark eyes, her lips twitching. "You know what I mean."

Hope couldn't help but feel an unexpected warmth towards her dorm-mates the likes of which she had never previously felt before.
I Must Not Tell Lies

The next morning found Hope more than a little irritated because people seemed to either hurry away from her or whisper rather obviously behind their hands as they stared at her as though she was going to explode like a bomb any second and they wanted to watch the ash settle. Or maybe that was just Hope's darker side talking.

"It'll get better," Hermione tried to console her friend, but Hope paid her no heed, her hair turning a dark blue that made a second year Ravenclaw turn absolutely white and flee as if Hope had just threatened to kill her.

Hope bit back a nasty retort to yell after her, her mood still sour since she'd found out that Seamus didn't believe her (much like a large percentage of the school's population), but she maintained her silence. Hermione and Ron weren't entirely sure if that was a good thing.

Ron wasn't sure that he'd ever seen Hope quite so miserable, and that was including the whole Slytherin's Heir debacle from second year and the Fourth Champion issue from the past year.

"It'll blow over," he said with a surety that Hope didn't share. Hermione scowled slightly since he had basically said the exact same thing as her.

"Besides, don't you remember what Dumbledore said at the end-of-term feast last -oh, you skipped that didn't you?" Hermione cut herself off looking a little ashamed. Hope hadn't been feeling well enough to attend and Cedric's eulogy only made it more difficult, so she hadn't bothered, opting to remain in the hospital wing with Madam Pomfrey instead.

Hope didn't comment, so Hermione ploughed on.

"Well, when he was talking about You-Know-Who he said, 'His gift for spreading discord and enmity is very great. We can only fight it by showing an equally strong bond of friendship and trust.'"

"And that means?"

"It means exactly what the Sorting Hat was saying yesterday!" Hermione said in exasperation as they sat down at the table for breakfast. "We should be all working together instead of fighting with each other."

"Easier said than done," Hope said, to which Hermione had to concede as they took their new timetables.

"Look at this!" Ron said stabbing a finger at his own schedule. "History of Magic, double Potions, Divination, and double Defence Against the Dark Arts! I've got Binns, Snape, Trelawney, and that Umbridge woman all in one day!"

"The only difference is we've got Babbling instead of Trelawney," Hope said arching an eyebrow, "and thank the gods for that." Hermione didn't bother stifling her giggle.

"I wish Fred and George'd hurry up and get those Skiving Snackboxes sorted," he bemoaned. Skiving Snackboxes was a new invention that Fred and George were still working the kinks out of. They were a range of sweets designed to make the one who consumed them ill, ill enough at get out of class but then would eat the other half of the sweet and would miraculously recover.
"Do me ears deceive me? Hogwarts prefects surely don't wish to skive off lessons?" Fred was grinning as he and George joined them, George greeting Hope with a kiss to the cheek, per usual. Hope pinked as his hand fell to rest on her thigh. She spared him a glance, rolling her eyes when he looked a little disappointed that she hadn't reacted a bit more.

"You know what they say about dogs not learning new tricks, don't you?" she murmured in his ear, twirling a finger around a loose lock of ginger hair.

George pouted. "Aw, Hope, don't be like that!" He leaned forward to whisper lowly into her ear "Remember, I know what makes you tick."

Hope's cheeks darkened slightly when his eyes lingered on the area hidden by her collar where his love bite still rested and she spared him a scowl.

"Admit it, this is the worst Monday you've ever seen." Ron's voice drew her back into the conversation just as his friend practically threw his timetable into his brother's hands.

"Fair point," Fred conceded, wrinkling his nose at Ron's list of classes. "You can have a bit of Nosebleed Nougat cheap if you like."

But Ron wasn't Hope's best mate for nothing and he now practically had an affinity for suspicious instances. "You haven't figured out an antidote yet, have you?" he concluded wisely.

The impish grins he received were the only answer he needed. He gave a mournful sigh. "As sad as it is…classes might be a little better."

Hope sniggered into her juice.

"And speaking of your Skiving Snackboxes," Hermione said in an acidic tone, "you can't advertise for testers on the Gryffindor notice board."

"Says who?" George arched an eyebrow.

"Says me," Hermione said shortly, her eyebrows drawing together. "And Ron."

"Oh, no, you're on your own," Ron said, leaning back a little as Hermione cast an enraged look upon him.

"You'll be singing a different tune soon enough, Hermione," Fred said with deep assurance, as if what he was saying was an irrefutable fact. "You're starting your fifth year, you'll be begging us for a Snackbox before long."

"And why would starting fifth year mean I want a Skiving Snackbox?"

"It's OWL year," Hope said before George could speak, looking a little disappointed that she had stolen the words right out of his mouth.

"What does that have to do with anything?" Hermione demanded crossly.

"You've got your exams coming up, haven't you?" Fred said with a smirk. "They'll be keeping your noses so hard to that grindstone they'll be rubbed raw."

"Half our year had minor breakdowns coming up to OWLs," George added, his eyes lighting up a bit in his mirth at the memory. He, of course, had a rather carefree fifth year (not counting the dementor issue) and had probably spent more time with Hope than he had actually studying. "Tears
and tantrums...Patricia Stimpson kept coming over faint...

"Kenneth Towler came out in boils, d'you remember?" Fred asked his twin with a dreamy smile that one either associated with a prank or was Angelina-induced.

"Wasn't that your fault, though?" Hope asked, prodding her eggs carelessly with her fork as she gave him a rather direct look.

"Bulbadox powder in his pyjamas," George agreed.

"Oh, yeah…that was me, wasn't it?" Fred said grinning brightly. "I'd forgotten…hard to keep track sometimes, isn't it?"

"Didn't I give you a prank book first year?" Hope asked.

"Oh, we filled that with ideas for the shop," Fred said waving his hand before hinting, "We could actually use another one, come to think of it."

"I'll put it on the list," Hope said dryly.

"Anyways," Ron said, returning to the conversation they had begun before, "how many did the pair of you get? Three OWLs each?"

Neither boy seemed concerned about their supposed lack of achievement, after all, they had scored straight O's.

"Yep," Fred agreed, completely unfazed. "But we feel our futures lie outside the world of academic achievement."

"Clearly," Hermione uttered.

"We seriously debated whether we were going to bother coming back for our seventh year," George added, "now that we've got- er- now that we've got our OWLs, I mean, do we really need NEWTs? But we didn't think Mum could take us leaving school early not on top of Percy turning out to be the world's biggest prat." The slip was hardly noticeable, for which Hope was grateful; she didn't feel like explaining where her Triwizard Winnings had gone.

"Hear, hear," Ron said glumly.

"We're not going to waste our last year here, though," Fred added, sharing a manic grin with his brother. "We're going to use it to do a bit of market research, find out exactly what the average Hogwarts student requires from a joke shop, carefully evaluate the results of our research, then produce products to fit the demand."

It was a sound plan, Hermione thought, but something was still bugging her… "You do realize you'd need gold to start it up, though?" she asked, eying Fred strangely as if money was a curious thing for him and George to overlook. "You're going to need ingredients and materials –and premises, too…"

Fred shared a smirk with his twin. "Ask us no questions and we'll tell you no lies," they both intoned brightly.

"C'mon, George," Fred added, "if we get there early we might be able to sell a few Extendable Ears before Herbology."

"Too right, brother o' mine," George said standing as well, brushing a kiss to her cheekbone that felt
anything but innocent and Hope tried very hard to keep her mind off of him the rest of the morning, but it was very hard work.

"Welcome back to Ancient Runes, my darling students!"

Professor Babbling greeted them as cheerfully as she always did and it was times like this that Hope remembered just how much she loved her class (because you couldn't really like a class if the teacher was bloody awful).

"Did you have a good holiday, Prof?"

"Good morning!"

"You haven't got an extra book, have you, Prof, I've forgotten mine."

Many greeting and questions were thrown her way all at once and Hope marvelled at her ability to sort them all out, responding kindly to many and directing Terry Boot to the shelf where the spare books were located.

"Hello, Hope, Hermione, lovely summer?" She asked as she came to a stop in front of their desk.

"It wasn't bad," Hermione said.

"I went to France," Hope grinned, "we even visited some catacombs where there were Runes inscribed."

Professor Babbling lifted a hand to her heart with a mock-stunned expression on her face. "I'm jealous that you didn't invite me!"

Hope and Hermione shared a laugh with their professor as she returned to the front of the class to begin.

"Now, it must be said," she said with a bemused smile as several students made a low noise of annoyance, "yes, I know, but I'm still required to say it. It's OWL year and it's my duty to prepare you for your examinations. We are going to be touching on the drawing of Runes this term and if you pass your OWL in this class we will be moving on to creating your own and giving them power through your magic."

Awe and excitement rippled through the class.

"Basically I'm bribing you to do well," Professor Babbling informed them in a deadpan, making them all laugh. "But, on to what we'll be covering that deals with your OWLs…you're going to need to be able to tell the difference between Runes so don't be surprised if you have to decide whether a Rune, for instance, is Gungnir or Jumis, you'll have to be able to tell which Runes or best used for which particular spells, such as fire or protection…"

Professor Babbling spent their whole first day lecturing about their OWLs, but Hope didn't mind too much as she jotted down the last of her words as the bell rang signifying the end of class.

"Alright, for the next class I want a seven foot essay on the differences and similarities between Norse and Celtic Runes!" she called after them as they packed up, some practically flying out of the room in their haste.

"Do you think the exam'll be hard?" Hope wondered as they made their way towards Defence.
"It must be," Hermione conceded, "I've heard that not many students go on to take the NEWT class."

Hope gave a mournful sigh.

"What's up? You look like someone just died." Ron had joined them, slightly out of breath from the jog down from the high tower that Divination was located in.

Hermione glanced quickly to Hope but it seemed as if the comment had soared over her heard, or at least she wasn't calling any attention to it.

"I'm just going to have to put a serious effort towards Ancient Runes if I want to take the advanced class," Hope said, "there goes all my free time."

Hermione rolled her eyes and Ron laughed, before falling swiftly silent once they entered Umbridge's room. Hope just knew that Umbridge woman was going to be awful, and seeing her sit there in revolting pink with her small eyes glinting malevolently as they landed on Hope and her blue-coloured hair only furthered Hope's beliefs. Hope narrowed her eyes in return; there was something very... off about this woman.

"Well, good afternoon," she simpered once they were all in their seats, tutting when only a few mumbled a greeting back. "That won't do will it? I should like you, please, to reply "Good afternoon, Professor Umbridge". One more time, please. Good afternoon, class!"

Hope's eye twitched at how they were being treated as though they were barely old enough to understand speech. She did not join in with the rest of the unenthused class.

"There, now." Umbridge smiled at them all, but it didn't much endear her to the class. "That wasn't too difficult, was it? Wands away and quills out, please."

Hope was almost resigned as she withdrew her parchment, quill, and ink well as Umbridge tapped her wand against the blackboard and Hope gloomily jotted down the lines that appeared: Defence Against the Dark Arts, A Return to Basic Principles.

"Well now," she continued, trying to seem sweet but overdoing it far too much, "your teaching in this subject has been rather disrupted and fragmented, hasn't it? The constant changing of teachers, many of whom do not seem to have followed any Ministry-approved curriculum, has unfortunately resulted in your being far below the standard we would expect to see in your OWL year. You will be pleased to know, however, that these problems are now to be rectified. We will be following a carefully structured, theory-centred, Ministry-approved course of defensive magic this year. Copy down the following, please."

Three lines appeared under the first words and it made Hope want to yawn.

Course Aims

1. Understanding the principles underlying defensive magic.
2. Learning to recognize situations in which defensive magic can legally be used
3. Placing the use of defensive magic in a context for practical use.

"Has everybody got a copy of Defensive Magical Theory by Wilbert Slinkhard?"

Hope didn't bother deigning an answer to that either.
"I think we'll try that again," Umbridge simpered. "When I ask you a question, I should like you to reply, "Yes, Professor Umbridge", or "No, Professor Umbridge". So: has everyone got a copy of Defensive Magical Theory by Wilbert Slinkhard?"

"Yes, Professor Umbridge."

"Good." She smiled, but it only made her face uglier. "I should like you to turn to page five and read "Chapter One, Basics for Beginners". There will be no need to talk."

They had barely opened their books when Hope thrust her hand into the air. She, like Hermione, had read the book before and found it lacking in some (all) areas.

"Yes, dear?" she asked kindly, but Hope could see the way she was looking at her, eager to put her down.

"You say we're going to learn a 'Ministry-approved course of defensive magic' that doesn't actually include learning defensive magic, isn't that a bit contradictory?" Hope asked and Hermione made a noise; evidently that would have been her question as well. "How are we supposed to do well on our OWLs if we can't properly use defensive magic?"

She didn't need to look back to know that all the eyes in the room were on her.

"My dear," she said, making Hope's eyes narrow and colour hazel, "you will be learning about defensive spells in a secure, risk-free way. I can't imagine any situation arising in my classroom that would require you to use a defensive spell. You surely aren't expecting to be attacked during class?"

"Our OWLs are half theoretical, half practical," Hope said, "how are we going to be prepared for them if we only learn half of what we should know? And if we are going to be attacked, they're not going to wait for us to negotiate some kind of false-peace-"

Clearly, Umbridge didn't like her attitude, so she said in a rather sharp voice, "Students will raise their hands if they wish to speak in my class, Miss -?"

"Pretending you don't know my name when you were at my hearing and voted for my expulsion speaks volumes about your character," Hope snapped, sneering as she crossed her arms tightly.

Now, however, there were hands being raised and Dean was the first person she called on.

"Well, Mr. Thomas?"

"It's what Hope said," Dean said, "If we're going to be attacked, it's not going to be risk free."

"I repeat, do you expect to be attacked during my class?"

"I'd probably attack myself to get out of it," Hope muttered to Ron who made a grunt of agreement.

"No, but-"

Umbridge spoke in a much higher, much shriller voice to be heard over Dean. "I do not wish to criticize the way things have been run in this school, but you have been exposed to some very irresponsible wizards in this class, very irresponsible indeed - not to mention," her eyes fell to Hope, "extremely dangerous half-breeds."

Hope's eyes burned crimson and she stood, angry in defence of Remus. "You cow! How dare you-!"
Ron, receiving a firm glance from Hermione, forced Hope back into her seat.

"If you mean Professor Lupin," Dean said, not as angry as Hope, but angry enough (Remus had been his favourite teacher to date), "he was the best we ever-"

"Hand Mr. Thomas! As I was saying -you have been introduced to spells that have been complex, inappropriate to your age group and potentially lethal. You have been frightened into believing that you are likely to meet Dark attacks every other day-"

"No we haven't," Hermione said, stunned into speech, "we just-"

"Your hand is not up, Miss-"

"Granger." But once Hermione thrust her hand into the air, Umbridge ignored her.

"It is my understanding that my predecessor not only performed illegal curses in front of you, he actually performed them on you," Umbridge continued when Dean interrupted her again.

"Well, he turned out to be a maniac, didn't he? Mind you, we still learned loads."

"Your hand is not up, Mr. Thomas!" Umbridge cried. "Now, it is the view of the Ministry that a theoretical knowledge will be more than sufficient to get you through your examination, which, after all, is what school is all about. And your name is?" This time it was Parvati with a question.

"Parvati Patil, it's like what Hope said, isn't there a practical bit in our Defence Against the Dark Arts OWL? Aren't we supposed to show that we can actually do the counter-curses and things?"

Hope glanced back to where the Indian witch was sitting looking as stunned as Hermione. It was something when Hermione thought something was wrong with teaching methods, but for Parvati to call her out on it as well…that was when you knew something was really wrong, because Parvati preferred less work above everything.

"As long as you have studied the theory hard enough, there is no reason why you should not be able to perform the spells under carefully controlled examination conditions."

"Without ever practicing them beforehand?" Parvati demanded. "Are you telling us that the first time we'll get to do the spells will be during our exam?"

"I repeat, as long as you have studied the theory hard enough-"

"Have you ever taught class before?" Hope asked. "Because, in case you didn't know, just reading about something doesn't mean you're going to be able to use it. What good is using theory in the real world?"

"This is school, Miss Potter, not the real world," she said in a kindly voice.

"Oh, thank you for clarifying that for us, we were so confused," Hope said sarcastically and turning to the class. "Guess what, guys? School is completely a fantasy world!"

A few snickers followed her words.

"Miss Potter," she said sweetly, "you are speaking as though there is an almighty evil in this world that seeks out and attacks children."

"That's funny," Hope said, "because Voldemort didn't kidnap me from the Third Task last year, yeah," Hope chuckled darkly, "right. Because your boss is too stupid to-"
"Ten points from Gryffindor, Miss Potter."

Hope didn't so much as blink towards the loss of points.

"Now, let me make a few things quite plain," she said quietly. "You have been told that a certain Dark wizard has returned from the dead -you have been informed that a certain Dark wizard is at large once again. This is a lie."

"If it's a lie," Hope said chillingly, "then who Cruciated me in Little Hangleton?"

Neville made a small noise and shocked murmurs made themselves known.

"Miss Potter," Umbridge said in a sickeningly sweet voice as if trying to make a child see reason, "you have never been to Little Hangleton and you have never had the Cruciusus Curse placed upon you."

"Funny, I didn't know your minimalistic expertise included post-Cruciusus effects," Hope snarled.

"Detention Miss Potter-"

"Cedric Diggory didn't just drop dead," Hope interrupted angrily.

"Cedric Diggory's death was a tragic accident."

"Bullocks," Hope bit out, "everyone with a brain knows that the Avada Kedavra leaves no traces. He was murdered and anyone who thinks different is just kidding themselves."

The silence following Hope's words was oppressive, some stunned and in awe of Hope's backbone and some in disbelief and scorn.

She was hardly breathing as Umbridge gave her a slip and directed her to Professor McGonagall, too angry to speak as she strode out of the room, her bag swinging angrily into Seamus as she passed.

"How was Umbridge?" Fred asked the next night before heading down to dinner to Hope, Ron, and Hermione, who had all left dinner early.

Hope gave him a dark glare.

"That bad?"

"I've got detention for the next three weeks," Hope said just as darkly as her expression, earning stares from both the twins. "What a complete bitch."

George and Fred shared a grimace; Angelina wasn't going to be happy, she had wanted the whole team together on the tryouts for Keeper.

"I have to go," Hope said shortly, kissing George's cheek, "might as well get it over with before I off myself to be rid of the sight of her."

George wasn't sure if she was joking. "Definitely bad, then."

She chuckled darkly. "Like you wouldn't believe," she said, exiting the portrait hole just as Dean and Seamus entered and she studiously avoided looking at the latter.

"Potter, hey, Potter!"
Hope came to a halt, staring back towards the owner of the voice, who just so happened to be Ernie Macmillan, and she couldn't help but arch an eyebrow. It wasn't as if the pair had ever really gotten along; Ernie was very prideful and Hope had a habit of inadvertently trampling over his pride.

"Ernie," she said coolly, "may I help you?"

The Hufflepuff prefect came to a stop, taking a hasty gulp of air before speaking. "I want you to know, Potter, that it's not only weirdoes who support you." He was no doubt referring to Luna who had come up to Hope out of the blue to tell her that she believed Hope when she said Voldemort was back. "I personally believe you one hundred per cent. My family have always stood firm behind Dumbledore, and so do I."

"Er, alright," Hope said a little flummoxed. "Thanks…but I've got to go…detention-" She made a hasty retreat, finding the conversation rather awkward in her opinion, both because it was Ernie and because she wasn't really Dumbledore's biggest fan at the moment.

She arrived at five on the dot to Umbridge's office and for a brief moment, she thought she had entered into the wrong room, because it was positively ghastly. There was lace and flowers and wall filled with a collection of plates each with a different cat resting in it as though they were magical photos.

"Good evening, Miss Potter."

Hope tried hard not to gag at the flowery robes the woman was wearing; Merlin, could she get any more revolting?

Hope didn't bother with a "Good Evening," she wasn't that nice; she merely blinked to indicate that she understood.

"Well, sit down."

Hope eyed the lace-covered table with only a black sheet of parchment on it in slight apprehension, before flopping herself down in a manner to would have not been suited for a lady, but Hope could care less when it came to this woman.

"Now, Miss Potter," Umbridge said in that sickening voice of hers. "This is your punishment for spreading evil, nasty, attention-seeking stories."

"Do get on with it," Hope said coldly, maintaining her cool resolve with difficulty, something that Umbridge was quick to take note of.

"There, we're getting better at controlling our temper already, aren't we?"

Hope contemplated shattering every little precious plate on the wall and see what she said then.

"Now, you are going to be doing some lines for me, Miss Potter. You're going to be using a rather special one of my quills. Here you are."

The quill she handed him wasn't like any other quill she'd seen. It was thin and as back as a raven's wing and the tip was surprisingly sharp.

"I suppose I'm just supposed to make ink magically appear?" Hope said, rolling her eyes for good measure, but it only made Umbridge release that high laugh of hers.

"Oh, my dear," she simpered, "you won't be needing any ink. Now, I want you to write, I must not
tell lies."

Hope gritted her teeth behind her lips, only responding by jutting out her chin slightly. "And exactly how many times should I write it?"

"Oh, as long as it takes for the message to sink in," Umbridge said with a smile. "Off you go."

Hope set the quill to the parchment and slowly scrawled out: I must not tell lies. She sealed her lips together at once because she words that she had written out were in turn etched upon her hand as though carved by a delicate knife. The skin healed over in a matter of seconds, but Hope knew that the longer she wrote it, the more likely it would be to scar. She clenched the quill tightly, but she did not let on the pain she was experiencing. If this was to be a battle of wills, then Hope would not bend.

The sky darkened outside and the moon and stars shone ever-bright until, at long last, Umbridge said, "Come here."

Hope's hand was bleeding, but barely as she stiffly extended her hand to the woman when she asked. She wanted to rip her hand out of Umbridge's grip immediately because it was as revolting as the robes she wore and the way she decorated her office.

"Tut, tut, I don't seem to have made much of an impression yet," she said, making Hope's eyes narrow. What? Did she have to wait until the quill cut off her whole hand? "Well, we'll just have to try again tomorrow evening, won't we? You may go."

Hope pulled her strap onto her shoulder and grasped the door handle before turning back to deliver one last jibe: "Lady, you're fucked in the head."

It would only be the next day that she would find out another few days had been tacked onto her sentence, but she didn't care; the stunned look on Umbridge's face was worth it.

But, as Hermione suggested, putting a cap on that awful temper of hers might do her some good.
Not Like Her Father

There were only two things that made Hope's Friday good: the first was that it was the weekend, meaning she could get ahead on her assignments, as she had fallen behind (not drastically so, but enough) and the second was that Ron had made the House Team.

People didn't seem to think that "Just lines" was so bad, but those people didn't include Hermione or Ron. They had noticed immediately at how Hope had begun to favour her left hand for doing things instead of her right. The scar shocked and revolted both Ron and Hermione, but above most things, they couldn't believe she was going to complain about having to split open her hand every night. They knew Hope was tough, but this…this was just bloody mental.

She was wan and with drooping eyes she entered the portrait hole, her eyes popping at the exuberant party that seemed to be in full swing, and though happy that Ron had made the team, Hope was rather dead on her feet, so she offered her congratulations and went over to where Hermione seemed to be half-asleep in a chair.

"Too tired to celebrate?" Hope uttered in a light drawl as she slumped into the sofa. "Not still making those hats are you?"

Hermione scowled. "What's wrong with making those hats?" She had recently taken a more drastic step in attempting to free the house-elves, involving leaving clothes around with scraps on top of them; Hope doubted they would appreciate the sentiment.

"Hermione," Hope sighed, and it drove home to Hermione just how energy-sapping Umbridge's torture sessions were to her friend, "maybe you're going about this spew stuff all wrong."

Hermione opened her mouth to correct her before skating over it. "What d'you mean?"

"You're assuming that all house-elves are treated the same," Hope said, rubbing her eyes, "but each household is different. Sometimes you've got people like the Malfoys and sometimes you've got Hogwarts. Maybe you should get the house-elves opinions first before you start trying to free anyone, hm?"

Hermione conceded to that, staring a little at Hope as she shivered suddenly. "What's the matter? Are you cold?"

Hope's hand hovered over the one that was cut, making, perhaps, to massage the inflamed flesh but changing her mind quickly. "When we were in detention," Hope said lowly so that no one else would hear, "Umbridge touched my hand…and I felt something…"

Hermione was immediately interested. "Felt something? Like an emotion?"

"I don't know," Hope said, she wasn't quite sure how exactly to describe the sensation. "My scar—there was this moment when she touched me, my hand, and then it hurt."

Hermione's chestnut orbs were flooded with concern. "Was it like last time? I mean, last year when you could sense how close You-Know-Who was?"

"I don't know," Hope said miserably. "Maybe Umbridge is under the Imperius…or maybe she's voluntarily awful." Hope chuckled without humour. "I'm not actually sure which one is better."

Hermione's eyes softened. "Hope…you should tell Dumbledore about your scar."
Hope's grimace deepened and her eyes became frigid emeralds. "I'm not telling that damn manipulator anything," she said flatly.

Hermione's eyes widened. "What? Hope-

"The headmaster has made it very clear that the only thing of importance I have is in my scar and the supposed connection I share with Voldemort," Hope said coolly.

"Hope, you know that's not true!"

Hope only grunted, sinking lower into the cushions, dropping off in a manner of seconds. Hermione gave a fond sigh; only Hope would get out of listening to her by falling asleep.

"She's asleep?"

George was unsurprisingly put out by his girlfriend's oblivion to the world; he took the thick afghan from the back of the couch to drape it over Hope's shoulders. It was an endearingly sweet gesture that made Hermione instantly jealous, but then George froze, his face going stark white.

Hermione sat up suddenly, her face colouring with unease. George had seen the cut. He lifted her limp hand with restrained anger, examining the cut closely, his eyes seeming to burn a darker blue.

"She did this?" he demanded quietly. "She did this to my Hope?"

Hermione was a little surprised by the possessive pronoun.

"She…she didn't want you to know," Hermione said awkwardly before flinching backwards at the blazing look that he cast her.

"George." Ron pulled his brother back, attempting to keep a cool head in the face of the glare his older brother gave him. "You know how she is. She would probably bear the weight of the world if she could, silently."

"It doesn't mean that she should!"

"No," Hermione agreed, "but Hope's made of stronger stuff, you know that, she says Umbridge thinks she can break her, but that she's nowhere close."

George's smirk was feral. "You got that damn straight."

Hope shifted under the blanket, mumbling under her breath. The firelight caused the bruising under her eyes to be thrown into harsh relief; she looked like she hadn't gotten a good night's rest in days.

She awoke much later that night with the hearth only just glowing with embers. It was then that she decided to pull out her stationary and scrawl two letters. One to Sirius written in a good bit of code to explain her scar hurting ('headaches') and one to Fleur.

Fleur-

*I'm sorry I haven't had a chance to write to you, it's been a very busy week. And by busy, I mean it's been utter shit. I should have known that OWL year was hell. Fred and George didn't seem to have too much trouble, but they only got three OWLs each, so that explains a lot, but I'm aiming towards being an Auror, so I've got to do really well. I'm in detention for the next two weeks for my smart mouth, but I think I'm getting a handle on this Ignore the Stupid thing that you do a lot. Umbridge is a real bitch, and I half hope she tries to read this because who doesn't love a good insult to the face?*
I can't wait to get back in the air again, being on the ground for so long is off-putting. Ron made the House Team and Hermione's immersed in her house-elf freedom campaign again. Everyone thinks I'm an attention-seeking moron again (big surprise) but everyone else's been trying their best to distract me so I hardly notice. I hope you and Bill are doing great, I know that George and I are!

-Au Revoir

Hope

A number of strange things occurred on Saturday. At the top of the list was Filch trying to bar Hope from sending her mail in the morning. Luckily she had already sent off Hedwig with a letter to Snuffles and still had her one to Fleur left when he caught up with her, but Hope refused to hand it over (it was, after all, for Fleur) and had sent it off with Ron's owl Pigwidgeon in a matter of seconds, though why he thought she was buying Dungbombs was beyond her (though, Hope definitely wouldn't be against that).

The next thing that happened was that someone had received a tipoff that Sirius Black was staying in London, so that sadly meant Sirius would be staying indoors for awhile. Also in the paper was a mention of Sturgis Podmore (who was, if Hope remembered correctly, which she was sure she did, was the member of the Order that was supposed to join them on the journey to the platform before term began) who had apparently been caught trying to break into the Ministry and would be serving six months in Azkaban (Hope felt pity; Azkaban couldn't be pleasant). Then Ron had done terribly at practice which sent his self-esteem through the floor and made him just downright irritable, so irritable that neither he nor Hermione noticed the owl perched outside the window of the common room. It was a screech owl that Hope recognized as the one that Percy had.

She cracked the window and held out an arm for Hermes to perch on instead as he hopped inside with a grateful hoot, clamping his talons onto her arm.

Hope examined the addressee of the letter tied to his leg: Ronald Weasley, Gryffindor House, Hogwarts.

"Ron…you've got mail," she called to him, making him jerk out of his argument with Hermione to snap at Hope.

"What?"

"Mail," Hope said haughtily, raising the arm that held the owl. "Owl. Letter. Understand?"

He gave a grimace of embarrassment before staring at the owl as if he couldn't quite believe what it was doing there. "Wait…is that Hermes? Percy's writing to me?"

Once he'd removed the letter and Hope had offered Hermes an owl treat (for which she was given an affectionate nibble on her finger), the owl departed into the rain once more. Three heads peered over the parchment as it was unrolled.

_Dear Ron,

I have only just heard (from no less a person than the Minister for Magic himself, who has it from your new teacher, Professor Umbridge) that you have become a Hogwarts prefect. I was most pleasantly surprised when I heard this news and must firstly offer my congratulations. I must admit that I have always been afraid that you would take what we might call the 'Fred and George' route ("Admit it, the 'Fred and George route' is so much cooler," Hope said with a smirk, obviously being one who had taken that path, not taking well to authority and all) rather than following in my
footsteps, so you can imagine my feelings on hearing you have stopped flouting authority and have decided to shoulder some real responsibility ("Follow his footsteps?" Ron demanded. "I'm not following his footsteps and I'm not flouting authority...well...maybe just a bit..." Hermione sighed and Hope sniggered.).

But I want to give you more than congratulations, Ron, I want to give you some advice, which is why I am sending this at night rather than by the usual morning post. Hopefully, you will be able to read this away from prying eyes and avoid awkward questions (Ron's eyes narrowed in suspicion, he could tell where this was going; Percy wasn't known for being subtle).

From something the Minister let slip when telling me you are now a prefect, I gather that you are still seeing a lot of Hope Potter. I must tell you, Ron, that nothing could put you in danger of losing your badge more than continued fraternisation with that girl (Hope arched an eyebrow. "Seriously?"). Yes, I am sure you are surprised to hear this -no doubt you will say that Potter has always been Dumbledore's favourite ("I have not!" Hope said, insulted. "I'm not sure he meant it like that," Hermione said, but what exactly he meant it like, Hope didn't find out)- but I feel bound to tell you that Dumbledore may not be in charge at Hogwarts much longer and the people who count have a very different -and probably more accurate- view of Potter's behaviour ("People who count?" Ron ground out, his eyebrow twitching at the slight towards his best mate). I shall say no more here, but if you look at the Daily Prophet tomorrow you will get a good idea of the way the wind is blowing- and see if you can spot yours truly!

Seriously, Ron, you do not want to be tarred with the same brush as Potter, it could be very damaging to your future prospects, and I am talking here about life after school, too. As you must be aware, given that our father escorted her to court, Potter had a disciplinary hearing this summer in front of the whole Wizengamot and she did not come out of it looking too good, and with a goblin representative, no less! She got off on a mere technicality, if you ask me, and many of the people I've spoken to remain convinced of her guilt (Hope's cheeks enflamed. "Oh, really? Why don't I go and show him just how-" Hermione blushed at the vulgarity of the words that followed).

It may be that you are afraid to sever ties with Potter -I know that she can be unbalanced and, for all I know, violent ("That's so rude of him!" Hermione complained. "Why should he care about who you're friends with?")- but if you have any worries about this, or have spotted anything else in Potter's behaviour that is troubling you, I urge you to speak to Dolores Umbridge, a truly delightful woman ("A delightful woman?" Hope repeated aghast. "He's blooming mental! Look at her! Your brother ought to check himself into the mental ward at St. Mungo's!" Ron grunted in agreement.) who I know will be only too happy to advise you.

This leads me to my other bit of advice. As I have hinted above, Dumbledore's regime at Hogwarts may soon be over. Your loyalty, Ron, should be not to her, but to the school and the Ministry. I am very sorry to hear that, so far, Professor Umbridge is encountering very little co-operation from staff as she strives to make those necessary changes within Hogwarts that the Ministry so ardently desires (although she should find this easier from next week -again, see the Daily Prophet tomorrow!). I shall say only this - a student who shows himself willing to help Professor Umbridge now may be very well-placed for Head Boy ship in a couple of years (And why the bloody hell would I care about that?" Ron snarled.)!

I am sorry that I was unable to see more of you over the summer. It pains me to criticise our parents, but I am afraid I can no longer live under their roof while they remain mixed up with the dangerous crowd around Dumbledore. (If you are writing to Mother at any point, you might tell her that a certain Sturgis Podmore, who is a great friend of Dumbledore's, has recently been sent to Azkaban for trespass at the Ministry. Perhaps that will open their eyes to the kind of petty criminals with whom they are currently rubbing shoulders.) I count myself very lucky to have escaped the stigma of
association with such people -the Minister really could not be more gracious to me- and I do hope, Ron, that you will not allow family ties to blind you to the misguided nature of our parents' beliefs and actions, either. I sincerely hope that, in time, they will realise how mistaken they were and I shall, of course, be ready to accept a full apology when that day comes.

Please think over what I have said most carefully, particularly the bit about Hope Potter, and congratulations again on becoming prefect.

Your brother,

Percy

His arrogance was nothing short of astonishing. Hope couldn't imagine how someone could change so much in a time span of a few years. She remembered when she'd ask Percy all of those questions about school and often ran point for the twins so they could prank without their oppressive elder brother hovering over them. That boy was hardly recognizable as this man.

"What a load of tripe!" Ron spat, ripping the letter into pieces. "Him? Telling me who I can't be friends with! Like I'm going to listen to that!"

Hope smiled and Hermione could see the heartfelt relief there, and then it dropped from her face as she whispered "Sirius!"

Two heads whipped around to stare into the fire, because in the midst of the flickering orange flames was Sirius' slightly sunken, broadly grinning face.

"I've been checking in every hour," he said conversationally, "thought I'd actually miss you."

"You could have been seen, Sirius!" Hermione said scandalized.

"I've only been checking for a few seconds," Sirius said in light exasperation. "I think a girl -first-year, by the look of her- might've get a glimpse of me earlier, but don't worry, I was gone the moment she looked back at me and I'll bet she just thought I was an oddly-shaped log or something."

"Sirius! It's terribly risky, what you're doing!" Hermione said.

"This was the only way I could come up with of answering Hope's letter without resorting to a code -and codes are breakable," Sirius said in an insistent manner.

Hope had only told Hermione and Ron about the letter after she had sent it off, thus making Hermione worry for the whole day that someone would be able to crack the vagueness of Hope's words, which were pretty vague and confusing that even Umbridge, with her brain being smaller than a pea, wouldn't be able to understand it.

"You don't think anyone broke it do you?" Hermione asked in worry, but Sirius' grin widened.

"No, it was good," he said, "better than we were expecting…nice insult at the bottom."

Hope had added: P.S. Tell Dumbledore he's a cock-head. She wasn't really sure what it meant, but it sounded good.

"Anyway, we'd better be quick, just in case we're disturbed -your scar. I know it can't be fun when it hurts," Sirius said sympathetically, "but we don't think it's anything to really worry about. It kept aching all last year, didn't it?"
"Dumbledore said it had something to do with Voldemort feeling a certain emotion...maybe he was just happy I was getting my hand sliced open or something."

"Can he feel happy?"

"Why're you asking me?" Hope demanded. "We're only distantly related! But back to Umbridge... she couldn't be a Death Eater, could she?"

"Very doubtful," Sirius snorted, "but she is a nasty piece of work, you should hear Remus talk about her."

"She insulted him a few days ago," Hope grumbled, "bitch."

Sirius grinned at the insult. "She also drafted a bit of anti-werewolf legislation two years ago that makes it almost impossible for him to get a job."

"How's that fair?" Ron demanded. "It's not like Lupin's going to go and attack people out of the blue especially on days that aren't the full moon!"

"These people don't see the world that logically," Sirius said calmly, though he was smiling at the true rage on the three fifth year students' faces, "most of them are scared of people like Remus just because of what he is-"

"But Remus is a real sweetheart!" Hope complained.

Sirius smirked in amusement before returning to the topic they kept drifting away from. "But Umbridge has a thing against all part-humans; she campaigned to have Merpeople rounded up and tagged last year, too. Imagine wasting your time and energy persecuting Merpeople when there are little toe-rags like Kreacher on the loose."

Hermione opened her mouth to complain about Sirius' treatment of Kreacher when the man spoke over her. "So, what are Umbridge's lessons like? Is she training you all to kill half-breeds?"

"She's not letting us use magic, as in not even to practice spells! How on earth are we supposed to learn this stuff if we don't practice, I tell you?" Hermione said, still annoyed about Kreacher, but also annoyed about the way the class was set up.

"Well, that figures," Sirius agreed, "our newest intelligence from inside the Ministry is that Fudge doesn't want you trained in combat."

"Because of course we're building some kind of wizard army," Hope said rolling her eyes in disdain.

"It might sound foolish," Sirius conceded, "but that's what he thinks you're doing, or, rather, that's exactly what he's afraid Dumbledore's doing - forming his own private army, with which he will be able to take on the Ministry of Magic."

"Does he realize how completely stupid he sounds?" Ron asked incredulously.

"We're not allowed to learn proper spells just because Fudge's terrified of Dumbledore?" Hermione demanded, angry for the sake of her education which was being stunted by the bloody Minister of Magic.

Sirius nodded in agreement. "For some reason, Fudge thinks Dumbledore will stop at nothing to seize power. He's getting more paranoid about Dumbledore by the day. It's a matter of time before he has Dumbledore arrested on some trumped-up charges."
Hope wouldn't have minded.

"And about Hagrid-"

Hope, Ron, and Hermione all perked up at the mention of their half-giant friend whom they hadn't seen since the end of the previous year.

"He was supposed to be back by now, no one's sure what's happened to him, but I'm sure he's fine." Their dubious expressions told him that they weren't fooled. "Madame Maxime was with him, we've been in touch with her and she says they got separated on the journey home - but there's nothing to suggest he's hurt or - well, nothing to suggest he's not perfectly okay."

The dubious expressions remained and Sirius was reminded just why Hope sustained so many injuries and got into so much trouble at Hogwarts; she was sticking her nose into places it didn't belong.

"Listen," he added, "don't go asking too many questions about Hagrid, it'll just draw even more attention to the fact that he's not back and I know Dumbledore doesn't want that. Hagrid's tough, he'll be okay."

Hope, Ron, and Hermione exchanged glances.

"When's your next Hogsmeade weekend, anyway?" Sirius asked, attempting to change the subject smoothly and failing. "I was thinking, we got away with the dog disguise at the station, didn't we? I thought I could-"

"NO!" all three insisted.

"Sirius, didn't you see the Daily Prophet?" Hermione demanded, worry tingeing her face and voice.

"Oh, that," Sirius said dismissively, "they're always guessing where I am, they haven't really got a clue-"

But Hope couldn't be sure. Hadn't Malfoy distinctly said 'dogging' on the train?

"Alright, alright," she said sullenly at the serious expression on Hope's face. "Just an idea, thought you might like to get together."

"I would," Hope said adamantly, "but not at the threat of you soulless, Sirius."

His next words were like a knife through the heart to Hope, who had never imagined him saying these words to her.

"You're less like your father than I thought,' he said, his voice as cold and cool as a snowstorm. "The risk would've been what made it fun for James."

"Well, I'm not him, am I?" Hope snarled. "It's time for you to get it through your thick skull, Sirius. This is an entirely different game we're playing and you're too important of a piece to lose."

She tossed a spare Daily Prophet into the flames, obscuring Sirius' face as she stalked away.
The Start of a Rebellion

MINISTRY SEEKS EDUCATIONAL REFORM

DOLORES UMBRIDGE APPOINTED

FIRST EVER HIGH INQUISITOR

In a surprise move last night the Ministry of Magic passed new legislation giving itself an unprecedented level of control at Hogwarts School of Witchcraft and Wizardry.

"The Minister has been growing uneasy about goings-on at Hogwarts for some time," said Junior Assistant to the Minister, Percy Weasley. "He is now responding to concerns, voiced by anxious parents, who feel the school may be moving in a direction they do not approve of."

This is not the first time in recent weeks that the Minister, Cornelius Fudge, has used new laws to effect improvements at the Wizarding school. As recently as 30th August, Educational Decree Number Twenty-two was passed, to ensure that, in the event of the current Headmaster being unable to provide a candidate for a teaching post, the Ministry should select an appropriate person.

"That's how Dolores Umbridge came to be appointed to the teaching staff at Hogwarts," said Weasley last night. "Dumbledore couldn't find anyone so the Minister put in Umbridge, and of course, she's been an immediate success totally revolutionising the teaching of Defence Against the Dark Arts and providing the Minister with on-the-ground feedback about what's really happening at Hogwarts."

It is this last function that the Ministry has now formalised with the passing of Educational Decree Number Twenty-three, which creates the new position of Hogwarts High Inquisitor.

"This is an exciting new phase in the Minister's plan to get to grips with what some are calling the falling standards at Hogwarts," said Weasley. "The Inquisitor will have powers to inspect her fellow educators and make sure that they are coming up to scratch. Professor Umbridge has been offered this position in addition to her own teaching post and we are delighted to say that she has accepted."

The Ministry's new moves have received enthusiastic support from parents of students at Hogwarts.

"I feel much easier in my mind now that I know Dumbledore is being subjected to fair and objective evaluation," said Mr Lucius Malfoy, 41, speaking from his Wiltshire mansion last night. "Many of us with our children's best interests at heart have been concerned about some of Dumbledore's eccentric decisions in the last few years and are glad to know that the Ministry is keeping an eye on the situation."

Among those eccentric decisions are undoubtedly the controversial staff appointments previously described in this newspaper, which have included the employment of werewolf Remus Lupin, half-giant Rubeus Hagrid and delusional ex-Auror, "Mad-Eye" Moody.

Rumours abound, of course, that Albus Dumbledore, once Supreme Mugwump of the International Confederation of Wizards and Chief Warlock of the Wizengamot, is no longer up to the task of managing the prestigious school of Hogwarts.

"I think the appointment of the Inquisitor is a first step towards ensuring that Hogwarts has a headmaster in whom we can all repose our confidence," said a Ministry insider last night.
Wizengamot elders Griselda Marchbanks and Tiberius Ogden have resigned in protest at the introduction of the post of Inquisitor to Hogwarts.

"Hogwarts is a school, not an outpost of Cornelius Fudge's office," said Madam Marchbanks. "This is a further, disgusting attempt to discredit Albus Dumbledore." (For a full account of Madam Marchbanks' alleged links to subversive goblin groups, turn to page seventeen.)

"High Inquisitor?" Hope demanded the next morning after she had put the paper down. "What're they trying to play at? What does a 'High Inquisitor' even do?"

"It means that the Ministry is going to interfere with the school more directly now, messing with other classes too," Hermione said grimly.

"Do you think if I went to the Ministry and lobbed Fudge over the head that he would change his mind?" Hope asked as they gathered up their things and headed towards Potions, which was no longer Hope's least favourite class, and that showed you just how much she hated Umbridge--oops, Umbridge-- that she had taken Snape's much hated post as Hope's least favourite professor.

Ron laughed. "I doubt it. He'd probably use it as an excuse to snap your wand and throw you into Azkaban for an extended sentence."

"Probably," Hope conceded, "and I'm rather fond of my wand."

"Then don't do anything foolish," Hermione snorted.

"I don't do foolish things!"

"Hope, you're dating George and you've gotten in trouble or gotten injured every year," Hermione said, giving Hope a firm stare.

Hope crossed her arms with an irritable expression on her face. "Let's bring George into this, please."

Ron rolled his eyes. "You're ridiculous."

"It has been said," Hope agreed, "but I need a way to keep my sanity, you know, spending hours upon hours in silence with Umbridge. You have seen what she looks like, haven't you? I've impressed myself!"

But Hermione knew that when they weren't watching her face fell into lines of misery and her eyes gained that haunted look. Hermione suspected she was still either dreaming about Cedric's death and Voldemort's return or that strange passageway with the single door that she couldn't make sense of.

She almost wanted to ask her if she was sleeping better, but she caught herself. If Fleur, who had only known Hope for a single year, hadn't pressured Hope into talking, then Hermione, who had known her since Halloween of their first year, wouldn't bring it up.

"At least you're not really falling behind anymore," Hermione said finally, to which Hope made a noise of agreement.

"You're not wrong," she grumbled, "once I'm through with these detentions, though, I'll have much more time for school work, and then I won't be playing catch-up during History of Magic." And catch-up, she meant catching up on sleep, which was something she often lost during the week, staying up rather late to finish her work so she didn't fall behind.

Hope rolled her shoulders, catching the strap of her bag before it dropped, her hand catching the
light.
The shiny cuts made Hermione sick to her stomach, and she knew she wasn't the only one, judging by Ron's expression.

Hope hadn't spoken to Sirius or written to him since the Floo call, something that caused Sirius to mope around for days on end.

"Sirius, just go and apologize!" Remus insisted at dinner one night when it was only the two of them, speaking over cooling stew. "Hope would take you back in an instant if you just said you were sorry!"

"But I'm not wrong!" Sirius disagreed, which was, of course, a lie.

Remus glared. "You just told your goddaughter, who adores you more than most things in the world, that she isn't anything like her parents. That's pretty much a slap to the face!"

"She's the one who didn't want to see me!" Sirius said, acting like a petulant child.

"Sirius," Remus complained, "Hope is worried about your safety! She doesn't want you to risk your neck for her, and you're not the only one! Hope's made it very clear since the day I first met her that she is quite capable of doing things herself and not have people doing them for her. She hates it when you're overprotective!"

"It's my job to be over-protective!" Sirius snapped. "Look at her! She's fifteen and she's been through hell! I should be protecting her!"

"You're stifling her," Remus countered, "you're starting to turn into Molly."

Sirius looked horrified at the thought.

"You need to give her space, and you need to apologize. Hope's got a big heart and you've broken the part that belongs to you."

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I must not tell lies.

I must not tell lies.

I must not tell lies.

Hope wrinkled her nose as she scrawled those words over and over again. It wasn't like she wasn't used to pain; she rather now had a high tolerance for it. She bit her lip to keep from smiling.

Umbridge had been the subject of a number of pranks by the Weasley Twins and she didn't even realize that for three days she had croaked every other word or that her wardrobe had turned bright green for a week.

George had enjoyed the kiss she had given him for his efforts.

I must not tell lies.

I must not tell lies.

I must not tell lies.
She knew how many times she etched those words into the back of her hand, she didn't bother counting, what was the point, really? Minutes ticked by slowly for Hope, bending slowly until the hours of her detention were finally done, and she could, at long last, leave the lurid room that now smelled so heavily of perfume that Hope wanted to gag. Her hand was bleeding so profusely now that she had to duck into the first lavatory that she saw, twisting the tap and sighing as the water ran over the cuts. She pressed a slightly wet paper towel against the still throbbing hand as she left, ascending the stairs slowly and uttering the password tiredly before entering into the common room.

It was dark, illuminated only by the flames flickering in the fireplace.

"Shouldn't you two be sleeping?" Hope asked, barely stifling a yawn as she fell into the cushions beside Hermione who was holding a small bowl of mustard-coloured liquid.

"Here," she said offering the bowl to Hope who stared at it uncomprehendingly.

"What is it?" she asked suspiciously. She didn't have to drink that, did she?

"It's a solution of strained and pickled Murtlap tentacles," Hermione explained, "it helps with cuts; just soak your hand in it."

Hope did as she asked, sighing at the feel of the solution against her wounded hand. Crookshanks gave a soft meow, climbing from Hermione's lap to nestle against Hope, rubbing his face fondly into her stomach before settling down on Hope's. "That's nice," she murmured.

"I still say McGonagall would go bonkers if she knew what that hag was doing to you," Ron said in a serious voice.

"I bet she would," Hope muttered. Professor McGonagall didn't condone anything that included prolonged injury. "And then ten galleons I bet Umbridge would pass another decree saying no one's allowed to say anything against the High Inquisitor."

Ron would've said something to counter her words, only she was almost certainly right.

"She's an awful woman, a horrible woman," Hermione said, her eyes alight with an anger that Hope had never seen before. "I was telling Ron right before you came in, we've got to do something about her."

"I offered poison," Ron told Hope, who gave a weak chuckle.

"There's a thought."

"No," Hermione said, casting her a look that told Hope she'd come up with a bright idea, "I was more meaning about how to learn Defence…as in, do it ourselves."

"Defence Against the Dark Arts?" Hope repeated dubiously. "Do you even know someone who's the most qualified to teach a bunch of kids?"

They both stared at her.

"What? Me?" Hope said a little stunned. She had never really considered it.

"It's like you said in Umbridge's first class, Hope," Hermione said, her eyes gaining a feverish light that only slightly scared her, "we need to be prepared for the real world, for what's out there. We need a proper teacher, one who can show us how to use the spells and correct us if we're wrong, one who knows all about using spells in a real world context."
"You mean in combat," Hope said sullenly.

"Well," Hermione said, drawing the word out, "not completely-"

"Hermione, you're asking her to teach a bunch of kids how to use spells in the real world," Ron said, rolling his eyes, "probably really advanced spells, possibly against other people. That's combat."

Hermione flushed. "Just think about all the things you've done, Hope, at school for these past four years!"

"I haven't-"

"First year you saved the Philosopher's Stone from You-Know-Who," Ron said ticking off on his fingers, "Second year, you killed the Basilisk and destroyed Riddle, third year you fought off about a hundred dementors at once, and last year you fought off You-Know-Who again."

"Ron."

He fell silent as Hope spoke. "You're making me sound as if I'm this-this really impressive person, but I'm not--no, listen to me," she insisted when they both looked as though they were going to interrupt. "You two were both there when we went after Quirrel, if it wasn't for you, I wouldn't have made it through, and in second year, Hermione, it was you that figured it out, and Ron you were the one that came to me when I thought I was dying; if it wasn't for Fawkes, I would be dead. Third year, third year I put you both in danger by going after Sirius and I was so close to dying myself that I imagined my mother saving me. And last year…" Hope's throat clogged. "Last year I was mostly running on adrenaline and sass."

Ron and Hermione sniggered.

"It's not funny," Hope said, her voice smooth and direct, sounding rather like Professor McGonagall. "It's not like school, being out there and fighting against him. You know you're seconds away from dying, and if you think you can flip a switch and suddenly be calm in that kind of situation, you're wrong. It's dangerous, dangerous like you wouldn't believe. Facing this stuff in real life…it's not explainable. You don't know what it's like watching someone die before your eyes, a friend, or being seconds away from murder...you don't know what that's like."

"You're right, Hope, we don't," Hermione said quietly, "that's exactly why we need you to teach us. There's no one better in the school! We need to know what it's r-really like…facing him…facing Voldemort."

Hope looked up in surprise, stunned that Hermione had said his name. In all the years that she had known her, she had never uttered the name.

"And if you're serious about this, it has to be spread to all the Houses, Slytherin included," Hope said finally, "talk to Daphne."

Hermione bobbed her head eagerly.

"Thought I heard some voices."

George descended the stairs, arching an eyebrow at the three of them. "You're all up to something, aren't you?"

Hope smiled brightly at him. "Always."
Hermione and Ron shared a knowing glance before beating a hasty retreat up the stairs, leaving George to take Hermione's vacated spot. His expression was clouded as he took in why her hand was being soaked in the Murtlap.

"It's really not that bad," Hope said.

"For a good liar you're a terrible liar."

"That makes no sense," Hope sighed as he cupped her cheek, smoothing a thumb across her flesh. She leaned into his touch. "I've had worse, Georgie, believe me. On a plus side, I'm finally curbing my temper."

"So you won't have to hack open your hand every night," George said coldly, "that's hardly a good thing."

A smile curved Hope's lips for what felt like the first time in days and she lifted a hand to curl her fingers into his hair.

"I love you," she said softly, "I know I say that a lot, but I love you."

"You should," George scoffed lightly, "you're going to be putting up with me for a very long time."

Hope didn't have the opportunity to analyze that information when he hooked his fingers behind her neck and pulled her forward to meet his lips. Crookshanks made a disgusted sound before leaping out of her lap as Hope clutched him tighter, feeling light-headed from the kiss (the likes of which she had been deprived of for a good week or two). He tangled a hand into her long hair with one hand and pulling her leg onto his hip with the other, breaking from her lips to trail kisses of fire down her throat to the spot that Hope had proven to be sensitive to.

They both jerked apart rather quickly at the sound of something shattering. Hope stifled her laughter against George's shoulder once she caught sight of the bowl of Murtlap cracked and spilled on the floor.

The Hog's Head was not what Hope would imagine as an ideal place for a group of particularly rebellious teens to meet, but it wasn't as if they had much choice. Umbridge would easily find out if they held it at the school, so their first Hogsmeade Weekend was their best bet. Hope didn't have any idea just how many people Hermione and Ron had invited until they all came through the door.

Neville was the first to enter, to Hope's surprise, trailed closely by Dean and Lavender. Parvati entered after with her twin, Padma, with Cho and one of her friends that Hope didn't really recognize. A few moments later, the dreamy-eyed Luna entered with three Slytherins in tow. Daphne Greengrass was accompanied by a younger girl who looked remarkably like her, probably her younger sister, Astoria, and a pretty girl with brown hair and eyes (Hope was sure her name was Tracey Davis). Following them were Katie, Alicia, and Angelina with Colin and Dennis Creevey, Ernie Macmillan, looking as proud as ever as he entered with Justin Finch-Fletchley, Hannah Abbott, and Susan Bones. Three Ravenclaw boys came soon after, Anthony Goldstein, Terry Boot, and Michael Corner holding hands subtly with Ginny, and a Hufflepuff boy coming after that Hope didn't recognize but attained an instant dislike towards just by the way he was looking down his nose at them all. Fred, George, and Lee were the last ones to enter, all carrying bulging with Zonko's products.

Hope stared at Hermione, a little more than slightly stunned. "You invited this many people?"

"Well, it was a rather popular idea," Hermione said with a grin.
"You haven't told them anything have you?" Hope asked horrified.

"They just want to hear what you've got to say," Hermione assured her, "don't worry I'll speak first."

Hope suddenly found herself wondering why on earth she'd agreed to this as many eyes flashed to her and several eyed the three Slytherins cautiously.

"Er, well, er, hi," Hermione said, standing up to speak, sounding much more awkward than she had intended and wished silently and fervently that she had Hope's leadership skills. She glanced to Ron and he nodded encouragingly, so she barrelled on. "Well, you know why you're here…I had the idea, and Hope thought it wasn't too terribly bad (Hope chuckled softly), that it might be good if people who wanted to study Defence Against the Dark Arts, and I mean really study it you know, not the rubbish that Umbridge is doing with us, because no one could call that Defence Against the Dark Arts."

"Hear, hear," Anthony Goldstein of Ravenclaw said, only to be shushed by Terry Boot.

"Well, I thought it would be good if we, well, took matters into our own hands, and by that I mean learning how to defend ourselves properly, not just in theory, but doing the real spells-"

"You want to pass your Defence Against the Dark Arts OWL too, though, I bet?" Michael Corner said, eyeing her in speculation.

"Of course I do," Hermione said automatically, and a little insulted, "but more than that, I want to be properly trained in defence because…because…because Lord Voldemort is back."

Hope commended her for ignoring the typical responses to hearing his name spoken.

"Where's the proof You-Know-Who's back?"

Hope, who had lifted her butterbeer for a swig, put it down suddenly, and the noise it made when she did so was deafening; she didn't need to look up to know that she had the entire table's attention.

"What's your name?" she asked, standing up, casting Hermione a glance that had her sitting quickly.

"Zacharias Smith," he said coolly, "and I think we've got the right to know exactly what makes you say that You-Know-Who's back."

"The right?" Hope laughed softly. "You think you have the right to demand anything of me?"

He reeled back slightly, surprised. It was times like this that people saw just how Slytherin she could be.

Daphne was smirking.

"I can't make you see the truth, it is so often layered by perception that the truth is quickly distorted," Hope said, her eyes flickering over the group. "The simple facts are that he is back, he killed Cedric Diggory, and he took my blood from me." She drew back her sleeve to reveal the thin scar across her arm that seemed almost silver in the lighting. "Face the facts, and you'll be better off."

"All Dumbledore told us-"

"I don't care what Dumbledore told you," Hope said swiftly, "as it is, I'm not his biggest fan, no matter what you think or what you've been told. And if you think I'm going to tell you what it's like to watch one of your friends die before your eyes, then you're dead wrong, because that's…"
that's indescribable."

The silence was followed was one of awe, because they had never faced anything like what she'd faced; she was like a strange creature from a distant land.

Hope spared Cho a glance to see her mopping her eyes with her sleeve.

"Is it true that you can produce a Patronus?" It had been Susan Bones that had spoken.

"Yes," Hope said, wondering where she was getting her information from.

"A corporeal Patronus?"

"You wouldn't be related to Madam Bones, would you?" Hope asked.

"She's my auntie," Susan said, beaming. "She told me about your hearing. So -is it really true? You make a panther Patronus?"

"Yes," Hope repeated.

"Blimey, Hope!" Lee was very in awe. "I never knew that!"

"Mum told Ron not to spread it around," Fred said, winking at Hope. "She said you got enough attention as it was."

"Well, no one's denying that," Hope muttered, raking a hand though her hair as several laughed at her comment.

"And did you kill a Basilisk with that sword in Dumbledore's office? That one you took into the maze?" Terry Boot asked. "That's what one of the portraits on the wall told me when I was in there last year..."

"Well, yes-"

A few noises of awe and impressed looks filled the table, and Hope could feel her cheeks blushing pink.

"And in our first year she saved that Philosopher's Stone from You-Know-Who," Neville added, smiling at her.

"And that's not to mention," Cho said and Hope found herself surprised to see the girl who had been previously crying quietly at the mention of Cedric's death to be smiling at her, "all the tasks she had to get through in the Triwizard Tournament last year -getting past dragons and Merpeople and Acromantula and things..."

"Alright, I know it all sounds impressive and stuff," Hope said, pressing a finger over her eyebrow, "but it wasn't like I did all that stuff on my own-

"Not with the dragon, you didn't! That was some cool water magic!" Michael Corner said.

"And nobody helped you get rid of those dementors this summer," Susan added.

"No, I mean, there was some stuff that I did, obviously, but-"

"Are you trying to weasel out of showing us any of this stuff?" Zacharias Smith demanded.
"Here's an idea," Ron snapped, standing up suddenly, "why don't you shut your mouth?"

"Well, we've all turned up to learn from her and now she's telling us that she really can't do any of it."

"That's not what she said," Fred bit out.

"Would you like us to clean out your ears for you?" George said coldly, pulling a suspicious instrument from a Zonko's bag.

"Or any part of your body, really," Fred added, "we're not fussy where we stick this."

"Fred, George," Hope said with warning, "that's not really necessary."

"We're just here to keep things on track, love," George said innocently, and Hope resisted rolling her eyes as a few people laughed.

"I think it's a brilliant idea," a smooth voice said, and all the heads turned towards Daphne. "Everyone with a brain knows how many hours Hope spent looking up offensive and defensive magic last year. I doubt there's anyone else in Hogwarts with more expertise in the area."

Hope felt her cheeks flush, the colour darkening as many muttered their agreement.

"Right," Hermione said, glad that they had at least decided learning from Hope was the best option, "well, the next question is then how often we do it. I really don't think there's any point in meeting less than once a week--"

"Hang on, we need to make sure this doesn't clash with our Quidditch practice," Angelina said quickly.

"No, nor with ours," Cho added.

"Nor ours," Zacharias Smith said.

"I'm sure we can find a night that suits everyone," Hermione said in slight exasperation, "but you know, this is rather important, we're talking about learning to defend ourselves against V-Voldemort's Death Eaters--"

"Well said!" Ernie cried. "Personally, I think this is really important, possibly more important than anything else we'll do this year, even with our OWLs coming up! I, personally, am at a loss to see why the Ministry has foisted such a useless teacher on us at this critical period. Obviously, they are in denial about the return of You-Know-Who, but to give us a teacher who is trying to actively prevent us from using defensive spells--"

"We think the reason Umbridge doesn't want us trained in Defence Against the Dark Arts is that she's got some...some mad idea that Dumbledore could use the students in the school as a kind of private army. She thinks he'd mobilise us against the Ministry," Hermione explained to general astonishment.

"Well, that makes sense," Luna agreed. "After all, Cornelius Fudge has got his own private army, an army of Heliopaths."

"No, he hasn't," Hermione said in disdain.

"Yes, he has," Luna insisted.
"What are Heliopaths?" Neville asked, flummoxed.

"They're spirits of fire," Luna explained, her eyes like giant moons, "great tall flaming creatures that gallop across the ground burning everything in front of –"

"They don't exist, Neville," Hermione said coldly.

"Oh, yes, they do!" Luna very nearly growled, all trace of dreaminess gone.

"I'm sorry, but where's the proof of that?" Hermione snapped out, scowling at the fourth year Ravenclaw.

"There are plenty of eye-witness accounts. Just because you're so narrow-minded you need to have everything shoved under your nose before you–"

"Alright, that's enough," Hope said, speaking over the pair, "is once a week good?"

"Once a week sounds cool," Lee agreed.

"Right, well, we'll try to find somewhere to practice," Hermione said, regaining her composure and ignoring the angry glare Luna was throwing her. "We'll send a message round to everybody when we've got a time and a place for the first meeting…and I think everybody should write their name down, just so we know who was here. But I also think that we all ought to agree not to shout about what we're doing. So if you sign, you're agreeing not to tell Umbridge or anybody else what we're up to."

Some were more than happy to sign, but others needed a bit of persuading, such as Zacharias Smith, Ernie, and Cho's friend, but to everyone's surprise the three Slytherins were eager to sign.

Astoria and Tracey introduced themselves to Hope after almost everyone had left.

"Not a lot of people are your fans in Slytherin," Astoria said with a small smile, "but we're from a neutral family, we don't mind fighting against Voldemort."

Hope smiled.

"I'm all for kicking the bugger's arse," Tracey said with a lack of decorum, "this thing you're doing sounds exciting. M'glad Daphne brought me along."

For the first time in what was probably a very long time, the four Houses were coming together, even if the Slytherins were easily outnumbered.
The First Meeting

By Monday it became clear that someone knew what they were up to. Ron was betting on Zacharias Smith or Michael Corner, but Hope was betting on the shrouded witch that had been listening quite intently to what they had been saying. Umbridge had taken the time to paste another Educational Decree to the notice board. This one said: *All student organisations, societies, teams, groups and clubs are henceforth disbanded. An organisation, society, team, group or club is hereby defined as a regular meeting of three or more students. Permission to re-form may be sought from the High Inquisitor (Professor Umbridge). No student organisation, society, team, group or club may exist without the knowledge and approval of the High student found to have formed, or to belong to, an organisation, society, team, group or club that has not been approved by the High Inquisitor will be expelled.*

Thankfully, Hermione had the forethought to charm the paper that they had all signed, something that would make it really obvious who had told, only it didn't seem to be any of them. This also meant that they would, obviously, be doing the meetings illegally. This seemed to thrill the other students more, especially the twins (though that didn't really surprise Hope).

Hope felt alive for the first time in weeks at the idea that she was doing something against Umbridge without the stupid woman even knowing, which made it even more sweet.

"Is she in there?"

Hermione peered cautiously into Binns' class to check and see if Umbridge was going to be inspecting their History of Magic class.

"The coast's clear," she told them, laughing at the expressions of immense relief on their faces as they entered into the room and set down their bags, pulling out parchment and quill to jot down verbal notes from Binns. Hope, unlike Hermione, had to blink and jerk herself a number of times in his lecture to keep herself from falling asleep. Hermione must've been made of steel, or something, because the boring subject with the boring tone of voice he used would've put Hope out like a light if she wasn't actively trying to pay attention. Ron's eyes were already rather vacant as if he was in a daydream, which was entirely likely.

Hermione jabbed her harshly in the side so suddenly that Hope glared. "What are you doing?" she demanded in a low hiss.

"Look!"

She was gesturing towards the window and Hope turned her head, her mouth dropping open slightly. It was Hedwig. Hope had never seen her owl look quite so mournful.

Hope moved quietly in a crouch so that Binns wouldn't see her to the window, unlatching it in a short movement and opening the window widely and allowing her to hop inside and onto her arm with an upset sort of hoot. Hope returned to her seat and was surprised to discover that a number of Hedwig's were sticking in the opposite direction and that her wing had been twisted at an angle.

"What happened to her?" Ron asked stunned. "She looks like she's been attacked!"

Hope shrugged her shoulders helplessly before picking up the owl, hiding her behind her back and standing. "Professor Binns," she said, startling the ghost and causing several eyes to fasten on her, "I'm feeling quite ill."
"Ill?" he asked, as though the idea of being sick was surprising.

"Quite ill," Hope agreed. "I should go to the hospital wing."

"Yes," Binns said in a vague manner, "Yes...yes, hospital wing...well, off you go then, Perkins..."

Hope was out of the door faster than one could blink. She couldn't take Hedwig to Madam Pomfrey, she only dealt with magical ailments of humans, and sometimes part-humans, she would've taken Hedwig to Hagrid, but he wasn't here, so that left Grubbly-Plank. Hopefully she was in the staff room, because Hope didn't fancy searching the whole castle for the woman.

"You should be in class, girlie."

"It's urgent," Hope told one of the gargoyles that guarded the entrance to the staff room.

"Ooooh, urgent, is it?" the other one cackled. "Well, that puts us in our place, hasn't it?"

Hope ignored them, knocking three times, jerking back as it was opened by Professor McGonagall

"You haven't been given another detention!" she said in a demanding voice.

Hope's shoulders sagged and she didn't bother restraining an eye roll. "No, Professor," she said monotonously.

"Well then, why are you out of class?" Professor McGonagall asked, her eyes falling to the owl resting on Hope's shoulder.

"I'm looking for Professor Grubbly-Plank," Hope explained, gesturing to the doleful owl on her shoulder who gave one sad hoot. "Hedwig -my owl-'s been injured."

"Injured owl, you say?" The substitute teacher set down her copy of the Daily Prophet, locking her pipe carefully between her teeth as she stood and approached. Hope carefully removed Hedwig from her shoulder and out towards the older woman. "She showed up in the middle of History of Magic, and she won't let me touch her wing."

Professor Grubbly-Plank examined the bird closely. "Hm...Looks like something's attacked her."

"Like an animal?" Hope said, immediately horrified. "Or a person?"

"Hard to tell," Professor Grubbly-Plank said. "Thestrals will sometimes go after birds, of course, but Hagrid's got the Hogwarts Thesrals well-trained not to touch owls."

"Do you know how far this owl's travelled, Potter?"

"Huh?" Hope, in her worry towards Hedwig, had completely missed Professor McGonagall's question.

Professor McGonagall's lips twitched slightly as she repeated the question.

"Oh, er, I'm pretty sure London."

Her professor's eyes narrowed shrewdly, understanding just who she had been communicating with.

"I should be able to sort this out if you leave her with me, Potter," Professor Grubbly-Plank said, "she shouldn't be flying long distances for a few days, in any case."
"Thanks," Hope said in relief, taking the slip of parchment that was her letter and patting Hedwig's head softly who was stunned that she handing her off to a stranger. "Oh, don't look at me like that, Hedwig," Hope chided the owl, "this woman is going to make you better."

The hoot of indignation made it clear that she didn't feel the same way. "I know you don't like strangers, Hedwig, but she's going to make you as good as new," Hope promised the owl, much to the bemusement of the two women. Hope sighed as Professor Grubbly-Plank walked away, sorry to leave her beloved owl with her, but knowing that it was for the best.

"Potter?"

"Yes, Professor?" Hope asked, having been turning to leave.

"Bear in mind," she said, her voice so low that Hope had to lean in to hear it, "that channels of communication in and out of Hogwarts may be being watched, won't you?"

It left Hope with an ominous feeling as she read the words in Sirius' scrawl: *Today, same time, same place*, followed by *I'm sorry, I was wrong.*

Hope growled.

"Hi," he said, eyeing the spot where his goddaughter was and had not moved from.

"I said I was sorry," he wheedled.

Hope slapped the book shut to glare at him. "Maybe it has escaped your eyes," she said scathingly, "but some of us aren't just ghosts of the past."

"I deserve that," Sirius said with a wince, "and I really am sorry, I mean it."

Hope scowled.

"So...how're things," Sirius said awkwardly.

"Not that great," Ron said, casting Hope a glance, "the Ministry's forced through another decree, which means we're not allowed to have Quidditch teams-"

"Or secret Defence Against the Dark Arts groups?"

Hope's scowl deepened. "Who told you?"

"Mundungus, of course," Sirius said, practically ecstatic that she was speaking to him. "He was the witch under the veil."

"What was he doing in the Hog's Head?" Ron asked.

"What do you think he was doing?" Sirius snorted, jerking his head towards Hope. "He's keeping an eye on her."

"People are still following me like the damn paparazzi?!" Hope demanded, incensed.
"Yeah, they are," Sirius said, side-stepping her anger, "and just as well, isn't it, if the first thing you're going to do on your weekend off is organise an illegal defence group." He sounded very proud of her actions.

"Why was he hiding?" Hermione asked in confusion.

"He was banned from the Hog's Head twenty years ago," said Sirius, "and that barman's got a long memory. We lost Moody's spare Invisibility Cloak when Sturgis was arrested, so Dung's been dressing as a witch a lot lately...anyway...first of all, Ron - I've sworn to pass on a message from your mother."

"Oh, no," Ron groaned, making Sirius chuckle.

"She says on no account whatsoever are you to take part in an illegal secret Defence Against the Dark Arts group. She says you'll be expelled for sure and your future will be ruined. She says there will be plenty of time to learn how to defend yourself later and that you are too young to be worrying about that right now (Ron rolled his eyes at that, and Hope heartily agreed). She also advises Hope and Hermione not to proceed with the group, though she accepts that she has no authority over either of them and simply begs them to remember that she has their best interests at heart. She would have written all this to you, but if the owl had been intercepted you'd all have been in real trouble, and she can't say it for herself because she's on duty tonight."

"On duty doing what?" Ron asked, but Sirius spoke over him.

"So it's fallen to me to be the messenger and make sure you tell her I passed it all on, because I don't think she trusts me to."

"You're not going to tell me to not do this," Hope theorized, eyeing her godfather's face shrewdly.

"Me? Certainly not!" Sirius assured her. "I think it's an excellent idea!"

"Really?" Hermione asked for Hope, she seemed very interested in what Sirius had to say, even more so than usual.

"Of course I do!" Sirius said enthusiastically. "D'you think your father and I would've lain down and taken orders from an old hag like Umbridge?"

"You didn't seem to keen on me risking my neck last term," Hope said sullenly.

"Hope, last year all the evidence was pointing towards someone inside Hogwarts trying to kill you," Sirius said in an almost careless manner. "This year, we know there's someone outside Hogwarts who'd like to kill us all, so I think learning to defend yourselves properly is; a very good idea!"

"And if we do get expelled?" Hermione asked, her eyebrows melding at the centre as she scrunched them together.

"Hermione, this was your idea!"

"I know, but I was wondering what Sirius thought," Hermione said casually, but something about it threw Hope off.

"Well, better expelled and able to defend yourselves than sitting safely in school without a clue," Sirius told them firmly.

"Hear, hear," Ron agreed.
"So, where are you all meeting up? Have you thought of the Shrieking Shack?"

Ron brightened, but Hermione stamped out that light.

"Sirius, there were only four of you meeting in the Shrieking Shack when you were at school," Hermione said, "and all of you could transform into animals and I suppose you could all have squeezed under a single Invisibility Cloak if you'd wanted to. But there are thirty-one of us and none of us is an Animagus, so we wouldn't need so much an Invisibility Cloak as an Invisibility Marquee-
"

"Fair point," Sirius conceded, "I'll have a think and get back to-"

His words fell short as he gazed into the side of the fire, stunned into silence.

"Sirius?" Hope asked, worry lacing her voice as his head vanished.

Then they all leapt back at the sight of a stubby, pink-nailed hand appeared where Sirius' head had been. Three pairs of feet raced for their respective dormitories and Hermione whispered once they were safely up the stairs, "Do you think she saw us?"

"I doubt it," Hope whispered back, but it left her with a fitful sleep.

The next night Hope was up late, again, but thankfully, all of her schoolwork as done. She was starting to 'flesh-out' some curses and jinxes to show the group (as they had yet to gain a name), slowly working their way up to higher level stuff like the ice-whip she had used in the First Task and the Patronus Charm, but even that was subject to change.

A loud pop jerked Hope's eyes up and she moved to quickly cover her parchments when she caught the eye of two very large green ones. "Dobby?"

Dobby the House-elf grinning broadly, despite wearing what looking like everything Hermione had ever knitted, holding Hope's irritated but completely mended owl. "Dobby has your owl, Hope Potter!" he said breathlessly. "Professor Grubbly-Plank says she is all well now, miss." He bowed much more lowly than house-elves generally did.

"Hedwig!" Hope said in relief as the owl soared over to her arm, nuzzling her shoulder affectionately.

"Have you been taking all of Hermione's clothes, Dobby?" Hope asked, taking note of his appearance.

"Oh, no, miss," Dobby said brightly. "Dobby has been taking some for Winky, too, miss."

"How is she?" Hope asked. The house-elf that had once belonged to the Crouch family hadn't looked too good the last time she had seen her which had been back during June once they'd discovered that Mad-Eye Moody had actually been Barty Crouch Jr. under the effects of Polyjuice Potion.

"Winky is still drinking lots, miss," he said mournfully. "She still does not care for clothes, Hope Potter. Nor do the other house-elves. None of them will clean Gryffindor Tower any more, not with the hats and socks hidden everywhere, they finds them insulting, miss. Dobby does it all himself, miss, but Dobby does not mind, miss, for he always hopes to meet Hope Potter and tonight, miss, he has got his wish!" He looked suddenly regretful. "Did Dobby interrupt, miss?"
"Of course not," Hope assured him, contemplating him. "Dobby…you know this castle quite well, don't you?"

"Yes, miss!" Dobby bobbed his head in agreement.

"Would you like to help me with something?" she asked.

Immediately a wide grin spread across Dobby's face. "Of course, miss! Name it, Hope Potter, miss!"

"I'm looking for a place where thirty-one people can practise Defence Against the Dark Arts without being discovered by any of the teachers. Especially Umbridge."

Dobby gathered that Hope Potter did not like Professor Umbridge, so she must be bad!

"Dobby knows the perfect place, miss!" he promised, practically jumping up and down. "Dobby heard tell of it from the other house-elves when he came to Hogwarts, miss. It is known by us as the Come and Go Room, miss, or else as the Room of Requirement!"

"The Room of Requirement?" Hope repeated. "Why is it called that?"

"Because it is a room that a person can only enter," said Dobby, surprisingly serious given his bright disposition, "when they have real need of it. Sometimes it is there, and sometimes it is not, but when it appears, it is always equipped for the seeker's needs. Dobby has used it, miss," the elf looked a little uncomfortable to be admitting it to her, "when Winky has been very drunk; he has hidden her in the Room of Requirement and he has found antidotes to Butterbeer there, and a nice elf-sized bed to settle her on while she sleeps it off, miss…and Dobby knows Mr Filch has found extra cleaning materials there when he has run short, miss, and--"

Hope remembered what Dumbledore had said at the Yule Ball the previous year: "Oh I would never dream of assuming I know all Hogwarts' secrets, Igor. Only this morning, for instance, I took a wrong turning on the way to the bathroom and found myself in a beautifully proportioned room I have never seen before, containing a really rather magnificent collection of chamber pots. When I went back to investigate more closely, I discovered that the room had vanished. But I must keep an eye out for it. Possibly it is only accessible at five-thirty in the morning. Or it may only appear at the quarter moon - or when the seeker has an exceptionally full bladder."

"I suppose if you really needed the loo that it would fill itself with chamber pots, then?" she asked wryly.

"Dobby expects so, miss," Dobby agreed, nodding so much that his ears flapped on his head. "It is a most amazing room, miss."

"Do many people know about it?" Hope asked. After all, what was the point of using the room if everyone knew about it?

"Very few, miss. Mostly people stumbles across it when they needs it, miss, but often they never finds it again, for they do not know that it is always there waiting to be called into service, miss," Dobby explained.

"It's perfect!" Hope beamed. "How does it work?"

"Yous walk past the blank wall opposite the tapestry of Barnabas the Barmy three times on the seventh floor," Dobby explained. "And when yous walk yous think hard about what yous want your room to have and it makes it for yous."
"Can you show me where it is?" Hope asked eagerly, excitement bubbling inside her.

"Any time, Hope Potter, miss," Dobby agreed, bouncing on the balls of his feet. "We could go now, if you like!"

Hope glanced at her half-finished plan for the Group-That-Had-No-Name and for a moment she considered saying no, but then she grinned and said "Sure."

The Room of Requirement, Hope decided, was bloody brilliant. It was wide and spacious with flickering torches that illuminated the room, including walls of books and a number of cushions on the ground close to the door, and a few shelves holding a number of magical items such as Sneakoscopes, Secrecy Sensors, and a large Foe-Glass.

Hope waited for them all to settle down (George gave her a wink that made her blush; he'd been making a joke that as a professor now, she shouldn't be in a relationship with a student such as himself. She hit him for that.) and stop asking questions.

"So, welcome," she said, coughing slightly in her hand once all the eyes jumped to her, "we're going to have to start at the-yes, Hermione?" She couldn't keep the amusement out of her voice at the sight of Hermione raising her hand to Hope.

"I think we ought to elect a leader," she said and Hope grinned.

"What was that you were just saying about my leadership skills, Hermione?"

Hermione flushed and a few people chuckled. "Yes, well, I think we ought to vote on it properly," she said, still red, "that makes it formal and it gives you authority. So -everyone who thinks Hope ought to be our leader?"

No one didn't agree, and Hope couldn't help but be flattered. "Anything else, Hermione?"

"Well, I thought we ought to have a name," Hermione added as Ron chuckled, "it would promote a feeling of team spirit and unity, don't you think?"

A few people murmured in agreement.

"The Anti-Umbridge League?" Angelina offered, still apparently irritated about how long it had taken her to reform the Gryffindor Quidditch Team.

"Or the Ministry of Magic are Morons Group?" Fred added.

"Something not as obvious as that, Fred," Ron said rolling his eyes, and Hermione nodded, adding, "Like a name that didn't tell everyone what we were up to, so we can refer to it safely outside meetings."

"The Defence Association, then?" Cho suggested. "The DA for short, so nobody knows what we're talking about?"

"Yeah, the DA's good," Ginny agreed, "only let's make it stand for Dumbledore's Army, because that's the Ministry's worst fear, isn't it?" Hope ground her teeth slightly, but she didn't comment. Who was she to judge if they wanted to be called that?

"It also stands for Direct Action, and that's basically what we're doing, isn't it?" Tracey mused from the back, examining her nails.
"So, all in favour of the DA?" Hermione asked brightly before scrawling DUMBLEDORE'S ARMY across the top of the parchment that held all of their names.

"Alright," Hope said, "er, ground rules, you can request that we learn certain spells, yes, Ernie, we'll be going over the stuff that's probably going to be in the OWL (Ernie put down his hand looking a little disappointed). In any event of my absence, I don't know why that would be, but if it ever does come up, Ron and Hermione are in charge. No inter-house rivalry, I know some of you might not be too happy with Slytherins in here, but I invited them, so deal…I think that's about it…shall we get started?"

Everyone stood up eagerly.

"We're going to have to go back to the basics and work our way up," Hope explained, drumming her wand against her hand, "because I have no idea how behind or advanced any of you are. So, we'll be starting with the Disarming Charm. I know it's not what you were-"

"Oh, please," Zacharias Smith scoffed. "I don't think Expelliarmus is exactly going to help us against You-Know-Who, do you?"

"Oh, I don't know," Hope said softly, "it worked pretty well for me when he was trying to Avada Kedavra my arse back in June, but if you'd rather not, the door is right there."

But he didn't move.

"Good," Hope said coolly, before stepping back and raising her voice, "now divvy yourselves up into pairs. I'll start walking around in a while to check how you're doing."

Hope watched as they divided, smiling as Ginny, in a surprise move, grabbed Astoria, who looked vaguely stunned, but Neville fell to her as one group had three instead of two. She felt a little irritated at that.

"I'm hopeless," Neville said in a depression as every time he tried to do the spell, his wand was sent flying out of his hand.

"No, you're not!" Hope said affronted, handing the wand back to him again. "You've just got to give it a sharper jab; you make your movements too wide…Luna, could you come here for a second?"

Luna who was only disarming Justin half the time danced over to Hope's side and Hope had her stand a bit away. "I need you to play target for a mo', Luna, then you can get back to Justin."

Luna bobbed her head agreeably as Hope wheeled Neville around to face the serene-looking girl. "Alright, Neville, this is how I want you to do it, alright?" She took his hand over his wand and made the sharp circle movement. "Now you try."

"Already?" Neville seemed a little frantic.

"Neville, the only way you're going to get this if you try on your own," Hope said kindly, "give it a go."

Neville swallowed thickly and pointed his want at Luna who was looking rather vacant. "Expelliarmus!"

Luna's wand spun out of her hand, but not by much. Neville clearly still had a ways to go, but Luna smiled kindly before flouncing back to her partner.
"I DID IT!" Neville cried in euphoria, hugging Hope so tightly that she could have mistaken him for Mrs. Weasley. "I've never done it before!"

"That's really good, Neville," Hope said, pleased. "Now, do me a favour and take some turns with Ron and Hermione while a check and see how everyone else is doing."

Neville nodded fervently, practically bowling over Ron in his excitement.

Hope placed her hands on her hips, arching an eyebrow at the twins, who were having a good bit of fun by disarming Zacharias Smith every time he tried to disarm Anthony Goldstein.

"Sorry, Hope," George said with a grin, "couldn't resist."

"Uh-huh," Hope said, eyeing the pair and fingering her wand. "Perhaps you two want to get back to the task at hand?"

"Sure thing, Prof!" they both said, making her roll her eyes as she passed.

"Hannah."

The blonde-haired Hufflepuff was immediately horrified. "Oh, no! I'm trying, I promise!"

"I know you are," Hope said kindly, "but I'm still walking around and helping anyone that needs it… I want you to watch me for a second."

Hope flicked her wand at Ernie. "Expelliarmus!"

Ernie's wand soared out of his hand and he had to run after it. "You're making your wand-waving too wide; it's throwing off your aim."

"Thanks," Hannah said in relief as Hope continued on. As she made her way around to every group, each student slowly got better, until Hope approached the area where Cho was practicing with her curly-haired friend.

She was doing quite well until Hope came nearer, and then- "Oh, no! Expelliarmious! I mean, Expellimellius! I--oh, sorry, Marietta!"

Marietta scowled at Hope as if she was the reason why her friend was lighting her on fire, before quickly putting it out with a bit of water from her wand tip.

"You made me nervous, I was doing all right before then!" Cho said, earning her an odd look.

"I make you nervous?" she asked flummoxed. Was it because of the whole thing with Cedric? It must have been.

Cho laughed, but her friend moved away, as though Hope was bad news.

"Don't mind her," Cho added, noticing how Hope's eyes were drawn after the girl. "She doesn't really want to be here but I made her come with me. Her parents have forbidden her to do anything that might upset Umbridge. You see -her mum works for the Ministry."

Hope's eyes narrowed slightly. "And your parents?"

"Well, they've forbidden me to get on the wrong side of Umbridge, too," admitted Cho, before straightening her spine, a glint entering her eyes. "But if they think I'm not going to fight You-Know-Who after what happened to Cedric--"
She fell abruptly silent, her face becoming distinctly upset, no doubt remembering how her ex-boyfriend had looked when Hope had brought him back to the grounds as a corpse.

"Well, my dad is very supportive of any anti-Ministry action!" Luna said loudly, unashamedly listening in on their conversation. "He's always saying he'd believe anything of Fudge; I mean, the number of goblins Fudge has had assassinated! And of course he uses the Department of Mysteries to develop terrible poisons, which he secretly feeds to anybody who disagrees with him. And then there's his Umgubular Slashkilter-

"That's nice, Luna," Hope said kindly as Cho erupted into stifled giggles and Hope made way back towards the front.

"Hope!" Hermione said as she passed her, Ron, and Neville. "Have you checked the time yet?"

Hope glanced at her watch and muffled a swear. "Shite! It's ten past nine!" They were already out of bounds, which they were going to have to wrap this up quick if they didn't want to be caught by Filch prowling the halls.

I need a whistle, she thought, and immediately one appeared on the shelf and she blew it hard. It took a few moments for people to stop saying the Disarming incantation and for a few more wands to fall to the floor.

"You've all done brilliantly!" Hope said beaming at them all, "but we're over curfew now, so we'd better call it a day. Same time, same place next week?"

"Sooner!" Dean insisted, a sentiment which was greatly shared.

"We'll say next Wednesday, then," Hope said, "Gryffindor, Ravenclaw, and Hufflepuff bring your Quidditch schedules so we can plan around them…we'd better leave in threes and fours, else people'll know what we're up to so…"

She watched on the Marauder's Map as they all left as she had suggested, and Hope felt it was a rather good start.
A Suitable Teacher

The DA, Hope found, was far more exciting than anything she was currently doing, and that included Quidditch, as sad as it was. Perhaps it had something to do with them doing something illegally, but it had lit the flame of rebellion inside all of them, and Hope was more than happy to fuel it.

Hope was glad that Quidditch schedules changed so often that they wouldn't have one specific day to meet on, that made it more difficult for Umbridge to catch them and for other people to notice what they were up to.

There was no pattern, as Luna had bluntly put it.

By their second lesson, Hermione had shown her brilliance once more and had come up with a clever way in which to communicate between members when the next meetings were, through the use of fake Galleons.

"You see the numerals around the edge of the coins?" Hermione explained, indicating on a coin to where she was pointing. "On real Galleons that's just a serial number referring to the goblin who cast the coin. On these fake coins, though, the numbers will change to reflect the time and date of the next meeting. The coins will grow hot when the date changes, so if you're carrying them in a pocket you'll be able to feel them. We take one each, and when Hope sets the date of the next meeting she'll change the numbers on her coin, and because I've put a Protean Charm on them, they'll all change to mimic hers."

The silence that followed threw Hermione off clearly as Hope examined her coin in fascination. It was a brilliant idea. Hermione, clearly not used to the same kind of attention that Hope was generally gifted with, automatically associated it with being a bad idea.

Well -I thought it was a good idea," she said awkwardly, "$ mean, even if Umbridge asked us to turn out our pockets, there's nothing fishy about carrying a Galleon, is there? But . . . well, if you don't want to use them--"

"You can do a Protean Charm?" Terry asked stunned.

Hope didn't recognize the spell, but a number of Ravenclaws clearly did, some being rather impressed, except Cho…was that a flicker of jealousy that Hope saw? Hope disregarded it.

"Yes," Hermione said, still a little confused. "why?"

"But that's...that's NEWT standard, that is," he said, still stunned.

"Oh." Hermione's cheeks pinked. It wasn't as though she actively tried to not be her brilliant self. "Oh…well…yes, I suppose it is."

"How come you're not in Ravenclaw? With brains like yours?" His tone was almost accusatory.

"Well, the Sorting Hat did seriously consider putting me in Ravenclaw during my Sorting, but it decided on Gryffindor in the end--"

"Besides," Hope said silkily, "House isn't always accounting for traits. I would've done well in Slytherin and Anthony clearly could have been a Hufflepuff."
Anthony chuckled a little in agreement and a titter of amusement reverberated from the group.

"So, does that mean we're using the Galleons?" Hermione asked, beaming at them all as they made noises of agreement and moved to take the golden coins from the basket she had.

"This is really brilliant," Ron said, impressed as he took one, examining the spot that Hermione had indicated where the date of their current meeting was inscribed.

Hope glanced to Hermione. She hadn't told her friends much of what had happened in the graveyard, but she had mentioned how Voldemort had summoned his Death Eaters to him that night.

"Taking ideas off of Voldemort, Hermione?" she asked lightly, arching an eyebrow at the girl who now looked a little sheepish.

"Hm?" Ron asked, not quite hearing what she'd said.

"The Galleons are like the Death Eaters Dark Marks," Hope explained. "Voldemort touches one of them, and all their scars burn, and they know they've got to join him."

"Well, I can't say he didn't give me the idea," Hermione muttered, "by obviously mine is less painful seeing as I decided to engrave the date on bits of metal rather than on our members' skin."

"I'm sure that's for the best," Hope laughed, "imagine being in that kind of pain once a week, we'd have no one left to teach."

Ron laughed. "True enough."

"I suppose the only real problem we'd have with them is possibly spending them," Hope conceded, flipping it in the air.

"Fat chance," Ron said a bit gloomily as he palmed his coin. "I haven't got any real Galleons to confuse it with."

Hope threw an arm over his shoulders and grinned widely, "Then you've got one up on us, mate, because I get the feeling sooner or later someone's going to lose theirs." And Ron and Hermione had to concede with her there, the temptation was obvious and if they forgot, they could very well be spending the fake Galleon as if it was real currency, and that could present a problem.

"Gather round, you lot!"

She had the thirty kids split evenly on either side of her, forming two opposing lines and reminding vaguely of that farce of a Duelling Club that Lockhart had tried to set up back in second year.

"The Stunning Spell," Hope said after she had taught them the incantation as she walked back and forth, her eyes not training on one specific someone, "is one the most important spells you could use in a fight. It could knock out your victim, or it can block objects –projectiles, really– moving towards you. It's one of the spells you want to avoid, as it'll put you out like a light, but it's also very handy in the right hands…Dennis, want to give it a go?"

By far one of youngest of their group at only being a second year, Dennis Creevey blushed a bright red, earning a few laughs and a nudge from his brother.

"Don't worry," Hope added, smiling kindly, "Hermione's ready to Rennervate me, if you manage to knock me out, but if not, that's fine too."
"She's really good at this, isn't she?" Ron whispered to Hermione, who smiled.

"When the most impatient person becomes patient you know it's serious," she joked and he grinned as Dennis took his place opposite Hope.

"Come on, then, Dennis, give me your best shot," Hope offered.

Dennis breathed in deeply and flung his wand up. "Stupefy!"

The jet of red hit Hope in the chest and sent her flying backwards and into the cushions that had been conveniently placed there. A second thump told the group that the force of the spell had sent Dennis onto his back as well.

"Good," Hope said pulling herself up into a standing position again, "nearly knocked me out, there, you need to work on intent, but very good form."

Dennis grinned.

Fred muttered something to George and he sniggered.

"Something you'd like to share with the class, boys?"

Hope arched her eyebrow to the pair.

"Oh, no, professor!" Fred chortled.

"Wouldn't want to interrupt!" George added with a grin.

"You've already interrupted so the point is moot," Hope said, twirling her wand between her fingers that could be perceived to be in a dangerous manner. "George, darling, won't you join me?"

George eyed his girlfriend with unease. Size was, after all, no accounting for power, and Hope had to be the most powerful witch he knew. A few people sniggered and giggled at his hesitation. "I think I'm safer where I am, thanks."

"If you don't practice, Mr. Weasley, how on earth will you learn?" Hope chided. "Join me or I'm not snogging you for a week."

Laughter erupted from Fred's lips at the horrified look on George's face, and he wasn't the only one.

"But-But-!"

"Make it two."

"Hope!"

"George!" Hope mocked. "Now get your arse over there and Stun me!"

George grumbled under his breath before conceding and stalking over to the opposite end and facing Hope with only his wand. It was rather daunting, but Hope's wand wasn't in her hand; she was the target.

"Stupefy!"

The aim was slightly off, hitting her shoulder instead of her chest, which was the general area to aim for, Hope had told them, but it still sent her spinning back into the cushions, and this time she didn't
get up until Hermione had revived her.

"That, everyone is what you're aiming for," Hope said. "Daphne, Padma, you're up."

The Ravenclaw Patil twin eyed her opponent nervously. When they had been practicing earlier, Daphne had proven herself to be quite gifted with Stunning. Daphne's eyes narrowed slightly and they both took their positions, crying at much the same time, "Stupefy!"

Both spells hit their mark and both fell back.

"Double knock out," Terry said impressed, "what're the chances of that?"

Hope muttered the counter curse and helped Daphne sit up; the first time being Stunned was always the one that was the most disorienting. "That depends on how fast you cast it and your aim so that it doesn't hit the other person's spell in midair."

"Well done," Daphne said, holding out her hand to Padma who gazed at in surprise for a moment before taking it with a smile.

"The same."

"Hermione, Ron, show us your stuff."

"Yeah, Ron!"

"Come on, Ron!"

Hope hid a laugh as Ron told Hermione rather directly. "Don't worry, I'll go easy on you."

Hermione's eyes were laughing. "Thanks, Ronald."

Hope bit her lip to hide her own as both her friends prepared their wands. Ron took too much time in raising his wand and Hermione was much quicker. "Stupefy!"

Hope revived him in seconds.

"Try not to be as slow, Ron, it could mean life or death," Hope warned as she hauled him up.

"I let her do that," he told his brothers, who clearly didn't believe him for a second, "it's good manners, isn't it?"

Fred smirked.

"It was completely intentional," Ron said, dragging the words out as he cast a lingering glance towards Hermione.

"Colin, Luna, forward!"

Hope couldn't help but watch pleased and impressed with the progress the other students had made.

"Impedimenta is another need-to-know spell," Hope explained during the next lesson as she walked around to all the pairs, fixing each person's wand work as she went by. "This spell can have a number of effects, including freezing the target, or blowing them back depending on how much power you're putting into it...Michael, let's see yours."
Hope had set up the DA sessions to be practice for the first half and then slight sparring with the spell they were working on against each other during the last half; so far it was proving fruitful, or at least no one had yet to complain, so Hope had to assume that it was working.

Michael cleared his throat and raised his wand, pointing it at Ginny (as Astoria was now partnering Parvati; everyone was required to have a different partner for each lesson). "Impedimenta!"

It didn't freeze her, but did send her reeling back a little. Michael looked so put out.

"Don't worry," Hope consoled. "That's actually really good for one of your first few tries, believe me, I was much worse."

"Really?" he asked vaguely startled by this information.

"I'm not automatically brilliant in this subject," Hope said dryly, "no matter what it may seem."

She stepped aside to dodge between students. "Colin! Why don't you show me your hand?"

Colin jumped at her sudden voice but grinned brightly. "Hi, Hope!"

"Hi," Hope said arching an eyebrow, "your spell?"

"Oh, er," Colin shifted uncomfortably, "I'm having a bit of trouble," he admitted, "it's not coming out as strong."

"I'm not expecting you to get these spells right off the bat, Colin," Hope said, "saying the incantation and doing the wand movements is one thing, but what's more important is intent."

"Intent?" Susan Bones, his partner had come forward, her inquisitive eyes confused.

"Know what you want to happen," Hope explained. "If I waved my wand at you and told myself I'd rather freeze you than blow you back, then my wand's going to follow that. Be sure you're not confusing it, trusting in yourself is important, but trusting in your wand is just as important. You depend on it daily. Now show me."

Susan took a few long steps back and Colin looked down at his wand in resolution before looking straight at his opponent and raising his wand and saying "Impedimenta!"

This time Susan did freeze, and Colin jumped up and down joyfully.

"Thanks, Hope!" He said in glee looking very much like a child on a sugar rush. "I wouldn't have been able to do that!"

"I'm sure you would've," Hope said wryly, "it would've probably just taken you a lot more time to do it."

The Impediment Hexes were progressing nicely, she had to admit as she dodged a few spells, waving off a few scandalized apologies. It was one of the simpler spells she could teach them, and she wanted them to have it mastered before moving onto the Reductor Curse which was hopefully going to be the next spell she taught, but that, like most things having to do with the DA, was subject to change.

"Astoria, how's your spellwork?"

The Slytherin third year frowned slightly as though Hope had insinuated that her spellwork was shoddy or sub-par.
Hope gave a light laugh. "Don't worry, it's not that you're bad, I'm just checking everyone...like last
time...and the time before that..." Hope grinned as the blonde blushed giving a murmured apology
before sending Parvati flying backwards with a muffled groan as she collided with the ground, which
wasn't really soft to begin with.

Hope nodded in approval before passing by- "No, Fred! You're going to hit-

Fred missed his target, which was Lee, and knocked Tracey forward. She turned around and
scowled at him and he had the decency to look chagrined.

"Sorry," he said quickly, "missed the mark."

Hope jerked him so that he was facing his partner. "Stop trying to ogle Angie's arse, and pay
attention, it's throwing off your aim."

The few people nearest chuckled, and even Tracey couldn't help but be amused.

"What, like George isn't doing the same thing to you?" Fred scoffed, nodding towards his twin who
was indeed glancing over to her from time to time, his eyes lowered towards her behind.

"George is more subtle," Hope said dryly, "and he's paying attention to where his target is." Granted,
Hermione was proving rather difficult to nail a curse against.

"Subtle my arse," Fred grumbled, "this is blatant favouritism!"

Hope canted her head slightly. "Then you'd have to be as good at him at snogging, are you?"

She must have been speaking a bit louder than she intended, or a large number of the room must
have been eavesdropping, or maybe a combination of the two. Fred spluttered as the room erupted
into laughter and Hope fought to keep the heat from rising in her cheeks.

"He's not!" George called across the room.

"Yes I am!" Fred cried, insulted at thought. "Everyone knows I'm a much better- Angie-!"

"Hope!" George was quick to appeal to his own girlfriend.

"I give up," Hope sighed, pinching the bridge of her nose. "What a mess...why did I bring it up in
the first place?" She scowled at Fred. "Just focus on where you're aiming next time, would you?
We've got enough problems to worry about without adding Inter-House War to the list."

Tracey, whom Fred had blasted, laughed at her word choice, startling a few people who had
probably never heard of a Slytherin laughing in a way that wasn't maniacal.

"Alright, everyone, front and centre!" Hope called. "Once you've all had a go at each other we can
call it a day. Katie, Cho! You two're up first!"

"He was right, though," George murmured into her ear as she came close.

"About what?"

His eyes gained a twinkle. "I couldn't resist, you do have a fine bum."

Hope's cheeks burst with colour and she had to resist the urge to smack him. The idiot was giving
her heart problems, per usual.
They had one last DA meeting before the first Quidditch game of the season, Gryffindor vs. Slytherin. It was much anticipated as the first game always set the bar for which team the other teams had to beat. And it almost always seemed to be Gryffindor vs. Slytherin. Maybe the professors were trying to get them to expend their frustrations out on the field so they wouldn’t have to between classes, but Hope thought that was a bit of a futile effort.

The DA meeting before the game was on Reductor Curses and Hope had been surprised to discover that Ginny and Parvati were the best at using them, but Hope didn't have much time to think about working out the next lesson as she and Ron walked down to the changing rooms on the Friday of the match.

"Ron," Hope said, drawing his attention, as he had fallen into a bit of a depression, "I have to admit you could still use a bit of practice, but your confidence is the main problem."

Rather than getting angry and stalking away, Ron frowned slightly, his eyebrows drawing together. "What d'you mean?"

"Once you make one mistake, you spiral downwards," Hope explained, "what you've got to do is stay focused on the game. Ignore the people, focus on the balls, and then you'll do fine."

"You think so?" Ron asked.

Hope scowled, looping her broom over her shoulder as they entered. "Trust me."

And Ron did trust her.

"Now say after me: I don't care what anyone thinks."

"I don't care what anyone thinks," Ron intoned.

"I beat out people for this position."

"I beat out people for this position."

"I'm going to go out there and save some goals!" Hope said enthusiastically, punching the air.

"I'm going to go out there and save some goals!" This time a bit of life returned to Ron as they both changed and waited with the others as the stands filled with spectators. Hope linked her fingers with George, waiting until-

"It's time," Angelina said, looking almost as nervous as Ron. "C'mon everyone…good luck."

Hope smiled encouragingly to Ron as she fell into line, keeping her broom over her shoulder as the exited to cheering.

The whole Slytherin team was wearing crown-shaped badges that gave Hope a bad feeling, and she was sure that Malfoy was the one behind it, judging by the smirk he was baring towards her.

"Mount your brooms!"

Fourteen players mounted, tensing for flight, shooting into the air as the whistle blew and the balls were released.

A Bludger was already aimed at Hope, but she dodged it easily, making a lap around the stadium, her head twisting around in the hope of glimpsing the sheen of gold that indicated the Snitch.
"And it's Johnson-Johnson with the Quaffle, what a player that girl is, I've been saying it for years but for some reason she chose Fred Weasley over me."

Hope could hear Alicia's laugh; clearly her boyfriend wasn't in any danger of becoming single.

"JORDAN!"

"-just a fun fact, Professor, adds a bit of interest- and she's ducked Warrington, she's passed Montague, she's -ouch- been hit from behind by a Bludger from Crabbe...Montague catches the Quaffle, Montague heading back up the pitch and -ouch- Bludger there from George Weasley, that's a Bludger to the head for Montague, he drops the Quaffle, caught by Katie Bell, Katie Bell of Gryffindor reverse-passes to Alicia Spinnet and Spinnet's away-"

A Bludger was aimed at Hope's head, but really, did they think she was going to let herself get brained? George swerved forward to block it, leaving her open to search for the Snitch once again.

"-nice save by George Weasley, though I'm sure Hope could've handled that herself-" Hope smirked. "Spinnet dodges Warrington, avoids a Bludger -close call, Alicia- and the crowd are loving this, just listen to them, what's that they're singing?"

Hope's blood boiled as she was finally able to make out what the Slytherins were chanting:

"Weasley cannot save a thing,

He cannot block a single ring,

That's why Slytherins all sing:

Weasley is our King.

Weasley was born in a bin

He always lets the Quaffle in

Weasley will make sure we win

Weasley is our King."

Those revolting little pieces of utter shite! Hope was seething on her broom stick as she glared venomously at Malfoy who was singing with them. The bastard!

Angelina's toss into the goal-hoop didn't make it past Bletchley who tossed the Quaffle to Warrington who then headed in the direction of Ron, ducking around Alicia and Katie who moved in.

Ron took a deep breath, his whole face on fire from the song, but he remembered what Hope had said. "I don't care what anyone thinks. I beat out people for this position," he repeated, "And I am going to save some goals!"

"-so it's the first test for new Gryffindor Keeper Weasley, brother of Beaters Fred and George, and a promising new talent on the team -come on, Ron!"

The Quaffle was thrown and the Gryffindors cheered as Ron caught it, throwing it to Katie as she passed.

"Saved!" Lee cried. "We're still at zero-zero folks!"
This did not seem to deter the Slytherins, Hope noticed, much to her anger, in fact, they were growing louder. Hope wasn't sure why, clearly he didn't always let the Quaffle in. Arses.

"WEASLEY WAS BORN IN A BIN

HE ALWAYS LETS THE QUAFFLE IN..."

"-and Gryffindor back in possession and it's Katie Bell tanking up the pitch."

Hope could hardly hear Lee over the wind, the song, and the beating of her own heart as the circled, intent on finding the Snitch and ending the match as fast as possible.

"WEASLEY WILL MAKE SURE WE WIN
WEASLEY IS OUR KING..."

"-and it's Warrington again," Lee had to practically roar to be heard now, "who passes to Pucey, Pucey's off past Spinnet, come on now, Angelina, you can take him -turns out you can't- but nice Bludger from Fred Weasley I mean, George Weasley, oh, who cares, one of them, anyway, and Warrington drops the Quaffle and Katie Bell -er- drops it, too -so that's Montague with the Quaffle, Slytherin Captain Montague takes the Quaffle and he's off up the pitch, come on now, Gryffindor, block him!-and Pucey's dodged Alicia again and he's heading straight for goal, stop it, Ron!"

This time Ron missed and the Slytherins cheered and were now bellowing.

"THAT'S WHY SLYTHERINS ALL SING
WEASLEY IS OUR KING."

"-and Katie Bell of Gryffindor dodges Pucey, ducks Montague, nice swerve, Katie, and she throws to Johnson, Angelina Johnson takes the Quaffle, she's past Warrington, she's heading for goal, come on now, Angelina - GRYFFINDOR SCORE! It's twenty-ten, twenty-ten to Slytherin and Pucey has the Quaffle..."

Hope almost didn't see it, but its silver wings caught her eye where it was fluttering close to the ground. A glance towards Malfoy toward her he hadn't seen it (when did he ever?), and it was closer to her than it was to him...

She dived, almost vertical, streaking towards the ground so fast that several people screamed. Malfoy was a little late on the uptake, a few seconds behind as Hope pulled up on her broom so that she was level with the ground, the Snitch barely in reach. A fingertip brushed against the metal and then she threw her weight forward and clenched a fist around the small ball, pulling up only to be thrown from her broom a second later by something striking her in the back, sending her skidding over the earth.

She groaned as she forced her body off the ground, stumbling into a standing position as Angelina raced to her side, jumping off her broom in her haste.

"Are you alright?" She asked, her face tight with worry.

"Fine," Hope promised, "it's just a bruise."

"It was that thug Crabbe!" Angelina said, her voice full of fire. "He whacked the Bludger at you the moment he saw you'd got the Snitch –but we won, Hope, we won!"
Hope smiled as she hugged her, the smile falling from her face once they parted and Malfoy said in a snide voice, "Saved Weasley's neck, haven't you? I've never seen a worse Keeper...but he was born in a bin...did you like my lyrics, Potter?"

Hope cast him a look so cold that she was surprised that he didn't step back. "Keep your fat mouth to yourself," she said chillingly, as she went to the other teammates who were dismounting –Ron had opted to disappear into the changing rooms–

"That was brilliant!" Alicia told Hope as she and Katie hugged her.

"Thanks-"

"We wanted to write another couple of verses! But we couldn't find rhymes for fat and ugly -we wanted to sing about his mother, see-"

Hope paled as Fred and George hugged her, not having noticed what Malfoy was saying.

"-we couldn't fit in useless loser either -for his father, you know –"

They both went as stiff as a board.

"Leave it!" Angelina begged Fred, taking his arm with both of her hands. "Leave it, Fred, let him yell, he's just sore he lost, the jumped-up little-"

"-but you like the Weasleys, don't you Potter? Spend holidays there and everything, don't you? Can't see how you stand the stink, but I suppose when you've been dragged up by Muggles, even the Weasleys' hovel smells OK. Or perhaps, you can remember what your mother's house stank like, Potter, and Weasley's pigsty reminds you of it-"

Hope didn't hear the screams or the yells, Hope didn't hear anything...it all just fell away, and suddenly, Hope was gone.
Tales of Giants

Her eyes opened and she found that she was in the Forbidden Forest, not a particularly good place to be, even on a nice day like this. Her heart was throbbing in her chest and she had fallen to her knees in the undergrowth.

"There are things worth getting angry over," Remus had once told her, "and then there are things that aren't worth your time."

And Malfoy definitely wasn't worth her time, but how dare he! How dare the foul-mouthed little bastard say those things about her mother!

She wanted to hit something so badly! She just wanted to-!

Hot, angry tears cascaded down her cheeks as she raised her fist and punched the nearest tree, which, in retrospect, probably wasn't a good idea, really. She disregarded the slight pain and drew it back a second, a third, a fourth, before she finally dropped it to her side.

"You seem upset, Hope Potter."

Hope jumped and twisted around to find herself facing the palomino centaur from her first year, Firenze, ironically he had come to her rescue then too after she had flashed to the forest by mistake.

"Firenze," she breathed, before turning away slightly to swipe the tears from her face. "Er, hi, how are you?"

"As well as the planets in orbit," the centaur said solemnly, which made no sense whatsoever to Hope. "You are upset."

"Oh, well," Hope gave an airy, false laugh. "That seems to be happening a lot this year, don't let it worry you…could you do me a favour and show me how to get out of here? I think some people might be wondering where I am."

"Certainly," the centaur said graciously, bending forward slightly to extend his elbow to her, which she gladly took as he led her through the forest, dousing her with water, because apparently there was a spot that always rained. The rain was welcomed, soaking through her uniform and plastering her hair to her face in seconds.

They did not speak after that, and Hope assumed it was that Firenze had nothing to say, for usually when he spoke, it was almost always cryptic.

"Follow this path and you will reach Hagrid's Hut," Firenze said after a certain amount of time had passed and Hope removed her arm from him, giving a bow of thanks as she followed his instructions. The air was much colder outside the forest than within it, and being soaked to the bone was not helping Hope as she walked slowly up to the castle, ignoring the whispers that passed her as she walked by, making towards one room, Professor McGonagall's office.

She raised her good hand to knock when a sickly sweet voice spoke from the other side.

"You remember how you overrode me, when I was unwilling to allow the Gryffindor Quidditch team to re-form?" Umbridge's voice queried. "How you took the case to Dumbledore, who insisted that the team be allowed to play? Well, now, I couldn't have that. I contacted the Minister at once, and he quite agreed with me that the High Inquisitor has to have the power to strip pupils of
privileges, or she -that is to say, I- would have less authority than common teachers! And you see now, don't you, Minerva, how right I was in attempting to stop the Gryffindor team re-forming? Dreadful tempers...anyway, I was reading out our amendment...hem, hem... "The High Inquisitor will henceforth have supreme authority over all punishments, sanctions and removal of privileges pertaining to the students of Hogwarts, and the power to alter such punishments, sanctions and removals of privileges as may have been ordered by other staff members. Signed, Cornelius Fudge, Minister for Magic, Order of Merlin First Class, etc., etc." So...I really think I will have to ban this young man from playing Quidditch ever again."

Hope's heart sank. It had to be one of the twins.

"I think a lifelong ban ought to do the trick," said Umbridge, sick pleasure in her voice that made Hope's blood curdle. "Mr. Weasley here, and I think, to be safe, this young man's twin ought to be stopped, too -if his teammates had not restrained him, I feel sure he would have attacked young Mr. Malfoy as well. I will want their broomsticks confiscated, of course; I shall keep them safely in my office, to make sure there is no infringement of my ban. And Miss Potter."

"Showed exceptional restraint," Professor McGonagall said in a low voice that made a surge of affection towards her Head of House rise inside her, "by being the better person and walking away."

Umbridge giggled impishly. "You think so do you? When it was so clear that the girl wanted to attack the poor boy, no, I think-"

The door was thrown open and three pairs of eyes fell on Hope as she entered.

"Hope!" George said in clear relief at the sight of her, but then his face fell slightly as he took in her water-logged clothes and bloodied fist. "What happened?"

"Life," Hope said in a deadpan, moving forward to stand beside where he was sitting and grasping his fingers tightly with her uninjured hand as she glared at Umbridge.

"Am I to be punished for a crime I did not commit?" she asked in a dry voice. "My, the Ministry is really falling back to their defaults, aren't they?"

Umbridge's pig-like eyes narrowed as she smiled. "We're just concerned for the well-being of our students, dear."

"Well-being?" Hope scoffed. "What a load of-"

"Hope," Professor McGonagall warned.

"Since I have done nothing wrong," Hope said coldly, "you can't take my broom or ban me from Quidditch...so why don't you run back to the Slytherins and tell them that their plan failed."

Professor McGonagall watched stunned as Hope kept talking.

"Detention, Miss Potter. One week starting on Monday."

And then she was gone and George was looking at Hope miserably.

"You shouldn't have had to do that," he said, standing up and cupping her cheek, not really caring that Professor McGonagall was there.

"I know," Hope said tiredly, "but she's such a cow, I couldn't resist."
The scars shone silver on her hand.

"Miss Potter? Where did you go?" Professor McGonagall wasn't really going to get into the new set of detentions Hope was expected to do.

"I Flashed into the Forbidden Forest by mistake," Hope said, turning slightly towards her professor. "I punched a tree...I think I might have broken my wrist, actually...Firenze led me out."

"I'm taking her to the hospital wing," George said coolly before steering his girlfriend out.

"I'm sorry you and Fred got banned," Hope said morosely as they walked through the silent halls, "I mean, he was saying awful things about your mum and dad, but-

George kissed her and the excuses fell from her lips as she raised a hand to thread it through his bright hair. There was something about this kiss that was so very different than all the other ones she had shared with him. This one held a kind of calmness that hardly suited him, but the softness of it made her heart throb.

Hope smiled slightly as he parted from her. "It'll be alright, you'll see."

"Aren't I the one who's always telling you that?" George said with a slight smile.

"Well, yes," Hope admitted, wincing slightly as her hand brushed against her side. Gently, more gently than Hope could ever imagine George being, he gingerly gripped her arm, raising her broken wrist, examining it intently for a moment.

"Well, at least we know one thing," he said in a light voice.

"Hm?" She mumbled in confusion.

He grinned. "You've got a mean right hook."

Hope scoffed.

The whole night was dead depressing with only one bright point, and that was Hagrid's sudden return.

"Hagrid! Open up! It's us!" Hope said as she banged harshly on the door with her hand that had been easily mended by Madam Pomfrey.

"Shoulda known," his familiar voice grunted from the opposite side of the door. "Bin home three seconds...out the way, Fang...out the way, yeh dozy dog..."

But Hope couldn't help but be stunned when the door opened and they finally caught a glimpse of Hagrid's, but that was nothing compared to Hermione giving a small scream at the sight of the blood, bruises, and cuts that appeared to make up his face.

He ushered them quickly inside with an "It's nothin'," as they gazed at his horror-struck as he put on a kettle of tea and they sat into the hairs beside the fire. He grinned widely at them, but it looked painful to Hope. "Blimey, it's good ter see yeh three again –had good summers, did yeh?"

"Hagrid, someone's attacked you!" Ron said, still stunned by the half-giant's appearance.

"I toldjer! It's nothin'!"
"Would you say it was nothing if one of us turned up with a pound of mince instead of a face?" Ron retorted, eyeing Hagrid for other hidden injuries. He suspected a few broken ribs, going off of how he was favouring his left side.

"You should at least go for a hospital wing visit," Hermione insisted. "Those injuries-"

"I'm dealin' with 'em, alrigh'?" Hagrid said curtly as he moved to lift a raw steak that had a greenish tinge to it.

"Hagrid, that's dragon meat!" Ron said stunned. "Were you hurt that bad?"

Hagrid ignored that as he slapped the meat against the side of his face.

"Are you going to tell us who did that to you?" Hope demanded, coming out of her shocked stupor.

"Can't, Hope," he grunted. "Top secret. More'n me job's worth ter tell yeh that."

"The giants did that, didn't they?" Hermione guessed, making a frantic gleam enter Hagrid's eyes.

"Giants? Who said anythin' abou' giants? Who yeh bin talkin' to? Who's told yeh what I've- who's said I've bin-eh?"

"We guessed," Hermione said simply.

"Oh, yeh did, did yeh?" Hagrid eyed her with the one eye that wasn't covered by the steak.

"It's kind of obvious," Ron piped up, "you did leave with Madam Maxime, and the only thing you two've got in common is giant blood."

Hope was sure that Hagrid might've been more insulted if Ron hadn't been saying it in a matter-of-fact way.

"Never known kids like you three fer knowin' more'n yeh oughta," he grumbled under his breath as he set them up each with a large mug of boiling tea. "An' I'm not complimentin' yeh, neither. Nosy, some'd call it. Interferin'."

But they could hear the smile in his voice.

"So you did go looking for giants?" Hope asked, leaning forward slightly, her face bright with interest.

Hagrid sat down opposite them as they blew on the tea to cool it. "Yeah."

"And you found them?" Hermione asked in awe.

"Well, it's not as though they're difficult ter find, ter be honest, pretty big, see," Hagrid muttered.

"So tell us about being attacked by the giants, and Hope'll tell you about being attacked by the dementors-" Ron started to say when all three had to duck as Hagrid did a spit-take.

"Whadda'yeh mean, attacked by dementors?" he demanded.

"Didn't someone tell you?" Hermione asked, a little surprised of his reaction.

"I don' know any thin' that's bin happenin' since I left!" Hagrid said, incensed. "I was on a secret mission, wasn' I, didn' wan' owls followin' me all over the place - ruddy Dementors! Yeh're not
serious?"

Hope felt the need to point out. "No, that would be my godfather." He wasn't amused. "But yeah, they showed up one night and came after me and Dudley, and then the Ministry of Magic expelled me~"

"WHAT?"

"- and I had to go to a hearing and everything," Hope said talking over him, "but tell us about the giants first."

"You were expelled!"

"You first! Then I'll tell you how my summer was."

Green met black and Hope smirked as he conceded.

"Oh, all righ'," Hagrid said in a manner as if he had no other choice. "Well, we set off righ' after term ended~"

He took a gulp of tea as Hermione asked, "Madame Maxime went with you, didn't she?" Hermione knew she had, but, being Hermione, she had to make certain of all the facts.

"Yeah, tha's righ'," he agreed, a fond glow lighting his face at the mention of the Headmistress of Beauxbatons. "Yeah, it was jus' the pair of us. An' I'll tell yen this, she's not afraid of roughin' it, Olympe. Yeh know, she's a fine, well-dressed woman, an' knowin' where we was goin' I wondered 'ow she'd feel abou' clamberin' over boulders an' sleepin' in caves an' tha', bu' she never complained once."

"Did you know where the giants were, then?" Hope asked in interest.

"Well, Dumbledore knew an' he told us," Hagrid admitted.

"Are they hidden?" Ron asked, screwing up his face as he tried to imagine where giants could hide.

"Not really," said Hagrid, "It's jus' that mos' wizards aren' bothered where they are, S'long as it's a good long way away. But where they are's very difficult ter get ter, fer humans anyway, so we needed Dumbledore's instructions. Took us abou' a month ter get there~"

"A month?" Hermione asked in surprise. "Were you not supposed to use magic, then?"

Hagrid grunted in agreement. "The Ministry's keepin' an eye on Dumbledore an' anyone they reckon's in league with 'im, an' we had ter be careful, 'cause Olympe an' me, we stick out a bit~"

Ron snorted into his tea, but Hagrid didn't seem to notice.

"- so we're not hard ter follow. We was pretendin' we was goin' on holiday together, so we got inter France an' we made like we was headin' fer where Olympe's school is, 'cause we knew we was bein' tailed by someone from the Ministry. We had to go slow, 'cause I'm not really s'posed ter use magic an' we knew the Ministry'd be lookin' fer a reason ter turn us in. But we managed ter give the Berk tailin' us the slip round abou' Dee-John. We chanced a bit o' magic after that an' it wasn' a bad journey. Ran inter a couple o' mad trolls on the Polish border an' I had a sligh' disagreement with a vampire in a pub in Minsk, bu' apart from tha' couldn't'a bin smoother. An' then we reached the place, an' we started trekkin' up through the mountains, lookin' fer signs of 'em...We had ter lay off the magic once we got near 'em. Partly 'cause they don' like wizards an' we didn' want ter put their
backs up too soon, an' partly 'cause Dumbledore had warned us You-Know-Who was bound ter be after the giants an' all. Said it was odds on he'd sent a messenger off ter them already. Told us ter be very careful of drawin' attention ter ourselves as we got nearer in case there was Death Eaters around."

"But you found them," Hope said.

Hagrid nodded his massive head. "Went over a ridge one nigh' an' there they was, spread ou' underneath us. Little fires burnin' below an' huge shadows...it was like watchin' bits o' the mountain movin'."

"Were they big?" Ron asked.

"'Bout twenty feet," Hagrid said, making it sound not too impressive to him. "Some o' the bigger ones mighta bin twenty-five."

"Were there a lot?" Hope asked.

"I reckon abou' seventy or eighty, hard to tell, really," Hagrid said.

"Only seventy or eighty?" Hermione said in astonishment.

"Mm," Hagrid mumbled in a morose manner, "eighty left, an' there was loads once, musta bin a hundred diff'rent tribes from all over the world. Bu' they've bin dyin' out fer ages. Wizards killed a few, o' course, bu' mostly they killed each other, an' now they're dyin' out faster than ever. They're not made ter live bunched up together like tha'. Dumbledore says it's our fault, it was the wizards who forced 'em to go an' made 'em live a good long way from us an' they had no choice bu' ter stick together fer their own protection." "What happened after you saw them?" Hope asked.

"Well, we waited till morning, didn' want ter go sneakin' up on 'em in the dark, fer our own safety' Hagrid said seriously. "Bout three in the mornin' they fell asleep jus' where they was sittin'. We didn' dare sleep. Fer one thing, we wanted ter make sure none of 'em woke up an' came up where we were, an' fer another, the snorin' was unbelievable. Caused an avalanche near mornin'. Anyway once it was light we wen' down ter see 'em."

"You walked right into camp?" Ron said, staring at him agape.

"Well, Dumbledore'd told us how ter do it," Hagrid said with slight shrug that made the meat plastered to his face sway slightly. "Give the Gurg gifts, show some respect, yeh know."

"Gurg?" Hope said, sounding the word out strangely.

"Oh, the Gurg - means the chief," Hagrid explained. "So we went down ter him, where he was lyin' in the valley. They was in this dip between four pretty high mountains, see, beside a mountain lake, an' Karkus -that was his name- was lyin' by the lake roarin' at the others ter feed him an' his wife. Olympe an' I went down the mountainside--"

"They didn't kill you?" Ron asked, shocked.

"Some o' them were definitely considerin' it," Hagrid said grudgingly, "but we did what Dumbledore told us ter do, which was ter hold our gift up high an' keep our eyes on the Gurg an' ignore the others. So tha's what we did. An' the rest of 'em went quiet an' watched us pass an' we got right up ter Karkus' feet an' we bowed an' put our present down in front o' him."
"What kind of gift was it?" Ron asked curiously.

"We took him magic. Giants like magic, jus' don' like us usin' it against 'em," he told them.
"Anyway, that firs' day we gave 'im a branch o' Gubraithian fire."

"Wow!"

"Really?" Hope asked impressed, but Ron just looked confused.

"What?"

"A branch of everlasting fire," Hermione said, frowning at her friend, "you should remember it; Professor Flitwick's mentioned it more than once in class!"

"So, anyway," Hagrid said before another fight could break out between Ron and Hermione, though, Hope had to admit, there hadn't been any huge ones this year, so that was impressive, "Dumbledore'd bewitched this branch to burn fer evermore, which isn' somethin' any wizard could do, an' so I lies it down in the snow by Karkus' feet and says, "A gift to the Gurg of the giants from Albus Dumbledore, who sends his respectful greetings."

"Did he like it?" Ron asked curiously.

"Oh, yeah." Hagrid nodded his head, his dark ratty hair going in several directions. "It went down a storm once they understood what it was. Very pleased. So then I said, "Albus Dumbledore asks the Gurg to speak with his messenger when he returns tomorrow with another gift.""

"You didn't stay?" Hermione asked, puzzled.

"Dumbledore wanted us ter take it very slow. Let 'em see we kept our promises," Hagrid explained. "We'll come back tomorrow with another present, an' then we do come back with another present - gives a good impression, see? An' gives them time ter test out the firs' present an' find out it's a good one, an' get 'em eager fer more. In any case, giants like Karkus - overload 'em with information an' they'll kill yeh jus' to simplify things. So we bowed outta the way an' went off an' found ourselves a nice little cave ter spend that night in an' the followin' mornin' we went back an' this time we found Karkus sittin' up waitin' fer us lookin' all eager."

"You talked to him?" Hope asked.

"Oh yeah," Hagrid said, wrinkling his eyebrows together as he did so. "Firs' we presented him with a nice battle helmet - 'goblin-made an' indestructible, yeh know - an' then we sat down an' we talked. He didn't say much, listened mostly. Bu' there were good signs. He'd heard o' Dumbledore, heard he'd argued against the killin' o' the last giants in Britain. Karkus seemed ter be quite int'rested in what Dumbledore had ter say. An' a few o' the others, 'specially the ones who had some English, they gathered round an' listened too. We were hopeful when we left that day. Promised ter come back next mornin' with another present. Bu' that night it all wen' wrong."

Hermione gave an ominous gasp and Hope and Ron shared identical worried looks.

"They didn't…attack you, did they?" Hope asked.

"Not then," Hagrid said grimly, "bu' giants, they're not meant ter live together. Not in big groups like that. They can' help themselves, they half kill each other every few weeks. The men fight each other an' the women fight each other; the remnants of the old tribes fight each other, an' that's even without squabbles over food an' the best fires an' sleepin' spots. Yeh'd think, seein' as how their whole race is abou' finished, they'd lay off each other, bu'..." Hagrid made a sad noise and it took Hope a
moment to realize that it was a sigh. "That night a fight broke out, we saw it from the mouth of our
cave, lookin' down on the valley. Went on fer hours, yeh wouldn' believe the noise. An' when the
sun came up the snow was scarlet an' his head was lyin' at the bottom o' the lake."

"Whose head?" Hermione asked, slightly fearful, having been completely drawn into the tale.

"Karkus'," Hagrid said lowly. "There was a new Gurg, Golgomath…well, we hadn' bargained on a
new Gurg two days after we'd made friendly contact with the firs' one, an' we had a funny feelin'
Golgomath wouldn' be so keen ter listen to us, bu' we had ter try."

"You decided to go and have a chat after you saw him rip off someone's head?" Ron asked half-
stupefied, half-impressed.

"Course we did," Hagrid grumbled, "we hadn' gone all that way ter give up after two days! We wen'
down with the next present we'd meant ter give ter Karkus. I knew it was no go before I'd opened
me mouth. He was sitting there wearin' Karkus' helmet, leerin' at us as we got nearer. He's massive,
one o' the biggest ones there. Black hair an' matchin' teeth an' a necklace o' bones. Human-lookin'
bones, some of 'em. Well, I gave it a go - held out a great roll o' dragon skin - an' said, "A gift fer the
Gurg of the giants-" Nex' thing I knew, I was hangin' upside-down in the air by me feet, two of his
mates had grabbed me."

Hermione stifled a gasp and Hope looked horrified as Ron choked on his tea.

"However did you get away?" Hope asked.

"Wouldn'ta done if Olympe hadn' bin there," Hagrid admitted grudgingly. "She pulled out her wand
an' did some o' the fastest spellwork I've ever seen. Ruddy marvellous. Hit the two holdin' me right in
the eyes with Conjunctivitis Curses an' they dropped me straightaway - 'bu' we were in trouble then,
'cause we'd used magic against 'em, an' that's what giants hate abou' wizards. We had ter leg it an' we
knew there was no way we was going ter be able ter march inter the camp again."

"Blimey, Hagrid!" Ron said, startled, after regaining his breath from a thump to his back by Hope.

"How long were you there?" Hope asked. "It couldn't have been just the three days if it took you so
long to get back."

"We spent a couple o' days lyin' low up in the cave an' watchin'. An' wha' we saw wasn' good."

"Did he kill anyone else?" Hermione's voice was filled with revulsion.

"No," Hagrid said with a tiny bit of disappointment, "we soon found out he didn' object ter all
wizards - just us."

"Death Eaters," Hope said darkly.

"Yup," Hagrid agreed in a voice just as dark. "Couple of 'em were visitin' him ev'ry clay, bringin'
gifts ter the Gurg, an' he wasn' dangling them upside-down."

"How could you tell they were Death Eaters?" Ron asked.

"Because I saw Macnair with them," Hagrid said in a resentful voice. "Remember him? Bloke they
sent ter kill Buckbeak? Maniac, he is. Likes killin', as much as Golgomath; no wonder they were
gettin' on so well."

"So what happened?" Hope pressed.
"Me an' Olympe talked it over an' we agreed, jus' 'cause the Gurg looked like favourin' You-Know-Who didn' mean all of 'em would. We had ter try an' persuade some o' the others, the ones who hadn' wanted Golgomath as Gurg."

"How did you know how to tell them from Golgomath's lot?" Ron asked.

"They were the ones bein' beaten to a pulp, weren' they?" Hagrid fiddled with his dragon meat before beginning again. "The ones with any sense were keepin' outta Golgomath's way, hidin' out in caves roun' the gully jus' like we were. So we decided we'd go pokin' round the caves by night an' see if we couldn' persuade a few o' them."

"You went into dark caves looking for giants?" Ron's eyes were as wide as saucers.

"Well, it wasn' the giants who worried us most," Hagrid said with a careless shrug that had him wincing. "We were more concerned abou' the Death Eaters. Dumbledore had told us before we wen' not ter tangle with 'em if we could avoid it, an' the trouble was they knew we was around - 'spect Golgomath told 'em abou' us. At night, when the giants were sleepin' an' we wanted ter be creepin' inter the caves, Macnair an' the other one were sneakin' round the mountains lookin' fer us. I was hard put to stop Olympe jumpin' out at 'em, she was rarin' ter attack 'em...she's somethin' when she's roused, Olympe...fiery, yeh know...'spect it's the French in her..."

Hope smirked, recalling Fleur when she got angry before pointedly clearing her throat. With some luck they might actually finish this story before midnight. "So did you find them? The giants against Golgomath?"

"What?" His eyes were a little dazed. He'd gotten off track. "Oh . . . oh, yeah, we did. Yeah, on the third night after Karkus was killed we crept outta the cave we'd bin hidin' in an' headed back down inter the gully, keepin' our eyes skinned fer the Death Eaters. Got inside a few o' the caves, no go - then, in abou' the sixth one, we found three giants hidin'."

"Did they attack you?" Hermione asked, her hands still over her mouth, only slightly muffling the words.

'Probably woulda done," Hagrid conceded, "if they'd bin in any condition, but they was badly hurt, all three o' them; Golgomath's lot had beaten 'em unconscious; they'd woken up an' crawled inter the nearest shelter they could find. Anyway, one o' them had a bit of English an' 'e translated fer the others, an' what we had ter say didn' seem ter go down too badly. So we kep' goin' back, visitin' the wounded...I reckon we had abou' six or seven o' them convinced at one poin'."

Ron looked excited by this but Hermione's ears caught his last words. "At one point?"

Hagrid's face and voice grew sombre. "Golgomath's lot raided the caves. The ones tha' survived didn' wan' no more ter to do with us after that."

Hope, Ron, and Hermione shared identical looks of shock.

Voldemort had won that round. Giants siding with him would be a huge blow to their side.
Hope's hand was bleeding again by the time she, Ron, and Hermione began their first lesson of Care of Magical Creatures with Hagrid back as their professor. She had to wrap a bandage soaked in Murtlap around it, but it was hidden from sight by Hope's glove.

"This sounds like a very bad idea," Hermione muttered under her breath as they trekked after Hagrid until they reached a spot in the Forbidden Forest where the trees were not as sparse and were knit so closely together than they had blocked out a good deal of the sun, keeping the snow at bay by a thicket of branches.

Hagrid, who had been carrying half of a cow that smelled a bit badly, stopped and placed the carcass onto the ground, motioning them forward. "Gather roun', gather roun', now, they'll be attracted by the smell o' the meat but I'm going ter give em a call anyway, 'cause they'll like ter know it's me."

Several people jumped back as he made a very strange, very loud noise that was pitched higher than he had ever spoken. He gave it once more before Hope gave a silent gasp, taking a step forward in stunned disbelief.

It was the skeletal horses that had pulled the drawn carriages that took them to the castle. She was sure that its wide pale eyes had fastened on hers for a moment before it knelt to chew on the cow.

"Oh, an' here comes another one!" Hagrid said as a second black horse-like…thing appeared, bending its head to eat the meat as well. "Now…put yer hands up, who can see 'em?"

Hope raised her hand, and she wasn't the only one. Neville had as well as a thin Slytherin boy that Hope did not even know the name of.

"Yeah...yeah, I knew you'd be able ter, Hope," he said, not a trace of the grin he had bore before. 'An' you too, Neville, eh? An'–"

"Excuse me," Malfoy said in a voice filled with scorn, "but what exactly are we supposed to be seeing?"

Hagrid gestured to where the cow was and Parvati made a horrified noise. "What's doing it? What's eating it?"

"Thestrals," Hagrid said, grinning once more. "Hogwarts has got a whole herd of 'em in here. Now, who knows–?"

"But they're really, really unlucky!" Parvati said, a stunned expression on her face. "They're supposed to bring all sorts of horrible misfortune on people who see them. Professor Trelawney told me once–"

"No, no, no," Hagrid said quickly, faintly amused, "tha's jus' superstition, that is, they aren' unlucky, they're dead clever an' useful! Course, this lot don' get a lot o' work, it's mainly jus' pullin' the school carriages unless Dumbledore's takin' a long journey an' don' want ter Apparate –an' here's another couple, look–"

"I think I felt something, I think it's near me!" Parvati cried in alarm.

"Don' worry, it won' hurt yeh," Hagrid said calmly. "Righ', now, who can tell me why some o' yeh can see 'em an' some can't?"
"The only people who can see Thestrals," Hermione said after being called on, "are people who have seen death."

"That's exactly right," Hagrid agreed, "ten points ter Gryffindor. Now, Thestrals--"

"Hem, hem."

Hope couldn't resist rolling her eyes to the sound of her practically weekly torturer.

"Oh, hello!" Hagrid was far too nice to not give her a smile.

"You received the note I sent to your cabin this morning?" she asked in a voice that was both loud and slow as if talking to someone who was either very young or very deaf. It instantly ticked Hope off. "Telling you that I would be inspecting your lesson?"

"Oh, yeah. Glad yeh found the place all righ'! Well, as you can see --or, I dunno --can you? We're doin' Thestrals today--"

"I'm sorry? What did you say?"

"What a complete cow," Hope hissed under her breath as she watched Umbridge write down--loudly--several false complaints that she herself had instigated. "What a complete cow!"

Hermione made a noise of agreement as she literally shook with rage.

"Er...yeah...good stuff abou' Thestrals," Hagrid said, flustered by her behaviour and questions. "Well, once they're tamed, like this lot, yeh'll never be lost again. 'Mazin' sense o' direction, jus' tell 'em where yeh want ter go--"

"Assuming they can understand you, of course," Malfoy said in an obnoxious voice.

"You can see the Thestrals, Longbottom, can you?" Umbridge asked, turning to Neville and making Hope's skin crawl. She felt pity for him having to be that close to her. "Who did you see die?"

"My...my granddad," Neville said quietly.

"And what do you think of them?"

"Er..." Neville didn't seem too much like the line of questioning, growing increasingly more nervous as she continued to ask him questions. "Well, they're...er...okay..."

"Students...are...too...intimidated...to...admit...they...are...fright--"

"What's she doing?"

Hope had approached the first Thstral, the one Hagrid said was called Tenebrus. He lifted his great head to survey her as she raised a hand to him. He could smell the blood, no doubt, as he nuzzled it, giving her gloved palm a good lick. Hope smiled as she patted its bony neck. The others may not view them as lovely, but she did. Then again, Hope always had a habit of going for things that weren't deemed ordinary, such as Blood Magick or Parseltongue.

Tenebrus licked her cheek and she gave a light laugh, whispering into his ear, "Want to circle around the forest?"

He knelt easily and Hope threw a leg over its back, feeling the muscles ripple as it stood, her feet leaving the ground. There were a few "Ooh"s of surprise as she did so, leaning forward as she
lodged her feet at the wing joints and gripped the mane tightly as it set off at a run, spreading its leathery wings as it rose upwards flapping them to rise higher and higher.

It was as impressive as flying with Buckbeak had been, and when she touched the ground, she was beaming, a grin that widened at the look on old Toady's face.

December was upon them faster than Hope would've thought was possible. Fred and George had been replaced by Ginny and a boy named Jack Sloper, who, according to Angelina, wasn't too great but Ginny had a hell of an arm on her, even if she was built more for chasing (which Ginny had told her was why she would be trying out of the position next year when Alicia and Angelina had gone on). Hope was still working off her detentions that she wasn't sure if her hand would ever completely heal, and it was with great reluctance that scheduled their last DA meeting before the holiday on their last Friday, which they all had off. It was with reluctance because Hope would be missing for the first half of the meeting, being in detention.

"Alright," Ron called out to the members, feeling a little out of his depth—this was more of Hope's thing—as he called them all to order, "Hope's not going to be here for awhile, so—"

"Why?" Zacharias demanded crassly.

"'Cause she's in detention, you tosspot!" Ron snarled, earning a few laughs that reddened Zacharias' cheeks. "And she's put me in charge, so deal with it!" He took a sigh to calm his nerves. This was usually Hermione's sort of thing, why she had asked him of all people to do it, Ron had no clue. "She wants you to keep practicing what you've learned—"

"We're not doing anything new?" Zacharias' irritation didn't seem to ebb away at all. "If I'd known that, I wouldn't have come."

"We're all really sorry Hope didn't tell you, then," Fred said, his voice echoing in the silence and making several people snigger in amusement.

"When she gets here," Ron continued as if he hadn't been interrupted, "she was thinking she might do a simulation or two to test you on what you know, but there's no point in learning anything new since we're going to be going on holiday."

Excited murmurs filled the room. "Now split off!"

Hermione gave him a smile that made his ears burn. "You're doing great," she promised, "Hope would approve."

Ron hoped so, but still came as a relief when the door creaked open and she entered, a fresh bandage wrapped around her hand. Despite looking as exhausted as she did, she spared him a grin, clasping his shoulder.

"Looks great," she told him. "Thanks for covering for me."

"It wasn't that big of a deal," he muttered, his cheeks reddening, making her grin widen.

"Gather round you lot!" Hope called after giving one piercing whistle, and the thirty students swarmed her in seconds. "Simulation time! Here's how it's going to work…"

She narrowed her eyes slightly and envisioned what she wanted and everyone stumbled as the room lengthened and large practice dummies seemed to appear out of thin air.
"Each dummy has a letter on them," she called out, "R for Reducto, E for Expelliarmus, S for Stupefy, I for Impedimenta, D for Diffindo, and the question mark…well, surprise me…" Hope grinned. "The dummies will switch their positions each time, so you won't know which to expect first, and that's the point. If a Death Eater's pointing his wand at you, all you've got to do is react. However, I will be grading you on accuracy and spell strength." Several people groaned. "You can always fail your OWLs," she sang, and they quickly silenced. "Now, who wants to go first?"

Some students glanced between each other.

"I can always choo-"

"I'll go."

It was Hermione who had spoken first, a nervous energy radiating around her as she walked up to Hope amidst the cheers of the other members. "This is really brilliant," she added to Hope, "it reminds me of Remus' exam, only more spell oriented."

"It is, isn't it?" Hope hummed in agreement, "see you at the end!" She ran the length of the room to sit on the table at the end, taking out a parchment and quill and writing out: **Hermione Granger** at the top with a letter for each spell. She lifted her eyes and watched intently as Hermione took a few steps forward only to be accosted by a dummy with an S "Stupefy!"

It fell forward into a heap as Hermione stepped over it. Ten steps later- "Impedimenta!" The force of the spell threw it back.

"Expelliarmus!" The thick wooden wand was cast aside.

"Reducto!" The dummy was reduced to cinders.

And the last one- "Diffindo!" A long gash appeared across its breast.

"How did I do?" Hermione asked as she came to a stop before Hope.

"You did pretty well across the board," Hope conceded, "Your Impedimenta could be a little stronger and you need better aim on your Diffindo…mid to high E."

Hermione nodded seriously, taking Hope's criticisms to heart.

"Lee, you next!"

After seeing Hermione do it first, the others were more eager to do so. Hope soon discovered that Lee was stronger in Stunning than he was in Impediment, Tracey was downright awful at Diffindo, but stellar at Disarming and the Reductor, Ginny was the best at the Reductor, but the worst at Impediment, Terry was completely average, Luna was getting better at Disarming but excelled at Impediment, Justin was nearly perfect with his Diffindo but shaky at Reductor, Daphne was much like Hermione only with a weaker Impediment…the list went on.

"So, you all know what you need to practice," Hope said, grinning widely at them all, "you've all made such unbelievable progress, really, well done. So, we're not going to be meeting until after the holidays, but do your best to practice on your own." She was positively beaming. "It's really great, great work!"

The applause that followed made her blush redder than Ron's hair after she had finished speaking. "Oh, shut it!" she said laughing. "Check the Map on your way out, I don't want you lot ending in detention on your last day!"
"Thanks a lot, Hope!" Neville said, and Hope hugged him, kissing his cheek, making him blush.

"It's no problem, just work on the Stunning Spell, alright?" she grinned as she released him.

"Definitely!" he was making towards the door with Luna at his side, babbling about a recent oddity her father had printed.

"Merry Christmas, Hope!"

"Thanks so much!"

"Have a good Christmas!"

Hope smiled at them all, it fading slightly as she came to Cho. "You have a good Christmas, Cho, alright?"

Cho was smiling, but her eyes were filled with tears. Hope wondered what had upset her this time. "I-I will, but! But I was wondering…"

"Yes?"

George was waiting for her at the door.

"It's just," she said thickly, "learning all this stuff...it just makes me...wonder whether...if he'd known it all...he'd still be alive."

Of course...they'd returned to Cedric. They always seemed to.

"Cedric did know this stuff, he was really good!" Hope promised. "It's just...sometimes people are better...the room is yours, take care of yourself, alright?" Hope gave her a quick and tight hug before returning to George's side and Cho couldn't help but watch in envy as Hope left with her love.

"That was one of your best."

"Was it?" Hope asked as she walked in time with George as they left Cho by herself.

"Mm-hm." George glanced to her. He'd been wanting to ask her for weeks now, and it was now or never, before his courage failed.

He pulled her up short and Hope's eyes flashed to his, vaguely surprised. "George?"

"I want to ask you something, and it's really important, well, I mean, it's really important to me, it might not be-"

"You're rambling," Hope said, tugging lightly on his fingers. "What is it?"

George issued a low breath. "I wanted to know...if you'd move in with me over the summer."

Hope's eyes coloured hazel in surprise. Of all the questions he could have asked her, this one was far from the top of the list. But it had been one of the most common things she had told him since the day they had met, how she wanted nothing more than to get out of the Dursleys house.

"Yes."

"I-what?"
"Yes," she breathed, "I will absolutely move in with you."

A wide grin split his face. "Really?"

"Really!"

She threw her arms around his neck and kissed him fiercely until her lungs burned for air.

Hope dreamt about the first time she'd laid eyes on the Mirror of Erised, recalling the second image she had seen, the older version of her holding a child. Only know that she was older she was able to see that the boy's hair favoured George's. It had been little more than a silly childhood crush at the time, but look at her now! Moving in with her soon to be eighteen year old boyfriend at fifteen, oh her mother would have been scandalized! But Hope was in the clouds, only to be forced suddenly down to earth.

She felt...serpentine...smooth and sliding across an equally smooth floor that cool against her underbelly...it was dark but her sight was clear and she could see strange and glowing objects that she cared little for...there was someone here, someone blocking her from her goal...Hope slid forward at the sight of a man with thinning ginger hair was nodding off, sitting on the floor...Hope very much desired to sink her teeth into him until he bled, but she had a job to do...

But then the man's eyes flared open and he saw her. He drew his wand, but Hope was faster, striking hard and quick three successive times, her fangs plunging into skin and tasting blood, breaking bone. It was glorious!

He cried out in pain and then he fell, collapsing in pain and blood, and Hope's scar was burning...

"Hope! HOPE!"

Her eyes opened but she could hardly see anyone through the haze of pain. Hermione's bushy head was visible and a mane of red...perhaps Ginny had been heading to the loo? Hope's stomach burned like acid and she felt the need to--

Hope lurched over the side of the mattress to vomit sick onto the floor.

"We should get help," a voice was saying in the background. Was it Parvati or Lavender? She couldn't be sure...

"Hope? Hope!" Ginny was at her side and Hermione was smoothing her hair back.

Hope clutched at Ginny's thin wrist weakly. "Attacked...your..."

"What?"

"Your dad," she gasped, "attacked...blood everywhere..."

"I'm getting McGonagall." This time she was sure it was Lavender.

"You were dreaming," Ginny's voice sounded scared, after all, Hope had had a number of dreams that had turned out to be real, and she was white under her freckles.

"No," Hope insisted, the world that had been swirling around her was slowly getting clearer.

"Over here, Professor."
Hope had never been so relieved to see the older woman in her life. "What is it, Potter?" she asked, out of breath with her glasses askew. "Where does it hurt?"

"Never mind me," Hope snapped. "Mr. Weasley, he's been attacked by a snake, there was blood everywhere!"

"What do you mean? You saw this?"

"I was sleeping," Hope said, her mind a muddle, "and-"

"You mean you dreamed this?" Professor McGonagall queried.

"No!" Hope snapped. "I was dreaming before, something else, but it changed! Mr. Weasley was falling asleep on the floor and then he was attacked by this snake! There was lots of blood, you need to find him!" Hope clutched Professor McGonagall's shoulder tightly, her eyes frantic. "Please! You have to believe me!"

"I believe you, Potter," said Professor McGonagall, looking slightly horrified at what Hope had described. "Put on your robe– we're going to see the Headmaster."

The only constant that Hope was completely sure of as they made their way out of the dormitory and up to Dumbledore's office was Ginny's fearful presence. Hope understood, after all, her father's life could be hanging in the balance.

"Oh, it's you, Minerva…and…ah." Dumbledore determinedly avoided looking at Hope and Hope resisted the urge to take her wand and jab it into his eye socket.

"Albus, Potter has had a…well, a nightmare-"

"Mr. Weasley's been attacked by a snake!" Hope said, speaking over her Head of House.

Dumbledore hardly blinked, though Hope could swear she saw surprise flicker in those bright blue orbs of his. "How did you see this?"

"What's it matter?" Hope growled.

"It matters a great deal." Only to you, Hope thought viciously. "Where were you positioned as you watched this attack happen? Were you perhaps standing beside the victim, or else looking down on the scene from above?"

It sounded rather as though he knew the answer to his question.

"I was the snake," she said coldly.

"Is Arthur seriously injured?"

"Yes!" Hope snarled. "What part of that did you miss?"

But then he was no longer looking at her, focusing intently on two frames. "Everard? And you too, Dilys! You were listening?"

"Naturally," an aged female voice commented.

"The man has red hair and glasses," Dumbledore said, "Everard, you will need to raise the alarm, make sure he is found by the right people–"
Hope didn't want to think anymore, she felt weak and brittle and revolting. She hardly noticed when Professor McGonagall guided her to a conjured chair and sat her down in it.

"Dumbledore!" one of the portraits that held one of the two that he had sent off had returned, looking as though he had run a marathon. "I yelled until someone came running, said I'd heard something moving downstairs—they weren't sure whether to believe me but went down to check—you know there are no portraits down there to watch from. Anyway, they carried him up a few minutes later. He doesn't look good, he's covered in blood, I ran along to Elfrida Cragg's portrait to get a good view as they left—"

Ginny choked, her fingers on Hope's uncomfortably tight.

"Good. I take it Dyls will have seen him arrive, then—"

As if summoned, the witch's voice returned, emanating from her portrait. "Yes, they've taken him to St Mungo's, Dumbledore...they carried him past my portrait...he looks bad..."

"Thank you," Dumbledore said gravely as he turned to Professor McGonagall. "Minerva, I need you to go and wake the other Weasley children."

"Of course," Professor McGonagall said and Hope fell into a stupor of self-guilt. What if it had been her? What if she was the one who had attacked Mr. Weasley? What if she was the reason that he might be dead?

The door opened once more and the three Weasley males entered, each looking white and mussed with sleep.

Ron's eyes fell to Hope's. "Hope—what happened? McGonagall said something about Dad—"

"Your father has been injured in the course of his work for the Order of the Phoenix," Dumbledore said smoothly. "He has been taken to St Mungo's Hospital for Magical Maladies and Injuries. I am sending you back to Sirius' house, which is much more convenient for the hospital than The Burrow. You will meet your mother there."

"How're we getting there?" It was Fred who had spoken. George seemed to be beyond words. "Floo powder?"

"No, Floo powder is not safe at the moment, the Network is being watched. You will be taking a Portkey." He gestured to a kettle that lay on his desk. Hope blinked. She must have missed him getting it out. "We are just waiting for Phineas Nigellus to report back...I want to be sure that the coast is clear before sending you—"

Hope hardly cared who Phineas Nigellus was (though the name did ring with familiarity) when there was a flash of fire, a golden feather seeming to materialize in the air.

"It is Fawkes's warning," Dumbledore explained. "Professor Umbridge must know you're out of your beds...Minerva, go and head her off—tell her any story—"

Professor McGonagall disappeared so fast that Hope would have thought she had flashed.

"He says he'll be delighted," Phineas Nigellus said, returning to his portrait. "My great-great-grandson has always had an odd taste in house-guests."

Dumbledore gestured them forward to cluster around his desk. "Come here, then. And quickly, before anyone else joins us. You have all used a Portkey before?" They all nodded and Hope
remembered the strange feeling that had occurred when she had touched the Triwizard Cup in the maze. "Good. On the count of three, then...one...two..."

Hope's eyes met Dumbledore's, and in that instant, her scar seared against her forehead and suddenly Hope felt an anger towards him that she had never felt before, coupled with the desire to strike him down with only the use of her fangs. But that couldn't have been Hope's thought, after all, she didn't have any fangs and she didn't hate him that much.

"...three."

Her knees buckled and she fell to the floor as the portkey landed them in Grimmauld Place.

"Back again, the blood-traitor brats. Is it true their father's dying?"

Hope would've liked nothing more than to hit Kreacher for that comment, but she was saved of it by a loud voice yelling, "OUT!"

"What's going on?" Sirius barrelled into view, directing them into a much cleaner sitting room than Hope remembered. He locked an arm around Hope as she swayed dangerously on her feet, her face a grey tint. "Phineas Nigellus said Arthur's been badly injured--"

"Ask Hope," Fred said in a voice that shook. Hope had never heard anything like it before.

"Yeah, I want to hear this for myself," George added, his desire for information great.

Ron seemed to be at a loss, but Hope could tell he knew how serious things were.

Hope did not want to tell the tale of the vision again, but she did so, in a rather deadened voice. She only made one slight change that Ginny did not correct her on, and that was her perspective. She could not bear the looks of disgust if she told them she had been the one that attacked their father.

"Is Mum here?" Fred asked, turning away from Hope who looked so exhausted that she would probably fall asleep right where she was standing.

"She probably doesn't even know what's happened yet," Sirius told him. "The important thing was to get you away before Umbridge could interfere. I expect Dumbledore's letting Molly know now."

"We've got to go to St. Mungo's!" Ginny said, her wide eyes reflecting the fire in the fireplace that was slowly burning out. "Sirius, can you lend us cloaks or anything?"

"Hang on," Sirius interjected, a little startled. "You can't just go tearing off to St. Mungo's!"

"Course we can go to St. Mungo's if we want!" Fred snapped in defiance. "He's our dad!"

"And how are you going to explain how you knew Arthur was attacked before the hospital even let his wife know?" Sirius asked coolly, crossing his arms.

"What does it matter?" George demanded.

Sirius glared venomously. Why was it that he seemed to be the only one cared about the girl that looked rather like an Inferius than a living person? "It matters because we don't want to draw attention to the fact that Hope is having visions of things that are happening hundreds of miles away! Have you any idea what the Ministry would make of that information?"

George balked slightly but Fred clearly could care less what the Ministry thought.
"Someone else could have told us…” Ginny said slowly, flickering her eyes between Sirius and Hope, "we could have heard it somewhere other than Hope."

"Like who?" Sirius demanded. "Listen, your dad's been hurt while on duty for the Order and the circumstances are fishy enough without his children knowing about it seconds after it happened, you could seriously damage the Order’s-"

"We don't care about the dumb Order!" Fred's voice rose to a shout.

"It's our dad dying we're talking about!" George said just as loudly. Hope's ears were ringing and her stomach was roiling again.

"Your father knew what he was getting into and he won't thank you for messing things up for the Order!" Sirius snapped. "This is how it is –this is why you're not in the Order– you don't understand– there are things worth dying for!"

Hope closed her eyes and when she reopened them she was in her room, safely away from the noise. She clutched her stomach, wrenching open the bathroom door to be violently sick into the toilet a second time. She stumbled out of the loo and to her bed, drawing her knees up to her chest and locking her arms around them.

Hours passed like that in silence. The night was pitch black…it couldn't have been more than three in the morning when she finally heard noise from downstairs. There was only one tone that Hope could make out: Relief. She breathed out slowly. Mrs. Weasley must've arrived with news, then.

It was minutes later when a quiet knock issued from behind the door and Mrs. Weasley slowly opened the door looking as tired as Hope felt.

"Is he-" Her voice cracked, but Mrs. Weasley smiled.

"He's going to be fine," she assured her, sitting on the edge of Hope's bed. Hope seemed like an immobile statue. "I don't know what would have happened if it hadn't been for you, Hope," she admitted, tearing up slightly. "They might not have found Arthur for hours, and then it would have been too late, but thanks to you he's alive and Dumbledore's been able to think up a good cover story for Arthur being where he was, you've no idea what trouble he would have been in otherwise, look at poor Sturgis…”

Hope allowed her to bestow a grateful hug upon her, but she still felt like she was something foul, like she was the one who had attacked Mr. Weasley.
Hope was silent on their way to St. Mungo's the next day, hardly paying attention to Tonks as she jabbered away happily. She leaned her head on George's shoulder as they sat side by side on the train.

"Did you get any sleep?" he asked her quietly.

"Did you think I would?" she replied in an exhaustive manner.

George kissed her head. "If it wasn't for you, Dad would probably be dead. You did something really good."

"It doesn't feel like it," Hope said with an expression that would have been better suited for someone at a funeral.

George knew that there was something off about the vision she had told them about, judging by the way that Ginny and her had shared a glance, something that scared her. He wanted to ask her, but it could wait.

They lapsed into silence as the train deposited them onto a busy street. It took Hope a few moments to realize that the entrance into St. Mungo's was actually through one of the shops. Hope had never gone through it that way; she had just suddenly woken up in her first year to find herself in the hospital. The hospital was louder than she remembered, or maybe that was just because Hope had actually been in a ward, and this was just the waiting room.

Hope felt more than a little apprehensive as they approached the Dai Llewellyn ward, in which Mr. Weasley was resting. Hope's knees buckled when she saw him actually sitting up in his bed and reading, George's arm around her waist was the only thing that kept her upright. It seemed so unreal to her, him looking like that, like he hadn't been terribly wounded hours before.

She waited as all his children greeted him in relief, standing to the side awkwardly, bracing a hand on the bedside table.

"Hello, Hope." He was smiling, but she wasn't. She reached forward to grasp his hand, as that was what he had extended to her.

"Mr. Weasley," she said his name in a low voice, "I'm-I'm so glad you're-" Her voice cracked and Mr. Weasley's smile grew softer, he squeezed her fingers gently.

"That's all thanks to you," he told her kindly. Hope looked like she wanted to deny it but Ron nudged her foot discreetly and she simply nodded, stepping back and into George's side once more.

"I start bleeding like mad every time they try," he was telling Fred who had asked why he couldn't come home yet. "It seems there was some rather unusual kind of poison in that snakes fangs that keeps wounds open. They're sure they'll find an antidote, though; they say they've had much worse cases than mine, and in the meantime I just have to keep taking a Blood-Replenishing Potion every hour. But that fellow over there," he gestured to one of the other two occupants in the room. The man looked rather ill, like Remus after the full moon, and the next second Hope knew why. "Bitten by a werewolf, poor chap. No cure at all."

"A werewolf?" Mrs. Weasley said in apprehension. "Is he safe in a public ward? Shouldn't he be in a private room?"
Hope made a fairly audible huff of irritation. How could Mrs. Weasley say that when she was in close contact with a werewolf herself? Wasn't that a bit hypocritical?

Mrs. Weasley coloured slightly, realizing how she must have sounded.

"It's two weeks till full moon," Mr. Weasley said with a slight fling of his hand, unconcerned. "They've been talking to him this morning, the Healers, you know, trying to persuade him he'll be able to lead an almost normal life. I said to him - didn't mention names, of course- but I said I knew a werewolf personally, very nice man, who finds the condition quite easy to manage."

"What did he say?" George piped up.

"Said he'd give me another bite if I didn't shut up," said Mr. Weasley said with a frown on his face. "And that woman over there," he gestured slightly towards the second bed, "won't tell the Healers what bit her, which makes us all think it must have been something she was handling illegally. Whatever it was took a real chunk out of her leg, very nasty smell when they take off the dressings."

"So, you going to tell us what happened, Dad?" Fred asked, moving slightly closer, his inquisitive nature spiking.

"Well, you already know, don't you?" Mr. Weasley nodded towards Hope. "It's very simple - I'd had a very long day, dozed off, got sneaked up on and bitten."

"Is it in the Prophet, you being attacked?" Fred pressed.

"No, of course not," Mr. Weasley said quickly, "the Ministry wouldn't want everyone to know a dirty great serpent got."

"Arthur!"

"-got-er-me," Mr. Weasley finished, but Hope thought he was heading for a snake getting into some place in the Ministry, but what could Nagini have wanted?

"So, where were you when it happened, Dad?" George asked, picking up from where his twin left off.

"That's my business," Mr. Weasley said tightly, fingering the Daily Prophet (Hope wasn't sure there was much a point of getting it anymore, all it seemed to print was a load of shite, but she was too lazy to withdraw her subscription). "I was just reading about Willy Widdershins' arrest when you arrived. You know Willy turned out to be behind those regurgitating toilets back in the summer? One of his jinxes backfired, the toilet exploded and they found him lying unconscious in the wreckage covered from head to foot in -"

Fred butted in again. "When you say you were "on duty", what were you doing?"

"You heard your father," Mrs. Weasley hissed, her hand clutching the smooth white frame of her husband's bed, "we are not discussing this here! Go on about Willy Widdershins, Arthur."

"Or at all," Ron muttered to Hope, which Hope didn't doubt. Mrs. Weasley only ever saw them as children, even though the twins were of age. She wouldn't willingly tell them anything.

"Well, don't ask me how, but he actually got off the toilet charge. I can only suppose gold changed hands-"

"You were guarding it, weren't you?" George's voice was low, so low that Hope nearly missed his
"The weapon? The thing You-Know-Who's after?"

"George, be quiet!"

Mr. Weasley cleared his throat loudly. "Anyway, this time Willy's been caught selling biting doorknobs to Muggles and I don't think he'll be able to worm his way out of it because, according to this article, two Muggles have lost fingers and are now in St Mungo's for emergency bone re-growth and memory modification. Just think of it, Muggles in St Mungo's! I wonder which ward they're in?"

"Didn't you say You-Know-Who's got a snake, Hope?" Fred asked Hope, though his eyes were on his father to see if he would react. "A massive one? You saw it the night he returned, didn't you?"

Hope opened her mouth to respond when irate Mrs. Weasley shut her down. "That's enough," she barked. "Mad-Eye and Tonks are outside, Arthur, they want to come and see you. And you lot can wait outside. You can come and say goodbye afterwards. Go on."

"Fine," Fred muttered as the door shut in his face, "treat us like little kids and don't tell us anything." His fingers were searching his pockets when George held up flesh-coloured string loosely jumbled together.

"Looking for these?" he asked with a quirked eyebrow.

"You read my mind." Fred helped him straighten out the strings in a matter of seconds. "Let's see if St Mungo's puts Imperturbable Charms on its ward doors, shall we?"

They all listened intently with the Extendable Ears in their own ears when they at last heard Tonks' voice as the string slipped under the door.

"...they searched the whole area taut couldn't find the snake anywhere," Tonks was telling Mr. Weasley. "It just seems to have vanished after it attacked you, Arthur...but You-Know-Who can't have expected a snake to get in, can he?"

"I reckon he sent it as a lookout," Moody grunted darkly, "'cause he's not had any luck so far, has he? No, I reckon he's trying to get a clearer picture of what he's facing and if Arthur hadn't been there the beast would've had a lot more time to look around. So, Potter says she saw it all happen?"

"Yes," it was Mrs. Weasley this time, and her voice was a bit edgy. "You know, Dumbledore seems almost to have been waiting for Hope to see something like this."

Hope gritted her teeth and Ron shared a glance with her, bidding her to keep silence.

"Yeah, well," Moody said in careless manner, "there's something funny about the Potter girl, we all know that."

"Dumbledore seemed worried about Hope when I spoke to him this morning," Mrs. Weasley said quietly.

"Course he's worried," Moody's growl was unmistakable. "The girl's seeing things from inside You-Know-Who's snake. Obviously, Potter doesn't realise what that means, but if You-Know-Who's possessing her."

Hope stood up, dragging her ear away from the string and moving silently down the hall, sitting down in the first empty chair that she could find. Possessed? Could that really be it? Her glare darkened. 

*But of course let's not tell Hope,* she thought scathingly, *let's let her walk around blindly, hitting every tree in the forest before we decide to give her some tiny insignificant detail.*
"Ah, I thought I recognized that scowl," a familiar voice commented and Hope looked up in surprise to be greeted with the face of the woman who had once treated her.

"Healer Archer!" she said in stunned surprise, leaping to her feet. "Hi."

"Hello, Hope," the Healer said with a wide grin, embracing her swiftly and releasing her just as fast, looking her up and down. "You have grown, my former patient."

"Well, I was eleven," Hope said a bit sheepishly, "but don't worry, I'm still as sarcastic as ever."

"It will get you far, that sarcasm will," Archer intoned in a deadpan, as George ran up to her.

"Hey, it's time to-wait, don't I know you?"

"Was this the lad that read to you?" Archer asked.

"Yeah, that's George."

"How long have you been together?" she asked, casting the pair a knowing glance as they both blushed.

"Er, my third year and his fifth year," Hope muttered.

Archer nodded approvingly. "Must be quite serious."

Hope and George shared a glance. "Oh, it is," Hope said softly, linking her fingers with his.

"I thought you might've been a patient again," Archer added, changing the subject so abruptly that Hope and George stared. "Your complexion could compete with a ghost."

"Oh, no," Hope said quickly, remembering why she was so angry and sick with herself in the first place, "George's dad is the patient, we're just visiting. We should be getting back, but it was lovely to see you."

"Take care," Archer called after them as they meandered down the hall once more. There had been something off about Hope…she just wasn't sure what.

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Hope didn't speak to anyone for the rest of the day or the next. She stayed in her dark room with the covers thrown over her and her back towards the door, feigning sleep. She fell asleep only a few times, but for the most part she was awake, angry and sick with herself.

So, Dumbledore had been expecting something like this, had he? He had been expecting her to see into the mind of a snake and feel what it was like to strike and break flesh? He had seemed worried about, did he? Not the little pro-Light angel he had hoped for, was she? Hope clenched a fist as she looked at her face in the mirror, her mother's face. That was all anyone saw really, wasn't it? Lily and James' daughter, but she wasn't just that, was she? She was a living, breathing person, one who didn't need Albus Dumbledore to do her thinking for her. So what if he was worried? He wasn't her problem! Fuck him!

Hope's hair shortened and darkened to a similar pixie cut to Tonks' usual style, only much darker.

"Whatever," Hope muttered, zipping up her jacket over her clothes, lodging her wand back into her arm holster, and throwing on her boots as she made her way down the stairs when a voice stopped her just seconds before reaching the door.
"Hope? Where're you going?"

It was Ginny.

Hope turned around to note that Ginny looked rather tired as well; it was nearly midnight, shouldn't she be asleep?

"Out," Hope said shortly.

"Away?"

Hope's eyes met hers and Hope could see that her question was as honest as her worry.

"Not permanently," Hope said with a bit of a sigh, "but I need some fresh air."

"We've been waiting for you to come out all night," Ginny said quietly, "won't you come up to the twins' room?"

"Why?" Hope asked cautiously.

"Hermione's here...and we all want to talk to you," Ginny said gently, "please, just five minutes."

Brown dared green and Hope finally conceded, allowing her to be pulled upstairs and into the room that Fred and George stared, only to be mildly surprised by the people inside. Fred and George were there, of course, but Ron and Hermione were there as well. Basically, all the 'children' in the house.

"Hope!" Hermione said her name in such obvious relief that Hope felt a little ashamed as Hermione wrapped her in a tight hug, releasing her quickly to look at her face. "You're as pale as snow!"

Hope arched an eyebrow at Ron who could only roll his eyes.

"Weren't you supposed to be skiing?" Hope uttered in confusion, and Ron was forced to stifle his amusement, earning a glare from Hermione.

"I was but—oh, stop laughing, Ronald! I decided I'd rather be here."

"What d'your parents think of that?" Hope asked.

Hermione gave a helpless shrug. Her parents had never been really able to accept just how different their daughter was to them. "Well, they were a bit disappointed, but I've told them that everyone who is serious about the exams is staying at Hogwarts to study. They want me to do well, they'll understand."

Hope didn't think they really did; it wasn't as though she was studying English or Algebra, or anything like that.

Hermione's eyes were imploring. "How are you?"

Hope felt suddenly cross, glaring at them all; she had to commend them for not recoiling in the slightest at the sight of the glare, but they had probably become desensitized over time.

"I'm fine," she said frigidly.

"You've been locked in your room for the past day," Hermione scoffed, "that isn't okay."

"I wasn't feeling well," Hope fired back, which was the truth.
"Well, I can understand why," Hermione said, her eyes narrowing, "they told me what you lot heard on the Extendable Ears-

"Did they?" Hope scowled.

"Yeah, we did," Ron said, leaping to his feet, "because you've been avoiding us!"

"I'm not- I'm not avoiding you," Hope said stiffly, suddenly morose, her shoulders hunching a bit. "I'm staying a safe distance away."

"What on earth are you going on about?" Fred demanded. "Safe distance? From what?"

"From me!" Hope's eyes were blazing and Fred recoiled sharply. "You weren't there! Any of you! You didn't see what I saw, you didn't feel what I felt! I-I made myself sick!" Her hands were balled into tight fists at her side, so tight that her fingernails cut into her palms.

She didn't look up until George took her arms gently above the wrist. She looked into his eyes and she hated herself for doing so instantly because the sympathy and understanding in his azure orbs made her tremble.

"Ginny told us how it really went," he said softly and Hope flinched. "We don't hate you."

"You should," Hope said, wrenching her arms from him. Her voice was shaking. "I-I attacked your father, and I enjoyed it!"

"That was the snake you were feeling, Hope, remember?" Hermione said gently. "You've had dreams like this before-"

"Not like this!" Hope's face became downcast and George and Fred shared a look clearly not knowing what they should do or say.

It seemed like minutes or even hours had passed before she gave a slow sigh and spoke once more. "What Mrs. Weasley said…it just ticked me off more than anything else."

Ginny's eyebrows furrowed together and Ron mimicked the movement. She had been expecting Hope to complain about what Moody had said, but maybe that would come later.

"She said Dumbledore's been expecting this," Hope said bitterly, "which means he's been basically setting me up for failure."

Ginny could tell that Hope had been cautious about Dumbledore to begin with, she was a rather overly-cautious person who hardly trusted easily, but whatever trust she had held for the man had gone right down the drain this year. Ginny believed her when she said she was a Grey witch, someone who wasn't going to pretend to be Light, someone who wasn't afraid of playing dirty or using Darker spells if it got the job done.

For that, Ginny admired her.

"I don't think-" Hermione started to say, but a look from Ron cut her off with a sharp look. Ron was another person who did not view Dumbledore in the same light, mostly because he blamed him for why Hope exploded before term had begun. He was the one who fought so hard to keep her in the dark about the world, but it wasn't safe to go walking around blind.

"What's possession like?" Hope asked brusquely as she uncurled her fists; she didn't have to look to see that the tips were smudged with blood. Ginny jumped a little at the sudden question that could
have only been asked to her.

"It's…" Ginny had tried so hard to forget, but for Hope's sake, she would remember. "Well, you know immediately if you've been possessed, or at least, you know something's wrong."

Hope frowned. "What d'you mean?"

"Can you remember everything you've been doing? Are there big blank periods where you don't know what you've been up to?"

"No," Hope said.

"Then You-Know-Who hasn't ever possessed you," Ginny informed her. "When he did it to me, I couldn't remember what I'd been doing for hours at a time. I'd find myself somewhere and not know how I got there."

Hope nodded, rubbing her hands subconsciously along her arms, still feeling how Nagini's sleek scales had felt. She wasn't sure if that made her feel better or not.

"You felt that way because it was how that snake felt," Ron said simply, "we know you love Dad, you wouldn't have done that if it had been you."

Noises of agreement were echoed around the room on all sides, but Hope's anxiety didn't cease.

"C'mere."

Hope's face turned a shocking shade of crimson as George bent forward to lift her onto his shoulder. "What're you doing?! George! Put me down right now!"

Fred sniggered as his twin turned around to wink at them all. "I'm going to have a look at her hands. I'm sure you'll see us both tomorrow."

Hermione hid a giggle behind her hand and Ron made a small grimace, but Ginny could only smirk.

"Are you going to put me down any time soon?" Hope demanded in a hushed whisper as they rounded the corner.

"In the kitchen," George responded, humoured as he carefully descended the stairs into the darkened sitting room, crossing through the dining room and at last entering the kitchen, lit only by a few candles that were made to shine through the night (Hope suspected that Mrs. Weasley didn't much like the blackness of the house). "Show me your hands."

"What if I don't want to?" Hope asked feeling petulant.

This was apparently the opening that George had been looking for, because a smirk lit his lips, fire reflecting in his eyes as he leaned forward whisper into her ear, "Are you sure you want to know the answer to that?"

Hope gulped, her mouth suddenly dry and then her grip on the counter became frightfully tight and she scowled at him.

"That's playing dirty," she accused.

"Coming from the girl that always plays dirty?" George countered, prying on hand free to inspect it closely before running cold water over her palm and making her wince.
"Yeah, well, that's me, ain't it, love?" she muttered, allowing him to tap her cleaned wounds (if you could call them that), bandages appearing out of thin air and binding tightly to her hands. "I guess this might put you off wanting me to live with you, huh?"

"Not slightly," George promised. "Your problems are my problems."

"I have an awful lot of problems," Hope said vaguely. "Dark Lords, secret rebellions, you know, the works."

"Oh, I know-"

"Shouldn't you two be asleep? Preferably in different beds?"

Two heads snapped around to stare at the mildly amused, mildly annoyed Sirius Black.

"Sirius!" Hope blushed, moving slightly away from her boyfriend. "George was just helping me with my hands." She gestured helplessly, showcasing the thin bandages.

"Indeed," Sirius said smoothly, "why don't you go up to bed, Hope? I want a word with George."

Hope glanced between George and Sirius, suddenly apprehensive. "Are you sure?" she was speaking more towards George than Sirius. "I can stay…"

"It's alright," George assured her, kissing her cheek swiftly. "You get some sleep; you're dead on your feet again."

Hope rolled her eyes good-naturedly. "Night," she murmured, removing herself from him to walk over to Sirius, kissing his sunken cheek slightly before passing him and disappearing up the stairs. Sirius could see George's eyes lingering on where he last saw her.

It was like watching James moon after Lily all over again, and that, to Sirius was so very painful.

"You really should be more careful," he commented mildly, "this house has many ears."

A horrified expression overtook his face and Sirius had a difficult time stifling his amusement. "So," he said, his voice taking on a sadder tone, "she's moving in with you is she?"

"Er, well," George had never imagined having this kind of an awkward conversation with his girlfriend's godfather, "I asked her and she said yes."

Sirius wanted to get mad about the whole thing, get angry, but he couldn't. If there was one thing that he knew about Hope, it was that she was fiercely independent and strong-willed, and she did not take kindly to people messing around with her choices (mainly Dumbledore these days). And he also knew of the kind of relationship she had with her mother's sister's family, and he knew that it left much to be desired.

Sirius couldn't tell her not to be with the person she loved if it made her happy, he could only watch from the side-lines and help her up if she fell down. That was his job.

"Don't let her down," he said finally, "or you'll have more than her to deal with."

The threat hung in the open air as he swiftly left the kitchen, leaving George to exhale slowly, relief pouring off him in waves. He counted his lucky stars that he was still alive.
Will of the Mind

Hope thought it was strange that Kreacher didn't come when he was called, but she didn't mention it when they all finished Christmas lunch and headed over to the hospital inside Mr. Weasley's Ford Anglia which Mundungus had been kind enough to bring over. Hope couldn't help but be relieved that it had an extension charm on its interior, or else it would have been quite cramped. Still, Hope was glad to be out of it when they reached St. Mungo's; she had never been a fan of small spaces.

"Everything alright, Arthur?" Mrs. Weasley asked her husband as her children greeted him, handing over their gifts.

"Fine, fine," Mr. Weasley promised, though his voice was too airy for Hope to take into account. Remus squeezed her shoulder as he removed himself from the group to meander over to where the werewolf was eyeing them in a morose manner. Her lips twitched upwards slightly.

Remus held out a hand to the man, no doubt explaining who he was to the man's surprise. Hope cast a glance towards the Weasleys before opting to join Remus.

"Hope, this is Samson Strue," Remus introduced graciously as she made her way to his side, "this is my niece."

"Hi," Hope said, extending a hand with a pleasant smile.

"Are you a-" Samson croaked.

"Oh, no," Hope said quickly with a small grin, "I am a sympathizer, though, and I take care of Remus sometimes after the full moon." She cast the man an amused look. "I've seen more of him than I have of my boyfriend."

Remus' scarred cheeks flooded with colour and the new werewolf released a rusty chuckle.

"Have you gone through your first transformation yet?" Remus asked the man who shook his head, fear colouring his face.

"Lock up anything with spice or herbs," Hope advised, "your nose will be highly sensitive for the two days following and it's better to eat food that don't have so many scents; I know it drives Remus mad."

Remus coughed uncomfortably and out of the corner of her eye, Hope could see Bill, Fred, and George leaving. Fred winked at her and Hope rolled her eyes.

"I think I'm going to grab a cup of tea," Hope said, her eyes falling to Mrs. Weasley whose cheeks were turning a ruddy colour and looked fit to burst. "Want anything?"

"No, thank-" He blinked, she had gone and had pulled the remaining three out of the door with her before he could finish.

All four flinched at the sound of Mrs. Weasley's raised voice. "WHAT DO YOU MEAN, THAT'S THE GENERAL IDEA?"

"Typical Dad," Ginny said with a sigh. "Stitches…I ask you…"

"They're not as terrible as they sound," Hermione said, "they do work well on non-magical wounds,
Hope had stitches when she was ten."

"Wasn't that why Madam Pomfrey couldn't heal her leg back in first year, though?" Ron asked shrewdly.

"I'm right here," Hope said in annoyance. "She didn't want to mess up my leg further by interfering with the healing process; it's happened a few times with muggle-borns who were in accidents and were treated by Muggle doctors instead of healers. She preferred me to wait it out to see if the muscle would heal on its own. I didn't mind."

Hermione and Ron shared a surprised look. When they had asked her about it, she had just said that Madam Pomfrey couldn't heal everything.

"Anyone know where the tearoom is?" Ginny said in an airy voice that wouldn't have been abnormal if she had been Luna.

"Fifth floor...I think," Hope said, as they entered the staircase, dutifully ignoring how some of the healer portraits informed them of the maladies they must be suffering from including some sort of viral infection that resulted in the dark red of Hope's hair and that Ron and Ginny were suffering from spattergroit when they really had freckles.

Hermione had to fight to keep her giggles down as the remaining three cast her scowls that were nearly identical.

"What's this floor?" Ron demanded, severely ticked off.

"I think it's the fifth," Hermione said.

"It's the fourth," Ginny said, being the only one who had bothered to keep track, they moved to take the stairs one more level before staring suddenly at the SPELL DAMAGE glass doors, because all four recognized the man there with his face to the glass, his breath fogging it up. But that didn't stop them from recognizing the wavy blonde locks, blue eyes, and wide smile.

"Is that-?" Ginny said stunned.

"Blimey!" Ron said in murmured agreement.

"Oh, my goodness," Hermione gasped (she had always been rather taken with him. "Professor Lockhart."

"Professor?" Hope scoffed. "I didn't learn anything from that man."

Gilderoy Lockhart had been their Defence Against the Dark Arts teacher back in their second year (well, it had been Ginny's first year), and all Hope really cared to remember about him was slamming her cane up into his bits. That had been highly enjoyable.

"Why, hello there!" he cried, removing his face from the glass to wave jauntily at them. "I expect you'd like my autograph, would you?"

"Are they sure the damage isn't permanent?" Hope asked Ginny suspiciously. "He's acting an awful lot like his usual self."

Ginny had to stuff her fist in her mouth to hide her giggles.

"Er," Ron began awkwardly, after all, his wand was to blame for Lockhart being placed in the
memory-damaged ward to begin with, but Hope, who had never liked him much to begin with, thought he was better suited there, "how are you, Professor?"

"I'm very well indeed, thank you!" Lockhart told him brightly, his face lighting up at the question as he seemed to pull a quill out of thin air. "Now, how many autographs would you like? I can do joined-up writing now, you know!"

"No, thank you," Hope said smoothly as Ron turned to her with a "Help me!" expression on his face, "we've got to go…but should you really be out of your ward?"

The vacant expression he cast to her made her a little uncomfortable. "Haven't we met?" he inquired.

"No," Hope said quickly, taking a step back, ready to beat a hasty retreat when a Healer suddenly appeared with an "Oh, Gilderoy, you've got visitors! How lovely, and on Christmas Day, too! Do you know, he never gets visitors, poor lamb, and I can't think why, he's such a sweetie, aren't you?"

Ginny shared a look with Hope that said maybe the Healer was addled in the head too. Sweetie? Not likely.

"We're doing autographs!" Lockhart beamed and Hope grimaced. "They want loads of them, won't take no for an answer! I just hope we've got enough photographs!"

"Hang on-"

"Listen to him!" the Healer was grinning just as brightly as Lockhart was; Hope was going to go blind for certain this time. "He was rather well known a few years ago; we very much hope that this liking for giving autographs is a sign that his memory might be starting to come back. Will you step this way? He's in a closed ward, you know, he must have slipped out while I was bringing in the Christmas presents, the door's usually kept locked...not that he's dangerous! But," she whispered to Hermione who was the closest, "he's a bit of a danger to himself, bless him...doesn't know who he is, you see, wanders off and can't remember how to get back...it is nice of you to have come to see him."

She didn't seem to take note of their excuses, practically pushing them inside after Lockhart. "This is our long-term residents' ward," she told them in a low voice, "For permanent spell damage, you know. Of course, with intensive remedial potions and charms and a bit of luck, we can produce some improvement. Gilderoy does seem to be getting back some sense of himself; and we've seen a real improvement in Mr. Bode, he seems to be regaining the power of speech very well, though he isn't speaking any language we recognize yet. Well, I must finish giving out the Christmas presents, I'll leave you all to chat."

Bode? Hope mouthed the name. Why did it sound so familiar?

Her gaze drifted to the man who must've been Bode. She frowned at the vacant expression on his face as he mouthed words at the ceiling. Hadn't she seen him somewhere before?

"What is it?" Hermione whispered into her ear.

"Hm? Oh, nothing," Hope said quickly, averting her eyes from the man.

"And look, Broderick, you've been sent a pot plant and a lovely calendar with a different fancy Hippogriff for each month; they'll brighten things up, won't they?" the Healer said in an encouraging sort of voice. "And-- oh, Mrs Longbottom, are you leaving already?"

Hope gave a low hiss and a grimace. Shite. She'd forgotten that Neville and his gran visited his mum
"Neville!" She cursed Ron a thousand times as he grinned at their friend. "Hey, what're you doing here? Who're you visiting?"

Neville looked rather like he'd rather sink into the floor. He cast a glance to Hope for help but Hope was too busy glaring at the Weasley boy.

"Friends of yours, Neville, dear?"

Hope laid eyes on Augusta Longbottom for the first time and she wasn't surprised that she was Neville's second choice for a boggart. Tall and thin but with a severe expression rather like Professor McGonagall's that Hope wondered vaguely if they were related.

"Ah, yes, Lady Potter." Hope shook Mrs. Longbottom's hand firmly. "Yes, yes, I know who you are, of course. Neville speaks most highly of you."

"Thank you," Hope said politely, "but the 'Lady' isn't really necessary."

"If you insist," she said graciously, but Hope could see that she was impressed as she turned to Ron and Ginny. "And you two are clearly Weasleys. Yes, I know your parents – not well, of course – but fine people, fine people...and you must be Hermione Granger?"

Hermione was pleasantly surprised that she knew her name as well, after all, she was a Muggle-born; Mrs. Longbottom wouldn't have known her parents.

"Yes, Neville's told me all about you. Helped him out of a few sticky spots, haven't you? He's a good boy, but be hasn't got his father's talent, I'm afraid to say."

"Madam, I think you'll find that Neville has many talents," Hope said coolly, her eyes drifting from Neville's turning-puce face to his grandmother, "he is just not as vocal about them as others are."

Mrs. Longbottom appraised Hope for a moment. "I understand you visited my son and his wife in your first year, is that right?"

Hope squared her shoulders, her eyes sharp. "That's right," she said stiffly, "I was in the hospital for damage I'd sustained during a Quidditch match. Alice is my godmother, so I thought I'd drop by… please excuse me."

Hope brushed past them to beyond the curtain, unwilling to listen to Mrs. Longbottom's explanation of Neville's parents' conditions.

They looked rather unchanged from the last time she had seen them, hair paling, cheeks hollow, but when Alice saw her, she pounced, mumbling something that sounded a bit like "Lilylilylilylily." Hope swallowed convulsively. "Yes," she whispered, blinking a few times, "it's me, Alice, its Lily."

Alice beamed at her, but Hope could tell that she wasn't really all there. The smile was a bit vacant and her eyes seemed to be incapable of fastening on one point for too long.

"I'm...I'm sorry I haven't visited," Hope said, forcing a cheerful note into her voice, "J-James is more work than Hope is. Is Neville like that? Quiet?"

She could hear the boy in question make a choked noise behind her and knew she had their attention. Alice's eyes drifted off, confused, before she gave a quick, unsure nod.
"That's good," Hope said in faux-relief, "I was beginning to wonder if it was normal behaviour."

Alice's smile was vague and she released the tight grip she had on Hope's shoulders, meandering off to the side, where Neville was with a blank expression again, holding something small out to him.

It was a wrapper of Drooble's Best Blowing Gum.

"That's very nice," Mrs. Longbottom said kindly and Neville gave his mum a quiet thank you.

It was only after they'd left the ward that the others rounded on her.

"Why didn't you tell us about Neville's parents?" Ron demanded.

"And say what?" Hope asked helplessly. "That they look their son in the eyes and hardly recognize him? Alice thinks I'm my mother, for Merlin's sake! Besides, its Neville's family, not mine, if he had wanted to tell you, he would have."

And the blank expression on her godmother's face only made her hate Bellatrix Lestrange more.

Hope set a pot of tea on the stove, ignoring Ron and Hermione who were gaping at her like they had never seen anything like her before.

"What?" Hope asked defensively.

"What d'you mean you're moving in with George?" Ron demanded, his ears burning red.

"Just that, I'm moving in with George," Hope said with a simple shrug, not understanding why he was throwing a fit.

"But-but-" Ron spluttered, turning from red to burning crimson.

"But you're fifteen!" Hermione said, taking over for her stupefied friend. "Hope…"

"Look," Hope said, her cheeks flushing a brilliant rouge, "it's not like we're shagging or anything--"

"Eugh! Gross! I don't even want to think about that!" Ron cried, covering his ears with an expression of revulsion. "That is beyond--!"

Hope smirked. "All we do is snog, I swear."

But Ron still had his ears plugged.

"Are you sure this is a good idea?" Hermione asked nervously. "I mean, Dumbledore would--"

"Screw Dumbledore," Hope said in a savage manner, earning her a shrewd stare from the brunette that she could only have copied from Professor McGonagall. "I can set up my own wards if I have to."

"But that's really dangerous!" Hermione said startled.

Hope gave her a bland stare. "I used Blood Magick without much trouble."

"She has a point," Ron admitted. He'd heard a lot on the subject from Bill who was as raving mad about the subject as Hope was.

"Still…"
"What're you doing here?" Sirius' cold voice was growing closer and Hope, Ron, and Hermione ducked under the counter to hide and eavesdrop.

"I'm here for your goddaughter, Black, I don't see how that's difficult to understand," Snape said silkily and Hope wrinkled her nose at her friends.

"And why exactly do you need her?" Sirius demanded.

"Dumbledore asked me, otherwise I wouldn't be here," Snape said snidely.

"Well, goody for him," Hope said, standing from behind the counter, Ron and Hermione staring up at her, "because no one in this house is a fan of your old mug, Snivellus."

Snape's lip curled and Sirius tried hard to hide his laugh. "Like father, like daughter, Potter," he said in a voice rather akin to a snarl. "I suppose that is to be expected of an arrogant-"

"Personal bias," Hope gave a forlorn sigh, examining her nails intensely, "I did wish we would get past this, but it seems you're still an overgrown prick."

Hermione was keeping a firm hand over Ron's mouth to keep him from laughing out loud.

"Why's he here?" Hope directed to Sirius, eyeing her potions professor with distaste. It wasn't as though they had ever gotten along, and it seemed that the animosity only grew the longer they were near each other.

Sirius opened his mouth to explain, but Snape beat him to it. "The Headmaster has sent me to tell you, Potter, that it is his wish for you to study Occlumency this term."

"His wish?" Hope said, her eyes darkening to a near black. "Or his demand?"

"However you see it does not concern me," Snape said coolly.

"And just what is Occlumency?" Hope ground out, crossing her arms.

Snape sneered at the daughter of his nemesis. "Occlumency, Potter, is the magical defence of the mind against external penetration. An obscure branch of magic, but a highly useful one."

"Occlumency…like mind reading?"

Snape's sneer became more condescending. "Only simpletons believe in such a thing as mind-reading Potter."

"Are we including you?" Hope jibed. He glared at her. "Why do I have to learn this stuff, exactly?"

"Because the Headmaster thinks it a good idea."

"Does he?" Hope asked in a mocking voice. "Well, goody for him. I'd forgotten he was the one pulling all of the strings."

"You are a child, I wouldn't expect you of all people to understand," Snape said in an icy voice.

"Child?" Hope laughed in an unfeeling way that sent shivers down Sirius' spine. "Where have you been? I haven't been a child for a very long time, you can thank your master for that."

Snape pulled out his wand, anger flashing in his eyes. Sirius shoved Hope quickly behind him, drawing his own, something Hope didn't approve of in the slightest, her wand already at the ready.
"That's enough," Sirius barked, glaring at the man, "don't even think about it." His voice was filled with warning as Snape's eyes darted to Hope's, filled with contemplation. "And if I hear you're using these Occlumency lessons to give Hope a hard time, you'll have me to answer to."

"How touching," Snape said in an aloof voice. "But surely you have noticed that Potter is very like her father?"

"And her mother," Sirius said rather pointedly.

Snape's eyes darkened, if that was even possible. "Well then, you'll know she's so arrogant that criticism simply bounces off her."

Sirius' wand was pointed at his heart and Hope's eyes were burning.

"Look in the mirror, tosspot," Hope spat as Hermione and Ron slowly stood up to watch the scene with morbid fascination. "You'll find you're the only one who thinks that!"

The wand in Snape's grasp turned slightly towards her and Sirius moved slightly to block its view. However, they were interrupted by the sudden entrance of Mr. and Mrs. Weasley with Ginny, Fred, and George, all a combination of pleased and relieved.

"Cured!" Mr. Weasley cried, not seeing exactly what he had walked into. "Completely cured!"

And then several pairs of eyes fell on Snape and Sirius with their wands aimed at each other, their faces filled with loathing, Sirius standing protectively in front of his goddaughter whose face was pale with anger, and Ron and Hermione astonished in the background.

"Merlin's beard, what's going on here?"

Both replaced their wands, offering no answer as Snape said: "Six o'clock, Monday evening, Potter."

"I didn't agree to this!" Hope yelled after him as he turned on his heel in the direction of the Floo, but it didn't seem to matter.

Why did the gods hate her so?

"I'm thinking we won't do Patronuses for a bit," Hope mused as she walked with Ron and Hermione beside her on Monday, back at Hogwarts once more, her wand held to the Marauder's Map, using the Boggart Searching Spell that Remus had taught her over the holiday (with a rather obvious wink when she'd asked him), "but it can't hurt to get this out of the way."

"Why can't we do that sooner?" Ron asked with a small moan. "I'm really looking forward to it."

"Because," Hope said, "I want to teach you lot a few more spells before-"

"That's it! I'm doing it, and you can't stop me!"

Daphne rounded the corner, her expression resolute, but her cheeks were pink and her eyes over-bright.

"It's a horrible idea!" Tracey tried to grab her friend by the arm and Astoria tried to grab the other. "Daph!"

"Are you alright, Daphne?" Hermione piped up and three pairs of eyes turned towards the trio.
"Fine!" Daphne said, her voice a little higher than usual. "I'm doing it at dinner!" she vowed. "I'm going to grab him and snog him in front of the whole school!"

"Who're we talking about?" Hope asked with an arched eyebrow, but Daphne was already passing them leaving her friend and sister dumbstruck behind.

"Mental, that one," Tracey decided. "She's going to start a riot with her inter-house enemy relationship she's going for."

"So, she's mad for a Gryffindor, then?" Ron asked, staring after the blonde in surprise.

Astoria gave a long sigh, shaking her head before turning her attention to Hope. "When's the next meeting? Is it tonight?"

Hope's shoulders sagged slightly. "You have got to be the fifteenth person to ask me today," she bemoaned. "I'll let you lot know, alright? I've got detention with Snape today." Remedial Potions, her arse! Detention was far more likely.

"You have to be the most rebellious person I've ever met," Tracey said in a bit of awe.

"Will it be this week?" Astoria asked brightly.

"Possibly," Hope said, "I'll have a better idea once I get the Quidditch practice schedules."

The Gryffindors waved off the remaining two Slytherins.

"Who d'you think she's mad for?" Ron mused.

"Probably Dean," Hermione mused.

Hope stared, almost dropping her wand. "Really?"

"Process of elimination," Hermione said in a superior voice that broke halfway through resulting in her breaking into giggles.

"We're here," Hope noticed as the Map flashed and they turned into the spare classroom. An assortment of chairs and tables were thrown haphazardly about.

"Which is it?" Ron whispered, eyeing a few chairs apprehensively, though Hope couldn't imagine why. Boggarts were known to inhabit dark, enclosed places.

Hermione was the one who spotted it first. "That one."

Hope squinted at it. "Is that a wooden briefcase?"

"Was that a thing?" Ron inquired.

Hermione shrugged, checking her watch. "Hope, we'll handle this, but you need to get going, you have to meet Snape in five minutes."

Hope's attitude went down the toilet and her mood darkened at the mention of the man. "I didn't agree to this," she growled to herself, "I should just skive off."

"No, you won't," Hermione said, pushing her out of the door, "you'll feel better when you don't have so many nightmares and you know it."
Hope couldn't disagree with her there, but it didn't make her any happier as she stumped down to the dungeons, her hair straight black, falling slightly into her dark eyes.

Occlumency, Hope discovered, was rather a nightmare. She left Snape's office tired and drained and her head throbbing like mad. She sat down heavily on the nearest staircase, putting her head between her knees.

Say what Dumbledore would, Occlumency wasn't pleasant in the slightest, in fact, Hope found it to be a bit painful. Being forced to relive her memories, whether good or bad, was not how she wanted to spend two nights a week. Snape had already seen her battered and bleeding body lying on the pavement before first year, Cedric falling back after being struck with the *Avada Kedavra*, Hermione and Ron hugging her when she left the hospital wing, the image in the Mirror of Erised, George kissing her, and by the end of it, Hope felt rather sick and angry. This was mostly because he made a side comment about the boy in the mirror ("Maybe he won't be as much of a disappointment as his parents").

Hope wanted to deck him then and there, but as it was, she doubted she had the strength to do so.

"Hope?"

Hope squinted up at the owner of the voice. "Ernie?"

"Er, yeah…you alright?" he asked in concern. It was rare to see the fearless leader of the DA so down.

"I've got a massive headache, no big deal," Hope said in an offhand way, standing up so suddenly that she nearly toppled right over and would have, if Ernie hadn't snagged her wrist. "M'fine," she grumbled. "Just going to the hospital wing."

She made to pass him, but he tapped her lightly on the shoulder, pointing in the opposite direction. "The hospital wing is that way."

Hope blinked. "I knew that…bye Ernie."

She clamoured up the stairs only to bump into a second person. "Oh, hey, Ang."

"Hi." Angelina looked deeply suspicious for a moment. Hope would have been insulted if she didn't know that she was a very suspicious person. "What're you up to?"

"Hospital wing," Hope said, massaging her head. "I've got a massive headache."

Angelina nodded in understanding. "I'll walk with you," she offered. It had been ages since she and Hope had had a good one on one chat.

Hope made a low grunt as Angelina took up the space beside her. "I saw Ron and Hermione lugging something up to the seventh floor, is that for our next lesson?"

Hope smacked her face with her hand. "Exactly how many people saw them doing that?"

"Not too many," Angelina admitted, "besides, it wasn't as though we could see what it was, anyways, I think Hermione was using a weak camouflage spell."

"Good on her," Hope said approvingly. "So, how are you and Fred?" It was a foolish question, as Hope already knew the answer to it, but she felt the need to ask it anyways.
Angelina’s face split into a smile that was bright and soft. “Oh, you know,” she said in a dreamy way that earned her a sly glance from Hope. “Fred and I were finalizing some things on the flat.”

“Oh!” Hope had thought he’d already proposed, but then, it wasn’t as though he had a ring yet, so it made sense. “You’re moving in with him as soon as term’s done, then?”

Angelina beamed. “And St. Mungo’s Healer School has offered me a scholarship.”

“That's amazing!” Hope said with enthusiasm, hugging her. Angelina had had to work her bum off to get those straight O's in Potions, Transfiguration, Charms, Herbology, and Defence Against the Dark Arts in her OWLs. "Congratulations!"

"Thanks! But it'll only stick if I manage to do the same on my NEWTs," she said a bit fretfully.

"I have complete faith in you," Hope informed her firmly.

"Thanks," Angelina said again, pulling Hope away from ramming into a stone railing. "Are you sure you're alright?"

"M'fine," Hope said thickly, a strange balloon of euphoria expanding inside her, making her brimming with happiness, and all Hope knew was that it wasn't her that was feeling it.
It seemed to interest a large number of people that Gryffindor Dean Thomas was dating Slytherin Daphne Greengrass. It didn't help that one was a Muggle-born and one was a Pure-blood. Hope was sorry she'd missed Daphne kissing the dark-skinned lad in front of the school; Astoria said it was quite something. It was also perhaps the first romantic relationship between a Slytherin and Gryffindor in decades, maybe even centuries. Daphne seemed to be on cloud nine, and Dean clearly thought he was the lucky one. Not many of the Slytherins were pleased by the turn of events, but Gryffindor House was being surprisingly open about it (Hope took credit for that, being a snake wearing lion's fur).

"Do you suppose they've got anything better to do than glare at them?" Ron mused, nodding towards the Slytherin table. Daphne was sitting next to Dean, smiling politely as Seamus spoke, and Malfoy in particular was astonished that a member of his house, a prefect no less, was fraternizing with the enemy.

"Doubtful," Hope said, swallowing a bit of her porridge and flicking the bird at Malfoy when he glanced her way. "Oh, look, there goes five points for rude hand gestures." You knew it was bad when they got to being so calm about loss of points. They didn't much care anymore, did they?

"Hope," Hermione warned idly, though she wasn't much paying attention, her eyes focused on the Daily Prophet before her, and then she gasped.

"What is it?" Ron asked, shovelling eggs down his throat. "Not some more tripe about Hope, is it?"

Hope took the paper from Hermione, her expression turning thunderous. "MASS BREAKOUT FROM AZKABAN, MINISTRY FEARS BLACK IS 'RALLYING POINT FOR OLD DEATH EATERS.'"

Ron choked. "What?"

The entire front page was covered with black-and-white photos of those who must've been the Death Eaters. Hope could only recognize a few, and that was barely.

"Antonin Dolohov," she read, glancing to Ron who suddenly clenched his fingers tightly around his fork, "convicted of the brutal murders of Gideon and Fabian Prewett…Algernon Rookwood, convicted of leaking Ministry of Magic secrets to He Who Must Not Be Named…Bellatrix Lestrange, convicted of the torture and permanent incapacitation of Frank and Alice Longbottom… This is terrible!"

"Keep reading," Hermione advised in a still-stunned voice.

"The Ministry of Magic announced late last night that there has been a mass breakout from Azkaban," Hope intoned, "Speaking to reporters in his private office, Cornelius Fudge, Minister for Magic, confirmed that ten high-security prisoners escaped in the early hours of yesterday evening and that he has already informed the Muggle Prime Minister of the dangerous nature of these individuals.

"We find ourselves, most unfortunately, in the same position we were two and a half years ago when the murderer Sirius Black escaped," said Fudge last night. "Nor do we think the two breakouts are unrelated. An escape of this magnitude suggests outside help, and we must remember that Black, as the first person ever to break out of Azkaban, would be ideally placed to help others follow in his
footsteps. We think it likely that these individuals, who include Black's cousin, Bellatrix Lestrange, have rallied around Black as their leader. We are, however, doing all we can to round up the criminals, and we beg the magical community to remain alert and cautious. On no account should any of these individuals be approached." Oh, that's very helpful," Hope added scathingly, throwing down the paper.

"They can't serious think it was Si-Padfoot, can they?" Ron demanded in a low hiss, careful of who was listening in.

"What else are they supposed to think?" Hermione asked shortly, flicking the paper open with a scowl. "Fudge's been telling everyone for months now that Hope and Dumbledore are mental, even when all the facts are pointing to Voldemort –Ron, grow up!- he still picks Sirius over him."

"He's a moron," Hope decided, scrubbing at her scar a bit. Now it made sense to her, that happiness she had felt yesterday was from Voldemort's glee at the escape of his loyal supporters.

"Oh no!"

"Don't tell me someone we know is dead?" Hope asked suddenly, staring at her, her eyes bulging slightly as Hermione's lips thinned into a line. "Seriously?"

Ron took the newspaper from her loose grip and spread it out over the table.

**TRAGIC DEMISE OF MINISTRY OF MAGIC WORKER**

*St Mungo's Hospital promised a full inquiry last night after Ministry of Magic worker Broderick Bode, 49, was discovered dead in his bed, strangled by a pot plant. Healers called to the scene were unable to revive Mr. Bode, who had been injured in a workplace accident some weeks prior to his death.*

*Healer Miriam Strout, who was in charge of Mr. Bode's ward at the time of the incident, has been suspended on full pay and was unavailable for comment yesterday, but a spokes-wizard for the hospital said in a statement:*

"St. Mungo's deeply regrets the death of Mr. Bode, whose health was improving steadily prior to this tragic accident. We have strict guidelines on the decorations permitted on our wards but it appears that Healer Strout, busy over the Christmas period, overlooked the dangers of the plant on Mr. Bode's bedside table. As his speech and mobility improved, Healer Strout encouraged Mr. Bode to look after the plant himself, unaware that it was not an innocent Flitterbloom, but a cutting of Devil's Snare which, when touched by the convalescent Mr Bode, throttled him instantly."

*St. Mungo's is as of yet unable to account for the presence of the plant on the ward and asks any witch or wizard with information to come forward.*

Hope frowned. "I thought he was familiar…"

"What d'you mean?" Hermione asked. "You knew that man?"

"No, not really," Hope said quickly, "but I saw him briefly when I went to the Ministry with your dad." She directed the last bit towards Ron who gaped at her, realization dawning.

"Hang on, Dad's mentioned him," he said, lowering his voice and glancing around as the girls leaned in close as well. "He was an Unspeakable, he worked in the Department of Mysteries!"

"What's in the Department of Mysteries?" Hope asked.
Ron shrugged. "No one really knows- hey, where're you going?"

Hermione was on her feet, her eyes gleaming with something that Hope couldn't quite recognize.

"To send a letter!" Hermione said rather abruptly, taking one last gulp of pumpkin juice.

"Why?"

Hermione ignored the question, seeming a bit breathless. "It…well, I don't know whether…but it's worth trying…and I'm the only one who can."

"Do you ever get annoyed when she does that?" Ron asked Hope, staring after Hermione in a bit of bemusement.

"All the time," Hope said.

Hope's bad mood sprung forth in the occurrence of two things. The first was Hagrid's probation, and the second was the most recent Decree which stated that teachers weren't allowed to give students any information outside of their subject area. Hope had a habit of staying after class to talk with Professors Flitwick and McGonagall about recent Olde Magicks that she was still studying (though they were a bit on the back burner now), and now she couldn't even do that, which further irritated her.

Her only outlets these days were Quidditch and the DA. Quidditch was becoming steadily more aggravating, but the DA was getting more advanced by the week.

They were now working on Shield Charms, slowing making their way up to Patronuses, and Hope had been incredibly impressed with Neville who was only second to Hermione in picking up the spell.

"Well done, Neville," she said, beaming brightly at the sight of the familiar nearly transparent blue barrier. It wasn't very strong, but hardly anyone else could get theirs as large as his or Hermione's, though Ron was a close third.

He spared her a tired smile before it turned into a determined frown.

"Now, I'm not expecting you all to get this right away!" Hope said a little exasperated, just stopping Lee from drumming his wand too harshly against his hand as though it was the problem. "This is really difficult stuff, guys, it might take a lesson or two…give it five more minutes and then we call it a day, yeah?"

There were a few groans and Hope grinned. She knew that they would rather learn a new spell every week, but Hope would only teach them a new one once every member of the DA had learned the spell, which some of them (namely Zacharias) found quite tedious. On the upside, Hope was learning patience, which she was known for sorely lacking.

"George, show me yours."

Her boyfriend would usually cast her a cocky smirk, but this time he seemed quite irritated, his eyebrows melding together into a frown of concentration. "Protego!"

Hope cast a simple Jelly-Legs Jinx at it, like Hermione had last year when she was helping her, and it shattered, making George turn red. Fred had mastered the spell with little difficulty and Hope could see his embarrassment as clear as day. Fred shot her a glance as in "Do something."
Hope wrinkled her nose in his direction. "Everyone, you're dismissed!"

"You stay," she said, snagging his sleeve before he could follow after Fred. Hermione cast Hope a questioning look but Hope quickly shook her head and Hermione went back to glancing over the Map and telling students when they could leave until Hope and George were all that remained.

"Going to lecture me?" George said in a depressed sort of voice that surprised her. Though, she surmised, George was probably so used to being on the same level as Fred that to be outdone by him in an aspect was…insulting.

"Should I?" Hope asked, crossing her arms over her chest and looking at him head on. She inwardly smirked as his eyes unintentionally flickered slightly downwards, which was rather the point (as Alicia and Angelina assured her). He swallowed nervously.

"Maybe…"

"You're not doing anything wrong," Hope said drawing closer to him, uncrossing the arms and taking one of his hands with hers. "Power's the problem, just focus more and I'm sure you'll have it down."

"You're the boss," George said, though it was said a bit slyly.

"Are you saying that just because you want to snog me?" Hope asked shrewdly.

"Is there a right answer to that?" he asked with an arched eyebrow.

Hope's cheeks pinked, but her expression didn't change. "I'll make you a deal, Georgie…if you master this, then I'm all yours."

A spark lit George's eyes. "Really?"

Hope's cheeks darkened further. "Oh, just get to it," she grumbled, taking several steps back to aim her wand at him. "Locomotor Wibbly!"

The spell was shot at George's hastily thrown up shield. His shield held for a few moments before it broke.

"That's better," Hope said with a smile, "but give me more! Locomotor Wibbly!"

This time it held, vibrating from the force of Hope's spell, but remaining intact.

"See!" Hope said, her smile spreading across her face. "Told yo-"

George grabbed her by the waist, pulling her to him, kissing her. Hope's eyes fluttered shut and she gripped the front of his robes to keep herself upright. Her eyes were dazed when she opened them moments later after he released her.

"What was that for?" she asked, slightly breathless. The tone sent a shiver down George's spine.

"Oh, no reason," George said in a jaunty voice, "just happy to snog my prof."

Hope's hair turned the colour of fire, her cheeks turning beet red. "That's-you-ugh! I hate you!"

"No, you don't!" George sang. "Or else you wouldn't have agreed to live with me." It still made him giddy whenever he thought about it.
"I dunno, my boyfriend might get a little jealous if we're living in the same flat, don't you think?" Hope said in a sly voice.

"Don't worry, he likes me," George said with a wink.

"I find that incredibly unlikely," Hope disagreed, curling her fingers into his hair, "he's such a jealous bloke."

"Mm..." George hummed against her ear, making her shiver, something he caught that made him smirk, "ditch him, then. I'm much better company."

"It's a tossup," Hope said, pulling him towards the door. "Come along, Wizard-boy, I can already hear the rumours brewing."

He couldn't help but laugh at that as he allowed her to pull him unresisting out of the Room of Requirement, and for once he wasn't thinking about Umbridge or the shop. All he could think about was that sarcastically witty red-haired witch who couldn't stay out of trouble and had made him completely mad for her.

He was going to get her in a broom cupboard before he left if it killed him to do so.

Hope was finding her Occlumency lessons to be increasingly difficult, her supposed incompetence increasing with each lesson. She wanted to take one of the cauldrons and bash Snape alongside the head, something Ron heartily approved of (no need to mention Hermione's disapproval). But she went to each lesson despite her obvious distaste for them, mostly because Remus had cornered her after Snape had come by Number Twelve to tell her that it would be a good idea for her to make an honest attempt with the lessons.

Honest attempt, sure, but Snape was a royal pain in the arse and now it was turning into bi-weekly torture.

Thank Merlin she still had Quidditch, though, or she might have gone a bit mad, however, for some reason, Hermione wanted her to skip her practice on Valentine's Day to meet her in the Three Broomsticks.

"Angelina won't hear of it," Hope said in a firm voice, crossing her arms and eyeing Hermione curiously. "She wants a whole day of training...why do you need me--hey! Hermione!"

The brunette was making towards Angelina, with whom she seemed to have an intense conversation with.

"What's she up to?" Ron asked suspiciously as he eyed their friend from where she was standing. "Why does she want you to go to the Three Broomsticks?"

"Hell if I know," Hope grumbled, turning back to Ron's essay. "Alright, you look pretty good except for Mars has two moons, not one; you just forgot about Deimos-"

"So, you've got permission to leave before noon," Hermione said brightly as she returned to her seat by the fire, "so we're good!"

"And why do I need to go to the Three Broomsticks?" Hope asked as Ron bemoaned about having to spend the whole day training (even if he did need it).

"You'll find out tomorrow," Hermione said evasively. "Honestly, it's not as bad as you think."
However, by the time midday approached the following day, Hope found it to be just as bad as she thought.

Hope glared daggers at Rita Skeeter from where she was sitting across the table with Luna, Hermione beside Hope. "This is actually probably worse than I thought Hermione, well done."

Hermione winced at how cold her tone was. She knew Hope wouldn't like her idea very much, which was why she had hid it from her as long as conceivably possible.

"I know it looks pretty bad," Hermione admitted, "but it's the best plan."

"Hello, Hope, dear," Rita said in a simpering voice that sounded so much like Umbridge's that Hope's scowl deepened, "how's your year been?"

"How do you think it's been?" Hermione asked with a bit of irritation towards the woman. She may not've liked her, but some things had to be sacrificed for the sake of truth. "She's told the Minister for Magic the truth and the Minister's too much of an idiot to believe her."

Hope's eyebrows rose slightly. She'd never heard Hermione say anything like that about authority before, barring Umbridge of course.

"And you are sticking to your first story, are you?" Rita said in a despairing voice. "That He Who Must Not Be Named is back? You stand by all this garbage Dumbledore's been telling everybody about You-Know-Who returning and you being the sole witness?"

"I'm not here to convince you, if that's what you think," Hope said frigidly and Luna looked up in interest. She'd never seen Hope the way she was now, dark anger lighting her eyes, but she didn't know the old grudge Hope held against the reporter.

"You can believe whatever tripe the Daily Prophet comes out with these days," Hope said bitterly.

"I could," Rita said in a mocking manner, "but I could also report what you say…but Little Miss Perfect wouldn't want that, would she?"

"Actually," Hermione cut across her smoothly (Hope stared. 'Little Miss Perfect?'), "that's exactly what Little Miss Perfect does want."

Hope's glare had returned in full, aimed entirely at Hermione, but this time the brunette ignored her.

"You want me to report what she says about He-Who-Must-Not-Be-Named?" Rita said, her voice low and stunned.

"I do." There was a steely glint in Hermione's eyes that Hope recognized from when they studied together with Ron before their end of the year exams. "The true story. All the facts. Word for word from Hope. I'm sure she'll give you the details of what happened that night, the Death Eaters, the ritual, the duel with Voldemort-don't be such a little-"

Hope was impressed with her friend's nerve when Rita interrupted her.

"The Prophet wouldn't print it. In case you haven't noticed, nobody believes her cock-and-bull story." Rita spared her a sneer. "Everyone thinks she's delusional. Now, if you let me write the story from that angle-"

"We don't need more stories about how mental Hope is!" Hermione snapped, her eyes flashing in the lighting. "We've got enough of those, what we need is a story from her point of view!"
"Well, fat chance of that, there's no market for a story like that," Rita retorted.

"Maybe not for the Prophet," Hermione said.

"Not anywhere," Rita disagreed, "people don't want to believe You-Know-Who's back, they'll believe anything in print, and all that's been printed is how off their rockers Dumbledore and Hope are."

"Which is why we want her story out there!" Hermione insisted. "And if the Prophet won't take it, then we'll give it to someone else!"

"Like who?" Rita asked in a scathing voice, and it dawned on Hope why Luna was there.

"My father runs the Quibbler," Luna said in a cheerfully vague manner. "He publishes important stories he thinks the public needs to know. He doesn't care about making money."

Rita gave a short bark of laughter. "Important stories he thinks the public needs to know?" she scoffed loudly. "I could manure my garden with the contents of that rag!"

Hope rolled her eyes, hailing Rosmerta as she passed by. "Can I get a Gillywater?"

"Sure, love!" she called over her shoulder, smiling brilliantly as she did to all of her customers.

Hope tuned back into the conversation in time to hear: "I'm supposed to do this for free?"

Hermione's smirk was a dead ringer for hers. "Of course," she said speaking lowly, "I could always inform the authorities that you are an unregistered Animagus."

Hope hid her amusement as best as she could, recalling how Hermione had caught the beetle animagus at the end of the previous year during the aftermath of the Third Task.

"I don't really have a choice, do I?" Rita asked sourly.

"Not really, no," Hermione agreed while Luna beamed.

"Daddy will be pleased."

Hope ground her teeth taking a large gulp of her drink as Rosmerta brought it around to her, but she sighed at the imploring look in Hermione's eyes. Honestly, she was getting soft.

"Oh, fine," she grumbled, still annoyed when they left an hour later with Hope having a much more sore throat than when they started.

"I'm sorry I didn't tell you ahead of time," Hermione said softly as they left, Hope massaging her head and looking as pale as snow. Hermione knew the memories weren't pleasant. "But I knew you wouldn't like it, so..." She gestured helplessly.

Hope cast her a searching glance, but her lips curled upwards slightly.

"Very Slytherin of you. Didn't know you had it in you."

And it was a very different thing to see Hermione beam at the words.

Hope was suffering from a very short temper by the time the Hufflepuff-Gryffindor Quidditch match came around. She had to postpone DA meetings because Angelina was pulling out all the stops, and
her dreams just seemed to get worse with each day. And Snape's lessons weren't helping, in fact, Hope would wager that they were the main reason she had a short fuse. How would you like it if someone was ripping into your head every other night or so?

"You're our ace in the hole," Angelina told her solemnly before the game was to start. "Ginny's good and all, but Jack and Ron..." She grimaced. Ron hadn't been doing so well in their recent practices.

"Thanks for the pressure," Hope said dryly.

"No problem."

Hope sighed, shouldering her broom with a sour expression on her face. She could already hear the loud chorus of "Weasley is Our King" and she felt sick to her stomach for Ron. She knew she would have been horrified and disgusted if they had been singing that about her parents (disregarding that she probably would have snapped and committed mass murder).

Hope ground her teeth together as the fourteen players filtered onto the pitch, readying for the release of the Quaffle. Quidditch was becoming more of a trial than anything; that, like all things, she blamed on Umbridge. She narrowed her eyes on her competition, a boy called Summerby. She hadn't seen him in action, but she doubted he was as good as Cedric. No one was as good as Cedric, she thought with a pang.

It became rather clear that she had a target painted across her, because as soon as they all took to the air, the Beaters immediately went after her.

"Ooh! Bad idea, boys! Potter's got a history with Beaters of opposing teams! Really think it's going to work this time around?"

Hope dodged the onslaught from the Bludgers swiftly, sparing them each a disconcertingly bright smile, which was as good as waving a flag around and chanting "Na-na-na, Can't catch me!"

"Swing and a miss! Have you lot forgot how good she is on a broom? Spinnet to Bell! Making for the goal hoops, and she-SCORES!"

Cheers sprung up around the pitch as Hope spun around violently searching vainly for a flicker of gold that was the tell-tale sign of the Snitch. She scowled at Summerby who was watching her like a hawk more than actually looking for it himself. A low growl left her lips. Honestly! Did she have to do everything herself?

Ah! There it was!

Hope surged forward, catching the glitter of gold near Jack Sloper's foot. It raced downwards towards the ground and Summerby was on her tail.

"Look out, Hope!"

Hope hardly registered this, however, she did feel the Quaffle soar through her arms to collide with her chest. The toss didn't break anything, but it did force the breath from her lungs.

"No good filthy little-"

Hope could feel her ribs snap as a Bludger collided with her side and she gave a small cry of pain, somehow still forcing her eyes to the Snitch...it was just beyond reach...Hope could ignore the pain...
The cold weather was slowing the small golden ball down, something that was very lucky for Hope, because try as she might to ignore the pain of her ribs, it was pretty fucking painful. *Just grab the Snitch and you can go see Madam Pomfrey,* she told herself, *just get the stupid thing.*

She threw herself forward, the movement jarring her damaged bones, but then her fingers clasped around the walnut-sized ball and a low exhalation of relief left her lips as she raised it up in triumph.

The cheers were explosive, but she didn't stick around to find out, not even bothering to get off her broom to head for the hospital wing.

Madam Pomfrey wasn't surprised, though, Hope mused as the woman grumbled darkly to herself as she cast a few spells upon her, she must've been used to the amount of trouble Hope got into just for breathing. She made a noise of irritation as the door to the hospital wing was thrown open.

Angelina was as white as her complexion could allow, and George's freckles were an obvious contrast with his pallor. It must have been something else to be in the stands and not be able to be up in the air with her.

She winked. "Aw, were you worried about me, Georgie?"

George rubbed his face with a groan as Fred sniggered beside him, muttering something about his girlfriend being the death of him. Hermione came up to her side as Madam Pomfrey gave Hope a nod, clearing the girl.

"Are you alright? It looked pretty bad."

"Painful," Hope admitted grudgingly, "but you know me." She grinned sheepishly at her friend. "Harder than a rock, and all…where's Ron?"

Hermione, whose lips had twitched at the truth of her words, fell at the mention of the ginger-haired Keeper. "Er…he's gone up to the common room…"

Hope winced. "Ah…"

"I don't know if I should punch you or kiss you!" Angelina burst out, finally having regained her speech.

"I'd leave the kissing to George," Fred said dryly, "it's his department, after all."

A mock-affronted expression morphed onto his twin's face that they all had a good laugh at. "Oh, shut up." And then he did just that, kissing her through her laughter, and making the others only laugh harder.

It was nice, Hope thought, to forget about the world for a second and bask in the victory of the game. And heaven knew, Hope needed a break from the real world.

By Monday morning, however, the real world had hit Hope at full throttle and the fifth year found herself surrounded by owls. One bore the title: *HOPE POTTER SPEAKS OUT AT LAST: THE TRUTH ABOUT HE WHO MUST NOT BE NAMED AND THE NIGHT I SAW HIM RETURN.*

"Ah…” Hope said weakly. "So that's what this is all about."

"Yup!” Luna's voice rang with cheerfulness today as she plopped herself down onto a seat at the Gryffindor table, smiling dreamily to them all. "The article ran yesterday. I asked Dad to send you a
free copy. I expect all these are letters from readers."

Hope blinked, a little startled at the assessment, eyeing the flurry of owls with a suspicious eye as her friends began opening the letters around her, a number of Gryffindors joining in as well.

"This one's from a bloke who thinks you're off your rocker," Ron said, rolling his eyes and ripping up the parchment.

"This woman recommends you try a good course of Shock Spells at St Mungo's," Hermione noted in disapproval.

"This one thinks you're telling more than the Minister's willing to admit," George added, waving a parchment at her.

"This one's a bit torn," Fred said, squinting at the letter in his hands. "Says you don't come across as a mad person, but he really doesn't want to believe You-Know-Who's back so he doesn't know what to think now. Blimey, what a waste of parchment."

Hope sniggered.

"But, Hope, look!" Hermione was beaming at her, thrusting a letter into her hands. "'Having read your side of the story, I am forced to the conclusion that the Daily Prophet has treated you very unfairly...little though I want to think that He Who Must Not Be Named has returned, I am forced to accept that you are telling the truth'...Oh, this is wonderful!"

"This one thinks you're barmy, ah, well, you can't win them all, I guess... but this one says you've got her converted and she now thinks you're a real hero," Ron added with a grin.

"What is going on here?"

Hope forced her face to remain neutral in the face of Umbridge's ugly presence (and it was hard work, believe me).

"Why have you got all these letters Miss Potter?"

Hope opened her mouth to reply with a snappy retort, but Fred beat her to it.

"Is it a crime, now? Getting mail?"

He gave her a wink with a clear "I got you" expression that Hope wasn't quite sure how to respond to. George rolled his eyes for good measure.

"Be careful, Mr. Weasley or I shall have to put you in detention. Well, Miss Potter?"

"I did an interview on what happened after the Third Task," she said bluntly. "I'm not sure if you know what those are..."

A few people sniggered, but Umbridge didn't rise to the bait; how disappointing.

"And people have written to me because of what I've said."

"An interview?"

"Eh? You deaf or something?" Hope demanded, arching an eyebrow. "Look yourself."

She took the copy of the Quibbler that remained on the table while Hermione and Ron were giving
her a look that clearly asked why she was poking the sleeping dragon in the eye, but George was a bit resigned to the fact that his girlfriend didn't really have a filter when she didn't like you. Hope watched in fascination as her face burned a colour much darker than red.

"When did you do this?" she asked in her high-pitched voice.

Hope's eyes narrowed minutely. If she said she'd done it on the Hogsmeade Weekend, then she'd be banned for sure, and those weekends were the only break she really got these days.

"Over owl post," Hope said shortly, crossing her arms on the table and leaning on them, her eyes glinting at the pure anger in tiny eyes.

"You will be banned from owl post, Miss Potter," she seethed quietly, though Hope wasn't sure the cow knew how exactly she could do that. "How you dare...how you could...I have tried again and again to teach you not to tell lies. The message, apparently, has still not sunk in. Fifty points from Gryffindor and another week's worth of detentions."

Hope watched her go with a disconcerting sadistic smirk on her face. If she thought she was going to win this battle of wills, if she thought she was going to break Hope, she was sadly mistaken.
Ron and Hermione didn't have any luck finding Hope in the morning of the day following the appearance of the article in the Quibbler, which had thus resulted in the subsequent banning of the magazine (but somehow everyone still managed to read it without being caught). The reason became apparent at the sound of raised voices as they left the common room.

"Like it?" Hope's voice was dangerously low. "You think I like cutting open my hand every night, George?"

"What am I supposed to think?" George demanded. Ron winced at the true anger in his voice. "It's like you can't help yourself-"

"Can't help myself?" Hope seethed, clenching her hands into tight fists. "What-?! Am I supposed to lie down and take it like a dog?!"

"No, but what you're doing-"

"I'm not bending!" Hope raged. "What's so wrong with that?!

And then she stormed away on her heel, almost colliding with Ron and Hermione on the way, hardly batting an eye as she gripped each of their elbows in a painfully tight grip, not releasing them until they were at the Gryffindor table. People steered clear of Hope, considering the dark expression on her face.

Hermione cleared her throat, speaking rather bravely, Ron thought. "Are you and George fighting?"

It was a bit outside the norm for them, to see her actually exchange biting words with her boyfriend and actually have intense anger aimed at him.

Hope grumbled something inaudible under her breath. "He thinks I should keep my head down and stop slicing my hand open."

Hermione clearly wanted to say that he wasn't wrong, but she held her tongue.

"Like I'm going to bow to that cow," Hope snarled, stabbing moodily at her eggs. "What a load of shite."

She looked up in time to see her boyfriend enter the hall, but he didn't approach her, a frown marring his face.

"I had another dream last night," Hope said, trying to distract them from her fight with George.

Ron was surprised but Hermione was annoyed.

"You're supposed to be learning to close that connection, Hope!" she said aghast.

"Yeah, well, fat chance of that," Hope snapped. "But anyways there was this bloke, Rookwood, and he was telling Voldemort that Bode couldn't have taken 'it', something about him being under the Imperius Curse."

Ron frowned. "Bode was spelled to take something?"

"That's what it sounded like," Hope said with a shrug.
"It explains why he was killed," Hermione mused, her eyes shrewd.

"Huh?" Ron screwed up his eyes. "You think some Death Eaters snuck that Devil's Snare into St. Mungo's?"

"Who else?" Hermione asked reasonably. "Bode was recovering, what do you think would have happened if he'd been able to say what happened to him?"

A morbid silence settled over them.

"Could they really be hiding something in the Department of Mysteries, though?" Hope queried. "Something worth stealing for Voldemort?"

"Maybe," Hermione considered, her eyes falling to Hope's dark and hooded ones that were glancing up the table to where George was sitting. Hermione opened her mouth, possibly to chastise Hope for not managing to close her mind properly, but she couldn't force the words out. Hope was already under enough pressure as it was, what with Quidditch practice, planning for the DA, and intensive studying for the OWLs in order to bring her Potions grade up. Hermione shut her mouth.

"How's Trelawney, d'you think?" Hope mused, taking a gulp of pumpkin juice. The Divination professor had been dismissed from her post by Umbridge, only by Dumbledore stepping in was the woman allowed to remain at the castle, being rather distraught over the whole thing and locking herself into her tower.

"Probably better than you look."

Hope rolled her eyes as Ron was jabbed in the side by Hermione's elbow. "Gee, thanks," she said dryly. "C'mon, I'll walk you to Divination, I've got a free period for an hour."

Ron eyed her suspiciously for a moment. "Alright, but hang on a second, I've got to tell the twins something…" He stood and Hope froze.

"I don't know what your issues are," Ron told his brother shortly in a low hiss so that no one could overhear them, "maybe you're both wrong, maybe you're not, but one of you has to step up and fix it."

George gaped at his brother before he was dragged away by his girlfriend who ignored his presence, complaining about her most recent grade by Snape until they were out of hearing.

"You'll have to tell me how Firenze is as a teacher," Hope said.

"Oh, yeah…wasn't he that centaur who found you in the woods?" Ron asked.

Hope hummed in affirmation. "He's very…” She struggled to find an appropriate word to describe the centaur. "Complex."

"Good complex or bad complex?" Ron asked, because there was definitely a difference between the two.

Hope made a "so-so" gesture with her hand. "Meh, I suppose it depends on what you like. He's pretty easy to get along with."

"Hope Potter."

Hope jumped violently at his serene voice that would have put Luna to shame. Firenze spared her a
small smile.

"My apologies."

"Oh, it's fine," Hope said, waving her hand in a careless manner. "I'm just jumpy, that's all." She took his hand when he extended it to her. "It's nice to see you."

"And you," Firenze said in an unblinking manner. "It was foretold that we would meet again."

"Oh?" Hope had learned rather early on not to question the centaur's dependency on the position of the planets and the stars. "Well, I was just walking with my friend, I'm not really in the class…"

Hope was uncomfortably aware that the entire class was gazing at her, impressed that she was on speaking terms with a centaur.

Ron blinked owlishly before shouldering his bag and walking past the pair.

"Hope Potter." This time he'd bent his head close, his voice lowered. "You are a friend of Hagrid's, are you not?"

"Yes," Hope said in confusion, furrowing her eyebrows together.

"Then give him a warning from me," Firenze warned. "His attempt is not working. He would do better to abandon it. I would warn Hagrid myself, but I am banished—it would be unwise for me to go too near the Forest now—Hagrid has troubles enough, without a centaurs' battle."

Hope's frown deepened, but she promised in an equally quiet voice to pass the message on before giving a swift farewell and heading up the stairs. Her feet moved on their own, taking her up flight after flight until she came to the viaduct. This was hardly surprising; the viaduct and the Astronomy Tower were her number two go-to places at Hogwarts.

However, by the time she got about halfway across that she found herself rooted to the spot, staring at the lone figure.

George had that uncanny ability at robbing her of speech, despite being not so close to her. There was something about the way he looked at her, a way that took her breath away. Hope stumbled backwards a step as George was suddenly in front of her, her lapse of attention costing her.

He caught her arm in case she tried to run, but she didn't, her heart beating a little fast in her chest (per usual).

"You're an idiot, you know that?" George asked quietly, bringing a hand up to grasp her chin.

Hope's lips pulled down into a frown. "I'm not-"

"Do you know how angry I get," George spoke over her, "when you come back to the common room with your hand bleeding like that?"

Hope's eyes widened slightly before shifting downwards, avoiding his eyes, but it was a little difficult to do with his hand still gripping her chin.

"I want to chase down that Umbridge woman and beat her senseless." He tilted her chin upwards, forcing her to meet his soulful eyes, imploring her. "And I don't understand why you keep letting her hurt you."

Hope bit on her lower lip to ensure that it wouldn't tremble as she lifted a hand to cup his cheek.
"You know me," she said, her voice hardly above a whisper. "Authority and I...we don't really, you know..." Get along.

"I know," George sighed, leaning his cheek into her hand with a certain fondness in his expression that made Hope's heart clench. "I'm sorry I said what I said earlier."

"I'm sorry too," Hope said, leaning up on her tip toes to brush her lips against his very gently, but his hand still on her chin slid to instead tangle in her hair, deepening the kiss until Hope was sure the world had faded over entirely.

Later, she wouldn't quite recall what it was exactly that had caused them to fight in the first place.

"I'm sure you've all been waiting for this," Hope said with a slight chuckle, "so we're going to be starting Patronuses."

A murmur of excitement fell upon the group at these words. This was the lesson they had been waiting for for months now.

"Alright, so the incantation is *Expecto Patronum,*" Hope said, saying it rather slowly for their benefit. "It's a little different because if you actually want to create a Patronus, you've got to focus on a happy memory, a powerful memory."

Several people looked very confused.

Hope sighed. "Mine changes a lot, but it usually includes the first time I saw my parents in a photograph," her eyes flickered to Ron and Hermione who took photograph to mean 'Mirror of Erised', "and my best friends," then she winked, "sometimes even my boyfriend."

George squawked indignantly. "Sometimes?" A few people laughed.

"If you say the incantation and focus on those thoughts, you'll end up with something like this — *Expecto Patronum!*" The silvery-bluish panther exploded from her wand tip to land gracefully on the ground, its tail flicking in the air as it curled its body protectively around her as people made a few excited noises and a few irritating 'aw's.

"You won't be needing pairs for this, so get to work."

Everyone spread out and Hermione was the first to search her out with a lost expression.

"Having trouble with a good memory?" Hope asked sympathetically.

Hermione nodded a little miserably.

"Think about the happiest you ever were with your parents, or even us, your friends, or maybe just Ron," she added with a wink, making Hermione's cheeks burn red with heat.

"I'm not--" she stuttered, but that only made Hope laugh.

"Get out of here, you crazy girl."

Hermione's chestnut eyes became thoughtful as Hope wandered around in search of any students who needed any help. Seamus, who had joined the DA just that day after telling Hope he believed her, having read her take on everything in the Quibbler, was very ecstatic in his attempts, even though they were only creating little more than puffs of silver smoke.
With a sudden burst of light, an owl burst from a wand tip and Hope turned, beaming towards Daphne. "Well done, Daphne!" The blonde-haired Slytherin's face was shiny but pleased, a pale flush dusting her cheeks as Dean kissed one. "This is what you're aiming for, people, a solid animal!"

"Even if you can't produce a corporeal one," Hope continued of the noise of incantations, "shield forms can work well, even if they're not as good as full-bodied ones--" She froze, staring at the Patronus that George had just made. It was a solid, larger, male panther.

Remus' words rang in her ears when she had asked back in third year about her parents' Patronuses: "Their Patronuses were what we call complementary, meaning that they were a male and female form of the same animal. James' was a stag, and Lily's was a doe. It only occurs in a few rare cases, such as soul mates."

Hope felt uncommonly warm at the thought and she turned quickly away so George wouldn't see how flattered and pleased she was, instead focusing on Luna, Ernie, and Ginny, each who were respectively creating a near perfect hare, boar, and horse.

"This is much easier than actually going against a dementor boggart, or even a dementor-" Hope started to say, but she was interrupted.

"Oh, don't be such a killjoy," Cho said, watching her swan Patronus in fascination. "They're so pretty!"

Hope's eye twitched in irritation. "Pretty? They're shields not fluffy little animals. And if you don't focus well enough next lesson against the boggart pretending to be a dementor, then you're going to faint."

Lavender paled a few feet away to twist and look at her. "We're doing that?" she squeaked. "It sounds so scary, though!"

Hope exhaled slowly. "Dementors are scary, Lavender, that's the point, this is the best option without actually having to kidnap a dementor and drag it here."

Lavender gave a short laugh before turning rather seriously towards her Patronus once more.

Hope had to be pleased with the efforts that were being made by her fellow students when the door to the Room of Requirement opened and closed silently. Noise abruptly quieted as Dobby the House-elf tugged on Hope's leg.

"Dobby? What're you doing here?" Hope asked in surprise before taking in how he was trembling. She knelt down to place a hand on his shoulder. "What's wrong? Has something happened?"

His shaking quickly became more prevalent and the fear was reflected in his wide green eyes. "Hope Potter, miss," he said, hardly above a whisper, his voice shaking like his body. "Hope Potter, miss… Dobby has come to warn you… but the house-elves have been warned not to tell…"

He made to run towards the wall, perhaps to give himself so head-damage, but Hope grabbed his arms before he could do so, forcing him to remain still. "Warned not to tell what?"

"Hope Potter," Dobby gasped, "she…she…" He tried to hit himself, but Hope forced the fist down, her face pale, realization dawning.

"Umbridge," Hope said quietly, swallowing her horror, "does she know about us?"
Dobby nodded.

"Is she coming up here?" Hope demanded.

A wail left Dobby. "Yes, Hope Potter, yes!"

Hope's heart thudded painfully in her chest as terrified whispers spread around the group.

"Alright... Dobby, I need you to do me a favour, and you need to do it fast." Dobby looked up. "I need you to take everyone here as close to their common rooms as you can get without being seen by anyone else, can you do that?"

"Yes, miss!" Dobby said eagerly.

"Hope!" Ron rushed forward and Hope thrust the list of the members into his hands as Dobby took the Slytherins — being the smallest group — first. "Whatever you're thinking of is a really bad idea!"

*Crack!* The Hufflepuffs were gone.

"Someone's got to head them off," Hope said with a cheeky grin as the Ravenclaws disappeared. "See you soon!" George's eyes met hers for an instant before the Gryffindors had gone too.

And then Dobby returned to her side. "Dobby, I want you to get back to the kitchens, and anytime she asks you if you helped me, say no, and I forbid you to hurt yourself."

Dobby nodded, relief shining in his eyes as he left.

Hope threw open the door and shut it just as fast, gripping her wand tightly in her hand as she ran down the hall, ducking as a flash of light arched over her head. She aimed blindly over her shoulder. "*Expelliarmus!*"

It collided with something, but she couldn't be certain of what exactly, and then something hit her sharply in the back, pitching her forward, the world fading suddenly to darkness.

Professor McGonagall's eyes were alight with anger at the sight of one of her favorite students being thrown to the floor of the Headmaster's Office completely out cold, her usually dark red hair a murky brown.

"How dare you!" Professor McGonagall gasped as she knelt to inspect the fifteen year old witch for injuries when a pair of equally brown eyes opened and Hope rubbed her head, sitting up with a slur of "No good son of a bitch! Only cowards hit from behind, bastard—"

She used this opportunity to stand and survey the people in the office, other than herself, Professor McGonagall, and Umbridge, there was Fudge, Kingsley, a man in Auror robes Hope did not recognize, Dumbledore in his chair, and Percy with a large parchment and quill.

"Well, well, well, well..." Fudge said in glee, and Hope, being Hope, decided to mock him.

She morphed her face to an exact replica of his, making her voice extra high. "Well, well, well, well," she mocked in a soprano pitch.

Fudge's face glowed with embarrassment, but Hope could see that Kingsley was hiding a smile.

"She was heading back to Gryffindor Tower," Umbridge said, speaking over her as Hope returned her face to normal with a sour expression adorning her face. "The Malfoy boy cornered her."
"Did he, did he? I must remember to tell Lucius."

Hope scoffed loudly. "Cornered?" She gave a harsh laugh. "Is that the tripe he told you? He nabbed me from behind, you arse-hole, like the coward he is. Hardly becoming of a Slytherin…feel free to interject at any time," she said, raising her voice, directing to a portrait hoisted high up in the back.

A low chuckle reverberated around the room. "I don't know," a cultured voice uttered, lilting pleasantly, "you see to be doing perfect on your own, darling granddaughter."

Hope rolled her eyes at him and laughed. "Still a charmer, Salazar, does it ever got old?"

He chuckled again in amusement as Fudge tried to bring her attention back to him. "Potter, I expect you know why you are here?"

"I've been kidnapped and attacked," Hope said dryly, "really, now, you're starting to act like old Voldemort, Minister."

"Shut up!" he hissed.

Hope yawned widely. "As much as I love all the attention, you lot all bore me." Her eyes flashed silver. "I could be snogging my unbelievably hot boyfriend right now, but no!"

Professor McGonagall coughed delicately and Percy choked a little.

"So you have no idea," Fudge said, speaking over her and ignoring what she said (big surprise there), "why Professor Umbridge has brought you to this office? You are not aware that you have broken any school rules?"

Hope gave him a bland look. "Really, you'll have to specify, I have a habit of breaking school rules."

"What about Ministry decrees?" Fudge demanded.

"Oh," Hope blinked. "Is this about the whole boys and girls not being allowed to be within eight inches of each other, because that's only fifty percent my fault-"

"No," Fudge snarled, "I am referring to an illegal student organization."

"Really?" Hope asked in apparent fascination. "Are you certain?"

It seemed that he was apparently quite certain as Umbridge fetched Marietta Edgecombe who had apparently spilled the beans. Hope's dislike for the girl increased. She didn't know why she was hiding her face, but she hoped it was painful. It became clear that it was once she removed her hands for all to see the word SNEAK in ugly purple pimples across her nose and cheeks.

"Minister, Miss Edgecombe here came to my office shortly after dinner this evening and told me she had something she wanted to tell me. She said that if I proceeded to a secret room on the seventh floor, sometimes known as the Room of Requirement, I would find out something to my advantage. I questioned her a little further and she admitted that there was to be some kind of meeting there. Unfortunately, at that point this hex, came into operation and upon catching sight of her face in my mirror the girl became too distressed to tell me anymore."

Hope hid a smirk, deciding she would have to thank Hermione as soon as she saw her.

It soon became obvious that the hex either stopped her from speaking or she was too horrified to, as if the pimples would get worse if she further alienated her classmates. It was her own fault, Hope
thought viciously, the spineless coward.

"You will remember, Minister, that I sent you a report back in October that Potter had met a number of fellow students in the Hog's Head in Hogsmeade –" Umbridge started to say in a sickly voice before she was cut across by Professor McGonagall who had long since placed a secure arm over Hope's shoulders.

"And what is your evidence of that?" she asked curtly.

"I have testimony from Willy Widdershins, Minerva, who happened to be in the bar at the time. He was heavily bandaged, it is true, but his hearing was quite unimpaired. He heard every word Potter said and hastened straight to the school to report to me," Umbridge said, speaking over the disgust of the blatant corruption. "The purpose of Potter's meeting with these students was to persuade them to join an illegal society, whose aim was to learn spells and curses the Ministry has decided are inappropriate for school-age--"

"I think you'll find you're wrong there, Dolores," Dumbledore said quietly and Hope couldn't help but be incensed that he was going to try to clean up her mess for her. She didn't need his help! Clearly she was doing just fine without him stepping in!

She gritted her teeth in irritation as Dumbledore took the fall for her, claiming it to have been his idea, and Hope couldn't help but be angry on Hermione's behalf because she was the one who had come up with it.

Her face remained trained in a scowl even as Dumbledore knocked out the members of the Ministry and disappeared in a flare of fire.

Sitting across from Umbridge was not a punishment Hope would have wished upon anyone, but she so often found herself subjected to it, being detention buddies and all. This time it was interrogation, or questioning, depending on how you looked at it, but Hope saw it as interrogation. Then again, Hope was a bit of a pessimist and a realist.

She scowled at the sight of Fred and George's Cleansweeps padlocked as she always did. What right did she have to take private property anyways? Even if they weren't allowed to play Quidditch, there was nothing against them simply flying around was there?

"Well, now," Umbridge said in that annoyingly sweet voice of hers. "What would you like to drink?"

Hope remembered Tonks telling her about Moody. "You know why he drinks from that hipflask, don't you? How many times d'you think people've tried to poison the bugger?"

"Nothing thanks," Hope said coolly, tapping her serpent ring against the chair, her lips twitching slightly into a smirk as her pig-like eyes darted to where the noise came from.

"I must insist," she said in a demanding tone.

"Tea," Hope said shortly, knowing something was up with the way she poured it with her back to her, obviously adding something (at least, obviously to Hope's overly suspicious mind).

"There. Drink it before it gets cold, won't you?" She said, handing Hope the cup. "Well, now, Miss Potter...I thought we ought to have a little chat, after the distressing events of last night."

Hope made a great show of swallowing despite the liquid not passing her lips.
"Good," she said, smiling brightly. "Very good. Now then...Where is Albus Dumbledore?"

"Dunno," Hope said shortly. How was she meant to know, anyways? It was more likely that he would've told Professor McGonagall, if anyone.

"Now, Miss Potter," she said sweetly, "let us not play childish games. I know that you know where he has gone. You and Dumbledore have been in this together from the beginning. Consider your position, Miss Potter..."

Hope gave her an unimpressed look as she took another 'gulp' of her tea.

"Very well," she sighed in disappointment. "In that case, you will kindly tell me the whereabouts of Sirius Black."

Hope's eyes narrowed just slightly. "I wouldn't know," she said airily.

"Miss Potter," Umbridge said in a direct sort of voice, "let me remind you that it was I who almost caught the criminal Black in the Gryffindor fire in October. I know perfectly well it was you he was meeting and if I had had any proof neither of you would be at large today, I promise you. I repeat, Miss Potter...where is Sirius Black?"

"I heard he was in Tibet," Hope said arching an eyebrow. "If I was you, I would be much more concerned with what was going on within the walls rather than outside it."

"And that brings me to my last question," she simpered. "Are you, by bloodline, related to Salazar Slytherin?"

Hope's eyes narrowed further. "I am, so?"

"Yet you do not have the power to open the Headmaster's Office for use?"

"Still sore about that, huh?" Hope said in mock-sympathy. "Sorry, that lies outside my abilities."

"And what-"

BOOM!

Hope's tea upended onto the carpet, staining the material as the whole office shook.

"Back to lunch with you, Potter!"

But Hope didn't go back to lunch, being the curious girl she was, and knowing that Fred and George were undoubtedly responsible, she followed the noises and yells to gaze in awe at what was causing so much pandemonium.

They were dragons, dragons made of fireworks, or fireworks that made dragons, one or the other, Hope couldn't quite be sure of anything other than they were brightly coloured and causing a number of explosions. Suddenly it wasn't just dragons, there were Catherine wheels, rockets, and brightly shining purple bats.

Hope couldn't resist laughing as one of the Catherine wheels aimed at Umbridge, the laughter becoming more pronounced as the stupid woman tried to Stupefy a rocket which only made it explode rather impressively. Hope was nearly in tears from her laughter as she ducked into a hidden passage behind a tapestry, almost bowling Fred and George over.

"You two are geniuses!" she told them rather breathlessly, kissing a cheek on each lad. "One of
those wheels attacked the cow! You should've seen what happened when she Stupefied one!"

"Oh, that's nothing!" Fred sniggered. "Wait until she tries to Vanish them, then they'll multiply by ten!"

Hope could only stare impressed and in awe of the twins.

After all the fun chaos that had erupted from the fireworks, Hope was more than a little depressed to go to her Occlumency lesson, and Cho's sudden appearance didn't really help things.

"Hope," Cho said in an imploring manner when she saw Hope's less than impressed expression. "I never dreamed Marietta would tell…"

"Maybe you shouldn't have brought her along in the first place," Hope grumbled almost completely under her breath. It was her belief that the whole episode could have been avoided had Cho not brought her friend along to Hog's Head in the first place.

"She's a lovely person, really," Cho insisted. "She just made a mistake—"

"Are you fucking kidding me?" Hope demanded, her eyes flashing; always a dangerous sign. "She sold us out for nothing!"

"We all got away, though, you know, her mum works for the Ministry, it's really difficult for her—"

Hope gaped at her for a moment. Was she really going to give her friend an excuse?

"Lots of people's parents work for the Ministry in the DA," Hope snapped, "but I've noticed none of them have got 'sneak' written across their faces."

"That was a really horrible thing for Hermione Granger to do!" Cho said bitterly.

"Horrible? Hermione? Are you mad?" Hope demanded, her eyes colouring crimson as she defended her friend. "Your friend betrayed us to Umbridge! It's lucky Hermione thought to jinx that parchment and hide it in a safe place, or it'd be more than just me paying the price!"

"Oh, please," Cho snarled. "A bit of detention—"

Hope ripped the bandages from her healing hand, shoving the wounded hand in front of Cho's nose.

"Just detention?" she seethed, scoffing at Cho's words. "What a load of tripe!"

And she stormed off to Snape's office before Cho could offer any apology that would have seemed to Hope rather empty.

Snape was waiting for her, hardly giving her any time to prepare herself before -"On the count of three then, one -two-Legilimens!"

Hope screwed up her face as he invaded her mind, a headache building upon impact- She was ten and a car was speeding towards her, colliding painfully into her –then she thirteen, standing beside Sirius, listening to him talk– anger blossomed inside her; that was private!

"Protego!" she snapped, and suddenly she was looking in on something else.

"Alright, Snivellus?" a superior voice asked and Hope turned to stare at a fifteen year old boy with dark hair in a disarray and hazel eyes shining behind a pair of rectangle glasses. He was talking to a
boy who could only be a younger Snape; he had the same hook nose, sallow skin, and greasy hair.

Snape struggled with his wand, but it was useless, James disarmed him in seconds, earning a bark of laughter. Hope turned to see a younger Sirius. He was handsome, she noticed, something Azkaban had taken from him.

"Impedimenta!" Snape was blown back a few feet, tumbling into the grass as several students laughed. Hope could see Remus' eyes peering over his book (because it couldn't really be anyone else) and Peter ducking around him to watch in amusement.

"How'd the exam go, Snivelly?" James taunted.

"I was watching him, his nose was touching the parchment," Sirius said, his eyes glinting malevolently. "There'll be great grease marks all over it, they won't be able to read a word."

Snape cursed loudly and foully that Hope stared, a little impressed.

"Wash out your mouth," James said, unimpressed by his swears, probably because they were aimed at him. "Scourgify!"

Snape choked on the soup and bubbles that clogged this throat.

"Leave him ALONE!"

Lily had joined the fray, and Hope gaped in surprise. She had never really took it to heart when people talked about just how much she looked like her mother, but they could've been twins! Though the differences were obvious; Hope was more about loose ties and un-tucked shirts and slightly wild hair, while Lily was neat and orderly.

And then something threw her back and Hope found herself against the wall, shocked and surprised. She yelped in pain as a tight grip on her arm pulled her away from the wall, anger radiating from Snape's entire being.

"Enjoyed the view, did you?" he snarled.

Hope was too stunned to formulate a response before she was thrown harshly against the door.

"Get out, get out!" He roared. "I don't want to see you in this office ever again!"

Hope narrowly missed a jar of billywig stings as she slipped through the slim opening and out onto the landing, cursing herself and bemoaning of her foolishness, and then of having to still go to her detention with Umbridge.

Hope sighed as George submerged her hand in the Essence of Murtlap.

"I still think you're an idiot," George told her resolutely.

This time, Hope laughed. "Aren't we all?" she murmured, curling her fingers into the locks at the nape of his neck. "Mm, George?"

"Yeah?"

"I like your hair long."

He gave a short chuckle, ducking to kiss her cheek. "I'll keep it in mind." He tied the bandage
around her hand.

"George, what d'you suppose happened to Montague after you shoved him into that Vanishing Cabinet?" Hope asked, leaning into his side as he placed the bowl of Murtlap on the floor, allowing him to wrap his arms around her, hooking her legs over his, drumming his fingers against her thigh.

"Dunno," George sighed. Earlier that day Graham Montague and Draco Malfoy had chosen to dock points from a select number of people for no reason at all. Malfoy had docked points from Ernie (who had been with them at the time), Hope, Ron, and Hermione, and Montague had attempted to dock Fred and George.

*Attempted* being the operative word.

"Are you going to start up the DA again?" he asked her instead.

"Maybe when the coast is clear," Hope mused.

"We're in the clear, though," George said in a bit of confusion.

"Just because we're in the clear does not mean we're in the clear," Hope said as if it was common sense.

George rolled his eyes, trailing soft kisses from her temple down to her jaw. "That makes no sense," he murmured against her skin as Hope turned to face him. "Do you always speak in riddles?"

"I try very hard," Hope whispered against his lips before pressing a kiss to them.

"Did something happen during your lesson with Snape?" George asked, reaching past her to grab the Headache Potion bottle that she had hidden between the cushions when she had seen him coming. Hope pouted before sighing.

"I dunno, maybe," she muttered, "I'm not going back there again, though, he rather despises me, I think."

George arched an eyebrow, but she didn't elaborate, thanking her lucky stars that he hadn't seen the bruise on her arm from Snape's tight grip.

Now all she had to worry about were those strange and persistent dreams about that door that wouldn't open…
"You know they're thinking about doing it," Angelina told her shortly after practice one day as Hope loosened the tie that held her hair away from her face.

"Thinking about what?" Hope grunted, wincing as the tie became tangled in her hair.

Angelina gave her a rather direct look. "You know, leaving."

Hope sighed as she freed her hair (at long last). "I figured," she said shortly, "what with the whole thing about not really caring about staying."

"There's only one thing left to do," Angelina hummed in agreement as she threw her jacket on over her clothes, bidding goodbye to Ginny, Katie, and Alicia who hadn't quite finished changing out of their Quidditch things.

"Oh, yeah? What's that?" Hope asked as she was tugged out into the cool air.

"Give them a proper send-off."

Hope's cheeks burned with heat at the very thought and Angelina smirked.

"I hear George has been dying to get you in a broom cupboard," she sang, ducking as Hope tried to slug her. "They might be leaving in a few days, so…"

She left it open to interpretation.

"You're telling me to drag my boyfriend a broom cupboard and snog him senseless?" Hope asked with an arched eyebrow.

"He'll never see it coming!" Angelina said brightly. "Go get him!" And she shoved her towards the stone courtyard with a laugh as Hope spared her an irritated glance before stalking towards the stairs, almost running headlong into the person she was looking for.

"Whoa, easy there, love," George said brightly, steadying her. "Where's the fire?"

"Oh, you know," Hope said airily, not bothering to clarify anything before grabbing his tie and jerking him up the stairs.

George choked a little. "What'd I do?"

Hope smirked as they rounded a corner. "What haven't you done, love? Besides, all I'm doing is looking for a broom cupboard."

George didn't stop walking, but his eyes did widen a bit and then he grinned, wrapping an arm around her waist, tugging her into the nearest cupboard. "Really?" he asked, leaning his forehead against hers.

"Well, er, proper send-off, you know," Hope said, hardly breathing.

"I love you," he murmured against her lips.

"I know," she whispered back, locking her arms around his neck, "now give me a kiss to remember you by."
George chuckled, leaning down so that his lips were against her ear to whisper, "You know it'll still be a little bit before we leave, right?"

"I imagine it might be a rather hectic day," Hope said mildly, dragging his face back to hers. "Now kiss me."

"As Milady commands it." And then his lips met hers, forcing all other thoughts from her mind. Her arms tightened around his neck and she gasped in surprise as he lifted her up, holding her legs over his hips. Hope suddenly felt very overheated, but that wasn't going to stop her from her task at hand (which seemed to be to make the Weasley miss her as much as feasibly possible).

George made a low sound in the back of his throat, making her smirk against his lips, but it was quickly forgotten as his kisses trailed downwards to the spot she had proven to be sensitive to.

"George!" Hope gasped out his name, her eyes flaring open slightly at the attention he was paying to her neck. She could feel his grin against the flesh there as he teased her for a moment longer before trailing a line of fire to her mouth and kissing her so deeply that Hope was glad her legs were around his waist and not on the ground because she was sure they would have ceased functioning entirely.

Hope tangled her fingers into his hair, drawing him, if it was possible, even closer to her...

"George looks way too satisfied," Fred sniggered, earning himself a rap alongside the head from said brother's girlfriend as she sat with her friends, looking at career brochures. Today they had Daphne with them, something the Fat Lady had been very leery about, seeing as she was of a different House, but she let her through eventually. There was no one Daphne could really talk to about studying and all that right now because currently Tracey was a little busy getting some extra help in Charms.

"I will smack you," Hope promised, narrowing her eyes over the Curse-breaker pamphlet. "Damn… I'm going to need Hermione's brain to pass all this…"

"Hey!"

"Better you than me," Daphne noted.

"What're you planning on being?" Ron asked, slightly suspicious.

"I'm thinking Unspeakable, and you need at least an Exceeds Expectations in History of Magic, Arithmancy, Ancient Runes, and Potions."

"Sounds like a lot of work," Ron complained.

"Everything here is a lot of work," Hermione admonished. "That's rather the point."

"Spill the beans," Fred muttered so the others wouldn't hear as Hope jotted down a few notes.

"Hm?"

"You've been looking down for weeks, so what's up?"

Her eyes became distant as if she was lost in a memory or a dream. She hadn't talked to anyone about what she'd seen, but there were two people she had wanted to talk to, one more than the other. "I kind of want to talk to Padfoot," she muttered lowly.

Fred's eyes widened a little. "Padfoot? Why?"
Hope sighed, making a careless motion with her hands. Her own reasons, Fred surmised.

"Hang on a second." She arched an eyebrow to him as he stood, striding over to where George was bouncing on the balls of his feet. George frowned as his twin explained something to him in a low voice, but then he nodded, speaking just as lowly before they returned to the couch, George taking the spot on Hope's opposite side that Daphne had just vacated to go have words with her boyfriend.

"So you want to talk to Padfoot?" George asked.

Hope could practically hear the crack as Hermione whipped her head around to stare at Hope and even Ron looked up in surprise.

"Well, yeah," Hope admitted.

"Are you mad?" Hermione demanded. "Umbridge has boxed you in! No Floo and no owling!"

"There's a way around everything if you look hard enough," George said smugly, sharing a look with his twin. "It's a simple matter of causing a diversion. Now, you might have noticed that we have been rather quiet on the mayhem front during the Easter holidays?"

Fred continued his train of thought. "What was the point, we asked ourselves, of disrupting leisure time? No point at all, we answered ourselves. And of course, we'd have messed up people's revision, too, which would be the very last thing we'd want to do." His eyes darted to Hermione, who, everyone knew, was spending an inordinate amount of time studying these days. "But it's business as usual from tomorrow. And if we're going to be causing a bit of uproar, why not do it so that Hope can have her chat with Padfoot?"

"And how is Hope supposed to be able to talk to him?" Hermione asked with a blank stare.

"I can use Umbridge's office."

Ron wasn't the only gaping at her. "Are you barmy? How are you supposed to get in? It's spelled against Alohamora!"

Hope frowned thoughtfully for a moment. "I could use my lock-picks…or…" She brightened suddenly. "The knife! I can't believe I forgot about it!"

"Knife?" Fred said blankly. "What knife?"

"Oh!" Hermione said in surprise. "That might work."

"Two blokes over here a little confused," George interjected.

Hope rolled her eyes. "Padfoot gave me a knife the Christmas after the Yule Ball that's enchanted to open any lock."

"Nice gift, can I have one?"

Hope scowled at Fred briefly as he winked at her. "We're thinking of doing it tomorrow, just after lessons, because it should cause maximum impact if everybody's in the corridors –Hope, we'll set it off in the east wing somewhere, draw her right away from her own office– I reckon we should be able to guarantee you, what, twenty minutes?" He glanced to his twin for confirmation.

George nodded, humming in agreement. "Easy."

"And what kind of diversion is it?" Ron asked suspiciously. "Something that'll damage bystanders?"
He had to bat away Fred's hand as he ruffled his hair with a noise of annoyance.

"You'll see, little bro," Fred said with a mischievous grin. "At least, you will if you trot along to Gregory the Smarmy's corridor round about five o'clock tomorrow."

"Good luck with the studying," George whispered into her ear, kissing a spot directly under it, making her flush.

"I'm going to need it," she called after him, ignoring his laughter as she turned back to her friends. "All this studying is going to turn my brain to mush," she said with a sigh.

"Hope...don't you need an OWL in Arithmancy to be a Curse-breaker?" Ron asked, eyeing the pamphlet curiously.

"I asked Fleur about that one, she said you only need that bit if you plan on doing the banking part, but I'm not, so I should be good."

"I keep forgetting Fleur is working part-time as a Curse-breaker," Hermione said, tapping her quill against her chin. "How d'you think she is?"

Hope shrugged. "She seemed pretty good the last time I talked to her, but we haven't talked in awhile, you know, because of the pink cow." Hope sank into the couch with an abysmal expression on her face. "You realize I have to pretty much pass every single class? It'll be a nightmare!"

"What d'you mean?" Ron asked. "Because you're caught between two professions?"

Hope nodded miserably. "The one class I don't care about, sadly, is Care of Magical Creatures, but I need at least an O in Ancient Runes, Defence Against the Dark Arts, and Potions, and an E in History of Magic, Transfiguration, Charms, Astronomy, and Herbology."

"Why does Astronomy matter?" Hermione asked.

"Ancient civilizations often based a lot of what they did on the movement of the stars and planets," Hope said as if reciting from a text and Hermione nodded in understanding.

"Well, I guess you'll be spending less time with George, then?" Hermione asked.

Hope's face soured.

Hope was in a very dark mood the next day as she stalked to her Career Advice meeting with Professor McGonagall. The cause of her anger? Do you really have to ask? Snape had been growing increasingly...how should she put it? Bitchy? Arse-hole-y? At any rate, every lesson he gave her a zero, claiming she'd done something wrong with her potion and vanishing it or simply dropping her flasks.

Hope shoved her hands into her pockets, muttering several distasteful somethings under her breath and turning her hair a short and spiky black before finally reaching the Professor McGonagall's office and turning the knob.

"Come in, Potter," her Transfiguration professor called, and Hope opened it, entering quietly into the office, sparing an annoyed glance towards Umbridge (was she sitting in on fucking everything?!). "Sit down."

She didn't comment on her hair, but that wasn't surprising; she had seen it change for five years now.
Her eyes were more focused on the pamphlets and what looked to be assessments from Hope's professors, only shifting upwards when she had finally straightened the pile.

"Well, Potter, this meeting is to talk over any career ideas you might have, and to help you decide which subjects you should continue into the sixth and seventh years," Professor McGonagall explained in a bit of a monotone. Hope suspected she'd said those lines over and over to every one of her students. "I know you've given this a lot of thought." Professor McGonagall was the one Hope had talked to the most about her possible career options.

"I'm, er, still caught between the two," Hope admitted in a sheepish manner, ignoring Umbridge as best as she could.

"Curse-breaker and Auror?" Professor McGonagall inquired. "There is another one I would suggest."

"Oh?" Hope asked in curiosity.

"Rune Analyst, considering your love of the Ancient Arts," Professor McGonagall said, "Many Rune Analysts start as Curse-breakers but later become more focused in particular areas, it and Curse-breaking have the same requirements…You shouldn't have trouble getting an O in Ancient Runes, Professor Babbling has ranked you very high in her class, and you'll need to bring up your grade in History of Magic, passing with an E is required, but Astronomy and Defence Against the Dark Arts appear fine."

Hope nodded seriously, taking to heart her words as they both ignored Umbridge's cough.

"Now for Auror," Professor McGonagall continued a little louder, "they ask for a minimum of five NEWTs, and nothing under "Exceeds Expectations" grade, I see. Then you would be required to undergo a stringent series of character and aptitude tests at the Auror office. It's a difficult career path, Potter, they only take the best. In fact, I don't think anybody has been taken on in the last three years."

"And what kind of classes would I have to take, other than Defence Against the Dark Arts, I mean?" Hope asked.

"I would also advise Transfiguration," Professor McGonagall said, speaking over another of Umbridge's high-pitched coughs, "because Aurors frequently need to Transfigure or Untransfigure in their work. Your Transfiguration grade has always been a solid Exceeds Expectations, often fluctuating on the spectrum, but still within it, so I am not worried." Her lips twitched at how Hope turned pink at the veiled compliment. Then you ought to do Charms, always useful, and Potions."

Hope gave a mournful sigh and Professor McGonagall's lips twitched again. "Poisons and antidotes are essential study for Aurors. And I must tell you that Professor Snape absolutely refuses to take students who get anything other than "Outstanding" in their OWLs, so—"

"Hem-hem!"

A muscle in Professor McGonagall's jaw twitched at yet another interruption. "May I offer you a cough drop, Dolores?"

Umbridge giggled. "Oh, no, thank you very much. I just wondered whether I could make the teensiest interruption, Minerva?"

"I daresay you'll find you can," Professor McGonagall said, her words almost unintelligible through her teeth, her eyebrow twitching in irritation.
"I was just wondering whether Miss Potter has quite the temperament for an Auror?" Umbridge simpered.

"Were you?" Professor McGonagall said in disdain before disregarding her presence completely. "Well, Potter, if you are serious in this ambition, I would advise you to concentrate hard on bringing your Potions up to scratch. I see Professor Flitwick has graded you at an "Exceeds Expectations" for the last two years, so your Charmwork seems satisfactory. As for Defence Against the Dark Arts, your marks have been generally high, Professor Lupin in particular thought you –are you quite sure you wouldn't like a cough drop, Dolores?"

"Oh, no need, thank you, Minerva." Hope made her eye roll obvious. "I was just concerned that you might not have Hope's most recent Defence Against the Dark Arts marks in front of you. I'm quite sure I slipped in a note."

"What, this thing?" Professor McGonagall asked, waving a flimsy sheaf of shockingly pink parchment (Hope wasn't surprised by the colour) before ignoring it. "Yes, as I was saying, Potter, Professor Lupin thought you showed a pronounced aptitude for the subject, and obviously for an Auror—"

"Did you not understand me note, Minerva?" Umbridge interrupted.

"Of course I understood it," Professor McGonagall refuted in a tone as cold as ice.

"Well, then, I am confused," Umbridge said in a would-be polite manner. "I'm afraid I don't quite understand how you can give Miss Potter false hope that—"

"False hope?" There was a flicker of something in Professor McGonagall's eyes that Hope couldn't interpret. "She has achieved high marks in all her Defence Against the Dark Arts tests—" But not on Umbridge's tests, Hope thought with a mental smirk. This was why Professor McGonagall was one of her favourite professors.

"I'm terribly sorry to have to contradict you, Minerva," Umbridge said sweetly, "but as you will see from my note, Hope has been achieving very poor results in her classes with me—" Hope rolled her eyes. She probably had a T in that class, but she still knew more about the subject than Umbridge.

"I should have made my meaning plainer," Professor McGonagall said in a stony voice, meeting her eyes once more. "She has achieved high marks in all Defence Against the Dark Arts tests set by a competent teacher."

Ooh, burn! Umbridge's simpering smile was replaced with an affronted expression as she set her quill to her parchment, writing furiously across it.

"Any questions, Potter?"

"Well, are there entrance exams for Curse-breaking or becoming an Auror?" Hope asked. "I never asked Bill or Tonks…"

"For Curse-breaking you will need to show you're your ability to discern jinxes and hexes from one another as well as a heightened understanding of runes," Professor McGonagall explained. "And for being an Auror, you'll need to demonstrate the ability to react well to pressure and so forth, perseverance and dedication, because Auror training takes a further three years, not to mention very high skills in practical Defence. It will mean a lot more study even after you've left school, so unless you're prepared to—"

"I think you'll also find," Umbridge interrupted once more, "that the Ministry looks into the records
of those applying to be Aurors. Their criminal records.” Hope arched an eyebrow, but Professor McGonagall gave her a look that clearly said “Ignore her” and she was only happy to comply.

“Won’t Curse-breaking require extra study, though, too?” Hope asked.

“Yes, but you’ll find that many with superior knowledge of Ancient Magicks can skip them entirely if they can prove they do indeed have that knowledge,” Professor McGonagall said dryly. ”I don’t see it being an issue.”

Hope felt flattered that her professor considered her knowledge in that area superior, but then, she had been reading up on the subject for as long as she’d known about the magical world.

“But if you are still conflicted over which profession to take and you aren’t prepared to take even more exams after Hogwarts, you should really consider—”

“Which means that this girl has as much a chance of becoming an Auror as Dumbledore has of ever returning to this school.”

How kind of her to disregard Hope’s first choice entirely. Please note the sarcasm.

“A very good chance, then,” Professor McGonagall said with surety.

“Potter has a criminal record!”

“Potter has been cleared of all charges!”

“Potter is also still here,” Hope muttered to herself as Umbridge leapt to her feet.

“Potter has no chance whatsoever of becoming an Auror!”

Again, forgetting the Curse-breaking bit.

Professor McGonagall stood as well, appearing much more imposing than Umbridge could ever dream to be.

“Potter.”

Hope lifted her head in surprise.

“I will assist you to become a Curse-breaker or an Auror if it is the last thing I do! If I have to coach you nightly, I will make sure you achieve the required results!”

“Really?” Hope asked in astonishment.

“The Minister for Magic will never employ Hope Potter!” Umbridge cried angrily.

“There may well be a new Minister for Magic by the time Potter is ready to join!” Professor McGonagall said, her voice rising steadily, her eyes flashing dangerously.

“Aha!” A madness had lit Umbridge’s eyes as she stabbed a finger in the direction of Professor McGonagall. ”Yes! Yes, yes, yes! Of course! That’s what you want, isn’t it, Minerva McGonagall? You want Cornelius Fudge replaced by Albus Dumbledore! You think you’ll be where I am, don’t you: Senior Undersecretary to the Minister and Headmistress to boot!”

“Mental,” Hope decided.
"You are raving," Professor McGonagall said coldly in agreement to Hope's words. "Potter, that concludes our careers consultation."

And Hope was only so happy to leave.

At the sound of the diversion not very much later, Hope left her bag with Ron and disappeared under the invisibility cloak after managing to make it through the crowd of people heading in the direction opposite of her as she pelted down the hall to Umbridge's office. The suit of armour lifted its helmet to look at her. She winked, placing a finger to her lips for silence and it ducked its head once more to the position it had been before as her body became completely invisible, sliding the knife into the keyhole and twisting until it clicked before replacing the knife in her pocket as she entered into the office.

It was as ghastly as ever, but Hope opted to ignore the appearance as she threw the Floo powder into the fireplace, calling out: "Number twelve, Grimmauld Place!" and thrusting her face inside.

The world spun like it did when Hope had travelled by Floo powder before, but when Hope finally opened her eyes she could see the table of the kitchen, at which-

"Remus?"

Remus started at the sound of her voice, whipping his head around to stare at her head in the fire. "Hope!" he said stunned. "What are- What's happened? Is something wrong?"

Hope bit her lip, unease colouring her face. Maybe it wasn't such a good idea, now that she thought about it…but there was no going back. "Can you get Sirius? I wanted to talk to him."

"Alright…" Remus stood, a little confused. "You sure you're alright?"

Hope gave him a rather bland expression as if to say "Get a move on," and he did, reappearing with her godfather moments later.

"Hope, what is it?" Sirius asked descending to her level, "what's wrong? You look-"

"I know," Hope sighed. "Miserable, like hell…but I need to know…" The knife tip was biting into her leg now.

"Know what?" Remus asked, kneeling beside Sirius.

Hope sighed again. "My last Occlumency lesson was a few weeks back, and he kept tearing into me so I Protego'd him-"

"You didn't!" Remus said stunned.

"You would too," Hope grumbled, "I just wanted a breather, I didn't mean to get in his head!"

"What'd you see?" Sirius asked her.

"I saw Dad and you guys and Snape…Dad just kind of attacked him." Her eyes conveyed how at a loss she was. "He used the Impediment Curse on him, then he Scourgify'd his mouth before Mum stepped in."

"Ah," Sirius said lowly. Hope had only ever heard stories about her father in a positive, mischievous light with Snape's scathing comments in the background. People had always told her she was so much like him-
"How can people say I'm like him?" Hope demanded, incensed. "I would never-!"

"We know you wouldn't," Remus placated. "But you aren't your father, Hope, not in the least. You're two separate people with different goals and different ways of thinking. I wouldn't like you to judge your father on what you saw there, Hope. He was only fifteen—"

"So am I!" Hope said hotly.

"Look, Hope," Sirius said gently, trying not to set her off. "James and Snape hated each other from the moment they set eyes on each other, it was just one of those things, you can understand that, can't you? I think James was everything Snape wanted to be—he was popular, he was good at Quidditch—good at pretty much everything. And Snape was just this little oddball who was up to his eyes in the Dark Arts, and James—whatever else he may have appeared to you, Hope—always hated the Dark Arts."

_For good reason, too_, Hope thought, her father was probably taught very early on of the damages Dark Magic could cause. Her thoughts drifted towards Adrian Slytherin.

"That doesn't mean he can just attack people," Hope said resolutely, "and you were just egging him on!" She felt so conflicted; on one hand, she really hated Snape, on the other, it was wrong of her father to attack him like that.

"I'm not proud of it," Sirius said, "but we all grew up, even your dad."

Hope's expression was dubious and Remus laughed. "He and your mum started dating in seventh year, after he stopped being such an arrogant toe-rag."

Hope frowned, not looking quite persuaded by their words.

"Look, Hope," Sirius said, directing her eyes to his, "I'm not saying what James did wasn't bad, because it was, but a lot of people are idiots at the age of fifteen. He grew out of it."

"Lucky you missed that gene," Remus added and Hope rolled her eyes. "But why did you say it was your last Occlumency lesson?"

"What d'you think?" Hope muttered coolly. "He kicked me out; the bruise didn't heal for about a week or so."

"Bruise?" Sirius demanded and Remus' eyes flared. The Werewolf forced himself to remain calm. "Hope, Occlumency is very important, I know—"

"I actually would like to not have to go up to the hospital two nights a week for extensive headaches," Hope said frigidly. "I've got exams to worry about enough without that shite."

"Hope—"

Hope froze at the sound of footsteps. "Someone's coming, I've got to go, love you!"

"Love—"

Her head disappeared.

"—you too," Sirius finished lamely.

He looked at his friend with an accusatory expression.
"What?"

Sirius sighed, making an annoyed noise in the back of his throat. "Oh, nothing.'

"Hope!"

Hope rushed to Angelina, clenching her hand tightly in her own as they peered over the balcony to where their respective boyfriends were standing surrounded by a tight ring of Inquisitorial Squad members.

"How'd it go?" Angelina hissed out of the corner of her mouth, as Umbridge was standing a few steps away from them. Angelina was aware of the plan, not by much.

"Fine," Hope muttered, smiling when George winked at her, unconcerned of the situation he had managed to get himself and his twin into.

"So!" Umbridge's voice was a tad bit smug. "So –you think it amusing to turn a school corridor into a swamp, do you?"

"Is that what they did?" Hope whispered to Angelina, impressed.

Angelina nodded in pride, squeezing her fingers tightly as Fred spoke up.

"Pretty amusing, yeah," he said unconcerned, examining his wand as if it was more important than Umbridge was.

"He picked that up from you," Angelina muttered into Hope's ear, recognizing the move, trying to smother her giggles.

Hope couldn't deny that.

"I've got the form, Headmistress!" An excited cry came as Filch made his way to the under-qualified (or overqualified, depending on how you looked at it) woman, brandishing some parchment that must have meant something. "I've got the form and I've got the whips waiting...oh, let me do it now..."

"Whips?" Angelina squeaked.

"That vile, no good, rotten bitch!" Hope seethed, clenching her free hand into a tight fist.

"Very good, Argus," Umbridge simpered. "You two are about to learn what happens to wrongdoers in my school."

"You know what?" Fred asked with a smirk. "I don't think we are."

Angelina moaned into her hand. "Why does he have to be so hot?"

"Probably a Weasley Twin thing," Hope said, giving an exaggerated sigh that made Angelina shake with suppressed laughter.

"George," Fred continued, "I think we've outgrown full-time education."

"Yeah, I've been feeling that way myself," George said with a similar grin.

"Time to test our talents in the real world, d'you reckon?" Fred asked in a way that you knew he
already knew the answer.

"Definitely," George agreed.

As one, they raised their wands and cried in one voice: "Accio brooms!"

"Get down!" Hope pushed Angelina to the floor just in time to miss an iron peg that was attached to one of the twins' brooms (as they had been chained to the wall in Umbridge's office, if you'll remember). They stood once the danger had passed.

"We won't be seeing you," Fred said in a bright manner to Umbridge whose face was glowing in rage and embarrassment.

"Yeah, so don't bother keeping in touch," George added, before his eyes flickered to where Hope and Angelina were standing. "And just so everyone's clear," he added a little louder, pointing at his and Fred's girlfriends, "those really hot birds over there are strictly off limits—"

"Unless you want something truly horrendous to happen to you," Fred added with a bright grin.

"Stay sexy ladies!" they both said.

Angelina blew Fred a kiss, and Hope did the same about a second too late, her face glowing with heat.

"If anyone fancies buying a Portable Swamp, as demonstrated upstairs, come to number ninety-three, Diagon Alley– Weasley's Wizarding Wheezes," Fred added. "Our new premises!"

"Special discounts to Hogwarts students who swear they're going to use our products to get rid of this old bat," George interjected with relish.

"STOP THEM!"

The Inquisitorial Squad moved forward, but they were quickly besieged by restraining suits of armour bearing the crest of Slytherin, giving Fred and George time to shoot into the air. George gave Hope a roguish wink for her efforts.

"Give her hell from us, Peeves!"

Hope wouldn't have believed it if she hadn't seen it. Fred giving Peeves an order…Peeves actually listening…

And then she was cheering loudly with everyone else as they made their escape out into the open sky.

No longer being able to see George as constantly as she had before didn't take as much a toll on Hope as one would think, though this was due mostly to Hope throwing herself into studying at an almost unhealthy level. Nowadays it wasn't so surprising to see her with her head lodged in one book or another, or looking through a set of study questions.

Ron had joined her a bit half-heartedly after citing that he'd need to get his own grades up if he wanted to become an Auror. His Potions grade was nearly as abysmal as Hope's, but if he could maintain his Charms and Transfiguration, do just a little better in Herbology, and remember everything he had learned in the DA and from Remus and Crouch, he'd be good. This all meant he was under much less stress than Hope.
On the upside, Angelina passed along notes from George to Hope that were both romantic and very sweet. Every single one of them said something along the lines of: *I know you're studying hard, so you don't have to send me a reply, but I'm thinking of you.*

This, however, didn't stop Hope from writing him back letters in return. Most of hers were filled with complaints about Umbridge or her studying, but she also included the numerous pranks that were now being pulled in their absence. She enjoyed hearing about the shop and the flat that they would be sharing. Just the thought of it gave her butterflies in her stomach. Not even sixteen yet…that was hardly a good idea and Hope wasn't sure her mother would have made the decision in her shoes, but it was what Hope wanted, blood wards at the Dursleys be damned.

It seemed as though a lot had happened in a short amount of time, but it had only been slightly more than a month since Fred and George had left by the time the Quidditch Final rolled around. Gryffindor had faced off against Slytherin (*winning, obviously*), and now they would be seen going against Ravenclaw. This, Hope was looking forward to. Maybe that was just a vindictive part of her that really wanted to rub Cho's face into the mud.

That would be the Slytherin side of her talking.

But she wasn’t surprised that once the fourteen players took to the air that Cho sent her a fiery glare, however, Hope was unfazed by it, because, as all knew, her glower was much more impressive.

Cho gritted her teeth. "Potter."

"Chang," Hope said in an airy manner, "I do hope you're not planning on tailing me again…it never ends well for you."

Hope shot upwards a little more, leaving Cho flushed with embarrassment as Hope's eyes flitted around the stadium in search of the Snitch.

"And Davies takes the Quaffle immediately," Lee called out. "Ravenclaw Captain Davies with the Quaffle, he dodges Johnson, he dodges Bell, he dodges Spinnet as well...he's going straight for goal! He's going to shoot –and – and –" Hope stifled her humour at the swear that followed. "And he's scored."

"*Weasley cannot save a thing*  
*He cannot block a single ring...*"

Merlin, could they be any *more* like gits than they already were? Hope wanted to wrap her hands around Draco Malfoy's neck and give him a good rattle. Not kill him, obviously, but shake him up. He needed a good shaking.

"Spinnet has the Quaffle –to Bell– Ooh! Looks like the Seekers are pretty nervous, well, Chang looks to be, but Potter's pretty chill…obviously one of them's a bit more worried about losing than the other…"

Hope could hear the enthusiasm of the crowd of Gryffindor supporters, laughing as she heard the sound of Luna's very realistic eagle. She was, of course, supporting Ravenclaw, but a number of the DA members were donning the Gryffindor colours.

The Snitch— Hope surged forward when she was blocked so suddenly and so violently that she was nearly thrown off her broom. Angered, Hope turned on Cho, letting her fist fly and smacking the girl in the cheek, the pair earning two short whistles.
"Both Seekers get fouls! Haven't seen this!" Lee said, yelling to be heard. "Chang nearly causes Potter to fall a good fifty feet and Potter punches Chang in the face. Well, can't say I'm surprised with the tension off the field…"

Hope scowled as the Seekers were forced to fly in opposite directions, Hope towards Gryffindor and Cho towards Ravenclaw…how unlucky for Cho, then, because, the Snitch was far closer to Hope than it was to Cho, now all she had to do was wait for the fouls.

Unfortunately Ravenclaw got one in, but Gryffindor did too, so Gryffindor was beating them by a good twenty points due to some pretty impressive saves by Ron if Hope did say so herself. And Ravenclaw…well, they would be losing soon, wouldn't they?

Hope pressed downwards towards the ground, completely flat against the shaft of her Firebolt as she raced after the small golden ball, Cho trying to make up time, but it wasn't working, and then Hope was holding up her hand in triumph, neatly dodging one of the Bludgers aimed at her.

Really, did no one learn?
"Guess who?"

It was the last Hogsmeade weekend before exams were to start. Most students stayed back to cram in a bit more of studying, but Angelina had insinuated that there might be a lovely surprise waiting for Hope in Hogsmeade, so she had gone down with her, only to be dragged into an alley with hands clamped over her eyes and a familiar voice singing the question.

Hope grinned. "Oh, I don't know…maybe if you kissed me I'd know who you were…"

"Demanding little thing, aren't you?"

But Hope reached out blindly to jerk him to her, allowing him to bestow a fiery kiss upon her lips before she was allowed to open her eyes. She threw her arms around his neck, hugging him tightly.

"I missed you," she murmured into his ear.

"I missed you more."

She drew back giving him a look. "Very doubtful, Georgie."

"No, it's not!" George cried affronted as Hope kissed the corner of his mouth.

"Mmmh…so you're my surprise that Angelina's been talking about?"

George scratched his cheek looking particularly shameless. "Half of it."

"Half-? What're you talking about?"

"Let's go on a little walk," George suggested, taking her hand and placing it on his arm as they ducked out of the alleyway to head in the direction of the edge of town.

"You're up to something," Hope noted shrewdly.

"I'm always up to something!" He leaned down to whisper into her ear. "Hold on tight."

"Wh-" He twisted and Hope was suddenly pulled harshly in several different directions forcing her to tighten her grip on his arm further before the world stopped spinning around her and they were standing before a polished door.

Hope punched George in the arm.

"Ow!" he complained, rubbing at the spot. "What was that for?"

"A little warning next time," Hope sniffed, starting a little as he pressed something small and cold into her hand.

It was a key.

Her eyes widened and she looked up at him in surprise and another emotion that George couldn't quite identify.

"Want to have a look?" he asked her softly, gesturing to the door in front of them.
Hope swallowed thickly, looking at the key for a long moment before sliding it into the keyhole and twisting until the door swung open.

The flat was wide and spacious, though, now that she thought about it, that might have been because of magic. The kitchen wasn't cramped, there was soft sofa before the fire, a roomy bedroom...

"George," she whispered, taking his hand, her voice softer and quieter than usual, bursting with emotion that made his heart clench, "it's perfect."

His face brightened. It was so bright, Hope rather thought it was a bit like looking into the sun, but then, the sun really had nothing on George, did it?

Hope's good mood continued all the way back to the castle and up to the common room until she flopped down on the couch beside Hermione.

"If you were any happier, I swear, you'd be floating," Hermione told her.

Hope pushed her friend slightly with her arm.

"What's wrong with being a little happy?" Hope asked brightly.

"Because we've got exams in exactly one week to study for," Hermione answered swiftly. "And because Hagrid's hiding a giant in the forest."

Ron looked up from his practice Potions exam to stare at her with Hope. "What?"

"Wait, how do you even know that?" Hope demanded lowly, careful of fellow Gryffindors passing them by. "When did you see Hagrid?"

"Erm, he came up into the stands soon after the match started," Hermione admitted, her cheeks burning pink. "The only part I got to see was Davies' first goal."

Ron's crestfallen expression would have made even Professor McGonagall hand him a handkerchief. "You didn't see me make any of those saves?"

"I'm sorry," Hermione squeaked, looking a little cornered, "I wanted to stay, but Hagrid insisted. He'd decided to tell why he was always so injured, you know? He took me into the forest and he showed me—"

"He can't have," Ron said stunned, "he would've had to bring him all the way down from those mountains Dumbledore had him and Maxime staying in."

"But it would explain why he took so long getting back," Hope said thoughtfully, "and why Maxime split off from him, getting back to Beauxbatons before he got back."

"And Grawp's about sixteen feet tall, enjoys ripping up twenty-foot pine trees, and knows me," Hermione said with a bit of annoyance, "as Hermy."

Hope arched an eyebrow and Ron expertly hid his snigger behind a cough, but Hermione saw through it, if her venomous glare was anything to go by.

"And," she continued, clearing her throat uncomfortably, "Hagrid wants us to teach him English."

"He's gone completely mental," Ron said resolutely and Hope nodded in agreement. Teach a giant English? When they were already busy enough as it was? Where would you even start?
"I'm starting to think he has," Hermione agreed with a rather sour expression. "But, unfortunately, he made me promise."

"Well, you're just going to have to break your promise, that's all," Ron said with a scowl. "I mean, come on...we've got exams and I for one need to pass a few of my subjects if I want to be considered for Auror. And anyways...remember Norbert? Remember Aragog? Have we ever come off better for mixing with any of Hagrid's monster mates?"

"Probably never," Hope interjected. "Just pray that Hagrid doesn't get sacked until the end of school, eh?"

It was downright ridiculous to entertain the thought that he wouldn't be fired at this rate, considering Umbridge's increasing dislike for the half-giant whom she hadn't been much of a fan of in the first place. And Hope would rather not have to deal with a sixteen foot giant on top of everything else, so she slumped lower into the cushions and plastered her eyes to one of her books.

Hope was sure she was very nearly dead on the first day of their OWL exams right after their Theory exam for Charms. Neville poked her elbow where it was resting on the table beneath her head.

"Hope, exactly how much sleep did you get?" he wondered.

"Enough to not kill her, right, Hope?" Seamus laughed.

Hope gave him a thumbs-up without raising her head. "Why can't I just give up?" she bemoaned.

"There's...too...much..."

Hermione pushed a plate of food towards her and Hope lifted her eyes slightly at the heavenly smell. "Think about it this way," she said, trying to keep her voice upbeat, "you're halfway through the first day."

Hope stared a bit blankly.

"I don't think that really helped," Ron said, forcing a fork into Hope's hand.

Hermione glared and the few other fifth years sitting with them laughed as Hope reluctantly began to eat, waiting out her time until they were all sitting in the antechamber waiting to be called into the testing area for their practical Charms exam. Hope was so nervous that her hair was fluctuating from one colour to the next so much so that it was becoming quite distracting.

She jumped when her name was called along with Parvati, Padma, and Pansy Parkinson.

"You'll be fine," Ron told her, pushing her towards the door, "just remember everything you studied."

Hope could only gulp and enter into the brightly lit room, her knuckles white around her wand. She could've sworn it warmed under her hand, but that was probably her imagination.

"Professor Tofty is free, Potter," Professor Flitwick informed her kindly as Hope took a calming breath, heading towards a table in a far corner where a wizard sat, his wrinkled hands clutching a quill and parchment.

"Potter is it?" he asked in a voice that cracked on every word. "The famous Potter?"

Hope winced. "Er...I suppose."
"Well," Professor Tofty smiled a little, "your mother was just as nervous when she took this exam too, but there's no need to be." Hope blinked in surprise at the mention of her mother. "Now, if I could ask you to take this egg cup and make it do some cartwheels for me."

It wasn't very difficult work, Hope mused, as she did just that, however, she must have been a little enthusiastic, because the cup went over the edge with its cartwheels and shattered.

Oops.

"No matter," Professor Tofty said, vanishing the pieces, placing a wine glass onto the table. "Now I want you to levitate this glass."

"Wingardium Leviosa!" Hope said with certainty, lifting the glass through the air to hover about the table by several feet unattached to anything before bringing it back down.

"Very good! Now for the Colour Change charm, please turn this rat orange."

Hope nodded and five minutes later she was walking out of the room feeling very drained, but also pleased that she had one less subject to study as she collapsed into her bed, staring blearily at her Transfiguration notes for the next day. But Hope found it to not be as hard as she had been imagining so fearfully in her mind, though that could be chalked up to the sheer amount of hours she'd spent studying for everything. Somehow, though, several other students had managed to have a meltdown or two over the exam in question.

Herbology was a little more difficult on Wednesday than Hope had considered, but, then again, plants weren't really her strong suit. That one made her a little nervous, because all the plants kind of blended together in front of her eyes…which could have also been caused by lack of sleep.

Defence Against the Dark Arts on Thursday, if Hope did say so herself. A number of her classmates gave her subtle thank-yous as they passed her on the way out of the Practical Exam (Theory hadn't been any trouble, she had noticed to her relief). Hope had easily demonstrated her knowledge of counter-jinxes, the Stunning Spell, the Full-Body Bind, Explosion Hex, and the Boggart-banishing spell.

"Oh, bravo! Very good indeed!" Professor Tofty cried ecstatically. "Well, I think that's all, Potter...unless..." He gave her a conspirator wink, leaning in slightly to speak in lower tones. "I heard, from my dear friend Tiberius Ogden, that you can produce a Patronus? For a bonus point...?"

Hope opened her mouth and froze. "Er, well, I'm not the only one that can do it," she admitted. "There are a couple of us, and if you're offering me credit, shouldn't you offer everyone else the opportunity too?"

His eyes glimmered and Hope could see that she had impressed him.

"Quite right," he agreed. "We will allow the rest of your year to do the same."

Hope smiled, thinking of Ron and Hermione, and Sirius and George and Remus, of George's kiss… "Expecto Patronum!"

The panther exploded from her wand tip to race in a rather majestic manner around the examiners and examinees before fading into nothing.

"Excellent!" Professor Tofty said in his raspy voice. "Very well, Potter, you may go!"

Hope flashed Umbridge a superior smirk on the way out. None of what she could do in there was
proof of Umbridge's magical skill…if she had any to begin with, in the first place…

Hermione and Hope had to sit their next exam without Ron, seeing as they both took Ancient Runes while he had taken Divination which he wouldn't be taking until next week. So Ron got a break while Hope and Hermione were hard at work in a classroom, translating as many Runes as they could and choosing which ones would be best to use in certain scenarios. All in all, Hope had to say that that one was one of her favourite exams ever (she wouldn't mention it to Ron because he'd call her a nerd), but she could see the scale tipping towards Curse-breaker than Auror. But it was only much later on the Astronomy Tower while completing her exam that the scales truly tipped.

Stars and planets weren't difficult to discern tonight, due to the lack of clouds in the sky. Hope knew her stars considering just how much stargazing she did. Astronomy fell under the "Not-worried-about-passing-would-have-to-fail-terribly-to-not-pass" category; sadly there weren't a lot in that category.

Hope labelled Mars and the Pleiades correctly, including their positions in the night sky, almost completely finished with it when the creak of the castle doors opening jolted her from her remaining questions. Hope, being the overly suspicious person that she was, pointed her telescope opposite to the heavens, aiming it at the ground instead to the at least half-dozen shadows that melded into the darkness as they made towards Hagrid's door.

Hope's heart hammered in her chest. They couldn't be here for a good reason, to be creeping along in the night…led by someone in what looked to be pink.

And Hope doubted Umbridge was up to anything good, something that became startlingly obvious at the loud bang of Hagrid's door and the bright red light of Stunners being shot towards him. Hope gasped out-loud, and she certainly wasn't the only one.

"No!" Hermione said, completely stunned and horrified.

"My dear! This is an examination!"

Nobody seemed to care that they were in the middle of their exam, far more fascinated with the scene below. The Stunners weren't having a very visible effect on the half-Giant (possibly because he was half-giant).

"Be reasonable, Hagrid!" one of the men cried.

"Reasonable be damned!" Hope couldn't help but agree with Hagrid there. "Yeh won' take me like this, Dawlish!"

One of the Stunners hit Fang, who had thrown himself in its path in an attempt to protect his master, and the dog went limp instantly.

Hagrid made a loud, out of control sound, throwing the man who had downed his faithful pet back. He must have put a lot of power behind the hit, because the man didn't move.

"Look!" It was Parvati who had spoken, her finger directing their eyes to the front doors as another figure stepped out to join the fray, but which side was yet to be made evident.

"Now, really! Only sixteen minutes left, you know!" Professor Tofty could not hope to bring his examinees back to order with the events unfolding in front of them.

"How dare you!" a familiar voice raged. "How dare you!"
Hope moaned into her hand as Hermione whimpered, "It's McGonagall!"

"Leave him alone!" Professor McGonagall yelled, racing forward. "On what grounds are you attacking him? He has done nothing, nothing to warrant such—"

Hope released a cry of alarm as four Stunners struck her professor; Lavender, Hermione, and Parvati surpassed her completely, screaming out loud as Professor McGonagall was thrown back, crumbling in a heap.

Hermione didn't understand what Hope yelled next, only that it was in Latin, however it became clear it was an order of sorts when a suit of armour lumbered out into the darkness to scoop up the unconscious professor and rush back inside, no doubt making for the hospital wing.

"Galloping gargoyles!" Professor Tofty had finally abandoned all of his attempts to redirect their attentions back to the exam. "Not so much as a warning! Outrageous behaviour!"

"COWARDS!" Hagrid roared so loudly that it caused some of the windows to be illuminated by lights as some students or staff awoke. "RUDDY COWARDS! HAVE SOME O' THAT —AN' THAT—"

"Oh, my—"

Hope was filled with vindictive pleasure as Hagrid threw his massive fists in a wide circle to collide with his opponents; they dropped like marionettes that had their strings cut. He ducked to heave the unconscious bloodhound over his shoulder

"Get him, get him!"

Hagrid ran faster than Hope would have thought possible towards the front gates, Fang's form swaying from the movement, just missing one last Stunner by a few inches.

"She's a monster," Hope muttered, "a fucking monster…poor Professor McGonagall…"

Ron turned to look at Hope, but her face was shrouded in darkness. Her shoulders were shaking but from repressing tears or anger, Ron couldn't be sure.

"Er…five minutes to go, everybody…"

But who was going to care about the stupid exam now, after what they had just seen? And Hope…Hope just wanted to beat the ever-living shite out of that toad-faced woman.

"If you ever interfere with my business again, Miss Potter," Lee heard the next morning as he left the common room, freezing at the sound of their lovely headmistress, "I promise you will regret it."

"Hardly," Hope's voice echoed sharp and cold. "I'm holding out that you'll be long gone by next year and I'll never have to see your ugly mug again."

The sound of loud, angry feet told him it was Hope that was approaching. Once she came into view, she did a double-take.

"Lee," she sighed, "I didn't think anyone was awake."

Lee waggled his eyebrows. "Makes it easier to cause mischief."

Her lips curled upwards. "I'm not sure if you got that from Fred and George or you were normally
this much of a troublemaker."

"Hard to tell these days," Lee agreed as she came closer. She looked like she needed to spend a few days fast asleep, if you asked Lee. "Those exams tiring you out?" he guessed.

Hope gave a slight shrug. "At least I've got my last one today, there's always that."

"Mm," Lee agreed, "until you take your NEWTs."

"Please don't make me think about that," Hope said, "I might become sick."

"Nah! You've got a strong stomach."

Hope arched an eyebrow, but she couldn't help smiling. "I remember why I called you, Fred, and George the Laughing Gas back in first year," she chuckled.

"Nicest title I've ever had," Lee informed her with a wide grin. "It's a pity you grew out of it."

Giving people group names, he meant.

"I grew out of a lot of things," Hope said dryly, thinking of the beads she used string in her hair before glancing down at her watch. "I should go get some early breakfast so I can squeeze in some extra studying…see you around."

Lee barely had time to wave before she disappeared down the stairs.

"Hope Potter…always on the move."

This statement was rather true as Hope moved her legs back and forth under her desk as she scrawled out answers to question after question. She was itching to get out of the class, that much was true. As it was the last exam, they were told that once they'd completed their work and turned it in, they could leave, even if others were still testing.

*Which ancient civilizations have the oldest recorded use of magic?*

That one was easy. *Ancient Greece and Egypt.*

*In your opinion, did wand legislation contribute to, or lead to better control of, goblin riots of the eighteenth century?*

*It led to better control of goblin riots, however the relationship between goblin and wand-carrier deteriorated rather quickly.*

*How was the Statute of Secrecy breached in 1749 and what measures were introduced to prevent a recurrence?*

*A clan of Vampires broke their treaty with the nation of Britain, attacking a small town and nearly exposing themselves to Muggles. This brought about Clause 73 which stated that should any magical creatures cause harm to Muggles, that Wizarding nation's governing body would be subject to discipline by the International Confederation of Wizards.*

*Describe the circumstances that led to the formation of the International Confederation of Wizards and explain why the warlocks of Liechtenstein refused to join.*

*The formation of the International Confederation of Wizards was created in the event that entire governing bodies were found at fault due to certain circumstances. The first Supreme Mugwump of the International Confederation of Wizards was Pierre Bonaccord, but his appointment was*
The steady scratch of the quill against the parchment almost lulled her to sleep, but Hope had to focus, Hope needed at least an 'E' in this class to be considered for Curse-breaker. Think, think… Hope pinched herself several times to keep herself awake. Maybe she shouldn't have pulled so many hours of study without sleeping…that didn't sound like such a good idea in retrospect, but Hope had needed to force the information into her head somehow, so…what could you really do?

And at long last she set her quill down and examined her exam with pride. She'd done it! No more OWLs to study for…she could sleep for days…

She stood, looping her bag over her shoulder and handing over the parchments to the examiner before leaving the room in a state of euphoria. She was so happy to be done, in fact, that she hardly remembered the trip all the way up to the common room. The only thing she really remembered was hitting the mattress of her bed and falling asleep instantly.

Number Ninety-Seven…Hope ran left, moving in the aisle between two rows until she reached the end where she saw a dark figure huddled on the ground, cowering before her.

Hope first felt fear, but then excitement, something she could not explain as her lips twisted into an unfeeling smirk.

"Take it for me," she said, breathless with anticipation, "lift it down, now…I cannot touch it…but you can…"

Hope knew this was a lie, even as she said the words, words that were not her own. Anger flashed inside of her at the resilience of his prisoner. "Crucio!"

The man, for it was now revealed to be as such, let loose a scream of agony that Hope understood completely. He tried to stand despite the pain, but it proved too much as he collapsed on the tile, twitching as Hope lifted the curse.

"Lord Voldemort is waiting…" She said quietly as the man lifted his head and Hope was suddenly pierced by Sirius Black's fierce grey eyes, unyielding in the face of his end.

"You'll have to kill me," Sirius rasped with difficulty, his voice harsh from the pain.

"Undoubtedly I shall in the end," Hope agreed in Voldemort's voice. "But you will fetch it for me
first, Black...you think you have felt pain thus far? Think again...we have hours ahead of us and nobody to hear you scream..."

Sirius screamed again and Hope opened her eyes, jolting awake in a cold sweat.
When Hope Potter burst into the hospital wing, Madam Pomfrey knew something was wrong immediately. She was distraught and panicked, her hair a wild spiky white, and her eyes coloured with fear.

"Hope, what's wrong?" she asked instantly, striding over to the fifth year who was glancing around the room feverishly as a pair of rushing footsteps came closer; Ron and Hermione, no doubt, they were all rather attached to one another. "Ho—?"

The girl gripped her upper arms, frantic. "McGonagall!" she gasped in breathless voice that told her she had run all the way to the hospital wing. "Need-see-McGonagall!"

"Hope!" Hermione and Ron had managed to catch up to her, though clearly the endeavour had exhausted them.

Hope ignored them, her wide eyes on Madam Pomfrey's.

"She's not here, Hope," Madam Pomfrey said, her expression a bit mournful and angry at the events of the previous night. "She was transferred to St Mungo's this morning. Four Stunning Spells straight to the chest at her age? It's a wonder they didn't kill her."

Hope gave a choked moan. Professor McGonagall was one of the few professors that were in the Order, the last that she could trust...should she really go and find Snape? He wouldn't believe her, that was for sure. "She's…?" Her fear doubled.

"I don't wonder you're shocked," Madam Pomfrey said with fiery pride in her eyes. "As if one of them could have Stunned Minerva McGonagall face-on by daylight! Cowardice, that's what it was...despicable cowardice...if I wasn't worried what would happen to you students without me, I'd resign in protest."

Hope's mouth moved wordlessly, her heart beating rapidly in her chest. She released the older woman's arms, her own hands shaking rather terribly.

Madam Pomfrey was instantly concerned. "Are you alright, Hope? Do you need to sit down?"

"Sit...down?" Hope looked as though she didn't even know what those words meant.

"We've got her, Madam Pomfrey," Ron promised, taking Hope's elbows and steering her out of the room with Hermione bobbing at their sides.

They entered into the first classroom they could find and Hope said, "I'm going to the Department of Mysteries."

"You're-what?" asked Hermione stunned.

"What're you going on about?" Ron demanded, confused as to how this decision came about.

"Voldemort!" Hope's voice echoed and Ron flinched at the use of the name. "Sirius! The bastard's got my godfather!"

"Wh-how-?" Hermione started to say, her face colouring in unease.

"I fell asleep and I saw it." Ron's eyes were on her, but she wasn't looking at him, her gaze was
angry now, and on the floor. "The recognized the hall, it was just like the time I saw Mr. Weasley get attacked...there were these glass orbs everywhere, and Voldemort kept torturing him, he's going to kill him!"

"Hope," Hermione said, forcing her voice to remain calm in light of Hope's hysteria, "how...how would Voldemort get into the Ministry of Magic without anybody realizing he was there?"

Logic hindered Hope temporarily. "There are spells that conceal one's identity, Hermione!"

"But the Ministry must have protective measures against that, too!" her friend refuted. "Besides, do you really think Voldemort and Sirius could get into a building full of Aurors undetected?"

Hope gave her a firm stare that said she did indeed believe that to be possible.

"Besides! You've only been to the Department of Mysteries once!" Hermione said, trying to make her friend see reason. "You've just been dreaming—"

"So, Ron's dad was a dream, was he?"

Hermione swallowed thickly at the dangerous tone Hope had now adopted.

"She's not wrong there," Ron said, glancing between the two girls with an unreadable expression.

"But-but," Hermione stuttered. "Hope, come on! Sirius has always been in Grimmauld Place! How could Voldemort get him if he's there?"

Hope's eyes blazed, but Ron stepped in again.

"You know Sirius has been dying to get out of the house," he said in a would-be calm voice, "he probably got caught in his Animagus form."

"But what does Sirius matter?" Hermione asked insistently. "Why on earth would Voldemort want Sirius? What does he have to do with the weapon?"

"What if..." Ron fell silent.

"What if?" Hope prodded him, her heart still racing in her chest.

"What if Sirius is bait?" Ron asked, an intent frown on his face, the same expression he wore when he was thinking up a strategy in chess. "What if Voldemort really wants Hope?"

Hermione gaped at him. That was only going to make her want to go more!

"I'm leaving," Hope said flatly, "I'm going to go and find my godfather, come if you want—"

"But that's what he wants!" Hermione complained. "He knows you'll come for Sirius, Hope! He knows you! What if—?"

"I don't care what he's doing, Hermione," Hope bit out, "I'm not leaving Sirius there to be tortured by my goddamn cousin!"

Hope had never spoken directly of her relation to Voldemort, though Hermione and Ron were well aware of the fact, seeing as both Hope and Voldemort shared the blood of Salazar Slytherin.

"I can't leave him," she whispered, "I can't let him die for me, not when I can do something about it."

"I'm leaving," Hope said flatly, "I'm going to go and find my godfather, come if you want—"
The door creaked open suddenly and Hope, Hermione, and Ron rounded on the familiar faces of Ginny, Luna, and Neville.

"Thought we heard your voice, Hope," Ginny said, entering without preamble, Luna gliding in after her, while Neville looked rather apologetic. "Something going on that we should know about?" She arched her eyebrows towards the windows that must have cracked sometime in Hope's tirade.

"Hope is very angry," Luna noticed in her blunt manner, "did you do something?" She directed this question towards Ron and Hermione who looked immediately insulted.

"It wasn't us—!"

"Why would—?"

"Anything we can do to help?" Ginny asked, her eyes flickering to Hope, but all the older girl could do was grind her teeth together.

"Doubt it," Hope muttered.

"Wait," Hermione said, an idea lighting her eyes, "wait, they can help."

Hope gave her a rather incredulous expression that Ron very nearly replicated.

"We need to see if Sirius is truly gone from Headquarters," Hermione said, and Hope's anger fired up again.

"He's not!"

"Please, please," Hermione pleaded to Hope. "Can't we just make sure he's not at home before we get to London? If he's not there—" She swallowed, her resolve sharpening. "—I'll help you, I promise I will, to find him—"

"What good'll that do?" Hope hissed. "He's already caught! He's probably being tortured right now!"

Neville was mostly confused, but he understood this bit quite well, his face paling a bit.

"And—" They all turned on him and his face burned, but he forced himself to keep talking. "The longer you're under the Cruciatus, the more of yourself you lose." He said these words in a mournful matter-of-fact way, recalling what the healer had said about his parents when he was old enough to understand.

Hope made a "See?" gesture and something small and square-shaped tumbled out of the pocket of her robe.

"What's that?" Hermione asked suddenly as Hope stooped to grab it.

"It's just a mirror," Hope said defensively. "Sirius gave it to me at Christmas, in case I ever needed to contact him… I haven't used it, though, I just keep it for luck."

"Mirror? Like Angelina's?" Hermione suddenly looked very excited.

"Yeah…" Hope said slowly.

"This means you can contact him without using the Floo!" Hermione said ecstatically. "Why didn't you say so before?"
"Because I've never used it!" Hope said hotly. "Besides, it won't work if he doesn't have it on him!"

"When you say "Sirius", are you talking about Stubby Boardman?" Luna interrupted in her vague manner, but they all ignored her.

Hope scowled at Hermione briefly before her attention turned back to the mirror, saying very clearly, "Sirius Black."

For a moment nothing happened, then the surface warped, but instead of Sirius, it was Kreacher.

"Kreacher," Hope said with forced calm.

"It's the Potter girl's head in the mirror," Kreacher noted in an almost gleeful voice that sent worry through Hope's entire being.

"Where's Sirius?"

The house-elf made a raspy noise of amusement, that might have been a chuckle, but it was rather difficult to tell. "Master has gone out, Hope Potter."

Hope's heart was in her throat. "Gone? What do you mean 'gone out,' Kreacher?"

"Nobody here but Kreacher," Kreacher said in true happiness, moving the mirror up and down for a moment, making it difficult to focus on his face.

"Is Sirius at the Department of Mysteries?" Hope said with difficulty, aware of the entire focus of the group on the small mirror in her hands.

His grin widened and his laughter cracked and broke half-way. "Master will not come back from the Department of Mysteries! Kreacher and his mistress are alone again!"

And then the only image in the mirror was Hope's reflection.

"Hope," Ron reached a hand out to her shoulder, but she flinched. Her face was positively white.

"We should get going," he said, ignoring her reaction, "if we want to get to the Ministry before midnight."

Hope looked at him for a long moment before giving a silent nod, however, before any plans could be made, the door burst open and each student was grabbed and restrained.

"Consorting with a wanted fugitive on top of seeking to usurp the Minister…Miss Potter," Umbridge tutted, "did you really think I wouldn't be paying a close eye on you after your actions yesterday?"

Luna marvelled at Hope's ability to put on a bored expression as she leaned her cheek on her fist, exposing the wand holster strapped to her arm, though it was now empty as they had all had their wands removed from them.

"Your eyesight isn't impressive, so I'm not too worried," Hope said coldly, rolling her eyes in annoyance.

"Silence, you brat!" she spat, striking Hope across the cheek, leaving a small cut from one of her rings.

Hope's lips twisted upwards. "So sorry…was that supposed to hurt?"
Luna glanced to the side, Neville was having difficulty breathing and Ginny was still fighting fiercely against her captor. Ron and Hermione were both pinned to the wall, though Ron was the one who looked worse for wear, along with Neville. Neville, a dreaminess entered her eyes (which wasn't much different from usual, so it went unnoticed) as she remembered how he had pulled his fists when they had tried to grab her. No one had ever done anything like that for her before except her father. Ron had done much the same for Hope and Hermione (Hope hadn't needed much help, seeing as she gave Malfoy a lovely black eye and made Crabbe's manly bits sore, judging by the expression on his face when she kicked him between the legs), but to little avail.

Umbridge's face turned a fiery colour. "Why did you contact Sirius Black?"

Hope morphed her face into the woman's, mockingly repeating her words. "Why did you contact Sirius Black?" Hope turned her face quickly back with a sour expression on her face. "I'm afraid if I look like you for too long I'll catch your stupidity," she said scathingly and Luna restrained a giggle. They really didn't get along at all. She wished she had been in Defence Against the Dark Arts with Hope to watch her insult the woman like this; it must have been quite humorous.

"Very well," Umbridge said in her over-the-top-on-sweetness voice. "Very well, Miss Potter...I offered you the chance to tell me freely. You refused. I have no alternative but to force you. Draco, fetch Professor Snape."

Hope's eyes flashed to Ron's and Luna could see silent communication commencing. What was it, though? Was Professor Snape significant to their plans?

Hope's face settled once more into the bored expression it had held originally, but Luna could see the gears turning behind her eyes. She was doing some very quick thinking, and she hardly blinked when the door opened a second time to reveal Professor Snape.

It didn't take a genius to see that Hope and Professor Snape hated each other, in fact, it was quite obvious for all to see. Hope's lips drew into a sneer, but perhaps that was a bit automatic; Luna couldn't be certain.

"Ah, Professor Snape," Umbridge said with a bright, girlish giggle unbefitting of her appearance. "I would like another bottle of Veritaserum, as quick as you can, please."

Luna saw a flicker of apprehension, but it died quickly.

"You took my last bottle to interrogate Potter," Professor Snape said, gesturing to the blank-faced girl in the chair. "Surely you did not use it all? I told you that three drops would be sufficient."

"You can make some more, can't you?" Umbridge simpered.

"Certainly. It takes a full moon-cycle to mature, so I should have it ready for you in around a month."

Hope's lips twitched before returning to the firm line it had been before.

"A month?" Umbridge cried. "But I need it this evening, Snape! I have just discovered Potter attempting to communicate with wanted mass murderer, Sirius Black!"

"Really?" Professor Snape sounded strangely fascinated by this new development and Hope glared at him. "Well, I won't deny that Potter has had shady dealings with Black in the past."

Hope's eyes turned into black burning coals. Was it possible to kill someone with just your eyes? Hope seemed to be trying very hard for that.
"I wish to interrogate her!" Umbridge stamped her foot angrily, looking very much like an overgrown child. "I wish you to provide me with a potion that will force her to tell me the truth!"

Hope rolled her eyes at the ceiling, mouthing several degrading insults (at least, that was what it seemed to Luna).

"I have already told you that I have no further stocks of Veritaserum," Professor Snape said simply. "Unless you wish to poison Potter—and I assure you I would have the greatest sympathy with you if you did– I cannot help you. The only trouble is that most venoms act too fast to give the victim much time for truth-telling."

Green met black and Luna was under the distinct impression that Hope was trying to convey something to the Potions professor.

"You are on probation!" Umbridge cried angrily in an almost childish manner. "You are being deliberately unhelpful! I expected better, Lucius Malfoy always speaks most highly of you! Now get out of my office!"

He was moments away from leaving when Hope finally spoke.

"He's got Padfoot," she said, her voice ringing in the room, "at the place where it's being guarded."

It was some sort of code, that much Luna could tell, but either Professor Snape didn't understand it, or he was a very good actor.

Umbridge gave a trembling sigh as the door shut behind him, pulling her short, stubby wand loose. "Very well...Very well...I am left with no alternative...this is more than a matter of school discipline...this is an issue of Ministry security...yes...yes...You are forcing me, Potter...I do not want to," Umbridge murmured this bit more to herself, but somehow Luna doubted the honesty there, "but sometimes circumstances justify the use...I am sure the Minister will understand that I had no choice...The Cruciatius Curse ought to loosen your tongue."

Neville's eyes burned with anger and Ron fought harder against his captor.

Hermione could hardly get out a scream. "N-!"

"Crucio!"

Hope ducked her head to the side, the jet of red light missed her by inches.

"We have to tell her, Hope!"

"Are you mad?" Hope snarled at the girl.

"I'm-I'm so sorry!" Hermione wailed and Hope stilled briefly, hearing something Luna could night, an oddly closed expression now on her face. "I can't d-do it anym-more!"

Umbridge grabbed Hermione, wrenching her forward, an expression of elation on her toad-like face. "Tell me now, why was Potter trying to reach Black?"

"B-Because he's the only o-one who knows ho-ow to reach Dumbledore!" Hermione bawled.

Luna was impressed at Hermione's ability to lie and create a lie so quickly.

"Dumbledore?" Umbridge said, her excitement growing.
Hermione nodded, her face hidden still behind her hands (Luna wondered if she was faking tears). "We-we wanted to tell him it's r-ready!" she sobbed.


"Shut up, Hermione!" Hope snapped.

"The-the weapon," Hermione choked out.

"Weapon? Weapon? You have been developing some method of resistance?" She was breathless in the face of this revelation. "A weapon you could use against the Ministry? On Professor Dumbledore's orders, of course?"

Hermione nodded in distraught (or so it seemed). "B-but he had to leave b-before it was fini-ished and n-now we've finished it for him, and we ca-an't find him t-to tell hi-im!"

"Hermione, for once in your miserable life, keep your fat mouth shut!" Hope snarled, doing a rather good act of being supremely angered. It was so good that Luna was sure that Hermione might actually have some real tears come out of it.

"Lead me to it!" Umbridge commanded.

Hermione threw a small tantrum about showing it to everyone so Umbridge made it so that Hope and Hermione would show her where it was. Hope spared Luna a barely perceptible wink as she and Hermione were forced out of the room at wand-point.

Hope's scar throbbed and burned with every step she took, anxiety eating away at her as she prayed silently for Sirius. She would've kissed Hermione if not for several things. 1) that would give away the fact that they were duping Umbridge, 2) she was supposed to be angry at Hermione, and 3) Hermione really, really, wasn't her type.

She hoped against hope that Hermione had a good plan as she led them into the Forbidden Forest, because Hope was all out of ideas, her heart still a little frantic from how quickly Umbridge had chosen to attempt to torture her. She had thought she was just a vile person, but no, now it was obvious; she was fucking insane.

"How much further?" Umbridge called from behind.

"Not far now!" Hermione yelled behind her. They were now in an area that Hope did not recognize. Hope was beginning to worry that Hermione had no real plan right about now. "Just a little bit—"

She released a small squeak as an arrow lodged into the trunk of the tree closest to her, Hope lurched backwards as one embedded itself in the ground squarely between her feet. Arrows could mean only one thing…so Hope wasn't surprised in the slightest to find them all surrounded by centaurs.

She gave Hermione a stony look that said she clearly hated this plan.

"Who are you?" a centaur Hope did not recognize spoke, his bow readied like all the other centaurs. "I asked you who you are, human."

"I am Dolores Umbridge!" Hope winced at the pitch of her voice; Merlin, it sounded like the Mandrake's cry! "Senior Undersecretary to the Minister for Magic and Headmistress and High Inquisitor of Hogwarts!"
Bad move there, Hope thought, admitting to being a Ministry of Magic worker.

"You are from the Ministry of Magic?" the first centaur said, clearly displeased.

"That's right!" Umbridge said, clearly terrified. "So be very careful! By the laws laid down by the Department for the Regulation and Control of Magical Creatures, any attack by half-breeds such as yourselves on a human—"

"What did you call us?" roared a centaur that Hope believed was called Bane.

"Law Fifteen B states clearly that "any attack by a magical creature who is deemed to have near-human intelligence, and therefore considered responsible for its actions—"

Strike two.

"Near-human intelligence?" the first one seethed as the others made noises of fury and disgust. "We consider that a great insult, human! Our intelligence, thankfully, far outstrips your own."

"What are you doing in our Forest?" an unfamiliar centaur with a grey body bellowed. "Why are you here?"

"Your Forest?" she shrieked. "I would remind you that you live here only because the Ministry of Magic permits you certain areas of land—" Her words faded as an arrow nearly hit her, reducing her to insulting the centaurs before her…not really a good move on her part. "Filthy half-breeds! Beasts! Uncontrolled animals!"

Strike Three.

For her part, Hope was remarkably unsurprised and just a tiny bit of vindictive pleasure (and by tiny, she meant a lot) when the result ended up being Umbridge carried away from them, screaming all the while.

Hope and Hermione were quickly restrained, but one of the centaurs was far too enthusiastic, releasing its arrow too soon, and suddenly one centaur was holding empty robes and the other was holding nothing.

Hope swore violently, gripping her arm as it bled, the arrow having gone right through her arm to lodge in a nearby tree.

"Hope!" Hermione's voice was fearful.

"What shall we do with these ones?" a voice asked condescendingly.

"They are young," another said, "We do not attack foals."

Hope made a low noise in the back of her throat. They'd already attacked them enough for one day.

"They brought her here, Ronan," the centaur who had previously been holding Hope threw down her empty robes in disdain. "And they are not so young . . . They came here unasked, they must pay the consequences!"

"ENOUGH!" Hope roared, standing, anger dimming her pain as she stood protectively before Hermione. "How dare you threaten an attack on two unarmed children!" She loathed to call herself a child, but, well…what could you do?

"How dare we? How dare you—?" one of them raged back.
"SILENCE!" Hermione could see how some viewed Hope as dangerous. In this moment she could see the girl who took on the title of Lady Potter, the one who spoke in the tongue of snakes. Lady Potter was so very different from Hope Potter. "I am the Serpent-tongue! I am Elpis, Daughter of the Slytherin House! And you have shown yourself to lack honour! I expected more of the Centaurs of the North!"

Hermione gaped at her friend, but she had no time to speak as Grawp, Hagrid's small giant half-brother, lumbered into view.

"Elpis? Daughter of the Slytherin House?" Hermione gasped as they made their way out of the forest, Hermione having a good bit of Grawp's blood on her (she doubted he was mortally wounded, though), and Hope's arm still bleeding as she clamped a hand to the wound, but Hope assured her it wasn't serious, so she wasn't too worried.

"Ancestral names sound so much better in my head," Hope said with a sigh. "At least it distracted them a little...Sorry about what I said earlier."

"Oh, it's fine," Hermione said a bit embarrassed. "But Hope, how are we supposed to get to London?"

"Yeah, we were just wondering that," Ron's voice commented through the trees as he grinned at the pair, closely followed by Neville, Ginny, and Luna. Ron handed Hope her wand as Luna hummed a spell that sealed up her arm, the Ravenclaw smiling in a disarming way that only slightly disconcerted Hope. "Any ideas?"

"I'm not sure I want to know what you did to get away," Hope said dryly, returning her wand to her holster as Ginny held out Hermione's who took it gratefully.

"We're a bit busy, aren't we? I'll save it for later," Ron said with a grin.

"Where's Umbridge?" Neville asked suspiciously.

"That's no longer a concern," Hermione said tiredly. "Back to getting to London—"

"We'll have to fly, won't we?" Luna added.

"And don't you dare try to keep us out of it," Ginny warned, fingering her wand looking so much like the twins that it was vaguely startling. "I care what happens to Sirius as much as you do!"

"No one cares about Sirius as much as I do," Hope said unimpressed. "However—" Ginny's eyes brightened. "—I don't hold power over you, so do what you want."

"Then we're coming," Neville said swiftly, his eyes meeting hers, fierce and calm. "We want to help."

"That's right," Luna said brightly. "And look! Our rides are here, and Hagrid says they're very good at finding places their riders are looking for."

Hope barely needed to turn around to know that she was gesturing towards a Thestral. The one closest to her approached in a solemn manner, bending to lick at the blood from her healed cut.
Hope didn't have a problem with the Thestrals, neither did Luna or Neville for that matter, but it was an entirely different matter when you couldn't see what you were riding. They wasted precious moments helping Hermione, Ron, and Ginny onto their Thestrals before they could even prepare to take flight. The flight itself was rather quick, but to Hope's surprise, getting into the Ministry of Magic was much easier than anticipated.

It was completely deserted, and that set Hope on edge as they descended slowly to the Department of Mysteries, down to the place Hope had been dreaming about for months. She swallowed a bit nervously, her hand clenching so tightly around her wand one would have thought it would be splintering by now.

"Department of Mysteries," the female voice chimed as grilles opened and they left the lift, entering through the only door without so much as a word. There seemed to be an oppressive force hanging in the air, forcing them to remain silent, or perhaps it was fear of the unknown; to was so difficult to tell the difference.

The door opened into a room that was shaped like a circle with the same design and colour of the first door in every direction they turned, Hope moved intent on the door directly in front of her when the door shut behind them and the doors began to shift, blurring as they moved before coming to a stop.

"What the-?" Ron said in a low voice, the others jumping as one of their number spoke for the first time since they had entered.

"To confuse us probably," Ginny whispered back, "so we won't know which door is ours."

Hermione made a small noise of agreement.

"We need to look for a door that leads to a room with rows of silvery orbs, alright?" Hope said, drawing their attention forwards as she pushed on the first door she saw. It did not open into the room she had dreamed of, but Hope was temporarily in awe of it. Above them streamed hundreds upon hundreds of stars forming colourful nebulas like Hope had seen in satellite images of space in some of the Muggle books Dudley had been gifted with but never read. And it wasn't just stars, Hope could see planets too...it was beautiful.

"Wow…" It was times like these that Hope was easily distracted when she really shouldn't have been. But she shook her head quickly. "This one's not it," she said, almost reproachful of herself. "Let's try a different one."

"Don't shut it!" Hermione said quickly as they all filed back into the circular room, making Luna pause before doing just that. "Flagrate!" A red 'X' was burned across the door before it was shut and the doors rotated once more, giving Hope an even bigger headache than she already had.

They opened two more doors (one that entered into what looked a bit like a tomb and one that was a garden that glowed with vitality and possibly magic itself) before they entered into a room that Hope could hear other noises coming from.

"Quiet!" She hissed back to Ron and Hermione, who were having a nearly silent heated argument over which room to pick. "Can't you hear that?"

She stepped into the room and the others fell silent as she approached the only thing that resided
within it; a crudely carved massive stone arch from which a dark ripped and ruined veil hung.

"I think there's someone behind that," Luna whispered, and as quiet as it was, her voice echoed a bit loudly in the silence. "Don't you?"

Hope nodded numbly. Could it be Sirius? Hiding from his captor to allow his wounds to heal? To wait for someone to save him?

"Hello?" she called softly, but the veil only fluttered, slight whispers coming from it drawing her forward.

"Hope, there's nothing there!" Hermione insisted, grabbing at her friend's arm while Ginny grabbed Luna. "Hope—"

Hope recoiled suddenly, seeing something within the veil that sent a wave of fear over her that had nothing to do with their situation at all. She'd just seen a pair of black, endless eyes…and it wasn't the first time she'd seen them, either. They were the last thing she saw before she flat-lined in the ambulance after she was in that car accident.

"What is it?" Luna murmured dreamily as if the veil was coaxing her.

"It's Death," Hope said shortly, her words jarring Luna out of her trance a little. "Hermione's right, we should leave."

The brunette sighed in relief as they left the room quickly, marking it as well.

"What did you mean by Death?" Neville asked quietly, but Hope could only mutely shake her head as she pushed open the next door.

"This is the one!" she said, recognizing it instantly as they entered into the room that shimmered with light.

"These aren't silvery orbs," Ron said in confusion, glancing around the room.

"That room's just through there," Hope said, pointing towards the door at the far end. "Follow me!"

Relief surged in her veins, her hope for finding Sirius had dwindled as they had tried more and more doors to little avail, but, at last, they were moving forward! Her heart was still beating frantically in her chest, her scar was still throbbing on her forehead, she was still somewhere between wanting to be furious and wanting to cry, but at least she was getting somewhere.

"Wait, look!" Ginny's voice caused them to momentarily pause to stare into a jar of sorts, inside which an egg resided. A crack appeared in the shell and a small hummingbird appeared.

"Ginny…" Hope tugged on her arm and the girl finally relented, though it was clear she wanted to remain to watch the hummingbird. But time was a necessity that they could not afford to waste in their current situation.

Hope pushed the next door open, sighing in relief at the sight of the orbs of her nightmares and dreams. Orbs upon dust orbs piled so high Hope had to wonder how anyone ever reached the top…or perhaps they were not meant to…Row Ninety-seven…

Hope rushed forward and her friends had to move quickly to keep up with her. "Hope!"

The frantic fear had returned. Sirius! Where was he? An ice-cold fist gripped at her heart. Was he
still alive? No! He had to be! Please, please...

Fifty-four…sixty-two…seventy-five…eighty-nine…The numbers melted together as she passed them; Hope could hardly read them in the face of what she would find.

What if he isn't even here? A voice in the back of her mind suggested, but Hope pushed it aside.

"Ninety-seven!"

The aisle was empty.

The fist tightened around Hope's heart. "No," she whispered, "he-he has to be—" She almost didn't recognize her own voice; it sounded so…broken. Hope felt sick. Was he dead and the body was gone or…?

"Was he never really here?" she mumbled, the cold air seeking to choke her. She had seen it through Voldemort's eyes! But…was it possible to manufacture memories?

"Hope?" Hermione's hand was warm, squeezing hers when Ron spoke up. "Hey, Hope, come here."

"Why?" Hope asked, still staring at the floor, where she had seen Sirius in her nightmare.

"It's one of those orb things," Ron said and Hope lifted her gaze to frown at him. "It's got your name on it."

"What d'you mean?" Hope asked, moving to where Ron was standing, tilting her head back to see the small sphere that was perched on a stand.

"S.P.T. to A.P.W.B.D., Dark Lord and Hope Potter," Ron read out loud as the others crowded around in curiosity. "Why d'they have your name on it?"

"Don't—!" Neville tried to say as she stood on her tip-toes to grab it, holding it tightly in her hand, its warmth comforting against the chill in the air. The silvery essence inside it swirled ominously, but it did nothing to her that might cause her damage as Neville had thought, and clearly Hermione by the apprehensive look in her eye.

But then something happened. A voice called out of the semi-darkness, a voice she recognized. "Very good, Potter. Now turn around, nice and slowly, and give that to me."

Hope whirled around, still clenching the orb in her fist, aiming her wand as Lucius Malfoy left the shadows with several others by his side. They all seemed to be the convicted Death Eaters that escaped from Azkaban. She didn't have to look behind her to know that Ron and Ginny would be aiming their wands at Antonin Dolohov and Neville at Bellatrix Lestrange.

"To me, Potter."

"That's likely," Hope said in a sarcastic tone, "tell me, did Voldemort send his most impotent little lackeys, or are you really all he's got?"

"Ooh! She's got a tongue on her!" Bellatrix gave a sadistic giggle that sent a shiver down her spine. "Want to play, little Potter?" Hope could feel her friends closing ranks around her.

"Your games would bore me, Bella," Hope said in an uncaring drawl.

"Enough," Malfoy said calmly, taking one short step forward before Hope's wand flashed to him and
"Take one more step," she warned, "and I'll show you why I'm Grey."

"Just give me the prophecy, Potter," Malfoy said, his voice now placating.

"Prophecy? Is that what this is?" Hope asked in mock-fascination. "Sorry, but seeing as it doesn't have your name on it…"

Hope's foot nudged Luna's and Hope barely moved her mouth as she spoke lowly. "My signal… smash…"

Luna must've gotten the message.

"And I suppose Sirius being tortured was one of lovely Voldemort's creations, then?" Hope said, speaking loudly to cover Luna telling the others. A few Death Eaters shared glanced and she smirked. "Oh? Did you not think I'd figure it out eventually?"

Bellatrix's eyes held a maddening light. "Aw! So the wittle girl figuwed it out—"

"Bella," Hope said lightly, "I may have to cut out your tongue just stop myself from hearing your repulsive voice."

The woman released a shrill laugh at that. "With the bite of a snake! Are you sure this is the girl, Lucius? She's hardly how you described."

"Pity, that," Hope said coolly.

"Give me the prophecy," Malfoy was ordering her now, but Hope paid him no heed, "or we start using her wands."

"What's stopping you?" Hope said coldly, lifting the prophecy loosely in her hands. "Is this thing really that important to Voldemort?"

They all froze as her hand tipped. "What would happen if I just—"

"NO!"

"Ah…" Hope smiled in an indulgent manner that would no doubt increase their irritation, but then Bellatrix had pointed her wand at Hope. "Accio proph—"

"Protego!" Hope said quickly, cancelling her charm before it could do any damage. She drew the prophecy to her chest, caution colouring her face as Malfoy yelled at Bellatrix.

"I TOLD YOU, NO! If you smash it—!"

His words seemed to have no effect on the woman who grinned devilishly at Hope.

"She knows how to play," Bellatrix said in amusement, amusement that Hope did not share. "You need more persuasion? Very well – take the smallest one. Let her watch while we torture the little girl. I'll do it."

Hope moved until she was standing protectively before the youngest Weasley, and she knew the others had shifted until they were guarding her at all sides. Ginny hissed an insult in Hope's ear that would have made her mother blush, but Hope only smirked.
"Try, and I smash this," she warned, "and won't that be a travesty."

Bellatrix's face darkened. "You conniving, filthy Half-Blood—!

"And somehow I've still got purer blood than you, Bella," Hope said mildly, "anything in your family tree we ought to know about?"

"Shut your mouth!" Bellatrix commanded.

"Did Voldemort tell you his father was a Muggle?" Hope continued, unrepentant. "You sure you want to follow someone—"

"STUPEF-" Bellatrix aimed her wand at Hope's heart.

"NO!" Malfoy's intervention caused Bellatrix's spell to shatter several orbs on impact... well, some shattered, and some gave a small explosion like firecrackers. "DO NOT ATTACK! WE NEED THE PROPHECY!"

"She dares!" Bellatrix cried, enraged at the fifteen year old witch standing before her, bold enough to dare. "She stands there –filthy Half-Blood–"

"WAIT UNTIL WE'VE GOT THE PROPHECY!" Malfoy roared.

"So," Hope said conversationally, like the group of Death Eaters standing in front of her weren't aiming their wands at her and her friends and weren't going to possibly kill them, "why does your master want this thing, anyways?"

"Do not play games with us, Potter."

"As fun as that would be," Hope said with a superior smirk, "I'm just...curious..."

"Dumbledore never told you the reason you bear that scar was hidden in the bowels of the Department of Mysteries?" Malfoy said in a condescending voice that Hope ignored in the face of this new knowledge.

She wrinkled her eyebrows together in confusion, but not saying a word.

"Dumbledore never told you?" he sneered, the Death Eaters laughing with him. "Well, this explains why you didn't come earlier, Potter, the Dark Lord wondered why you didn't come running when he showed you the place where it was hidden in your dreams. He thought natural curiosity would make you want to hear the exact wording..."

Hope had to grudgingly admit that did sound a bit like her. "And why did he want me to find it?"

"Why?" Malfoy repeated, his eyes glowing with excitement through the mask on his face. "Because the only people who are permitted to retrieve a prophecy from the Department of Mysteries, Potter, are those about whom it was made, as the Dark Lord discovered when he attempted to use others to steal it for him."

"Like Bode?" Hope asked coldly. "And Sturgis Podmore?"

Malfoy nodded in an almost approving manner.

"Clearly Voldemort wants this himself," Hope said tossing the sphere up into the air, enjoying Malfoy's frantic expression for a split second before catching it once more. "Why?"
Malfy didn't speak for a long moment. "Haven't you ever wondered why the Dark Lord tried to kill you as a baby?"

Hope gritted her teeth. "I can wait a bit longer. Dirumpor!"

An explosion of light blinded the Death Eaters temporarily, but that was nothing compared to the Reductor Curses that went flying in every direction, causing orbs to burst and fall and shelves to topple.

"RUN!" Hope screamed, grabbing Hermione and tugging her past the Death Eaters, shooting a curse at them as she passed.

"Stupefy!" Hermione cried as an arm seized Hope only to quickly retract as they raced towards the door through which they had come and Hermione sealed it behind them, leaving them gasping for breath.

"Where're the other three?" Hope gasped, her heart throbbing nearly as much as her scar now. Hermione and Neville were the only ones with her.

"Oh, no!" Hermione moaned, her fear and anxiety on her face.

"Shh!" Neville hissed, leaning his ear against the door, and they followed suit.

"Leave Nott," Malfy shouted, "leave him, I say – his injuries will be nothing to the Dark Lord compared to losing that prophecy. Jugson, come back here, we need to organise! We'll split into pairs and search, and don't forget, be gentle with Potter until we've got the prophecy, you can kill the others if necessary – Bellatrix, Rodolphus, you take the left; Crabbe, Rabastan, go right – Jugson, Dolohov, the door straight ahead – Macnair and Avery, through here – Rookwood, over there – Mulciber, come with me!"

"What do we do?" Hermione asked, making a startled noise as Hope shoved the prophecy into her hands and fisted her and Neville's robes. It was truly disconcerting to find yourself in one spot and then another without so much as a blink.

"Hide!" Hope hissed, taking Hermione with her under a desk. "Can you make a duplicate?" she asked her lowly, her eyes on the door at the opposite end.

Hermione's eyes widened. "Yes, but it won't—"

"Do it."

"Geminio!" Hermione murmured, pointing at the prophecy in her hand. Hope caught the second one as it appeared.

"Now smash the real one."

"What?" Hermione said, aghast, when Hope took the real one and threw it at the wall, causing it to shatter as the door flung open and Hope ducked under the desk again.

"Check under the desks," a crass voice said.

"Stupefy!" Hope's spell collided with the first, but the other took this time to aim a Killing Curse at Hermione. Anger lit Hope's eyes as she swung her heel to collide with the Death Eater's stomach, ducking as Neville shouted, "EXPPELLIARMUS!"
He scrambled to reach his, but Neville had already thrown his second curse, "STUPEFY!" and the man toppled into a cabinet.

"Stupefy!" Hope added towards the man that she had already downed once he showed signs of stirring.

A sudden yell and scream set them on edge again. It sounded an awful lot like Ron and Ginny. Neville pelted forward first this time, in the direction of the screams, but they were expected.

"IMPEDIMENTA!"

Hope crashed into a wall, nearly losing her grip on the fake prophecy, pulling herself to her feet as quickly as she could, breathing hard as one of the two Death Eaters that had attacked them began to shout.

"WE'VE GOT HER! IN AN OFFICE OFF—"

"Silencio!"

"Diffindo!"

Hermione's curse had aimed at the one who had yelled and Hope's had collided with the second man who gave a cry of pain as a slash appeared across his chest. "Stupefy!" she added for good measure.

Hope moved to turn her wand on the silenced wizard, but she was too slow. A flash of violet connected with Hermione and she crumpled instantly.

Enraged, Hope's eyes burned scarlet and she did something Neville did not expect. She raised her wand and uttered a spell that he didn't even know. "Concindo!"

Dolohov, for his face had been revealed once he had removed his mask, would have howled in the agony of losing his hand, for the spell that Hope had used had cut it right off at the wrist, blood pouring out of the stump and showing no sign of stopping.

Neville looked at Hope as Dolohov fell to his knees, glaring up at Neville's god-sister despite his pain.

"Oh, believe me," she snarled, "you deserve a lot worse. I know someone who would personally like very much to kill you." And then she brought her heel down on his wand snapping it in two. Now Neville understood what she meant by being Grey, none of them had used any spells that could do any serious harm, but Hope had just severed a body part like it was nothing.

Hope breathed in and out briefly, surprised that the spell had worked, slightly mildly disgusted with herself, before remembering— "Hermione!"

Neville checked her wrist, relieved to find a slightly slower but definitely steady pulse. "She's got a pulse."

Hope sighed. "And we still have to find the others," she said with a trace of misery.

"I'll carry her," Neville said quickly.

Hope shot him a look. "Neville, that's—"

"We can't just leave her here," Neville said, scowling a little, "besides, you're better at spells."
A dark look burned across her face, glancing towards the twitching and bleeding out man on the floor before nodding as Neville lifted her friend over his shoulder and Hope stowed the brunette's wand in her holster. They ducked quickly as a baby-headed Death Eater stumbled into view. Hope wasn't sure how that came about, but it seemed likely that it was the Death Eater that was thrown into that cabinet. Getting to the circular room again was the easy part (the baby didn't notice a single thing), but finding the right door was the hard part, because all of Hermione's red 'X's were gone from the doors they had tried before. However, lucky shined on them and a door opened and out tumbled Ron, Luna, and Ginny.

"We've been looking—" Hope started to say when Ron suddenly latched onto her with eyes that gleamed. It was a little worrying. "Ron?"

"Hope, there you are…" He gave a short laughter that sounded a bit unbalanced to Hope. "…you look funny, Hope…you're all messed up…"

Covered in blood, no doubt.

"Ginny?" Hope turned to ask his younger sister, but she seemed incapable for speaking, collapsing on the ground clutching her ankle, her face tight and pinched.

"I'm pretty sure it's broken," Luna murmured. "Four chased us into the room with the stars from before—"

Ron giggled, his grip straining Hope's shirt, her robes long gone, still back in the Forbidden Forest.

"—one of them grabbed Ginny's foot, and I Reducto'd Pluto in his face," Luna sighed abysmally, "but…"

"And Ron?"

Luna could only shrug.

"Get Ginny up," Hope said, hearing the footsteps, "quickly!"

Bellatrix's glee at finding them was short-lived as they sealed the door against her, but then they ran into a few problems, and that was that there were doors here that led to other rooms and the rush to seal them cost them, and Luna was thrown across the room, slamming into a desk.

"Get Potter!" Bellatrix screamed.

"Expulso!" Hope yelled, pointing her wand towards the ground, gouging out a hole and sending up a short geyser of stone.

"They're brains," Ron's voice giggled, "brains! Accio brain!"

Hope had not had time to look over the contents of the room they were in, but she had to freeze as something slimy was brought out of one of the tanks in the room, spinning towards Ron like an eerie octopus.

"RON, NO!" Hope's voice rose to a shriek as the brain with its tentacles began to wrap tightly around her friend. It bound around him, over his chest—

"Concido!" A tentacle was ripped free, but it did not slice off like Hope had expected, and the brain had plenty more to use. "Concidio!"
"It'll suffocate him!" Ginny screamed only to be promptly silenced moments later and Hope swore. "I'll distract them!" she told Neville, running through the door with the fake prophecy still in her hand as Neville aimed Stunners at the Death Eaters that followed after her, including Bellatrix, whose pitched laughter rang in her ears as she fell through the next room, landing with a painful jolt on her back in the room with the veil from before. She choked for breath, caging the prophecy in her hands as Malfoy leaned over her.

"Now, Potter," he purred, "be a good girl and hand over the prophecy."

He reached down when Neville reappeared with a yell. "GET AWAY FROM HER!" He roared, Stunning two of the Death Eaters before he himself was disarmed and restrained by a thick-skinned man.

"It's the Longbottom boy, isn't it?" Malfoy uttered in amusement. "Well, your grandmother is used to losing family members to our cause...your death will not come as a great shock."

Hope's breath caught in her throat.

"Longbottom?" A delighted smile graced Bellatrix's face. "Why, I have had the pleasure of meeting your parents, boy."

This only served to increase his rage exponentially.

"Let's see how long Longbottom lasts before he cracks like his parents," Bellatrix said still in that delighted voice, "Unless Potter wants to give us the prophecy."

"NO!" Neville yelled towards her. "DON'T DO IT! DO—"

The rest of his words were drowned out in a scream of agony that reverberated against the walls making it seem much louder and Hope flinched.

They were distracted rather suddenly as five people thrust open the door.

"OI!" A familiar voice roared. "GET AWAY FROM MY GODDAUGHTER!"

Hope very nearly cried in relief as Tonks' well-aimed Stunner sent Malfoy flying and Hope sat up to see Sirius, Remus, Tonks, Moody, and Kingsley descend like rain on a land of drought. Hope rolled and dodged the onslaught of spells to reach Neville's side.

"Alright?" she asked just loud enough for him to hear.

"I'll live," Neville groaned, his voice a rasp.

Hope gave a violent yell as she was gripped tightly about the throat and lifted off the ground.

"Give it to me! Give me the prophecy!"

Hope drew her legs up and kneed him hopefully in the spleen. Maybe he'd get a bruised organ out of it. She gasped, her throat stinging as Neville Stunned the man.

"Hope!" Hope shot a *Diffindo* to one of the hooded figures she did not recognize who let out a vaguely girlish scream that had Hope grinning viciously. "Take the prophecy, grab Neville and run!"

Though clearly aggravated at being told to leave, Hope conceded, helping Neville to his feet and towards the stone steps, up to the room with Ron, Ginny, Luna, and the brains.
"Potter!" Hope pointed her wand at Malfoy as he approached. "Give me the prophecy!"

Hope smirked. "What prophecy?" And then she smashed the double prophecy against the wall, immensely enjoying the horror on his face before she spelled him across the room with an "IMPEDIMENTA!"

"Hope!" It was Remus this time. "Go now! Run!"

Didn't need to tell her—

"Come on, you can do better than that!" Sirius yelled and Hope chanced a glance to her godfather. He was too close to the arch! What if—?

Hope's eyes widened as the next Stunning Spell hit him.

Hope screamed, abandoning Neville as she ran for the dais, her godfather's name leaving her lips. "SIRIUS!"

Her godfather fell right through the veil and Hope saw those black eyes once more.

Hope's heart felt as though it had stopped beating as Remus ran forward, pulling her back. The only thing she could hear was her own blood thundering in her ears as she extending a hand, grasping at air, tears falling from her eyes, sobbing out his name knowing he wouldn't be able to hear her or respond to her again.
Broken Trust

Hope's scream pierced the air and the whole room shook, as if her sorrow and her pain were being projected onto it. Remus wrenched her back and out of the way of a falling rock. Hope's eyes were wide, her breaths were short. This was as close to seeing out of control that Remus had ever seen her.

Hope gave a roar of rage, her eyes on Bellatrix as she ran up the steps leading to the Brain Room. She didn't say any words, simply jabbing her wand in the woman's direction. The spell left a several inch deep slice in the stone wall, only giving the woman a cut on the shoulder the length of an index finger. That only made her laugh, disregarding the attempt on her life completely.

"Hope!" Remus tried to hold her tightly, but she slipped out of his grasp. "No! Stop!"

She pelted up the stairs after her, running like she'd never run before, her anger giving her the strength to continue. She had reached the lift. Hope missed a Crucio by inches.

"Avada Kedavra!"

The green light left her wand and Bellatrix's eyes widened in surprise at Hope's usage of one of the Unforgivable Curses. Hate burned in Hope's eyes as the spell collided with the grilles of the lift as it ascended.

"Bye, bye!" Bellatrix cooed, waggling her fingers in a mocking wave until she couldn't be seen and another lift took its place. Hope wrenched the grilles open and shut, stabbing harshly on the button that led to the Atrium. The lift was far too slow for Hope's liking and the grilles groaned as threw them open again, firing off a spell at Bellatrix's retreating figure making for the telephone both that she and the others had used to get into the Ministry.

"Dirumpor!"

While the last time she had used it as a diversion and thus had not caused any lasting injuries to the Death Eaters, this time the spell connected.

The telephone booth exploded, sending metal debris in every direction and making Bellatrix shriek as she was forced to protect herself before turning angrily on Hope.

"Aw!" she said snidely. "Little Hope wants me all to herself!"

Hope's eyes burned the same crimson as Voldemort's.

"Are you here to avenge my dear cousin?" she asked in amusement.

"Shut up!" Hope snarled, her wand still trained on Bellatrix, the tip glowing green with murderous intent, much like it had the previous year when she had faced Voldemort.

"Ah~!" she sang. "Did you love him, little Potter?"

"Avada Kedavra!" This one missed her a second time, and Hope very nearly swore; she was not this bad of a shot!

Bellatrix laughed as she ducked. "Ooh! You must hate me very much, Potter! Casting Unforgiveables left and right!" Her lips curled into a dark smile. "Not as Light as Dumbledore, are
"Don't you dare compare me to him!" Hope raged, lurching to the side as Bellatrix threw a Crucio at her head, instead the spell connected with the wizard of fountain that sat at the centre of the Atrium, blow the head off.

"Fax!"

Bellatrix screamed as her skin burned hot, as though she had been branded. "Stupefy!"

Hope was forced to drop the curse to dodge.

"I'm going to give you a chance," Bellatrix said, breathless from her pain, "to give me the prophecy – roll it towards me now – and I may spare your life!"

Hope burst into peals of laughter. It was hard to tell what she thought was more ludicrous; her handing over the prophecy or Bellatrix sparing her.

"WHY ARE YOU LAUGHING?!!" Bellatrix's voice echoed making it sound much louder than she really was.

"You Death Eaters think you're so smart," Hope chuckled, her laughter died down. "I smashed it back in the Time Room, minutes after I got it! You were chasing a fake one this whole time!" Her scar was throbbing more painfully now.

"What?!

"You heard me," Hope smirked. "I wonder what your master does to servants that fail him." It felt as though someone was carving a knife into her forehead but she tried not to let it show.

"YOU LIE!" She screamed, her eyes wide in dread. "YOU'VE GOT IT, POTTER, AND YOU WILL GIVE IT TO ME! Accio prophecy! ACCIO PROPHECY!"

But nothing came and Hope dodged to the side to avoid the Killing Curse shot her way.

"Try all you like!" Hope said, using the tip of her wand (and a light carving charm they'd learned in Potions to use when a knife wasn't available) to carve a blood sigil on each of her palms, because the increase of pain could mean only one thing; Voldemort was on his way. They weren't deep and would heal easily so Hope hardly noticed them compared to the pain of her head. "It's not going to come!"

"No! It isn't true, you're lying! MASTER, I TRIED, I TRIED – DO NOT PUNISH ME –"

Hope turned, her heart beating in her throat, her breath catching at the sight.

Voldemort had arrived. His scarlet eyes meeting hers of a similar colour. This seemed to amuse him. Hope growled, pointing her wand at him.

"So, you smashed my prophecy, did you?" Voldemort inquired in that quiet voice of his. Hope's curled upwards into a sadistic sneer that he had no doubt employed at one stage or another. "No, Bella, she is not lying…I see the truth…months of preparation, months of effort…and my Death Eaters have let Hope Potter thwart me again…"

"Maybe you should get some better followers, Tom," Hope said shortly in an uncaring manner. His eyes met hers and Hope saw something there, something she could not identify. Perhaps
annoyance and hatred for using his common, Muggle father's name.

"Master, I am sorry!" Bellatrix wailed in distress, seeing how she had failed her master. "I knew not! I was fighting the Animagus Black! Master, you should know —"

"Be silent, Bella," Voldemort warned. "I shall deal with you in a moment. Do you think I have entered the Ministry of Magic to hear your snivelling apologies?"

"But Master," Bellatrix whimpered, "he is here – he is below –"

"I have nothing more to say to you—"

"Then don't," Hope said coolly, slamming the left palm down and uttering a single order, "Attack."

The floor trembled and the tiles broke as sharp, jagged rocks burst through. Voldemort and Bellatrix dived in opposite directions to avoid being shredded, when one of the statues in the fountain, the witch, came to life, trapping Bellatrix to the floor.

"What–? Dumbledore!" Voldemort said the name in surprise and revolt, and Hope had never been less pleased by the sudden appearance of her headmaster as he streaked forward faster than Hope would have thought possible considering his age. Dumbledore flicked his wand and the centaur made towards Voldemort while the goblin and house-elf statues, suspiciously, made their way to the Floo fireplaces. Hope cried out as the headless wizard threw her back away from the fight, tossing her unceremoniously into the fountain.

Hope gasped and choked on the water as she resurfaced, spluttering in the water as Voldemort and Dumbledore continued to speak as though nothing had happened and there wasn't a sopping wet, vengeful fifteen year old lying just to the side.

"You do not seek to kill me, Dumbledore?" Voldemort asked in amusement. "Above such brutality, are you?" His eyes flickered to Hope's whose clearly said she wasn't.

"We both know that there are other ways of destroying a man, Tom," Dumbledore said in a patient manner, as if he was explaining something complex to a first year. "Merely taking your life would not satisfy me, I admit–"

"It'll satisfy me," Hope grumbled, attempting to stand up but finding the water clung to her, heavy and weighing her down. Dumbledore, that bastard!

"There is nothing worse than death, Dumbledore!" Voldemort bit out.

"You are quite wrong," Dumbledore said in an annoyingly mild tone. "Indeed, your failure to understand that there are things much worse than death has always been your greatest weakness—"

The water grew so heavy that Hope was temporarily pulled under. As lights flashed above her; green and red. Hope's throat burned as she pushed herself through the surface again, stunned to find Voldemort standing on the plinth less than a foot from her. He had not been so close to her since the events of the previous year.

Dumbledore flung what looked to be a snake (Voldemort's attack, obviously) high into the air and away from him, it evaporating into nothing. And then Hope was forcibly ejected from the water, tumbling across the floor as the water rose up to capture Voldemort in an encasing sphere.

This did not last long, however, because in a matter of seconds, it broke and the water flooded the fountain again, the place where Voldemort had previously been standing was empty.
"MASTER!"

But then Bellatrix wasn't the only one screaming.

Hope clutched her head, her scar blazing like fire, her skull feeling as though it had been split open. This was pain beyond pain and Hope wasn't sure it was going to stop as her pain-filled screams continued to echo around them. Make it stop, make it stop…Get out, GET OUT!

Hope fell forward, breathing shallowly as the pain abruptly left her, leaving her as she had been before; bruised, bleeding, and exhausted.

"Are you alright, Hope?"

Hope wanted to break his nose at the sound of his voice. Sadly, she was too worn down for an attack on Dumbledore.

"He was there!" A new voice entered into the Atrium and Hope was suddenly aware that there were more people in there than before. "I saw him, Mr. Fudge, I swear it was You-Know-Who, he grabbed a woman and Disapparated!"

"I know, Williamson, I know, I saw him too!" Fudge's blustering voice was unsettled. Good, Hope thought angrily to herself. "Merlin's beard –here–here! –in the Ministry of Magic! –great heavens above– it doesn't seem possible– my word –how can this be–?"

Hope just wanted to collapse, but something inside her forced her to stand and she could hear Sirius' voice in her ear. "What? You clumsy? Stand up and face your adversary…the floor."

He'd said it the first time she'd tripped over the troll's leg at Grimmauld Place.

His death came to the forefront of her mind once more, her rage dissipating now that Sirius' murderer was gone from her view. Now all that was left was deep sorrow, a sadness that could not simply be pushed away.

Hope blinked in surprise as the golden head of one of the many statues from the fountain in her hands.

"Take this Portkey, Hope."

That was not a suggestion. The anger that was ebbing away, stopped, remaining and burning in her stomach.

"I shall see you in half an hour," Dumbledore said as Hope clenched her hands around the sculpted hair as the world around her became nothing until she was skidding on the floor of the Headmaster's office.

She hardly noticed the change of scenery; her eyes were too blurred with tears, her head bowed and her shoulders shaking.

Why did Sirius have to die? Her tears peppered the golden surface of the severed head. Why did strong, spirited, courageous Sirius pay the price?

Hope hated herself falling for such an obvious trap, but how could she have resisted? How could she not have tried to save her godfather?

She felt as though a brilliant star had gone out in the sky, a star that had always guided her whether
she was aware of its presence or not. Hope bit back sobbing out loud, mopping her tears on the sleeve that didn't have as much blood on it.

She hated that stupid little prophecy!

So that was what the members of the Order had been guarding this whole time? What a complete waste!

Fire burned in her heart and ice pumped in her veins. All of this could have been avoided if Dumbledore had just told her the truth!

A few silver instruments on the nearby table shattered, but Hope paid them no heed, standing achingly and at long last, moving determinedly towards the door. Her hand clenched around the handle and she turned it vigorously.

"Elpis?"

Hope closed her eyes, leaning her head against the cool, smooth wood surface of the door. She had forgotten Salazar Slytherin still had a portrait here, like all the founders (though every time she was here the others seemed to be curiously absent).

"Grandfather," she intoned in a dull croak.

"What—?"

But whatever the long-dead Slytherin had intended to ask was silenced as the fire flared and Dumbledore stepped through, though Hope kept her back to him, her hand still tight around the unyielding knob of the door.

The portraits around the room all gave him bright and exuberant welcomes while Hope's temper simmered just under the boiling point.

"Thank you," Dumbledore said in a quiet voice, moving around behind her. "Hope—" Hope's grip on the knob became almost painful. "—you will be pleased to hear that none of your fellow students are going to suffer lasting damages from the night's events."

Hope's eyes pricked with tears, recalling Hermione still and pale, Ron attacked by the brain, Luna thrown across the room, Ginny with her broken ankle, and Neville…Neville who had been tortured as he tried to protect her…

Hope released her grip on the door and moved a small step back, leaning against the threshold instead, feeling the weariness of everything weighing so heavily on her now.

"Madam Pomfrey is patching everybody up," Dumbledore continued. "Nymphadora—" Hope's breath caught slightly at the woman she was distantly related to. "—Tonks may need to spend a little time in St. Mungo's, but it seems she will make a full recovery."

Relief washed over her. At least someone else had not died because of her foolishness.

"I know how you're feeling, Hope."

"What I'm feeling?" Hope repeated his words with a note of danger. "Pain? Sadness? Anger? What would know of it?" Hope's lips curled into a sneer. "That's all my life has been, hasn't it? And I, I blame you for that." Her eyes were cold, so much like Tom's in that respect. She had grown up in a loveless environment that he himself had placed her in.
"You may rightly do so," Dumbledore said calmly, "There is no shame in what you are feeling, Hope—"

Hope laughed. It was a dark, unfeeling noise that was slightly choked in her sorrow. "You think I'm ashamed of how I feel?" She asked in a voice that could slice through stone. Her eyes were filled with hate once more as she pushed herself off the threshold to glower at the man who for the first time in months had met her eyes. "I loved—him," she was not brave enough to say his name, knowing she would break down entirely, "he was my godfather! He was the one person I trusted above everyone else—" Her eyes were filling with tears. "And now he's gone! He's gone and he's not coming back!" She gritted her teeth, forcing the tears not to fall. "And you presume to know what I feel!"

A few cracks appeared in the window. Dumbledore knew she would not want to hear what he had to say, but say it he must.

"Hope," he said her name quietly, "suffering like this proves you are still a woman. This pain is part of being human—"

"Human? Human?" The fire of rage blazed hot under her skin. "This pain doesn't make me HUMAN!" The window blew out. "ALL IT PROVES IS I LOVED HIM TOO MUCH!" Books flew out of his shelves in her anger. "I WISH I COULD RIP MY OWN HEART OUT!"

"I understand," Dumbledore said, just as calmly as before. "You have now lost your mother, your father, and the closest thing to a parent you have ever known."

Hope breathed hard. "No, you don't understand, no one does…they all died for me, they all wasted their sacrifice on someone who wasn't worth it," she bit those words out, her tears spilling over to run down her cheeks.

"They did not waste their sacrifice on you."

"But my father taught me one thing, you know?" Hope said jabbing a finger at him. "He taught me trust is earned, not expected, and you…I'll never trust you."

He opened his mouth to speak, but Hope spoke over him.

"I knew you were always a little cautious about me…I was too much like Tom," she spat his name out, "I was darker, I was cleverer, maybe if I'd been a boy it would have been different, but trusting you ever was a great mistake on my part."

A few portraits gave small outbursts at this, but a glare from Hope silenced them. "You've been the master of the chessboard this whole time," she accused, "you've been pulling my strings for years but it never really dawned on me until this year." Dumbledore looked older and wearier the longer she spoke. "You practically flat out told me in first year you'd expected me to go to that chamber to save the Stone, the Stone that was hidden inside of the mirror that my grandfather gave my grandmother before their courtship, a gift you had no right to!" Salazar nodded approving in his portrait. "And don't even get me started on everything else; we'll be here for hours!" Her glare deepened. "I've stopped being the pawn, Dumbledore, I've become something else, but some people never change, do they? And I hate people like that!"

Dumbledore's beard twitched as he grimaced, sitting heavily in the seat behind the desk, but Hope did not move, not an inch.

"Hope, I owe you an explanation." As if that was the least of his problems. "An explanation of an
old man's mistakes."

"It won't change anything," Hope said in a frigid voice, "the past is etched in stone." Her opinion of him would remain no matter what he said, that much he could tell.

"I guessed, fifteen years ago," he said, breathing out deeply, "when I saw the scar on your forehead, what it might mean. I guessed that it might be the sign of a connection forged between you and Voldemort."

He had already told Hope this and she didn't care much for the recap.

"It became apparent, shortly after you rejoined the magical world, that I was correct, and that your scar was giving you warnings when Voldemort was close to you, or else feeling powerful emotion."

This Hope knew as well.

"And this ability of yours – to detect Voldemort's presence, even when he is disguised, and to know what he is feeling when his emotions are roused – has become more and more pronounced since Voldemort returned to his own body and his full powers. More recently, I became concerned that Voldemort might realise that this connection between you exists. Sure enough, there came a time when you entered so far into his mind and thoughts that he sensed your presence. I am speaking, of course, of the night when you witnessed the attack on Mr. Weasley."

"So setting Snape on me to rip open my head twice a week was the next logical choice, was it?" Hope said with more bite than necessary.

Dumbledore sighed. "I believed it could not be long before Voldemort attempted to force his way into your mind, to manipulate and misdirect your thoughts, and I was not eager to give him more incentives to do so. I believed there to be a possibility he would seize his chance to use you as a means to spy on me. I feared the uses to which he would put you, the possibility that he might try and possess you. Hope, I believe I was right to think that Voldemort would have made use of you in such a way. On those rare occasions when we had close contact, I thought I saw a shadow of him stir behind your eyes——"

"That was probably just me wanting to throw your arse out of the window," Hope lied, crossing her arms.

"It would have been justly deserved." Hope's glare deepened. She didn't want him to agree with him, that spineless—! "In an attempt to arm you against Voldemort's assaults on your mind, I arranged Occlumency lessons with Professor Snape."

"Worst idea you've ever come up with, really."

Dumbledore cleared his throat lightly giving a conceding nod. "Professor Snape discovered that you had been dreaming about the door to the Department of Mysteries for months. Voldemort, of course, had been obsessed with the possibility of hearing the prophecy ever since he regained his body; and as he dwelled on the door, so did you, though you did not know what it meant. And then you saw Rookwood, who worked in the Department of Mysteries before his arrest, telling Voldemort what we had known all along—that the prophecies held in the Ministry of Magic are heavily protected. Only the people to whom they refer can lift them from the shelves without suffering madness: in this case, either Voldemort himself would have to enter the Ministry of Magic, and risk revealing himself at last—or else you would have to take it for him. It became a matter of even greater urgency that you should master Occlumency."
"It's a bit difficult to master something when your teacher doesn't take the time to tell you how!" Hope snarled. "If I hadn't had those dreams—he'd," her throat clogged, "and stupid Kreacher…"

"Kreacher intended you to go to the Ministry of Magic," Dumbledore said in a solemn voice.

"What?" Hope said, temporarily surprised by this new bit of information.

"After Sirius shouted at him to "get out" during the Christmas holiday, he sought refuge with the last Black he knew of, Narcissa, sister of Bellatrix and wife of Lucius Malfoy," Dumbledore explained.

"And I suppose he just told you this, did he?" Hope demanded.

"Kreacher told me last night," Dumbledore said in a sombre voice. "You see, when you gave Professor Snape that cryptic warning, he realised that you had had a vision of Sirius trapped in the bowels of the Department of Mysteries. He, like you, attempted to contact Sirius at once. Professor Snape found that Sirius was alive and safe in Grimmauld Place. When, however, you did not return from your trip into the Forest with Dolores Umbridge, Professor Snape grew worried that you still believed Sirius to be a captive of Lord Voldemort's. He alerted certain Order members at once."

Hope raised a hand to pinch the bridge of her nose, breathing in and out in short breaths.

"Alastor Moody, Nymphadora Tonks, Kingsley Shacklebolt and Remus Lupin were at Headquarters when he made contact. All agreed to go to your aid at once. Professor Snape requested that Sirius remain behind, as he needed somebody to remain at Headquarters to tell me what had happened, for I was due there at any moment. In the meantime he, Professor Snape, intended to search the Forest for you. But Sirius did not wish to remain behind while the others went to search for you. He delegated to Kreacher the task of telling me what had happened. And so it was that when I arrived in Grimmauld Place shortly after they had all left for the Ministry, it was the elf who told me –laughing fit to burst– where Sirius had gone."

Hope's fingers curled into shaking fists at the thought of someone laughing over her godfather's demise.

"Thankfully," Dumbledore said, seeming to sense another rise in Hope's temper, "Kreacher was not able to betray us totally. He is not Secret Keeper for the Order, he could not give the Malfoy's our whereabouts, or tell them any of the Order's confidential plans that he had been forbidden to reveal. He was bound by the enchantments of his kind, which is to say that he could not disobey a direct order from his master, Sirius. But he gave Narcissa information of the sort that is very valuable to Voldemort, yet must have seemed much too trivial for Sirius to think of banning him from repeating it."

Dumbledore glanced up to her face, but it was still hidden by her hand, but he could see her teeth tightly clenched. "Such as the fact that the person Sirius cared most about in the world was you, that you, in turn, were coming to regard Sirius as a mixture of father and brother. Voldemort knew already, of course, that Sirius was in the Order, and that you knew where he was –but Kreacher's information made him realise that the one person for whom you would go to any lengths to rescue was Sirius Black."

Hope's heart throbbed and swelled inside her chest at his words. "He…he stole his mirror and he lied to me, didn't he?" she asked, her voice choked.

"He did," Dumbledore agreed.

"I-I," Hope's cheeks were stained with tears again and she swallowed thickly before continuing, "I'd
been carrying that thing around for months, just waiting…I wanted to tell him how much I hated those stupid lessons, that I had to go to see Madam Pomfrey twice a week because of him."

Dumbledore grimaced again. "I forgot –another old man's mistake– that some wounds run too deep for the healing. I thought Professor Snape could overcome his feelings about your father - I was wrong."

"You were wrong?" Hope's lips formed into a sneer. "Snape's hated me the second he saw me! He's hated me even before I knew that he and my father didn't get along!" Her voice was rising again. "But what gave him the right to poke and prod at my fondest memories, huh? What gave him the right to MOCK my parents in the mirror? Or George? WHAT GAVE HIM THE RIGHT TO INSULT MY SON?!"

This last comment had Dumbledore surprised and Hope had an expression that clearly said she hadn't meant to say that.

"It was a mistake I made in my haste to protect you from Voldemort," Dumbledore said softly, "I apologize.

Hope made a derisive noise that told him she could've cared less.

"It is time for you to know everything I have resisted telling you," he said, "Five years ago you arrived at Hogwarts, Hope, safe and whole, as I had planned and intended. Well –not quite whole. You had suffered from your accident, but you were alive. I knew you would suffer some when I left you on your aunt and uncle's doorstep. I knew I was condemning you to ten dark and difficult years."

Hope's teeth clenched tightly, much like her fingers as they formed into fists once more. Her cuts stung even worse than before.

"You might ask –and with good reason– why it had to be so," Dumbledore said. "Why could some Wizarding family not have taken you in? Many would have done so more than gladly, would have been honoured and delighted to raise you as a daughter. My answer is that my priority was to keep you alive. You were in more danger than perhaps anyone but I realised. Voldemort had been vanquished hours before, but his supporters –and many of them are almost as terrible as he– were still at large, angry, desperate and violent. And I had to make my decision, too, with regard to the years ahead. Did I believe that Voldemort was gone forever? No. I knew not whether it would be ten, twenty or fifty years before he returned, but I was sure he would do so, and I was sure, too, knowing him as I have done, that he would not rest until he killed you.

"I knew that Voldemort's knowledge of magic is perhaps more extensive than any wizard alive. I knew that even my most complex and powerful protective spells and charms were unlikely to be invincible if he ever returned to full power. But I knew, too, where Voldemort was weak. And so I made my decision. You would be protected by an ancient magic of which he knows, which he despises, and which he has always, therefore, underestimated –to his cost. I am speaking, of course, of the fact that your mother died to save you. She gave you a lingering protection he never expected, a protection that flows in your veins to this day. I put my trust, therefore, in your mother's blood. I delivered you to her sister, her only remaining relative. And she took you in."

"Something she's been regretting for years, believe me," Hope said coolly.

"But still each year she allows you to return to her home, sealing the charm I placed upon you. Your mother's sacrifice made the bond of blood the strongest shield I could give you."
"Blood wards," Hope noted in disdain, to which Dumbledore nodded.

"While you can still call home the place where your mother's blood dwells, there you cannot be touched or harmed by Voldemort. He shed her blood, but it lives on in you and her sister. Her blood became your refuge. You need return there only once a year, but as long as you can still call it home, whilst you are there he cannot hurt you. Your aunt knows this. I explained what I had done in the letter I left, with you, on her doorstep. She knows that allowing you houseroom may well have kept you alive for the past fifteen years."

Hope's lips formed into a tight line. "And the prophecy? What was so important about it?"

"It is the reason," Dumbledore said with yet another sigh, "that Voldemort tried kill you when you were a child." Hope's eyes snapped up to meet his, thunderstruck. "He knew the prophecy had been made, though he did not know its full contents. He set out to kill you when you were still a baby, believing he was fulfilling the terms of the prophecy. He discovered, to his cost, that he was mistaken, when the curse intended to kill you backfired. And so, since his return to his body, and particularly since your extraordinary escape from him last year, he has been determined to hear that prophecy in its entirety. This is the weapon he has been seeking so assiduously since his return: the knowledge of how to destroy you."

"I broke it," Hope said in a hollow sort of voice, "and Hermione made me a duplicate in case one of the Death Eaters got it."

"A wise choice, I assure you," Dumbledore said with a nod, "however, the thing that smashed was merely the record of the prophecy kept by the Department of Mysteries. But the prophecy was made to somebody, and that person has the means of recalling it perfectly."

He did not explain as he stood, pulling a few silvery threads—thoughts— from his head to deposit into the Pensieve Hope and George had fallen into the previous year. Hope could hear the words as clear as day even from where she stood close to the door. "The one with the power to vanquish the Dark Lord approaches...born to those who have thrice defied him, born as the seventh month dies...and the Dark Lord will mark her as his equal, but she will have power the Dark Lord knows not...and either must die at the hand of the other for neither can live while the other survives...the one with the power to vanquish the Dark Lord will be born as the seventh month dies..."

So much lost for just those words...and all Hope wanted to do was find a secluded and dark corner away from the world and away from the living.
I heard Madam Pomfrey thinks she doesn't want to wake up," Luna commented mildly from where she sat on Ron's hospital wing bed.

"Who'd want to face reality after…?" Ron muttered in agreement.

It was only the day after their little field trip to the Department of Mysteries, and Hope had completely slept through it. Luna, Ginny, Neville, were healed rather quickly in comparison to Ron and Hermione. Ron would be out within the next day, but the spell cast on Hermione had done some internal damage that she was very lucky to be alive.

"She loved Sirius," Hermione murmured, her eyes as red as Ron's from crying. They may not have been as close to the man as Hope was, but he was a bit like that distant uncle that would always listen to whatever you said. "I remember I would walk by her room sometimes and hear them talking."

Ron nodded morosely. "She said that she'd find him if she ever had nightmares and he'd stay up with her all night just talking."

Neville's eyes darkened. "I wish one of those Killing Curses the Death Eaters were throwing around hit her," he said in an aggressive voice that made Luna squeeze his hands.

"Would that have really made you happy?" a worn voice asked.

"Hope!" Ginny said her name in hushed relief. "You're awake! How d'you feel?"

Hope didn't answer that question, though she looked worse than Ginny had ever seen her. Her eyes were grey pools and her hair was as dark as midnight. She vaguely realized that if Sirius had had a daughter, that was probably what she would look like.

Hope swung her legs over the side of the bed with a deep sigh, wiping at her eyes as tears had formed in her sleep. "I tried," she mumbled, "I tried so hard to kill her."

"Hope," Neville said quickly, "I didn't—"

"It's a pity neither of my Avada Kedavras hit their mark."

This pronouncement stunned her friends as she stared sorrowfully at the floor, almost wishing it would swallow her up. Hermione frowned, sharing a glance with Ron. She couldn't honestly say she was surprised. Hope had always been the grey area, and, according to Neville, she had severed Antonin Dolohov's hand easily without so much as a blink (it was miraculous the Death Eater hadn't bled out before he was found, healed, and incarcerated). She could see Hope being angry enough at Bellatrix to cast the curse.

"Yes," Luna murmured, "it is a pity, isn't it?"

Hope's eyes lifted to meet Luna's dreamy ones and the girl smiled serenely at her.

"Bellatrix Lestrange has killed and damaged many people, hasn't she?" Luna asked quietly. "I don't find any fault in what you did."

"Dumbledore wouldn't agree," Hope said in an almost dry manner, sounding a bit more like herself.
"Forget Dumbledore," Ginny said, waving her hand as she did so, "I would've probably done the same thing if she'd killed Dad."

"Ginny!"

"What? You know it's true!" Ginny insisted, scowling at her brother. "Don't say you wouldn't."

"That would be pretty pointless," Ron grumbled, turning towards Hope, "we don't blame you or anything, Hope, and Ginny's right…for once."

"Hey!"

"I thought the hospital wing was a designated quiet place?" a mild voice commented from the door and six pairs of eyes flashed to where George was standing holding a large bag of candy from Honeydukes.

"Hey." George grunted as Ginny flung herself onto him, hugging him so tightly he feared for his lungs. "Careful, Gin, I might die yet." She laughed as he handed the candy over to his surprised brother. He ruffled his hair and leaned down.

"You're both stubborn idiots," he muttered to his siblings, "but I'm glad."

Ginny laughed again, but this time she was joined by Ron as they began to divvy up the sweets as their older brother meandered to sit beside his girlfriend. She didn't look up even as he took her limp hand in his. He did not speak and he did not ask her to talk. It was a testament to just how deep their relationship was that they could simply sit in silence and yet convey a thousand words.

Hope rubbed at her eyes with her free hand, hiding the tears from everyone else.

She squeezed his hand back.

"Hope?"

Hope was surprised by Madam Pomfrey's voice, she shouldn't have been, but everything seemed a little hazy so that could have been the cause.

"Madam Bones is here to speak with you," she said gently as if speaking at a normal volume would set off the fifth year, "if you're up to it."

Hope gave a jerky nod and Madam Pomfrey was replaced by Madam Bones who sat opposite Hope who straightened her back almost involuntarily.

"Lady Potter," she said respectfully.

"Madam Bones," Hope said stiffly. "How can I help you?"

Madam Bones' lips formed a tight line. "I understand this is intrusive," she said apologetically, "but as soon as I straighten this out, you'll be left relatively alone."

"Relatively?" George repeated the word. "What d'you mean by that?"

Madam Bones' eyes flickered to him momentarily. "The press has gotten wind of what happened at the Ministry, I'm sure you'll be receiving a newspaper within the next few days with an article of the day in question. The press likes…to hound people, I'm sure you've gathered."

George's face turned stony and his grip on Hope's hand nearly became painful.
"I'm used to it," Hope said, "I imagine you're here about the Unforgivables I cast?"

"Yes…" Madam Bones' lips turned down slightly. "Considering the events surrounding the usage has been taken into account, but I must ask you who you cast them at and if any of them connected." That would only make this more difficult.

"I was aiming at Bellatrix Lestrange," Hope said coldly. "They both missed."

"I see," Madam Bones said with a note of gratitude. "Thank you for your time…and for what it's worth—" Hope looked up. "—Sirius Black was a great man."

Tears welled in her silver eyes and she buried her face in her hands, hiding the sobs.

The next morning the Sunday Prophet bore the heading: HE WHO MUST NOT BE NAMED RETURNS.

Hope, Ron, Hermione, Ginny, Luna, and Neville had pushed four hospital wing beds together and were all clustered on them, as Hermione still wasn't allowed to leave and Hope was still under observation by Madam Pomfrey. Hope was slowly getting back to normal, but Sirius' death had taken a toll on her. She had only smiled a few times in the last two days.

Hope, Ron, and Ginny were eating most of the chocolate, but Neville had had a few, listening as Hermione read out the words on the newspaper.

In a brief statement on Friday night, Minister for Magic Cornelius Fudge confirmed that He Who Must Not Be Named has returned to this country and is once more active.

"It is with great regret that I must confirm that the wizard styling himself Lord - well, you know who I mean - is alive and among us again," said Fudge, looking tired and flustered as he addressed reporters. "It is with almost equal regret that we report the mass revolt of the Dementors of Azkaban, who have shown themselves averse to continuing in the Ministry's employ. We believe the Dementors are currently taking direction from Lord - Thingy.

"We urge the magician population to remain vigilant. The Ministry is currently publishing guides to elementary home and personal defence which will be delivered free to all Wizarding homes within the coming month."

The Minister's statement was met with dismay and alarm from the Wizarding community, which as recently as last Wednesday was receiving Ministry assurances that there was "no truth whatsoever in these persistent rumours that You-Know-Who is operating amongst us once more."

Details of the events that led to the Ministry turnaround are still hazy, though it is believed that He Who Must Not Be Named and a select band of followers (known as Death Eaters) gained entry to the Ministry of Magic itself on Thursday evening.

Albus Dumbledore, newly reinstated Headmaster of Hogwarts School of Witchcraft and Wizardry, reinstated member of the International Confederation of Wizards and reinstated Chief Warlock of the Wizengamot, has so far been unavailable for comment. He has insisted over the past year that You-Know-Who is not dead, as was widely hoped and believed, but is recruiting followers once more for afresh attempt to seize power. Meanwhile, the "Girl Who Lived" –

"See, now they mention you," Ginny said, rolling her eyes at Hope who was half paying attention and half writing a very detailed letter to Fleur, whom she had greatly neglected due to her inability to owl. George had assured her that he'd told Fleur why she couldn't respond, but he'd hinted that she'd
like a nice long letter from her anyways. So Hope was chronicling everything important and unimportant that she could possibly remember about the past few months since she’d last owled her.

"They would," Hope said, twisting her snake ring on her finger (she had long since replaced the signet ring; resolving to only wear that one when at the Ministry), digging through the bag of treats from the Weasley twins in search of something else to eat…a Peppermint Toad, that would work…

"Back to the "Girl Who Lived," is she?" Ron asked, frowning at the paper. "Not still a demented little troublemaker?"

"I'm always a demented little troublemaker, where have you been these past few years?"

They laughed, half-relieved that she had made a joke.

"They're being very nice about you, Hope," Hermione added, skimming through the words. "'A lone voice of truth…perceived as unbalanced, yet never wavered in her story…forced to bear ridicule and slander…'

"Nice of them considering they were the ones slandering her," Neville added to a few murmurs of agreement.

"You-Know-Who's Last Attempt to Take Over, pages two to four," Hermione continued to read out loud. "What the Ministry Should Have Told Us, page five, Why Nobody Listened to Albus Dumbledore, pages six to eight, Exclusive Interview with Hope Potter, page nine…I don't see how it's exclusive, it's been circulating for over two months."

"Daddy sold it to them," Luna said in a bright voice, leaning a bit against Neville, unaware of how red that made his face. "He got a very good price for it, too, so we're going to go on an expedition to Sweden this summer to see if we can catch a Crumple-Horned Snorkack."

Hope spared her a smile. "I hope you find some."

"I hope so, too," Luna said with a dreamy smile.

"Tell us how it goes," Hermione said, shaking her head slightly at the madness of Luna Lovegood. "What's been going on in school?"

Hope and Hermione had pretty much been isolated and bored to tears, really. They'd played far too many card games with Hope's old deck that Parvati had dropped off for them.

"Remember how Flitwick said he couldn't remove Fred and George's swamp?" Ginny asked her eyes sparkling.

"Let me guess, a lie?" Hermione asked in a sardonic voice.

"Of course!" Ginny giggled. "He vanished it in about three seconds, but he left a tiny patch under the window and he's roped it off; he said it was a really good bit of magic."

Hope smiled.

It wasn't long after that Hope managed to con Luna into going for a walk with her around the castle. Hermione was irritated, mostly because she couldn't get up and wander about.

"Do you feel different now?" Luna asked in her vague voice, looping her arm around one of Hope's.

"What d'you mean?" Hope asked.
"Coming back here," Luna clarified, "back where everyone else complains about material things like grades and clothes, when you've just come back from a battle?"

"Is it for you?" Hope asked instead.

"Yes," Luna said simply. "And I'm very sorry about Sirius Black, losing someone is always painful."

The way she said those words made Hope realize that Luna really got it, Luna really understood. People said they were sorry for her loss, but Luna had the empathy to make it completely sincere.

"It is," Hope said, blinking fiercely. "Sirius—" Her throat clogged a little. "Sirius wouldn't have wanted me to be miserable forever, though."

Luna nodded in agreement. "You'll see him again one day and he'll live on in other ways."

"I have no doubt," Hope said thinking of pranks and trouble, her lips twitching.

"Sirius is a nice name, isn't it?" Luna mused.

This thought startled her briefly and then her smile widened. "Yes, I suppose it is."

"Ah, Potter, Lovegood."

"Professor McGonagall!" Hope blurted in surprise as their newly released professor.

An amused smile twisted the older woman's lips briefly. "Yes, hello."

"You missed out on a lot of excitement, Professor," Luna said dreamily.

"I've heard," Professor McGonagall said, her eyes flashing to Hope's before resting on the House Hourglasses that rested behind them. "Well, I think you and your friends ought to have fifty points apiece for alerting the world to the return of You-Know-Who…So that's fifty each for Potter, the two Weasleys, Longbottom and Miss Granger for Gryffindor…" Hope watched more rubies fall into the hourglass for Gryffindor. "And fifty for Lovegood for Ravenclaw."

Luna positively beamed, but Professor McGonagall was looking at Hope again and Hope read the expression to be "If you ever need to talk, my door is open," but Hope wasn't open to talking much. This was the most she'd said about Sirius since her explosion in Dumbledore's office.

What Hope really needed was some time.

The train was nearly in the station when Mrs. Weasley confronted her son, which probably wasn't the time and place for it, but it was the only chance she had.

"I know what you and Hope are up to," she said in a low voice so as not to be overheard, "and I can't say I approve."

George's cheeks pinked a little before an annoyed frown marred his lips. "Mum—"

"However," she continued, speaking over him, "it's none of my business…as long as you keep things…chaste."

His cheeks now resembled tomatoes. "I-er-we weren't—" He cleared his throat awkwardly, the colour of his cheeks fading to be replaced with a solemn expression. "I don't think Hope would be thinking about that right now, and I'm not either."
Mrs. Weasley’s eyes softened. All her children seemed so grown up now…and Hope too, but Hope had always seemed a bit older. She thought back to what Professor Dumbledore had said, how the girl had cut off Antonin Dolohov’s hand, and she allowed herself a bit of vindictive pleasure at that…and then she was momentarily distracted by her two youngest appearing through the barrier.

"Don't tell me you're here to make sure I didn't jump train?" Hope asked in a dry voice, her arms crossed as Mrs. Weasley fussed over her children, Ron gaping at Fred and George's new dragonskin jackets. "The Dursleys don't pick me up, Mad-Eye."

"Just the same," the scarred ex-Auror grumbled, "You get into enough trouble as it is."

Hope canted an eyebrow, seeming much more like herself. "I'm sure." She turned to greet the other members of her entourage which were Tonks and Remus. Hope's hug for Remus lasted longer than Tonks'.

"When was the last time you slept?" she asked him quietly, but he waved off her concern with a tired smile, and an "I'll be fine."

"FRED!"

A blur of brown and black flew past them to connect with one half of the Weasley twins. Hope marvelled at Fred's ability to keep standing while being so furiously kissed.

"Dear Merlin, do you need to breathe?" Hope yelled at them in laughter, hugging Luna in farewell as she drifted by. Remus noticed a lot of people offered her a jaunty goodbye; perhaps they were members of the defensive magic group she had headed.

Angelina and Fred ignored her as she finally turned her attention to George.

He pouted. "I was starting to think you'd gotten over me already," he said in a faux-depressed manner.

Hope curled her fingers into his hair with a murmured, "Never," before kissing him.

"Are you sure we can't threaten your aunt and uncle?" Tonks wheedled as the large group began to move towards the entrance.

Hope laughed. "I'd be flattered, but don't worry, Tonks, I can handle myself."

Tonks gave an exaggerated sigh, but she cast Hope a wink. "Well, you owl for anything, alright? And I mean anything, well, not help with your homework, I was horrendous!"

"I'll keep it in mind," Hope agreed as most of them left to Apparate discreetly away and Mrs. Weasley cast George a warning look as they parted and Hope pulled her motorbike out of her pocket, handing the spare helmet to her boyfriend as she fixed hers on her head.

"Tell me why we're going back to the Dursleys house again?" George said, sliding into the only seat other than the driver's which rested just behind.

"Tying up loose ends!" Hope yelled over the roar of the engine as they pulled out and George immediately latched onto Hope's waist, a little disconcerted by his position.

He learned that the drive was a lot longer than he thought, that and Hope had a habit of swearing at people who cut her off, and flipping the bird at them. Another thing he also learned was that the Dursleys furniture was very uncomfortable. He listened patiently as Hope spoke, his eyes flitting
over to where her large cousin was sitting, eyeing him just as nervously; he fought a grin.

"We both know you want me in this house less than I want out of here," Hope said, fighting to keep the sarcasm from entering her voice as it always did when speaking to them. "There's no guarantee that I won't come back, but you and I both know those blood wards are much frailer than many think, Petunia."

Her aunt flinched and Hope held out four red-coloured stones that had strange symbols carved into them. "Bury these in the four corners—"

"Don't do it, Petunia!" Vernon said quickly.

"Do you want protection or not?" Hope snapped, glaring at him, making him recoil. "The man who killed my parents is back and he'll probably try to get at me by coming here, but he'll stop before getting too close if he sees you have these protections, alright?"

She sighed. "You'll probably see me at one point or another, maybe soon, maybe not. But it'll do us both good if you pretend I still live here and I pretend I still live here."

Petunia, whom Hope had never liked, swallowed thickly and gave one nod of agreement before watching Lily's daughter leave her home, ready to start the next chapter of her life.
Dumbledore's Return

Albus Dumbledore was a fool. He should have known better, he should have realized that Tom would have charmed the ring against those that sought to destroy it. Dumbledore had destroyed the ring, yes, but the price he had paid was high.

It was a foolish man's dream; the Resurrection Stone! The ability to recall loved ones from the dead!

Upon closer inspection, the realization now dawned. How many times had he seen young Hope Potter wear a ring that was nearly identical? She had never been without since she had stepped foot in Hogwarts at the age of eleven.

And James and Lily were no slouches. They may have discovered Tom's secret to immortality and attempted to remove the Horcrux and failed, learning that while the bit of soul that was attached to an object could moved to an object of nearly identical properties, this would not destroy it.

So that left Hope with two of the Deathly Hallows. She had no idea how close she was to being the fabled Master of Death! Dumbledore pushed these thoughts aside swiftly. It was an old man's dream, and Hope was rather unaware of just what those gifts from her ancestors were.

It mattered little, he knew, either way, because Hope no longer trusted him, and perhaps she was right not to. He had robbed her of all that she deserved; a loving family, a proper childhood, the complicated man she had loved that had been her godfather…but there were still things she needed to know, still things he needed to teach her…

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*Her feet were propped up against the wall, her back to the mattress with her head hanging off the end. The man next to her was in rather the same position.*

*Hope giggled. "You realize we look incredibly ridiculous?"*

*Sirius sniggered without a care in the world. "Psh, who's going to care? It's my house!"

*"You are a terrible host!"

*"Do I want to know what you two are up to?" Remus asked in a mild voice, opening the door slightly to arch an eyebrow at the pair and their strange positions.*

*"Godfather-Goddaughter Confidentiality!" Sirius and Hope said as one, having practiced the phrase moments earlier before laughing at their ridiculousness.*

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*Hope poked at the piece of food, eyeing it in a dubious manner. "Are you sure this is edible?"

*Sirius scoffed. "Of course it's edible!"

*Hope gave him a look. "I don't think that even Ron would eat this, Sirius, and I've seen Ron eat a lot of strange things."*
"Oi!" her friend said sounding slightly insulted. "I do not—"

"Let's not get into this," Hermione sighed, taking note of how Ron's ears reddened as his older brothers laughed, "it's a losing battle, really."

"Hermione!" Ron said stunned. "You're supposed to be on my side!"

Sirius winked at Hope and she hid her smirk.

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Hope traced a finger over one of the spines of the old books in the library.

"I would've figured you wouldn't want me to read any of this," she commented lightly to Sirius where he was leaning against the doorway, eyeing the books in an apprehensive manner.

"Godfathers don't exist to tell you what to do or what not to do," Sirius reminded her with a small smirk, "besides, one day this will all be yours."

Hope's breath caught. "Really?"

"Really," he promised, "besides, there is a wealth of knowledge here, stuff you may need to know for the future, stuff you may need to protect against."

"Sirius…" Emotion clogged her throat. "Thank you."

"For what, kiddo?"

Hope's twisted into a smile. "For being you."

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She was crying again, why couldn't she stop? Every night she tried to go to sleep and every night she was awakened by those good memories that always ended with him falling through the veil.

George was beside her, rubbing soothing circles into her back as she wept. Why was this so hard? Why couldn't she just come to terms with his death?

It was almost too much to bear.

It seemed like it was a very long time before her sobs and hiccups faded into nothingness as she leaned against George.

Her boyfriend was a godsend, really, and Hope was beginning to think that leaving the Dursleys was the best thing she could have done, because she knew they wouldn't have appreciated being awoken at odd hours of the night.

"You're going to fall asleep at work tomorrow," Hope mumbled as she melded her body to his side.
"No, I'm not," George said in an exhausted manner that made Hope feel awkward seeing as she was the reason he was still up.

"But—"

He kissed her hard before pulling away and muttering, "Go to sleep, Hope, before I have a reason to stay awake." His fingers were only barely under her sleep-shirt, ghosting over her hip as he traced circles into her side.

"A…reason?" Hope asked with a little bit of difficulty.

Fred had been complaining that the two of them were complete saps and always seeming to act like a young, recently married couple, but he couldn't really say anything considering Angelina had him wrapped around her finger.

"Mm-hm," he mumbled into her shoulder as he turned on his side, pulling her back into his chest, kissing the curve of her neck before whispering in her ear, "Now, go to sleep before I start getting inventive."

Hope smiled, even if he couldn't see it.

"George?"

"Hm?" The noise was mostly uttered into her skin and she could tell he was almost completely asleep again.

"I love you."

"Mm," was all he said, making a noise of agreement before his voice faded into nothingness, sleep claiming him.

It wasn't much longer after this that Hope joined him as well; content in the arms of the man she loved, entering into the dreams that gave her no peace.

"If you keep getting distracted, you're not going to be able to open the shop on time," Hope murmured against his lips the next day. George was just barely out of the door, prolonging his goodbye to his girlfriend.

"No I won't," he breathed, kissing her again. Hope's lips curled into a smile before she pushed him out, laughing at the expression on his face.

"Get going, you idiot!"

George grumbled something under his breath as Hope blew him a kiss, shutting the door swiftly behind him. She yawned widely, stretching until she heard a few cracks before making for the shower and a fresh set of clothes, reappearing minutes later, her damp hair soaking spots into her shirt as Hedwig hooted a greeting, having just gotten back from catching her on breakfast (she seemed very pleased by the frog in her beak).

"Hey, Hedwig…"

Hope inspected the small pile of mail. George had opened his, but there was one letter untouched, on addressed to: Miss Hope Potter, by a man named Lyall Lupin. Hope frowned. Was he a relation of Remus'?
The address was of retirement home not too far away…hm…a Muggle retirement home.

Hope broke the seal, removing the letter from within.

*You do not know who I am, that much must be said,* it began. *I do not believe my son would have mentioned me, for we have been estranged for years since the death of his mother. My name is Lyall Lupin, and if it would interest you, I would very much like to meet in person, as my death is fast approaching...*

It was raining rather terribly when Hope entered into the lobby of the retirement home listed on the return address. The nurse at the front eyed her in an apprehensive manner. Angelina had told her on the way out that she had that "Do not approach" look in her eye; it must have been a bit obvious.

"Er, hello, I'm looking for a man named Lyall Lupin," Hope said, consulting the envelope and sounding the name out strangely.

The woman arched an eyebrow, typing the name into her computer. "Room 17B on your left...please be quick about it." The man in question was quite frail and on his death bed.

"Thank you," Hope said gratefully as she followed the direction the woman had indicated, knocking softly on the door before peering her head inside. The man on the bed bore a resemblance to Remus she could see clearly, despite the heavy wrinkles and the thick sheet of grey that was his hair.

"Miss Potter," he rasped her name, coughing a little as she shut the door behind her.

"It's just Hope," she said quickly and an odd light entered his eyes. Remus had told her that Hope had been his mother's name too. "Mr. Lupin," she said softly, "are you sure you don't want me to get your son, I'm sure he would..." Hope's voice faded and she bit her lip slightly.

Lyall Lupin smiled kindly. "My time's nearly up...Remus would not want to see me after all the pain I've caused."

Hope's mouth thinned into a line. "I've heard." Lyall was the reason his son was a werewolf, after all, one should not antagonize werewolves, especially ones as out of control as Fenrir Greyback.

Lyall focused on her for a long moment. She was taller and older than the last time he'd seen her, and much more sad. The bright smile he'd seen before was gone and her eyes were dark and turbulent.

She had just lost someone she loved. He did not want to pry into who it was.

Hope took his hand, to his surprise. "Remus and I first met on the train in my third year, when he came to Hogwarts as our new Defence Against the Dark Arts professor...at this time, Si-a convict was supposedly at large and dementors had come onto the train to search for him..."

Lyall listened with a smile as she spoke of his son, wishing vainly that he had been able to reconcile with him, but some things just weren't meant to be. But he would know soon enough of his passing.

Hope wasn't sure exactly how long she spoke until Lyall loose grip on her hand failed and the monitor resting beside him became one solid beep.

This wasn't Hope's idea of fun, she would have you know. Only the threat of Dumbledore had her returning to Number Four Privet Drive and informing them that the headmaster would be swinging round at eleven o'clock. Rather late, if you asked Hope.
"Go to sleep, George," she said into the mirror that had been connected to one her boyfriend now owned (it was, apparently, less girly than her compact).

"I'm missing my flatmate, in case you hadn't noticed," he told her, giving her a rather direct look. "Besides, I'm going to have to come and pick you up from the Burrow at some point."

Hope, being very mature, stuck her tongue out. "You're going to be missing your flatmate for months on end, love, better get used to it."

"But I don't want to get used to it!" he whined.

She spared him a bemused expression before starting at the sound of the doorbell. "Looks like the old coot's here; I'll call you when he drops me off, yeah?"

"Yeah, yeah…" George winked and she blew him a kiss before shutting it and tucking the mirror into her pocket with her motorbike, shrugging on the leather jacket she'd taken to wearing since the summer of the previous year.

"It is a long time since my last visit," she could hear Dumbledore's voice as she descended the stairs. "I must say, your agapanthus are flourishing."

Vernon seemed quite beyond speech as Dumbledore allowed himself into his home.

The elderly man smiled at Hope as though she hadn't ripped him a new one the last time they had seen each other, and he hadn't dropped the impending weight of that prophecy on her shoulders. Hope's eyebrow twitched in irritation.

"Ah, good evening Hope." Was it her imagination, or had his eyes flickered towards the ring she wore with the black stone? "Excellent, excellent."

There were the typical greetings, well, as typical as one could be if approached by the embodiment of all things they feared (Hope aside).

Hope leaned against the wall, not bothering to seem as though she belonged in the sitting room. Dumbledore was out of place enough, but Hope had lived in the house for practically a decade and a half, yet there were no signs of her.

"I thought we were leaving," Hope said in a vague voice that wouldn't have sounded out of place on Luna.

"Yes, indeed we are," Dumbledore agreed, perhaps a little relieved that she hadn't bitten his head off yet (again), "but there are a few matters we need to discuss first. And I would prefer not to do so in the open. We shall trespass upon your aunt and uncle's hospitality only a little longer."

This didn't amuse her relatives much as they were all forced magically into the couch and Hope caught a glimpse of Dumbledore's wand arm. Her eyes widened a fraction at the sight of the blackened flesh, as though the hand had died.

"I would assume that you were going to offer me refreshment," Dumbledore said in a congenial voice, "but the evidence so far suggests that that would be optimistic to the point of foolishness."

Hope blinked in surprise as a glass filled with what looked like mead appeared in front of her. She took it in her hand, eyeing it suspiciously.

"I can assure you, Hope," he said mildly, "if I harboured any ill will towards you, I would not be so
"I don't drink," Hope said dryly, sparing a look towards Petunia, Vernon, and Dudley all of whom had their glasses nudging against their skulls.

"A wise choice," Dumbledore agreed, vanishing hers with ease. "Well, Hope, a difficulty has arisen which I hope you will be able to solve for us. By us, I mean the Order of the Phoenix. But first of all I must tell you that Sirius' will was discovered a week ago and that he left you everything he owned."

"I'm aware." Hope had been present at the Will Reading. She was the only one present. Dumbledore had to have either discovered it himself or heard its contents at a later time (though this was rare). Dumbledore cleared his throat. "Well, there is the slightly problematic part of the legacy —"

"Her godfather's dead? He's dead?" Vernon demanded. "Her godfather?"

Hope's hands tightened into fists and Petunia glanced nervously at her sister's daughter who could possibly be capable of blowing out the whole house.

"Yes. Our problem," he said, speaking to Hope once more, "is that Sirius also left you Number Twelve, Grimmauld Place."

"What about it?" Hope said colder than usual.

"Black family tradition decreed that the house was handed down the direct line, to the next male with the name of 'Black'," Dumbledore explained. "Sirius was the very last of the line as his younger brother, Regulus, predeceased him and both were childless. While his will makes it perfectly plain that he wants you to have the house, it is nevertheless possible that some spell or enchantment has been set upon the place to ensure that it cannot be owned by anyone other than a pureblood."

Hope didn't doubt this.

"And if such an enchantment exists, then the ownership of the house is most likely to pass to the eldest of Sirius' living relatives, which would mean his cousin, Bellatrix Lestrange."

Hope's lips twisted, giving her face a rather ugly expression. Bellatrix, the woman who had murdered her godfather? The woman who had destroyed the mind of her godmother and her husband?

"My thoughts exactly," Dumbledore said, taking note of the look on her face. "The situation is fraught with complications. We do not know whether the enchantments we ourselves have placed upon it, for example, making it Unplottable, will hold now that ownership has passed from Sirius' hands. It might be that Bellatrix will arrive on the doorstep at any moment. Naturally we had to move out until such time as we have clarified the position."

"He signed it over to me," Hope said shortly, "I don't understand."

"Ah," Dumbledore gave a small chuckle, vanishing the other glasses at Vernon's voiced irritation, "but, you see, if you have indeed inherited the house, you have also inherited —"

He made a twist with his wand and Hope forced herself not to jump at the sound of apparition as a house-elf appeared looking dingy as ever.

Hope's face curled with disgust once again at the sight of Kreacher. It had been because of Kreacher
that she had fallen into Voldemort's trap to begin with, Kreacher who had lied to her about Sirius.

"What the hell is that?" Vernon yelled as his family recoiled from the repulsive-looking house-elf.

"That is Kreacher," Dumbledore said, as though it explained everything.

"Kreacher won't, Kreacher won't, Kreacher won't!" Kreacher wailed like a child that wasn't being paid attention to. "Kreacher belongs to Miss Bellatrix, oh yes, Kreacher belongs to the Blacks, Kreacher wants his new mistress, Kreacher won't go to the Potter brat, Kreacher won't, won't, won't —"

"SHUT UP!" One of Petunia's fine vases shattered, though Dumbledore easily repaired it with a flick of his wand, his eyes on Hope as she glared at the house-elf with her own red eyes.

Kreacher gagged as though his words had been abruptly silenced. Realization dawned on him that Hope had power over him.

"Well, that simplifies matters. It seems that Sirius knew what he was doing." Hope still scowled at Kreacher. "You are the rightful owner of number twelve, Grimmauld Place and of Kreacher."

"I don't want him near me," Hope said quickly.

"If I might make a suggestion," Dumbledore offered as Hope's eyes returned to the bright green they had been before, "you could send him to Hogwarts to work in the kitchen there. In that way, the other house-elves could keep an eye on him."

"Did you hear what Dumbledore said?" Hope asked Kreacher loudly and with evident disdain. Kreacher didn't respond. "Hey!" she snapped, stopping just short of kicking the house-elf. "I asked you a question. Did you hear what Dumbledore just said?"

Kreacher nodded mutely.

"Then go."

Kreacher stood giving her one last look of extreme hate which didn't surpass Hope's own before vanishing with a crack as loud as the one he had used to arrive.

"Very good," Dumbledore said, apparently very pleased with how she'd taken it, possibly expecting her to attack Kreacher in anger. "And then there is also the matter of the hippogriff, Buckbeak. Hagrid has been looking after him since Sirius died, but Buckbeak is yours now, so if you would prefer to make different arrangements —"

"No, leave him alone," Hope said with a drained sigh, "Buckbeak will like Hagrid better than anything I could give him."

Dumbledore smiled kindly at her, but Hope ignored it. "Hagrid will be delighted. He was thrilled to see Buckbeak again. Incidentally, we have decided, in the interests of Buckbeak's safety, to rechristen him 'Witherwings' for the time being, though I doubt that the Ministry would ever guess he is the hippogriff they once sentenced to death. Now, Hope, is your trunk packed?"

"I sent it on ahead along with Hedwig," Hope said, not bothering to tell him that all of her things had been at George's flat (Our flat, she mentally reminded herself) since the start of summer holiday.

"A good choice," Dumbledore said approvingly. "Just one last thing, then."
Hope tilted her head slightly in confusion, leaning off of the wall a little as Dumbledore turned his attention towards the Dursleys who were being surprisingly quiet. "As you will no doubt be aware, Hope comes of age in a year's time—"

"No."

"I'm sorry?" Dumbledore said, turning his eyes upon Petunia.

"No, she doesn't," her aunt said, steeling herself in the face of what she viewed to be "her sister's crowd". "She's a month younger than Dudley, and Dudders doesn't turn eighteen until the year after next."

"Ah, but in the Wizarding world, we come of age at seventeen," Dumbledore said brightly. "Now, as you already know, the wizard called Lord Voldemort has returned to this country. The Wizarding community is currently in a state of open warfare. Hope, whom Lord Voldemort has already attempted to kill on a number of occasions, is in even greater danger now than the day when I left her upon your doorstep fifteen years ago, with a letter explaining about her parents' murder and expressing the hope that you would care for her as though she were your own."

He allowed this to sink in to the three before him and Hope could see how Voldemort could fear a man like Dumbledore.

"You did not do as I asked. You have never treated Hope as a daughter. She has known nothing but neglect and often cruelty at your hands. The best that can be said is that she has at least escaped the appalling damage you have inflicted upon the unfortunate boy sitting between you."

Hope didn't speak, even as Vernon tried to defend him and his wife at how they could have possibly mistreated their own son, but silence fell quickly as Dumbledore spoke again.

"The magic I evoked fifteen years ago means that Hope has powerful protection while she can still call this house 'home'," Dumbledore said quietly, missing the glance Petunia threw to Hope, receiving a glance in return that warned silence. "However miserable she has been here, however unwelcome, however badly treated, you have at least, grudgingly, allowed her houseroom. This magic will cease to operate the moment that Hope turns seventeen; in other words, at the moment she becomes a woman. I ask only this: that you allow Hope to return, once more, to this house, before her seventeenth birthday, which will ensure that the protection continues until that time."

Hope frowned. Here he was making her decisions for her again, as he always did. Her teeth gritted behind her lips. Did he not learn? Did he not remember how much she hated people who did everything for her? She was a do-it-yourself kind of person, and that was never going to change.

"Well, Hope," Dumbledore said after the three remained silent, all with a bit of fear on their faces, "time for us to be off…Until we meet again," he added towards the Dursleys who didn't look like they ever wanted to meet Dumbledore ever again.

Hope pulled the zipper of her jacket up about half-way, not really caring much that the wind might be a little cool. The mirror in her pocket warmed, a sign that George was calling her to see if she was at the Burrow yet. She resisted a fond smile at his worrisome and overprotective nature.

"And now, Hope, let us step out into the night and pursue that flighty temptress, adventure," Dumbledore said, holding the door open for Hope as she passed, still not saying a word.

She sighed, looking towards the heavens to the stars, to where Sirius shimmered brightly overhead. The light from the star seemed to wink at her.
"I could have easily taken the motorbike to the Burrow," Hope said coolly once they were walking on the street once more, barely illuminated by the flickering street lamps. "Why did you really come?"

She couldn't see his face, but she could sense that he had intended to tell her upon arrival, and Merlin knew how Hope hated surprises (unless, of course, you counted surprises sprung on her by George; she really liked those).

There was a short stint of silence following her words, during which Dumbledore contemplated what exactly to say.

"As you are no doubt aware," he began, "we are short a professor, once again."

Hope muttered a "Good." If she had to deal with Umbridge one more year, she might actually be forced to kill the woman and make it look completely like an accident. Hope glanced down to the scars on the back of her hand upon which "I must not tell lies" had been carved countless times into her flesh by her own hand.

"We are going to visit an old colleague of mine—"

"So, you're using me," Hope said, rolling her eyes. "Of course."

The awkwardness that had been present in the air increased a little. "The man I am hoping to recruit has a very specific mindset."

"What kind of mindset?" Hope asked suspiciously.

"Horace Slughorn," Dumbledore said, "likes the company of the rich, the famous, and the powerful. You are all of these."

An annoyed huff left Hope at this comment.

"He enjoys the feeling that he influences people with these qualities," Dumbledore continued as if he had not heard her. "He has never wanted to occupy the throne himself; he prefers the backseat — more room to spread out, you see. He used to handpick favourites at Hogwarts, sometimes for their ambition or their brains, sometimes for their charm or their talent, and he had an uncanny knack for choosing those who would go on to become outstanding in their various fields. Horace formed a kind of club of his favourites with himself at the centre, making introductions, forging useful contacts between members, and always reaping some kind of benefit in return, whether a free box of his favourite crystallized pineapple or the chance to recommend the next junior member of the Goblin Liaison Office."

"Sounds a little like Lucius Malfoy," Hope said, her voice distrusting.

"Yes," Dumbledore agreed, "only Horace's motives are not quite as dark as Mr. Malfoy's were."

Hope wasn't so sure as they finally stopped walking.

"Are we Apparating, then?" she asked, wrinkling her nose. She hadn't liked it when George had Apparated her out of Hogsmeade and to Diagon Alley the weekend before OWLs.
"Familiar with it?" Dumbledore asked with a mild voice that made Hope scowl.

"It's not my most favourite thing in the world," Hope said. "I'd much rather flash despite it being more dangerous."

Dumbledore made an agreeable noise, though Hope could tell he really didn't. She smirked to herself. "You will need to hold on to my arm very tightly," he told her. "My left, if you don't mind — as you have noticed, my wand arm is a little fragile at the moment."

Hope's eyes fell to the blackened skin not the first time since she'd seen the injury, her eyebrows together in confusion. But she still gripped Dumbledore's elbow tightly, looking distinctly uncomfortable as the man twisted and Hope resigned herself as the world turned to darkness, a force she couldn't see pulling her in several different directions.

She released Dumbledore quickly once her feet connected with the ground, making her stumble, her knees buckling slightly before she straightened herself up. They were in a small, silent village that Hope had never seen before. The darkness seemed greater here because of the smaller number of lampposts that it had when compared to Privet Drive. And a chill hung above them, not unlike the type created in the presence of dementors.

Hope's grip on her wand involuntarily tightened.

"This way," Dumbledore beckoned to her, and she followed without any complaints (for once). Something about this place was a little off to her.

"Tell me, Hope," Dumbledore spoke, his voice sounding strangely loud compared to the silence. "Your scar…has it been hurting at all?"

This question startled her. "No." She hadn't even thought about her scar, being too sidetracked by her nightmares.

"Ah," Dumbledore uttered, pleased by her response. "It seems that Lord Voldemort has finally realized the dangerous access to his thoughts and feelings you have been enjoying. It appears that he is now employing Occlumency against you."

"Wonderful," Hope said in an emotionless voice.

"Left here, Hope."

Hope turned swiftly with him, not saying a word as they followed the thin road that went sharply up a short hill before levelling out once again. The village seemed to reflect the current state of affairs. Shortly after the end of term Fudge had been given a vote of no-confidence, thus being fired from his job as Minister for Magic, being replaced by an aggressive looking man named Rufus Scrimgeour who had previously been Head of the Auror Office. Hope would have thought Madam Bones was a shoe-in for the job, but sadly the witch had been killed along with Emmeline Vance, a member of the Order that had no doubt been assigned as her protector, shortly after the beginning of summer. It must've been awful for Susan, but Hope doubted the girl wanted to do anything but not see anyone.

"Oh dear. Oh dear, dear, dear," Dumbledore murmured as they came close to a house a bit off on its own, one that seemed to have been quite attacked, by the state of the windows and door that was splintering and swinging eerily in the wind.

Hope followed him inside, her wand-grip still frightfully tight.

"Lumos."
Destruction was putting it mildly when describing just what had happened to the home. The chandelier had been ripped from the ceiling, its crystals strewn across the floor. Shards of a mirror had been thrown across the room, the frame from which they had originated from knocked to the floor. Hope stepped over the ruins of the piano, eyeing the dark substance on the walls that looked a great deal like blood in apprehension.

"Not pretty, is it?" Dumbledore said in an almost mournful air. "Yes, something horrible has happened here."

Hope's attention turned towards a stuffed armchair that seemed to have escaped all the damage, curiously. Hope remembered back to her second year when she had examined that locked box that Kingsley and Tonks had happened upon, the one that had a hasty glamour placed on it.

Hope swung her leg forward, whacking it against the back of the chair, to which a loud voice uttered a complaint of pain, the chair becoming an older man sprawled uncomfortably on the floor. Hope gave a scowl towards Dumbledore whose eyes twinkled more brightly as she took up residence against the wall.

The man rubbed at his back, which was no doubt the spot that Hope had struck, grumbling still as he stood, not seeing Hope, directing his attention towards Dumbledore instead.

"What gave it away?" he complained, still massaging his back as if Hope had hit him particularly hard, which had hardly been the case.

"My dear Horace, if the Death Eaters had really come to call," Dumbledore said, his beard twitching slightly as he didn't bother to restrain his smile, "the Dark Mark would have been set over the house."

Realization dawned in his squinty eyes, the expression making his moustache flutter as if by wind. "The Dark Mark…Knew there was something…ah well…Wouldn't have had time anyway, I'd only just put the finishing touches to my upholstery when you entered the room."

"Would you like my assistance clearing up?" Dumbledore asked courteously.

"Please," the man said in an if-you-would-be-so-kind manner.

And Hope didn't move or speak as a mere wave of their wands sent everything back to their proper positions, completely repaired with no sign as to having been anything less than.

"What kind of blood was that, incidentally?" Dumbledore asked, ducking under a shard of glass that was making towards the window.

"On the walls?" The man, Horace Slughorn, spoke over the pitched sounds of the piano keys returning to the piano once more. "Dragon. My last bottle, and prices are sky-high at the moment. Still, it might be reusable."

He examined the contents of the bottle into which the blood on the wall had gone. "Hm. Bit dusty," he concluded.

It was only when he set the bottle down that he finally saw Hope.

Horace Slughorn found himself temporarily stunned at the sight of Lily Evans' only daughter. He had heard the rumours and seen her picture many times in the Daily Prophet, but it hadn't really dawned on him just how nearly identical she was to her mother. The same dark red hair, the same green eyes, the same fair cheeks. But that was where the likeness ended. Hope wore darker colours
and had an aura around her that could either radiate danger or commanded respect.

Hope's eyes narrowed slightly in suspicion.

"Oho," he said, his eyes doing the involuntary flick towards Hope's forehead, a movement Hope had long-since resisted scowling at. "Oho!"

"This is Hope Potter," Dumbledore introduced her, a bit unnecessarily, she thought. "Hope, this is an old friend and colleague of mine, Horace Slughorn."

Hope tipped her head slightly, but, again, she did not speak, merely eyeing him as if he were a curiosity, yet to formulate an opinion on him.

"So, that's how you thought you'd persuade me, is it? Well, the answer's no, Albus."

Hope wondered why exactly he was putting forth so much effort towards one man when there were perhaps others who would be willing to take the job instead. He seemed rather intent on the man…it was suspicious…But then, many things were suspicious to Hope, so that wasn't saying much. She kept her silence even as Dumbledore offered Slughorn a drink and offering Hope the armchair closest to the fire.

She twisted the small mirror between her fingers, smiling just slightly every time it heated within her hands as she gazed into the fire, only half-listening to what the two men.

"If you're going to tell me my life would be more peaceful at that pestilential school, you can save your breath, Albus!" Slughorn snapped. "I might have been in hiding, but some funny rumours have reached me since Dolores Umbridge left! If that's how you treat teachers these days —"

"Professor Umbridge ran afoul of our centaur herd," Dumbledore said smoothly, skating over the words. "I think you, Horace, would have known better than to stride into the forest and call a horde of angry centaurs 'filthy half-breeds.'"

"That's what she did, did she?" Slughorn asked, sounding partially amused. "Idiotic woman. Never liked her."

Hope could not silence the amused noise that escaped her lips, the silence following telling her that she had gained their attention, however, she deigned neither with a glance.

"Are you leaving?" Slughorn asked a moment later after Dumbledore stood.

"No," Dumbledore said simply, smoothing his hands down the front of his robes, "I was wondering whether I might use your bathroom."

"Oh," Slughorn seemed a little downcast at the answer. "Second on the left down the hall."

Hope replaced the mirror in her pocket, glancing up towards Slughorn in an uneasy manner that said she still wasn't sure what to make of him.

"Don't think I don't know why he's brought you," he told her sharply, but she only blinked innocently at him, tilting her head just slightly as if to convey honest confusion.

"You look very much like your mother," he said after a long moment.

"Yes," Hope said, not bothering to deny this fact. Slughorn's eyes momentarily rested on her finger where the silver snake ring rested.
"In Slytherin, are you?" This question seemed to surprise him.

"No," Hope said, "Gryffindor. I've got some Slytherin friends, though."

"No school rivalries?" Slughorn asked, incredulous.

This time Hope laughed. "Oh, no," she said in a voice still filled with amusement, "we definitely hate each other's guts, but...they're a different brand, I guess...did you know my mother, then?" She was drawn by his earlier comment. Most people told her that, yes, but his voice held a bit of melancholy.

"Yes," Slughorn had to admit. "You shouldn't have favourites as a teacher, of course, but she was one of mine. Lily Evans. One of the brightest I ever taught. Vivacious, you know. Charming girl. I used to tell her she ought to have been in my House. Very cheeky answers I used to get back too."

Hope's lips twisted into a smirk and Slughorn thought she seemed very much like Slytherin material, as well.

"Your House?" Hope prodded him into speech.

"I was Head of Slytherin," he said. "I'm not surprised you went into Gryffindor. Yes, it usually goes in families. Not always, though. Ever heard of Sirius Black? You must have done — been in the papers for the last couple of years — died a few weeks ago —"

"I was there," Hope said in a cold voice, a knife twisting in her heart. Slughorn, however, missed her words as they were spoken so low that he could not discern them or even notice them.

"Well, anyway," he said, "he was a big pal of your father's at school. The whole Black family had been in my House, but Sirius ended up in Gryffindor! Shame — he was a talented boy." Hope ground her teeth together slightly as if to say being sorted into Gryffindor meant you lacked talent. "I got his brother, Regulus, when he came along, but I'd have liked the set."

The way he spoke sent a shiver down Hope's spine, as if people were objects, and Sirius had been one that he had lost.

"Your mother was Muggle-born, of course," Slughorn continued. "Couldn't believe it when I found out. Thought she must have been pure-blood, she was so good."

Hope frowned. "I don't see how blood matters," she said, "one of my best friends is Muggle-born and no one's beaten her in class." Except Hope in maybe Defence Against the Dark Arts and Ancient Runes.

"Funny how that sometimes happens, isn't it?"

Hope glowered. "I don't see how it could be."

Slughorn realized, a bit belatedly, that he must have incensed her with the way he'd worded it. "You mustn't think I'm prejudiced!" he said, speaking quickly to alleviate the damages. "No, no, no! Haven't I just said your mother was one of my all-time favourite students? And there was Dirk Cresswell in the year after her too — now Head of the Goblin Liaison Office, of course — another Muggle-born, a very gifted student, and still gives me excellent inside information on the goings-on at Gringotts!"

Hope could see a shadow around the corner, muttering a few dark insults under her breath towards the headmaster for leaving her to fend for herself.
Slughorn was still talking…Hope wanted to groan into her hand as he began gesturing to a number of frames he had situated on his dresser. "All ex-students, all signed. You'll notice Barnabas Cuffe, editor of the Daily Prophet, he's always interested to hear my take on the day's news. And Ambrosius Flume, of Honeydukes — a hamper every birthday, and all because I was able to give him an introduction to Ciceron Harkiss who gave him his first job! And at the back — you'll see her if you just crane your neck — that's Gwenog Jones, who of course captains the Holyhead Harpies...People are always astonished to hear I'm on first-name terms with the Harpies, and free tickets whenever I want them!"

Hope didn't say anything to that. She knew Ginny aspired to be a Holyhead Harpy, something her mother greatly disapproved of (though, Hope thought, there were very few things Mrs. Weasley didn't disapprove of).

"Of course," he said in a new sort of voice, almost as if he'd come out of a dream, "I have been out of touch with everybody for a year…still…" His eyes became more focused. "The prudent wizard keeps his head down in such times. All very well for Dumbledore to talk, but taking up a post at Hogwarts just now would be tantamount to declaring my public allegiance to the Order of the Phoenix! And while I'm sure they're very admirable and brave and all the rest of it, I don't personally fancy the mortality rate—"

"Talking about Emmeline Vance," Hope said coolly, "or Sirius Black?" Her throat stung as she said her godfather's name, forcing down the feeling as Slughorn turned to gaze upon her again.

Her eyes were fierce; it was like he was looking upon Lily Evans once more.

"At least they were brave," Hope said firmly, "at least they fought for the right side. Besides," she added almost as an afterthought, "being a teacher at Hogwarts doesn't put you into the Order automatically, hardly any of them are actually in it, and none of them've been killed." Her head canted slightly to the side. "Or perhaps you're as scared of Dumbledore as Voldemort is?"

A blotchy red appeared on his cheeks. "O-of course not!" he blustered, before his expression became thoughtful, taking something else entirely from her words. "Well, yes, it is true that He-Who-Must-Not-Be-Named has never sought a fight with Dumbledore," he mumbled more to himself. "And I suppose one could argue that as I have not joined the Death Eaters, He-Who-Must-Not-Be-Named can hardly count me a friend...in which case, I might well be safer a little closer to Albus...I cannot pretend that Amelia Bones' death did not shake me...If she, with all her Ministry contacts and protection..."

Dumbledore stepped into the light, sparing Hope a covert wink that had Hope's lips drawing downwards.

"Oh, there you are, Albus," Slughorn, jumping a little at the sight of his old friend. "You've been a very long time. Upset stomach?"

"No, I was merely reading the Muggle magazines," Dumbledore replied with a rather quick and easily believable lie that had Hope a little impressed despite herself. "I do love knitting patterns. Well, Hope, we have trespassed upon Horace's hospitality quite long enough; I think it is time for us to leave."

Hope stood eagerly, wanting the night to be over with so that she could be back in George's arms sooner than later.

"You're leaving?" He seemed a little…disappointed, though Hope couldn't fathom why; she had barely spoken.
"Yes, indeed," Dumbledore agreed. "I think I know a lost cause when I see one."

"Lost...?" Slughorn's eyebrows furrowed together as Hope reached the door.

"Well, I'm sorry you don't want the job, Horace," Dumbledore said in an apologetic tone, as if he had greatly been looking forward to such a prospect. She had to admit he was very good at manipulation. "Hogwarts would have been glad to see you back again. Our greatly increased security notwithstanding, you will always be welcome to visit, should you wish to."

It took him precisely eight seconds to change his mind.

The Burrow was a pleasant sight, Hope had to admit. It had only been a few weeks since the end of term, but she hadn't felt up to coming round the Burrow, mostly because Mrs. Weasley would want her to talk about what had happened, and she knew that Ron was dying to know as well. And that put a damper on her visiting plans.

Hope gave a low sigh, exhaling a bit audibly as they passed through the gate. The whole evening had left her emotionally tired with how casually Sirius' name had been thrown into conversation...it made Hope sick.

"If you don't mind, Hope," Dumbledore said quietly, well aware that her anger and indifference towards him had not subsided. "I would like a few words with you before we part. In private."

"This is private enough," Hope said coldly, crossing her arms, her perpetual scowl returning in full as she met his eyes full on.

Dumbledore conceded to her; he had not been expecting her to wish to remain in his company for longer than she had to.

"I wish to say...you have been doing remarkably well, considering all that has happened," he said gently, "Sirius would have been proud of you."

"Sirius," his name choked on her tongue, "would have been proud of me no matter what I did."

"That he would," Dumbledore agreed in the same quiet voice as before. "It was cruel that you and Sirius had such a short time together. A brutal ending to what should have been a long and happy relationship."

Hope blinked furiously, looking down at the grass, digging the heel of her shoe into the earth.

"Sirius represented much to you that you had never known before," Dumbledore continued softly. "Naturally, the loss is devastating..."

"Naturally," Hope rasped with difficulty, her eyes stinging with tears. Hope said nothing more, so Dumbledore took that as the go-ahead to continue to speak.

"On a closely related subject," Dumbledore said, "I gather that you have been taking the Daily Prophet over the last two weeks?"

"You talking about the nonsense about me being the 'Chosen One'?” Hope asked, recovering herself a little and saying the words with scorn. "Stupid little prophecy," she muttered angrily under her breath.

"Now, I think I am correct in saying that you have not told anybody that you know what the prophecy said?" Dumbledore asked, easily hearing her muttered words.
"No," Hope said in a voice that said she hadn't really thought about the prophecy in weeks.

"A wise decision, on the whole," Dumbledore told her. "Although I think you ought to relax it in favour of your friends, Mr. Ronald Weasley and Miss Hermione Granger. I think they ought to know. You do them a disservice by not confiding something this important to them."

Hope frowned. Ron and Hermione wouldn't like being kept out of the loop, but part of her wanted to shield them from the possibility of her death by Voldemort's hand.

"On a different, though related, subject, it is my wish that you take private lessons with me this year."

"Oh, it is, is it?" Hope asked, arching an eyebrow, her eyes black and cold as ice. "And, what," she spoke through gritted teeth, "pray tell, would I be learning from you?"

"Oh, a little of this, a little of that," Dumbledore said serenely.

Hope wasn't impressed. "What if I don't want lessons with you?"

"You'll find you will," Dumbledore said quite seriously, "there are things I must teach you—"

"Does it involve that injury you got to your hand?"

The sudden question caught him a little off balance, but he responded just as easily. "At one point, yes."

Hope still didn't like the idea of being in his presence, alone, but she couldn't contest the issue as Dumbledore began to speak once more.

"Now, two more things, Hope, before we part," he said. "Firstly, I wish you to keep your Invisibility Cloak with you at all times from this moment onward. Even within Hogwarts itself. Just in case, you understand me?"

Hope's eyebrows furrowed together, and she reluctantly agreed (it wouldn't be too bad to have it on her at all times).

"And lastly, while you stay here, the Burrow has been given the highest security the Ministry of Magic can provide. These measures have caused a certain amount of inconvenience to Arthur and Molly — all their post, for instance, is being searched at the Ministry before being sent on. They do not mind in the slightest, for their only concern is your safety. However, it would be poor repayment if you risked your neck while staying with them."

Hope felt a little uncomfortable, seeing as she wasn't even staying with them, but Mrs. Weasley assured her that the wards Bill had set up around the shop and Fred and George's flats were powerful enough, and they were more than willing to give her a small comfort and peace of mind even if it caused them a few difficulties.
"Who's there?" a voice from within demanded. "Declare yourself!"

"It is I, Dumbledore, bringing Hope," Dumbledore said in a voice that seemed half-polite, half-serious.

Mrs. Weasley flung open the door immediately to see the headmaster and a more solemn, more tired Hope than the last time she had seen her.

"Hope, dear!" she uttered, and the barest of smiles appeared on the girl's face. She looked rather as though she was emotionally exhausted, in a sense, but her posture was stiff in the presence of Dumbledore. "Gracious, Albus, you gave me a fright, you said not to expect you before morning!"

"We were lucky," Dumbledore said simply as Hope entered the room, her eyes falling—to her surprise—on Tonks who looked much worse than her, she noticed. Her hair, which was usually a bright pink, had faded to a brown that matched her mournful eyes.

"Hello, Professor," Tonks said, nodding her head towards the pair. "Wotcher, Hope."

"Wotcher, Tonks," Hope said in return, frowning a little in confusion before irritation formed in her eyes. It had been plain to her that Remus had been rather fond of the Metamorphagus, and that Tonks had reciprocated those feelings…but Remus had once told her he had never wanted to enter into a relationship because of what he was. He must have rejected her out of fear, the idiot.

"I'd better be off," Tonks said her voice as tired as her appearance, pulling her cloak loose and over her shoulders. "Thanks for the tea and sympathy, Molly."

"Please don't leave on my account," Dumbledore said, "I cannot stay, I have urgent matters to discuss with Rufus Scrimgeour."

"No, no, I need to get going," Tonks said quickly. "'Night—"

"Dear," Mrs. Weasley said gently, "why not come to dinner at the weekend, Remus and Mad-Eye are coming—?"

"No, really, Molly," Tonks said, grimacing slightly, "thanks anyways…goodnight, everyone."

She brushed past them to the door, barely making it a few paces before Hope called out her name, forcing her to stop and turn as her somewhat distant cousin came up to her side.

"I never got to ask you," Tonks muttered before she could speak, "how you're…coping…"

Hope's eyes appeared over-bright, but Tonks knew that was from the tears that wouldn't fall.

"As well as you'd expect," Hope said throatily, wiping quickly at her eyes as they stained her cheeks. "The dreams are worse."

Tonks nodded in understanding.

"Sometimes," Hope swallowed, "sometimes you've got to look past the bad to see the good…I'll talk to Remus for you."

Tonks looked suddenly stricken at the thought. "You shouldn't—" she started to say, but the shrewd
glare Hope gave her cut her off. She bowed her head briefly. "Thanks."

"Name me godmother of your first kid and we'll call it even," Hope sniffed in a faux-arrogant sort of way. And for the first time in a very long time, Tonks gave a short laugh.

"See you around, Cousin," she murmured before twisting on the spot.

Hope sighed exhaustively, moving back to the Burrow to pass through the doorway.

"Well, I shall see you at Hogwarts, Hope," Dumbledore said simply. "Take care of yourself. Molly, your servant."

Once he was gone, Mrs. Weasley pulled her gently into the kitchen.

"You look like you're about to fall over," she tutted, examining her slightly. "Won't you have a bit of something before you go?"

"What've you got?" Hope asked, collapsing into a chair.

Mrs. Weasley smiled, but she didn't give her an answer, merely tapping a few of her pots until moments later she had situated a bowl of onion soup in front of her.

"Thanks," Hope murmured, blowing softly on the soup before opening her mirror from where she had previously stowed it in her pocket. "George Weasley," she said clearly, her boyfriend's face swimming into view instantly.

He brightened. "So, you're done, then?"

"Yeah," Hope yawned. "But you're mum's given me some soup…she seems to think I'm about to fall over."

Hope spared Mrs. Weasley an almost playful expression that made relief bloom inside the older witch.

"Sounds like her. I'll be over soon," George said.

"I'll be here," Hope muttered, shutting the compact and spooning several mouthfuls of hot soup into her mouth, ignoring the blistering of the heat, practically inhaling it. Mrs. Weasley had to wonder when she'd eaten last that day when a crack of apparition interrupted her thoughts and George opened the door.

George and Hope were two people that there was never a question whether or not they would end up together, the only question had been when. She doubted that there two people more suited for each other than those two.

Hope abandoned her half-finished soup to fling her arms around his neck.

"'M tired," Hope said thickly into his robes.

"Then I'll take you home," George said quietly.

Hope turned back to Mrs. Weasley, giving her an exhausted smile. "Thanks for the soup, Mrs. Weasley. I'll try to come and visit tomorrow…I think that might be a good idea."

Mrs. Weasley smiled indulgently and with understanding. "Of course, dear. Why not join us for breakfast?"
"That'll be lovely," Hope said, her eyes falling shut a little until only slivers of green could be seen.

"We should get going," George said, "or else she's going to fall asleep on me."

"Will not," Hope complained, fisting the front of his robes, her eyes opening just enough to give him an adorable pout.

"That doesn't faze me anymore, Hope, you mist need to switch tactics," he told her with a smirk, her pout falling from her face.

"I hate you," she said.

"No, you don't, now, c'mon."

Mrs. Weasley watched the pair in bemusement as they left, thinking it might've been a good idea that they were living together. George seemed to be the only one who could deal with Hope's madness.

Hermione was in a nervous titter seeing the tawny owls bearing their OWL results. There were three; the Ministry must have gone ahead and sent Hope's, assuming that she was staying there, as most people thought.

"Should we open them without Hope?" she uttered, completely terrified.

"Nah," Ron said, looking out the window, "look, there she is!"

The sound of a loud engine was growing louder and Hermione flew to the window as well, giving a squeal of delight as a motorbike fell out of the sky to park out of the lawn, two hands pulling loose the helmet, shaking out of a mane of dark red.

"Hope!"

Her friend grunted as Hermione raced across the grass in record time to fling her arms around her friend, sending her staggering but somehow she kept standing by sheer willpower alone.

"Hermione," she said, vaguely startled by her friend's antics, "you look about ready to have a heart attack."

"It's the OWL results!" Hermione wailed.

"Er…alright?" Hope reached to pat her on the back awkwardly. "Can you let go? I think I'm going to break something soon."

"Oh, sorry!" Hermione said, quickly releasing her friend and looking her straight in the eye. She looked very tired, as if she hadn't gotten a decent bit of rest in a good while and her green eyes were darker and more forlorn.

"Do I have something on my face?" Hope asked dryly.

Hermione blushed. "No, it's—"

"Don't mind her," Ron told her swiftly, coming to stand in front of her as well, "she's been worried about you for weeks."

Red-faced and embarrassed, Hermione scowled viciously as her friend with a look that clearly said "Traitor."
"I'm…" Hope very nearly said 'fine,' but her friends knew her too well for that, "better."

"That's really good," Hermione said optimistically.

"Good…yeah," Hope said, her voice a little distant, very much like her eyes, Hermione thought. "How are you?"

"Oh, I'm fine," Hermione said, opening her mouth to ask her something that was undoubtedly Sirius related.

"Does your mum have breakfast, then?" Hope asked of Ron as they started to walk towards the Burrow.

"Yeah," Ron said with a nod, "everyone's eaten but us, we were waiting for you."

Her lips curled upwards slightly and Ron counted it as a win.

"Have you heard Bill and Fleur's news, then?" Ron asked.

"Oh, yeah," Hope gave a short laugh. "I was the first person she told, apparently. Fleur was so excited."

"She's been staying at the Burrow," Hermione interjected. "Just for a few days…I don't know what Bill was thinking."

"Hm?" Hope's forehead crinkled in confusion.

"Mum hates her," Ron said with a wince, "but Bill wanted her to get to know the family better…Ginny hates her too."

Hope made an annoyed sound in the back of her throat.

"She keeps trying to get Tonks to come round," Ron added, rolling his eyes, "like Bill's suddenly going to fall for her."

Hope burst out into loud laughter, surprising her two friends as she actually bent double. "She thinks Tonks is going to go for Bill?" she gasped out. "He's not her type at all!"

"What's her type, then?" Ron asked.

Hope pressed a finger to her lips for silence, her eyes sly. "Can't say, at least, not yet…"

Hermione opened her mouth to ask a second question, but she found herself abruptly silenced by the excited scream of "'Ope!"

Hope was nearly bowled over by the French witch who hugged her so tightly that Hope swore something punctured her lungs. "Fleur," she said with difficulty, "you saw me about a week ago…"

"Oui," Fleur agreed, "but it 'as been so long!"

"If you say so," Hope muttered as she was pulled inside the house. A still-hot plate of food was placed in front of her in seconds. "Thanks, Mrs. Weasley."

Mrs. Weasley smiled kindly at her. "It's no problem, dear."

Hope caught the irritated glance that Mrs. Weasley tossed towards Fleur and Hope frowned into her
eggs, finishing the food rather quickly (feeling uncomfortable by so many people watching her).

"How's Gabrielle?" she asked Fleur, who brightened quite visibly at the mention of her sister. Ginny made an annoyed face behind her back as Fleur explained—in great detail—the goings-on of her family back in France.

"She eez raving about you," Fleur finished in amusement. "She idolizes you."

"Can't imagine why," Hope said in a dry voice, her cheeks a little pink, "I doubt you've met anyone more rebellious, troublesome, authority-defying—"

"All very good qualities, I'm sure," Mrs. Weasley said, shooting Hope a glance that was half-reproving, half-amused, as her friends laughed in agreement. Hope's face fell slightly and Ron could tell she was thinking of Sirius, who exemplified all those qualities.

"We were waiting to open the OWL results until you came," he interjected suddenly and Hope grimaced a little.

"I bet I did awful on Potions!" she bemoaned. "And I needed an 'O' for that one!"

"I'm sure you did fine," Ginny consoled with a grin as Hope examined her letter closely as if trying to see the grades through the envelope. "I mean, you did study yourself into unconsciousness…"

Hope scowled. "Yes, and if it got me straight 'O's, perhaps you should attempt it for your exams this year."

That sobered her quickly.

Hope broke the seal on hers, pulling out the parchment with a wince.

**Ordinary Wizarding Level Results**

**Pass Grades**

*Outstanding (O)*

*Exceeds Expectations (E)*

*Acceptable (A)*

**Fail Grades**

*Poor (P)*

*Dreadful (D)*

*Troll (T)*

**Hope Lily Potter has achieved:**

*Ancient Runes O*

*Astronomy E*

*Care of Magical Creatures A*
Hope wasn't sure how she'd managed it, but she passed everything!

"Yes!" Hope punched the air in her euphoria, doing a little dance. "Take that, Snivellus!"

Ron sniggered behind his own parchment which bore the adequate grades required for Aurors. It was sheer luck that he'd scraped an 'O' in Potions, he swore, something Hope and Hermione were probably responsible for. And Hermione's grades needed no explanation; all 'O's except for Defence Against the Dark Arts, where she earned an 'E.'

All in all, Hope was exceedingly proud of herself.

"Remus…Remus…Remus, open the fucking door!" Hope continuously banged her fist against the door to Remus' cabin. "Remus, you know I'll—"

The door was wrenched open suddenly and Hope found herself face to face with the irate werewolf himself. "Hope," he said, sounding as tired as he looked, "why—"

"Oh, I'm here to knock some sense into you," Hope said conversationally, inviting herself inside.

"I can't imagine of what you are speaking of," Remus said in a vague voice that earned him a scowl. He didn't even see it coming when Hope threw her fist, socking him in the cheek. The action startled him, but it shouldn't have, after all, Hope typically preferred actions over words.

"What-?"

"You are a fucking moron!" Hope seethed as the force of her punch sent Remus reeling back a few steps, gingerly touching his new injury. "I expected better!" She sounded much like a mother admonishing her child for a brief moment that Remus actually looked a little awkward.

"What are you—?"

"Tonks!" Hope snapped, jabbing him harshly in the chest. "She's in love with you and you're being a complete fool!"

"I—I—" For the first time since Remus and Hope had met, the man seemed beyond words. "Tonks deserves someone young and whole—"

"Young and whole?" Hope demanded incredulously. "Are you mental? Look around, Remus, most of the people you know are damaged in some way! You think Tonks wants someone who's perfect? Perfect people are boring! She wants you!"

"Well, she shouldn't!" Remus snapped. "I am wrong for her!"
"Remus…" Hope gave a sigh that clearly said "I know you're being ridiculous, but I'll humour you."

"I am too old for her, I could never provide for her, and I am far too—"

"Too what? Dangerous?" Hope asked. "Remember when you told me you never entered into a relationship before because you were scared that someone would find out—"

"I don't think scared was the term I used," Remus said, but she spoke over him.

"—But now you've got a girl that loves you for who you are, knows what you are, but you push her away? Remus, stop thinking with your head," Hope said in an imploring manner, resting her palm against his chest, directly over his heart, patting at the area to make her point. "Think with your heart."

Remus swallowed thickly after looking into her eyes and seeing nothing but sincerity. He reached a hand to squeeze the one that lay over his heart, his eyes softening. "I forget sometimes how much you're like Lily."

Hope took a step back, Remus releasing her hand as her eyes widened. "No," she disagreed, "I'm really not."

Remus smiled at her, but it was a bit too understanding for her liking.

"Tonks," Hope said after a moment of silence, "is a really great girl, and she only wants you…don't you dare screw this up, you hear?"

"Yes, ma'am," Remus promised, earning him a glare and a mutter of "stupid wolfmen making my life difficult," as she stalked outside, revving her motorbike and disappearing into the clouds above. Remus gave a slightly forlorn sigh, before making plans to visit Nymphadora immediately and apologize.

"I'm back!" Hope called, throwing her keys on the counter with her free hand as she kicked off her shoes, smiling as she set down the bag on the floor in front of the fire. She smiled, perching on the edge of the cushions, leaning down to kiss George's lips softly.

"Miss me?" she murmured as he reached a hand out blindly to grasp her hip, his eyes still closed. "I always miss you," he said, his voice huskier than usual, laced with the sleep she must have just awaken him from. "You were out awhile…"

"I grabbed some Chinese…since you've never tried it," Hope whispered, forcing herself to remain still as the tips of his fingers slipped just barely under her shirt to rub circles into the skin, something he seemed to do every time they were so close, it seemed. "…If you're hungry."

"Mm," George mumbled, his fingers retreating from side to smooth over her back, tracing her spine through the fabric.

Predictably, Hope arched.

"George!" she complained.

He laughed, finally opening his eyes to cup her cheeks with both of his hands. "I can't help it," he said, "you do that thing with your back every time!"

Hope flushed and scowled, making for a rather strange expression as she crossed her arms, leaning
back. "Well, I was going to give you a nice kiss, but now I don't think I will…" She made to stand up, but George's arms snagged her around the waist, and the next thing she knew, she had her back to the cushions and he had trapped her there with his body.

"Georgie," Hope drawled out the name, dragging her fingers through his hair.

"Hope," he said her name in the same low voice as before; she shivered. "Thought you were going to give me a kiss?"

"I don't want to," Hope pouted, jutting out her lower lip, "and nothing you can do can make me."

George grinned in an almost devilish way. "Maybe you're missing the part where I've got you pinned to couch and completely at my mercy."

The pink of her cheeks darkened at his words. "I could get out of here, if I wanted," Hope said with certainty.

"That only works if you're focused," he whispered into her ear, his breath tingling across her skin and making goosebumps arise. "But I can be very distracting."

Hope swallowed thickly before he bent further, his lips making contact with her throat. With each kiss to her skin, she was thrown closer and closer into oblivion. Hope gasped his name out loud before dragging his lips back to hers, gifting him the kiss she had been denying him.

Their food lay forgotten.

"Sixteen already…feel older?"

Hope raked her fingers through her loose hair, grinning at Ginny as she perched on the end of the couch in the sitting room. "Not really, but George tells me I am one hundred percent sexier."

Ron gagged and Hermione broke down into giggles while Ginny cracked a grin.

"Oh, I'm sure," she said sarcastically. "After all, who else would notice?"

Hope waggled her eyebrows at her. "He got me these, you know?" She reached a hand to touch one of the small black onyx hoops at her earlobes. "Pure onyx. They're supposed to guard against negative emotions."

"That's sweet of him," Hermione said, leaning forward slightly to examine them. George always had the habit of giving her meaningful gifts…something that didn't seem to be shared by his younger brother, much to her irritation.

"'Ardly surprising," Fleur said, entering with a bright smile to tell them tea and cake were ready, "'e was always so thoughtful when I saw you togezer two years ago."

Ginny rolled her eyes at Hope behind Fleur's back and Hope frowned in a bit of annoyance.

"No," she mused, turning back to Fleur, "is Bill like that?"

The beaming smile that was thrown her way was all the answer she needed.

"Don't get her started," Ron warned as they took their seats at the table, "she'll talk about Bill for ages."
"Ha-ha," his oldest brother said in a drawl from across the table, "hilarious, Ron."

"It's what I do best."

"Thanks Mrs. Weasley," Hope said with a smile as the woman placed a piece of cake in front of her.

"It's no problem, dear," Mrs. Weasley promised, her eyes twinkling slightly, "I've noticed a certain someone has been smiling a bit more…anything to do with something you might've done?"

"Mrs. Weasley!" Hope said in a faux-scandalized voice. "Would you really expect me to interfere in something as trivial as the relationships of certain someones?"

Several "yes"s accompanied her words and she scowled at the all.

"The way I understand it," Hope continued as if she had not been interrupted, "they are taking things slow, very slow, but I'll take what I can get."

"And what are you getting?" Remus' amused voice cut across her as he was admitted into the kitchen, shrugging off his cloak and thanking Mr. Weasley who drew up an extra chair for him.

"Oh, nothing," Hope sang, giving him a conspirator-like wink. He gave her a flat stare in return. "I keep my silence in favour of certain parties."

"I…see," Remus said slowly, a confused frown just twisting his lips.

"You look like hell," Hope added, "what's happened, I mean, apart from the obvious?"

"There have been another couple of dementor attacks," he finally conceded. "And they've found Igor Karkaroff's body in a shack up north. The Dark Mark had been set over it — well, frankly, I'm surprised he stayed alive for even a year after deserting the Death Eaters; Sirius's brother, Regulus, only managed a few days as far as I can remember."

Hope frowned, her fork stilling over her cake and Hermione and Ron exchanged a look. They studiously avoided saying her godfather's name, but when Remus went and threw it out of the blue…

"Yes, well, perhaps we should talk about something diff—" Mrs. Weasley started to say, her eyes on Hope as well.

"Did you hear about Florean Fortescue, Remus?" Bill asked the werewolf, taking a sip of wine from the glass Fleur had given him. "The man who ran —"

"—the ice-cream shop," Hope finished. "Yeah, I saw it was abandoned. Does anyone know what happened?"

"Dragged off, at least, that's the way it seems," Bill told her.

Hope's eyes showed nothing. "And if he's dead?"

Mrs. Weasley looked nothing short of reproachful towards her son when her husband spoke. "Talking of Diagon Alley, looks like Ollivander's gone too."

"The wandmaker?" Ginny asked, looking up from her cake to look at her father in shock.

"That's the one," Mr. Weasley agreed. "Shop's empty. No sign of a struggle. No one knows whether he left voluntarily or was kidnapped."
"But wands," Ginny said, still stunned by this most recent disappearance, "what'll people do for wands?"

"They'll make do with other makers," Remus said with a bit of a forlorn sigh. "But Ollivander was the best, and if the other side have got him it's not so good for us."

"But what could Voldemort gain from a wandmaker?" Hope pressed, pushing her half-finished cake aside. "He's already got a wand."

"Maybe he needs a better one?" Ron suggested around his bit of cake.

"That's not likely," Hope doubted. "Why get a new wand when you're already proficient enough with another?"

They could only guess. Hope leaned back and allowed the conversation to buzz around her, her fingers smoothing over the pale scars on her palms of the blood seals she had carved herself. She had thought back when she had written them in her own blood and flesh that they would heal remarkably quickly, but Hope shouldn't have expected as much of Blood Magick. It was designed to last, that was why it was still around, though so rarely practiced.

The scars remained, as though a promise of protection and attack just waiting to be called forth.
Visit to Diagon Alley

It was weeks before the Weasleys (plus Hermione and Hope) decided to do their shopping before the start of term. Hope, being the one that actually lived in Diagon Alley, had her shopping already done, but, for appearances sake, she went with them, knowing she could possibly pick up some new books in Flourish and Blotts.

It was upon entering into Madam Malkin's in the search for new robes that Hope's hands clenched into fists at the mere sound of Draco Malfoy's voice from beyond the racks.

"...not a child, in case you haven't noticed, Mother. I am perfectly capable of doing my shopping alone."

Sadly, this seemed to be the point Hope had rather been pressing for weeks now, but, as usual, everyone seemed content to keep her caged in. Except George, he was far too sweet for that.

"Now, dear," Madam Malkin's voice could be heard, "your mother's quite right, none of us is supposed to go wandering around on our own anymore, it's nothing to do with being a child—"

"Watch where you're sticking that pin, will you!"

He hadn't changed much, Hope noticed, whether in appearance or in attitude. He was as foul as usual, and this only became more obvious when he caught sight of the three of them meandering at the front, waiting for him to finish. His lip curled.

"If you're wondering what the smell is, Mother, a Mudblood just walked in," Malfoy said in a disdainful voice.

Hope subtly shifted her body slightly in front of her friend, her wand already in her hand, a move that Ron quickly replicated.

"I don't think there's any need for language like that!" Madam Malkin said disapprovingly. "And I don't want wands drawn in my shop either!"

A tall woman stepped out from behind the racks. Narcissa Malfoy looked nothing like her stark-raving mad sister, her eyes and hair far paler than Bellatrix's could ever be. Narcissa would have been quite beautiful if not for that expression of superiority and disgust on her face that was probably the same look Hope had seen during the World Cup two years previously.

"Put those away. If you at-tack my son again, I shall ensure that it is the last thing you ever do."

"Will you? Can you really afford that?" Hope asked, arching an eyebrow. "After all, your husband wasted an awful lot of your money paying off politicians. Or maybe you're going to call up darling Bella to do your dirty work? Exactly how strong is that sisterly bond of yours?"

Narcissa's eyes narrowed slightly. "Still playing the fool, Hope Potter?"

Hope took a few steps forward, closer to the woman. "The thing about playing the fool," she murmured, "is that everyone falls for the obvious bait...but I'm done playing games." Her eyes glowed a dangerous red. "Tell Bella, next time I see her, she's mine."

"For one who talks so big, I have to wonder if you can back it up," she responded easily.
Hope smiled sweetly, taking a few steps back, her palms spread open in an almost gesture of "I mean no harm" though clearly that couldn't be taken at face value. Narcissa eyes darted down to Hope's open hands, her eyes widening at the Blood Magick scars there.

"I see," she said, faintly amused, "not quite Dumbledore's Golden Girl, are you?"

Hope's eyes narrowed. "I really hate when people put me in with the manipulative codger, besides… silver is definitely better than gold."

"Indeed."

Hermione and Ron watched on in silence, utterly bemused by the turn of events. The pair had gone from practically insulting each other to paying almost grudging praise.

"How is Azkaban treating Lucius?"

Malfoy made a low growl in her direction. "Don't you dare talk about my father like that, Potter!"

Hope fixed him with a dry stare. "I suppose we all join clubs we wish we hadn't." Her eyes purposefully drifted to his left arm, the one that Madam Malkin had brushed against that had caused him pain just moments previously. Hope had seen it out of the corner of her eye while having her stare-down with Narcissa.

Malfoy's pinched face paled at the veiled implication, something that was hardly noticeable, given the natural pallor of his skin that he shared with his mother. His grey eyes became hard as he stared into hers which were an identical shade, Sirius' eyes.

"Mother," he said stiffly, shrugging off the robes from his shoulders, dropping them to the floor in a heap, "I don't think I want these anymore—"

"You're right, Draco." Narcissa's eyes lingered on Hermione for a brief moment, her lips curling slightly into a sneer that made her look much less beautiful. "Now I know the kind of scum that shops here... We'll do better at Twilfitt and Tatting's."

Hope stepped aside to allow them to pass, only pausing Malfoy briefly.

"Just a warning, I'll be dogging your footsteps."

"I'd like to see you try," he told her frigidly, pushing his way past her, colliding purposefully against Ron as he did so, giving Hermione a similar look that his mother had just given her, a look that said he smelled something foul.

Hope didn't appreciate the look one bit.

Hope was now entering into the habit of long brooding silences, something that wasn't really a good thing if you were Hope Potter and your mind had too many things gangling about inside, but she was pulled abruptly from her thoughts by Ron who said in awe, "Whoa."

Hope had ventured down into Weasleys Wizard Wheezes dozens upon dozens of times, and it was so utterly Fred and George that it was hard to imagine any other sort of colouring. Bright, almost obnoxious colours covered the shop, a stark contrast to the dreary colours of the shops around the alley. One of the windows proclaimed upon a purple poster:

WHY ARE YOU WORRYING ABOUT
YOU-KNOW-WHO?

YOU SHOULD BE WORRYING ABOUT

U-NO-POO—

THE CONSTIPATION SENSATION

THAT'S GRIPPING THE NATION!

A smile curled Hope's lips at the wording. U-No-Poo were green round pills that caused constipation and could be mashed up and mixed with food and drink. Hope was just glad they hadn't tried out that product on her (because they had that nasty habit of attempting to, though it rarely ended well for them).

Mrs. Weasley, on the other hand, was less than impressed, but that only proved to amuse Hope further as they entered the shop.

It was packed, like every other day Hope had been in the shop. The popularity was pretty surprising considering the dark times they had now entered into, but Fred and George liked to make things happier and brighter, even if conditions were less than desirable.

The Skiving Snackboxes were the most popular of the Twins' merchandise, but they had developed so many products that even Hope didn't know all of them. They ranged from Extendable Ears, Nose Biting Teacups, Trick Wands, and Wildfire Whizbangs to Self-Inking, Spell-Checking, and Smart-Answer Quills.

"'Patented Daydream Charms,' Hermione read aloud from one of the boxes on the shelf ("You were the inspiration for that," George had told her before, waggling his eyebrows suggestively at her. She had given him an unimpressed look. "I'm sure you tell all the girls that."). "'One simple incantation and you will enter a top-quality, highly realistic, thirty-minute daydream, easy to fit into the average school lesson and virtually undetectable (side effects include vacant expression and minor drooling). Not for sale to under-sixteens."

Hope smirked at how impressed Hermione was. The Twins rarely made her in awe of what they made.

You know, that really is extraordinary magic!"

A laugh escaped Hope.

"For that, Hermione, you can have one for free."

Both girls turned around to see Fred grinning at the pair of them (Ron having already moved away to inspect other merchandise that caught his eye).

"How are you, Hope?" he asked with an obvious wink that made her roll her eyes as she gave him a one-armed hug. "Hermione?"

"Alright," Hermione said, eyeing him shrewdly as though ready for any prank he could possibly play on her.

"Want the grand tour?" he asked, still grinning at them. Hope, of course, had been in the shop dozens of times, but Hermione had never been. "Come on!"
Hope linked her arm with Hermione's dragging her forward with a muffled complaint from the
brunette, pulling her towards a small stand on which held simple Muggle magic tricks; card decks,
rope tricks, and hats that looked like the ones magicians pulled out of hats were among the few on
the stand.

"Muggle magic tricks! For freaks like Dad, you know, who love Muggle stuff. It's not a big earner,
but we do fairly steady business, they're great novelties...Oh, here's George, jealous bloke, Hope,
whatever did you do to make him like that?"

Hope laughed at the faux-disgruntled twin as she cupped her boyfriend's cheeks in her hands as he
rounded the corner.

"Hey, you."

"Hey," Hope said with a grin, kissing him. "I missed you."

"I've got one of those faces," he said with a cheeky grin, kissing her cheek quickly. "You haven't
seen our more serious line yet, have you?"

"I thought you were still working on that," Hope said, glancing between the bright pair as George
linked his hand with one of hers.

"I think we've practically worked out everything," Fred informed her, shaking his head slightly,
"funny how we got into it, seeing as we're...you know..."

"I think we all know," Hermione said rather dryly following them to a less brightly coloured room
off from the main shop.

"You wouldn't believe how many people, even people who work at the Ministry, can't do a decent
Shield Charm," George told them. "'Course, they didn't have you teaching them, Hope." He lowered
his voice. "Or you giving them incentives." Hope's cheeks burned a bright red, remembering how
he'd stayed after one of their DA meetings so she could help him with his shield spell.

"That's right," Fred said, casting his brother and Hope an amused all-knowing glance. "Well, we
thought Shield Hats were a bit of a laugh, you know, challenge your mate to jinx you while wearing
it and watch his face when the jinx just bounces off. But the Ministry bought five hundred for all its
support staff! And we're still getting massive orders!"

"So we've expanded into a range of Shield Cloaks, Shield Gloves..." George continued.

"...I mean, they wouldn't help much against the Unforgivable Curses, but for minor to moderate
hexes or jinxes..." Fred added.

"And then we thought we'd get into the whole area of Defence Against the Dark Arts, because it's
such a money spinner," George said in a bright voice that matched his grin. "This is cool. Look,
Instant Darkness Powder, we're importing it from Peru. Handy if you want to make a quick escape."

Hope hefted one of what looked a bit like a small black stone. "I suppose it breaks upon impact."

She received two thumbs-up.

"And our Decoy Detonators are just walking off the shelves, look," Fred interjected, nodding
towards a pile of black objects, some of which were moving around, trying to get out of the pile and
onto the floor. "You just drop one surreptitiously and it'll run off and make a nice loud noise out of
sight, giving you a diversion if you need one."
"Very nice," Hope complimented, examining one, "how much?" Being a girlfriend to one of the owners did not mean that she was going to skip out on paying them.

"Oh, no!" Fred and George waved her off. "No charge."

"But—" Hope started to say, but she was cut across as George left to help one of his employees, a pretty blonde witch named Verity, by Fred.

"You gave us our start-up loan, we haven't forgotten. Take whatever you like, and just remember to tell people where you got it, if they ask," Fred told her, waggling his finger at her.

"You're impossible," Hope decided as Ginny entered into the room after them.

"That's where you lot went," she said, "I thought you'd been overtaken by the crowd."

"Nearly," Hermione said, rolling her eyes, and directing her words towards Fred. "Anything else we should see?"

She really needn't have asked. "Haven't you girls seen our special WonderWitch products yet?" he asked, his grin sly. "Follow me, ladies..."

Hope was familiar with the bright pink products, most of which had hearts on them, something which made Hope want to fervently avoid them the first time she saw them. She could just make out the titles of several of the products; Crush Blush, Everlasting Eyelashes, and–

"There you go. Best range of love potions you'll find anywhere."

Hope gagged at Hermione who cast her friend a bemused expression.

"Do they work?" Ginny asked.

"Certainly they work," Fred said, sounding a little insulted, "for up to twenty-four hours at a time depending on the weight of the boy in question—"

"— and the attractiveness of the girl," George's voice said, making Hope jump at his sudden voice and the arm that wrapped around her waist. "But we're not selling them to our sister, not when she's already got about five boys on the go from what we've—"

Hope punched him in the arm.

"Whatever you've heard from Ron is a big fat lie." Ginny had turned her attention instead to an opaque pink bottle. "What's this?"

"Guaranteed ten-second pimple vanisher," Fred said, crossing his arms and canting his head slightly. "Excellent on everything from boils to blackheads, but don't change the subject. Are you or are you not currently going out with a boy called Seamus Finnegan?"

"Yes, I am," Ginny said shortly, her eyes drifting to a cage that held a number of round fuzz-balls that were pink and purple rolling around and making soft noises. "And last time I looked, he was definitely one boy, not five. What are those?"

"Pygmy Puffs," George said vaguely. "Miniature puffskeins, we can't breed them fast enough. So what about Michael Corner?"

"He's with Cho now," Hope told him.
Fred muttered something derogatory under his breath and Ginny smiled.

"Yeah, he was a bad loser. He went running to Cho after we beat Ravenclaw last year," Ginny said, poking a finger through the bars, giggling as a pink Pygmy Puff nosed it in fascination. "They're really cute!"

"They're fairly cuddly, yes," Fred agreed, though his eyes didn't move from his sister's face. "But you're moving through boyfriends a bit fast, aren't you?"

Ginny glared at him. "It's none of your business, but I don't see how two boys is 'moving through boyfriends a bit fast'. And I'll thank you—" She turned to scowl at Ron how had approached bearing several products in his arms, "not to tell tales about me to these two!"

And then she stormed off, causing several people to veer out of her way in fear of being trampled.

"That's three Galleons, nine Sickles, and a Knut. Cough up," Fred told Ron, glancing over the merchandise he was holding.

"I'm your brother!" Ron said, agape.

"And that's our stuff you're nicking," George told him. "Three Galleons, nine Sickles. I'll knock off the Knut."

"But I haven't got three Galleons, nine Sickles!" Ron complained.

"You'd better put it back then, and mind you put it on the right shelves," Fred added.

Ron flipped the bird at his older brother, a few boxes tumbling out of his arms as he did so, unfortunately Mrs. Weasley saw it.

George sniggered, leaning down to kiss the side of Hope's neck as his mother chastised his brother, moving away with his twin to assist some customers.

Hope's eyes drifted to the no longer obscured window, giving a long sigh. The sky was dark, foreboding in a way, a promise of the darkness that was coming…but then a person on the street caught her eye. A head of pale hair and a dark cloak…Draco Malfoy.

Hope's eyes narrowed in suspicion, moving closer to the window.

"What is it?" Hermione asked.

"Malfoy," Hope said, nodding out the window.

"Where's his mum, though?" Rona asked, having escaped from his mother's clutches as Ginny directed her attention to the Pygmy Puffs.

"Dunno," Hope said, searching her pocket for her invisibility cloak and shaking it out.

"What're you doing?" Hermione asked, glancing back towards the others who were all preoccupied.

"I'm going to follow him," Hope said, casting her a grin, "coming?"

"I am," Ron said with certainty.

"I don't know…" Hermione said in a doubtful manner.
"Oh, come on," Ron told her, "you know you want to."

She gave him a short glare at that, before following suit and disappearing under the cloak, squeezing through the crowd as best as they could and out of the door without Hagrid seeing them, which was more difficult than usual, since he was there to guard them (her), but they managed it after a few moments, sweeping towards the direction Malfoy had been going in, the one that lead down Knockturn Alley.

"What a surprise," Ron muttered under his breath, "but what's he doing down there?"

"Dunno," Hope whispered.

"Hurry or we'll lose him," Hermione cut across her. "Careful, though! Our feet!"

But Hope ignored her, being far more interested in catching up to Malfoy than if people saw disembodied feet running across the ground, something that probably should've mattered a bit more.

Knockturn Alley, much like Diagon Alley, was quite empty, so they needn't have worried. Every dark shop's windows showed equally dark rooms within as they moved down the street.

"There!" Hermione nudged her, pointing forwards to the shop that Malfoy had just entered into. It was Borgin and Burkes. Hope remembered the shop well, and it hadn't really been a pleasant experience for her, back when she was barely twelve, in fact, Hope hadn't liked it in the slightest. The shop gave creepy a whole different level, if you got her drift. Now, that was saying something, because half the books Hope read were partly viewed as Dark (though, she theorized, that was probably because there was a price to pay for certain magicks, such as blood or strength).

"Looking for these?"

Ron grinned at the pair, holding a pair of flesh-coloured strings, Extendable Ears.

Hope grinned back. "You're a life-saver," she told him seriously as he fed them under the door and they listened intently, eying the two figures through the window beside the door. It was only Malfoy and Mr. Borgin, and Mr. Borgin looked rather like he'd prefer not having Malfoy as his customer.

"...you know how to fix it?" Malfoy was demanding.

"Possibly," Mr. Borgin said in a vague voice. "I'll need to see it, though. Why don't you bring it into the shop?"

"I can't." Malfoy said through gritted teeth. "It's got to stay put. I just need you to tell me how to do it."

Mr. Borgin shifted awkwardly, looking a bit anxious. "Well," he swallowed, "without seeing it, I must say it will be a very difficult job, perhaps impossible. I couldn't guarantee anything."

"No?" Malfoy's voice had gone cold and dark, more so than Hope had ever heard it. "Perhaps this will make you more confident."

He moved closer to Mr. Borgin, showing his something that made what little colour that was in his face quickly drain from it.

"Tell anyone and there will be retribution," Malfoy warned. "You know Fenrir Greyback? He's a family friend. He'll be dropping in from time to time to make sure you're giving the problem your full attention."
"There will be no need for—" Mr. Borgin said quickly.

"I'll decide that," Malfoy interrupted. "Well, I'd better be off. And don't forget to keep that one safe, I'll need it."

"Perhaps you'd like to take it now?" Mr. Borgin offered.

"No, of course I wouldn't, you stupid, little man," Malfoy said with scorn, "how would I look carrying that down the street? Just don't sell it."

"Of course not...sir," Mr. Borgin said in a slightly unsteady voice as he bowed to Malfoy.

"Not a word to anyone, Borgin, and that includes my mother, understand?" Malfoy commanded.

And Hope was left wondering what it was that he wanted to fix, what it was that he wanted later, and what exactly he had shown Mr. Borgin to make him so scared. It gave her a very bad feeling.

"She doesn't like me very much," Fleur said softly as Hope poured her some tea, being very wary of how loud they were speaking when Mrs. Weasley wasn't too far away.

Hope patted her arm kindly. "We don't choose our in-laws. She'll come around eventually, you'll see."

"I 'ope so," Fleur said, heaving a long sigh, before returning to her wedding plans.

Wedding planning, Hope soon came to realize, was much more of a hassle than it seemed, but Fleur was totally into it, so she tried not to mind it.

"I wanted to ask you eef you would be my Maid of Honour?" Fleur said, smiling so brightly at Hope that she was almost blinded and thus taken completely by surprise by her words.

"Er...what?" Hope asked blankly. "You want me to...?"

Fleur bobbed her head, beaming. "You are my best friend! You should be my Maid of Honour!"

"Yeah, but Fleur, I don't know anything about weddings!" Hope winced a little as Mrs. Weasley began to aggressively chop at her sprouts before realizing she had a wand that she could use.

"Neizzer do I!" Fleur clapped her hands delightedly. "It will be fun, I promise!"

"So you say," Hope said dryly, "so, tell me what you were thinking about so far."

Fleur beamed brightly again. "So, Bill and I 'ave decided on only two bridesmaids, yourself and Gabrielle will look very sweet togezzer. I am theenking of pale gold for ze dresses, what do you zink?"

"Whatever you like," Hope said, waving her hand and taking a gulp of tea, "I can change my hair for the occasion, if you like."

"We can go shopping during your winter holiday," Fleur added.

"Sure," Hope said again before freezing, "wait...do I have to do a speech?"
Fleur's grin was almost feral.

"Ooh...I have corrupted you, my friend."

The French witch inclined her head slightly in amusement. "I wanted to look at dresses at zat time as well..."

"I'm guessing you won't be looking at bouquets until you've got a dress, then?" Hope mused, moving her cup slightly so that the tea swirled around in it.

Fleur nodded in agreement.

"You're really trying to make my life difficult, aren't you?"

Fleur could only laugh.
Train Ride of Irritation

Hope had gotten quite a bit used to the stares, which wasn't really a good thing, but when you were Hope Potter, you got used to publicity. As it was, she was ignoring all of the stares, grinning at her boyfriend, her arms locked around his neck and his around her waist.

"Don't miss me too badly," she said with a smirk, curling her fingers into his hair, "it might drive you a little mad."

"I'm already quite mad," he told her with a wink, "there wouldn't be much of a difference."

A laugh issued from Hope's lips at that comment. "Don't get up to too much fun without me, hm?"

"Nothing like what you get up to," he promised with another wink, bending down to kiss so deeply that once they had parted her cheeks were a flushed pink and several people were staring (though that probably had more to do with who she was than what she was doing).

"See you at Christmas," she said, waving as she jumped onto the just-starting-to-move train.

"I'll be waiting," he yelled after her.

"You make sure you look after yourself and," Mrs. Weasley called over the noise, "be good and stay safe!"

Hope could only wave until the train had moved out of the station, becoming quickly aware of the gathering of students around her.

"Over here, Hope!"

Hope tried very hard not to make the relief quite so obvious on her face at the sound of Neville's voice and she squeezed through the crowd to get to his side.

"Thank Merlin," she muttered as she was pulled into the much less crowded aisle. "I thought I was going to die!" She grinned around her god-brother towards the dirty-blonde haired Ravenclaw at his back. "Hey, Luna."

"Hello, Hope," Luna said in a serene voice, no different from usual.

"How was your holiday?" Hope asked, trying so very hard to ignore the obvious eavesdroppers around them, "hang on- let's grab a compartment first…"

Hope grabbed Luna's hand who in turn grabbed Neville's hand, dragging the pair down the hallway to the first free compartment she could find.

Hope was used to the stares that followed her, but that didn't mean she liked them, and she shifted a bit uncomfortably as several people peered through the glass.

"They're staring at us too," Neville noticed in surprise, gesturing to Luna and himself, "because we're with you."

Hope rolled her eyes, crossing one leg over the other. "I think that's only half of it, Neville," she said dryly. "You were at the Ministry too, it was in the Daily Prophet."

"And the Quibbler," Luna said brightly.
"I thought Gran would be angry about all the publicity, but she was really pleased," Neville informed her. "Says I'm starting to live up to my dad at long last. She bought me a new wand, look!"

"Wait, when did you break your wand?" Hope asked in confusion as he pulled out one that looked new in comparison to the one he had once carried.

"Oh, it got snapped after you went after Lestrange," Neville said keeping his voice mild and steady with difficulty, "I didn't really want to bring it up after... you know..."

The light in Hope's eyes flickered for a brief moment and Neville rushed into speech, hoping to distract her from her misery which must have been still present, seeing as it was only months after her godfather's death.

"Cherry and unicorn hair." He extended it to her and she glanced over the smooth, twisted wood at the grip that was a darker colour than the shaft. "We think it was one of the last Ollivander ever sold, he vanished next day- Oi, come back here, Trevor!"

Hope laughed as his toad escaped his one-handed grip to hop under the seat, Neville following after him.

"Are we still doing DA meetings this year?" Luna asked. "I really enjoyed the meetings. It was like having friends." She placed a pair of Specrespecs onto her eyes.

Hope reached out to squeeze her fingers affectionately. "You're my friend, Luna, don't you think anything differently."

Luna smiled brightly.

"I was considering carrying it on," Hope added, causing Neville to whack his head on the underside of the seat as he surfaced with Trevor once more.

"Really?" His excitement showed on his whole body at that news. "That's great!"

"We'd have to find a new place to practice, though," Hope mused more to herself.

"What's wrong with the Room of Requirement?" Luna asked in her dreamy manner.

"Nothing," Hope said with a shrug, "you know, apart from the fact that we were discovered there... I'll think of something, don't worry."

"You always do," Neville said in such a way that told her he didn't doubt her words. Hope smiled, but they were suddenly interrupted by the door opening to reveal a dark-haired Gryffindor fifth-year with a self-assured expression on his face entered. Hope could see a few people clamouring to see outside of it, his friends perhaps.

She arched an eyebrow at the boy. Of the many raising-eyebrow expressions that Neville had seen her sport over the years, he could easily translate this one to "What the fuck do you want?" Her words, not his.

"Hello, Hope," he said, giving her his full attention and ignoring Luna and Neville as if they weren't even there and giving her a roguish grin that was a pale imitation to George's. "I'm Edward Thompson, my friends and I would love if you would join us in our compartment." It sounded very much like he had rehearsed these words, making them sound a little formal, too formal for her tastes. "You don't have to sit with them."
Luna watched in fascination as Hope's whole body froze. It was like she had been carved out of stone, or ice, her eyes frigid emeralds.

"That's my god-brother and my friend you just insulted," she said in a mild voice.

"Really?" the boy asked startled slightly, glancing between the three before quickly excusing himself.

"People expect you to have cooler friends than us," Luna said after a moment of silence.

"You two rank pretty high on my 'cool list'," Hope said, rolling her eyes once more. "They're the ones who didn't fight with me at the Ministry, that was you guys."

Luna smiled glowingly at her, as if she could be paid no higher compliment.

"We didn't face him, though," Neville disagreed.

"Neville," Hope said shortly, "I didn't go to the Ministry to fight Voldemort, remember?"

"But you did," Neville told her.

"Yes, but—" Hope floundered.

"If we'd been as good as you, maybe we might not have gone down so early on," Luna speculated.

"Then I suppose we'll have to work on your duelling skills, yeah?" Hope asked dryly, before standing up in irritation to wrench open the door and glare down the hall to the gaggle of boys and girls that were still milling about there.

"To all of you who are unaware," she said loudly, "I am in a serious relationship with my boyfriend and I do not plan on cheating on him anytime soon, so 'The Chosen One' is off the market!" She shut the door with so much force that the glass in the door vibrated dangerously.

"That won't deter them," Luna said from behind the Quibbler.

"She's right," Neville said, glancing out of the compartment nervously, "it'll probably be worse at school."

Hope groaned. "Why did George leave me with a school of fools?"

Luna's face was hidden behind her magazine, but Neville couldn't completely smother his chuckles. "Murder me," she murmured to herself, resting her head against the cushion of the back of her seat. She only opened her eyes an hour or two later when the compartment door opened once more.

Hope wasn't surprised to see Hermione and Ron in the least, but their tag-along she was surprised to see.

"Susan?" she said her name in utter bemusement.

Ron grinned, resting a hand between the Hufflepuff prefect's shoulder blades. "Saw her wandering around and figured she'd like some company."

Susan's cheeks flooded with colour. "I-I don't want to intrude," she said quickly.

"No, its fine," Hope assured her, waving off her concern, "I mean, it's not like we were doing anything...how are you?"
Susan’s lips twisted as if trying to form something that was a cross between a smile and a grimace. "I've seen better days, you?"

"This is one of the better days," Hope admitted.

"Several members of the DA have come up to us," Hermione said, hoping to draw the two girls away from the topic of deaths, "they want to know if you're starting it up this year."

"I think I might," Hope mused, somehow restraining from outright laughter at the pleased looks on their faces.

"That's wonderful!" Susan said in euphoria. "We –I mean, the Hufflepuffs– were hoping you'd continue, we learned so much."

"Even Smith?" Hope asked and Ron and Hermione studiously avoided her eye. Zacharias Smith was the one Hufflepuff who irritated her above all others (taking Ernie’s former place).

"Well," Susan gave a small chuckle, "maybe not Zacharias."

"I was telling Luna and Neville that we'd need a new place to practice," Hope told Hermione more, who was being strangely quiet. Was it because of the attention that Ron was paying towards Susan?

Hermione nodded in understanding. "Still keeping it a secret group, then?" She threw a grin to her friend.

"You know me," Hope said with a shrug, "secrecy and all."

"Is that why George calls you Mystery-Girl?" Luna piped up suddenly.

Hope's cheeks flushed with colour, making those in the compartment laugh at her expression. "Among other things."

"Excuse me," a small voice squeaked behind Susan, who quickly angled her body so that everyone could see a small boy in Ravenclaw colours clutching two scrolls in his hands. "I-I'm supposed to deliver these to Neville Longbottom and H-Hope Potter," he stuttered, his face burning hotter than the sun when he made eye contact with Hope, practically throwing the rolls of parchment at them as he left the compartment quickly.

"Still having an effect on people?" Ron asked, his lips twitching in amusement.

"Oh, shut up," Hope grumbled, removing the ribbon from hers to read the contents.

Hope,

I would be delighted if you would join me for a bite of lunch in compartment C.

Sincerely,

Professor H.E.F. Slughorn

Hope scowled fiercely at the fancy lettering.

"Is it bad?" Ron queried, trying to read it over her shoulder before she crumpled it up in her hand.

"What is it?"

"A lunch invite," Hope said unenthusiastically, "I don't suppose I could just skive off…"
"I get why he wants to see you," Neville said, gazing at his own invitation, looking completely flummoxed, "but what's he want me for?"

Hope opened her mouth, but she shut it quickly. Slughorn had to know the stories of Neville's parents, they were rather elite among the Aurors before Bellatrix got to them.

"Not a clue," she said, feigning confusion. "Better get it over with, though, come on."

Hope studiously ignored the staring as she left the compartment once more.

"I suppose this is the downside of people realizing I was telling the truth all last year," she muttered to Neville.

He shrugged in a "What can you do?" manner that didn't help Hope in the slightest as they opened the door to Compartment C.

"Hope, m'girl!"

Hope strained to hide her grimace. "Hello, Professor." She stamped a little on Neville's foot as he was staring a little at the potions master with a bit of fear.

"Good to see you, good to see you! And you must be Mr. Longbottom!" He hardly waited for a response, as they sat down in the only two free seats, gesturing to the other people he had gathered in the compartment. "Now, do you know everyone?" he asked them. "Blaise Zabini is in your year, of course—"

Hope's eyes flickered to where the sixth-year Slytherin who narrowed his eyes at her in turn. She had heard rumours about the suspicious deaths of all men that his mother had married, each death leaving her and her son richer than they had been to begin with.

"This is Cormac McLaggen, perhaps you've come across each other—? No?"

Cormac McLaggen was practically a Casanova, but generally harmless but doubly irritating. He winked at her and raised a hand to Neville. Hope hardly blinked.

"—and this is Marcus Belby, I don't know whether—?"

Hope was hardly familiar with the Ravenclaw boy who looked much more awkward than anyone else in the room. She didn't hang out with many Ravenclaws, unless they were the ones in the DA.

"—and this charming young lady tells me she knows you!"

Neville and Hope stared at Ginny where she was squashed in a corner, looking quite like she'd rather be anywhere else but there.

"Well now, this is most pleasant," Slughorn said pleasantly. "A chance to get to know you all a little better…"

It seemed to Hope that Slughorn had gathered a number of people who either had skills or were well connected. Marcus Belby's uncle was the one who had developed the Wolfsbane potion, Cormac McLaggen was well-connected through his uncle to the current Minister for Magic, Blaise Zabini was quite wealthy, Neville's parents were famous Aurors, and Ginny had shown proficient magical skill.

Hope had been zoning out a bit when he finally turned to her, and she quickly forced her mind out of
the clouds and back to the present.

"And now, Hope Potter!" Slughorn cried. "Where to begin? I feel I barely scratched the surface when we met over the summer!" He eyed her shrewdly for a moment and Hope forced herself to not shift uncomfortably under the stare. "'The Chosen One,' they're calling you now!"

Hope's hand clenched under the table.

"Of course, there have been rumours for years," Slughorn mused, "I remember when —well— after that terrible night —Lily—James—and you survived—and the word was that you must have powers beyond the ordinary—"

A frown twisted her lips downwards slightly at the small noise of mirth Zabini had uttered.

Ginny was quick to jump to Hope's defence, snarling at the boy. "Yeah, Zabini, because you're so talented…at posing…"

"Oh dear! You want to be careful, Blaise!" Slughorn warned in a light-hearted manner. "I saw this young lady perform the most marvellous Bat-Bogey Hex as I was passing her carriage! I wouldn't cross her!"

Hope spared Ginny a thankful look.

"Anyway…such rumours this summer." His eyes were back on hers. "Of course, one doesn't know what to believe, the Prophet has been known to print inaccuracies, make mistakes—but there seems little doubt, given the number of witnesses, that there was quite a disturbance at the Ministry and that you were there in the thick of it all!"

"I was," Hope said curtly, "along with five other students."

"Were you really?" Slughorn seemed pleased that this information was indeed true. "If that is true, one has to wonder if…the rumour of a fabled prophecy—?"

"We never heard a prophecy," Neville said quickly. This was true, Hope had smashed it before anyone, even her, could hear what it was.

"That's right," Ginny agreed, "Neville and I were both there too, and all this 'Chosen One' rubbish is just the Prophet making things up as usual."

"You were both there too, were you?" Slughorn asked, but the pair seemed unwilling to comment further and the conversation drifted farther from Hope, much to her relief. However, that did not end her torture, because she, Neville, and Ginny were further subjected to long-winding stories about witches and wizards that Slughorn had taught, until the sky had darkened.

"Good gracious," he said, looking out of the window, "it's getting dark already! I didn't notice that they'd lit the lamps! You'd better go and change into your robes, all of you. McLaggen, you must drop by and borrow that book on nogtails. Hope, Blaise—any time you're passing. Same goes for you, miss," he added to Ginny who looked a bit like she wouldn't be dropping by his class anytime soon. "Well, off you go, off you go!"

"What were you doing in there, Ginny?" Hope asked once they'd left.

"He saw me hex Zacharias Smith," Ginny said, rolling her eyes. "You remember that idiot from Hufflepuff who was in the DA? He kept on and on asking about what happened at the Ministry and in the end he annoyed me so much I hexed him—when Slughorn came in I thought I was going to
get detention, but he just thought it was a really good hex and invited me to lunch! Mad, eh?"

"Better then because you're connected to a Dark Lord," Hope said with a mournful sigh, "I've got to run to the loo before I get changed. See you later?"

They both nodded and waved goodbye to her as she headed down the train alone.

Five minutes later, she left the bathroom under the invisibility cloak, because she just couldn't deal with so many people looking at her and whispering about her and trying to talk to her. She was used to it, sure, but too much was too much. She stalked angrily down the aisle, careful not to run into anyone when Malfoy's voice caught her interest.

"Mother wants me to complete my education," he said, his voice slightly muffled through the door, "but personally, I don't see it as that important these days. I mean, think about it... When the Dark Lord takes over, is he going to care how many OWLs or N.E.W.T.S anyone's got? Of course he isn't... It'll be all about the kind of service he received, the level of devotion he was shown."

"And you think you'll be able to do something for him?" Zabini said in obvious scorn and just a small amount of jealousy. "Sixteen years old and not even fully qualified yet?"

"I've just said, haven't I?" Malfoy said, lowering his voice so that Hope had to strain to hear. "Maybe he doesn't care if I'm qualified. Maybe the job he wants me to do isn't something that you need to be qualified for."

Hope was tempted to listen for a second longer, but she only had a few more minutes to get changed so she quickly headed off, her thoughts swirling in her head at his words.

"Wotcher!"

"Tonks!"

The older Metamorphmagus was assaulted by a number of students, each hugging her tightly enough to bruise a few ribs.

"Cor! Don't go breaking my bones, you lot!" she complained, though she was smiling at all of them, her hair a shocking shade of pink that Hope hadn't seen in a very long time.

"What're you doing here?" Hope asked, grinning at her.

"Oh, I've been stationed in Hogsmeade," Tonks told them over Ginny's head as she hugged the girl, "along with Proudfoot, Savage, and Dawlish— as extra protection."

"Sounds boring," Ron said, wrinkling his nose at her.

"Oh," Hermione said, quickly glancing to where Neville stood looking a bit lost and Luna a bit dreamy (no more than usual), "Neville, Luna, this is Tonks, she's an Auror and she helped out at the Ministry last year."

"Wotcher," Tonks said grinning at the pair, shaking Neville's hand and winking at Luna, "keep out of trouble, you lot, eh?" She directed her words towards Hope more than anyone else. Hope pouted as her friends laughed.

"I need a moment with my cousin, if you don't mind," she added, pulling Hope a short distance away.
“First of all, I’ve got to thank you for what you said to Remus,” Tonks told her smiling, "he's…well, you know."

Hope did know. The last time she'd seen Remus, he had looked much happier than he usually did.

"He asked me to pass this along to you," she added, extending a sealed envelope to her, which she took in confusion. "He's not going to be able to write—"

"Why?" Hope asked in confusion.

"He's going to be underground for awhile, with other werewolves, trying to win them over to our side."

Hope frowned. "Do you think that'll work?"

Tonks shrugged. "Well, someone's got to try, I suppose…take care of yourself, Hope, alright?"

"You know me," Hope muttered, "all about safety and security."

Tonks was forced to smother her laughter as she pushed the now dark-haired girl towards the carriage her friends were holding.

"What was that about?" Susan asked in confusion, having joined them at Ron's insistence (Ginny had gone off to Seamus and Dean's carriage)

"It's nothing," Hope said simply, "just family stuff."

"What did Slughorn want?" Hermione asked her, hoping to distract Susan from Hope's small conversation with Tonks.

"What everyone else does," Hope said rolling her eyes in irritation, "to know about the Ministry—what we did there."

"Him and everyone else," Hermione said in disapproval, "I lost count how many people came up to Ron and I on the train."

"They all wanted to know if you were 'the Chosen One'," Ron added.

"What'd you tell them?" Hope asked with an arched eyebrow.

"What d'you think? I told them to shove off!"

The laughter echoed loudly inside the carriage, only cutting off when they finally reached the castle.

"Oh, thank Merlin!" Ron cried, "I'm starving!"

Hope heard Susan giggle and glanced over to where Hermione was standing, her face shadowed by darkness. She looped her arm in Hermione's, earning her a surprised look.

"Try not to be so obvious," Hope whispered and Hermione blushed.

"But, he's—" Hermione started to say.

"Hermione," Hope cut across her. "Ron hasn't been giving you his attention since third year for kicks."
Her flush darkened.

"Maybe they'll go out, maybe they won't," Hope said with a shrug, "but you know that Ron has no experience in romantic relationships...as in, at all."

Hermione had to stifle her humour at that.

"Give him time...maybe go on a date yourself," Hope suggested, "if he's worth it, then wait."

Hermione's face held an expression of understanding. "I suppose you would know all about relationships, wouldn't you?"

"Eh," Hope said with a shrug, "I have been dating the same bloke since third year, so...I guess."

Hermione laughed as they headed inside, the pair studiously ignoring the whispers as they sat down at the table together.

"Heard someone on the train talking about the DA restarting," an all-too-familiar voice uttered and Hope looked up to grin at one of her favourite Slytherins, Daphne Greengrass.

"Daphne, hey!" She stood up to hug the Slytherin prefect, causing an outbreak in muttering (nothing as bad as when Dean and Daphne had first started to go out). "Still going strong with Dean, then?"

"Of course," Daphne said, rolling her eyes as they sat down, "lots of my House don't care too much for me, but who cares about them, right?"

Ron sniggered.

"But how am I supposed to resist someone that hot?" She added, jerking her head towards Dean, whose dark cheeks flushed slightly before he leaned down to kiss her.

"Aw, you guys are so cute!" Ginny cooed as she sat down with Seamus, looking much happier than she had with Slughorn.

"Shut it, Weasley!" Daphne barked, parting from her boyfriend before turning back to Hope. "So we are doing it this year, right?"

"Possibly," Hope said evasively, "once I find a new place for us to practice, I'll let everyone know."

"Great!" Seamus and Dean said at the same time, making each other laugh.

"I only got to go to barely one the first time around," Seamus said.

"Yeah...that lesson was fun, wasn't it?" Hope laughed, remembering how she'd been dragged up to the headmaster's office, only to have her attention diverted when Dumbledore said his few words and food appeared. They were all quite distracted with dinner and dessert until a good bit later when Dumbledore stood to begin his typical start of term speech. Hope kept her eyes firmly to the table, her finger tracing into the wooden surface, picking at imperfections.

"The very best of evenings to you!" he called to them all.

Hermione made a startled noise beside her. "What happened to his hand?"

The blackened flesh of his right hand looked as awful as it had when he had come to pick her up, and it had caught many students' attentions as well.
"Nothing to worry about," he assured them all, moving his arm so that his sleeve hid his hand. "Now... to our new students, welcome, to our old students, welcome back! Another year full of magical education awaits you..."

"How long d'you think his hand has been like that?" Ron whispered to the two. "It wasn't like that last year, was it?"

"It was like that when he dropped me at the Burrow," Hope said in a low voice, "I wonder if it can't be healed by magical means if it still looks like that..."

"There are some injuries you can't cure," Hermione said quietly, her face tinged a little green, "old curses...and there are poisons without antidotes..."

"...and Mr. Filch, our caretaker," Dumbledore continued, "has asked me to say that there is a blanket ban on any joke items bought at the shop called Weasleys' Wizard Wheezes."

Hope smothered her sniggers at those words.

"Those wishing to play for their House Quidditch teams should give their names to their Heads of House as usual. We are also looking for new Quidditch commentators, who should do likewise. We are pleased to welcome a new member of staff this year, Professor Slughorn—" The bald-headed wizard stood, beaming brightly at them all. "—is a former colleague of mine who has agreed resume his old post of Potions master."

"Potions?" Many people murmured in confusion.

Hope hadn't liked the thought Snape of taking the Defence Against the Dark Arts position (because why else would Dumbledore give the Potions position to someone else?), but that could have possibly been because she hated him to pieces and he was likely to sabotage her in one of her best subjects, and that just wasn't fair.

"Professor Snape, meanwhile," Dumbledore had to raise his voice as whispers broke out suddenly over the four House tables, "will be taking the position of Defence Against the Dark Arts teacher."

Hope gagged as the Slytherins exploded into laughter, his lips smirking.

"The only upside of this is that he'll hopefully be dead by the end of the year," Hope said in an optimistic manner.

"Hope!"

"What?" Hope demanded, turning slightly towards Hermione. "The man's a git and a bully, even Daphne's got to agree with that."

"To three-fourths of the school, yeah," Daphne agreed, nodding to Hope, "I think he takes your existence as a personal insult."

"Or he's just a bullying git to all the Gryffindors," Ron offered.

"Trust me," Daphne said with certainty, "he reserved a special kind of hatred for Hope."

"Gee, thanks," Hope said sarcastically.

Dumbledore cleared his throat, causing all of the noise to come to a sudden stop. "Now," he began on a more solemn note, "as everybody in this Hall knows, Lord Voldemort and his followers are
once more at large and gaining in strength. I cannot emphasize strongly enough how dangerous the present situation is, and how much care each of us at Hogwarts must take to ensure that we remain castle’s magical fortifications have been strengthened over the summer, we are protected in new and more powerful ways, but we must still guard scrupulously against carelessness on the part of any student or member of staff.

I urge you, therefore, to abide by any security restrictions that you teachers might impose upon you, however irksome you might find them — in particular, the rule that you are not to be out of after hours. I implore you, should you notice anything strange or suspicious within or outside the castle, to report it to a member of staff immediately. I trust you to conduct yourselves, always, with the utmost regard for your own and others’ safety.”

Worried glances were exchanged and Hope couldn’t help but feel that if Voldemort wanted to get into the castle, he wouldn’t be trying to come in through the front door. It seemed rather like he already had a man on the inside.

What other use would he have for a student like Draco Malfoy?
"Look, I'm not saying that there isn't a possibility that Malfoy could be a Death Eater," Hermione said lowly as they walked down to the Great Hall the next day to eat and be given their schedules for the next term. "But there are other factors to consider."

"What was it that he said exactly?" Ron asked from beside her.

Hope screwed up her face in thought. "Something about his mother wanting him to continue his education, but he didn't see the point if Voldemort only cared about the devotion he received…"

"That does sound like Death Eater ideology," Ron said seriously to Hermione, who appeared slightly impressed by his use of 'ideology.'

"Yes, but he could also just be a sympathizer," Hermione insisted, "you know, like Sirius' parents." Ron sucked in a breath of warning and Hermione realized a second too late what she'd said.

"You don't need to freak out every time his name's said," Hope said in annoyance, "I'm a big girl."

"Right, er, sorry," Ron said and Hermione smiled apologetically. "So, what'd he say after that?"

"Something about the job Voldemort wanted him to do didn't need him to be qualified," Hope said.

"Could he have been trying to impress who he was with?" Ron asked.

Doubt filled Hermione's eyes. "I don't know," she admitted. "It would be like Malfoy make himself seem more important than he is...but that's a big lie to tell..."

"Reserving judgment, then?" Hope asked sourly.

"Reserving judgment," Ron and Hermione agreed, making their friend groan as they sat down at the table, helping themselves to eggs, sausage, and bacon.

"How d'you think Hagrid's going to react when he finds out we're not taking his class this year?" Hope asked, forcing a smile on her face as she waved at the half-giant.

"But he can't really think we'd continue Care of Magical Creatures!" Hermione said, slightly aghast. "I mean, isn't in the careers we want to go into, and it not like we expressed any…interest."

"Are you kidding?" Ron snorted. "We're probably the only ones that have. Nobody else likes the class! We only try do cause it's Hagrid, but he thinks we like the stupid subject. D'you reckon anyone's going to go on to NEWT?"

"Probably not," Hope conceded, tucking into her food and waiting until Professor McGonagall came around about ten minutes later, to distribute their schedules.

"See you in Ancient Runes," Hermione said cheerfully as Professor McGonagall cleared her for her classes, before turning to Hope.

"So, Potter, Potter…" Professor McGonagall rifled through her notes until she found Hope's results. "Well done across the board, I expected nothing less." Hope beamed at the praise. "I see you've chosen to go with Curse-breaking, then? Excellent, excellent. Dropping Care for Magical Creatures and Herbology?"
"Yes, Professor," Hope said agreeably as Professor McGonagall tapped her timetable, making her classes appear.

"Twenty hopefuls have already put down their names for the Gryffindor Quidditch team. I shall pass the list to you in due course and you can fix up trials at your leisure," Professor McGonagall added, "and won't you stop by my class before dinner for it?"

"Of course, Professor," Hope promised, gathering her timetable and pulling her bag strap over her shoulder and striding off to first period Ancient Runes to meet up with Hermione.

"Welcome, welcome!" Professor Babbling ushered them all inside her room, "as you all have passed your OWL in this subject, we will be delving into the more advanced and ancient and sometimes obscure branches…" Her eyes flickered to where Hope was grinning, waggling her eyebrows at Hermione. "There aren't many of you in this class, which doesn't surprise me, very few go into Curse-breaking or Rune Analyzing, or even wish to continue this course just as an extracurricular. This year we will be focusing on the many cultures that use Runes and how they power their Runes and how several different Runes can mean the same thing…We will begin with the Celts."

She tapped the chalkboard with her wand and words began to appear and her students struggled to find parchment and quill to ink everything down.

"Now, a brief history on the Celts…they were a group of people that occupied lands from the British Isles to Galatia. One unique aspect of the Celts is that there is hardly any written account of their history, apart from the Runes they carved into stone of the places they lived. Many of these Runes we will be studying for the next few weeks, and on why the Celts drew them the way that they did, giving them life…"

By the time Hope and Hermione joined the queue outside of Defence Against the Dark Arts, they were both carrying a more than sufficient weight slung across one shoulder from the heavy tomes in their bags that Professor Babbling had assigned.

"Only you would be happy about homework in Ancient Runes," Hermione grumbled to her friend who was whistling softly to herself.

Hope clapped her hands together eagerly. "I can't help it! They're just so fascinating!"

"You're crazy," Ron bemoaned as he joined them, his cheeks slightly pink. Hope hid a smirk; he must have been speaking with Susan shortly before meeting them. "Who'd be excited about extra homework?"

"In Runes? That mental one," Hermione said, prodding her friend in the arm, earning her an irritated look as the door opened and the students were ushered inside. Hope had to say she didn't like how Snape had redecorated…it was very dark. Grotesque pictures adorned the walls, showing gruesome injuries and contorted expressions of pain. Hope could already tell she was going to hate him as a teacher.

"I have not asked you to take out your books," Snape said as they all took their seats, and Hermione was quick to hide the fact that she had been reaching for her book. "Who'd be excited about extra homework?"

"I have not asked you to take out your books," Snape said as they all took their seats, and Hermione was quick to hide the fact that she had been reaching for her book. "I wish to speak to you, and I want your fullest attention."

If there was one person who's attention he did not fully have, it was Hope's (big surprise there). The moment he had begun to speak, Hope had pulled out a small sketchbook and lightly inked runes against the paper. She carefully traced out the Blood Rune for Defence, as Snape spoke.
"You have had five teachers in this subject so far, I believe," Snape said and Hope rolled her eyes at the parchment. Right, like he didn't actually know how many professors they'd had before him… yeah, that was likely. Hope etched a delicate curve to the symbol.

"Naturally, these teachers will all have had their own methods and priorities. Given this confusion I am surprised so many of you scraped an OWL in this subject," Snape added scathingly. "I shall be even more surprised if all of you manage to keep up with the NEWT work, which will be more advanced."

Hope made a mocking face to her paper, her hair a dark curtain, shrouding her face from view, though she was certain that Snape could guess her expression, he had, after all, seen it countless times before (often in detention).

"The Dark Arts are many, varied, ever-changing, and eternal. Fighting them is like fighting a many-headed monster, which, each time a neck is severed, sprouts a head even fiercer and cleverer than before." Hope wrinkled her nose. How nice of him to compare the Dark Arts to the Hydra of Greek Myth. "You are fighting that which is unfixed, mutating, indestructible."

She lifted her eyes momentarily to be fixed with a penetrating stare that made her question which side he was really on, because it sounded rather like he loved the Dark Arts. Now, Hope couldn't deny her own fascination with it, but it stemmed from a single aspect (typically), which was runes. That was how she got into Blood Magick, though now she was considering going into Natural Magick which was nearly as old as Blood Magick.

"Your defences must therefore be as flexible and inventive as the arts you seek to undo," Snape continued as Hope's eyes dropped to her parchment once more. "These pictures (he must have been referencing the lovely portraits he had around the room, but Hope didn't bother to look) give a fair representation of what happens to those who suffer, for instance, the Cruciatus Curse, feel the Dementor's Kiss, or provoke the aggression of the Inferius."

"Has an Inferius been seen, then?" Parvati surprised them all by speaking up, her voice an octave higher than usual. "Is it definite, is he using them?"

"The Dark Lord has used Inferi in the past," Snape said in a dismissive voice, clearly not caring for the interruption, "which means you would be well-advised to assume he might use them again. Now...you are, I believe, complete novices in the use of nonverbal spells. What is the advantage of a nonverbal spell?"

To no one's surprise, Hermione's hand was the first into the air as well as the only one. It appeared as though it was quite painful for Snape to choose her for the one to give the answer. "Very well—Miss Granger?"

"Your adversary has no warning about what kind of magic you're about to perform, which gives you a split-second advantage," Hermione said, hardly breathing as she recited the answer.

"An answer copied almost word for word from The Standard Book of Spells, Grade Six," Snape agreed reluctantly, his words intending to insult no doubt, but Hermione had thick skin from all those years of being one of Hope's best mates, "but correct in essentials. Yes, those who progress in using magic without shouting incantations gain an element of surprise in their spell-casting. Not all wizards can do this, of course; it is a question of concentration and mind power which some...lack."

Hope's eyes betrayed her boredom as his purposefully strayed to her once more. Hope arched an eyebrow before leaning back in her chair, straining the back two legs. She had no way of knowing she was imitating her godfather from so many years previously.
"You will now divide into pairs," Snape told them. "One partner will attempt jinx the other without speaking. The other will attempt to repel the jinx in equal silence. Carry on."

Hope had only attempted nonverbal spells a few times, and they hadn't really gone well for her. George had tried to teach her a little, but her mind had always been elsewhere at the time (she couldn't deny she hadn't been a tiny bit preoccupied last year).

Hermione—once again, unsurprisingly—managed it within ten minutes, but for Ron and Hope, it was a bit more difficult. Hope had managed it, but only barely; the jinx had cancelled within seconds. Ron was straining for even the smallest response, though, something Snape was quick to notice.

"Pathetic, Weasley," he said in disdain. "Here—let me show you—"

His spell never connected and Hope threw up her wand making a violent slash that sent both her and Snape flying backwards, earning the attention of the entire class. It was pure luck that the bell rang just moments later and Hope clamoured quickly to her feet, grabbing her bag in a flurry as the other students quickly exited, but a voice stopped her.

"Potter."

Hope grimaced, freezing in her spot to turn back to scowl at Snape. "Professor?"

"I would not be so callous next time you use magic without thinking, it does have consequences… though, if you are like Black, as I suspect you are, I doubt you'll consider that."

Hope's face went white in anger and her eyes glowed red as Ron and Hermione grabbed her by the elbows and steered her out of the room.

"Hasn't changed much, has he?" Ron asked as Hope shrugged herself out of their grips, her face still tight from Snape's words.

"He really shouldn't have said that," Hermione said quietly.

"He's heartless and cold and cruel," Hope said darkly, "I'm more surprised that my mum was friends with him."

"Huh?" Both Ron and Hermione gaped at her as this new information came to light. Unfortunately, Hope did not elaborate.

"When—"

"The next person to ask me about the first meeting will lose their coin, I swear to Merlin!" Hope said lowly, scowling fiercely at Ernie MacMillan who gulped a little nervously, but Ron and Hermione were quick to dismiss her attitude. They had seen her explode before, and her 'mild' was death threats, so this was hardly threatening to Ernie.

Hope could hear Daphne and Tracey at the next table over, muffling their amusement. She sent them a look and Tracey gave her a wink in return before they all turned back towards the front of the Potions classroom. Hope was at a table with Ron, Hermione, and Ernie, and they were the closest to a cauldron holding a slightly off-white potion that was giving off some lovely scents. To Hope, it smelled like gun powder, treacle tart, and old parchment.

"Now then, now then, now then," Slughorn beamed at them all. "Scales out, everyone, and potion kits, and don't forget your copies of Advanced Potion-Making…"
There was a flurry to remove their things from their bags and Hope was disappointed to learn she hadn't actually bought Advanced Potion-Making.

"Erm…Professor?" she said, raising a hand slightly. "You wouldn't have extras, would you? I bought a rebound Magical Drafts and Potions, it seems…"

"Not to worry, Hope, m'girl!" Slughorn said brightly. "We've got a small stock of old books here, they'll do until you can write to Flourish and Blotts..."

"Thank you," Hope said gratefully as the former Slytherin Head retrieved a book for her (though it was remarkably worn, she noticed).

"No trouble," he said kindly. Before beginning his lecture concerning what kind of potions they ought to be able to do, including Amortentia (the most powerful love potion, which made sense seeing as it smelled a tiny bit like George), Veritaserum, and Polyjuice Potion.

Hermione, of course (was there really any need to question it anymore?), was the only one who seemed to know all the bubbling potions that rested before them, something that drew Slughorn's interest and something that made Hope suspicious. Slughorn seemed like the type of person who would single out the best in the class and leave the others to flounder. Going by the irritated look Ron was throwing her, it had already begun. And it hadn't helped that Hope had mentioned Hermione before when she'd said one of her best mates was Muggle-born and was at the top of the year.

"And now, it is time for us to start work," Slughorn said, clapping his hands together.

"Sir," Ernie interrupted politely, pointing to a cauldron separate from the ones Slughorn had spent the first part of the class talking about, "you haven't told us what's in that one."

"Oho!" Slughorn said, the eagerness laced in his voice as he bounced on his heels. "Yes. That. Well, that one, ladies and gentlemen, is a most curious little potion called Felix Felicis. I take it that you know what Felix Felicis does, Miss Granger," he added towards Hermione who was gazing at the golden potion in astonishment.

"It's liquid luck!" Hermione said, craning slightly to see it better from her spot. "It makes you lucky!"

"Quite right, take another ten points for Gryffindor. Yes, it's a funny little potion, Felix Felicis. Desperately tricky to make, and disastrous to get wrong," Slughorn warned, sounding serious for once. "However, if brewed correctly, as this has been, you will find that all your endeavours tend to succeed...at least until the effects wear off."

Hope arched an eyebrow. Hm…that sounded like it would come in handy.

"Why don't people drink it all the time, sir?" said Terry Boot asked.

Hope snorted, drawing a number of eyes towards her. "Could you imagine the arrogance?"

"Quite right, Hope," Slughorn agreed. "If taken in excess, it causes giddiness, recklessness, and dangerous overconfidence. Too much of a good thing, you know...highly toxic in large quantities. But taken sparingly, and very occasionally..." He spared them all smiles of contentment. "I had it twice in my life. Once when I was twenty-four, once when I was fifty-seven. Two tablespoonfuls taken with breakfast. Two perfect days...And that, is what I shall be offering as a prize in this lesson." He pulled out a round shaped bottle that was a little larger than Hope was anticipating.

"Now, I must give you warning that Felix Felicis is a banned substance in organized competitions...sporting events, for instance, examinations, or elections. So the winner is to use it on
an ordinary day only...and watch how that ordinary day becomes extraordinary!"

Hope grinned at Ron who rolled his eyes as if to say there was no chance he was going to get that bottle.

"So, how are you to win fabulous prize?" Slughorn asked brightly. "Well, by turning to page ten of Advanced Potion Making. We have a little over an hour left to us, which should be time for you to make a decent attempt at the Draught of Living Death. I know it is more complex than anything you have attempted before, and I do not expect a perfect potion from anybody. The person who does best, however, will win little Felix here. Off you go!"

As Hope opened her tattered copy of Advanced Potion Making, she was dismayed to discover the previous owner had written into it a great deal, scrawling over the directions with their own annotations. Crushing sopophorous beans instead of cutting them, adding a clockwise stir instead of complete anti-clockwise stirs...Hope eyed the corrected instructions distrustfully, but really, what was the harm in it?

A lot, she told the voice in her head.

She eyed the instructions oddly. George had once told her that crushing the beans released more juice than cutting...but that had been ages ago, back in her first year. Her eyes narrowed. Well, if it didn't work, she'd at least know not to use it a second time.

She tapped her cauldron, lighting the fire underneath it as she sliced her Valerian roots carefully into equal four inch lengths before throwing them into the bubbling cauldron. It turned a dark grey that gradually darkened in colour as she added her Essence of Wormwood. Hope's face soured slightly as she looked over the next part, which the previous owner had scribbled out.

She took her silver knife, crushing the bean carefully and dribbling the juice contained within the bean into the cauldron. Hope could hardly contain her surprise as the potion lightened to a soft shade of pale purple.

What luck did she have to get a potions book from someone who was clearly a genius?

She stirred the potion carefully, adding in a clockwise stir amongst the anti-clockwise stirs. Each time she added the clockwise stir, the potion got paler and paler and Hope couldn't quite fathom why.

"How are you doing that?" Hermione's tone was slightly accusatory.

Hope shrugged her shoulders looking a little lost, if the expression on her face was anything to go by. It was unprecedented for Hope to ever surpass Hermione in Potions class (though, most of that could be simply blamed on Snape, the bastard).

"And time's...up!" Slughorn called through the haze of steam that had erupted from a number of the cauldrons. "Stop stirring, please!"

He inspected all the potions closely, maintaining a silence until he came across Hope's which was only slightly opaque and still the lightest coloured potion in the class.

"The clear winner! Excellent, excellent, Hope!" he said, his eyes dancing as he spoke. "Good lord, it's clear you've inherited your mother's talent. She was a dab hand at Potions, Lily was! Here you are, then, here you are-- one bottle of Felix Felicis, as promised, and use it well!"

There was no way Hope was this lucky, but she took the bottle, relishing in the angry look on Malfoy's face. However, Tracey and Daphne's expressions of contemplation put her on edge; she
suspected an interrogation later. Hope gave an internal grimace. They wouldn't be the only ones. Hermione was going to pick at her brain later, she just knew it.

"Professor?" Hope called into the room, peeking her head around the door of Professor McGonagall's office, smiling when she saw the older woman at her desk, making annotations for her lectures.

"Ah, Potter, come in," she said, waving the girl forward. "Here is the list."

"Thanks..." Hope took the list, glancing it over, an eyebrow rising slightly. "Some of these are first years..." she said slowly.

"Nothing bars them from trying out, though," Professor McGonagall said with an amused shrug.

"Less for me, though," Hope grumbled, rolling up the parchment. "Was there anything else?"

"Just a request," Professor McGonagall said, causing her to pause.

"Hm?"

"You no doubt know that Prefects and Aurors will be patrolling the halls this term," Professor McGonagall began.

"Yes," Hope said, not quite understanding where she was going with that.

"Each of the Quidditch Captains are being asked if they would be willing to join them on patrol," Professor McGonagall explained. "I was wondering if you would mind giving up a few hours one night a week?"

"Not at all, Professor," Hope said simply. "Anything to help."

Professor McGonagall thought she was being a bit overly polite, and she had a good feeling why. The last she had seen of Hope the previous term was when she had offered to her the chance to speak about Sirius if she ever needed to, but Hope wasn't one for talking, especially not about the events surrounding the incident.

"Hope—" She slipped into using her student's first name.

"If that's all, Professor," Hope said, cutting across her, "I've got a few tonnes of homework to get through if I don't want to collapse under them over the weekend, so if you'll excuse me."

She forced her way out of the room, shutting the door with a loud snap. Hope heaved a heavy sigh, trying to shove the roll of parchment into her already bulging bag only to have her Potion's book fall to the ground instead. Hope rolled her eyes up at the ceiling. She grunted as she stooped low to grab it, but the handwriting caught her interest.

This book belongs to the Half-Blood Prince

Hope didn't have time to fathom just who the Half-Blood Prince was as a distant bell rang and she grabbed it quickly, not wanting to be seen by gawking students.

And as she jogged up the steps, high in the tower in which his office was located, Dumbledore pondered the enigma that was Hope Potter.

"She won't like it, you know," a voice mentioned behind him and he lifted his eyes to the only
Founder portrait that held someone that wasn't feigning sleep (though he thought it looked very much like Rowena was sleeping, with Helga and Godric were doing bad attempts at faking it).

"My granddaughter is not known for her patience," Salazar informed him coldly.

"You hardly know your granddaughter," Dumbledore said in a tired manner, fixing his sleeve over his blackened arm, "she has only been up here a few times, hardly long enough to gauge who she is."

Salazar's smirk was quite superior and hardly surprising. "I know Elpis better than you think," he said with a chuckle, "and she hates you, and don't forget she'll never trust you again, not after all that."

"What I am teaching her—"

"That's just it, isn't it?" Salazar said, crossing his arms and looking quite like Hope (or was it the other way around?). "You're not teaching her anything other than the life of my grandson and what he did to make him what he is." Salazar's eyes narrowed. "I lectured her once on a similar matter and she will appreciate even less now than she did then."

Dumbledore couldn't fathom when the two would have had time to chat and he liked the idea of it even less.
The broken rock cracked under Hope's shoes as she inspected the rubble, bending down to crouch on the ground, hefting a small piece of stone before dropping it back to the ground. She had almost forgotten about the cave-in Lockhart had caused when they were last down there, back in second year.

"Reparo," Hope hummed, the rock that had piled up on the ground flying back to the ceiling of the cave, leaving the pathway clear except for the snake skin, which was just as massive as it had been all those years ago. Hope weaved around the coils of the snake skin until she came across the wrought iron circular door, the carved snakes as ominous as they had been in her second year.

A low hiss left her lips, causing the snakes to move together slightly as the door creaked open, revealing the ladder that led into the second chamber.

The tile was wet, but she had been expecting that, as there was water resting on either side of the tile, from the depths of which many pillars had been placed centuries previously. Hope gazed around, taking in everything as she had not been able to before.

"It's beautiful," she murmured aloud before her eyes fell on the still decomposing corpse of the basilisk, stopping just short of stepping on a few bones. Basilisk parts were very lucrative in the area of potions, not just for the venom, but for the flesh and bone as well. "I suppose I'll have to move you," Hope mused to the skeleton. Imagine if one of the DA members took a bone and then had to explain where they got it? There was a point to the DA being a secret group, after all.

Hope moved a few fingers over the pale, smooth, and bare skull, a finger tracing the orbit of an eye, one of the most dangerous—if not the most dangerous—eyes she had ever encountered. Then she straightened her back, looking past the serpentine skeleton to Salazar's ancient face.

"Open!" she hissed and the mouth dropped open to reveal a passageway. Chamber of Secrets indeed.

There was a fork, one smoothed by time and a basilisk continuously sliding through it, but the other had a much rougher appearance, leading into darkness.

"Lumos," she murmured, a bright light appearing on the tip as she lifted it to illuminate the way. She didn't have very far to walk before the passageway widened and led into a separate chamber. It was very much like the Chamber of Secrets had a common room of its own.

"Wow…" Hope couldn't help but be in awe. There was something about this place that wasn't unlike Morea's Room high up in the castle. There was something about this room that seemed almost alive. The fire in the fireplace flickered ominously, cycling through several colours as Hope watched on, illuminating the shelves of books that carried books that held swirly writing that formed words that only Hope could read, and the assortment of varying shades of green furniture. It was far homier than Hope remembered the Slytherin Common Room being.

"Ah, Elpis, so lovely to see you," a voice chimed, drawing her eyes to the portrait positioned over the fireplace.

Hope laughed aloud, unable to help herself. "Really? A portrait, Grandfather?"

Salazar was just as youthful as he had been the first time they had met, which had been, ironically, centuries after his death. His eyes were still that pale green, and dark locks framed his face, his
painted emerald robes brushing against the floor.

"I see no point to deny my arrogance," Salazar said, thoroughly unconcerned by her response (possibly because he'd heard it before). "So, tell me, how did you happen upon my secret chamber?"

"Are we talking about this one, or the Chamber as a whole?" Hope asked, gesturing first to the room before jerking her thumb back in the direction she had come.

A hint of a smirk appeared on his painted lips. "Here."

"Oh, I was just checking out the Chamber," Hope said in a dismissive manner, "I'm thinking about using it for a secret defence group."

"Oh?" He arched an eyebrow as if to say "do tell."

Hope did not offer an explanation of sorts. "I'd rather not say," she said, eyeing him shrewdly, "I did have a question, though."

"And what makes you think I will answer it?" he asked in a haughty manner.

"Because being a portrait is rather boring and I'm sure you're enjoying this because at least it's something," Hope said crossing her arms and arching her own eyebrow.

Salazar gave a forlorn sigh. "You really are too much like her."

"I'll take that as a compliment," Hope said, rolling her eyes in the direction of the portrait as she twisted around, moving until she was next to the bookshelf, tracing over the leather bound books. "What language is this?"

"What language do you think it is?" Salazar countered.

"Well, it's not English, and it's certainly not French," Hope mused, "but it makes perfect sense to me, so…is it written Parseltongue?"

"The last in the world," the Slytherin Founder admitted, "I believe that you are the only one in living memory who's seen them."

Hope paused, turning back towards him, her smile freezing on her face. "Voldemort's not seen this?"

"No…what was that question of yours that you wanted to ask me?"

Hope's smile widened into a grin. "How do you make new secret passageways in the school without alerting the Headmaster?"

"Surprisingly easily with blood like yours." Salazar's lips curled upwards. "Care to learn?"

If there was one thing Hope wasn't looking forward to, it was her lessons with Dumbledore, and quite rightly so, she thought to herself as she made her way back to the common room late Saturday night. The atmosphere was much tenser than it had been before, but that had been during the summer holiday, now they were back in school.

Now he was back to his vague and evasive manner, not telling her more than she needed to know.

Now he was back to being the puppet master and driving Hope quite mad in the process.
"So, how'd it go?" Ron asked as she sat down in the armchair before the fire, looking to be the epitome of exhaustion. He and Hermione were the only ones left in the common room, having waited up for her to come back from her private lessons with Dumbledore.

"I want to punch him in the face…is that normal?" Hope asked, leaning forward to press her palms into her eyes.

"I don't know…you can be pretty violent when you want to be," Hermione said reasonably, if not slightly reproachfully (Dumbledore was, after all, an authority figure that should be respected).

"What did you do? Did he teach you some new spells?" Ron asked, eager to know the details.

"No," Hope said in a drawling voice, raking her hand through her hair, "he's having me look through Voldemort's memories."

Ron's eyebrows wrinkled in confusion, but Hermione gave a small shrug. "Know thy enemy. Did you learn anything, then?"

Hope's eyes drifted out of focus slightly, roving a thumb over her large ring that bore a strange triangular eye crest. "It wasn't really about Voldemort…it was more about his mother."

"He had a mother?" Ron asked in a stunned voice before making a complaining noise as Hermione whacked him with a spare, rolled-up newspaper. "What?"

"Everyone's got a mother, Ronald," Hermione said waspishly, rolling her eyes with so much emphasis that she looked rather like Hope. "So, who was Voldemort's mother?"

"A woman named Merope Gaunt who had fallen in love with an arrogant and wealthy man called Tom Riddle," Hope told them, "of course, he didn't love her, or even know her, it seemed, so obviously a Love Potion was involved."

"Obviously," Ron said, still a little irked by how short Hermione had been with him before. "But what's so special about her?"

"Her? I dunno, but her father had something I thought was a bit odd," Hope admitted, removing her ring and holding it to the light. "My father passed this on to me, it's a family heirloom…but it was once in the possession of Merope's father."

Ron took the ring from her, examining it intently, taking note of the scratches on the surface of the stone. "Is it enchanted?" He handed it off to Hermione, accidentally brushing her fingers with his and then studiously ignoring the pale pink flush that adorned her cheeks from the touch.

"I doubt it," Hope said, "It's just very old…but Dumbledore seemed…abnormally interested in it."

"What d'you mean?" Hermione asked with a frown, handing the ring back to her.

Hope shrugged, twisting the ring back onto her finger. "I catch him looking at it sometimes when he thinks I'm distracted. Maybe a ring like mine did that to his hand…?"

"Could a ring really do that kind of damage, though?" Ron asked in a pensive tone.

Ron and Hope looked to Hermione as if she had all the answers (which, she did, usually).

Hermione huffed lightly in irritation at the looks thrown towards her. She didn't know everything! "Maybe, but I don't really know."
"Anyways, when Merope was pregnant with little Tom Jr.," Hope continued, "she stopped giving him the Love Potion and he became disenchanted, leaving her and his son."

"Nice guy," said Ron.

"Had to get the arrogance from somewhere, right? I mean, apart from Salazar," Hope added, rolling her eyes at the ceiling. "Why is it that all my relatives are egotistical bastards?"

"I think 'all' is a bit of an overstatement," Hermione said lightly. "Whatever happened to Merope?"

"She died soon after giving birth to Voldemort, I don't think she had much of a will to live after Tom Sr. left her."

Ron winced. "He's got a bit of a depressing back-story, doesn't he?"

"You'd be surprised how many people have depressing back-stories," Hope said, uncrossing her legs in a hurry, shoving her hand into her pocket and withdrawing a small mirror. "It's George," she explained unnecessarily.

"And that's our cue to leave," Hermione said, standing up. "Night."

"Night." Hope watched as the two went up separate staircases before she opened the mirror. "Hey, George."

"Hey…how's school?" His grin was infectious and even with how exhausting she had found her day, she smiled reflexively.

"Boring as hell, you know how it is," Hope said in an unconcerned manner, "Snape's still a bastard, but I wasn't raising my expectations, so I'm not surprised."

"Nothing a good prank won't fix," George assured her with a wink, making her laugh.

"I think I'll be a little too busy for pranking, sweetheart," Hope said, pausing to yawn widely. "I'm setting up the DA again."

"Ooh!" His eyes lit up. "That sounds fun, too bad I'm not there."

"But then you would be making all these jokes about snogging a prof," Hope said in a faux-despairing voice.

"Admit it," George said with a smirk, "you liked it."

"I admit to nothing," Hope said stoutly, but the dark pink flush that spread across her cheeks told a different story.

His eyes softened and Hope could feel more heat rising under her skin. "What?"

"You're just…I miss you, that's all," George said, his voice gentle.

"I miss you, too," Hope promised. "I wish it was the winter holiday already…I'm counting down."

"Me too…and Mum wanted me to pass on a request that you be extra careful this year," George added.

Hope groaned. "All that woman does is worry! I'll be fine! Besides, they've upped the protections this year—"
"But you know how you are about being under someone's thumb," George retorted and Hope's face soured.

Sometimes she really hated that he knew her so well.

"I'm starting to get really irritated," Hope said through clenched teeth as she walked down to the Quidditch Pitch with Ron and Hermione (a glance back told her Susan and Hannah would be joining as well). "This is nearly stalker behaviour!"

"Nearly?" Ron said before she jabbed him in the side with her elbow.

She was, of course, referring to how the entire school seemed to be watching her every move like she was a fascinating television program.

"I'd rather not have so many people following me around or watching me wherever I go," Hope said, raising her voice slightly and with emphasis, glaring at the group behind them.

It only made them laugh, earning them a sneer of disgust from Hope.

The past few weeks weren't too bad in her opinion, as first few weeks of school could go, though she was finding life much more boring than usual without Fred and George around to liven the mood. But that was to be expected, really, Hope had been mentally preparing for going away from George for days before they'd parted ways at King's Cross. However, that didn't mean that she didn't miss his warm arms around her at night, or his fingers threading through her hair as she attempted to ignore him and read on her own (but that didn't mean she didn't still get goosebumps from his touch). Hope's cheeks flushed slightly at the memory before she scrutinized two girls just ahead of them.

"Hang on a second," she told her friends, moving quickly to bump shoulders with Parvati. "Hey, Parvati!"

The dark-skinned beauty jumped slightly at her voice, the crease of her eyebrows betraying her surprise, but then a wide smile bloomed on her face. "Hey, Hope, nice day for flying?" Her eyes glanced to the Captain's Badge clipped to her robes.

"Possibly," Hope said with a mournful sigh, "though it looks like I'll be out there all morning with so many people trying out…I wanted to ask you and Lavender something."

"George and I are quite well, thank you very much," Hope said shortly, her eyes blazing blue and her hair turning spiky black. "It's about the DA."

Light sparked in both of their eyes and their grins widened.

"I'd heard a rumour you were starting it up again," Lavender said, elation obvious in how she now seemed to be skipping as opposed to walking. "So it is true, isn't it?"

"Yes, it's true," Hope said, waving her hand in an uncaring manner, "we'll be practicing in a new place and it'll be much more difficult to get into."

"Are you sure?" Parvati asked.

Hope's smirk was all the answer she needed to give. "Trust me. And do me a favour? Get word around to the Gryffindor members that the first meeting will probably be next week."
Hope was slightly startled at how pleased they were that she was continuing the DA.

"Do people really get that excited about it?" she asked, slowing to meet Ron and Hermione step for step.

Ron shrugged. "We feel like we're part of something bigger, helping in the fight against Vo-You-Know-Who," he corrected himself, far too used to hearing Hope use the Dark Lord's proper name but not liking to say it himself.

"And we're all friends fighting for the same thing, and helping each other," Hermione added, squeezing her arm affectionately.

Hope wrinkled her nose slightly, throwing her broom over her shoulder, waving a farewell to Hermione who set off to climb the stands, Hannah and Susan following close behind, Susan only lingering a moment to wish Ron good luck that had his ears burning.

Hope didn't bother hiding her snort, making Ron scowl at her as he searched for a seat where all the hopefuls were, which looked extremely difficult.

Hope could feel a migraine forming just looking at all the people in the stands. This was not normal. The stands were nowhere near this full during all the try-outs she'd ever been to and Hope had to resist smacking herself in the face. Most of the crowd consisted of Gryffindor House, but she could make out a fair bit of Ravenclaw blue and Hufflepuff yellow in the mix.

"Why, oh why did I agree to this?" she grumbled to herself. She already had so much to do without having to be in charge of an incohesive team of Quidditch Players. Someone kill her; there was a group of first years amongst the others that seemed like they'd never taken their feet off the ground, which seemed incredibly likely to Hope as she was approached by an older boy.

She recognized him easily enough from the train; he was the boy who had winked at her in Slughorn's compartment. She mentally hung her head; why did George have to leave her with all the idiots?

"We met on the train, in old Sluggy's compartment," the boy told her.

Hope arched an eyebrow, crossing her arms and looking at him as if to say "And you're over here, why?"

"Cormac McLaggen, Keeper."

Hope reluctantly shook his hand. "Great," she drawled out, "now go wait with your group."

She missed the expression of irritation on his face as she turned away, but Hope had a habit of irritating people, so that wasn't completely out of the norm. He had never made much of an impression on her to begin with, and that hadn't changed over the years. It didn't matter if they were both well-connected, Hope took personality over wealth any day (just ask the Weasleys).

Hope blew sharply into her whistle, a scowl etching onto her face when hardly any of the people in the stands quieted down.

"OI! SHUT IT!"

Hope blinked and stared at Ginny in surprise –that girl had a pair of lungs on her–, but all the girl did was cast her an "I got your back" sort of glance, for which Hope couldn't help but be slightly relieved.
"We'll be starting with basics first," Hope called over the noise, ignoring the few groans from the seasoned fliers gathered, "split into groups of ten and—" Her eyebrow twitched. "Hufflepuffs! Get off the pitch! Anyone not in Gryffindor either make yourselves scarce or get in the stands!"

The Hufflepuff group and a few young Ravenclaws left the pitch in laughter, something Hope didn't appreciate in the slightest. How did Oliver and Angelina ever deal with this kind of nonsense? Then again, they probably never had to…Hope just brought the crazy with her.

Her first group was made of first years who were obviously useless, her second group was made of fangirls and fanboys (if the giggling and blushing hadn't made that obvious enough)...it was a complete mess to be honest.

Katie performed at her best, so Hope had no trouble welcoming her back to the team, as well as adding a new girl to the mix, Demelza Robins. Hope hadn't really paid much attention to her before, but Hope was also incredibly occupied most of the time, so this hardly came as a surprise. Still, Demelza impressed her well enough, that even with her short temper as she yelled to Ginny to get into the air, that she spared the girl a grudging nod. Demelza beamed so widely that Hope was sure she strained a few muscles.

Ginny had no competition. She was easily one of the best players Hope had seen all day, however, there weren't many people that had played well up until now. Unfortunately, most were just there because she was there, something that made Hope want to claw at her cheeks in aggravation. And if they thought they could somehow sway her from George in his absence, they were dead wrong.

"And for the last bloody time!" Hope roared to the group that had tried out for Beater but failed miserably. "Peakes and Coote are the Beaters, so deal with it! And if you don't leave now I'm going to get very inventive with my wand!"

They made a few more complaints that only added to Hope's ire before disappearing into the stands. Hope rubbed at her brow, feeling the throb of a migraine coming on.

The Keepers couldn't be worse than the Beaters, she told herself, wincing each time a goal was made. The first five players clearly didn't understand the concept of feinting well if at all, because it was that more than anything that got them. She was surprised to discover that Cormac McLaggen actually had some skill other than picking up girls (something that seemed surprisingly easy for him and intensely annoying to many). She winced every time he saved a goal.

Hope was resigned to the fact that she was going to have an arrogant, pompous arse on her team for a Keeper when something very strange happened. When Ginny approached, launching the Quaffle through the left hoop, McLaggen lurched towards the right. Hope's eyes narrowed suspiciously, finding their way to Hermione in the stands who seemed to be hastily stowing her wand. Hope stifled her amusement with difficulty; who would have thought that Hermione would spell a Quidditch player?

And then it was Ron's turn. Hope was sure she'd seen milk darker than his complexion, even as Susan kissed his cheek and wished him luck. A few DA members in the crowd cheered for him when he was called forward and wolf-whistled when Susan kissed him.
Hope had to cough to hide her laughter as she blew the whistle that told Ron to lift off into the air.

Katie took the first shot, streaking quickly across the pitch with the Quaffle lodged securely under her arm, tossing it through the right hoop. Hope held her breath, but he caught it easily.

Ginny flew forward, flinging the Quaffle towards the centre. Ron's fingers fumbled, but he still managed to save it.

Three…four…five! Hope couldn't resist standing up on her tip-toes and falling back to the ground, a wide smile of elation spreading across her face.

"It looks like Ron Weasley will be our Keeper," she cheerfully informed McLaggen, whose blustering face was turning an angry shade of purple. It was rather unpleasant to look at and rather close to her own face, but Hope stood her ground, refusing to take a step back.

"His sister didn't really try," the older boy responded with a snarl. Someone clearly wasn't used to losing. "She gave him an easy save."

"Right, of course she did," Hope said dryly, rolling her eyes in disdain. "It was so easy that he almost dropped the Quaffle."

He dared to come even closer and Hope couldn't hide her revulsion.

"Give me another go," he demanded.

"You had your chance," Hope snapped, "and you failed. Ron saved one more goal than you did. Ron is my new Keeper, if you've got a problem with that, take it up with Professor McGonagall, until then stay out of my face."

She shoved past him, bruising her shoulder in the process as she headed towards her new Quidditch team.
Hope fingered the coin, examining the grooves etched across its surface with fascination before holding it up to the light.

"You have outdone yourself this time, Hermione," Hope said, clearly impressed, flipping the coin into the air before catching it once more as her friend looked over the hastily drawn notes that Hope had given her.

"Thank you," Hermione preened, "Ron and I had everybody switch out the old galleons for these ones; they're all really eager to see where we'll be practicing."

"I'll bet," Hope said dryly, shoving the coin in her back pocket. The only person that had really concerned her at the time was Ginny, because she was the one who had been taken down to the Chamber in her first year, but Ginny had quelled her concerns and had assured her the Chamber had long since ceased to be her nightmare.

"You do realize I have no idea how to create a passageway, though, right?" Hermione asked her, scrutinizing Hope's scrawl. "Is this supposed to be a door?"

Hope glared at her, snatching the notes away, gesturing wildly at them. "Of course it's a door!"

"Someone missed their mirror-call with her boyfriend last night," Hermione said in an annoyingly mild voice that Hope was half-sure she'd picked up from her at one time or another.

Heat bloomed under her cheeks and Hope spluttered in her embarrassment. "I don't know what you're talking about!"

"Sure you don't," Hermione scoffed lightly. "And here I thought you were an exceptional liar."

Hope could only stab a finger in her direction, as if that would seem threatening in the slightest towards the renowned bookworm who had clearly spent too much time with her friend. "I'll get you one of these days!"

"Right…"

"There is just no love," Hope complained. "Are you going to help me make these secret passages or not?"

"Don't you need blood to do this?" Hermione asked, swiftly grabbing Hope's notes once more. "Isn't Blood Magick your thing?"

"Well, yes," Hope admitted, "but there's a spell that goes along with it, and you're the best at using them."

Hermione arched an eyebrow, resting her hand that wasn't holding the notes on her hip. "Are you trying to flatter me?"

"Is it flattery if it's true?" Hope batted her eyelashes at her friend, making her laugh. "The spell's Creo Iter. I figure it'll be easier if we have four separate doors, each somewhere that's concealed and closer to each of the Houses so it won't look suspicious if we all head towards the same passage."
"Probably," Hermione hummed in agreement. "Remind me again why Ron isn't here?"

"Probably because he's off with Susan," Hope said with a morose sigh. "Was this how it was when I was with George, leaving you two alone?"

"Er…a little," Hermione admitted with a wince. To be honest, it had taken a little getting used to when Hope had first started dating George, because he took a good chunk of her time away from her and Ron, but she knew that it wasn't intentional.

"You have my most sincere apologies," Hope informed her solemnly, before consulting the map and examining a perfect spot for a hidden door. "Come on, there's a tapestry around the corner that doesn't have anything behind it."

Hermione grinned. "So, there's really a portrait of Salazar Slytherin down there? What's it like talking to your grand-dad? I bet he knows—"

"Yes, the portrait's there," Hope explained patiently, "he's as arrogant and haughty as he's ever been…there's a lot of old books down there, but they're all in Parseltongue, so you won't be able to read them."

"But you can translate!" Hermione said, her whole face bright at the prospect; the idea of ancient knowledge that had been forgotten was just beyond her reach excited her like very few things could. "Imagine—!"

"Whoa! One thing at a time, Hermione," Hope said, raising a hand to stop her friend's flow of words, drawing back the tapestry that depicted Egyptian figures huddled around some scales that Hope recognized to be the one used to weigh the soul of the dead (someone needed to stop being so into mythology, but mythology influenced the present in a number of ways, such as in the runes Hope was currently studying). "Hold this for me, would you?"

Hermione took the corner of the tapestry from her, exposing the blank wall as Hope dug in her bag pulling out a small jar filled with a dark liquid. The blood fled from her face. "That's not your blood is it?"

"Is there a right answer to that?" Hope asked in retort, unstoppering it and pulling out a brush she'd nicked from a room on the fifth floor that belonged to the art class.

"You know how…creepy it is how willing you are to slice yourself up, right?" Hermione said with a small gulp.

"Some Slytherins play with Dark Magic, others play with Ancient Magic," Hope said with a shrug, dipping the tip into the jar before setting it against the stone. "Blood's just another medium for magic, you know."

"I know…" Hermione sighed, "But don't you have enough scars?"

The one on her forehead was hardly hidden by her fringe, the one that Umbridge had made her carve into her hand still shone white against her flesh, and the strange symbols she had carved into her palms during the Battle of the Department of Mysteries were still there.

Hope's eyes softened to an identical brown, making her look a little more like Ginny. "It's fine…I'm proud of these scars; they saved my life last June."

Hermione gave her a half smile as she turned back to her work, the brush moving smoothly over the rough stone in spirals and sharp points until— "Done! Now you can work your magic!"
Hope and Hermione switched places and Hermione pointed her wand towards the wall, imitating the movement Hope had scrawled across her messy notes. "*Creo Iter!*"

The blood melted into the wall, turning black and spreading across the stone first in lines and swirls until there was nothing but black with a knob shaped like a carved snake. However, it disappeared as abruptly as it appeared.

Hermione frowned, glancing back to Hope's notes. "Did I get it wrong?"

Laughter bubbled from Hope's lips. "Not at all, see that slot right there?" She pointed to a thin hole in the wall. "The DA members just drop their coin through there and the door appears, voila!" She waved her arms as expressively as she could without dislodging the blood jar from her hand.

Hermione tried her hardest not to roll her eyes at Hope's antics.

The room was abuzz with excitement. There were so many people and not enough seating places for them that some had resorted to sitting on the ground. Hope was surprised to see that it was something like a family reunion, people talking with each other regardless of House. Slytherin with Ravenclaw, Hufflepuffs with Gryffindors, and everything in between.

Astoria was fawning over Salazar's portrait with Padma, the man seemed a bit smug at the attention. Hermione and a few of the bookish members of the group were investigating the library, hardly deterred by not being able to read the words. Ron had an arm thrown around Susan's shoulders, whispering something in her ear, making her giggle and blush.

A number of eyes were on her, but Hope was waiting for the last person to stumble through one of the doors, which happened to be Michael Corner –newly broken up from former member, Cho Chang–. There were three that had not returned, as Luna had taken the liberty of removing Cho and Marietta's galleons (Marietta had been the one Hope was adamant about, but Cho had handed hers over willingly), and Susan had handed over Zacharias' as he had only joined the group because of the OWLs and wanting to know what really had happened in Little Hangleton.

Hope cleared her throat and silence fell immediately, it was almost comical in a way.

"Hello," she began, her voice starting out a little weak before it got stronger, "several people had voiced their opinion that they would like the DA to be continued." Murmured assent followed these words. "And I'm inclined to agree." Her eyes hardened. "Voldemort is out in the open once more and a storm is brewing, we need to be prepared for whatever follows. That's why I believe this group should continue."

"So, it's going to be another war?" a small voice piped up, and Hope's eyes were drawn towards Dennis Creevey who hadn't grown much since she'd last seen him.

"Honestly? I have no idea," Hope said with a shrug. "But war creates fear, and if there's one thing that Voldemort is good at, it's creating fear...this year we're going to be getting into some more serious spells and duelling, so I should make this very clear." Hope's eyes met each and every one of them. "I'm not Dumbledore's Golden Girl, I'm firmly in the grey area, and a few of the spells I used last June reflected that. If there are some spells you are not comfortable learning, you don't have to, and no one in this room can make you learn something you are against." Hope nodded towards Hermione who moved to the front holding a new piece of parchment.

"Alright," Hermione said, "I've got a new parchment for you all to sign, since some of us graduated last year or didn't get the chance to sign," her eyes flickered towards Seamus who grinned
sheepishly, "but after that, we can all get started."

This time around, there was no reservation, but then there wasn't really the worry that Umbridge would find out, so that was a plus.

"You're really getting the hang of this whole leadership thing," Ron muttered to her as he slid into the usual place at her side as the others raced forward to sign the sheet that he, Hope, and Hermione had already signed.

"It's pretty touch and go," Hope retorted just as lowly as his voice was, "I'm trying not to alienate anyone with the whole grey thing, but…" Indecision clouded her eyes when he squeezed her shoulder comfortingly.

"Sirius would wish he was here breaking rules with us."

Hope's lips twitched slightly. "Not nearly as many rules as we did last year, though…but I'm sure he would." Hermione stooped forward to grab the parchment and fold it into her bag, allowing Hope to raise her voice. "Alright, you lot! Follow me!" And she ducked through the same tunnel that she had entered through the first time around, leading them through and out into the wide chamber. "Welcome to the Chamber of Secrets!"

"No way!" Terry Boot hardly dared to breathe, twisting his head around to see every detail. "Wait—that's not the Basilisk, isn't it?"

All the eyes jumped towards the pale skeleton that peeked through the water that rested on either side of the tile upon which they stood on. The water level was hardly high at all and the poisonous fangs were clear for all to see.

"Yes, however, if you take something from it, I will know," Hope warned shrewdly, "anyone who touches it is going to end up looking a bit different from when they started." Actually, it was only a mild colour change spell, but a few people paled.

"Obviously, our first lesson is going to be on the Patronus Charm since we were interrupted last time," Hope said to the group at large. "Spread out as much as you like. I know some of you have this down, but a lot of you are still having trouble and this is a very good spell to know, so just practice it this time. Next time we'll see how you fare against a Dementor-Boggart."

Anthony grinned and Dean arched an eyebrow.

Hope's eyes narrowed at them all. "You all know the incantation, now get to work!"

And they were quick to follow her orders, especially when she practically barked them at them. Soon the chamber was filled with silver vapour, indiscriminate forms, and ghostly animals.

Ginny's horse was the first one she saw, closely followed by Luna's hare, Hermione's otter, and Ron's Jack Russell Terrier. Hope grinned as Hannah asked Hermione for some assistance and Daphne threw her an exasperated look that practically screamed for help in the most subtle way a Greengrass could. Hope lurched forward to assist, elation swelling inside her heart at how much the group was coming together; they weren't just four Houses anymore, they were all students.

The first Hogsmeade weekend came as much of a reprieve to Hope. Ancient Runes was rubbing her nose to the grindstone and Transfiguration was starting to become incredibly challenging, but the most trying was Defence Against the Dark Arts…Snape was making her want to pull her hair out. Unfortunately, George wouldn't be able to meet her in the village because the shop was really
kicking off, but Hope assured him that it was fine, she would be alright hanging out with Ron and
Hermione.

Mostly Hermione, though, as Ron spent the morning with his new girlfriend (the irritated frown on
Hermione's lips had nothing to do with the cold). But Ron joined up with them later outside of
Honeydukes heading towards the Three Broomsticks. Hope didn't comment on how red his ears were.

"Did you see Tonks?" he asked them when they met halfway.

Hermione's eyes widened slightly. "No, have you?"

"She's a little ways down," Ron said, nodding back towards the street where a figure could be seen,
their collar turned up against the wind, pink hair whipped in the air. Hope and Hermione waved in
her direction, to which they received a few wiggle of fingers in return. She was on the job obviously,
so she couldn't come and talk to them.

"She's in a much better mood," Hermione said, smiling, "remember when she was moping around."

Hope smirked. "She's just got a new man in her life, that's all."

"Ooh! Who?" Hermione asked in interest, and even Ron looked to her for an answer.

"I'm not telling you!" Hope scoffed in a faux-haughty manner as they walked forward. Her eyes
were drawn to a shorter-statured wizard who appeared to have made a trade with a much taller
wizard with long scraggy hair. The first man was the one who caught her eye as the second one
moved away, a whiff of smoke telling her easily who it was.

"Mundungus!" she barked the name, making him jump violently and upend his suitcase, spilling out
a number of items. The jumpiness told Hope he was probably not doing something that was strictly
legal, which only heightened her suspicions.

"Oh, er, 'ello, 'Ope," Mundungus said, anxiety evident on his brow, attempting to seem as though he
wasn't doing anything wrong; a useless endeavour, really. "Well, don't let me keep y-"

Ron showed Hope a silver goblet that had spilled out of his bag with a disapproving frown on his
face and it didn't take long for Hope to discover why.

"Gimme tha—" Mundungus' words were cut short was a spell was thrown at him, sweeping his legs
out from under him and sending him sprawling into the snow. Hope took the goblet from Ron, her
eyes flashing red in her anger. It had been awhile since she had felt so enraged.

"This is the Black Family Crest," she seethed, shaking the chalice at him as she lifted him up by the
front of his robes.

"Hope!" Hermione warned, but Hope wasn't listening.

"You took this from Sirius' house," she nearly growled.

"What? No-no!" Mundungus shook his head vehemently.

"How dare you!" Hope's lips curled into a snarl, her hair darkening to a midnight black, the same
colour as Sirius'. "What? Did you wait until he died to go back to take everything of value?"

"I-no-that's—" His wand was pointed her and suddenly her hands burned and she released him,
allowing him only enough time to grab the suitcase and Disapparate like he'd never been there in the first place.

"Filthy, stinking son of a—!" Hope swore so violently that a few passers-by stared, but she couldn't heed them, her anger at Mundungus was too great. How dare he steal her godfather's things! How dare he! Sirius had vouched for him, and this was how he repaid him?

Hope wanted so badly to hit something, to scream, but it was Ron who brought her back to awareness.

"Come on, let's get into the Three Broomsticks before we all freeze to death," he said shortly, taking Hope by the elbow and pressing slightly against the small of Hermione's back to prod her forward, and in a matter of minutes they were settled at a table each with a bottle of butterbeer before them, but Hope was still white-faced and furious.

"That bastard!" she snarled under her breath. "I'll gut him the next time I see him!"

"Hope! Please calm down," Hermione begged.

"Calm down?" Hope retorted. "That little prick filched my godfather's things—"

"I know," Hermione sighed, "but there's nothing you can do about it right now...why don't you talk to Dumbledore—"

"Fat chance of that," Ron muttered into his drink.

"—or McGonagall?"

Hope pursed her lips but did not speak, her knuckles white around her bottle as her took a deep swig. She didn't know why she was so upset in the first place, after all, Sirius had always hated his family. But everything from that house reminded her of him and Mundungus just taking from it as if it was his personal stash spot stung like a burn. Hope took another long drink. Hermione glanced worriedly towards Ron at Hope's silence, but the look he gave her in return was one that clearly said "Let her sort it out."

Hermione relented and the three finished their drinks in silence, aware of the attention that was being directed towards Hope; that only made them finish their drinks faster as they followed Katie and her friend Leanne out of the pub and onto the main road.

"Fine," Hope grumbled eventually, her voice nearly lost to the wind, "I'll talk to Professor McGonagall."

The relieved expression that was muddled with surprise told Hope that Hermione hadn't really expected her to go along with her suggestion. Hope's nose sank behind her turned-up collar, shielded from the wind that tore tears from her eyes. The sooner they got out of the cold, the better they'd be.

Raised voices caused her eyes to shift upwards from glaring at the ground—because looking head-on was much more difficult to do than simply look at the ground—to squinting at the two figures a bit of a ways in front of them. Hope didn't think she'd ever heard the two friends fight before.

Katie was pulling away from Leanne, keeping something that she was holding in her hand away from her friend who tried to grab it. "It's nothing to do with you, Leanne!" Katie told her, but that didn't deter Leanne who reached forward and managed to snag the package that she was holding. Katie ripped it back towards her, causing it to fall to the ground, but then something strange happened.
Katie was lifted into the air as if by the wind, hovering six feet off the ground, her arms spread at either side, her eyes closed and her face blank. That was frightening more than anything Hope had ever seen, mostly because it seemed as though she was being held by something invisible.

And that fear was only made worse as she began to scream a blood-curdling scream that chilled Hope to the bone. The pain and anguish in her voice caused Leanne to scream as well, in fear, as she moved forward to pull her friend down by the ankle, and Hope, Ron, and Hermione raced to her side to help, but the most they did was cause her to fall back to the ground, her screaming continuing and her struggling difficult.

Leanne and Hope had either of her arms, while Hermione tried to restrain her legs.

"Go get help!" Hope demanded to Ron who seemed at a loss as to what he should do.

Ron was gone in a matter of seconds, rushing towards the castle on faster and longer legs than Hope or Hermione possessed. It seemed like an eternity passed before he returned with Hagrid in tow, but that was probably only because of how difficult it was to restrain her teammate.

"Get back! Lemme see her!" Hagrid order them and the three reluctantly released the thrashing girl, thus causing Leanne to burst into tears.

"Something's happened to her!" she cried, her sobs hidden by the roar of the wind. "I don't know what—"

It was clear that Hagrid didn't know what had caused her state either, judging by the strangely serious expression on his face that was hardly hidden by his bushy hair. And then he gathered her up and sped off towards the castle, undoubtedly making towards Madam Pomfrey in the hope that she could cure Katie of whatever had been done to her.

Hermione had taken to interrogating Leanne by the time Hope looked away from the castle. "Did it just happen all of a sudden, or—?"

"It was when the package tore," Leanne sobbed, her tears refreshed once more, gesturing towards the brown-wrapping paper now soggy from the ground and ripped from the two girls' argument.

Ron crouched to get a closer look, but Hope pulled him back, recognizing the gleaming opals instantly.

"I remember that necklace," she told him quietly as Hermione comforted Leanne. "It was in Borgin and Burkes, I saw it back in second year. It's cursed."

Ron glanced from the necklace back to her. "What's Katie doing with it?"

But Hope couldn't even begin to guess how it came into her possession, however…she could guess that Draco Malfoy was involved.
Facing Fears

Hope really hated her so-called lessons with Dumbledore, if that wasn't already quite obvious, which it should have been as she kicked her feet angrily as she stalked away from said wizard's office. What exactly was the point of learning about Voldemort's past in the first place? To understand how Lord Voldemort came into existence?

As if Hope needed to understand that. Now, if she was actually learning a few spells that actually had some value, she might understand, but she wasn't, and Dumbledore was trying in vain to repair the bridge that had broken between them, however, it was useless. The idea of Hope ever trusting him again was highly implausible.

What grated on her nerves the most was when he asked her if she felt sorry for Voldemort. She had held her tongue, but the true answer had been yes, she, in fact, did. It was their experiences that made them what they were, and Voldemort had been forged in darkness and tempered with undying hatred, and it was something that Hope could understand, even delving into the darkness and exploring that kind of anger wasn't something she would prefer to do.

Hope growled something spiteful under her breath as she clenched her fist tightly, the skin pulling tight and the scars shining, illuminated by the moonlight that filtered in through the open arches.

"Hope? You alright?"

Hope's hand automatically went to the wand holster bound tightly to her arm before she forced her body to relax, raking a fevered hand through her midnight hair. "Oh, Tonks, sorry, didn't see you there."

Tonks was cloaked in semi-darkness, the flickering of the fire in the brackets casting shadows into her bright and short hair. Even given how carefree Tonks generally was, Hope wasn't surprised to see her just a touch tense, what with the dark atmosphere of fear that Voldemort was having them all live in.

Hope scowled slightly, remembering that Tonks had indeed just asked her how she was. "Oh, fine," she grumbled, "just swell." She turned to stare darkly in the direction from where she had come.

Tonks arched an eyebrow slightly at the heavy sarcastic tone she had used. Now, if there was one thing Tonks knew about Hope, it was that the girl had a thing with sarcasm. Some of the sarcasm was meant in a joking way, and some of the sarcasm was meant to be biting and filled with irritation that showed how much she felt.

"This wasn't my idea," she grumbled angrily to herself. "Give me a book on advanced spells any day."

Tonks' lips twitched slightly, but Hope missed it as she glared at the ground, digging the heel of her shoe into the stone. "Dumbledore causing you grief?"

Hope could only grunt in agreement. "Something like that…don't you have guard duty or something?" Hope was now scrutinizing her intently.

"Just finished my shift," Tonks said with a grin. "So what's eating you?"

Hope expelled a loud sigh as they started to walk in the direction of the Gryffindor Common Room;
Hope got the feeling that Tonks' superiors wanted to keep a close eye on the elusive Girl-Who-Lived. "Hermione wanted me to talk to Professor McGonagall about Mundungus," Hope finally said in a long-suffering tone.

Tonks arched an eyebrow, her eyes colouring a pale blue in curiosity.

"Well, she really wanted me to talk to Dumbledore," Hope conceded, rolling her dark eyes, "but what are the chances that that's going to happen?"

Clearly Hope's…distrust of the headmaster still remained even after the month or so distance between the two during the holidays. Tonks wasn't quite sure of what had caused the rift to separate into a schism, but she was sure that Sirius' death was just a catalyst to the explosion.

"What's he done this time?"

"I caught him in Hogsmeade trying to sell off Sirius' stuff!" Hope's eyes sparked a frigid silver. "The cad! And he had the nerve to act like he wasn't doing anything wrong!"

Tonks' grimace was marred with anger and resignation. Mundungus Fletcher might have been one of the original members of the Order of the Phoenix, but he certainly wasn't known for his… well, let's just say, keep your valuables in arms reach.

"I'd almost forgotten Sirius named you his heir," flew out of Tonks' mouth before she could pull them back and the colour leeched from Hope's face almost instantly and Tonks felt for the girl. She'd heard her friends say his name casually with hardly a response from her, but she supposed when she threw it in her face about everything Sirius owned now belonging to her… "Sorry."

"It's…fine."

It hadn't taken Tonks very long to figure out that this was Hope's go-to phrase.

Tonks dropped a hand to Hope's shoulder, jolting her out of her thoughts as she leaned down so they were more level.

"Then go talk to McGonagall about it, if you don't want to talk to Dumbledore," she advised, smiling slightly at the frown that immediately formed on her lips.

"Fine," Hope bemoaned with great exaggeration that was evident in her voice and the roll of her eyes.

"You and your band of misfits keep out of trouble, yeah?" Tonks added as they came to a stop outside the lightly dozing Fat Lady who didn't even bother to acknowledge their presence.

"I'm afraid I don't have any idea of what group you are referring to," Hope replied haughtily with a wide smirk that told her different and Tonks had to stifle her chuckles as her distant cousin murmured the password and entered silently into the passageway.

For the first time in what seemed like ages, Hope, Ron, and Hermione were together again. It seemed like their coursework was determined to separate them as much as it could, and then there was Quidditch practice and the Slug Club (which Hope found herself evading by scheduling practices on those nights, because Merlin knew she didn't want to be poked and prodded about what happened at the Ministry, and she trusted Hermione to be tight-lipped and vague). Which was why they were currently cooped up in the antechamber to the Chamber of Secrets.
Ron was finishing the last of his Charms and Transfiguration essay while Hope was putting the finishing touches on her interpretation of the Norse runes, but Hermione—as was typical of her—had completed all her work and was now browsing the number of books on the shelves; Hope didn't see why she bothered, they were all in Parseltongue. This was another reason for why Hope was taking so long to complete her essay; because Hermione kept rushing over to her to ask her what certain phrases meant.

"Maybe you should just make a Parseltongue-English Dictionary," Ron suggested after this occurred the seventh time.

Hope's lips curled. "Yes," she said with just a touch of sarcasm, "because so many people actually want to read Parseltongue."

"Just a thought," Ron said mildly, as Hope tried to explain that the book she had picked up was one on the lunar cycle and its effect on magic.

"Maybe I'll just translate a book for her for Christmas," Hope grumbled under her breath as she set her completed essay aside.

"Really?"

Hope was slightly startled by how pleased Hermione sounded when she looked up. Her eyes were wide and over-bright with excitement and an eager smile had graced her lips as she held a number of thick tomes in her hands. Ron looked away quickly, his ears burning with heat. In the thirst for knowledge was one of the moments when she looked most beautiful.

"You will?" Hermione asked, positively euphoric at the prospect.

"Er…sure," Hope said a little awkwardly. "I was actually thinking about doing some kind of gift exchange with the DA."

"Gift exchange?" Ron interjected in confusion. "You mean for Christmas?"

"Yup," Hope said, popping the 'p'. "Like, we all put our names in a hat or something and then we have to get a gift for whoever we draw…a cheap gift, obviously, and it can be a joke or something…except for the people that want a translated book."

"I like it," Hermione concurred. "Maybe it'll help everyone relax."

"I dunno about that," Ron said with a sigh, "but it might distract them."

"That's good enough," Hermione said stoutly before rushing back to the bookshelf to investigate some more (Hope could see Salazar roll his eyes in his painting even as he faked sleep).

"So," Hope said quietly now that Hermione was distracted, "how're you and Susan?"

The pair had been nearly inseparable and painstakingly adorable, Hope had to admit. Despite how much she cared for both of her friends, she couldn't bring herself to hate Susan on Hermione's behalf, and neither could Hermione.

"She's just too sweet!" the brunette had complained. "Why couldn't he have picked someone else?"

Ron gave a small shrug, his eyes following Hermione as she moved. "We broke up."

Hope blinked once…and then once more for good measure. "Why?" she finally asked. "I thought
you two were getting along rather well."

"Oh, we are," Ron agreed, furrowing his brow slightly. "But I think the biggest thing was that her aunt'd just died and we kind of threw ourselves into a relationship without thinking much about it… and she knows how I feel about…" He trailed off, but Hope caught his meaning, and his glance towards Hermione.

"Are you two going to stay…friends?" Hope screwed up her face slightly. They hadn't really quite been friends before, more like they knew each other from class and the DA, but they weren't that close. However, the DA was turning into quite a tight-knit group.

"Possibly," Ron muttered back, "we're going to start off with a bit of distance, though."

Hope shrugged. "I'll keep that in mind when everyone partners up."

"But aren't we testing our Patronuses today against that Boggart-Dementor of yours?" Hermione suddenly interjected, making Hope wonder if the bushy-haired witch had been listening in on the conversation, but she gave no hint that she had done so.

"I mean later, after the next lesson," Hope said in an almost careless manner as she waved her hand, inspecting a worn bit of parchment that Hermione was holding. "What's this?"

"I'm not really sure," Hermione admitted, lowering herself to sit across from her friend as she unfolded the worn and yellowed parchment.

It was a map, a very detailed map. Words were scrawled on it with a precise and delicate hand, dictating where certain landmarks were located. Hope's fingers traced over some of the words.

"The Forest of Morea…" she murmured to herself before tilting her head back to look at Salazar who was still feigning sleep. "Did you draw this?"

"I have no idea what you're talking about," Salazar said silkily and three pairs of eyes scowled at him.

"You'd get more information from a rock," Ron grumbled under his breath.

"A rock would be simple to understand," Hermione agreed.

"And much less vague," Hope added, smirking upwards towards the painting who astutely ignored the trio before him. Her eyes fell to a single word within the forest. *Pithos*.

A pithos was an urn of sorts, having origins deep in the Greco-Roman culture. It was rumoured that the evil spirits contained in Pandora's 'Box' were actually held in a pithos.

A pithos could be viewed, in that aspect, as a protected place…very interesting, Hope thought.

The DA meetings always seemed to have a relaxed atmosphere, even with the stress of schoolwork and the threat of an oncoming war, but perhaps that was the way Hope wanted it.

Everyone knew what they were doing there (or, at least everyone involved; it kind of exhilarating to be part of a private secret society dedicated towards learning useful spells), so it was nice to not worry about anything other than what they were learning that day.

"You're doing a great job."
Hope looked up to meet a pair of bright blue eyes and grinned. "Am I?"

Daphne rolled her eyes, glancing over the lesson plan for the evening that Hope had in her lap, but the girl quickly hid it, though it wasn't something that they didn't already know—possibly a few hints to what they could be doing next lesson. "Please, have you seen any other members of the Four Houses working together outside of the DA?"

"Maybe the DA's just more open-minded than most," Hope said before standing, causing such an abrupt silence that her grin widened.

"Well, you all know the gist of what we're doing," Hope began. "All of you have succeeded in creating solid Patronuses, and that's a NEWT spell, keep in mind—"

The group broke out into cheers, and Hope, halfway through flummoxed and flustered, realized some of it was directed towards her.

"Alright, settle down, you lot!" she snapped, earning a few laughs in return. "Bunch of rowdy…" Hope grumbled under her breath.

"Since you've all managed to do that," Hope continued after a long moment, "we're going to move on to trying your hand at keeping it up against a Dementor, though ours will be a Boggart, so—"

"But don't Boggarts only change into what we fear most?" Hannah asked apprehensively from the back.

"That's true," Hope admitted. "However," her eyes gained a steely glint, "I will be remaining in close contact with it, and my Boggart is a Dementor."

Ron goggled at her and Hermione's eyes widened slightly in shock. Hope hated Dementors and had since the moment she had laid eyes on them. To be willing to be in such close contact with a Boggart that was even a pale imitation of a Dementor…well, she must have thought it was very important for them all to be capable of maintaining a Patronus in spite of fear and cold.

"Will you be alright with that?" Neville spoke up for them.

Hope gave him a rather direct look. "I'll be fine." She exhaled. "Well, what are you all waiting for? That Boggart's getting bored."

There were a few laughs and a number of nervous titters as the students attempted to cram themselves through the passageway and out into the Chamber. They spilled out onto the stone platform that rested above the water and Hope weaved through the group until she stood and the head of them next to what appeared to be a wooden trunk of sorts.

"So…who wants to try their luck first?" Hope asked with a wide grin that made a few of them (righteously) nervous. "Come on, anyone?...I can just pick one of you unsuspecting…how about you, Lavender?"

The blonde-haired girl jumped violently, earning a few good-natured laughs from some of the members gathered around.

"Don't worry," Hope cajoled her, gesturing her forward, which she did so albeit a bit reluctantly, "it's better to go against a Boggart than it is to go against a real Dementor, don't you think?"

"Well…" Lavender said, looking a little awkward, "wouldn't it be better to have a go at the real thing?"
"With the possibility of losing your soul?" Hope quirked an eyebrow. "The Boggart can replicate the Dementor's effects at a smaller degree, so you get an idea of what's going to happen when you really face a Dementor."

"Oh," Lavender said, only slightly relieved, "alright then."

"The important thing," Hope said, speaking to the whole group, "is to keep your mind focused on those happy memories that make your Patronus, alright? As soon as your attention wavers, your Patronus will disappear and you'll be completely undefended."

Hope could remember back when she was thirteen, standing over Sirius' body, casting Patronus Charm after Patronus Charm in the hope that one would form more than silver vapor, praying to the gods above that it would be enough to keep them at bay and spare her and Sirius.

"That's not a situation you ever want to be in." The others could practically hear the weight of her words, becoming quite subdued and serious in response.

"Ready?" she asked Lavender, pointing her wand at the trunk which shook violently, as though it knew it was being watched.

Several people jumped.

Lavender swallowed thickly, her complexion a bit fairer than how it had been to start with, but she still raised her wand and nodded.

"Alohamora!" The trunk's locks undid themselves and the lid swung open. For a moment it seemed to be nothing but twisting matter, and then it focused on Hope and a Dementor was floating above the ground, towering over her. Her eyes narrowed slightly and she curled a few fingers towards Lavender as if inviting her to move forward, which she did so.

Lavender took a deep breath, feeling the chill of the Dementor as it turned towards her and she half expected the Boggart to shift into something else, but it remained in that form. She raised her wand high. "Expecto Patronum!"

A silver dolphin burst from the wand tip, but the image wavered and faded into mist as she quickly found herself distracted. How hard could it be to keep those happy thoughts in her head? At least, that was what she had thought, but Hope was no slouch at dealing with Dementors, and only now did Lavender see why.

"Think of something happy!"

Hope's barked words grounded her and Lavender steeled herself, thinking hard until—"Expecto Patronum!"

This time the dolphin nudged the Boggart back and into the trunk which Hope shut with a snap, grinning widely at Lavender (though her dorm-mate could see a light sheen of sweat glittering on her skin). "Well done…so, who's next?"

Let it be known that Hope could hold a grudge, and since the removal of Katie Bell from the hospital wing to St. Mungo's she seemed to have a permanent suspicion of Draco Malfoy.

However, he unfortunately had an alibi for the event in question, as he had been serving a detention at the time Katie had been cursed. Hermione and Ron didn't quite agree, but that was fine because Hope knew there was something off about Malfoy and she was absolutely sure that the reason his
arm had been bothering him at Madam Malkin's was because he had a Dark Mark.

There were only two people left in the Slytherin common room and both were positioned before the fire on opposite sides.

One was Daphne Greengrass, her legs crossed and her book balancing on her thighs as she read the passage that they would be quizzed over in Charms the next day.

The other was Draco Malfoy who was biding his time and waiting for the blonde-haired blood-traitor (you couldn't be called anything else when you were dating a Muggle-born and periodically were shown to be on speaking terms with the Golden Girl) to finish her reading and leave so he could sneak up to the Room of Requirement.

"You play a dangerous game, Heir Malfoy," Daphne said, her voice smooth and mild.

Malfoy glared at her, his grey eyes flashing, however, Daphne lived up to the title of Ice Queen, remarkably unfazed when others exploded. "What would you know of it?" he snapped at her.

Her lips curled upwards slightly into a telltale smirk. "I know that you don't need to be present to spell someone to give Katie Bell that package."

Malfoy, it seemed, was not very good at keeping his expression neutral to evade suspicion, and his face automatically paled, his fingers twitching towards his wand.

"I wouldn't do that," Daphne warned, her own wand twirling between her fingers, but there was something off about her. Her hair darkened to a blood-red, spilling down her back and her eyes shifted from icy-blue to bright green in an instant.

Malfoy sneered. "You! How'd you get in here?"

Hope gave a rather mournful sigh. "Oh, Malfoy, I suppose I really did expect too much of you, didn't I?" Her tone had become quite mocking. "I am Salazar's many-time granddaughter, you fool, did you honestly think I wouldn't be able to get into here if I wanted to?" The emerald eyes of the snakes of her ring glinted in the lighting, making them almost seem alive.

His eyes narrowed further. "What do you want?" he nearly growled.

"I know what you did to Katie," Hope said, her voice as frigid as a raging snowstorm. "I don't care if you're trying to kill Dumbledore, because you seem to be a fairly useless assassin, I honestly don't know what Tom was thinking…but if you come near my friends…"

She leaned forward, her hair darkening to a midnight black and her eyes a shocking crimson that made her look very much like her cousin. "I will end you," she promised in a voice that demanded retribution for what had already been committed.

His eyes narrowed further. "What do you want?" he nearly growled.

"I know what you did to Katie," Hope said, her voice as frigid as a raging snowstorm. "I don't care if you're trying to kill Dumbledore, because you seem to be a fairly useless assassin, I honestly don't know what Tom was thinking…but if you come near my friends…"

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She didn't look quite like the girl Malfoy remembered, the one who made jokes and laughed constantly with her friends, no, this was someone to be feared. This was a girl who wasn't afraid of cutting off a few limbs (Antonin Dolohov being a rather prime example, as she had cut off his hand at the wrist), who wasn't afraid of using the Unforgivables. This Hope Potter wasn't one to trifle with unless you were prepared for some kind of damage.

And then she stood, dropping the book to the cushion and disappearing out of the entrance, but no fewer than five seconds later Daphne Greengrass entered, fumbling with the tie that she was attempting to secure around her throat.
Malfoy was incensed by the audacity of the girl to side with a Gryffindor (and not just any Gryffindor at that) over members of her own house who had chosen the Dark Lord. But she had made her choice obvious when she chose the dark-skinned Muggle-born over any Pure-Blood of good standing.

She captured his eyes and smirked widely. "What's the matter, Draco?" she asked, her mild voice lilting in amusement. "You look rather startled…" Her eyes glimmered as she bent slightly to pick up the book that Hope had discarded with a clear smirk, and then she moved swiftly towards the girls' dormitory only to pause and look back.

"And one more thing," she said, "she told me to pass on a message… "I'll be dogging your footsteps"…whatever that means."

But it meant that Malfoy was going to have to be extra careful where Hope Potter was concerned.
Consequences of Choices

It soon dawned on Hope just how advanced the DA was becoming, and she would soon have to resort to rifling through her spell books to look for some new spells to teach them. As it was, she had already been requested to teach them the spells she used in the First Task and during the Battle of the Department of Mysteries. These consisted of a surprisingly short number:

*Rigo Flagellum* – to make a whip of ice, *Concido* – to slice through flesh and bone, *Dirumpor* – causes explosions, and *Fax* – to burn into skin.

Three of the four were technically viewed as Grey spells, considering the nature of the spells, which was why Hope hadn't quite decided what to teach them by the time their next lesson rolled around.

"I know you all have asked me about the spells I used during the Tasks and the battle at the Ministry," Hope's eyebrow twitched at the sound of several groans. "Oh, shut it!"

"The only new spell I used during the Tasks was the ice-whip I used against the dragon," Hope explained rather patiently, "and the other ones are Grey spells, so if you don't feel comfortable learning them, you certainly don't have to."

"What kind of spells are they?" Hannah queried from an overstuffed chair.

"Well, I used *Concido* to cut off Antonin Dolohov's hand," Hope admitted in an unrepentant manner, "I caused the visitor's entrance –this was a telephone booth, mind you– to explode with *Dirumpor*, and I burned Bellatrix Lestrange with *Fax*…if there's one you'd rather not learn, just let me know…"

She glanced around to meet each and every pair of brown, green, blue, and hazel eyes that were currently fastened on her. "Even if you don't want to learn these spells, you should at least be familiar with the effects so you can avoid them yourself…"

A few people exchanged uneasy glances; Hope noticed that those who did so were more of the younger students than the older.

"Alright…follow me and we'll begin with *Dirumpor*."

This was the part that Hope hadn't really been looking forward to, mostly because she had never really explained what kind of damages her spells had caused during the battle. Neville was there when she had used *Concido* on Dolohov and he had heard how she had tried to kill Bellatrix with the Avada Kedavra, but he was one of the few. Hope was sure that when she had described herself as Grey that not all of the DA took those words to heart.

They entered the Chamber and the students gathered a good bit behind Hope, wary of the blast radius as a dummy had been set up on the opposite end (which was ironically where the entrance was to the Chamber if one had descended from the girls' lavatory).

"Alright, so, as I said," Hope began, turning away from the dummy briefly to address the assembled DA members, "*Dirumpor* is used as an explosive, it can be small or it can be big, depending on how much of an explosion you want. That means you can possibly blow someone back and knock the breath out of them with a smaller one, or you can…" Hope bit the inside of her mouth uncomfortably at the shifty eyes of several students.

"Look," she said with a low sigh, "you don't really have to stay if it makes you that uncomfortable
you can leave, nothing's stopping you and no one's going to look down on you for leaving."

But no one moved and Hermione threw her an encouraging nod so Hope inhaled rather deeply and pulled out her wand to aim at the dummy. "Watch closely…Dirumpor!"

A jet of white light soared through the air to collide with the dummy. The subsequent explosion had everyone who didn't glance away blinking in an attempt to assuage the white spots in front of their eyes for several minutes afterwards.

The explosion had started at the centre, where the spell had struck, belling outwards from that point to encompass the entire dummy in a flash of red and white.

All that remained was a pile of ash and debris.

"Whoa!" Colin uttered from behind Ernie (who was hardly a larger target than him) as he peeked his head out only once he ascertained that he was no longer in immediate danger.

"And that is why the Ministry had to construct an entirely new telephone booth for their visitor's entrance." Hope sounded slightly smug as she mentioned this, destruction of property was something she seemed to be quite well known for (several prime examples being the chamber that held the Philosopher's Stone, the cemetery of Little Hangleton, and the Department of Mysteries).

Laughter rippled through the group at that comment as well as the tone in which the words were spoken.

"Of course, I'm not expecting you to use this against a person," Hope continued, waving her hand in a careless manner. "I mean, I only used it as a stalling tactic, but I won't deny that Concido and Fax were used against people, but they were also very bad people…I can demonstrate the other two if you like, but if you'd rather leave, that's entirely up to you."

Let it be known that Hope gave them all the opportunity to back out, but they refused to, and that warmed Hope's heart just enough. And for a few moments Hope didn't think about the inevitable war, for a moment it was just her and the group of brave Gryffindors, loyal Hufflepuffs, intelligent Ravenclaws, and cunning Slytherins who had come to her despite the oppression of Umbridge, wanting to learn Defence Against the Dark Arts. And this was the group that had returned even after Umbridge had gone.

But the reality was that the war was coming and they needed to be ready when it did.

The lines were drawn and the battleground was set, but only few were willing to admit it. Daphne and Astoria Greengrass had made themselves targets, that much couldn't be denied. Slytherins siding with the Light over the Dark? It was unheard of! And Malfoy knew the two would only get in his way unless he removed them forcibly.

It was a pity they were both Pure-bloods, in fact, it was almost a shame, but Malfoy had to do this, he had to kill Dumbledore. If he didn't, then the Dark Lord would kill him and his family…and his mother didn't deserve a death like that.

It was easier than he thought, introducing the poison into their drinks, and even Hope Potter with all her reservations and suspicions was nowhere near as suspiscious as Mad-Eye Moody and would not have noticed the poison until the effects took place, which wouldn't occur for a few hours.

So he watched quietly as Daphne laughed at something Dean Thomas said –the Mudblood now wore the Gryffindor Quidditch Uniform that someone had to replace Katie Bell as Chaser–, leaning
her head comfortably on his shoulder before leaning back so that he could stand with his red-and-gold dressed teammates.

Potter's hair was bound tightly in a dark red braid for the occasion and her Firebolt was leaning securely on her shoulder. It was only once she had gone off that Malfoy made his move.

Hope knew something was off when Ginny said those fateful words: "Malfoy's gone off sick!"

A scowl marred Hope's face. "No way he's sick, I just saw him."

Ginny shrugged, reaffirming her grip on her broom. "Either way, it's better for us; it means Harper's playing, and he's an idiot."

Her lips curled in slight amusement, but she couldn't shake the feeling that Malfoy was simply skiving the match, but why, though? He hadn't looked ill before, so why ditch? Malfoy had been rather all about Slytherin House surpassing Gryffindor, something that hadn't been done since Hope had arrived at Hogwarts.

However…the castle was remarkably empty during Quidditch Games. Her eyes narrowed suspiciously at the thought before she sighed. Well, there was little she could do about it now.

"We're out in five," she told her team. She was reasonably satisfied with them, but they were nowhere near as good as they had been with Katie, Angelina, Alicia, Oliver, Fred, and George.

And five minutes later Hope was scowling up at the new Slytherin Quidditch Captain, Urquhart, who might have had some troll blood in him, now that she thought about it. Hope was sure she looked rather small and unassuming compared to him, but Hope had long-since proven that small packages packed large punches.

"Captains shake hands," Madam Hooch barked, her eyes sharp on the pair who were looking rather like the very idea of touching one another would make them sick, but the conceded.

Hope didn't even blink when he tried to squeeze her metacarpals and phalanges into mush.

"You're going down, Potter," he growled.

"You first," she dared as her hand was released, the appendage throbbing, though she made it seem as though no damage had been done to her.

"Mount your brooms," Madam Hooch continued, preparing her whistle. "Three…two…one…" And the whistle pierced the air as fourteen players took to the air.

By far the worst thing about the Quidditch match was that Professor McGonagall—in a lapse of judgment, apparently—had chosen Zacharias Smith as commentator (a truly horrible decision, if you asked her). The boy spoke with so much scorn that Hope was beginning to believe that he didn't know any other why to speak. It soon became obvious that he was more into degrading the Gryffindor Team than the Slytherin one (Hope wondered if he was paid for that or if it was honestly deliberate—if she had to guess, it would probably be the latter).

Smith was nearly as annoying as Harper, and Harper had attempted—and failed quite spectacularly, mind you—to knock her off her broom twice now.

His strategy seemed to be to not bother looking for the Snitch himself—or at all—but to block her in her attempts to do so. Hope had to say that he wasn't doing so well, but that might have had something to do with the fact that Hope had the fastest broom on the pitch, far outstripping his

Ron was doing spectacularly well today, but Hope chalked that up to whatever Hermione told him before the match. Both of their cheeks had a matching blush, but the colour had spread to Ron's ears as well (Hope half wanted to know what she'd told him, but that wasn't any of her business).

So she didn't really appreciate it when Harper, the moron, said—as he collided with Hope yet again to loud boos from the Gryffindor side—"Thinks he's something special today, doesn't he? Your blood-traitor pal—"

He gave a small grunt as Hope threw her shoulder against him, knocking him away.

"At least he's got better attention than you!" Hope snarled as she shot over him and after a shimmer of gold that could be nothing other than the Golden Snitch.

"Oh, look," Zacharias said in a voice of eternal boredom, "it seems Potter caught sight of the Golden Snitch once again…"

Irritation twitched Hope's eyebrow as she raced after the small orb, which passed by the commentator's podium, she flexed the broom so that the twig-end of it smacked Smith in the face as she passed.

The laughter as Smith fell back rang in Hope's ears as she came closer and closer to the Snitch, ducking under a decisive Bludger as she did so, her hand outstretched towards the ball. Nothing short of Harper actually switching his broom for a Firebolt was going to stop her from getting that Snitch!

She was straining now and finally, at long last, her fingers curled around the cool orb and she pulled up, holding it high in the air as the cheers exploded around her.

Daphne didn't much like excitement, though the Gryffindor House seemed to be full of nothing but. The constant ringing in her head made standing difficult, which was why she was sitting down, a bottle of chilled Butterbeer in her hand.

There were a few people from the other three Houses in the Gryffindor common room, and they were all ones from the DA, Daphne was humoured to note.

Luna was still wearing her giant lion's head on her own head and the people around her had stopped jumping every time it gave a mighty roar, her hands fluttering in the air as she moved them in time with the words she said to Neville who was smiling.

Padma was beside Hermione, staying away from the chaotic atmosphere as best as she could, with a small smile gracing her lips.

Daphne's boyfriend was with his teammates, laughing as Hope described Ginny's epic crash into the commentator's podium, thus knocking out the irritating Zacharias Smith.

Poor Astoria was missing out on all the fun to study for an exam; Daphne couldn't see why, after all, it wasn't for another week, but the fourth-year was insistent.

"You look like you're about to fall asleep."

Daphne tilted her head back to smile up at Dean. He was still garbed in his Quidditch wear, along with his other teammates, and it defined his lean body in ways that sent a shiver down her spine.
"I'm sure it's nothing," Daphne said shrugging her shoulders in a careless manner, but her body was beginning to feel a great deal like lead. She took his hands and they felt like ice beneath her palms as he pulled her up and into a standing position. "Just not enough sle…"

She pitched forward suddenly, the world spinning around her and the only thing she could be sure of was Dean's voice echoing above her, calling for someone to get help.

"Luna! Get Poppy!" Hope's voice pierced through the haze and she could barely make out a tail of wild blonde hair disappearing out of the portrait hole. That was good, the swift Ravenclaw was the quickest of the DA.

"Daphne? Can you hear me?"

"Yes," Daphne mumbled, her words slurred as she tried to focus on Dean, but Hope cut across him, her voice taking on a vicious edge.

"Have you eaten or drunken anything today?" she demanded, a hand pressed against Daphne's forehead.

"Yes…"

"Poison, you think?" a different voice was speaking now…Padma, she thought. "Give me a look."

"Storia," Daphne forced out her sister's name as best as she could.

"Have you got this, Padma?" Hope asked in the silence that had formed in the wake of Daphne's collapse.

"Go," Padma said with a nod and Hope clasped Dean's shoulder with a request to keep an eye on the Slytherin before racing up to the girls dormitory and returning with a parchment clutched in her hand. She was out of the portrait hole in seconds with Hermione and Ron following just as fast.

"I solemnly swear that I'm up to no good," Hope breathed, ink painting itself across the page until the image of the floors of Hogwarts appeared.

"Do you really think its poison?" Ron asked as he and Hermione hovered over Hope's shoulders.

"Who would want to poison the Greengrass Sisters?" Hermione responded.

"A neutral family that publicly allies with the Girl-Who-Lived?" Hope asked in the driest manner she could manage, her anger just simmering under her skin. "I wonder…" She bit the inside of her mouth as she frantically searched for Astoria's dot; this was her fault, this was all her fault. All she'd wanted to do was scare Malfoy into slipping up, but she'd only succeeded in showing her hand.

"There!" Hope cried in relief. "The corridor off of the library!"

"I know a shortcut, come on!" Hermione said, tugging them in what seemed like the opposite direction, but not so surprisingly –as this was Hermione they were talking about– it got them there quicker and the trio could just make out a slumped figure against the floor with blonde hair pooling over her shoulders, the vestiges of sunlight painting across her snow-white flesh.

"She's breathing!" Ron assured the other two as they hastily made their way to her side and he quickly hefted her up and into his arms.

But Hope's heart was still racing even the next day when she came to visit the two girls.
Daphne heard her approach and turned her head towards the now strawberry-blonde-haired Gryffindor as she came to sit beside her.

"I was wondering when you were going to show up," Daphne said groggily. "Dean just left to grab a bite."

"Yeah, I saw him," Hope said a bit jerkily, twisting her hands uncomfortably. "I, er..." Her words stalled in her throat, quite a strange thing to witness, Daphne had to admit, as Hope always seemed to have something to say.

"It's my fault," she said finally, looking her in the eye, "I practically goaded Malfoy and...you paid the price."

Daphne threw her golden head back against the cushions with a groan. She had been expecting this. "Please, I agreed to it, and Astoria and I are going to be fine, that poison wasn't nearly enough to kill us, but it was lucky you got to her." Daphne's face sobered. "Madam Pomfrey said the poison affected her worse because she has a smaller body and lower immune system."

Hope's eyes flickered over to where Astoria was currently sleeping off the now diluted poison.

"We'll just have to be careful what we eat and drink," the blonde said as offhandedly as she could manage. "Besides, we both knew we were painting targets on our backs by siding with you over Voldemort."

Hope blinked at the use of the man's name, and at the careless manner Daphne had spoke in.

"If you thought a bit of poison was going to change our mind about anything," Daphne scolded, "you're dead wrong."

Hope was sure she would have felt at least halfway exasperated if the attitude Daphne was acting in wasn't so similar to her own.

"Fair enough," she conceded, "but I'm still taking your patrols for the next two weeks."

"Hmph, you're welcome to them," Daphne scoffed with a smirk. "More time for me to sleep."

Hope's lips curled upwards slightly into the briefest smile.

The fortnight passed without much incident after Daphne and Astoria's poisoning, which, unsurprisingly, got around to the school pretty fast. The rumour grapevine was nothing if not impressive. But the Greengrass girls had proved themselves to have resilient hearts and minds and had returned to class and DA lessons with renewed fervour and dedication that had not previously had within a week after the event.

Luna had practically adopted the younger Greengrass and Dean hardly left Daphne's side now, so Hope felt they were rather well looked after.

Hope regretted taking on Daphne's shifts, mostly because it meant her path often crossed with Malfoy's, and she knew he was behind everything, however, there was little more she could do than glare venomously at him as she stalked in the opposite direction.

Luckily, though, today was her last day and Hope wouldn't have to miss out on the sleep she was sure Daphne was enjoying.
Hope tapped her wand nervously against her side, a tick she had developed rather recently that annoyed her greatly. A cold gust of wind blew across her, causing her to shiver as she walked past the stone courtyard to continue up towards the stairs that led to the Gryffindor common room, more than happy to leave now that her last shift was over.

She paused briefly to twist around suddenly and scowl into the darkness…She could have sworn that she heard something…perhaps it was noth—

Her eyes bulged as something grabbed her from behind, a hand clamping over her mouth while another gripped her wand warm, forcing it down.

Fear spiked in her veins as she reached up with her free arm to tug at the hand over her mouth when a voice whispered in her ear, "One would think you didn't want to see me, Mystery-Girl."

Hope's heart did a few back flips, her spine relaxing at the sound of his voice and she twisted around to see the hood of a invisibility cloak (nowhere near as good as hers, obviously) thrown aside to reveal a head of ginger hair framing cheeks of freckles with blue eyes piercing through the darkness.

Hope threw her arms around George's shoulders, pulling him down to her and giving him a fiery kiss that had him stumbling slightly as he wrapped his arms around her, pulling her just slightly off the ground.

Her fingers tangled with his hair as he pulled her more tightly against him in a meeting of lips, teeth, and tongue. All George could feel was her flesh against his and her scent was intoxicating.

Everything about her was intoxicating.

She broke from him suddenly, gasping and breathing deeply and clinging to the front of his robes as though she would collapse on her own two feet.

"George Weasley!" she gasped his name in a way that filled George with heat. "You…what…huh?"

It had been awhile since George's kissing skills rendered her into an incomprehensible mess, and the lad allowed him a moment to marvel before grinning down at her.

"Order of the Phoenix, love," he murmured into her ear, making her shiver as a result, "I managed to snag guard duty."

The pink was fading from Hope's cheeks quickly and an expression of suspicion replaced it. "Guard duty? The school or me?"

He gave her a sheepish smile and Hope scowled in return, removing herself from his arms and crossing her arms. He instantly missed her warmth as he had been without it for months now.

"I don't need someone to watch me," she said coolly, "or is Dumbledore trying to get something else out of you?"

"I think it's more of Mum," George conceded, "she's more worried about you than she is about Ron and Ginny…though that might be because they can keep their heads down a bit more than you."

Hope wrinkled her nose at him with an expression of disinterest. "Your mother always worries, Georgie, I think that is her main function."

"Probably," George chuckled, reaching out a hand to pull her close, earning a noise of surprise and embarrassment as he nuzzled his face into her neck, peppering light kisses against her skin.
"The next patrol will be here in a few minutes," Hope said, hardly breathing as the kisses drew upwards to move against her lips.

"I'll make this quick." George was smirking as he swept her into another soul-wrenching kiss that left her dazed and smiling like the cat that caught the canary even after he had left.

It was going to be nearly two months before Hope would see him again, so she did her best to imprint the memory into her mind.

Merlin, that man was bad for her heart!
"But-but!" Hermione was spluttering as she gazed at her friend. "You're –you know! You have to take someone!"

It was little more than halfway through December when Hope found herself being goggled at by Hermione, her newly Parseltongue-translated book clutched in her arms as she followed the pixie-haired girl (don't even get her started on the shade of blue her locks were) around the Library as she searched for a few books in particular on ancient magicks.

"I'm just going stag, what's the big idea?" Hope demanded under her breath, casting a wary eye towards Madam Pince who was eyeing the pair with increasing suspicion, as she often did towards those who disturbed the relative silence of her library.

"Hope!" Hermione hissed. "You're famous! You can't go alone!"

They were, of course, speaking of the Slug Party, which was a party of sorts that would occur the day before the train was due to leave Hogsmeade. The invitation was only extended towards Slug Club members and their dates, and though Hope had avoided the meetings like the plague, she couldn't really dodge this last ditch effort, so, reluctantly, Hope agreed. Slughorn had been rather pleased.

"George and Fred are working on a new project this week and I don't want to pull them away." A dazed smile erupted on her lips as she recalled the last time she had seen the man in question, and it would only be a few days more until she saw him again. "Besides, going alone makes a statement."

"Yes," Hermione agreed, stressing the word more than she should have, "that you're single!"

"That I'm independent," Hope corrected with a light scoff as she pulled a few dusty tomes from the shelf to carry them up the Madam Pince to check them out, still towing along Hermione who was shaking her head in exasperation.

"Do you have any idea how many boys are trying their hand at brewing a love potion?" Hermione demanded once they were out of the room and she could raise her voice.

"I can't imagine a bloke wanting to go to a party," Hope said dryly, rolling her eyes towards Hermione, a smirk worming its way onto her lips. "Have you asked Ron yet?"

Hope had no doubt in her mind that Ron would agree in an instant.

Hermione's cheeks pinked and she scowled. "Don't change the subject," she warned, "it's not the fact it's a party, it's that they want to have you on their arm…You didn't read that article in Witch Weekly, did you?"

"What article?" Hope asked blankly. She only read the Daily Prophet and the Quibbler (one out of the realization that she needed to know even a slight amount of information, and one because it made her smile).

"There was an article on you in Witch Weekly last week," Hermione explained patiently. "Your likes and dislikes…it's really well researched…I wonder who talked to her…"

Hope smacked a palm against her forehead with a groan, her bag of books swinging heavily on her shoulder. "You've got to be kidding me!"
Hermione shrugged. "Gossip sells. Don't tell me that you haven't noticed how much attention is being paid towards you?"

Hope blinked owlishly and looked at her. "Er…no, not really, I mean, it's annoying, sure, but I usually ignore the fanboys…George is far more impressive."

"I've no doubt," Hermione said, smiling good-naturedly, "but you do realize how many people you've got after you, don't you?"

"Can't imagine why," Hope said with a laugh as they rounded the corner, "it's not my winning personality, I assure you."

"No," Hermione agreed, "it's just your good looks, fame, and fortune. Some people don't marry for love, you know."

"Those people are shallow," Hope scoffed, "or in a betrothal contract, I'm not really worried about that. I love George and he loves me." The last words were said with so much surety that Hermione wished she had as much luck in love as her friend had.

"There you two are."

Ron looked relieved to see them both, an irritated frown marring his lips as he straightened his bag's strap over his shoulder.  

Hope eyed him suspiciously. "This isn't about the love potion, is it?"

His back stiffened and his eyes clouded slightly. "What love potion? I-I mean, of course not!"

"Ronald," Hermione said shrewdly, "you are a rather terrible liar."

The tips of his ears turned red before his cheeks did. "Like you're any better."

Hermione opened her mouth, ready to berate him when Hope clasped each of their shoulders with a wide grin spreading across her lips. "Aw! It's so cute when you two fight!"

All that sexual tension would kill them one of these days, that much Hope was almost completely sure of, unless they actually did something about their mutual attraction, but even that had a rather slim chance of occurring.

Predictably, both sixth year Gryffindors' cheeks burst with colour, a bright flaming red that Hope wasn't sure she'd seen on anyone before.

"By the way," Hope said, continuing to grin at the pair and Hermione could practically see the gears turning in her head, "I hear Hermione's got something to ask you."

She gave Ron a rather roguish wink that she had to have picked up from his older brother before tipping an invisible hat to the pair of them and striding away before Hermione could stutter out her request for him to accompany her to the Slug Party.

She didn't see his response, but later she certainly saw him walking with a spring in his step and Hermione smiling a bit dazedly every so often as though replaying memories in her head.

Hope would take full credit for pushing Hermione towards Ron, because Merlin knew the girl would have needed eons to become so bold as to ask him herself; and she was lecturing Hope on waiting so long for a date (even though Hope wouldn't be taking one)!
Hope hummed a soft tune to herself.

Hope didn't much like fancy parties, hence why she was so reluctant to come to Slughorn's in the first place, and it didn't have to do with how she looked, because, as Parvati put it, she looked "damn fine."

The dress suited her, being a sleeveless gown that was a deep emerald green that fell to the floor, melding to her skin in a way that was flattering but not enough that it was tight against her flesh, showing too much. The emerald-coloured clutch in her held nothing other than her wand and invisibility cloak (which hardly seemed to spend any time away from her these days).

Her rings glittered on her fingers, but she only wore one other piece of jewellery, and that was necklace shaped like a snake that was coiled around her neck (courtesy of Tracey who had gotten her name for the gift exchange; it wasn't nearly as expensive as it seemed). Her dark crimson hair was pinned to one side, falling in delicate curls over one shoulder.

It was almost a pity that George wasn't there to escort her, and that was the reason why several boys had approached her to ask to escort her and Hope was on her last nerve when she told them through gritted teeth she was fine on her own, thank you very much. But really...maybe she should have just asked Neville to go with her.

She almost turned right back around before wincing at Slughorn's loud voice, the man no doubt catching sight of her tell-tale dark red hair.

"Hope, m'girl!" he called to her, making Hope think that he had been watching her for quite some time. "Come in, come in, so many people I'd like you to meet!"

Hope sighed and plastered a smile to her face. "Of course, Professor," she said simply, allowing herself to be dragged towards a short-statured man with rectangular spectacles perched on his nose and a tall man dressed in dark clothes and looking incredibly tired –Hope knew the feeling.

"Hope Potter, I am simply delighted!" he cried and Hope smiled sheepishly. "The pictures do you no justice!"

"Er...thanks," Hope said, forcing herself not to look around to search for Hermione and Ron, who she was sure could see her and were probably laughing at her predicament.

Worple was still talking. "I was saying to Professor Slughorn only the other day, 'Where is the biography of Hope Potter for which we have all been waiting?'"

"You have?" Hope asked, looking vaguely startled at the prospect.

He positively beamed. "Yes, indeed, though I understand you prefer to keep your affairs private, from what Horace has told me. But seriously, I would be delighted to write it myself --people are craving to know more about you, dear girl, craving!" Hope fought back another sigh. Honestly, you'd think she was some kind of saint the way people tended to go on about her. "If you were prepared to grant me a few interviews, say in four or five-hour sessions, why, we could have a book
finished within months. And all with very little effort on your part, I assure you- my dear girl, the
gold you could make, you have no idea—"

"I'm flattered," Hope said carefully, "but I already have more gold than I could ever need—" Hope
could see Ron over Slughorn's head, arching an eyebrow at her, an amused smirk resting on his lips.
"Now, if you'll excuse me, I see my friend."

Hope disappeared faster than anyone could have grabbed her to pull her back, fighting against the
crowd to reach the tall ginger-haired boy's side.

"Looked like you were having a lot of fun over there," Ron said, laughing at the rather harried
expression on his best mate's face.

"Sure it did," she bit out in a snarky manner. "Where's Hermione?"

She scanned the crowd for that familiar mane of bushy brown curls, catching sight of them a bit
away at one of the tables laden down with a variety of foods and drinks.

"She's just grabbing a drink," Ron supplied for her and Hope nodded in understanding. "So what'd
the bloke want?" He nodded back towards Worple.

"Apparently to write my biography," Hope said with obvious disdain as Ron snorted.

"I'm sure you were so excited about that," he said as Hermione made her way back to them, instantly
gushing over Hope's dress, to which Hope in turn responded hers was just as nice. Hermione opened
her mouth to say something else, but the three were interrupted by a dramatic tone of "Hope Potter!"

"Great," Hope grumbled before forcing a neutral almost-smiling expression onto her face. "Hello,
Professor Trelawney."

Hermione rolled her eyes clearly at the sight of the fraud; she had never gotten on with the
Divination professor, so this didn't surprise Hope. Ron, on the other hand, was not so silent with his
snort of amusement.

"My dear girl!" the woman cried, her eyes seeming over-large behind her spectacles, but what else
was new. "The rumours! The stories! 'The Chosen One'! Of course, I have known for a very long
time—" This time Hope rolled her eyes with Hermione. Of course she'd known for a long time, after
all, she was bound to get lucky with all those claims of Hope's soon-to-pass death. "—The omens
were never good, Hope…but why have you not returned to Divination? For you, of all people, the
subject is of the utmost importance!"

"Ah, Sybill," a second voice uttered and Hope honestly wondered how she didn't see Slughorn
coming, given his vast size, "we all think our subject's most important! But I don't think I've ever
known such a natural at potions!"

Hope grimaced and Hermione scowled. They had a matter of a difference of opinion in regards to
the Half-blood Prince's potion's book, this had more to do with the 'unfair advantage' Hope had over
other students by using the Prince's suggestions in class, putting her at the front of her class for the
first time since coming to Hogwarts.

"Instinctive, you know," Slughorn said cheerfully (a good bit tipsy, Hope thought), "like her mother!
I've only ever taught a few with this kind of ability, I can tell you that, Sybill –why even Severus—"

Just then Hope and Ron shared an identical expression of unadulterated horror as their worst
nightmare was pulled before them.
"Stop skulking and come and join us, Severus!" Slughorn admonished half-heartedly, only earning a sour expression from the sallow-skinned Head of Slytherin House. "I was just talking about Hope's exceptional potion-making! Some credit must go to you, of course, you taught her for five years!"

If Hope had to choose between being in the same room as Severus Snape at this moment and jumping off the Astronomy Tower, she'd choose the Tower, especially with how he was looking at her.

A light probing feeling brushed against her and Hope instantly blanked her mind, recalling the feeling all too well from the previous year's fiasco of Occlumency lessons. As soon as she found a rune that block against mental intrusions, Hope was making herself an amulet.

"Funny," Snape said with a clear sneer that Hope threw back in his face, her lips curling in distaste. "I never had the impression that I managed to teach Potter anything at all."

Hope bristled. Maybe if he wasn't vanishing her supposed potion failures every other lesson, she might have gotten a more than adequate grade in his class. Ron and Hermione grabbed Hope's arms discreetly in case they needed to stop Hope from leaping at the greasy-haired git.

"Well, then, it's a natural ability!" Slughorn blustered loudly. "You should have seen what she gave me, first lesson, Draught of Living Death –never had a student produce finer on a first attempt, I don't think even you—"

Hope didn't like the way Snape was scrutinizing her and she flexed her arms under her friends' loose grips and they immediately dropped their hands, sharing a glance behind Hope's back that she missed. Hope took a tentative step to the side, intending to make an escape, when—

"Remind me again what subjects you're taking, Hope?"

Hope tried not to wince so obviously, but she was sure that it must have been quite obvious.

"Erm...Charms, Defence Against the Dark Arts, Transfiguration, Ancient Runes, Potions, and Astronomy," Hope said, her eyebrows creasing together as she listed her classes off.

"Of course," Snape said in a voice that was nearly scornful, "all classes for an aspiring Curse-breaker."

Hope's back stiffened and she glared at her. "That's what I'm good at, in case you hadn't noticed."

Hermione hissed a warning in her ear before they were suddenly interrupted by the unexpected arrival of Draco Malfoy being tugged through by a tight grip from Argus Filch. Hope's eyes narrowed suspiciously, and when Snape left to escort him back to his common room, Ron was the first to notice that Hope left soon after.

Hermione sighed beside him. "She's relentless, isn't she?"

Ron snorted into his mead. "When is she not?"

The train ride to King's Cross Station was unusually quiet, and that worried Hermione and Ron. The two were sitting opposite their green-eyed friend who was sitting with her legs propped up on the cushions, one of the Parseltongue books open on her lap. Hermione wasn't sure what it was on, but it seemed to be quite enthralling.

"So," Hermione said conversationally, "find anything out from Malfoy?"
"I haven't the faintest idea what you're talking about," Hope said in a vague manner, her eyes glinting silver in the light. "After I left the party, I went right to bed."

"Sure you did," Ron drawled the words out as he leaned forward on the cushion. "How stupid do you take us for?"

Hope scowled.

"Besides," Hermione added, "if a cat was as curious as you, it would be dead nine times over."

Ron snorted as Hope scrunched up her body slightly, hunching her shoulders as she made an attempt to hide behind her book, the scowl deepening with every movement.

"C'mon!" Ron poked her denim-clad knee with a finger. "What'd you hear?"

"Nothing that can be proven," came the grumble from behind the thick tome.

"We still want to hear it," Hermione replied in a light tone.

A low sigh was uttered and Hope dropped the book to her chest, exposing her head.

"Alright, so I followed Snape and Malfoy under my invisibility cloak," Hope began, swinging her legs over the side of the bench once more so she could look her friends in the eye.

"Of course you did," Hermione said, unsurprised by this development.

Hope ignored this.

"He was having an argument with Snape about 'no one suspecting him', that he didn't have anything to do with what happened to Katie, and that the Greengrasses had a lot of powerful enemies."

Ron's face grew stony and Hermione's expression cooled. Everyone had known about the poisoning attempt in a matter of hours, but the DA members were the ones who took it the most personally. Dean, in particular, had vowed vengeance on the person who had nearly killed his girlfriend.

"I think Snape tried to read his mind after that," Hope said, screwing up her eyes slightly as she tried to recall the exact phrasing, "because he mentioned something about Bellatrix teaching Malfoy Occlumency...he said he swore to Malfoy's mother that he would protect him...something about a vow or something..."

An odd look overtook Ron's features while Hermione remained clueless.

"Not an...Unbreakable Vow?" Ron asked, appearing as though he distinctly hoped it was nothing of the sort.

"An Unbreakable Vow?" Hermione asked curiously, glancing between her friends. "What's that?"

Two pairs of eyes goggled at her and her cheeks turned bright pink.

"This is a monumental occasion," Hope said, still gaping at the busty-haired brunette whose face was slowly flushing crimson, "Hermione Granger not knowing something that Ronald Weasley knows."

"Oh, shut up," Hermione grumbled, "so what is an Unbreakable Vow?"

Ron looked distinctly uncomfortable, and Hope and Hermione couldn't for the life of them understand why.
"Maybe a better question would be what happens if you break an Unbreakable Vow?" Hope mused.

"You can't break an Unbreakable Vow," Ron said, his eyes distant as if he was recalling a memory, "you die if you do."

"Really?" Hermione asked, startled by this new information and even Hope looked surprised.

"Yeah," Ron bobbed his head, shivering slightly, "Fred and George tried to get me to make one when I was about five. I nearly did too, I was holding hands with Fred and everything when Dad found us. He went mental. Only time I've ever seen Dad as angry as Mum. Fred reckons his left buttock has never been the same."

Hermione burst into giggles at the mention of Fred's buttock and Hope couldn't help but snort, easing past the uncomfortable moment and wondering just what Fred was trying to get Ron to vow not to do at that age (at the same time, Hope was quite sure she didn't want to know).

"Anyways," Hope said, her voice losing the lightness that it had held before, "Malfoy kept saying that he had given him a job to do, it was just taking a bit longer than he thought…and Snape offered to help him—"

"Snape offered to help Malfoy?" Ron said a bit dubiously.

"Let's think rationally here," Hermione said, waving her hands a bit for emphasis, "has it occurred to you that maybe Snape was pretending to offer help to find out what Malfoy's up to?"

Hope crossed her arms, slumping back in her seat. "You just don't want to believe that you're sharing classes with a Death Eater," she grumbled.

"And you don't want to believe that maybe all of this is a series of coincidences," Hermione retorted.

"I thought we all agreed that there was no such thing as coincidences," Ron interjected smoothly, feeling a little out of sorts at having to play mediator between the two girls, but luckily the job was not his for long as the train pulled to a stop at Platform Nine-and-three-quarters.

Hope stood up suddenly, her irritation leaving her to be replaced with a bright grin as she pulled her coat tight around her. "See you lot at dinner, I've got a ginger to snog."

And then she disappeared out the door before she could witness Ron gagging in distaste towards her words.

The wind whipped her hair, white flurries tangling with the dark crimson strands. Her eyes were narrowed against the wind, but she still saw him quite easily, and the smile spread across her face. And then she was racing through the crowd, weaving between people greeting their children until she could throw her arms over his neck, kissing him soundly.

"Let's go home," she whispered into his ear and she could practically hear George's smile before he twisted on the spot.

Hope laughed, a high, elated sound that he hadn't heard in quite some time, her smile turning her eyes hazel as she freed her arms from her coat and he did the same with him travelling cloak, only to throw them back around him a moment later as she pulled him down for a kiss.

"Mm, I love you," she mumbled against his lips, giving a sudden, breathy laugh when he gripped her hips pulling her up so that she could lock her legs over his.
"I should hope so," he nearly growled in her ear, a voice that sent a shiver down her spine, "'cause you're stuck with me, Potter." He nipped lightly at her neck, and a breathless gasp escaped her as wall connected with her back.

"And you make that out like it's a bad thing," she retorted, pulling him towards her by the hair, kissing him until he was the one pulling back for oxygen.

"Entirely bad," he said winded, only to be caught off guard by Hope pushing off from the wall, and his knees buckled, sending them to the floor.

Hope burst out laughing. "Can we both agree that rough snogging isn't much our thing?"

"Definitely," George groaned from underneath her. And no, he was absolutely not distracted by how his girlfriend had landed straddling him, or the warmth that was currently flooding through his body because of their current position.

Definitely not.

And Remus Lupin was never going to find out about this…never.

Dinner was a lovely affair, Hope had to admit, containing all of the Weasleys –apart from Percy who was still estranged–, Hope, Hermione, Fleur, Remus, and Tonks. Mrs. Weasley had been more than relieved to discover that Hope had, for the most part, stayed out of trouble for the first term (now if only she could repeat that, but if the previous years were any indication, it was only going to go downhill from there). Fleur was excited about her return so that they could go shopping for gowns in a matter of days. But Hope couldn't be interested in that right now, she had a more pressing matter to attend to, which was why she snagged Mr. Weasley, Remus, and Tonks after dinner, telling them of what she overheard the day before.

All three adults shared a sceptical glance that grated on Hope's nerves more than anything.

"Has it occurred to you, Hope," Mr. Weasley began slowly, "that Snape was simply pretending—?"

Hope expelled a loud sigh, rolling her eyes at the ceiling. "—to offer help because he wanted to find out what Malfoy was up to? Yeah, Hermione touched up on that, thanks, but how would you be able to tell if he was actually offering to help or just fishing for information?"

"It's none of our business," Remus informed her, his pale green eyes serious. "It's Dumbledore's business. Dumbledore trusts Severus, and that ought to be good enough for all of us."

Tonks' eyes flickered to Hope, taking in her reaction, noticing how the red-head gaped at the man who was practically her uncle, mouthing his words with incredulity. "Ought to be good enough for all of us?" she demanded. "I don't trust him at all!"

Remus closed his eyes for a long moment only to open them to look at her straight in the eye. Her eyes had filtered into a fierce hazel that reminded him instantly of James when he got worked up; this did not help.

"You cannot keep blaming him for Sirius' death."

The colour of her eyes darkened and Hope stood, practically radiating anger. She gave a short laugh that was colder than Remus expected.

"I didn't think you thought I was so simple, Lupin." Her sudden change from Remus to Lupin hit
him so fast he almost got whiplash.

"Hope," Tonks reached for the girl but she shrugged off her hand, stalking towards the door and pulling her coat off its hanger with an angry jerk.

"Dear?" Mrs. Weasley's face was one of curiosity as she set down the dish she had been cleaning to gaze upon Hope. "Where are you going?"

"For a walk," Hope said, scowling back towards the sitting room, "let me know if you need me to vanquish any Dark Lords, since that's apparently all I'm good for!" The door slammed shut behind her and she missed the scandalized expression on Mrs. Weasley's face.

Ron whistled lowly to Hermione as they peered out the window after their friend. "It's been awhile since she's been that mad…kind of makes you glad you aren't on the receiving end of it, yeah?"

Hermione rolled her eyes, but she still nodded her head in silent agreement.

Meanwhile, Hope was kicking up snow as she went, grumbling to herself in a low voice, her wand sliding easily into her grip.

"Of course, Snape can't be suspected of anything, no, I'm just supposed to accept that Dumbledore's got this all under control!" Silver sparks burst from the tip. "What a load of shite," she said as if agreeing with herself. "Fucking Death Eaters…"

"Ask and I shall appear, ickle baby Potter." A harsh giggle followed these words and Hope tensed, an unpleasant shiver rolling down her spine. That was a voice Hope hadn't expected to hear anytime soon, in fact, she could have gone her whole lifetime without hearing it again.

She turned, her wide eyes taking in the sight of Bellatrix Lestrange and her grip on her wand tightened. And then she glanced towards the Burrow and did a bit of mental math…of course she had just stepped outside the wards…because Hope had the worst luck in the world, really, you would have thought he had broken a mirror or two…

"Well if it isn't little Bella," Hope said, her voice a bit mocking, "is Voldy using you as a messenger girl, now?"

Bellatrix’s smile was sickeningly sweet as she twirled with her own crooked wand, displaying what appeared to be only vague interest towards Hope, but Hope could see that it was all an act.

"I don't expect you'll be alive by dawn," she purred, her dark eyes practically glowing in amusement, "it's a bit unfortunate that the Dark Lord wants to kill you himself…but," she bared her teeth into a grin, "he didn't say anything about roughing you up a bit."

"Come and try," Hope dared, making a violent slash with her wand that Bellatrix had to duck under, but the spell succeeded in slicing into her sleeve.

The Lestrange glared at her opponent before firing off a few successive curses, but Hope had gotten rather good at both dodging and using the Shield Charm.

"Protego!" Hope switched to verbal spells when Bellatrix sent a powerful Severing Charm towards her that nearly cut off her arm. Unfortunately, the spell was more powerful than Hope's charm, and she gained a slash down her arm for her efforts.

Hope bit her lip to keep from crying out in pain, not wanting to give Bellatrix the pleasure of seeing her do so.
"Fax!" she bit out, flicking her wand towards Bellatrix, vindictive pleasure flooding her veins as the woman gave a short noise of discomfort. But then Hope was diving to the side to avoid spellfire. This, regrettably, left her wide open to Bellatrix's next attack.

"Crucio!"

Hope forgot about not giving Bellatrix the satisfaction of hearing how she caused her pain as everything burned as though she had been lit on fire only at least ten times worse. Fire and spears slicing through her and axes hacking her to bits could not even come close to causing her as much pain.

A scream of agony left her lips, and Bellatrix knew instantly that it would not be overlooked by the house full of witches and wizards. But Bellatrix had thought ahead and she had added a bit more power than necessary to the spell and Hope slumped semi-conscious into the snow once it had been lifted, and that was good enough to Bellatrix.

Figures were streaming out of the door as Bellatrix through the Half-blood's body over her shoulder, kicking her wand away; she wouldn't be needing it.

She cackled at the wands that were trained on her, taking note of how one of the older ones had to be restrained, anger darkening his blue eyes…a lover, she supposed.

"Too late," Bellatrix sneered, twisting on the spot and vanishing from Ottery St. Catchpole with Hope Potter all together.
Hope's eyes flashed open the second after Bellatrix apparated away from the Burrow. Apparition was not as instantaneous as one would think, especially if one was carrying a weight of a sixteen year old girl on their shoulder. And once she realized what was happening, she only had half a second to react, and in retrospect, it wasn’t a very good reaction, but it was the best she had.

She threw herself violently from Bellatrix as if repelled by a force.

In doing so, she removed herself from the Lestrange witch, however, this also sent her spiralling down through the free air to collide with a steep hill of snow. But Hope did not stop rolling when she hit the ground, she kept going until she met she base, snow painting her hair white and making her skin sting from the cold.

Hope clamoured into a standing position, disoriented from her fall and having no idea where she was, but an enraged scream from Bellatrix had her moving quickly, diving through the foliage in search of cover and to distance herself from the Death Eater in question.

As she ran, she searched herself for her wand, but it was no good, she must have dropped it when Bellatrix knocked her out.

Hope swore violently under her breath, increasing her speed as a spell cracked against a tree several meters behind her, resulting in a large crash from the falling tree. The snow was growing thicker around her ankles, stunting her ability to move at the pace she wished to.

Her eyes flashed ahead of her and in the distance she could see a structure that was very much like a castle, camouflaging into the wildlife in a way that Hope had never seen before, but Hope couldn't make a detour, it would have taken her closer to Bellatrix than she should have ever dared.

And Hope was at the disadvantage here. She had no wand, she certainly didn't know the terrain, and she was being chased by a torture-loving psychopath…wasn't that just lovely?

Hope had nothing on her—

Her eyes widened as her fingers brushed against something cool in her pocket and she pulled out a galleon.

"Alright, so I made a few adjustments to the DA's galleons," Hermione admitted as Hope looked the coin over. "Obviously it's got the same kind of enchantment as before—"

"Obviously," Ron snorted beside her, earning in irate glance from the brunette, but she opted instead to turn away from him and speak more towards Hope who had yet to laugh at her efforts.

"But I've added a sort of tracking spell, if there's ever a need."

"Would there be?" Hope asked, her eyes crinkling in amusement.

Hermione gave a helpless shrug. "Who knows? But better to have it than not, I guess."

Hope clenched her hand around the galleon, holding it close to her lips as she whispered two words: "Find me." The galleon glowed with heat in her hand, not enough to burn but enough to draw attention, not unlike how members of the DA were told when the next meeting was. However, unlike the usual response, the heat returned every few seconds, like a siren.
And then she shoved it back in her pocket, racing further down the slope towards a tree that appeared to have several indents and branches protruding outwards so Hope could fling her body onto it, scrambling up the tree as Bellatrix, but luck had never been on Hope's side, and when she glanced down she knew why Bellatrix was cackling like the madwoman that she was; the tree she had chosen to climb stood at a cliff over a lake.

A second glance down toward her that if she was to fall, she would land in the turbulent rapid portion of the lake that was moving quickly through a small channel not far away.

A spell to the base of the tree released a scream from Hope as she clung helplessly to the bark. She wasn't sure how long it would take Hermione or Ron to get the message to someone who could Apparate (and she assumed they would be members of the Order), or how long it would take for them to find her where she was, a bit off from the coordinates she had left behind, but Hope was almost certain that her grip wouldn't last that long.

Hope groaned as she tried to pull herself farther up on the trunk so that she could rest upon it and not have her legs dangling in the free air, but it was to no avail. The tree offered her hardly any grip, and that wasn't a good thing.

She looked down again and it was something she regretted. On the plus side, even if she did fall – and that was becoming more and more probable as time wore on-- she would at least collide with water as opposed to ice. Hope had never been afraid of heights, but she knew that if the water wasn't frozen by now, it had to be positively frigid, and she wasn't looking forward to that.

"Come on, ickle baby Potter," Bellatrix cooed in a mocking manner that had Hope growling in a wolf-like manner towards the woman. "The Dark Lord didn't say I couldn't damage you a bit." Her dark eyes glinted malevolently as Hope tried to pull herself up onto the trunk but only failed, causing her grip to loosen even more. She wasn't going to be able to hold on for much longer.

"You give your master a message from me," Hope said with as much of a sneer as she could possibly manage, knowing her grip was failing fast even as the sound of cracks that accompanied apparition, "go to hell!"

And then she let go of the bark and fell away from the cliff-side, straight down, bracing herself for the impact. Hope took as quick of a breath as she could manage before the force of the water hitting her slapped her in the face.

She lost all of her breath instantly as the cold washed over her, sweeping her under just as fast by the force of the tide. Hope had to force her numbing legs to move, kicking violently so that her face could break through the surface. This was both good and bad.

Good because she could breathe, bad because the air above was just as bad as the water below, and as it was, she barely got a chance to breathe before she was swept under once more, through the small channel and down a short waterfall, once her face rose from the water once more, she heard noises that sounded distinctly like spellfire and shouts.

A hand tried to grab her as slipped under a second time, but her arm slid out of their grip before they could manage it.

She was choking on the ice-water before a strong grip pulled her out and onto the snowy earth. For a moment she didn't even care about how cold she was, or how cold the ground was, all she was aware of was the water she was coughing up and the arms holding her.

"Over here!" a voice called and Hope peeled her eyes open to squint upwards into the fading light of
the sunset.

"I've got you," the voice promised and Hope's eyes shifted to the one who was holding her and she was remarkably unsurprised to see that it was Remus.

"R-Remus," she rasped out his name through numbed lips and chattering teeth before throwing her water-logged arms over his shoulders, embracing him tightly.

"It's alright," he murmured into her icy hair, "I've got you."

"Hope!" She heard the skidding of boots in snow before she saw him, but the relief in his eyes at the sight of her safe from harm made her heart swell in her chest.

"Thank Merlin you're alright!" was all he said and Hope could barely feel when her lips twitched upwards into a relieved smile of her own.

The next day Hope was on her own (since George, unfortunately, had to go back to work, which he did so, albeit rather reluctantly) and had three people at her door. She wasn't surprised by Ron and Hermione, but the other one was a different matter entirely.

Hope slapped her forehead once she remembered. "Right, the wedding, I completely forgot!"

A soft pout appeared on Fleur's lips at her words, and Hope rushed to rectify the situation.

"Not that I'm not excited about it," she said quickly, rubbing at her eyes and yawning as she opened the door wider to admit them inside, "I've just been…busy, I guess." Being almost taken to Voldemort by his right hand woman counted as busy in a way.

"How are you?" Hermione asked once the four of them were settled before the fire with Hope having blankets heaped over her legs.

"Better than everyone seems to think," Hope said with a soft snort, "I'm sore and cold, that's about it, and if Mrs. Weasley thinks that's going to dissuade me from going out on my own, she's dead wrong."

Ron rolled his eyes up at the ceiling. "Should've known that you'd say that."

Hermione moaned a little in exasperation. "Hope…"

"What? It's not like they can shove me in a box to use for later!"

Fleur's lips twisted upwards as she watched her friend bickered with her friends as though she hadn't nearly been lost to Voldemort the day previously.

"If you're here about the wedding," Hope added, her attention returning to the blonde-haired French witch, "then why's Ron here?"

Patches of red appeared on the ginger's cheeks as the two other girls giggled.

"Moral support," Fleur said, unblinkingly, and that set them all off once more, but within minutes they were all immersed in the plans for the summer.

"My muzzer 'as taken over my bouquet," Fleur said with slight amusement, "after a sent 'er a photo of my dress."
She took out a small photograph and held it out to the trio to see (though, understandably, Ron was far less impressed than his female friends), and Hope and Hermione "ôoh"ed at the sight of it. It was an intricate white dress bearing two black lace phoenixes facing each other over the bodice.

"Oh, it's beautiful, Fleur," Hermione gasped. "It must have cost you a fortune!"

"It eez not as much as it looks," Fleur promised, but she couldn't help beaming anyways. "Besides, you only get married once, no?"

"If you're lucky," Ron snorted.

"And I 'ave zis," Fleur added, withdrawing something from her pocket and expanding it to place a package over Hope's lap.

Hope's eyes narrowed a bit suspiciously, but she opened it nonetheless to gaze upon the pool of golden fabric within. She looked up suddenly, her mouth gaping slightly. "I thought you were going to wait until term ended so we could go shopping!"

"I was," Fleur admitted, "but when I saw zis dress, I knew it would be perfect for you and Gabrielle."

"Go try it on!" Hermione said, clapping her hands excitedly. Even though she wasn't one of Fleur's bridesmaids, that didn't mean she couldn't be excited about the dress of the Maid of Honor.

Hope rolled her eyes, throwing off the layers of blankets as she did so as Fleur stooped to hold out a pair of golden heels that she wasn't sure she could walk in.

"Don't forget zese," she sang, ignoring Hope's scowl easily as the younger witch snatched them out of her grasp and stalked off towards the direction of her and George's bedroom.

The fabric fluttered freely around her legs, long enough to cover her knees, the bodice secure and modest with the material wrapped several times around her waist to be tied in a loose bow.

"Oh, you look…absolument magnifique!(absolutely beautiful/magnificent)" Fleur breathed. "Ze eyes will be on you!"

"And then you'll show up and stun them all speechless," Hope interjected before turning on her heel and returning back to the bedroom so she could get out of the dress and shoes before she broke her ankle, or something equally important.

"What'd you think?" Hermione asked Ron.

"Er…she…looked nice?" He offered, though it sounded more like a question than anything else and Hermione tried not to scoff. "I'm sure George'll care more than me," he muttered under his breath, and Hermione knew that he wasn't wrong there.

"Hope! It's Christmas!"

Hope groaned rather loudly, pressing her face deeper into her pillow. "In the name of the gods! It's too bloody early for this!"

"It's eight o'clock," he whispered in her ear and Hope tried hard not to shiver.

"So?" she grumbled. "Don't normal people sleep in when they're on holiday?"
"Not on Christmas!" She could feel his lips curling into a smile against her neck. "Come on, you know I can get you out of bed…"

"You are an impossible man!" Hope complained as she turned her head to inform where he could impolitely shove his ability to get her out of bed (it sounded much better in her head, in retrospect), but he distracted her by bestowing upon her lips a deep kiss, and Hope quite forgot what she was complaining about as he pulled her underneath him.

Her fingers tangled into his hair as she responded just as easily before pulling back quickly to look him in the eye. "This isn't really making me want to leave the bed," she said dryly.

"Ah, well," George said in a helpless manner, "there's always Plan B."

"Plan-hey! What're you doing?!" Hope yelped as she was thrown over his shoulder and escorted into the sitting room to be sat before a Christmas tree that hadn't been there when she had gone to bed. It wasn't large in any sense, barely reaching her hip, but its lights were bright.

"When did you do this?" she asked, stunned.

"After you fell asleep," George responded shamelessly, "It's not very big, but I figured that we could always get a bigger one when we've got our own house…"

Hope's eyes softened at the thought. The idea of spending the rest of her life with George was sounding pretty appealing considering how things were now.

"Happy Christmas." He was holding a small box out to her and Hope hoped dearly that it wasn't an engagement ring, because though she loved George more than anything, she couldn't even consider marrying him when Voldemort was still out and about in the world. She opened the box.

It was two rings, actually, two gold rings. One was remarkably plain with several runes marked onto it for protection and health, while the other bore diamonds strewn into the metal with Celtic designs spun into the surface (and if one looked close, they could see runes of a similar nature on it). Her heart palpitated as she looked from George to the gift. "I-Is this?"

"Your mum and dad's rings?" he finished for her. "Yeah, I asked Remus about the designs because I was going to have a replica made, but he'd kept the real ones from your parents' funeral, I think he was planning to give them to you himself when you were older but…I beat him to it." Hope lifted the rings out of the box by their chain.

"It's perfect," she hardly said as she clasped it behind her neck. "Now, you!"

Hope's gift was remarkably less heartfelt than George's, consisting of a simple pendant on a chain into which she had carved the ancient Blood Rune for protection that ranged from poisons to spells. And after a shower and a fresh set of clothes, Hope and George were heading to the Burrow, where she was met with the relieved expression of Mrs. Weasley (you would think that she hadn't been dropping by for the past three days since the incident), and with the amount of relief on her face, you'd think she'd been doing something dangerous, honestly…

Bill was looking a little vexed on behalf of his fiancée, whom his mother had opted to not knit a sweater for, but Hope had been expecting this, hence why she had bought Fleur a blue one that bore a fleur-de-lis (a play on her name, obviously) on top of her gift of aquamarine earrings, a gemstone Fleur had mentioned to her on occasion.

"You got me a book on Blood Magic," Ginny said, once she had pulled her away from the large gathering.
Hope was confused. "Did you not want it? I can get you something else, if you like?" She held out her hand to take back the book, but Ginny didn't rise to the challenge.

"How did you know I was into it?" she asked instead.

Hope smirked. "Ginny, you're taking Arithmancy and Ancient Runes as electives, you're clearly following in your brother's footsteps, besides, you're the only one who seems to really understand what I'm talking about when I go on about Blood Runes...are you planning on being a Cursebreaker?"

"Well...I'm considering it," Ginny admitted, looking a little sullen, "but I also want to be an International Quidditch Player..."

"You can always do both and figure out which one you like more," Hope offered before winking at her. "Now go hide that in your room before your mum sees it."

Ginny grinned briefly before racing up the stairs two at a time as Hope went to rejoin the growing group, hugging Remus tightly around the middle when she saw him. "Thanks for the rings," she said so low that only he could hear.

"It's nothing," Remus returned easily. Especially when one considered that he could have very well been spending Christmas without her if they hadn't found her. Hope's eyes narrowed suspiciously, as if sensing where his train of thought was going, but she didn't comment on it as they all sat down at the table.

Tonks was missing, but Angelina filled the void, capturing Fleur's attention as she enquired about the wedding plans that the former Triwizard participant was only so happy to indulge her upon. The wedding plans were a subject that Mrs. Weasley was apparently still not fond of, though privately Hope thought she was fighting a losing battle as she helped herself to some parsnips as George passed them to her before handing it off.

All the conversations seemed to blend together and Hope wasn't surprised in the least as she chewed on her gravy-soaked turkey that Ron and Hermione were arguing again, though couldn't quite tell what this one was about.

"I invited dear Tonks to come along today," Mrs. Weasley said, her voice echoing over the general noise, her words aimed towards Remus. "But she wouldn't come. Have you spoken to her lately, Remus?"

"Briefly," Remus admitted with a dazed smile that Hope wasn't sure she'd ever seen on his face before. She caught Hermione's eye and they both hid their laughter, "I haven't been back long, but Tonks' family has their own traditions, so I suspect you'll see her after Christmas is over."

"I see." Hope was sure that if Mrs. Weasley didn't like the idea of Remus and Tonks as a couple that she would have still been pushing Tonks towards Bill.

Ginny snorted into her pumpkin juice as Angelina coughed violently as Fred whispered something into her ear that had her blushing so brightly that it was obvious on her dark-skin as she choked on her own drink.

"Arthur!" Mrs. Weasley cried, her attention out the window and her voice containing an undercurrent of shock that earned the attention of all those sitting at the table. "Arthur –it's Percy!"

"What?" Mr. Weasley demanded, looking out the window as well.
And Mrs. Weasley wasn't wrong. Though Hope hadn't seen Percy since her fifth year, she could make him out easily with his bright ginger hair and his horn-rimmed glasses, but he wasn't alone. Striding at a much slower pace beside him was an older man with greying hair and a long dark cloak. He seemed remarkably unimpressive to Hope.

"Arthur, he's—he's with the Minister!" Mrs. Weasley said, and Hope scrutinized the man once more, but that knowledge did little to change her opinion towards the man.

It seemed like ages had passed before the back door was opened without even a knock, and Percy entered with a rather muted, "Merry Christmas, Mother."

These words earned him a rather tearful hug from Mrs. Weasley as Rufus Scrimgeour moved out from under the doorway.

"You must forgive this intrusion," he said with a gruff voice that must have been normal for him but Hope doubted she knew anyone with a voice that low. "Percy and I were in the vicinity —working, you know— and he couldn't resist dropping in and seeing you all."

Hope doubted that, the third eldest Weasley wasn't showcasing any signs of being repentant towards siding with the Ministry over his family, and his father and the twins clearly weren't sure how to react to his presence.

Mrs. Weasley seemed more than willing to invite the Minister to Christmas lunch, but Hope knew in an instant what he had come for when his tawny eyes flashed to meet hers.

"We've only looked in for five minutes, so I'll have a stroll around the yard while you catch up with Percy. No, no, I assure you I don't want to butt in! Well, if anybody cared to show me your charming garden...Ah, that young lady's finished, why doesn't she take a stroll with me?" He gestured towards Hope and the temperature cooled a certain degree as George shifted his shoulders slightly so that he was positioned just a bit in front of her, and the skin over Remus' knuckles tightened. Hope glanced around the table, but no one had spoken; she nearly sighed. "Fine."

George twisted to look at her and Remus noticed an entire conversation seemed to be communicated by just their eyes as she leaned forward to kiss his cheek before standing and sliding her chair back.

She squeezed Remus' shoulder as she passed him before dropping a hand to Mr. Weasley's arm as she passed. "It's really fine."

She swept her coat over her shoulders and left out the door that Scrimgeour and Percy had entered through, trudging through the snow.

"Why don't you just cut to the chase and tell me why you're really here?" Hope asked, a scowl marring her lips.

Scrimgeour gave a small chuckle. "Very direct, just as Cornelius said." This did not affect Hope, and she suspected that he knew that as well. "Are you then aware that I have wanted to meet you for a very long time?"

"I was not," Hope said, breaking eye contact with him as she moved past the chicken coop.

"Oh yes, for a very long time," Scrimgeour said, moving to keep up with her pace. Hope remembered well struggling to keep up with her friends back in her first year, when her limp was at its worst. "But Dumbledore has been very protective of you—" Anger flared up inside of her at those words, but she squashed it aggressively. "—Natural, of course, natural, after what you've been
especially what happened at the Ministry...

Hope did not speak, her fingers curling into fists in her pockets. That was all anyone wanted to know about; what had happened at the Ministry.

"I have been hoping for an occasion to talk to you ever since I gained office, but Dumbledore has—most understandably, as I say—prevented this."

"What a shocker," Hope said.

"Yes, indeed," Scrimgeour chuckled himself, as though pleased that Hope seemed to have a bit more to her than the image of a young woman fighting toe-to-toe with a Dark Lord that until recently no one had believed was still alive. "The rumours that have flown around! Well, of course, we both know how these stories get distorted...all these whispers of a prophecy...of you being 'the Chosen One'..."

"Is that why you're here, Minister?" Hope asked icily. "To find out just what the prophecy said, to find out if I am the Chosen One, as you say?"

"Partly," man admitted, "however, it doesn't really matter whether you are 'the Chosen One' or not."

"And why's that?" Hope asked shrewdly.

"Well, of course, to you it will matter enormously," the Minister said after releasing a short laugh, and Hope couldn't see how it would matter to her. "But to the Wizarding community at large...it's all perception, isn't it? It's what people believe that's important."

Hope's blood boiled in her veins. So that was what he was after...her public image. Funny, the Ministry had been all-too-eager to destroy her credibility last year. If more people came to their own conclusions in this country there probably wouldn't be nearly so much corruption or miscarriages of justice in the Ministry of Magic, if you asked Hope.

"People believe you are 'the Chosen One,' you see," Scrimgeour explained as if she was coming to the conclusion rather slowly. "They think you quite the heroine—which, of course, you are, Hope, chosen or not!" Hope didn't really need his approval for that. "How many times have you faced He-Who-Must-Not-Be-Named now? Well, anyway—" Clearly he didn't even know. "—The point is, you are a symbol of hope for many, Hope. The idea that there is somebody out there who might be able, who might even be destined, to destroy He-Who-Must-Not-Be-Named—well, naturally, it gives people a lift. And I can't help but feel that, once you realize this, you might consider it, well, almost a duty, to stand alongside the Ministry, and give everyone a boost."

"A duty?" Hope repeated his words with just a slight hint of scorn that might have escaped his notice. "How so?"

"It's nothing at all onerous, I assure you," Scrimgeour said in a placating manner. "If you were to be seen popping in and out of the Ministry from time to time, for instance, that would give the right impression. And of course, while you were there, you would have ample opportunity to speak to Gawain Robards, my successor as Head of the Auror office. Dolores Umbridge has told me that you cherish an ambition to become an Auror. Well, that could be arranged very easily..."

Hope released a short laugh, stalling his speech. "I'm afraid you've been terribly misinformed, Minister," she said, "I am going to be Curse-breaker, or even a Rune Analyst, I've been quite put off by Aurors, and I'm sure I'd think of them in an entirely negative way if not for ones such as Nymphadora Tonks, Kingsley Shackeblest, and Alastor Moody." Hope reached up spin a few
fingers through her hair, turning it ink-black. "I don't think I'd much like to work for a government that redeemed Umbridge for no good reason, perhaps with the knowledge that she used blood quills on students during detention, or one that locks up Knight Bus conductors for no reason." She was glaring at him now.

Stan Shunpike's arrest had been all over the news back in September, as he had been supposedly convicted of being a Death Eater, the likelihood of this actually being true was rather low.

And by now Scrimgeour had realized that this conversation wasn't going the way he had planned at all, so his next plan of action, Hope suspected, would be to assert his authority as an older and wiser man.

"I would not expect you to understand," he said coolly. "These are dangerous times, and certain measures need to be taken. You are sixteen years old—"

"Age doesn't have to do with anything!" Hope snarled, her eyes burning bright red. "Bitten off a bit more than you could chew with me, eh, Minister? Thought you could manage to bring me over to your side with flowery praises?" She snorted. "Well, you're dead wrong!"

Fiery glares were thrown by either side.

"I see. You prefer —like your hero, Dumbledore— to disassociate yourself from the Ministry?"

"Dumbledore, my hero? Are you as barking mad as you sound?" Hope sneered. "I have never aligned my beliefs with his, and I can assure you, the only thing we can agree on is to not be used by the Ministry."

"Some would say it's your duty to be used by the Ministry!" Scrimgeour snapped.

"Oh, yeah? Come find me when you actually check to make sure that the people you're throwing in Azkaban are actually Death Eaters! If it wasn't for people like you and Barty Crouch my godfather wouldn't have had to live his last few years in the shadows! I really can't tell which is worse! Fudge letting Death Eaters roam free or you chucking people into prison who don't deserve it, holding onto the hope that the 'Chosen One' will work with you!"

"So you're not 'the Chosen One'?" Scrimgeour asked.

"I'm the one who stepped up, I'm the one he chose to mark," Hope said, stabbing at her forehead and Scrimgeour's eyes did the typical flick upwards towards where the scar could barely be seen through her fringe. "I'm the one who chose to not be another body walked over by him or by your Ministry, because you've made it very clear you don't care that I'm alive, but you certainly won't care if I die, either, but since when the Ministry ever cared about the damages they did to others as long as they came out on top?"

She raised her right fist to show the scars that lay deep on the back of her hand from so many detention with Umbridge.

"I didn't see you lot proclaiming that what I was saying was true back when I told everyone that Voldemort was back."

She was correct it seemed about him being remarkably unaffected by her living or dying in how he skated over the obvious injury, asking instead, "What is Dumbledore up to? Where does he go when he is absent from Hogwarts?"

"I don't know, and I certainly don't care," she said with a distinct growl.
"Well, it is clear to me that he has done a very good job on you," Scrimgeour said after a few moments of silence, his voice a few octaves lower, but Hope didn't even blink.

"I couldn't care less about Dumbledore, but you'd best keep in mind that you are talking to the descendent of Salazar Slytherin himself, and if there's one thing I've learned from my grandfather, it's always spot the snakes that hide in the grass."
A Curious Memory

Hope shut a few books over her finished Christmas homework before dropping them into her trunk as she piled her clothes back within it once more. She almost wished she wasn't going back to school so she could just sleep in George's arms every night. Heat rose slightly in her cheeks; that and of the snogging that went on in between.

She clipped the trunk shut, locking it easily (though without her wand, as her magic could still be tracked even with all the spells around the flat), before pulling it behind her as she headed towards the fireplace to take the Floo first to the Burrow and then to Professor McGonagall's office.

However, she found herself quite incapable of moving as she took a step before the couch that was in turn before the fireplace. Her eye twitched as she looked up to scowl at the strategically placed mistletoe.

*How did she miss that?*

"You think you're being *real* cute, don't you?" she called out, knowing that he was listening as she attempted to lift her feet from the floorboards and failed. Her scowl darkened at the sound of sniggers as her boyfriend stepped into the room, looking so casually handsome that it should have been a crime.

"So you found my mistletoe, did you?" he asked, quirking his eyebrows in amusement.

Hope growled in a distinctly wolf-like manner. "I did. Going to tell me what it takes to get rid of it?"

George smirked as he strode towards her, his fingers hooking into her belt loops jerking her against his chest with one finger while pulling her scarf free from her neck with the other. "I believe it's a special brand of mistletoe that requires a kiss longer than thirty seconds to the lips in order to allow you to move."

Hope arched an eyebrow. "Puts you at a disadvantage, doesn't it? I know how much you like kissing my neck." She tilted her head slightly to display the skin of her throat that currently bore several marks from his mouth that would only fade with time.

George grinned widely. "I didn't see you complaining," he said, waggling his eyebrows towards her, "when I pinned you to the bed last night and snogged you until you couldn't remember your name."

Heat flooded her face as she remembered the previous night. He had been more distracting that usual with kisses that were more daring than she was used to, but she enjoyed it all the same. "I," she said finally, "did *not* forget my name."

"Well," he said with a smirk, leaning forward to whisper in her ear, "there was only one name you were moaning, love, and I think I'd like to hear it at least once more before you leave."

Despite having already having more than three years in this relationship under her belt, Hope became quite flustered, her cheeks brightening to a deep red. "Well, you're out of luck!" she snapped. "Now kiss me so I can get out of this, you know your mother's expecting me in less than half an hour."

He leaned forward, his mouth barely touching hers but making her shiver all the same. "That gives me plenty of time," he breathed and Hope couldn't help but swallow thickly, her fingers curling into his robes.
"I hate you," she whispered fervently, "with every fibre of my being."

"You know what they say about hate, don't you?" he asked her, lightly tracing over her jaw with lips that left goosebumps in his wake.

"Hate?" Hope asked a bit dazedly, her grip on his robes tightening as he reached her neck, his lips moving over a spot just under her ear.

"Mmhmm," he hummed into her flesh, making her squirm slightly.

"George!" she complained and she could feel his grin against her throat.

"It's... a... passionate... emotion," he told her, punctuating each word with a kiss, and Hope's eyes slide shut as she tilted her head slightly.

"I'll give you the ultimate crime of passion," she threatened feebly, "murder."

His laughter was muffled into her jugular, sending tremors across her skin. "You know how adorable it is when you threaten me with murder?" His teeth raked against the side of her neck and Hope bit her lip to keep from making any noise, because she knew that's what he wanted.

"It'll be more adorable when you're dead," Hope replied, her words coming out more like a sigh than anything, her hands raised to tangle in his ginger strands before a low moan bloomed from her lips. "George... you're a bastard."

He pulled back so that he could look upon her with her bright and disoriented eyes and the bright flush of her cheeks.

"I'm your bastard, though," he corrected lightly, resting a few fingers under her chin so he could tilt her head back.

Hope released a short laugh that was quickly swallowed by his lips and Hope couldn't quite think as to why she wanted to get it over quickly when he kissed her like that, like he was trying to imprint the memory of her kiss forever in his mind until they would see each other again.

And Hope didn't mind that at all, barely taking notice of the patch of mistletoe falling to the floor, far too distracted as George's lips pulled over hers, his teeth lightly nipping at hers in a manner that had her gasping against his mouth, allowing his tongue passage over hers, until they were forced to part for need of breath.

"Get into some trouble for me," George said with a wink and she chuckled breathlessly, pulling her trunk up so that he could shrink it and she could place it in her pocket before tying the scarf back around her neck once more.

"I'll try, but you know me," she said, standing on her tip toes to kiss his cheek soundly. "I'm such a busybody."

And then she stepped into the fireplace, took a bit of Floo Powder and shouted, "The Burrow!" disappearing in green flames.

Term had begun before Hope knew it and she was glad for a distraction from missing George and thinking too much about Voldemort or what Scrimgeour had said to her over the holiday.

"I can't believe there's no mention of your kidnapping in any of the papers," Ron said, shaking his
"But then they would have had to admit that a Death Eater got around the wards at the Burrow," Hermione added, annoyance creasing her brow as she skimmed through the spells, searching for something they might learn so as to teach the DA during their next lesson, though it was not for another two weeks. "This is rather putting me off from wanting to work at the Ministry," Hermione admitted.

Hope's quill stilled over her parchment and she looked up to meet brown eyes. "What makes you say that?"

Hermione twirled a bushy curl around her finger, expelling a low sigh. "Well, why would I want to work for a department in the Ministry if they're so content on shielding the public from the truth? Everyone is running around only half-knowing what's going on, and the Order's the only people who seem to know the most."

"And when has the Order ever been about sharing information?" Hope asked with a snort, and Ron and Hermione had to murmur in agreement.

Hope, Ron, Hermione, and Ginny were still barred from anything that the Order had learned over the year, simply because they were still in school and Hope knew for certain that Mrs. Weasley would try to keep her, in particular, as far from the Order as she could possibly be.

But, rather thankfully, a few of the DA had joined the Order after leaving Hogwarts, including: Fred and George, Angelina, Alicia, and Lee. It seemed quite like there were three different leaders in the currently secret war to whom allegiances were sworn; Voldemort, Dumbledore, and Hope. And if Hope had to chose between the Order and the DA, she would choose the DA (because at least the DA didn't have a smarmy git like Snape in it). As it were, the five DA members in the Order could pass along information if the need ever arose, though, Fred had assured her when they had time to speak during the holiday, there wasn't much information of value coming in.

At least the DA would be better prepared if the war did come to the forefront.

"Hey, Sectumsempra is in here," Hope noticed, earning a scowl from Hermione at the mention of the spell. There were very few spells that Hermione outright disapproved of, and, coincidentally, most of them happened to be in Hope's new (old) potions book.

Hope couldn't imagine why she felt that way; spells were spells, it was only the intention to do good or evil with them that really mattered. There weren't many spells in the Prince's book, and most of them did hardly any damage. *Langlock* glued the victim's tongue to the roof of their mouth, *Levicorpus* (a nonverbal spell) which yanked the victim into the air by the ankle, along with its countercurse, *Liberacorpus*, which allowed them to fall back down to the ground again, *Muffliato*, which muffled the ears of those in the vicinity to the caster's words, but *Sectumsempra* had only 'for enemies' labelled beside it.

Hope traced a hand along the page, directly under the precisely scrawled words: "Deep lacerations that may induce death." She blinked. "Well, that doesn't sound very pleasant."

Ron grimaced at the thought. "Who would invent that kind of spell?" he demanded, leaning over to make sure Hope was indeed reading from the right section of the book in question, and not missing the effects of the spell entirely.

"Who would use that kind of spell?" Hermione corrected, appearing vaguely startled and unsettled at finding out what the spell caused to happen to its victim.
"It does say 'for enemies'," Hope mentioned, arching an eyebrow towards Hermione who returned a rather incredulous expression.

"Are you telling me that you'd actually use this one someone?"

"That would depend on how angry I am," Hope admitted. She had already proved that she wasn't above using violent spells on others. She had burned Bellatrix quite painfully twice now, and she had took off Antonin Dolohov's hand without hesitation, and most would not consider these good qualities, but Hope had never considered to be as Dumbledore wished her to be and as such, had a much darker view on the world. The world which was filled with danger and chaos and Hope was one who was determined not to perish in it anytime soon.

"I would definitely use it on Bellatrix, for instance," Hope decided, her voice firm as she thought about the woman who had done so many awful things. As if torturing both Alice and Frank Longbottom hadn't been enough, she had lowered herself further to using the Cruciatius Curse on Neville in the Battle of the Department of Mysteries, to cause Sirius' death by a simple stunner, and attempting to kidnap her and torturing her in order to do so.

If there was one thing Bellatrix deserved, it was a painful death, so Hope filed the apparently very deadly spell in the back of her mind for later use, but only for on her, or perhaps Voldemort, but he was far more skilled at dodging than his faithful lieutenant.

"But no one else," she added, glancing back towards her friends with a wry smile.

Ron's eyes held an expression of understanding and Hermione could only sigh, though, privately, she couldn't disagree with her.

Bellatrix Lestrange didn't have a remorseful bone in her body and one day she was going to get her just desserts.

Hope still had lessons with Dumbledore, and she was still making it as plain as day that she couldn't care less about what he said or did, but if there was one thing Hope didn't like, it was him knowing everything about her, especially concerning her brief kidnapping.

Dumbledore expelled a long sigh as he gazed upon the sixth-year sitting before him. Really, it was as if James' rebellious spirit had been reincarnated into his daughter (though he could never recall James disliking him so immensely). She was tilting her chair back on its legs, a perpetually bored expression on her face.

"I don't believe you understand the gravity of what occurred over Christmas break," he said, wording the phrase carefully.

"You're lecturing me on that?" Hope replied, an eyebrow arched, something dark flickered behind her eyes. And Dumbledore had to wonder if he was cultivating a second Voldemort. Hope certainly shared a number of similarities with him; having followers (Dumbledore didn't seem to understand that they were friends more than they were followers), having an obsession (fascination) with ancient or dark arts, being the only Parseltongues in centuries, and they both held a cleverness that was quite unlike the kind Hermione Granger possessed. "You? You weren't even there. I was! And I remember everything about it! I know could have happened, but it didn't, so can we please get on with this lesson so I can go to sleep?"

Hope was rubbing at her forehead, appearing particularly vexed that only halfway had to do with Dumbledore, the other was due to Scrimgeour.
"It was Fudge's idea originally, you know. During his last days in office, when he was trying desperately to cling to his post, he sought a meeting with you, hoping that you would give him your support. I told Cornelius there was no chance of it, but the idea did not die when he left office. Within hours of Scrimgeour's appointment we met and he demanded that I arrange a meeting with you, but I was as adamant as I had been with Cornelius. You were in the early and most painful stages of mourning Sirius' death, I felt it best that you were left on your own, but it appears that Rufus found a way to corner you at last."

That was just what she needed tonight, to know that the Minister had been after her for months…just great...

Dumbledore spared her one last glance before clearing his throat and speaking.

"So, we continue the tale of Tom Riddle," he began, "whom we left last lesson poised on the threshold of his years at Hogwarts. You will remember how excited he was to hear that he was a wizard, that he refused my company on a trip to Diagon Alley, and that I, in turn, warned him against continued thievery when he arrived at school."

Hope tried not to roll her eyes at the headmaster, but it was a very near thing. There wasn't much of a point to this recap of what they both knew.

"Well, the start of the school year arrived and with it came Tom Riddle, a quiet boy in his second-hand robes, who lined up with the other first years to be sorted. He was placed in Slytherin House almost the moment that the Sorting Hat touched his head—" Hope glanced towards where the Sorting Hat was perched every year when not in use, and she could swear the rip that was the mouth twitched, as though feeling her attention. "How soon Riddle learned that the famous founder of the House could talk to snakes, I do not know — perhaps that very evening. The knowledge can only have excited him and increased his sense of self-importance."

Annoyance flickered in Hope's eyes. She'd known of her ability to speak to snakes for a long time, sure, but she had never considered it to be something that made her superior. Initially, the idea had terrified her, after all, what ordinary girl could understand the tongue of snakes? However, she had grown to appreciate the skill over the years.

"However, if he was frightening or impressing fellow Slytherins with displays of Parseltongue in their common room, no hint of it reached the staff. He showed no sign of outward arrogance or aggression at all. As an unusually talented and very good-looking orphan, he naturally drew attention and sympathy from the staff almost from the moment of his arrival. He seemed police, quiet, and thirsty for knowledge. Nearly all were most favourably impressed by him."

There was an undertone in his voice that Hope recognized, one that made it obvious that he was one of the ones who had not been.

"You didn't," she said aloud, and Dumbledore inclined his head in agreement.

"No, I did not," he said, "I could not take it for granted that he was trustworthy. I had, as I have already indicated, resolved to keep a close eye upon him, and so I did. I cannot pretend that I gleaned a great deal from my observations at first. He was very guarded with me; he felt, I am sure, that in the thrill of discovering his true identity he had told me a little too much. He was careful never to reveal as much again, but he could not take back what he had let slip in his excitement, nor what Mrs. Cole had confided in me. However, he had the sense never to try and charm me as he charmed so many of my colleagues."

"A wise decision on his part," Hope muttered under her breath. She herself had never tried to
actively charm her professors. There were some she didn't particularly like, some that she didn't have much of an opinion of, and some that she really liked. She was far from charming and she had a personality that some didn't appreciate, and that was fine with her.

"As he moved up the school," Dumbledore continued, not having heard her, "he gathered about him a group of dedicated friends; I call them that, for want of a better term, although as I have already indicated, Riddle undoubtedly felt no affection for any of them. This group had a kind of dark glamour within the castle. They were a motley collection; a mixture of the weak seeking protection, the ambitious seeking some shared glory, and the thuggish gravitating toward a leader who could show them more refined forms of cruelty. In other words, they were the forerunners of the Death Eaters, and indeed some of them became the first Death Eaters after leaving Hogwarts."

This hardly surprised Hope. The 'group of dedicated friends' sounded a bit familiar, when you thought about the number of students in the DA (whether they had graduated or not), but they were far different from the Death Eaters. One of the things that made them better was probably because they voluntarily chose to stay in the DA, while one didn't really have a choice of the matter in Voldemort's followers.

"Rigidly controlled by Riddle, they were never detected in open wrongdoing, although their seven years at Hogwarts were marked by a number of nasty incidents to which they were never satisfactorily linked, the most serious of which was, of course, the opening of the Chamber of Secrets, which resulted in the death of a girl. As you know, Hagrid was wrongly accused of that crime," Dumbledore added the last bit, directing it towards Hope, as she was one that was directly involved in clearing his name.

"I have not been able to find many memories of Riddle at Hogwarts," Dumbledore added with a "not for lack of trying" added silently on. "Few who knew him then are prepared to talk about him; they are too terrified. What I know, I found out after he had left Hogwarts, after much painstaking effort, after tracing those few who could be tricked into speaking, after searching old records and questioning Muggle and wizard witnesses alike."

It made Hope wonder how he convinced others to speak, or if they had spoken at all; Legilimency came to mind, and it wasn't something that Hope particularly liked.

"Those whom I could persuade to talk told me that Riddle was obsessed with his parentage. This is understandable, of course; he had grown up in an orphanage and naturally wished to know how he came to be there. It seems that he searched in vain for some trace of Tom Riddle senior on the shields in the trophy room, on the lists of prefects in the old school records, even in the books of Wizarding history. Finally he was forced to accept that his father had never set foot in Hogwarts."

It must have been a real disappointment to discover that his father was the one that was not magical.

"I believe that it was then that he dropped the name forever," Dumbledore admitted, "assumed the identity of Lord Voldemort, and began his investigations into his previously despised mother's family — the woman whom, you will remember, he had thought could not be a witch if she had succumbed to the shameful human weakness of death."

Hope arched an eyebrow. She couldn't see how he had come to that assumption; many witches had died in childbirth, especially in the Dark Ages before a number of healing spells were discovered. Even the most powerful witches could be felled by the pains and complications that could accompany childbirth. And Merope Gaunt was not a witch who had appeared healthy enough to live past the birth of her son.

"All he had to go upon was the single name 'Marvolo,' which he knew from those who ran the
The first memory that Hope descended into that night was when Tom Riddle and Morfin Gaunt, Merope's brother, crossed paths. Hope wasn't surprised when Morfin attacked Tom, though she had to wonder why he didn't use magic (it seemed rather like the Gaunts didn't have much magic in their blood, if you asked her), only to be stalled by the Snake Speech.

Hope had to assume that she was the only one that could understand their words, but what had caught her more than anything was the ring Morfin wore, the same one that Marvolo had once wore. She didn't know why she focused so much on it, she had seen it in a previous memory. Her fingers moved to where the same ring rested on her own finger.

She missed how a gleam lit Dumbledore's eyes as they fell to the same ring.

"Where's the locket, eh, where's Slytherin's locket?" rang in Hope's ears as Dumbledore, incredibly patiently, described the fate of Morfin Gaunt in Azkaban, convicted of supposedly killing the three Riddles that lived in the Riddle House, as he admitted to, though it was his nephew who had done so. Hope imagined Tom got a bit of pleasure out of killing his father and grandparents.

And then they entered into a second memory, and Hope would later admit that it was one that intrigued her far more than the first.

Hope entered into the Pensieve and opened her eyes in Slughorn's office. The man himself was far younger than Hope could have imagined, though this might have had something to do with the hair on his head that Hope thought didn't suit him nearly as much as being bald did.

Horace Slughorn was surrounded by a small number of boys who were all wearing the green-and-silver ties of Slytherin House.

Tom Riddle was easy to make out amongst them. Two things startled her. One was that he looked a great deal like Salazar Slytherin when they had first met, though marginally less attractive (this shouldn't have come as a surprise, as she had seen him once before as such, when he came out of the diary, but perhaps it had only dawned on her just how much until now), and the second was that he looked very much like Hope when her hair was dark. Had they been born within the same decade, they might have been mistaken as siblings.

The thought sickened her as much as being a cousin to him through a distant bloodline. Her hand tightened into a fist and her ring cut into her hand.

"Sir," Tom said, his voice young and creating the illusion of boyhood that Hope never imagined him having, "is it true that Professor Merrythought is retiring?"

"Tom, Tom, if I knew I couldn't tell you," Slughorn chuckled, smacking his lips as he swallowed the last of his crystallized pineapple, "I must say, I'd like to know where you get your information, boy, more knowledgeable than half the staff, you are."

Laughter rang in the room, but Tom only smiled a smile that didn't touch his eyes. It was unnerving how many characteristics that Hope could find between the two of them; it was like looking in a mirror, as Hope had worn that smile several times before.

"What with your uncanny ability to know things you shouldn't," Slughorn continued, smiling fondly
towards Tom, "and your careful flattery of the people who matter — thank you for the pineapple, by the way, you're quite right, it is my favourite —"

Hope blinked, twisting around, suddenly disconcerted by a fog as thick as that which lay over fens. What did the fog have to do with the memory?

"You'll go wrong, boy, mark my words," a voice promised within the mist, Slughorn's voice, though far harsher than Hope could have imagined.

She blinked again, and in the time it took her to do so, the fog had gone and Hope jumped slightly at the sound of a clock chiming within.

The sound of the clock had startled Slughorn as well and he shook his head a few times to clear it, as though the fog from before had been within it as well. "Good gracious," he cried, "is it that time already? You'd better get going, boys, or we'll all be in trouble. Lestrange—" Hope started slightly, staring at the boy with dark hair and even darker eyes, "—I want your essay by tomorrow or it's detention. Same goes for you, Avery."

The boys shuffled out, heading down to the dungeons where the Slytherin common room was located, however, Tom remained, standing and moving over to where a beautiful hourglass with green glass spun around it at the edges in the shape of a snake. He flicked a finger lightly against the glass, creating a soft ringing sound.

"Look sharp, Tom," Slughorn added to the dark-haired Slytherin upon the realization that he hadn't moved much. "You don't want to be caught out of bed out of hours, and you a prefect..."

"Sir, I wanted to ask you something," Tom said, his eyes glinting in the light.

"Ask away, then, m'boy, ask away..." Slughorn said, beaming at the boy as he took a small gulp of the wine remaining in his goblet.

"Well, Sir, I was in the library the other night, in the Restricted Section," Tom began, appearing slightly bashful as he admitted this, "and I read something rather odd about a bit of rare magic, and I thought perhaps you could illuminate me...it's called, as I understand it, a Horcrux."

Fog spilled around them once more and for a moment, all Hope could see was Dumbledore's face and all she could hear was Slughorn's voice echoing rather loudly, sharp and angry.

"I don't know anything about Horcruxes and I wouldn't tell you if I did! Now get out of here at once and don't let me catch you mentioning them again!"

And then Hope and Dumbledore were back in his office once more and Hope was frowning intensely, her eyebrows furrowed together. "There was something wrong with that memory," she said finally.

"Indeed," Dumbledore agreed, moving to sit in his chair positioned behind the elaborate desk (the movement cast a dark shadow over the dying flesh of his arm and Hope hid a wince). "It is a memory that has been tampered with."

"I-I never knew you could," Hope admitted, too surprised to show her animosity towards the headmaster.

"It is very difficult to attempt," Dumbledore conceded, "and requires the utmost concentration."

"Then why attempt it?" Hope had to wonder.
'"Because Professor Slughorn, I believe, is ashamed of what he remembers," Dumbledore replied with a sigh, "He has tried to rework the memory to show himself in a better light, obliterating those parts which he does not wish me to see. It is, as you will have noticed, very crudely done, and that is all to the good, for it shows that the true memory is still there beneath the alterations."

Hope frowned slightly.

"And so, for the first time, I am giving you homework, Hope."

Hope arched an eyebrow in curiosity.

"It will be your job to persuade Professor Slughorn to divulge the real memory," Dumbledore revealed, "which will undoubtedly be our most crucial piece of information of all."

Hope couldn't quite imagine how she would be able to do so.
Worse had come to worse and Hermione had confiscated Hope's copy of *Advanced Potion-making* and given her an ordinary unmarked one, much to Hope's eternal irritation, as they had to create an antidote to the phials Slughorn had handed out.

Hope's smelled horribly of rat tails and she had no ideas whatsoever how to come up with an antidote. Hope screwed her eyes shut and thought as hard as she could, finally resorting to what she thought to be a rather desperate course of action.

*What would Snape do?*

Hope tried to recall everything the man had ever said, though his first words stuck to her more aggravatingly than they ever had before.

"Ah, yes...Hope Potter. Our new--celebrity."

She remembered how he had proceeded to ask her question after question about potion ingredients. First about what he would get if he had added powdered root of asphodel to an infusion of wormwood (which was the Draught of Living Death), and then about where he could find a bezoar...

The bezoar stuck with Hope and she frowned thoughtfully. A bezoar was indeed a stone taken from the stomach of a goat that could protect you from most poisons, should you ingest it soon after taking a poison.

Hope contemplated the potion in the vial that was now bubbling an ominous green in her cauldron. Hm...could it really be that simple?

She rifled through her potion supplies as Ron threw a bit of Armadillo bile into his cauldron, making it steam pink circles (Hermione's cheeks turned red as she attempted to stifle her laughter). She barely found it before Slughorn called, "Time's...UP! Well, let's see how you've done! Blaise..."

He started walking around, beginning with the Slytherins and making his way towards the Gryffindors and Hufflepuff.

Hermione tossed a smug grin towards Hope but when Hope held up the bezoar with a cheeky smile of her own, her friend's grin morphed into a scowl. Ron, caught between the two girls, could only roll his eyes.

Slughorn reached their table sooner rather than later, nodding approvingly over Ron's just barely satisfactory potion and smiled at Hermione's before coming to Hope's.

"And you, Hope? What have you got to show me?"

Hope raised the bezoar so that he might see it and for a moment Hope thought she'd done something wrong, as Slughorn didn't speak, and then she jumped a little a few seconds later when he suddenly laughed so loudly that it echoed off of the walls.

Not quite sure how to respond, Hope glanced to her friends, but they seemed to be as bemused as she was.

"You've got nerve, girl!" he chortled, finally speaking. "Oh, you're like your mother...well, I can't
fault you...a bezoar would certainly act as an antidote to all these potions!"

Malfy was scowling at her far more darkly than Hermione, an angry flush spreading across his cheeks before the bell rang, dismissing them all.

"Find us afterwards," Ron told her in an undertone, winking as they all cleaned up and Hope stuffed her bezoar back in its container, taking extra long in cleaning up as her friends left her behind.

"Come on, now, Hope, you'll be late for your next lesson," Slughorn said, sounding slightly reprimanding, though his smile ruined the effect.

"Sir, I wanted to ask you something," Hope said, well aware of how much she sounded like Tom Riddle so many years previously.

"Ask away, my dear girl, ask away," Slughorn invited.

"Well, Sir, I was in the library the other night," Hope began, recalling Tom's words from the memory only slightly edited, "and I read something rather odd about a bit of rare magic, and I thought perhaps you could illuminate me...it's called, as I understand it, a Horcrux."

The ruddy colour of Slughorn's cheeks was leeched away at her words and his eyes fastened on hers and all Hope did was tilt her head slightly. "What did you say?" he demanded.

"I wanted to know what you know about Horcruxes, Professor," Hope said innocently and Slughorn's eyes darted towards the door as if Hope was making him consider darting towards it. This assessment slightly amused Hope.

"Dumbledore put you up to this," Slughorn hardly breathed, his words barely heard, though Hope could hear quite plainly a note of fear in his voice. "Dumbledore's shown you that -- that memory. Well? Hasn't he?" he demanded.

"He has," Hope had to concede.

"Yes, of course," Slughorn said more to himself before raising his voice towards her. "Of course, well, if you've seen that memory, Hope, you'll know that I don't know anything --anything-- about Horcruxes."

He strode purposefully past her towards the door and Hope narrowed her eyes; the door slammed shut. Slughorn tried to turn the knob, but it didn't seem to be working.

"My apologies, Professor," she said, "but I think we both know that's not true."

Something flickered in his eyes and it was times like this that Hope embraced the darker side of her that incited fear in others (and for good reason).

"I think you told Tom Riddle what Horcruxes were, that night," Hope continued, "and I think you're not very proud of that fact...are you, Professor?"

Her hair was set in loose and dark curls framing grey eyes today, and Slughorn couldn't help but muse how much she looked like Tom --she must have planned it that way.

He opened and shut his mouth several times.

"I actually couldn't care less about what Dumbledore wants," Hope admitted, examining her nails intently for a few moments before meeting his eyes once more. "But I get the feeling that this is
"You don't know of what you're asking of me," Slughorn disagreed.

"You're right," Hope agreed, "I don't, but you do. I know a lot about magic that I shouldn't, but I've never heard of Horcruxes...so it must be incredibly Dark. I could probably find a book on it, if I looked very hard." Her eyes narrowed, glinting green for a moment. "But it would so much easier if you just gave the memory to me."

Slughorn floundered, but it wasn't as though he would be able to open the door anytime soon.

"Very well," he said, and Hope noticed that he wasn't pleased in the slightest and Hope suspected that his attitude towards her would remain that way for the rest of the year, though, granted, it was only about five more months.

He procured a flask and pressed the tip of his wand to his head, withdrawing a thick and silvery-blue thread, which he dropped into the flask and stoppered it, holding it out to her and she took it, inclining her head slightly.

"Just...don't think too badly of me once you've seen it," he said gruffly and Hope nodded, moving past him.

Slughorn was surprised when the door opened to her touch and she smiled at the figure beyond.

"Thank you, for your assistance," she said to the suit of armour that bore the Slytherin crest.

The helmet bowed towards her and she left with the suit of armour moving in an opposite direction.

How curious, indeed. She was both very much like Tom and very different from him. Slughorn wasn't entirely sure if that was a good thing.

They were halfway through February when Hope finally admitted to obtaining the memory, though she said that she wouldn't be giving it to Dumbledore until she had seen what was in it herself, and she couldn't do that without a Pensieve, and she didn't have one of those.

"I haven't found a single book that even tells what Horcruxes do!" Hermione complained on Valentine's Day. "I even went into the restricted section!"

"Really?" Hope raised an eyebrow in surprise, grinning widely at her. "Never knew you had it in you."

"You shut up," she threw back towards Hope, before continuing. "Anyways, even the restricted section had nothing! All I could find was this, in the introduction to *Magick Moste Evile*—"

Hermione withdrew on old and worn book bearing the title she had just indicated, flipping open to a certain page and reading it out for Hope, "Listen—"of the Horcrux, wickedest of magical inventions, we shall not speak nor give direction"...I mean, why mention it, then?" Hermione complained as she snapped it shut, ignoring the plaintive cry it gave from such a movement.

"It must be pretty bad for it not to be mentioned," Hope mused, "any luck on finding how to make a Pensieve?"

"No," Hermione said, aggrieved, "It was Ron that found the book, though, and it said an awful lot about balancing magicks and inscribing runes...I think you'd be better off looking for one that's
"Fat chance of me coming across one of those," Hope grumbled.

"Well, maybe there's one in the Room of Requirement," Hermione suggested, making Hope stare. "What? If it can come up with chamber pots for someone who needs the loo and a duelling space for a secret Defence class, then it probably has room for Pensieves, don't you think?"

"Hm…" Hope said thoughtfully before dragging her off in that direction. "Let's go!"

"But Ron's waiting for us in the Great Hall!" Hermione complained, though not truly too irritated. "And there's that Hogsmeade visit today!" It was the reason the pair of them were dressed in jeans and boots, their jackets in the common room, ready to be grabbed after Hermione dropped off her bag.

"It won't take long!" Hope laughed. "Come on! We can talk about his present, anyways."

Hermione and Hope were clubbing together to get Ron a brand new Wizard's chess board and pieces. The board he'd gotten from Hope first year had been broken for almost three weeks now and the ginger was constantly moaning over it. Hermione was getting him the board and Hope, the pieces. The black ones would be made of onyx and the white ones of white moonstone.

"And what does the moonstone represent?" Hermione asked once Hope told her this as they waited for the stairs they were on to stop moving. Hope had a habit of giving symbolic gifts, like her boyfriend (though George only seemed to do that for Hope).

"Well, it's supposed to…hang on, let me check..." Hope dug into her pockets, searching for the paper before reciting off the meanings of the stone: "brings good fortune, enhances intuition, promotes inspiration, brings success in love and business, and offers protection on land or sea…but he also asked me for a Blood Rune that protects against poison, but that'll be easy."

A thoughtful expression clouded Hermione's eyes, no doubt recalling how Daphne and Astoria had been poisoned. They had been lucky, but they weren't the only ones who had suffered from attacks this year and Katie Bell still had yet to return from St. Mungo's.

"You never told me what this stone meant," Hermione added, touching a hand to her ears where star-shaped stones rested. They glinted different colours depending on the lighting.

"The white opal?" Hope guessed. "It's considered a healing stone, it means good luck, and is supposed to clear emotions." She recited this from memory, but not without effort, if her squinting eyes were any indication.

Hermione nodded, opening her mouth to say something more only to fall silent at the sound of a second voice.

"Keep watch, Crabbe!"

Hope froze, raising a hand to her lips to indicate silence and Hermione nodded. Hope glanced just barely around the corner in time to see a pale head disappear through the door of the Room of Requirement, undoubtedly Malfoy, and that would make the two girls on either side of it, Crabbe and Goyle.

Hope's eyes narrowed shrewdly and she probably would have stayed longer if Hermione hadn't tugged her away, the two stepping carefully away so that the two guards wouldn't be able hear them before moving quickly, putting as much distance between them and the Slytherins.
They did not speak until they reached the Gryffindor common room and then they shared a quiet shared glance and an expression of "Malfoy is definitely up to something."

Hermione gasped when Ron bestowed upon her a pink rose, having expected the usual chocolate that Hope, Hermione, and Ron exchanged between each other on the previous Valentine's Days.

"Oh, it's beautiful, Ron! Thank you!"

She surprised both Hope and Ron by kissing his cheek and flustering the Weasley immensely.

"I-Well, I thought you might like it," Ron mumbled more to himself, fiddling with the zipper on his jacket.

Hope hid her smirk behind her goblet of pumpkin juice.

Hope wasn't surprised to not find an iris in the mail for her, George had mentioned that her gift would be coming later, and she had gotten several flowers from 'secret admirers' already, but they had all gone straight in the bin.

"So, what took you so long coming down?" Ron asked, clearing his throat uncomfortably once he realized that Hope was indeed there and still smirking at the pair of them. Hermione glared at her for good measure, but it didn't faze her in the slightest.

Hope and Hermione shared a glance before launching into the explanation in a low whisper so others trying to listen in would be hard pressed to understand a word of what they were saying without coming closer, omitting the details concerning his birthday gifts and a shadow came over his face.

"What the ruddy hell's he doing in the Room of Requirement?" Ron asked, his eyebrows creasing together as he frowned.

"Dunno," Hope said with a shrug, "but I'd wager it isn't good."

Hermione hummed in slight agreement –she had to concede that if Malfoy was going through the trouble to have Crabbe and Goyle disguise themselves as Slytherin girls, then what he was doing couldn't have been good.

"Hey, Hope!"

Hope looked up from her friends, a bit startled by the interruption, only to have her expression change to annoyance at the sight of Edward Thompson, the fifth year Gryffindor who had asked her on a date no more than two times already.

He was grinning at her. "Fancy a Butterbeer?"

"Not really," Hope said, just barely managing not to glare at him, making her friends stifle their chuckles.

"Hey, Hope!"

This time the metamorphmagus smiled as Seamus came skidding across the stone, holding hands with Ginny who was pink in the face and grinning brightly.

"Oh, good! You've got Ron and Hermione with you," he added.

Hermione arched an eyebrow at him. "Is there somewhere else we should be?"
Seamus snorted. "I guess not. Several of us in–" Seamus didn't say 'DA' though he did wink for good measure, so only those not in the group wouldn't be able to understand. "–are getting a drink at the Three Broomsticks at noon, are you lot coming?"

"If I can have a Gillywater, I'm all for it," Hope said and Hermione and Ron gave similar agreements.

"Great!" Seamus said before throwing an arm over Ginny's shoulders as they walked out of the Great Hall.

"That bloke probably just snogged my sister," Ron said in annoyance.

"Probably," Hermione agreed, her lips twitching. "Why? Does it bother you?" She already knew the answer to the question.

"Immensely," Ron grumbled as they stood and left the hall, heading out into the cool air, moving towards the direction of Hogsmeade. They passed Dean and Daphne who were walking at a more subdued pace, though this might have had something to do with the fact that Dean was whispering something in Daphne's ear that was making her stumble, her cheeks flushing with heat, and Luna and Neville, the former practically skipping with her arm looped in Neville's and a sprig of lavender in her hair.

At first, Hope didn't see him and then she stopped completely, her heart beating wildly in her chest at the sight of George Weasley holding a small bouquet of blue irises in one hand.

And then she stared at him as Ron and Hermione branched off amidst laughter and George said, a bit unnecessarily, "Er…Happy Valentine's Day."

Hope threw herself into his arms with so much force that it would have knocked a lesser man over, but George was far too used to her actions to do so. He grabbed her easily, swinging her around with a loud laugh before depositing her on her feet once more.

By now she was beaming brightly up at him. "You terrible man," she said, twisting her fingers into his hair.

He smirked, grasping her waist and pulling her to his chest so suddenly that Hope sharply took in a breath. "Terrible, love?"

"Mm-hm," Hope mumbled with a nod as he bent down, his lips almost brushing against hers, but not quite. "Terrible, in every way, but mostly for my heart."

"Good," George barely replied before he kissed, fisting her long hair, the dark colour lightening to her typical red. Hope could feel his smirk, but this did not stop her from moaning against his mouth before he released her.

"I love you," Hope said, her fingers moving from his hair to his cheek.

"You better," George said as he handed over her bouquet and Hope's grin widened.

"You never change, do you?" she asked with a laugh.

George threw an arm over her shoulders. "Never," he proclaimed, "now, show me a good time, Potter."

"Weasley," Hope said in mock-affront, "I always show you a good time."
He kissed her temple and they strode off in the direction of the Three Broomsticks where Hope was assured a delightful Gillywater as she sat at a long table surrounded by those she called friends and for a moment Hope was content not to think about Voldemort or Death Eaters or whatever trouble Draco Malfoy might be up to or finding some kind of Pensieve. For a moment Hope could forget that there was a war going on.

But she knew she would not be able to think that way for long.

Draco Malfoy was turning into a clever and dangerous individual and in his hands he held the oak-matured bottle of mead that Horace Slughorn was planning on giving as a gift to Albus Dumbledore, but wouldn't it be so much easier to kill two birds with one stone?

Wouldn't it be simpler to duplicate the poisoned mead and the bottle it was in? Ron Weasley's birthday was coming up…it would be perfect…

"Happy birthday!" Hope and Hermione called out to Ron as they waltzed into the boy's dormitory on the first of March. It was empty except for the birthday boy, Dean, Seamus, and Neville having already gone down to breakfast.

Ron grinned brightly at them, still in his pyjamas (though the three disregarded this fact quite easily, having known each other for far too long), at least three presents unwrapped already.

Hope could see some new Keeper's gloves that his sister had gotten him, a new watch that must have come from his parents, and bottle of mead.

Hope and Hermione handed over their gifts, laughing at his enthusiasm and awe as he took in the new chess board and pieces. "Wow! Hope, Hermione, this is great!"

He hugged them and Hermione's face lit up so that the colour might be compared to the setting sun.

"Did you see what Mum and Dad got me?" he said, holding up the watch to their eyes.

"Very nice," Hermione agreed, though the watch did look a bit strange to her. Though, Hope's Blood Rune looked a bit strange as well, the stone hanging from a long strap of leather.

"You might want to get dressed," Hope added with a smirk, "or you won't get any breakfast before Apparition Class."

Hope, Ron, and Hermione, like everyone in their year, it seemed, were taking classes on Apparition that only sixth years and above could take, though it wasn't going nearly as well as Hope would have liked, as she much preferred flashing to Apparating, and she had a flashing-mindset not an Apparating-mindset.

"Nah," Ron said with a wide grin, pulling the cap off the mead and taking a swig of it—just because he could— and Hope and Hermione had to roll their eyes.

"I guess someone's glad they can now drink alcohol," Hermione snorted and Hope had to agree.

But then they could no longer think of it as humorous as Ron dropped the bottle which shattered against the floor, making Hope and Hermione's eyes jump to him and Hermione released a cry of alarm as he fell.

Hope and Hermione were at his side in seconds as his body began convulsing.
"What happened?" Hermione demanded terrified.

"Must've been poisoned," Hope said, trying to stay calm, searching wildly for something that might help before she yanked the Blood Rune around his neck, but this did little to help the situation, only causing his spasming limbs to slow in movement. The poison must've been very potent.

"It's not working!" Hermione cried, not knowing what to do and clearly not liking being so powerless.

Hope was thinking a mile a minute before— "CPR!" she said suddenly. "Do you know CPR?"

"Of course I know CPR!" Hermione exploded angrily. "But how's that going to help?"

"Start giving him chest compressions," Hope replied, "keep his heart beating until I get a bezoar!"

"Oh!" and then Hermione leaning over Ron, her fingers interlaced as she thrust them down onto his chest as Hope ran down the steps, almost colliding with Colin.

"Hey, Hope!" he laughed, but it faded quickly seeing the look on her face. "What's wrong?"

"Go get Pomfrey!" Hope told him as quickly as she could manage, she really couldn't afford to waste precious time. "Tell her someone's been poisoned!"

The colour fled from his face and soon after he had disappeared out of the portrait hole, leaving Hope to race up the stairs of the girl's dormitory until she reached the sixth years' room and then she lunged for the potion-making kit that she kicked under her bed when not in use, pulling it towards her and searching almost blindly for that little box. And then she found it and wrenched it free.

It took a considerably less amount of time to run down the stairs to the girls' dormitory and up the stairs of the boys' than it did to find the bezoar.

"Out of the way," she snapped to Hermione as she wrenched open Ron's mouth from which foam was beginning to trickle from as his skin had become so pale that it would be nearly blue very soon now.

Hermione moved back, but only slightly, true unadulterated fear colouring her brown eyes as Hope shoved the mud-coloured stone into his mouth, forcing him to swallow it.

His body did not seize as it had before, in fact it didn't even move.

"Come on," Hope was hardly breathing herself, "come on, breathe, Ron!""

And then his chest rose as his lungs expanded within and Hermione sobbed in relief.
Collateral Damage

Hermione was sitting beside Ron where he lay on the hospital bed, with Ginny on his other side, her face so pale that her freckles stood out against her skin.

Hope was standing not too far away, speaking in low tones with Madam Pomfrey, a solemn Dumbledore, and sombre Professor McGonagall.

"He'll recover?" Hope asked, worry evident in her voice.

"With time," Madam Pomfrey promised, "but it'll take at least two weeks for him to be well enough to leave the hospital wing."

"I am more concerned as to how Mr. Weasley happened upon poisoned mead," Professor McGonagall said frostily, holding the repaired bottle of poison before her before Dumbledore took it, examining it closely.

"He had it when Hermione and I went up to wish him Happy Birthday," Hope told her, "I assumed it was a gift from his family, since he's legal now."

Dumbledore's eyes narrowed as he looked over the packaging. He had received an identical gift from Horace not yesterday, one of the finest oak-matured mead that money could buy, but Dumbledore could smell a hint of liquorice and cherry that was no doubt used to hide the scent of the poison. Dumbledore doubted that Horace had been the one to poison it, but he was certain that he was the intended recipient.

"I can't imagine who would want to poison Mr. Weasley," Professor McGonagall continued as Hope's eyes darkened to an almost-black.

"I fear that is my fault," Dumbledore conceded with a wince and Hope's angry eyes fastened on his. It seemed that these days he was always in her bad books, though, he wasn't really surprised about how she felt; she didn't understand why he did the things that he did. "I received an identical package…I believe the one who poisoned the mead believed he was, for lack of a better term, killing two birds with one stone."

Professor McGonagall and Madam Pomfrey shared a glance of surprise and unease.

Hope scowled at the headmaster, the idea that her friend was collateral damage ticking off her last nerve and she turned on her heel, moving to take the empty seat that was by Ron's head, just opposite Hermione.

Hope's eyes softened as she looked over her friend's pallor, the sweat causing his hair to cling to his face. She expelled a low sigh as he stirred faintly in his sleep.

"Imagine how red he'll turn when he wakes up," Hope weakly choked, "and we tell him he had several girls clustered around his sickbed."

Hermione choked on her laugh and Ginny smiled feebly.

"I-It'll be even worse once he realizes Hermione cried over him," Ginny added, her voice growing stronger.

Hermione tried to glare at the two girls, but it fell through when Ron's sleep-laden voice drew her
It was mostly a slur, but after a moment the three girls were able to ascertain what was mumbled beyond his lips. "Er…mi…ne…"

Hermione's cheeks flushed darkly and Ginny and Hope shared identical looks of "about time" only to twist wildly, their hands jumping to their wands as the doors to the hospital wing opened, only to relax at the sight of two ginger-haired lads.

"Fred! George!" Ginny cried at the sight of her older brothers, rushing to fling her arms around both of them before dragging them towards the bed. Worry was evident on their faces as they set down a large present on a nearby bed.

"How is he?" Fred asked, locking an arm over Ginny's shoulders.

"He's alive," Hope sighed, "so, I suppose that's better than nothing."

Even George had to concede that that was true.

"Not one of Ron's better birthdays, I suppose?" Fred offered, though the words were half-hearted. George took Hope's hand and she gave a tight smile in return.

"How did you get here so fast?" Ginny asked curiously as Hermione squeezed Ron's hand with both of hers. "Hope mirror-called only a few minutes ago."

"Well, we were in Hogsmeade, waiting to surprise him," admitted George.

"Hogsmeade?" Hermione asked in surprise. "But all the Hogsmeade visits have been cancelled until the end of the year."

"We didn't realize that until we got to the village," Fred said glumly, "we were also there to have a look at Zonko's since its been boarded up for awhile now…A Hogsmeade branch, you know, but a fat lot of good it'll do us if you lot aren't allowed out at weekends to buy our stuff anymore... But never mind that now." His eyes flickered between Hope and Hermione, the only ones who had been with Ron when he was poisoned and, consequently, the only ones who would never poison him. "What happened?"

Hermione glanced up, her eyes meeting his briefly. "We-we went up to wish Ron a happy birthday before heading down to breakfast," she said, her voice stuttering. "When we got there he was already unwrapping presents."

"There was a bottle there," Hope took over for her friend, who was only too grateful that she did so, "I thought it might've been from you or your parents, considering he's legal now."

The twins shook their heads in unison.

"If we had sent him alcohol," George said, "it would've been Firewhiskey." Fred nodded in agreement.

"And that wouldn't have made it through the mail-searches that are done on everything coming in and going out of the castle," Fred added.

Ginny blinked. She'd almost forgotten the extensive measures put up around the castle.

"He took a drink from it," Hope continued, "and then he fell to the ground…" There was a flicker of
pain in her eyes. "I had Hermione do chest compressions on him—"

"Chest compressions?" George repeated her words strangely.

"It's a muggle technique," Hermione explained, "it's often used to get people breathing once they've been underwater too long, so they can spit up the water, but it's also used in an attempt to get the heart beating again."

The Weasleys didn't really seem to understand this term, but they didn't question it further.

"It bought me enough time to run up the girls' dormitory to grab a bezoar and shove it down his throat," Hope finished without much of a flourish. "Colin returned with Madam Pomfrey and Professor McGonagall and they brought Ron here. He'll be fine, he just has to stay here for about two weeks, taking essence of rue every day."

Fred and George expelled a breath that they didn't realize they were holding.

"Blimey," George said, relieved, "it was lucky you thought of a bezoar, Hope."

Hope said nothing to that. Truly, she wouldn't have thought of it if she hadn't used it in Potions back in January. Then he really would have been dead, and that thought chilled her to the bone.

"Do Mum and Dad know?" Fred opted to ask Ginny instead when it became clear that Hope didn't want to speak any longer. George's arm tightened around her shoulders.

"They've already seen him, they arrived an hour ago," Ginny told him, "they're in Dumbledore's office now, but they'll be back soon…"

Many theories about how the poison could have gotten in were offered before the door was opened a second time and a giant of a man entered. Regrettably, they hadn't seen much of the half-giant since term started back in September, as none of them needed his class for their future careers. He had taken this as a slight of sorts until they explained to him how heavy their coursework was now, but, even so, they hadn't seen much of the man.

Hope had almost forgotten just how tall Hagrid was, or how bristly his hair was, or how dark his eyes were.

"Hagrid!" Hope said his name, clearly startled by the crossbow that he was holding as if wary of an attack.

"Bin in the forest all day," Hagrid gasped out, seeing how her eyes had jumped to the weapon, flicking his rain-soaked hair out of his face with his free hand as he did so. "Aragog's worse—"

Hope recalled the Acromantula that had tried to eat her and Ron when they had wandered into the forest in second year trying to find out if Hagrid was responsible for opening the Chamber of Secrets. She had no fond memories of that creature.

"I bin readin' to him — didn' get up ter dinner till jus' now an' then Professor Sprout told me abou' Ron! How is he?"

"He's just sleeping it off," Hope told him, "Madam Pomfrey says he'll be on his feet in two weeks at the latest."

"Tha's a relief," Hagrid rumbled as he looked over the slumbering sixth year. Hermione was
smoothing circles into his hand now. "I jus' don' believe this...Look at him lyin' there... Who'd want
ter hurt him, eh?"

"No idea," Ginny replied, glancing towards Hope, whose face revealed nothing, though Ginny
suspected she had some kind of idea who would sink so low.

"Someone couldn' have a grudge against the Gryffindor Quidditch team, could they?" Hagrid asked,
worry and fear in his voice. "Firs' Katie, now Ron..."

"I can't see anyone trying to bump off a Quidditch team," George replied, giving a small snort.

"Wood might've done the Slytherins if he could've got away with it," Fred corrected him and George
had to concede to that.

"But you're forgetting something," Hermione said speaking suddenly and jarring the others who had
nearly forgotten of her presence due to her silence. "Daphne and Astoria were poisoned too, and
they don't play Quidditch and they aren't in Gryffindor. But the attacks have different connections."

"How so?" Hope asked at the same time as Fred asked "How d'you work that out?"

They shared a small smile before turning towards the only brunette in the mass of red-heads (not
including the dark-haired Hagrid)

"Well, for one thing," Hermione began, leaning back and using what Hope and Ron liked to call her
'lecture voice', "they ought to have been fatal and weren't, although that was pure luck. Had Katie
held the necklace completely, she would have died. If Daphne had drunk any more of her pumpkin
juice that morning, she would have been dead. If Astoria hadn't been found, she would have died. If
R-Ron didn't swallow the bezoar, he would have been dead."

The group became rather sombre at this analysis.

"And for another," Hermione continued, "neither the poison nor the necklace seems to have reached
the person who it was intended for, or, if it did, it was either for a warning or for collateral damage."
She must have been listening when Hope was talking with Professor McGonagall, Dumbledore, and
Madam Pomfrey, but this didn't surprise Hope; they hadn't been very far away from her, Ron, and
Ginny. "Of course, that makes the person behind this even more dangerous in a way, because they
don't seem to care how many people they finish off before they actually reach their victim."

Hermione's russet orbs found Hope's briefly, conveying the information they wouldn't speak in front
of Hagrid.

And all those attacked were in the DA.

This could have been complete chance, but Hope didn't much believe in coincidences.

However, all such thoughts were put on hold when the door opened and the matriarch and patriarch
of the Weasley family entered.

They already knew of Ron's stable condition, so the first thing Hope got was her view obscured by
Mrs. Weasley's ginger curls, she was, however, quite unprepared when the older woman burst into
tears (or had she already been in tears? Hope didn't know, but tears were involved) and gripped her
so tightly that she could swear that a few of her ribs cracked.

"Oh, Hope," Mrs. Weasley wept as Hope rubbed soothing circles into her back the same way
George did when she woke up from a nightmare. "Dumbledore's told us how you saved him with a
bezoar. What can we say? You saved Ginny...you saved Arthur...now you saved Ron."

"Don't worry about,"Hope offered, "I seem to specialize in saving Weasleys."

She laughed wetly and she wasn't the only one.

Mr. Weasley embraced her next and Hope was startled when he gave her a hug that nearly rivalled his wife and when she stepped back she saw that his eyes were shining in a way that eyes did before tears fell.

"Half our family does seem to owe you their lives, now I stop and think about it," he admitted to her, swallowing thickly and barely keeping the tears at bay. "Well, all I can say is that it was a lucky day for the Weasleys when Ron decided to sit in your compartment on the Hogwarts Express, Hope."

Hope's lips twisted upwards into a smile and she blinked furiously. "It wasn't luck, it was because a boy wanted to know what kind of girl could earn his brother's attention."

"So, really, we should all be thanking me," George interjected with a wink and they all laughed, though still keeping quiet so as not to awaken the sleeping patient.

"You're awake!"

Ron looked up from his sickbed to grin at his friend. "Yeah, big shocker, isn't it?"

"Oh, shut up," Hope replied good-naturedly, plopping herself down on one of the seats beside his bed. She had given the same two words each time she saw him awake and he had responded in the same manner for the past week.

"Hermione not with you?" Ron asked in a would-be casual voice that fooled no one.

"Oh, she'll be along," Hope said in an unconcerned manner, flicking her red and gold plait over her shoulder. It was the day of the Gryffindor-Hufflepuff Quidditch match and she was decked out in the Quidditch uniform. She was so red-and-gold that it was almost overpowering.

"Did McLaggen replace me?" Ron asked her. He had avoided asking her because it sounded rather painful, being on the same team as Cormac McLaggen.

"Hell no!" Hope scoffed, a sneer forming on her mouth. "I caught Seamus and asked him if he'd be willing to try for Keeper to cover the game. He's not brilliant, but he's adequate. Ginny was pleased."

"I'll bet she was," Ron said rolling his eyes at her as she dropped a book beside him. "What's that?"

"The Hobbit," Hope said with a grin, "I read it to George and he read it to me when I was in St. Mungo's." She winked at him and he reddened. "Might want Hermione to read it to you, it's a good read."

"Says you."

Hope smirked. "Trust me, you'll enjoy it, very few don't...it might break the ice a little."

Ron eyed her speculatively. "Break the ice?" he repeated. It was true that Hermione had been treading very carefully with her words for the past week, but he wasn't quite sure why.

"Well, you might have said something while you were unconscious," Hope admitted in an evasive manner.
Ron's cheeks had been flushed before, but that was nothing compared to the colour they now held as he tried to imagine what it was that he had said when he was unconscious; none of it sounded remotely good in his mind.

"Oh, no!" he moaned into his hand, sinking further down into his pillows and blankets so that his face could barely be seen. "What did I say?"

Hope's smirk widened at his reaction and Ron was sure that he'd seen an identical expression on Fred or George's faces. "Are you sure you want to know?"

He glared at her as best as he could manage with his face mostly covered, but it didn't have the kind of response that he had hoped for.

Hope released a short laugh and Ron narrowed his eyes further at her.

"Well," Hope said, drawing the word out a little more than was necessary, "you didn't really say much, just one word...kind of broken up into syllables."

Ron was sure the blood in his veins had turned to ice and that his heart had stopped beating.

"Er-mi-ne, might've been what we heard," Hope sang, looking oddly exhilarated.

Hades below knew how long she had waited for her two friends to come even remotely close to getting together; those two were in a level of their own at skating around each other. They excelled at it in a way that no one else could.

She and George had never really had that problem. She hadn't even realized that he liked her in a romantic way until second year (which was possibly when she moved from friend to crush, but Hope couldn't be quite sure), but neither of them brought it up. Some kids started dating at thirteen, like she had, but those relationships didn't really last long, but she hadn't minded being in the minority; it wouldn't have really mattered to her if they dated in her third year or her fifth year, but she had to admit kissing him was a plus.

At least George had known what he had wanted and acted, but Ron was the strategist, ever careful and wary of deviance from his plans.

"I can hear her coming," Hope mentioned, "want to feign sleep?"

No sooner than she had said these words did he slump in the sheets curling around him when a head of bushy curls appeared around the slightly ajar door, her eyes widening slightly.

"Hope! I thought you already went down," Hermione said, trying to keep her voice low, taking notice of Ron's closed eyes and deep breathing.

"Hope! I thought you already went down," Hermione said, trying to keep her voice low, taking notice of Ron's closed eyes and deep breathing.

"I was just on my way to," Hope said, standing up and grabbing her broom and resting it over her shoulder as she strode towards the brunette with a grin. "Keep an eye on your Dream-boy, will you?"

Hermione's cheeks pinked, but her expression remained the same. "Are you sure you don't mind me not coming to the game?" she pressed.

"Don't worry about it," Hope assured her, "You've been to who knows how many since first year, it'll be fine."

Hermione smiled as Hope's currently red-and-gold hair whipped out the door after her, shutting it
with a snap. And then she sighed, moving to sit beside the still-slumbering Ron, frowning slightly as
she took in the book lying on the bedside table.

She picked it up, amused to note that it was *The Hobbit*, the book that Hope and George traded
reading to each other (though, she surmised that George preferred hearing her read it than him read it
to her). She flipped the cover open, surprised to see a few words scrawled on the inside cover.

*Bringing couples together since 1991*

Hermione flushed darkly, scowling at the book now. If Hope were here, she knew for a fact that she
would have been smirking and winking at her.

Ron stirred faintly in the bed, before his blue eyes blinked blearily open. "'Mione?" he said, his voice
carefully slurred with sleep as he sat up slowly, rubbing at his eyes. "Where's Hope?"

"Er, the Quidditch game," Hermione offered, rather uncomfortably aware that the two of them were
rather alone in the hospital wing and this knowledge caused her cheeks to gain a healthy bit of
colour.

"Oh, right," Ron said, hearing the sounds of cheers from the cracked window. His eyes swept over
her and Hermione tried very hard not to respond to the attention (she wondered if Hope had ever
done the same when George looked at her). This also gave her the opportunity to shamelessly gaze
upon him in return.

An awkward tension settled between them and Hermione floundered, not knowing what to do or
say. It was so much easier when Hope was here! She could pull conversation topics out of the air!

"I can read this, if you want," she mentioned, drawing his eyes to the book worn from so many
readings.

"Sure-I mean if you want," Ron quickly corrected himself, and Hermione pretended not to notice as
she opened the book to the first chapter and began to read.

"In a hole in the ground," Hermione began, "there lived a hobbit. Not a nasty, dirty, wet hole, filled
with the ends of worms and an oozy smell, nor yet a dry, bare, sandy hole with nothing in it to sit
down on or to eat: it was a hobbit-hole, and that means comfort."

Hermione glanced up briefly, but Ron didn't seem to notice, his eyes off in the distance, looking very
much like he was thinking intently about something.

"It had a perfectly round door," Hermione continued, ducking her head quickly so he didn't see, "like
a porthole, painted green, with a shiny yellow brass knob in the exact middle. The door opened on to
a tube-shaped hall like a tunnel: a very comfortable tunnel without smoke, with panelled walls, and
floors tiled and carpeted, provided with polished chairs, and lots and lots of pegs for hats and coats –
the hobbit was fond of visitors—"

Hermione stopped suddenly when Ron pulled himself into a sitting position, his hands covering hers
as he shut the book. Hermione could not overlook the feverish glow to his face.

"What's wrong?" she asked in concern.

"Hermione Jean Granger," he said her full name and Hermione nearly shivered at how it sounded
rolling off his tongue, "you are insanely clever, and beautiful, and frustrating in every possible way."

Hermione opened her mouth to speak, but she wouldn't have quite known what to say. Though, all
of her thoughts were stalled when he pressed a warm finger to her lips as she closed them abruptly and Hermione's breath caught.

"You're bookish and smart and not afraid of speaking your mind, you're willing to do the most insane things for your friends and I am in love with you."

Hermione swallowed thickly, her heart beating rapidly in her chest, in fact, it was beating so much that Hermione feared it would leap out of her chest.

"Really?" she managed to gasp out breathlessly as he removed his finger.

He grinned. "Really." And then he had cupped her cheeks and kissed her mouth. It was gentle and soft and sweet, and everything Hermione had hoped her first kiss would be (the most Viktor had ever given her was a kiss to her cheek, and she had been fine with that).

But then he released her all too soon and she couldn't help but be disappointed.

"So, how about it?" he said, looking as winded as she felt.

"How about what?" Hermione asked a bit blankly, still reeling from the kiss.

Ron's grin was nearly a smirk. "You and me...dating..."

Hermione would've said yes immediately but the side of her that had developed over the years due to exposure to Hope Potter said instead, "Kiss me again and I'll say yes."

Ron was only too happy to comply and swept her into a soul-wrenching kiss that had Hermione struggling to breathe but not wanting to break it as she tangled her fingers into his fiery locks.

And for one moment it was as if they were the only ones in the world, and Hermione and Ron didn't mind in the slightest.
Hope was exhilarated from the win over Hufflepuff, though Zacharias Smith hadn't seemed too pleased when she'd snatched up the Snitch from under Summerby's nose, and Hope really couldn't imagine why. It wasn't as though the Hufflepuff team hadn't tasted defeat at her hands before (no offense to the Hufflepuffs, but she just really wanted to rub it in Smith's face a bit).

She grinned widely, thrusting the fist that currently held the feebly fluttering Snitch up into the air, causing a loud explosion of cheers to echo around the pitch (excluding the Slytherin portion of the pitch, of course, but she hadn't expected much from them to begin with, seeing as only about three Slytherins cheered for Gryffindor).

And then Hope was on the receiving end of several rib-cracking hugs from her teammates, the Chasers performing one last victory lap before landing to follow suit.

"Great job, Seamus," Hope added, once she caught him. The Irish boy's face was still a little pale, though he spared her a tentative smile at her words.

"You're having me on," Seamus told her as Dean thumped him on the back.

"No, she's not!" he laughed. "You did good, mate!"

"I wasn't expecting you to be amazing," Hope added, rolling her eyes towards his words. "It was short notice and all, but I'd rather have you than McLaggen, gods knows how terrible that match would've gone."

The rest of the Gryffindor Team had a small laugh at that.

"Thanks for giving me a chance," Seamus said as they all started moving towards the changing rooms.

"Eh, don't worry about it," Hope said, waving her hand carelessly as she did so. "It's fine. All's well that ends well."

Seamus tilted his head slightly in confusion at the Muggle phrase when his freshly changed girlfriend loped out of the girls' side to throw her arms around his neck.

"I thought you were amazing," Ginny told him glowingly before standing on her tip-toes to kiss him something fierce.

It was only when Seamus' hands tangled in her hair and responded just as passionately that Hope thought it best to make a quick retreat, whistling lowly at the pair and sniggering as she removed her Quidditch uniform to pull on her warm jeans and jumper, and skip out and into the cool March air.

She then dutifully ignored how Daphne and Dean too were lip-locked, breezing past them and up the sprawling lawn back towards the castle.

Hope was sure that the whole of Gryffindor House would be celebrating the victory over Hufflepuff, but she didn't go back to the common room first thing, instead she took the stairs two steps at a time until she reached the hospital wing door, and then Hope pushed it open gently and peeked her head around.

And then she had her eyebrows raise high into her forehead at what she saw.
Ron and Hermione…as in Ron and Hermione! Hermione's fingers were threaded into his ginger locks with his were tangled in her curls with one hand, the other curved around her back, holding her to him as they kissed.

"W-o-w!" Hope said suddenly, startling them apart by her voice alone. "Don't tell me you've been doing that since I left?"

Hermione's flushed so red that Hope wouldn't have been surprised if the girl fainted. "Hope!" she said, terribly flustered by the position that her and Ron's best friend had found them in. "I-well-you see—"

"No," Ron told her simply, seeming remarkably unashamed of how they had been discovered (though this might've had something to do with how pleased with himself he appeared to be). "Just a few minutes after the match started."

"Ron!" Hermione snapped, mortified by his honesty as Hope threw back her head and laughed. "You can't just tell her that!"

"What's she going to do?" Ron retorted, arching his eyebrows towards the brunette whose cheeks were still flooded with colour. "It's not like she hasn't seen people snogging before."

"That," Hermione said, drawing herself up in a dignified manner, "was not snogging, it was just kissing."

"Very good kissing," Ron said, grinning widely at her.

Hope tried to hide her snigger behind her hand as Hermione turned so red that she was nearly purple. She was so used to George trying to make her blush that it was a little weird to be the one that saw someone else blush from kissing someone else.

"Oh, shut up," she said with a bit of heat.

"So, are you two dating now?" Hope asked, smirking widely as she moved forward to remind them that she was indeed still there.

Ron and Hermione looked up startled –clearly having temporarily forgotten of her as she had predicted– and then both flushed, though it was more noticeable on Ron, whose face wasn't currently resembling a tomato.

"We must be," Ron said with a grin, "since I kissed her again."

Hermione astutely ignored the two pairs of eyes that fell on her and Hope arched an eyebrow. "Oh?"

"I'm leaving," Hermione decided, "before either of you embarrass me further!"

"That's likely," Hope agreed when Ron –faster than she would have thought possible, especially considering that he was still recovering from poison– grabbed her wrist suddenly before she could move away, cupping her cheek as he gave her a long kiss that Hope had almost been expecting (she suspected it was a Weasley tactic, as George had used that one on her several times now).

Predictably, Hermione melted and Hope stepped slowly out of the room so that she wouldn't interrupt, grinning widely like the cat that caught the canary.

Hope was very careful when she had checked the Marauders Map to see if Malfoy was in the Room
of Requirement, for if he was, his dot wouldn't show up on the Map, however, she could see it clearly in the Slytherin common room, so Hope didn't need to worry.

The only place she could possibly find a Pensieve was in the Room of Requirement (even Morea's Room didn't have one, nor did the Chamber of Secrets, because she had checked them both first), and by possibly, she meant there was a very slim chance that there was one in its depths, but she was going to take that chance anyways.

When she had opened the door, she had been surprised to find herself in an unrecognizable place. Hope almost walked right back out, but the door was in the right place, so it had to be the room. Besides, it changed upon the needs of the user, didn't it? So that would explain why it didn't look like the duelling room that it had before because Hope no longer had any need for a duelling room— the Chamber of Secrets worked well enough, if you asked her.

But this had not been what she was expecting.

The Room of Requirement had expanded itself further and seemed to be completely filled with many items that Hope could barely fathom.

Thus, Hope wished she hadn't left Ron and Hermione to their own devices, but Ron was still in the hospital and completely mad for Hermione (and Hope knew how bad she was about George), so Hope soldiered on alone.

Hundreds upon hundreds books lay about, some carefully placed in bookshelves and others piled in high teetering stacks that made Hope very wary as she passed by them, because she was certain that if they fell on her she would be crushed.

But books were by far not the only thing in the vast room. Broken and burned furniture were positioned against the far walls as she made her way through the piles of assorted items, a number of weapons were fixed to jut outwards, almost skewering her as she walked by, skating cautiously around crossed bloodstained axes. Several potions were set on a table, as if waiting for their owner to return for them (Hope suspected this had occurred a long time ago, going off of how dusty and congealed the bottles and their contents were).

Hope stepped lightly over a black rook that lay on its side, similar to the ones in the chamber that had once held the Philosopher's Stone in her first year...or perhaps it was the original? Hope couldn't be sure, becoming distracted by a soft sound that could have been described as faint hissing reminiscent of song, though she was certain that if someone who wasn't a Parseltongue heard it, they would not agree.

She twisted her head slightly, searching for the origin of the noise before taking a left and coming to desk laden down with an assortment of items, with jewellery and cloth and tapestry and an old and worn box.

Hope was sure that whatever lay within was what was making the noise.

She flicked the clasp open and parted the lid so that she could see what lay on the black velvet and she found her words gone from her momentarily even as the hissing song continued.

It was beautiful and old (two things that drew Hope to it immediately) and Hope lifted it gingerly. It was a tiara of sorts, made of a strong silver that had been designed so that it appeared to be a bird spreading its wings, set with a blue sapphire.

But even then, Hope found herself yet again distracted and she replaced it its box, shutting it swiftly
as she pulled the long and lengthy tapestry towards herself, her fingers tracing over the names of Salazar Slytherin and Morea Avis, which were connected by a thick black thread.

Hope had never seen her family tree, it had supposedly been lost to the ages, or someone had tried very hard to hide it.

She unrolled it as best as she could until she reached the bottom where the names James Potter and Lily Evans were connected by a similar black thread, to which a green thread descended bearing the name Hope Potter; it must have been enchanted so that her name had shown up on the fabric regardless of anyone knowing of her ancestry and putting it there themselves.

Hope's lips twitched into a smile, and then she almost dropped a knife on her foot.

Not really her best moment.

Hope wrenched it out of the ground where it had landed and lifted it up in fascination. It must have been hidden in the furls of the cloth. The hilt was masterfully carved with a snake wound around a tree branch; that must've made it Morea's then, though, Hope had never read any mention of her grandmother using any weapon other than a staff and a bow.

But Hope didn't have time to think about this. She shoved the blade back into the fabric and folded it all up once more before miniaturizing it and placing it in her pocket.

She had almost forgotten why she was really here.

If only a bloody Pensieve was easier to find.

Hope very nearly gave up twice when she finally caught sight of one and then she almost sighed in relief, taking in the runes carved on its side before she gazed inside the eerily glowing basin.

"Finally," Hope grumbled to herself as she pulled her wand free and scowled at the Pensieve. "Do you have any idea how hard you are to find?"

Thankfully, the Pensieve could offer her no reply to that.

If it had, Hope would have chalked it up to hallucination, from inhaling the fumes of…the room, or something or other.

"Reducio," Hope incanted quietly, causing the basin to shrink to a more appropriate size so that she could pick it up and put it in her pocket before whistling a jaunty tune as she headed for the door, completely bypassing the famed Mirror of Erised.

"And it seems our resident at-Death's-door member has graced us with his presence."

Amusement and laughter rippled through the group as Ron grinned sheepishly at Hope who was pointing a dagger towards him in a relaxed sort of way, though many had to wonder where on earth she had picked one up (not many were aware that she was still carrying Sirius' knife shoved in her boot).

"Hope!" Hermione reproached, looking scandalized by her friend's behaviour, but not entirely surprised by it. "Put that down before you poke someone's eye out!"

Hope jutted her lip out slightly into a pout, causing more laughter as she reluctantly set down the knife. "Just saying," she grumbled before raising her voice, "I think there's a lesson to be learned
about constant vigilance here, with all the poisonings that have occurred this year."

There were a few mumbles of agreement, because she wasn't wrong there.

"So," Hope continued, pulling herself into a standing position to grin widely at them all. "Who's ready for another lesson?"

The many excited eyes were all the answer she needed.

"Well, c'mon, then, we haven't got all day!"

The dynamics within the DA had changed very much since the very first lesson they'd had the previous year. Last year it had been more segregated as Hope as the teacher and them as the students as well as each House only preferring to work with the same members of their House, but now it seemed as if everyone was fully integrated with each other with less strained and more relaxed atmosphere.

Hope enjoyed that very much as she stood before her peers.

"Since you've all requested it so much," she said in a resigned drawl, "I'm going to show you the water whip I used on the Hungarian Horntail back in fourth year, though I can't imagine what you'll use it on, it's not like there's a lot of dragons around…anyways, let me just step back a bit…"

Hope took a few steps back until she was at an appropriate distance away before she spoke the spell.

"Rigo Flagellum!"

The familiar blue-white colour of the water-ice whip hadn't changed from the last time she had used it during the First Task.

"Wicked!" came Colin's piping voice, followed by a number of chuckles.

Hope flicked her wand, and a resounding crack that followed had several members jumping at the sound.

"Having all of you do this spell at the same time probably wouldn't end well for anyone," Hope continued, "so form a line…this might take up a meeting or two, but ah well…Padma, you're first, the incantation is 'Rigo Flagellum.'"

And then she took a step back, allowing the line to form as she moved to the back of it where Ron and Hermione were standing, their fingers interlocked loosely.

"You look distracted," Ron noticed, "is something wrong?"

"No, nothing," Hope said, fingering the miniaturized Pensieve in her pocket as it brushed against the stoppered vial that contained the memories of Horace Slughorn that she was on the verge of seeing. She grinned at the pair. "I just can't imagine what they'd use that whip for."

Hermione almost snorted, but she didn't think that was what Hope was thinking about with her eyebrows furrowed together, her forehead creased in thought. There was something bothering her friend, though Hermione couldn't quite be sure of what; there always seemed to be a number of things on her mind, including George several times over.

"Flick your wrist more, Padma!" Hope called from where she stood. "Yes, like that!"

Elasted by her success, Padma stepped back, allowing Ernie to take her spot and try his hand at it.
Unfortunately, the Hufflepuff put too much power into his spell, thus resulting in his spell seeming to short circuit, blasting him off the platform and into the water that lay on either side (this was the unfortunate downside to practicing in the Chamber of Secrets, however, they all had gotten rather good at using drying charms on each other when their spells backfired).

Ernie gagged on the water, spitting it out quickly as laughter erupted around him.

"Oh, like this isn't going to happen to any of you!" he replied in a nearly-irritated voice as he clamoured up to stand on the platform once more, drenched to the bone only to be quickly blasted with a drying spell courtesy of Tracey who was still sniggering at his predicament.

And then they were all back to doing the spell and leaving Hope, Ron, and Hermione to have their semi-private conversation.

"When are you going to give Dumbledore that memory?" Hermione asked her in curiosity.

Hope scowled lightly at the mention of the headmaster whom she had yet to reconcile with (and with his track record, that wasn't something that was likely to occur in this life, because Hope could hold a long grudge). "When I feel like it," Hope said decisively.

"You mean when you've had a look at what's inside," Ron corrected her and Hope couldn't help the grin that made its way onto her lips.

"Aw! Ron, you know me so well!" she simpered, earning an annoyed glance from her friend at the voice that was quite similar to Dolores Umbridge's tone of voice.

"Oh, shut up," he said without any heat.

Hermione giggled beside him, her brown eyes glowing with mirth at how they all acted around one another. "You're both terrible," she told them.

"Yeah, but you love me more, right?" Hope asked with a grin.

"No, she doesn't," Ron disagreed, "you love me more, right, Hermione?"

Hermione's cheeks flooded with heat and she spluttered as she tried to come up with a suitable response before simply throwing her hands up in the air in aggravation at the pair's antics, which only made them laugh.

Hope had never been great at Occlumency, though she suspected that Dumbledore, seeking not to drive her further away, would not dare to delve into her mind during their private lessons, but this did not stop her from keeping her mind blissfully blank when she was around him so that he would remain unaware of the memory she possessed.

The two new memories that Dumbledore shared with Hope were a bit curious concerning the elusive Tom Riddle, as always, the first being when he conned a woman by the name of Hepzibah Smith out of two treasures that had once belonged to two of the Founders, Helga Hufflepuff's cup and Salazar Slytherin's locket. And by conned she meant the woman had been poisoned and the treasures disappeared.

The second as a meeting between Tom and the recently-named headmaster, Dumbledore, during which Dumbledore refused to give him the job of professor of Defence Against the Dark Arts.

But Hope couldn't think about that as she left his office, making off for the Chamber of Secret's
antechamber instead, where she had placed the basin against the wall.

Salazar, sleeping in his frame, paid her no heed as she spilled the silvery substance into the basin and ducked her head into it.

It was easy to find her place in the memory, at the point when it had become incased in fog when she had viewed the tampered version in Dumbledore's office.

It began with the sound of the chiming of a clock, thus causing Slughorn to usher the Slytherin boys who had been staying for detention out the door, leaving only Tom behind.

"Look sharp, Tom," he said, and Hope recalled this from the original, "you don't want to be caught out of bed out of hours, and you a prefect..."

"Sir, I wanted to ask you something," Tom said in an almost innocent manner.

"Ask away, then, m'boy, ask away..." Slughorn invited him with a wave of his hand.

"Sir, I wondered what you know about... about Horcruxes?" Tom asked, seeming almost tentative to broach the subject, though Hope suspected this was intentional.

His words caused Slughorn to pause in drinking his wine, setting down the glass heavily. "Project for Defence Against the Dark Arts, is it?" he asked mildly, but Hope was sure that he knew full well that it wasn't

"Not exactly, sir," Tom had to admit. "I came across the term while reading and I didn't fully understand it."

"No...well..." Slughorn inhaled deeply. "You'd be hard-pushed to find a book at Hogwarts that'll give you details on Horcruxes, Tom, that's very Dark stuff, very Dark indeed.

"But you obviously know all about them, sir?" Tom hid his eagerness to know very well, Hope thought. "I mean, a wizard like you —sorry, I mean, if you can't tell me, obviously— I just knew if anyone could tell me, you could— so I just thought I'd—"

"Well, well, it can't hurt to give you an overview, of course," Slughorn puffed importantly, his cheeks ruddy from a combination of the wine and the flattery turned upon him. "Just so that you understand the term. A Horcrux is the word used for an object in which a person has concealed part of their soul."

Hope frowned in curiosity. She had never heard of such a thing; she hadn't even known it was possible to place a bit of your soul inside an object.

"I don't quite understand how that works, though, sir," Tom said, appearing appropriately confused.

"Well, you split your soul, you see," Slughorn said, uncomfortable with the topic, it seemed, "and hide part of it in an object outside the body. Then, even if one's body is attacked or destroyed, one cannot die, for part of the soul remains earthbound and undamaged. But of course, existence in such a form..."

"How do you split your soul?" Tom asked.

"Well, you must understand that the soul is supposed to remain intact and whole," Slughorn explained. "Splitting it is an act of violation, it is against nature."
"But how do you do it?" Tom nearly insisted, just barely managing to not come off as needy.

"By an act of evil—the supreme act of evil. By committing murder," Slughorn intoned sombrely. "Killing rips the soul apart. The wizard intent upon creating a Horcrux would use the damage to his advantage: He would encase the torn portion—"

"Encase? But how—?" Tom asked, his eyes glinting malevolently in the lighting.

"There is a spell, do not ask me, I don't know!" Slughorn snapped suddenly. "Do I look as though I have tried it — do I look like a killer?"

"No, sir, of course not," Tom was quick to soothe. "I'm sorry...I didn't mean to offend..."

"Not at all, not at all, not offended," Slughorn disagreed, his fingers twitching around his cup of wine as he sought to not look upon his student. "It is natural to feel some curiosity about these things...Wizards of a certain calibre have always been drawn to that aspect of magic..."

"Yes, sir," said Tom simply. "What I don't understand, though—just out of curiosity—I mean, would one Horcrux be much use? Can you only split your soul once? Wouldn't it be better, make you stronger, to have your soul in more pieces, I mean, for instance, isn't seven the most powerfully magical number, wouldn't seven—?"

Seven? Hope was aghast. Who on earth would want to split their soul seven ways?

It appeared that Slughorn was similarly minded.

"Merlin's beard, Tom!" he cried. "Seven! Isn't it bad enough to think of killing one person? And in any case...bad enough to divide the soul...but to rip it into seven pieces..." This conversation had taken a turn that he had plainly not expected. "Of course, this is all hypothetical, what we're discussing, isn't it? All academic..."

"Yes, sir, of course," said Tom promised smoothly.

"But all the same, Tom," Slughorn shifted awkwardly, "keep it quiet, what I've told—that's to say, what we've discussed. People wouldn't like to think we've been chatting about Horcruxes. It's a banned subject at Hogwarts, you know...Dumbledore's particularly fierce about it..."

Hope couldn't imagine why.

"I won't say a word, sir," Tom said as Hope forced herself out of the Pensieve.
Ron and Hermione were waiting for her in the common room, as they always did after one of Dumbledore's lessons, but this time they were startled by how she returned. They had seen her on the verge of an apoplectic fit and they had seen her stewing in silence, however, they had never seen her so white that she was almost green with a horrified expression on her face.

"Hope?" Hermione asked tentatively. "Did something happen?"

Hope squeezed her eyes shut momentarily and opened them again to stare at Hermione before the pale green orbs flickered towards Ron.

"You guys are still awake?" she asked, momentarily confused before she sighed. "Of course you are."

"How was the lesson with Dumbledore?" Ron asked her curiously.

Hope's shoulders relaxed slightly, as though that had not been the line of questioning she had been fearing. "Oh," she said, "it was alright."

Hermione arched a dubious eyebrow as Hope fell over the arm of one of the sofa chairs closest to the fire, flinging an arm over her eyes. "All things considered."

"So why…?" Hermione paused trying to sound more delicate than "Why do you look so terrible?"

"You told me you couldn't find anything about Horcruxes," Hope said at long last. "I know why."

"Is it really that bad?" Ron asked in confusion.

"Probably worse," Hope groaned as she pulled herself upright, still rubbing at her forehead as though she was suffering from an intense headache. "It makes me glad my soul's at least whole, I don't even want to think about the state of Tom's at this point."

"His…soul?" Hermione said blankly, glancing to Ron who was sharing an identical look of incomprehension.

"So, I finally managed to watch that memory," Hope explained, which made a bit more sense given what Hope had been saying. "A Horcrux is an object that contains a portion of your soul so that even if your physical body dies, as long as you have a Horcrux you cannot be killed."

Now they could understand why she had looked so sickened.

"A portion of your soul?" Ron said aghast. "How on earth do you split your soul?"

"Why would you want to?" Hermione asked instead, the revulsion clear as day on her face.

"Well, no one said that Tom had any sense or sanity," Hope conceded, "especially when you consider that he came up with Lord Voldemort by messing around with the letters of his name."

Ron sniggered and Hermione's lips twitched slightly.

"But to split the soul you have commit murder," Hope continued, going off of the question that Ron had posed, "and I can see Tom as being very good at that, since killing seems to be what he's known best for."
Hope's eyes fastened on the fire, but they were distant, as though she was looking past it, but Hermione and Ron couldn't be sure of what she was thinking.

"This year is sucking the life out of me," she said, expelling a loud sigh.

"At least you weren't poisoned," Ron said reasonably.

"Ron!" Hermione chastised, smacking him on the arm, annoyed by his nonchalance concerning the matter of him nearly dying. If Hope had been a second too late with that bezoar, then he wouldn't still be sitting here with them today. "Don't say it like that!"

"How else am I supposed to say it?" Ron asked.

"How do you think?" Hermione retorted.

"Well, I wouldn't know, now would I? It's not like I can read minds, can I?"

Hope, thinking it would be best to leave the two to their own mischief, crept slowly away, smirking widely as she did so until she reached the staircase and thus scaled it quickly in time to get the barest glimpse of Hermione –being surprisingly forward– stalling Ron's retort by kissing him suddenly.

Hope had to arch an eyebrow at that; she didn't know that Hermione had it in her, to be honest. Of course, she knew that Hermione liked to argue with Ron, and he liked to argue back (all that sexual tension had to be released somehow, didn't it?), so she was never surprised by sudden arguments between the pair.

The kissing, on the other hand, she would have to get used to. Not that there was anything wrong with them kissing (as she would rather have them kissing each other than someone else).

But now Ron and Hermione had each other and Hope was alone.

Hope's fingers curled around the two necklaces she was currently wearing; the cartouche that George had given her for her thirteenth birthday and the chain that held her parents' wedding bands. She sighed mournfully and pulled out her communication mirror.

"George Weasley," she said clearly and after a few moments later, his freckly face appeared.

"Hey, love!"

"Hi," Hope said with a smile. "How're things at the shop?"

"The usual, keeping us pretty busy, what about you?"

Hope raked a hand through her hair. "Oh, you know how it is...classes...friends...teachers, the usual."

"That's very helpful," George said dryly.

She laughed slightly. "I miss you," she told him.

His grin softened. "I miss you too...do you have any idea how cold the bed is without you?"

Hope's cheeks flushed and she curled a dark red lock around her finger, yanking on it for good measure. "Really? That's the only reason you miss me?"

He laughed on the other end. "Don't be ridiculous! The cooking's great too!"
The night was cold and Hope almost regretted offering herself as one of the night patrollers, especially since she had carved a new blood seal into her flesh, this time on the inside of her wrist.

Hermione didn't approve of her mutilation of herself, as she said, and Ron thought she was barmy to give herself new scars, but it was Blood Magick, they should have known better; Hope was fascinated with the subject after all. What did it matter that the scars were permanent and caused her a bit of discomfort as they healed if they saved her life later on?

It was April first and subsequently Fred and George's birthday. If Hope could have left the castle to surprise her boyfriend, she would have, but security had gotten even tighter since Ron's poisoning so that was a no go…

Hope moved on light feet to stoop down suddenly.

"I believe you two ought to be in your common room," she said lightly, causing the two Hufflepuffs to squeak and run off, leaving Hope to snigger to herself.

"Must you always be so terrifying?" an amused voice behind her commented and Hope froze for a moment before turning swiftly on her heel to look upon the one that had spoken.

He was leaning against the wall with an air of having been standing there awhile (this Hope doubted very much), grinning roguishly at her.

"You would know all about that," she replied, making a great show of ignoring him and walking away, grinning to herself and knowing full well that he would follow after her.

True to form, Hope found an arm around her waist, jerking her around and into his arms; Hope grinned widely as she stood on her tip toes, locking her arms tightly around his neck.

"Oh, I do," he murmured, his lips just barely brushing against hers. "But you don't scare me," he whispered into her ear, his voice taking on a lower tone that had Hope swallowing thickly for a moment.

"Isn't that a pity," she said, "I loved when I could strike fear into your heart."

"When was this?" George asked cheekily. "I don't quite remember it."

Hope scowled at him.

"You know it's adorable when you do that, right?" he asked with a wide grin, but Hope was unfazed.

"I'm sure it is," she drawled, "but did you come all the way out here to get nineteen kisses from me?"

"Would I really?" he asked in a mock-thoughtful way.

"Do you want me to lie?" Hope questioned, curling her fingers into his hair before smothering his answer with a kiss.

"Mm, that leaves only eighteen more to go," George smirked as he broke the kiss.

Hope tilted her head back to release a laugh, before whirling around quickly to make sure that no one came running at the sound. "You're just here to get me into trouble, aren't you?" she asked as she
turned back towards him, easily taking note of the glint in his eye.

"Oh, absolutely," George promised.

"Seventeen—" Hope kissed one cheek, "—sixteen—" the corner of his mouth, "—fifteen—" just under his jaw, "fourte—"

Hope's words were silenced by George as he tangled his fingers into her hair, kissing her deeply, pushing her back slightly until her back hit a wall, but Hope barely noticed this, much too distracted by the taste and feel of him.

And then he pulled back to give Hope a chance to breathe. "Fourteen," he said before swooping down once more, kissing her until she nearly saw stars. "Thirteen…"

"That should at least count for two!" Hope gasped as she attempted to regain her breath.

"I dunno…I thought it was more like one to me," George said with a grin and Hope attempted to throw a glare his way, but it didn't really work.

"Are you ever going to play fair?" Hope demanded.

"Never," he replied with a smirk, kissing her again. "Twelve…"

"I hate you," Hope grumbled mutinously, though she didn't deny him as he stole yet another kiss from her.

"No you don't," George grinned, trailing his lips from hers down her neck as Hope exhaled sharply once they connected with her jugular.

"I do," Hope insisted vainly, releasing a small moan as she did so.

"You're lying…” George sang as he leaned back up to kiss her again softly. "Ten…"

Hope's eyes fluttered open and George allowed himself to enjoy the dazed expression in her eyes, as he didn't see it so often anymore (which was the real tragedy, if you asked him). Once Hope had regained her bearings a bit more, she was trying to squeeze past him, but this was a bit difficult, especially considering his superior height and size over her, but she managed it eventually with a reproving sniff.

"I've still got the rest of my shift to do," she told him, turning up her nose at him.

"You won't even know I'm there."

Hope glanced towards him just in time to see him disappear under his invisibility cloak, and then she rolled her eyes at the ceiling.

"I saw that," his disembodied voice commented, hiding his chuckles.

"Good," Hope retorted. "You were meant to." And then she ignored him to pull out the Marauders Map, frowning intently at it, her eyes falling on the stretch of corridor just beyond her, where the hidden door to the Room of Requirement lay. She shut off the light at the end of her wand swiftly at the sound of a door opening.

Hope glanced just barely around the corner, hiding herself quickly when a flash of blonde hair whipped in her direction before disregarding anything he might have seen and making off in the direction of the Slytherin common rooms.
It was a bit risky, if you asked Hope, staying out this late without someone being able to tell you if the coast was clear.

"Do I want to know why you're so interested in Draco Malfoy all of a sudden?" George's voice questioned archly.

"Not particularly," Hope responded, her eyes still narrowed in suspicion.

What could be in the Room that he needed to spend so much time in it?

"Hope, stay after a moment, won't you?"

Hope paused in stuffing her Ancient Runes textbook into her bag with her quill and screwed-tightly-shut inkwell. Hermione glanced between Professor Babbling and her friend, trying to ascertain if Hope had done anything to warrant staying after in class. Ancient Runes was Hope's favourite subject and she had never gotten called out in it.

"I'll-er-wait outside," Hermione mumbled as she brought her bag's strap over one shoulder and dashed out quickly, following her classmates.

A frown marred Hope's lips as she stood up as well to look upon her professor. "Was there something wrong with my essay?" she asked.

Professor Babbling smiled, her cheeks dimpling and making the woman look much younger than she appeared.

"Oh, not at all," Professor Babbling assuaged her fears, "it was as in depth as always…I've noticed a common trend with your essay subjects over the years, though."

Hope arched a curious eyebrow.

"All very ancient forms of magic, including several that the Ministry does not approve of," Professor Babbling said, her eyes fastening on her student's. To her credit, Hope didn't even bat an eye at her words. "Luckily, Gringotts has never put much store in Ministry regulations."

"Their loss," Hope said simply, shrugging her shoulders.

Professor Babbling hummed softly in agreement. "There are many who share a similar view, but that's not why I asked you to stay behind, it's because of this." She was holding out a letter that bore the Gringotts seal. "I sent a few of your essays to Gringotts, as I have done before with several other promising students, and they were very impressed."

Hope practically snatched the letter from her professor, her eyes scanning over the contents of the letter with a feverish air.

"…analysis of runes based on Ancient Magicks are not only accurate but expertly done…shows true love for the art…we request that you consider joining Gringotts after graduation," Hope read with increasing glee before glancing up to look at Professor Babbling with a bright grin. "Is this for real?"

"Absolutely," Professor Babbling promised with an equally bright smile. "We haven't seen promise like yours since Bill Weasley, which is why I'm offering you this."

This time she held out a slip of parchment, a waiver.

"What's this?" Hope asked in confusion.
"It's a form that gives my permission for you to take your N.E.W.T. in Ancient Runes a year early," Professor Babbling explained. "Most people don't take it, but I do hand it out to a select few and give them the opportunity to do so...if nothing else, it'll at least lighten your load for next year."

Hope blinked at her. "The exam is two and a half months away," she said.

"Yes, it is," Professor Babbling agreed cheerfully, "but I think you'll find studying for it won't be nearly as hard as you think it to be, but just to be sure..." Professor Babbling strode to her desk and pulled out a battered Advanced Ancient Runes textbook with a folded bit of parchment sticking out from under the cover. "I've written down the subjects we've covered so far and will cover before the exam, but you can feel free to ask me about anything you don't understand."

Hope took the book from her, eyeing it with a bit of anticipation, her mind already made up before she even signed the parchment with a flourish and practically shoved it at her professor before gathering up her books and leaving.

"So what was that about?" Hermione asked, startling Hope as she had forgotten that Hermione was waiting for her—though she was now joined by Ron who had probably come to walk her to lunch.

"Oh, I'm taking my N.E.W.T. for Ancient Runes a year early," Hope said, sighing with an expression that wouldn't have looked amiss on her face if George was in the room.

"You're barmy, you are," Ron told her, "who'd want to take an exam a year early?"

But Hermione squealed in excitement. "Ooh! How exciting! Do you need any help studying?"

"Nah, I've got this," Hope replied with a careless wave of her hand, pulling out a tie from her bag and hiking her hair up into a high ponytail. "It's a day of studying for me! I'll see you at dinner!" And then she was jogging away.

"You're blowing off lunch for studying?" Ron called after her, aghast. "Are you mental?"

"Oh, hush," Hermione grinned, laughing at the stunned expression on Ron's face, as he couldn't imagine someone voluntarily missing a meal, but he couldn't have said that he was honestly surprised—more exasperated, really—given Hope's track record. "Just because you're a 'growing boy' doesn't mean that everyone is."

"But I am a growing boy!" Ron refuted, throwing an arm lightly around her shoulders so that he could snap her bag, whipping it off her faster than Hermione could breathe.

"Hey!" she complained, but she couldn't really be taken seriously with that smile on her face.
"What're you doing?"

"Carrying your books for you," Ron said innocently, "isn't that what good boyfriends do?"

Hermione released a short laugh as she leaned on the tips of her toes to kiss the corner of his mouth. "Are you sure you can handle the weight?" she teased.

"I can manage it," he said with grunt as he reasserted the bag's strap on his shoulder, though he had to wonder how she could so easily carry that much weight around daily.

"You sure?" Hermione asked, grinning widely.

"Yes, I'm very sure," he said in a mock-affronted voice as he returned his arm around her shoulder as they moved towards the Great Hall, and he didn't miss the pleased smile on her face.
"Alright, today we're going to talk about dodging and the Duelling Tournament that some fanatic Ravenclaws have asked about," Hope began the next lesson with a buzz of excitement.

"Oi!" Padma interjected.

"We are not fanatics," Anthony added.

"Uh-huh?" Hope said dryly, arching an eyebrow. "Sure, you aren't…continuing on…"

The two 'fanatic Ravenclaws' spluttered as she continued to speak, causing the others gathered around them to smirk and snigger.

"Sometimes dodging is going to be your only choice," Hope said, twirling her wand between her fingers as she did so. "There are some spells you'll want to try very hard to avoid, anyone know which ones they are?"

And this was why several members of the DA had to wonder why she wasn't going to be a teacher, but Hope wasn't much of one, no matter what her friends said, teaching your peers was one thing, but teaching students that were years upon years younger than you was something else entirely.

Hope had changed students into witches and wizards that could aim precisely and accurately and take a head off with a decisive hit, though she very much doubted any would be willing to do something like that.

"The Avada Kedavra," piped up Dennis from the left, nearly falling off the platform.

Hope barely blinked. "That's one," she said, "anyone know any others?"

"The Cruciatus," a voice from the back said, and Hope knew it had been Luna that had spoken and not Neville, who had stiffened as he had similarly back in fourth year.

"Yes…anything else?" Hope asked. Surely they had to see the trend here.

"The Imperius?" Dean offered.

Hope hummed in agreement. "The three spells you'll want to avoid more than anything else will be the Unforgiveable Curses. Basically, avoid any spells that are green, red, or blue, because you don't know if that's a Stupefy or a Crucio aimed at your head, and believe me, it'll be easier just to avoid them all together than to get yourself hit by a torture curse."

A few people glanced at each other a bit awkwardly. This group wasn't about fun and games anymore, this was the reality of the world, and Hope was the only one among them to have experienced all three.

"So, we're going to play a little game that'll get you all dodging," Hope said in an unexpectedly bright voice that threw a few of them off. "Basically, I'm going to throw off red, green, and blue sparks and you're going to avoid them…you get hit and you're dead, figuratively speaking, of course…you have five seconds to spread out," there was a flurry of movement as the students rushed around her so that they weren't all crowded around at the entrance, "five…four…three…two…one…"

The wand tip glowed a bright crimson and she fired off a jet of red sparks that missed Parvati—who dived to the side, unfortunately sending her over the edge of the platform and soaking her through with water that made her squeal— but hit Michael.
"Michael, dead."

She shot a streak of green behind her that nearly hit Parvati as she climbed out of the water, but ultimately missed the others.

Her next set of sparks, blue this time, collided with Justin, Seamus, and Tracey, who swore violently as she fell on her bum.

"Justin, Seamus, and Tracey, dead."

The three scrambled off towards where Michael was sitting looking a bit put out at being taken out so early.

A shower of green sparks was thrown to her left, taking out Ron and Hannah in one go.

It was much more fun when it was introduced as a game, though all participants were aware of the reality that they might one day be faced with, but for now it was simply just a game.

It was some time later –after two rounds, the DA members had insisted– that Hope had them all sitting before her, most slightly wet, as she held a roll of parchment in her hand.

"Like I said before," Hope said, grinning, "there will be a Duelling Tournament next lesson, and it might go over into the lesson after that, depending on the kind of time we have…are you all ready to hear who your opponents will be?"

The consensus was loud enough for Hope to ascertain that they would like to hear the match-ups.

Hope cleared her throat and unfurled the roll of parchment.

"Hermione versus Padma," she said and both girls eyed each other up and down, "Anthony versus Ron, Hannah versus Dean, Colin versus Justin, Dennis versus Michael, Daphne versus Ginny—"

"Nice," Ginny grinned towards the Slytherin who smirked in reply.

"Lavender," Hope continued as though she hadn't been interrupted, "versus Susan, Parvati versus Terry, Seamus versus Tracey, Luna versus Astoria—"

Luna's distant eyes focused on Astoria briefly, her lips shifting into an easy and carefree smile as the younger blue-eyed girl grinned.

"And the last match shall be Ernie versus Neville."

Hope grinned. "Any questions?"
"I can't believe that you still haven't told Dumbledore about the memory!" Hermione cried the Monday after the DA meeting.

"I can," Ron muttered on Hope's opposite side as she replaced the rune books she had been using to study on the shelves before checking out the two that remained.

"Look," Hope said once they were out of the library and away from Madam Pince's glare of warning for any voice above a whisper. "I'll tell him eventually, alright?"

"I know you don't like him," Hermione said with a sigh, "but Dumbledore probably knows the most about…the you-know-whats…" Hermione glanced around furtively to make sure that no one was listening in.

"It's more than that," Hope grumbled as she shoved her books back into her bag, "it's the way her thinks."

Ron screwed up his face slightly. "Was that that bit when you called him a puppet-master?"

Hermione sighed again and Hope smirked, glancing sidelong towards him. "Something like that… are you two ready for that Apparition test in Hogsmeade?"

Ron groaned at the merest mention of it, but Hermione's face told Hope that at least one of her friends was ready for it. "I don't even want to think about it," he told her. "I'm anxious enough as it is."

"I'm sure you'll do fine," Hermione consoled him as a small girl bearing the Ravenclaw crest intercepted them.

"Hope Potter?" she said, a bit nervously, her dark eyes doing the customary flick up to where her scar was hardly hidden by her fringe.

"Yes?" Hope said a bit unnecessarily. Even with her hair set in aquamarine bouncy curls and her eyes an identical brown to Hermione's, it was obvious how she was (no doubt because no one else changed the colour of their features as frequently as she sometimes did).

"I was asked to give you this," she said, handing over a bit of parchment and turning on her heel and heading off in the direction that she had come from.

Hope unrolled it to read its contents, Hermione and Ron peering over either shoulder. She was surprised to discover that it wasn't a missive from Dumbledore, but a letter from Hagrid.

_Dear Hope, Ron and Hermione,_

Aragog died last night. Hope and Ron, you met him and you know how special he was. Hermione, I know you'd have liked him. It would mean a lot to me if you'd nip down for the burial later this evening. I'm planning on doing it round dusk, that was his favourite time of day. I know you're not supposed to be out that late, but you can use the cloak. Wouldn't ask, but I can't face it alone.

_Hagrid_

"Nope," Ron said quickly, "we're not doing that! He can send off Aragog's corpse on his own for all
I care! He's mental if he thinks that beast was special! That thing told its mates to eat Hope and me! Told them to help themselves! And now Hagrid expects us to go down there and cry over its horrible hairy body!

"It's not just that," Hermione said, the expression on her face a mix of worried and exasperated. "He's asking us to leave the castle at night and he knows security's a million times tighter and how much trouble we'd be in if we were caught."

"You say that like we all haven't snuck out to see Hagrid before," Hope reminded her.

Hermione gave her a rather direct look. "Yes, but to go to a funeral? I mean, if it were a question of saving him—"

"— I'd want to go even less," Ron informed her, disgust curling his lips. "You didn't meet him, Hermione. Believe me, being dead will have improved him a lot."

"I think I'll go," Hope said finally, looking at the parchment again, causing her friends to gape at her.

"You can't be serious," Hermione said aghast.

"Aragog tried to eat us, remember!" Ron insisted. "Are you really going to go down and cry over his corpse?"

"No," Hope said, "but we haven't seen much of Hagrid recently and he's really upset, besides, it's not like we're going off the grounds, we'll still be within the protective enchantments."

Both had winced when she mentioned that they hadn't seen much of the friendly half-giant, because she wasn't wrong.

"If we go with you," Hermione said slowly, "you have to promise to take that memory up to Dumbledore as soon as possible."

Hope's lips drew downwards, displaying her distaste towards the deal Hermione had offered her while Ron made gagging sounds behind them, clearly not wanting to be anywhere near the dead body of a giant spider.

"Fine," she said at long last. "I'll take it up to him after the burial." She flicked her fingers at the chain around her neck that disappeared under her shirt, holding that vial that contained Slughorn's memory hidden from view.

"Isn't he gone, though?" Ron reminded her.

"Oh, yeah," Hope hummed in agreement. "I forgot about that…"

"What d'you think he's doing?" Hermione wondered.

"Dunno," Hope said with a shrug. "but the Ministry is very interested in where he's going…they seem to be under the continued impression that I am covering for him because I'm ever so fond of him." She layered the last bit with more than a little bit of sarcasm.

Ron snorted. "That's a likely story."

"I've got Potions in about ten minutes," Hope said, glancing at her watch, "have fun with your Apparition and try not to Apparate on top of some poor old bitty doing her shopping."

Ron scowled at her as Hermione laughed, waving her goodbye.
There weren't very many in Potions class, given how many there were to begin with and given how many were old enough to take the Apparition exam. Only Malfoy, Ernie, Tracey, and Hope remained, and Malfoy soon found him by himself as Ernie and Tracey moved their things to Hermione and Ron's empty spots.

Slughorn arched an eyebrow at this, but didn't comment much as he grinned at the four of them. "Ah well," he said, "as we're so few, we'll do something for fun. I want you all to brew me up something amusing!"

Hope frowned slightly before digging out her Advanced Potion-making (having been stolen back from Hermione weeks ago; the brunette had not been impressed).

"What're you going to do?" Tracey asked her in an undertone as Ernie practically flung himself into his potion (into making it, she meant, not quite so literally) while the two girls flicked through their books.

"Something for healing, I think," Hope mused, "what about you?"

"Something similar, I'd wager," Tracey replied with a grin, "Blood-replenishing…it's going to be long day, hm?"

"I suppose it must be," Hope said with a sigh, shrinking her cauldron slightly as she settled it over the flames, searching for the ingredients to her potion; unicorn horn, dittany leaves, Valerian root, nettles, Baneberries, and moonseeds.

Well, no one said Essence of Dittany was easy to make.

Hope pulled out her mortar and pestle as she fixed the flames underneath the cauldron with a tap of her wand. Then she threw the Baneberries and moonseeds into the mortar with one hand, dropping three nettles into the bubbling cauldron before taking up the pestle and crushing the seeds and berries into each other, making odd squelching noises as Tracey ripped apart some knotgrass and tossing it into her ominously dark cauldron.

"It sounds disgusting," Tracey told her as she crushed some Billywig stings. "What are you even making?"

"Essence of Dittany," Hope said with a shrug and Tracey almost dropped her mortar as she goggled at the Gryffindor.

"How do you even have all the ingredients for that?" Tracey demanded, snatching up Hope's scribbled-on book.

"I have a lot of potions ingredients I don't use," Hope had to admit. Most of her ingredients had come from her mother and father's vault—as potion ingredients could keep for a very long time—and though she'd used up most of them over the years, the dittany leaves had been one of jars that had been getting dusty with disuse.

"You're impossible," Tracey told her, sounding slightly disgusted, but Hope knew her too well now to even take her seriously.

Hope smirked and snagged her book back from the Slytherin. "I love you, too," she said sweetly and she could very nearly hear Slughorn trying to restrain his chuckles.

Tracey rolled her eyes as she turned back towards her own potion, and Hope scraped the mush from
her mortar that had once been Baneberries and moonseed to splash into her cauldron, stirring three times counter-clockwise before adding five clockwise.

She did this three more times before adding shredded bits of a unicorn's horn and sliced dittany leaves before adding a few more stirs that turned her potion a milky colour.

"I'm going to laugh so hard when that potion is a failure," Tracey grumbled under her breath. "And if it's a pass, then you're forking some over."

"Why would I do that?" Hope asked innocently.

"Because you'll get some Blood-Replenishing Potion in exchange," Tracey wheedled.

Ernie snorted from across the table. "And how is that a fair trade? Dittany's worth way more than Blood-Replenisher."

"Shut it!"

Hope released a few sniggers at how they were fighting in a manner that was reminiscent of a married couple (or, at least, how some married couples fought).

She fiddled with the flames once more, lowering the flames as the book said to do before pulling her Valerian roots towards her, taking her silver knife and carefully slicing at the roots for what felt like a very long time, but was really only about fifteen minutes. She dipped the now equal in length roots into her jar of vinegar, only letting the liquid touch the tips of the roots before pulling them out the jar and sealing it while she waited for the roots to dry before dropping them into her mixture.

After a few counter-clockwise stirs, the mixture was a reddish colour now, which was good, as that was the way it was described to appear in the book, even with the Prince's etchings.

Hope just barely made the cut with her potion, as Slughorn called "Time's Up!" and everyone had to put a stop to their potions.

Tracey's looked pretty good, but Hope wasn't entirely what to make of the purplish lump in Ernie's cauldron that didn't even come close to resembling a potion.

Ernie glared at the pair of them who were trying to hide their sniggers at how his potion had turned out.

Slughorn passed by Malfoy's potion first, a Hiccupping Solution that didn't gain much praise (Malfoy glared at Hope like his failure was her fault), he was very pleased, in contrast, with Tracey's Blood-Replenishing Potion, however, when he came across Hope's potion, pure delight overcame his features.

"Well done, Hope! Essence of Dittany," he said beaming at her, "and I'd wager that it's been perfectly brewed! It very rarely is, and do I smell a hint of vinegar? Very ingenious, and you're quite correct, adding it would keep the wounds shut more effectively…I don't know where you get these brain waves, my girl…unless it's just your mother's genes coming out in you…"

Hope merely shrugged in reply before searching through her bag for an empty jar that she could store the Essence of Dittany in.

Hermione was going to be so jealous!
Even if it was for a good cause, Ron and Hermione were still not entirely comfortable going to the funeral for an Acromantula, neither was Hope, to be completely honest; she had never really liked Aragog, and she was certain that she never would, but, for Hagrid, she would ignore those feelings.

Getting out of the castle would have been difficult altogether if Hope hadn't had Salazar Slytherin's blood running through her veins, so they were lucky in that aspect as they walked slowly across the grounds under the cover of the fading sunlight and Hope's invisibility cloak.

Though, with how tall Ron now was, he had to now bend over so that their feet weren't visible. This annoyed Ron and amused Hope and Hermione.

"How about for Christmas we get you your own invisibility cloak?" Hermione hissed towards him.

"Haha," he replied in an equally low voice before doing something that made her squeak (Hope didn't glance back to see what he did, but she assumed it was a kiss of some sort).

It seemed like ages before they reached the door to Hagrid's Hut, knocking loudly on it with their fists, pulling off the invisibility cloak as the door was pulled open.

"Yeh came!" Hagrid cried and Hope had to blink a few times at how terrible Hagrid looked. His dark eyes were puffy from crying and his cheeks were ruddy from him constantly rubbing the tears away.

"We couldn't let you be alone," Hope said, patting his arm slightly.

"He'd've been touched yeh're here, you three," Hagrid gripped them all in a tight hug that banged their heads together as he sobbed.

Ron rather looked like he thought that Aragog would've been happier with them for food, but he kept his mouth shut about that.

"Er, Hagrid?" Hermione said, trying to speak as delicately as possible. "Where exactly are we burying him? In the forest?"

"Blimey, no," Hagrid said, shaking his massive head, looking for a moment more like himself for a fleeting moment. "The other spiders won' let me anywhere near their webs now Aragog's gone. Turns out it was only on his orders they didn' eat me! Can yeh believe that?"

Ron was overcome with a coughing fit that clearly said he could very much believe that, but Hagrid hardly seemed to notice.

"Never bin an area o' the forest I couldn' go before!" Hagrid said, talking over Ron's coughs. "It wasn' easy, gettin' Aragog's body out o' there, I can tell yeh —they usually eat their dead, see...But I wanted ter give 'im a nice burial...a proper send-off..."

Tears leaked out of the corner of his eyes before they formed into full-on sobbing.

Hope, Ron, and Hermione shared an awkward glance, not really knowing what else to do other than pat his arms in a soothing manner.

"So," Ron said awkwardly after a moment, "are we going to be burying it-him close by?" He hastily corrected himself so quickly that Hagrid missed it altogether.

His words, while not intending to upset the half-giant, did cause Hagrid's lower lip to wobble dangerously, but he managed not to reduced to tears again, which was quite an accomplishment, if
you asked Hope.

"Jus' beyond the pumpkin patch, I thought," Hagrid croaked. "I've already dug the —yeh know—
gave. Jus' thought we'd say a few nice things over him —happy memories, yeh know—"

His voice faded and Hope squeezed his much larger hand with both of hers in what she hoped was a
comforting gesture. A moment later she regretted this because he squeezed back so hard Hope's
fingers nearly broke.

They gave him a brief moment to collect himself before he could manage to say, "Shall we — shall
we do it, then?"

"Okay, Hagrid," Hermione said quietly, speaking more gently than before.

This time, Hagrid opened the door clumsily and Ron leaned slightly towards Hermione with a
whisper of, "He's taking it really hard, isn't he?"

"Don't be so insensitive, Ronald," Hermione said, elbowing him in the stomach.

"C'mon," Hope said, curling her fingers inwards. "We shouldn't leave him alone for too long."

But Ron was less than happy as they walked closer and closer to the massive corpse that had once
been Aragog. It dawned on Hope that he probably would have been running in the completely
opposite direction to the Acromantula if Hermione hadn't had a vice-like grip on his hand.

Hagrid took a small moment to gather his wits –or maybe he had been saying a silent prayer for his
old friend's passing, Hope couldn't be sure which– but then he moved forward to sweep
the creature's body into his arms for a brief moment before dropping Aragog as gently as he could
manage into the large hole had dug for his burial.

As soon as Aragog hit the bottom, Hagrid fell to his knees and succumbed to his grief, his shoulders
shaking as his sobs renewed.

Hope, Ron, and Hermione crowded around him as best as they could, giving him as big of a hug as
they could manage with how small they were compared to him.

"Hagrid," Hope said kindly, "do you want to go inside now?"

Hagrid nodded, still crying heavily and it took a great bit of effort, as well as a little bit of magic, to
get him back into the hut and into the armchair that he normally sat in when they visited him.

Ron grabbed the teapot on the table that was still steaming from Hagrid recently removing it from the
stove and Hermione slid a large mug forward, allowing Ron to pour the hot tea into it and slide back
in front of Hagrid. Fang whined softly, coming out Hagrid's bedroom, it seemed (Hope had never
been in there and was always shrouded in darkness, so she really couldn't be sure), to mill about by
his master's feet.

"Should we really leave him here on his own?" Hermione asked Hope as they took a few steps back.

"We can't do much," Hope retorted quietly, "there's not exactly a grieving handbook, you know."

A flash of green enveloping Cedric as he fell, his eyes wide and unseeing—

Red colliding with Sirius' chest as he was thrown back through the Veil, grey eyes meeting green one
last time—
Hope's lips thinned into a line.

"It must be past midnight by now," Ron said, glancing out the window. How long had they been out? It hadn't seemed that long to Ron, but he easily lost track of time on several occasions, so this came as no surprise to him.

"Shite," Hope uttered, earning only a slightly reproachful look from Hermione, but she should have been used to this after more than five years of friendship. "We should probably head back in, the professors are probably going to start doing their rounds."

"You would know all about that," Ron replied dryly, rolling his eyes.

"Hagrid?" Hermione placed a hand on his shaking shoulder. "Are you going to be okay if we go back to the castle?"

"I'll –be– fine," Hagrid hiccupped, smiling weakly at all of them. "Thank all of yeh for comin'."

"It's nothing—"

"Don't worry about it—"

"Take care of yourself, Hagrid—"

He waved them off and Hope flung the invisibility cloak over their shoulders, allowing them to disappear under the cover of darkness.

"Don't forget to talk with Dumbledore," Hermione reminded her as they moved up the main staircase.

"I'll keep that in mind," Hope said dryly and they all fell abruptly silent as Professor Flitwick rounded the corner, his wand tip lit as he scanned the corridor for any students out of bed (aka Hope, Hermione, and Ron hidden and leaning against the wall so as not to be seen or touched).

It seemed like an eternity had passed before the small Charms professor had moved on and the trio could breathe easily again.

"I'll never understand why you sneak out so much," Ron hissed under his breath.

"Stargazing, my dear friend," Hope smirked. "It's an acquired taste. I ran into your brothers a few times."

"That comes as no surprise to me," Ron said, rolling his eyes and almost tripping on a step, making his girlfriend snort.

"It shouldn't," Hope said with a smirk as if Ron hadn't almost ripped the cloak right off with his fumble. "You don't even want to know how many times George and I snuck out to snog…"

Ron gagged and Hermione stifled her giggles, knowing full well that Hope was only saying that to get that kind of reaction from Ron.

"Do you have to tell me that?"

"One day," Hope sang, "you will enjoy snogging in the dark, as I do."

Both Hermione and Ron's face enflamed at her words, but Hope didn't really notice, smiling at her own memories, recalling George's lips on hers, his warm arms circled around her waist, his voice in
her ear, and the way he said her name.

Gods, she missed that man more than anything.

"Shh!" Hermione said suddenly as Peeves made a racket not far ahead by sending a suit of armor with the Ravenclaw crest down the opposite staircase. Hope, Hermione, and Ron winced at the sound before Hope tugged them through tapestry that covered a passageway that came out close to the portrait hole, and thus into safety, allowing Hope to, at long, last whip off the cloak as they came to stop in front of the Fat Lady.

She was not impressed. "So, it's you three again, is it?"

The three Gryffindors laughed nervously. They had gained a bit of a reputation over the years.

"What sort of time do you call this?" she demanded of them, as though she was a mother chastising her unruly children who had been caught sneaking back into the house after hours (which was a surprisingly apt description, if you asked Hope).

"Sorry," Hope said sheepishly, "but there was this thing with Hagrid and—"

"Well, the password changed at midnight," she sniffed, "so you'll just have to sleep in the corridor, won't you?"

"What?" Ron said, gaping at the painting. "You have to be joking!"

"Why did it change at midnight?" Hermione demanded, worry lining her face.

"That's the way it is," the Fat Lady said stiffly. "If you're angry, go and take it up with the headmaster, he's the one who's tightened security."

"How is he supposed to tighten security," Hope said, restraining her ire as best as she could, "if he's not even here?"

"He is here," Nearly Headless Nick said, gliding through the wall and nearly scaring the life out of the three. "Professor Dumbledore returned to the school an hour ago. I had it from the Bloody Baron, who saw him arrive. He appeared, according to the Baron, to be in good spirits, though a little tired, of course."

Hermione nudged Hope, giving her a significant look and Hope tried hard not to roll her eyes.

"And do you know where Dumbledore is?" Hope asked with a sigh.

"In his office, I believe," Nick said with a nearly transparent smile, "from what the Baron said, that he had business to attend to before turning in."

"I guess that's where I'll be," Hope said with a bit of grumble as the Fat Lady swung open, allowing Hermione and Ron inside as Hope turned off in the opposite direction.

"Good luck!" they called after her and she waved a hand over her shoulder slightly in reply.
A Matter of Soul-Splitting

Dumbledore was sitting in a bit of exhaustion in the great chair behind his desk. He hadn't spent as much time as he usually did at the castle this year, but it was for a good reason, and he was certain he was close, *so close* to reaching a breakthrough.

His old eyes fell to the small carved box on his desk and he couldn't resist sliding it open and withdrawing the only thing that lay within.

Albus Dumbledore held the Resurrection Stone reverently in his hands. Imagine! If he hadn't given James' cloak to his daughter, by this time he would have been holding all three of the Deathly Hallows!

The dimmed in his eyes slightly. But it was such a fool's dream, however, he could not deny that the Resurrection Stone did indeed work, as he had turned it thrice in hand and seen his lovely younger sister Ariana just as she had appeared on the day she died.

He doubted Hope knew just what kind of a stone she had possessed, and it hadn't taken much persuading to convince the house-elf Dobby, who adored Hope greatly, to remove her ring from her bedside table while she slept so that he could exchange the stones, citing that he believed the stone she wore to be cursed with Dark Magic. Dobby was only so happy to comply.

The switch had occurred one week ago and she still had yet to notice, though, the glamour charm helped a good bit.

Dumbledore replaced the stone back into the box, sliding the lid onto it once more, considering going to sleep given how late it was when a sudden knock came at his door.

"Enter," he said and the door swung open to permit Hope inside. This surprised him very much, as they were barely on speaking terms (a thought that had him grimacing). "Good gracious, Hope! To what do I owe this pleasure?"

Appearing very put upon as she expelled a loud sigh upon her entry, Hope lifted up a chain that was swinging in her hand, a chain that held a vial containing a silvery substance.

"I’ve got the memory from Slughorn," Hope told him, trying to lock down her thoughts as best as she could so he wouldn't know just how long she had possessed the memory before she had been forced into handing it over.

Dumbledore seemed to be beyond words for a few moments at the sight of the memory that he had longed to see, and then he beamed brightly at her.

"This is spectacular news! Very well done indeed! I knew you could do it!"

Hope wrinkled her nose slightly at him as Dumbledore stood up hastily to move around his desk and take the vial from her and in a matter of moments Hope found herself back in Slughorn's office, Slughorn's tone and Tom's voice ringing in her ears until she was pulled from the Pensieve and into Dumbledore's office.

Hope did not sit as Dumbledore sat; she never sat in his office. Perhaps that was a nervous tick.

"I have been hoping for this piece of evidence for a very long time," Dumbledore told her after a short stint of silence. "It confirms the theory on which I have been working, it tells me that I am right,
and also how very far there is still to go..."

Hope frowned a little in confusion; so he'd guessed about the Horcruxes before? Hope had to wonder how he had even come up with such a Dark realization about Tom.

"Well, Hope," he continued, drawing Hope's attention forwards, "I am sure you understood the significance of what we just heard. At the same age as you are now, give or take a few months, Tom Riddle was doing all he could to find out how to make himself immortal."

He had been quite obsessed with the idea of immortality, Hope had to admit, every time she had crossed paths with him. "So he has a few Horcruxes? And that's why he hasn't been killed yet?"

"Yes," Dumbledore said, "and I notice that you picked up on the plural as opposed to the singular. You heard Voldemort, what he particularly wanted from Horace was an opinion on what would happen to the wizard who created more than one Horcrux, what would happen to the wizard so determined to evade death that he would be prepared to murder many times, rip his soul repeatedly, so as to store it in many, separately concealed Horcrux. No book would have given him that information. As far as I know — as far, I am sure, as Voldemort knew — no wizard had ever done more than tear his soul in two."

"Probably because it was painful," Hope said with a shrug, trying to tone down just how plainly disgusted she was concerning the matter of Horcruxes.

Dumbledore hummed in agreement. "And then, four years ago, I received what I considered certain proof that Voldemort had split his soul."

Hope looked up to meet his twinkling blue eyes.

"You handed it to me, Hope. The diary, Riddle's diary, the one giving instructions on how to reopen the Chamber of Secrets."

"But how could that've been a Horcrux?" Hope asked. "Shouldn't it have not been able to do all that it did?"

"Oh, no," Dumbledore chuckled slightly, "I think that because it did all that it did that made it indeed a Horcrux."

Hope had to arch an eyebrow at that.

"A mere memory starting to act and think for itself? A mere memory, sapping the life out of the girl into whose hands it had fallen?" Dumbledore asked rhetorically. "No, something much more sinister had lived inside that book...a fragment of soul, I was almost sure of it. The diary had been a Horcrux. But this raised as many questions as it answered. What intrigued and alarmed me most was that that diary had been intended as a weapon as much as a safeguard."

"But wouldn't it be a Horcruxes job to protect the bit of soul it had?" Hope asked, leaning against the wall and crossing her arms.

"It is, and it did," Dumbledore agreed, "the diary protected the fragment of soul that was concealed inside it, and undoubtedly played its part in preventing the death of its owner. But there could be no doubt that Riddle really wanted that diary read, wanted the piece of his soul to inhabit or possess somebody else, so that Slytherin's monster would be unleashed again."

"Only this time it would actually be known that he was the one that was the Heir," Hope guessed. That suited Tom; fifty percent arrogance and fifty percent Killing Curse.
"I don't doubt that you're correct," Dumbledore said, tapping his lip lightly as he thought before fastening his eyes on hers once more, remarkably pleased with how well their meeting was going currently, as with Hope they had always been a bit tense. "But don't you see, Hope, that if he intended the diary to be passed to, or planted on, some future Hogwarts student, he was being remarkably blasé about that precious fragment of his soul concealed within it. The point of a Horcrux is, as Professor Slughorn explained, to keep part of the self hidden and safe, not to fling it into somebody else's path and run the risk that they might destroy it—as indeed happened: That particular fragment of soul is no more; you saw to that.

The careless way in which Voldemort regarded this Horcrux seemed most ominous to me. It suggested that he must have made—or had been planning to make—more Horcruxes, so that the loss of his first would not be so detrimental. I did not wish to believe it, but nothing else seemed to make sense. Then you told me, two years later, that on the night that Voldemort returned to his body, he made a most illuminating and alarming statement to his Death Eaters. 'I who have gone further than anybody along the path that leads to immortality.' That was what you told me he said. 'Further than anybody!'"

Hope's eyebrows creased together in confusion. Had she? That night was a bit fuzzy, to be honest.

"And I thought I knew what that meant," Dumbledore, clearly having not sensed her brief confusion, "though the Death Eaters did not. He was referring to his Horcruxes, Horcruxes in the plural, Hope, which I don't believe any other wizard has ever had. Yet it fitted: Lord Voldemort has seemed to grow less human with the passing years, and the transformation he had undergone seemed to me to be only explainable if his soul was mutilated beyond the realms of what we might call 'usual evil'..."

"Do you know how many he made?" Hope asked, still frowning. "He couldn't have actually made seven, could he?"

"I believe seven is the number of Horcruxes that Voldemort did indeed strive towards," Dumbledore said calmly, nodding quite seriously. "You heard him say: 'Wouldn't it be better, make you stronger, to have your soul in more pieces . . . isn't seven the most powerfully magical number . . .' Isn't seven the most powerfully magical number. Yes, I think the idea of a seven-part soul would greatly appeal to Lord Voldemort, however, he only succeeded in creating six."

"Six?" Hope said, pale and astonished in the light of his office and Fawkes crooned a soft liquid note that was no doubt meant to cheer her up but it didn't have much of an effect.

"Six," he repeated, "The seventh part of his soul, however maimed, resides inside his regenerated body. That was the part of him that lived a spectral existence for so many years during his exile; without that, he has no self at all. That seventh piece of soul will be the last that anybody wishing to kill Voldemort must attack—the piece that lives in his body."

"But that still leaves five Horcruxes," Hope said, raking a hand through her hair which had lightened to a brown.

"Four," he corrected her this time, "I have destroyed one as well."

Hope looked up suddenly, surprised by this new information. "What was it?"

"Marvolo's ring," Dumbledore said, astutely keeping his eyes away from the fake stone the true ring on her finger held. It had been remarkable enough that James and Lily had discovered in months what it had taken him ten years to, and then had the ability to transfer the bit of soul with the curse Voldemort had put on it to a ring that was identical in every way. Perhaps they hadn't known how to destroy Horcruxes, but the world would never know. "And a terrible curse there was upon it too."
Had it not been—forgive me the lack of seemly modesty—for my own prodigious skill, and for Professor Snape's timely action when I returned to Hogwarts, desperately injured, I might not have lived to tell the tale. However, a withered hand does not seem an unreasonable exchange for a seventh of Voldemort's soul. The ring is no longer a Horcrux."

"But it can't have been easy to find," Hope said, settling her hands so that they were hanging loosely by her sides. "Surely there were spells that hid it?"

"There were," Dumbledore said, nodding approvingly. "But, as you now know, for many years I have made it my business to discover as much as I can about Voldemort's past life. I have travelled widely, visiting those places he once knew. I stumbled across the ring hidden in the ruin of the Gaunt's house.

It seems that once Voldemort had succeeded in sealing a piece of his soul in side it, he did not want to wear it anymore. He hid it, protected by many powerful enchantments, in the shack where his ancestors had once lived, never guessing that I might one day take the trouble to visit the ruin, or that I might be keeping an eye open for traces of magical concealment. However, we should not congratulate ourselves too heartily. You destroyed the diary and I the ring, but if we are right in our theory of a seven-part soul, four Horcruxes remain."

The gears turned inside Hope's head and her eyes flared a bright blue as she snapped her fingers. "The-the locket and the cup!"

"Precisely!" Dumbledore beamed. "For, as you have no doubt remembered, Lord Voldemort liked to collect trophies, and he preferred objects with a powerful magical history. His pride, his belief in his own superiority, his determination to carve for himself a startling place in magical history; these things, suggest to me that Voldemort would have chosen his Horcruxes with some care, favouring objects worthy of the honour."

"Like items that belonged to the Founders," Hope surmised. "But the diary was his."

"However," Dumbledore contradicted her, "the diary was proof that he was the Heir of Slytherin. I am sure that Voldemort considered it of stupendous importance. But I am certain that, as you had concluded as well, Lord Voldemort made a Horcrux out of both Hufflepuff's cup and Slytherin's locket. The remaining two Horcruxes, assuming again that he created a total of six, are more of a problem, but I will hazard a guess that, having secured objects from Hufflepuff and Slytherin, he set out to track down objects owned by Gryffindor or Ravenclaw. Four objects from the four founders would, I am sure, have exerted a powerful pull over Voldemort's imagination. I cannot answer for whether he ever managed to find anything of Ravenclaw's. I am confident, however, that the only known relic of Gryffindor remains safe."

A blackened hand gestured slightly towards where the Sword of Godric Gryffindor lay secured in a glass case from when Hope had returned it after her use of it in the Third Task during her fourth year.

"So, if he only got one of Ravenclaw's or Gryffindor's," Hope said slowly, "that means there's still one left."

"You are correct," Dumbledore concurred, steepling his fingers together on his desk. "Luckily, I think I know what the sixth Horcrux is. I wonder what you will say when I confess that I have been curious for a while about the behaviour of the snake, Nagini?"

Hope's eyebrows rose high on her forehead at that. "Nagini? I thought you could only put bits of your soul into an object, not an animal."
"The preferred method is sealing a portion of your soul into an object, and I would daresay that it is far safer to do so than to entrust it to a living creature," Dumbledore admitted.

"Why's that?" Hope asked.

"Because to confide a part of your soul to something that can think and move for itself is obviously a very risky business. However, if my calculations are correct, Voldemort was still at least one Horcrux short of his goal of six when he entered your parents' house with the intention of killing you. He seems to have reserved the process of making Horcruxes for particularly significant deaths. You would certainly have been that. He believed that in killing you, he was destroying the danger the prophecy had outlined. He believed he was making himself invincible.

I am sure that he was intending to make his final Horcrux with your death. As we know, he failed. After an interval of some years, however, he used Nagini to kill an old Muggle man, and it might then have occurred to him to turn her into his last Horcrux. She underlines the Slytherin connection, which enhances Lord Voldemort's mystique; I think he is perhaps as fond of her as he can be of anything; he certainly likes to keep her close, and he seems to have an unusual amount of control over her, even for a Parselmouth."

"Snakes are very drawn to Parselmouths, though," Hope pointed out. She had lost count how many times she had happened on snakes, whether in Petunia's garden or here at Hogwarts.

"But, I take it that she has never shown an inclination towards you?"

Hope thought hard. "No, I don't think so." She expelled a loud sigh. "Is that why you've been gone so much?" she asked him, drawing herself back towards the conversation. "You've been looking for Horcruxes?"

"I have, and I may be close to finding another one. There are hopeful signs." He glanced up at her, but Hope didn't really notice. "When I find it, I would like you to join me."

Hope's flashed green momentarily as she contemplated what he was asking of her.

"Alright," she said, something in her eyes almost calculating and it was an answer that Dumbledore half-expected her not to say.

"What happens when all the Horcruxes are destroyed, though?" she asked instead. "Does that take away his immortality of sorts?"

"It is my belief that it will," Dumbledore said, "as, without his Horcruxes, Voldemort will be a mortal man with a maimed and diminished soul. Never forget, though, that while his soul may be damaged beyond repair, his brain and his magical powers remain intact. It will take uncommon skill and power to kill a wizard like Voldemort even without his Horcruxes."

"You say that like I have uncommon skill and power," Hope said sourly, an annoyed expression on her face. She knew she wasn't exactly ordinary, but surely Dumbledore's powers greatly surpassed hers.

"Yes, you have," Dumbledore disagreed patiently. "You have a power that Voldemort has never had. You can love! Which, given everything that has happened to you, is a great and remarkable thing. You are still too young to understand how unusual you are, Hope."

Hope could think of the only really unusual thing about her to be the fact that a homicidal maniac had tried to kill her when she was a baby and had failed.
"The prophecy—" Hope started but was cut off.

"Hope, you must never forget that what the prophecy says is only significant because Voldemort made it so. I told you this at the end of last year. Voldemort singled you out as the person who would be most dangerous to him —and in doing so, he made you the person who would be most dangerous to him!"

"How d'you figure that?" Hope asked, looking a combination of vexed and befuddled.

"If Voldemort had never heard of the prophecy, would it have been fulfilled?" Dumbledore asked her rhetorically. "Would it have meant anything? Of course not! Do you think every prophecy in the Hall of Prophecy has been fulfilled?"

"But you said that eventually one of us was going to have to kill the other!" Hope burst out in a puddle of confusion at this point.

"Hope, Hope," Dumbledore shook his head, "only because Voldemort made a grave error, and acted on Professor Trelawney's words! If Voldemort had never murdered your father, would he have imparted in you a furious desire for revenge? Of course not! If he had not forced your mother to die for you, would he have given you a magical protection he could not penetrate? Of course not, Hope! Don't you see? Voldemort himself created his worst enemy, just as tyrants everywhere do! Have you any idea how much tyrants fear the people they oppress? All of them realize that, one day, amongst their many victims, there is sure to be one who rises against them and strikes back! Voldemort is no different! Always he was on the lookout for the one who would challenge him. He heard the prophecy and he leapt into action, with the result that he not only handpicked the woman most likely to finish him, he handed her uniquely deadly weapons!"

Dumbledore stood and it was made very clear to Hope just how short she was compared to him.

"By attempting to kill you, Voldemort himself singled out the remarkable person who stands here in front of me, and gave her the tools for the job! It is Voldemort's fault that you were able to see into his thoughts, his ambitions, that you even understand the snakelike language in which he gives orders, had you not both been descendents of Salazar Slytherin's noble line, and yet, Hope, despite your privileged insight into Voldemort's world (which, incidentally, is a gift any Death Eater would kill to have), you have never been seduced by the Dark Arts, never, even for a second, shown the slightest desire to become one of Voldemort's followers!"

Well, that was mostly true, but Blood Magic was still considered Dark by some.

"He killed my mum and dad, and Cedric, and he's the reason Sirius' dead!" Hope exploded angrily. "Of course I didn't want to side with him!"

"You are protected, in short, by your ability to love!" Dumbledore told her firmly, raising his voice slightly to speak over her. "The only protection that can possibly work against the lure of power like Voldemort's! In spite of all the temptation you have endured, all the suffering, you remain pure of heart, just as pure as you were at the age of eleven, when you stared into a mirror that reflected your heart's desire, and it showed you only the way to thwart Lord Voldemort, and not immortality or riches. Hope, have you any idea how few wizards could have seen what you saw in that mirror? Voldemort should have known then what he was dealing with, but he did not! But he knows it now. You have flitted into Lord Voldemort's mind without damage to yourself, but he cannot possess you without enduring mortal agony, as he discovered in the Ministry. I do not think he understands why, Hope, but then, he was in such a hurry to mutilate his own soul, he never paused to understand the incomparable power of a soul that is untarnished and whole."
He was half right; it had also shown her a son, a family that was just beyond her reach now. The only thing that was stopping George from proposing to her, she was sure, was that he knew she wouldn't say yes until Voldemort was at least six feet under.

"But it still going to come down to the pair of us trying to kill each other!" Hope insisted.

"Of course it is!" Dumbledore cried. "But not because of the prophecy! Because you, yourself, will never rest until you've tried! We both know it! Imagine, please, just for a moment, that you had never heard that prophecy! How would you feel about Voldemort now? Think!"

Hope mouthed wordlessly, thinking of the screams that the Dementors brought on, the screams of her parents moments before their deaths, the shock on Cedric's face as he was flung through the air by a jet of green light, and Sirius falling back through the veil. She thought about all the evil Voldemort and his Death Eaters had done, how many members of the Order they had killed and what George had told her had become of his two uncles for whom he and Fred were named.

"I'd want to kill him myself," she said.

"Of course you would!" Dumbledore said. "You see, the prophecy does not mean you have to do anything! But the prophecy caused Lord Voldemort to mark you as his equal...In other words, you are free to choose your way, quite free to turn your back on the prophecy! But Voldemort continues to set store by the prophecy. He will continue to hunt you...which makes it certain, really, that—"

"That one of us will die by the other's hand," Hope sighed.

Hope wasn't quite sure just how she should be responding to the events of the early morning, so she settled for a sombre expression that would have suited her better if she were at the bedside of a very ill friend.

Why was it always her?
There was a large number of DA members clustered around the Gryffindor table when Hope came down during breakfast only a few hours later, looking as though she rather regretted not getting enough sleep last night, but she looked a bit better, sporting her usual long dark red locks with two streaks –one of violet and another of indigo– running through it.

Hope put her elbows uncomfortably against Dean's shoulder blades as she lifted the parchment that they were all pouring over from the table, silencing the words being spoken between them.

She read its contents and arched an eyebrow at them. "Are you all really betting on each other's matches?"

There were a few sheepish grins and smirks and sniggers at her words.

"You realize the matches are in two weeks, don't you?" Hope asked sardonically as she looked over the bets. "And no one's bet against me, how sad!"

"We're not stupid," Anthony told her and laughter erupted around them, earning them a few strange looks from the students around them. They were a bit of an odd group, Hope had to admit as she handed the parchment back to Dean.

"Want to make any wagers?" Dennis asked eagerly.

"Not particularly," Hope said dryly, "I'm not a gambler…but you lot enjoy your fun." And then she left them to stride past to where Hermione and Ron were sitting.

"Barmy," Ron said, typically. "I don't even want to know who they think are going to lose."

"Probably best," Hermione said, "it might just bring you down."

"Are you saying 'you' as in me or 'you' as in in general?"

"In general," Hermione said, nearly scoffing at his words. "So," she added once Hope sat down and stabbed at one of her sausages, "how'd it go with Dumbledore?"

"Better than usual," Hope said after swallowing, "he explained a bit more about the Horcruxes, and he thinks that Tom split his soul six ways."

"Six ways?" Ron gagged and Hermione looked similarly revolted.

"Yup," Hope said, swallowing her pumpkin juice thickly before ticking them off on her fingers, "there's the diary, Marvolo's ring, Hufflepuff's cup, Slytherin's locket, Nagini, and something that either belonged to Ravenclaw or Gryffindor."

"Those seem to be mostly made of ancient artefacts," Hermione contemplated with a frown, "related to Hogwarts or his ancestry." She wasn't wrong; the diary was one he had kept while at school, and Hufflepuff, Slytherin, and Gryffindor or Ravenclaw's items were directly related through their owners. The ring and the snake, however, had more to do with his heritage.

"So it seems," Hope muttered. "And only two've been destroyed; the ring and the diary… He wants me to come with him when he finds the next one."

Ron, who had been reaching for the plate of bacon that lay not too far away, snapped his head back
"Really?" he gaped. "You really get to go with him to destroy it?"

"Well, that's what he says," Hope said with a shrug, before goggling as she glanced towards the front of the hall where a lot of the DA members had congregated towards. "Ohmigods! Is that Katie?"

Indeed, it was Katie Bell, her brown hair swept up into a loose bun and her eyes glinting as she smiled and hugged her friends and fellow DA members.

"Katie! You're back! Are you okay?" Hermione asked in almost a feverish manner as the seventh year branched off to where they were sitting at the quieter part of the Gryffindor table.

"I'm really well!" Katie said, beaming brightly at the three of them who were all quick to offer their relief at her recovery. "They let me out of St. Mungo's on Monday, I had a couple of days at home with Mum and Dad and then came back here this morning. Leanne was just telling me about how Quidditch has been going, Hope…"

"You're back just in time for the last match," Hope said, grinning at her widely, "and the DA's doing a duelling tournament in two weeks."

"Really? That's exciting…I can't believe I've missed out on so much," Katie admitted.

"I'm sure you'll catch up," Ron told her easily.

"Anyways," Hope said, lowering her voice, "Katie, can you remember anything about that day? About who gave you the necklace?"

"No," Katie said with a bit of regret, "I knew you were going to ask me, but I haven't got a clue. The last thing I remember was walking into the ladies' in the Three Broomsticks."

"You definitely went into the bathroom, then?" Hermione asked, frowning intently.

"Well, I know I pushed open the door," Katie acquiesced, her eyes clouding over as she thought hard, "so I suppose whoever Imperiused me was standing just behind it. After that, my memory's a blank until about two weeks ago in St. Mungo's. Listen, I'd better go, I wouldn't put it past McGonagall to give me lines even if it is my first day back..."

"Don't overwork yourself," Hope told her. "Oh, did Oliver go to see you?" She wasn't sure if the pair were still dating; the last she had heard they had broken up.

Her cheeks filled with heat. "Only every day," she admitted, "we've been back together since about August."

Hope couldn't help but laugh at that. If there was only one thing that had ever distracted Oliver Wood from Quidditch, it was Katie.

"See you!" Katie called as she turned back towards where her friends were waiting to head towards Transfiguration.

"So it must have been a girl or a woman who gave Katie the necklace," Hermione contemplated after she had gone, "to be in the ladies' bathroom."

"Or, at least, someone who could appear like a girl or a woman," Ron mused.

"That doesn't really narrow it down very much," Hope said dryly, and both had to agree with her
It was agreed to be a much longer 'lesson' than the DA meetings usually were, and thus it started a
good bit earlier than usual. Katie was back among them, though she did not join them, having far too
much school work to catch up on, though she did wish them all the best of luck. It also dawned upon
Hope that duelling tournaments needed a bit of preparation, so Hope wasn't planning on having
another one before the end of term (which was now in about a month as they were into early May).

Hope had turned her hair lavender for the occasion with a few small braids spun throughout her thick
mane the colour of violet. Why purple, no one really asked, but if they had, Hope would have said,
rather simply, that purple was not a House colour.

"I guess you're all a bit eager for this," Hope admitted as she took in their bright eyes and eager grins.
"So, we'll just get right to it."

Loud exclamations of agreement followed her words.

"OI! Shut it! So…first match will be Hermione versus Padma, try not to damage anyone too much,
or I'll have to explain it to Poppy…combatants forward!"

Both bookish girls moved forward with wide grins on either face.

"Whoo! Go Padma!"

"Kick her arse, Mione!"

Hermione and Padma came to stand before Hope.

"Like I said," Hope said, crossing her arms, her lips curling upwards slightly. "No spells to seriously
damage one another –Fax is permitted, but only for a short amount of time, though I don't think
either of you are a fan of that spell."

Two heads shook.

"Alright, there's only one round, all-or-nothing, one of you will advance to the next round, now,
Hermione, Padma, you might want to take a few steps back…"

The Ravenclaw and Gryffindor did as she had said and Hope disappeared back towards where the
crowd was sitting on the ground (it wasn't like they could sit on the side with the water being there,
and it was better to sit than to stand to avoid spellfire).

Two wands raised in preparation when Hope suddenly called out, "Begin!"

Luna was the swiftest of the DA, but Padma and Hermione were close seconds. Barely moments
after Hope had started the match had both fired _Stupefy_ at each other before bringing up a
swift _Protego_ for protection, or at least, Hermione had, and Padma had ducked under her
ricoeheting _Stupefy_ only to be nailed with a second one in the chest.

Applause and cheers erupted at the end –no matter how brief it had been– and Hermione
quickly _Rennervate'd_ her opponent with a swift apology.

"Don't worry about it," Padma assured her as she was pulled to her feet. "It was a good spell, and I
know what to work on."

Hermione smiled sheepishly at that, joining Ron, her face red at how loud his cheers had been, while
Padma went towards where Terry was standing.

"Anthony and Ron! Forward!"

Hope gave them the same talk that she had given Hermione and Padma, and then the second match began.

Ron stepped easily out of the way of Anthony's *Stupefy*, an ice whip forming from the tip of his wand as he flicked it out to wrap securely around Anthony's ankle, yanking his feet out from under him and sending his wand flying.

Hope would have been concerned by how quick these matches were ending if she hadn't known how good Ron and Hermione were beforehand (because Hope really couldn't be certain of how many times the three of them had tested out their spells on each other.

"Tracey and Seamus, you're up!"

Seamus and Tracey were pretty evenly matched, in Hope's opinion, which hadn't really been her intention when she originally matched them up, but it was how it ended up, so Hope couldn't really complain as she and those near her had to duck a bit in order to avoid being hit by what appeared to be a temporary blinding spell (Hope hadn't taught that one, so Tracey had to have learned it elsewhere), the match seemed to drag on a bit more than Hope had anticipated, and at long last, it was exhaustion that ended it, in Tracey's favour.

"Might want to work on that stamina of yours," Hope said, meaning nothing by it, but Seamus flushed red and Dean roared with laughter. That wasn't what she was going for in the slightest, and she could see from the look on Ginny's face that she was as unamused as Hope.

"Dean and Hannah!...Start!"

Dean dived out of the way of a well-placed *Incendio* that might have done Dean some serious damage, if that had been Hannah's intention, but the fire had been little more than a scare tactic and Dean hastily threw up a shield as she battered *Stupefys* against it until it broke and he fell back to the ground, dazed.

"Ernie versus Neville!...Begin!"

This was one match-up that Hope could clearly see a winner; not to slight Ernie, but it was safe to say that Neville had more drive than most of the DA, and he was on the upper end of the spectrum of more advanced of the DA, while Ernie was more in the middle. But that didn't mean that the Hufflepuff wasn't going to put up a fight, as he did, firing off spells and ducking under Neville's before a well placed *Expelliarmus* cost him his wand and the match.

"Lavender and Susan to the centre!"

"How're those bets going?" Hope asked, quirking an eyebrow towards Dean, who had taken his defeat by Hannah well and was now keeping a steady eye on who was winning and who was losing.

"Would it surprise you to learn that Ron's won thirty galleons already?" Dean muttered a bit mutinously. "I don't know how he does it…"

"He's got the brain of a strategist," Hope said with a smirk, "I wouldn't have bet against him, if I were you…might have saved you a few galleons."

"If only you'd told him that before," Daphne said, grinning widely at the (currently) lavender-haired...
witch before kissing her boyfriend's cheek. "Don't worry, babe, I'll win you some money."

"My hero," Dean drawled sarcastically as he captured her chin in his hand, pulling her into a kiss and Hope turned her attention back towards the match just as Susan effectively knocked out Lavender.

Lavender looked rather put out.

"Don't worry about it," Parvati told her, "you just know what to work on for next time."

"I suppose," Lavender said with a sigh as Hope called out the next match.

"Terry and Parvati, you're up!"

Parvati jumped slightly before leaping to her feet, vibrating in excitement as she joined Terry. The Gryffindors had been doing pretty well considering, but it did help that they were greater in number compared to the other Houses (with Slytherin at a measly three). Parvati was determined to keep Gryffindor ahead, and thus made a key mistake.

She underestimated her opponent. And Terry's defeat of her was swift with a simple ice spell to the ground that made Parvati slip, crying out as she fell over the edge and into the water.

Her twin didn't try very hard to hide her giggles when Parvati climbed out soaked to the bone and Terry was cheered on as the first Ravenclaw to go on to round two.

"Luna and Astoria!" Hope called out. "Show us what you've got!"

Putting of the arguably most graceful of the DA against each other proved to be a bit…fascinating, to say the least, considering that Astoria had picked up a few of Luna's mannerisms over the year, but she couldn't quite replicate Luna's light movements (for all Hope knew, Luna could have been part fae or aurae), but she matched her as best as she could until a well-timed *Stupefy* to her shoulder sent her spinning off course.

"Nicely done," Hope told Luna, who couldn't help but beam brightly before turning towards Astoria, "you did rather well, Astoria, better than I had expected, I'm sure you'll win next time." The fourth year Slytherin seemed reasonably pleased by Hope's words, wandering off towards where her sister was sitting beside Dean.

"Look like it's Daphne and Ginny, come on! We haven't got all day!"

This was one match that Hope could honestly say she didn't know what the outcome would be, as Daphne and Ginny were easily two of the most powerful witches in the DA.

They took up their opposing positions and raised their wands, awaiting Hope's cry of "Begin!" and then they were moving fast, dodging and flinging spells that forced everyone sitting to duck.

"*Flipendo!*"

Daphne was sent flying back, scrambling out of the way of a *Stupefy* to send a number of birds from the tip of her wand towards Ginny's face, but she exploded them easily.

"*Petrificus Totalus!*" Daphne managed and Ginny found herself rather suddenly immobile.

It took only a short while to have Ginny back to her normal state (she took her loss in good graces, plopping herself gracelessly in her boyfriend's lap).

"Michael and Dennis!"
Those two had been poorly matched, but Hope had so often been outmatched in her life that she felt that some of them must experience the same; it wasn't as though they would always be fighting someone who was their match. Hope could honestly say she had never duelled anyone who was her match. Dennis' defeat was rather swift in Hope's opinion, and then it was on to the final round of the preliminaries.

"Colin and Justin, front and centre!...Start!"

Justin, who was rather well-known for his shield charms was quick to throw up a *Protego* to block his disarming spell before ducking under a second one after dropping his shield quickly to nail Colin with an *Incarcerous* that trussed him up nicely and thus ended the preliminary round, forcing Hope to take to the platform before them once more.

"Alright, you all did that a bit well, and I'm glad we've got a bit of diversity House-wise," Hope began, consulting her list, "since you lot are an odd number, Hannah will be getting a free pass—"

Hannah gave an enthusiastic cheer at that. "The second round will be: Hermione versus Daphne, Luna versus Susan, Neville versus Justin, Ron versus Tracey, and Michael versus Terry…Hermione and Daphne, why don't you two go ahead and step forward?"

It was weird to be on the sideline, if you asked Hope as both Gryffindor and Slytherin took to the stage, raising their wands for the attack.

The problem, Hope soon discovered, was that both were just so very good with their wands. They weren't really evenly matched, being superior to each other in certain aspects, but was certain she wouldn't want to be on the opposite end of either wand.

Daphne's stunner just grazed Hermione's cheek as she moved to the side.

"*Levicorpus*!"

Hermione's spell missed Daphne and connected with Padma who found herself hoisted up into the air by the ankle only to be dropped shortly to the ground by the countercurse.

"*Fax*!"

Daphne was no stranger to using spells considered the grey area, and though the spell had been allowed, Hermione couldn't help but be a little annoyed by its usage on her (if it had indeed connected).

"*Stupefy*!"

And thus the match went to Hermione.

Hope would have liked to say that the next match, the one between Luna and Susan, was as enthralling, but Luna made short work of her opponent, using her speed against her.

"Neville and Justin, front and centre!" Hope called out and soon the two boys found their match quickly underway.

Neville was prone to moving around, something Hope had noticed rather early on, while Justin was more likely to stay where he was, and that was ultimately Justin's downfall by way of a simple *Expelliarmus* colliding with his chest.

"Ron versus Tracey…begin!"
Ron ducked to the side with a yell of "Oi! Watch where you're throwing that!" and was nearly hit with a stunner which was blocked by an effortless shield.

Ron, while having a great fear of spiders, did not feel the same about snakes (he couldn't really afford to with Hope as his best mate), and he kicked it back at her, the snake breaking up into dust before he stunned her.

"The last match of the second round: Terry and Michael!"

"This might be awhile," Padma told her as spellfire began again, "they're both too stubborn for anything less."

Hope had to grudgingly agree as she watched the battle with a bit of boredom—it really couldn't be helped when you weren't doing anything. She was sure that the match was actually one of the longest, only ending when Michael tripped and Terry caught him off guard.

And then Hope had to stand up again.

"We're almost done," she told them with a sheepish grin, "the third round will be: Neville versus Hannah, Luna versus Hermione, and Ron versus Terry."

She would have been lying if she said that the first match was anything but simple. Hannah was good, there was no denying that, but when you compared her to Neville, there was no competition, and within a minute Hannah found herself thrown back into the water that lay on the left side of the platform, and she crawled out spluttering.

"Luna versus Hermione!"

"Rictusempra!" Luna sang and Hope had to wonder if that was entirely the best spell to use on Hermione.

"Locomotor Mortis!" Hermione called out, but Luna leapt neatly over that (Hope couldn't help but be slightly jealous of how light she moved on her feet).

"Immobulus!"

Hermione dived to the side. "Stupefy!"

The stunning spell connected with Luna's side and she was out like a light.

"Ron and Terry!...Begin!"

Ron took charge with a well-aimed Diffindo to Terry's leg, that even if it had connected wouldn't have done him much harm, but Terry blocked, firing off an Impedimenta that just barely missed Ron.

Both seemed to be quite adept at dodging and blocking spells, Hope saw, before an Incarcerous made it difficult for Terry to move.

This led Hope to announce round four.

"Alright, since there are only three of you left, this is how it's going to go," Hope told them, "Ron and Neville will be the first round and the winner will fight Hermione...whoever wins that will go..."
on to fight me."

The three remaining duellers shared looks of apprehension. Fighting Hope had been in the backs of their minds, not realizing that they would reach it to the last round, but it was also an exciting prospect (though they very much doubted any of them would actually win against her; that would be a foolish idea).

"Ron and Neville, why don't you two come on forward and start us off?"

Both boys leapt to their feet, moving forward with eager grins until Hope called out "Begin!"

And then all pleasantries were thrown aside as jets of red and blue filled the air, some spells colliding with each other in a flash of sparks, others hitting the wall and the floor (everyone else was ducking again from the barrage of spells).

"Confringo!" Ron shouted, aiming at the platform, causing a small explosion that sent Neville flying back, relatively unharmed but quite dazed, and thus ending the match.

"And now we've got Hermione and Ron…I do wonder how that's going to end…"

There were a few chuckles and laughs at that.

"Come on, Ron!"

"Show him who's boss, Hermione!"

Hermione blushed prettily as she took Neville's place (the ground of the platform having been quickly repaired) and raised her wand.

"Begin!"

Ron was a bit of a reluctant opponent when his girlfriend was the one he was fighting. Hermione did not have the same reservations and made surprisingly quick work of him, much to the amusement of the DA.

And then it was the moment everyone had been waiting for.

Hope versus Hermione.

"Ready, Granger?" Hope asked with a wide grin as she joined her friend on the platform, glad to be able to do something at long last.

"Always, Potter," Hermione replied.

"Start!"

"Stupefy!"

Hope twirled out of the way of the first stunner, crouching to fire off a disarming spell that just missed Hermione who reflected it, making Hope sink completely to the floor to avoid it.

"Flipendo!"

Hermione went flying back as Hope scrambled to her feet, but somehow Hermione managed to stay on her own.
"Furnunculus!"

The boil-inducing spell grazed Hope's cheek as she moved to avoid it, leaving behind a light trail of throbbing boils.

"Nice!" Hope grinned widely that it was nearly feral, "but the match is going to me…Attack!"

She slammed a palm into the ground causing the platform tremble and Hermione twisted around violently searching for the source when the stone shot upwards to capture her in a cage.

Hope gave an exaggerated bow at Hermione's slightly irritated expression.

Hope was the last out of the Chamber of Secrets that day, rolling her shoulders before stretching her arms up to the sky with a wide yawn, and that was when she heard it; it was something that sounded an awful lot like crying.

Hope turned in the direction of the sound, which, strangely enough, had come from Moaning Myrtle's bathroom. Confusion marred her face as she slowly and silently pushed the door open. Her eyes widened at what she saw.

Draco Malfoy was the one she had heard, his body trembling like a leaf in front of a sink, his pale face snow-white.

"Don't," Moaning Myrtle said far gently than Hope would have imagined her speaking to anyone, "Don't...tell me what's wrong...I can help you..."

"No one can help me," Malfoy nearly whispered, "I can't do it…I can't…It won't work…and unless I do it soon…he says he'll kill me…"

Hope tried not to make a lot of noise as she made a quick getaway, but she doubted she succeeded as she raced away, unaware but suspecting the grey eyes that followed her down the corridor.
The Reason For Betrayal

Hope would have been lying if she said she hadn't pulled a few all-nighters to study for her only NEWT exam in Ancient Runes, because she would be damned if she didn't get an O on it. And she would be getting that O, mark her words, even if it took her running on pure adrenaline and pumpkin juice, she was going to do it. The weeks up to her only NEWT exam she ate, drank, and breathed Ancient Runes.

Ron and Hermione thought she was going to drive herself mad—as usual—but Hope managed it just fine.

Well, Hope's just fine was actually pretty sleep-deprived, but she'd managed to pass all her OWLs in a similar state, so Hope wasn't too concerned, far too happy to have her nose stuck in a book on Ancient Runes as she waited for the examiner to call her name, surrounded by classmates that couldn't be considered hers, including Cho Chang, who she hadn't had words with since her friend had sold out the DA the previous year and had then elected to not come to the meetings this year.

No tears were shed by Hope in that regard.

Hope feverishly mouthed definitions of runes and ways that runes were used more out of habit than not knowing, having made full use of her time out of class.

The first part of the exam was written and then the practical would follow once she was finished, like her OWLs had been, and she wasn't sure which she was more worried about, especially when one considered that her palms and insides of her wrists showed her practical application of runes (having the blood runes of 'attack', 'protect', 'heal', and 'conceal' carved into her flesh), but time would only tell.

It was a good thing the Quidditch season was over, as it had been hard enough to schedule practices with the DA in mind and her own (rather crazy, in Hermione and Ron's opinions) study schedule. The last match had been Gryffindor versus Ravenclaw and Gryffindor had won by a landslide, and Hope suspected that Professor McGonagall was beginning to like having the Quidditch Cup in her office.

So now Hope could focus on her Ancient Runes exam, but she had a very good feeling about it, even if there were butterflies flapping their wings constantly in her stomach, a feeling that only intensified when the door opened and they were gestured inside by one of the examiners, an old and wrinkled wizard with balding white hair and large spectacles perched on his nose.

She took a seat in the last row, flipping over the parchment and getting to work as the examiner said, "Begin."

List the various mediums through which runes are most powerful and why.

Hope grinned and dipped her quill into the inkwell.

Runes can be carved into either stone or gem, sometimes adding blood to the mix to increase its strength. By using these two substances, there is a guarantee of magic being tightly bound to runes, as there is a natural magick in all living things. This means, of course, that runes can be carved into trees as well, but their strength is nothing compared to stone or gem, since trees are living and stone is not.

On to the next one…
Which rune is best used for protection and what kind of protection does it offer?

The rune Algiz is the best rune to be used for protection. The kind of protection it offers varies according to the user. It can be a literal shield to defend and ward off evil, or it can be a mental protection to ward off negative energies.

And the day continued on until at last Hope was finished, allowing her to go on to the practical bit (the part she had been looking forward to a bit more than writing about the runes) and within minutes she was standing in front of Professor Tofty who had tested her the previous year for her OWLs.

Her exam went relatively simple after that and Hope left the room with a skip in her step, her bag swinging haphazardly with every movement as she hummed softly, only to find herself suddenly gripped by a hand and wrenched into the shadows, and she couldn't have said she was entirely surprised given how he'd last seen her; running in the opposite direction from Moaning Myrtle's bathroom.

Malfoy's grip on her wrist was painfully tight, but Hope forced her body not to shift to show discomfort. That would be showing weakness and what kind of Slytherin would she be if she showed how much his grip was bothering her?

"Who did you tell?" he demanded, his pale face flushed in the torchlight.

"No one, yet," Hope hissed, glaring at him, her eyes frigid ambers glowing in the relative darkness, "but if you don't let me go soon, I might just let something spill…"

She was practically daring him, but he didn't release her, his grey eyes frosty as he scowled at her. "You think you can threaten me?"

This was quite the wrong question to ask Hope Potter in retrospect.

"Oh," Hope said in a mocking voice, "it's not like I've threatened you before because you cursed Katie and poisoned Daphne, Astoria, and Ron, or anything."

His grip on her arm loosened and Hope wrenched her arm out of his grip before venting her feelings and kneeing him in the groin for good measure.

Malfoy bent over, groaning in pain.

"Never," Hope said darkly, "touch me again, or a kick to the balls will be the least of your problems, Malfoy."

And then she pulled herself back into the illuminated corridor, straightening her robes before striding off in the direction of the Gryffindor common room, where she was certain her friends were waiting for her to return.

Hope was slightly annoyed when she left the common room a few days after her only NEWT exam to answer a summons from Dumbledore. This time it wasn't so much Dumbledore that was annoying her, but Hermione, who was still insisting after all these months that she discover who the Half-blood Prince was.

Hope couldn't really understand the fascination, but she had to admit that the handwriting did look a little familiar (but she would never admit that to Hermione).

She dodged around Peeves, scowling when a bit of chalk launched from the ghost tangled in her hair
and she had to pause to remove it when a sudden scream interrupted her.

"How –dare– you– aaaaargh!"

Hope turned in the direction of the noise, moving quickly until she came across Professor Trelawney's fallen form not far from a case of sherry bottles.

"Professor?" Hope said, frowning slightly as she leaned down to help the Divination teacher to her feet. "Are you alright? What happened?"

Trelawney took in a deep shuddering breath that only made her hiccups more pronounced before she spoke at a pitch that made Hope wince. "You may well ask!" she cried. "I was strolling along, brooding upon certain Dark portents I happen to have glimpsed—"

"You were trying to get into the Room of Requirement, weren't you?" Hope asked shrewdly, recognizing the blank slate of wall just behind them.

"I—" Trelawney twisted her hands uncomfortably for a moment, "I didn't realize students knew about it…"

"Most don't," Hope told her, "but what happened? Could you not get in…?" Hope's eyes drifted downwards to the sherry bottles, which she gathered were what Trelawney had been trying to hide in the room.

"Oh, I got in alright," the professor said angrily, scowling at the wall where the door to the Room of Requirement was hidden. "But there was somebody already in there."

"Someone was in there?" Hope asked, her eyes flashing violet as they met hers. "Who was it? Could you see?"

"I have no idea," Trelawney said sullenly. "I walked into the Room and I heard a voice, which has never happened before in all my years of hiding –of using the Room, I mean." She coughed delicately to hide her slip-up, but it didn't help much.

Hope ignored this. "What did the voice say?" she asked directly, thinking of Malfoy who had been using the Room for months now, for what she couldn't yet be certain of.

"I don't know that it was saying anything," Trelawney had to admit. "It was…whooping."

"Could you tell if it was male or female?" Hope asked.

"I would hazard a guess that it was male," Trelawney said, straightening the many scarves that adorned her body.

"And it was happy…like it had finally accomplished something?" Hope asked curiously.

"I would rather think so," Trelawney said. "And then I called out 'who's there?'"

This, Hope thought, was a very poor decision.

"Everything went pitch black," Trelawney continued in an ominous voice, "and the next thing I knew, I was being hurled headfirst out of the Room!"
She was still shaking from the encounter, Hope noticed, and Hope wasn't quite sure what to do (she dealt with runes, not people, *dammit*!). "Er...I can stay here with you," Hope offered awkwardly, "until you're ready to go."

Trelawney sniffed, but thanked her, swallowing noisily. "I miss having you in my classes, Hope," she told her former student in an effort to distract herself. "You were never much of a Seer...but you were a wonderful Object..."

Hope tried very hard not to roll her eyes, but it was a very near thing; being a 'wonderful Object' as Trelawney had put it was the reason Hope had left Divination in the first place.

"I am afraid," she continued, "that the nag –I'm sorry, the centaur– knows nothing of cartomancy. I asked him –one Seer to another– had he not, too, sensed the distant vibrations of coming catastrophe? But he seemed to find me almost comical. Yes, *comical*!"

Hope couldn't really imagine how he couldn't have considered her comical, but she opted not to voice that view in front of Trelawney.

"Perhaps the horse has heard people say that I have not inherited my great-great-grandmother's gift," Trelawney grumbled, more to herself than to Hope who was considering when she could make a getaway. "Those rumours have been bandied about by the jealous for years. You know what I say to such people, Hope? Would Dumbledore have let me teach at this great school, put so much trust in me all these years, had I not proved myself to him?"

Hope blinked rapidly. "I, er, suppose not," Hope said and Trelawney closed her eyes and nodded seriously.

"I well remember my first interview with Dumbledore," Trelawney said, the shaking of her hands being much less obvious than before. "He was deeply impressed, of course, deeply impressed...I was staying at the Hog’s Head, which I do not advise, incidentally –bed bugs, dear girl– but funds were low. Dumbledore did me the courtesy of calling upon me in my room at the inn. He questioned me...I must confess that, at first, I thought he seemed ill-disposed towards Divination...and I remember I was starting to feel a little odd, I had not eaten much that day...but then we were rudely interrupted by Severus Snape!"

Hope froze suddenly, recalling quite well that Trelawney had been the one to give the prophecy concerning her and Voldemort. "*What?*"

"Yes," Trelawney agreed, relishing in how aghast Hope sounded, "there was a commotion outside the door and it flew open, and there was that rather uncouth barman standing with Snape, who was waffling about having come the wrong way up the stairs, although I'm afraid that I myself rather thought he had been apprehended eavesdropping on my interview with Dumbledore –you see, he himself was seeking a job at the time, and no doubt hoped to pick up tips!" Hope found that to be far from what Snape had planned. "Well, after that, you know, Dumbledore seemed much more disposed to give me a job, and I could not help thinking, Hope, that it was because he appreciated the stark contrast between my own unassuming manners and quiet talent, compared to the pushing, thrusting young man who was prepared to listen at keyholes –Hope, dear?"

Hope had gone completely white, the colour leeching into her hair and eyes. Snape had been listening when Trelawney had given the prophecy concerning her and Voldemort, and then he had taken what he had discovered straight to the Dark Lord and told him who it was he should target. The Potters with their only daughter, born as the seventh month died.

"I've got to go," she said stiffly, turning on her heel and running in the direction of Dumbledore's
study, leaping up the hidden staircase to throw open the door to his office, with a cry of "How could you?"

Naturally, Dumbledore wasn't quite sure of what she was referring to, believing she might have discovered about the Resurrection Stone. "I beg your—"

"He was listening right outside the door!" Hope exploded angrily, her hair returning to its vibrant colour in her anger and her eyes burning just as red as Voldemort's were. "Snape! When Trelawney gave that prophecy! She told me!"

Whatever Dumbledore had been expecting, it was not this, and for a moment, a loud silence descended upon them, and then he asked, "When did you find out about this?"

"When I saw her in the corridor," Hope snarled, her eyes practically sparking. "How could you let him stay here after he told Voldemort where to find us?!"

She did not scream as she had the previous year, or rip apart his office, but the rage was obvious and the disgust and it was clear that it was only incredible restraint that kept Hope from blowing a fuse.

"Hope," he said, as gently as he could manage without setting her off again, "please listen to me. Professor Snape made a terrible mistake—"

Hope scoffed loudly at his choice of words. A mistake that had cost two people their lives!

"He was still in Lord Voldemort's employ on the night he heard the first half of Professor Trelawney's prophecy," Dumbledore said as though he had not heard her. "Naturally, he hastened to tell his master what he had heard, for it concerned his master most deeply. But he did not know—he had no possible way of knowing—who Voldemort would hunt from then onwards, or that the parents he would destroy in his murderous quest were people that Professor Snape knew, that they were your mother and father—"

"Oh, please," Hope sneered, "he would have been happy if my dad was dead, just like when Sirius died!"

"You have no idea of the remorse Professor Snape felt," Dumbledore told her, his tone imploring her, "when he realized how Lord Voldemort had interpreted the prophecy, Hope. I believe it to be the greatest regret of his life and the reason that he returned—"

Hope shook her head and stared at him uncomprehendingly. After all this time, the reason he trusted Snape so much was because he claimed to be sorry for causing the deaths of Hope's parents? Was he fucking serious? Two people were dead because of him, and the only proof he had was Snape's word! And Hope knew all-too-well that giving someone's word did not mean that they would keep it.

How different things would have been if Snape hadn't gone running to Voldemort before turning into a coward. Hope wondered if he even felt anything when his former friend, her mother, had been killed. Or perhaps he had long-since forgotten about their friendship when he allowed her to be killed.

"I trust Severus Snape completely," Dumbledore said, slicing through her silence like a hot knife and Hope couldn't even bring herself to utter anything derogatory to that, because of the look on his face that showed just how much he believed his words to be true. "That is all I will say…now, do you wish to come with me tonight?" And it was then that Hope noticed his travelling cloak.

Hope blinked in surprise. "You've found one?" she asked. "A Horcrux?"
"I believe it is," Dumbledore said, inclining his head slightly, "I believe it to be hidden in a cave on the coast many miles from here, a cave I have been trying to locate for a very long time: the cave Tom Riddle once terrorized two children from his orphanage on their annual trip; you remember?"

Hope did indeed remember, even though it had been one of the first she saw (maybe even the first).

"Yes," she said.

"So, do you? Wish to join me?" he asked her.

"Yes," she repeated and it didn't sound as reluctant as he had been expecting; he smiled.

"Very well, then: listen," he told her seriously, "I take you with me on one condition: that you obey any command I might give you at once, and without question."

Hope started slightly at that. "I don't understand," she said.

"I mean that you must follow even such orders as "run", "hide" or "go back"," Dumbledore explained. "Do I have your word?"

Hope frowned for a moment before sighing. "Fine, yes, alright."

"If I tell you to hide, you will do so?"

"Yes."

"If I tell you to flee, you will obey?"

"Yes."

"If I tell you to leave me, and save yourself, you will do as I tell you?"

"I—what?" Hope asked, severely startled.

"Hope," he said her name in such a way that all she could do was mumble compliance.

"Very good. Then I wish you to go and fetch your Cloak and meet me in the Entrance Hall in five minutes' time."

Three minutes later Hope had her hair in a short pixie cut, black as night, her favourite leather jacket wrapped tightly around her shoulders as she explained everything to her friends, her invisibility cloak in her arms with the Marauder's Map.

She thrust the Map into Ron's arms, a serious expression on her face. "Dumbledore is going to be out of the castle tonight, so that means the castle is going to be less protected than it usually is. I want you to watch him and watch Snape. Round up the DA if you want, they'll probably be a huge help. Dumbledore says he's put extra protection in the school, but if Snape's involved, then he'll probably know a way around those, but even so, he won't expect all of you on watch, will he?"

"Hope—"

"Look after each other, alright?" Hope asked them, gripping their hands with hers and gazing into their eyes. "Promise me?"

"Promise," Hermione and Ron said as one, looking pale at the prospect of what might be a hostile
takeover (if she could put a word to it, that was about as close as it would get).

"But, Hope," Hermione interjected quickly, her grip vice-like on Hope's hand. "You will be careful, won't you? Who knows how those Horcruxes are protected? Look after yourself for a change, won't you?"

Hope's lips twisted upwards briefly and she tugged off her serpent ring and slipped it onto her friend's finger with a simple movement. "Look after this for me, will you?" she asked her instead, leaning forward to hug her tightly.

Hermione didn't much want to let go of her friend, fearing the worst (what if there were traps around the Horcrux and Hope fell into one? That would be her luck...), but then she abruptly released her and Ron hugged her as well before Hope straightened up and made for the portrait hole.

"Hope? Are you alright?" a sudden voice asked, and Hope paused to look at Neville who was watching her with a bit of concern.

She grinned. "Hold the fort, Neville," and then she disappeared out the portrait hole before he could say anything in response, leaping down steps until she had reached the entrance hall where Dumbledore was waiting for her.

She followed his instructions and vanished from sight in seconds under the cloak as Dumbledore strode off in the direction of Hogsmeade with her as his second shadow, giving off the impression that he was going off to either the Three Broomsticks or the Hog's Head for a drink (though Hog's Head seemed more likely as they passed right by Madam Rosmerta and her pub).

They had nearly reached the pub when Dumbledore had her come to a stop.

"It will not be necessary for us to enter," Dumbledore told her quietly, glancing around carefully, searching for any prying eyes to avoid, but there were none for even Hope to see. "As long as nobody sees us go...now place your hand upon my arm, Hope. There is no need to grip too hard, I am merely guiding you. On the count of three —one...two ...three..."

Hope turned on the spot in time with him, preparing for the uncomfortable feeling that Apparition had always given her. But, as usual, her preparation for the worst did nothing to lighten its effects on her and soon Hope found herself drawn in several different directions and then shoved down a tube without any air to allow her to breathe. She felt like she was drowning, fighting to reach the surface of the sea only to be pulled under by the coming of another wave, but then the danger had passed, and air entered her lungs, but it was not the air she was used to.

Nor was the sound of waves crashing against jutting rocks something she was used to.

Hope, at long last, pried open her eyes to gaze upon where they had ended up. She had fallen to her knees at some point, patches of wet and cold sinking through the denim as the icy ocean air brushed against her skin, causing her to try to wrap her jacket closer around her, struggling to do-up the zipper that she had disregarded at the time (she was very much regretting this action now, feeling the chill in her very bones).

Where they had ended up was actually quite beautiful, albeit in a more ominous and darker way, but that was probably what had made it so appealing to Tom in the first place.

This was the cave.
"It's not really an ideal picnic spot, is it?" Hope asked finally, wrapping her arms around herself to keep warm.

"I rather think not," Dumbledore agreed, "however, there is a village of sorts about halfway along the cliffs behind us. I believe the orphans were taken there for a little sea air and a view of the waves. No, I think it was only ever Tom Riddle and his youthful victims who visited this spot. No Muggle could reach this rock unless they were uncommonly good mountaineers, and boats cannot approach the cliffs, the waters around them are too dangerous. I imagine that Riddle climbed down; magic would have served better than ropes. And he brought two small children with him, probably for the pleasure of terrorizing them. I think the journey alone would have done it, don't you?"

"I suppose," Hope said, her eyes trailing down the cliff as she stuffed her cloak into her pocket as best as she could, making it bulge outward a bit obviously.

"But his final destination," Dumbledore continued, "—and ours— lies a little farther on. Come." And Hope followed after the aged headmaster along the jagged rock that was quite treacherous (enough to frighten two Muggle children, she was sure), slipping twice as she tried to lodge her feet in the wizard-made footholds (by Tom, no doubt). But, at long last, they reached the cliff face to stand before a blank slate of rock. Hope could see a crack in the cliff side through which she could see dark, turbulent water.

"Lumos," Dumbledore incanted, making the water clearer to see than before. "Would I be right in assuming you will not object to getting a little wet?" he asked her with a light twinkle in his eye and Hope huffed in annoyance.

"Then let us take the plunge," he said, allowing his body to fall into the sea, and Hope followed suit, though a bit reluctantly. She had fallen into water once during the winter, and the sea was as cold as the lake had been that night, but she forced herself to ignore the cold and to push on through the waves, following after Dumbledore who was surprisingly agile in his old age.

The crack was more than a crack, it was a tunnel, a very thin tunnel, and Hope swam with difficulty after Dumbledore, his lit wand bouncing light off the wall and giving Hope something to see more easily than the man himself as she twisted left around a bend.

And then Hope clambered out of the frigid water and up onto roughly carved steps that led into a large cave bathed in darkness. Hope wasn't sure if she should dare to use magic when they were outside of the grounds, even if she was freezing.

Dumbledore was standing, apparently unfazed by the cold, his wand high above his head so that it might illuminate the walls and ceiling and Hope took a step back, a sharp gasp leaving her. The feeling the cave gave…it was almost like it was alive, warm and beating like a heart.

Hope had never felt anything like that before.

"Yes, this is the place," Dumbledore said, his quiet voice reverberating in the silence. "It has known magic."

Well, there was no denying that.

"This is merely the antechamber, the entrance hall," Dumbledore told her after a moment of silence. "We need to penetrate the inner place...Now it is Lord Voldemort's obstacles that stand in our way,
rather than those nature made…"

"Do you think it will be like the one on the ring?" Hope asked as he moved towards wall to inspect it closely.

"I imagine it might be a bit different," Dumbledore mused before asking for her silence as he hummed a few words in a language that Hope didn't understand, probing the wall with his fingers while Hope stood awkwardly out of his way.

It seemed like a long time had passed before he had at long last said: "Here. We go on through here. The entrance is concealed."

"What a surprise," Hope drawled out and he chuckled softly, "but, just wondering, would you mind aiming a warming charm over here?"

Dumbledore looked back, slightly surprised by how her hair was plastered to her face (not that there was much of it, being in a short pixie cut at the moment) and how her waterlogged clothes were clinging to her frame.

"Oh, I'm terribly sorry," he quickly apologized, quickly rectifying the situation and leaving Hope in dry and warm clothes.

"Thanks," she said, moving forward to join him as he waved his wand at the patch of rock he had indicated before, causing the stone to glow slightly, but Hope suspected that there would be something that made it a bit more difficult to enter, because when had Tom ever made it easy for anyone.

"There," Hope said suddenly, before Dumbledore had apparently discovered what was keeping them out, pointing towards a symbol that had been coarsely drawn into the stone, "that's a blood rune…for sacrifice, I'm pretty sure."

Dumbledore followed her finger to look upon the rune with speculation. "I believe you are correct," he said, "a very crude sacrifice, I gather."

Hope kept thinking of virgins being sacrificed to the gods (she, rather unfortunately, fit that category). "A sacrifice of what?" she asked.

"I believe that we are required to make payment to pass," Dumbledore told her as he reached inside his robes with his bad hand to withdraw a silver knife that gleamed in the darkness. "And I believe that payment is blood, if I am not much mistaken."

"I see," Hope said. After all, who better knew of the strength of blood in magic than she? However, she didn't quite see how it was as crude as he believed it to be, but, then again, not everyone shared her stance on blood magic.

"The idea," Dumbledore continued, almost in a manner similar to a professor giving a lecture, "as I am sure you will have gathered, is that your enemy must weaken him- or herself to enter. Once again, Lord Voldemort fails to grasp that there are much more terrible things than physical injury."

The Cruciatus Curse came to mind and Hope knew all-too-well that the effects of that curse were mental, not physical, though they surely felt physical.

"Sometimes, however, it is unavoidable," Dumbledore said, exposing the pale flesh of his forearm and Hope felt it wise to speak.
"Professor, maybe I should do it?" Hope offered. She was rather accustomed to cutting into herself by now, but he shook his head, painting droplets of his blood against the stone, healing up his wound faster than Hope could blink.

"You are very kind, Hope," Dumbledore said, and Hope thought practical might have suited her better. "But your blood is worth more than mine. Ah, that seems to have done the trick, doesn't it?" The rock had parted with an ominous crack. "After me, I think," he said, descending into darkness and Hope followed hurriedly to not be left in the shadows that light did little to keep at bay.

Their descent slowed at long last when they came to the bottom to stand at the bank of what must have been a massive lake entombed in stone. But there was one thing in the lake, a small island in the middle of it that glowed an eerie green, but that wasn't what had caught Hope's interest.

It was the same noise she had heard in the Room of Requirement when she was looking for a Pensieve, the strange hissing that sounded an awful lot like a song.

"Let us walk," Dumbledore said, his voice, quiet as it was, echoing in the silence and causing ripples in the water. "Be very careful not to step into the water. Stay close to me."

He moved carefully around the edge of the lake, and this time Hope didn't disobey him. There was something about this place that she didn't like. The magic here was Dark and it swirled around her invitingly, but Hope dared not to stray from her line of grey that she had been walking on for so long.

"Er...does a Summoning Charm work on a Horcrux?" Hope asked as they circled the lake again, pushing down the desire to leave the way they came as they passed the archway.

"Why don't you try it?" Dumbledore invited and Hope eyed him for a brief moment, trying to see if he was baiting her, but then she opted to just get it over with.

"Accio Horcrux!"

A loud echoing bang nearly had Hope jumping out of her skin, especially since white appeared out of the water briefly before descending into its depths once more before Hope could catch a glimpse as to what it was, though she could have sworn it was vaguely human-shaped.

"What the ruddy hell was that?" Hope demanded.

"Something, I think, that is ready to respond should we attempt to seize the Horcrux," Dumbledore informed her, appearing rather unfazed (something that irritated Hope greatly).

"Wouldn't that mean that the Horcrux is down there?" Hope had to ask.

"Oh, no," Dumbledore assured her, "I think not. I think, instead, that the Horcrux is in the middle." He gestured to the small island at the centre of the lake.

"I don't suppose you know a spell to walk on water?" Hope asked dryly.

"I do, actually," he said and Hope did a double-take, "but that is not how we will be crossing... aha...here it is."

Hope narrowed her eyes, taking in the empty space before them that Dumbledore seemed to be searching fruitlessly...but it wasn't as empty as it seemed. The more Hope looked, the more she could faintly see an outline of something, what she couldn't quite be sure.
Dumbledore raised his wand to tap where his hand was, pausing in its probing as a chair formed out of thin air before piling onto the ground as the thick chain pulled something from deep down in the lake. An image of a great pirate ship appeared in Hope's mind briefly before she shook it away as a rather small boat broke through the surface. A pirate ship would have been too big to fit in the cave anyways.

Hope eyed it distastefully for a moment as Dumbledore lifted a leg to hop onto the boat. "Are you sure that's not just going to dump us when we get halfway across?" she asked him.

"Oh, yes, I believe it is quite safe," he told her. "Voldemort needed to create a means to cross the lake without attracting the wrath of those creatures he had placed within it in case he ever wanted to visit or remove his Horcrux."

"What about the things in the water?" Hope asked, "won't they attack us?"

"I think we must resign ourselves to the fact that they will, at some point, realize we are not Lord Voldemort. Thus far, however, we have done well. They have allowed us to raise the boat."

"Why, though?" Hope asked, gazing with the deepest suspicion into the black lake.

"Voldemort would have been reasonably confident that none but a very great wizard would have been able to find the boat," Dumbledore told her, fixing his eyes on her briefly, but she did not notice. "I think he would have been prepared to risk what was, to his mind, the most unlikely possibility that somebody else would find it, knowing that he had set other obstacles ahead that only he would be able to penetrate. We shall see whether he was right."

"Still," Hope said, fastening her eyes on the boat now, "it's a bit small, don't you think? What if we weigh it down?"

"I believe an enchantment will have been placed upon this boat so that only one wizard at a time will be able to sail in it. Voldemort would have cared more about magical skill than weight that I do not believe that it will be an issue," Dumbledore said a bit thoughtfully before shifting to look at her, their eyes meeting. "You are underage and un-qualified. Voldemort would never have expected a sixteen-year-old to reach this place: I think it unlikely that your powers will register compared to mine."

Hope had to arch an eyebrow at that.

"Voldemort's mistake, Hope," he assured her. "Voldemort's mistake...Age is foolish and forgetful when it underestimates youth...Now, you first this time, and be careful not to touch the water."

Dumbledore held out his hand as though he was a footman to a carriage, and with great reluctance, Hope took it, his fingers cool against her palm as she managed to lightly land in the boat, forcing her body to still so as not to rock the boat when Dumbledore followed her. Once they were as comfortable as they could manage, the boat was pulled forward into deeper waters.

Hope finally dared to look down when they were halfway to their destination and went positively white. The white thing she had seen made much more sense now. Pale bodies, pale dead bodies floating just under the water, and for a morbid and foolish moment, Hope wondered what would happen if she reached her finger underwater.

Thankfully, Hope chose not to act on this.

"The bodies under us," Hope said faintly, "are they going to attack us like the one that jumped before?"
"I am sure that once we take the Horcrux, we shall find them less peaceable," Dumbledore said behind her. "However, like many creatures that dwell in cold and darkness, they fear light and warmth, which we shall therefore call to our aid should the need arise."

Hope fleetingly remembered the Devil's Snare from her first year, under the trapdoor and Hermione saving her and Ron's arses, to put it mildly.

"We are nearly there," he told her cheerfully and she had to wonder why he was so cheerful. She would rather be back at Hogwarts than here.

The boat jostled slightly against the relatively flat island made of stone like everything else in the cave, only much smoother, as though water and time had smoothed its rough edges.

Hope and Dumbledore disembarked carefully, and Hope's eyes automatically fell upon the thing that had been glowing eerily from across the lake.

It was a basin not unlike the Pensieve.

Hope and Dumbledore looked within to see that it was the liquid that was giving off the shimmery haze that they had seen before, a green liquid through which Hope could barely see something connected to a long chain.

So it was the locket, was it?

"Is that a potion?" Hope asked finally.

"I am not sure," Dumbledore said with a bit of contemplation. "Something more worrisome than blood and bodies, however." Dumbledore drew back a sleeve and extended his injured hand to the liquid, however then something strange occurred; his hand could not even come close to touching the fluid.

Hope stepped back as he frowned, taking his wand in his hand and waving it in several sharp movements over the basin for a few moments before withdrawing.

"So?" Hope asked expectantly.

"The Horcrux is indeed within," he said decisively. "But how to reach it? This potion cannot be penetrated by hand, Vanished, parted, scooped up, or siphoned away, nor can it be Transfigured, Charmed, or otherwise made to change its nature." He flicked his wand delicately in his hand, creating a crystal goblet out of thin air that Hope caught quickly so it wouldn't shatter against the ground, and Dumbledore took to from her with a grateful look. "I can only conclude that this potion is supposed to be drunk."

Hope couldn't help but gape at him. "But that's a horrible idea!" she said, her voice echoing loudly, "what if its poison? What if it kills you?"

"Oh, I doubt it would work like that," Dumbledore told her, remarkably unconcerned of his well-being (an attitude Hope herself was well known for adopting, but she disregarded this). "Lord Voldemort would not want to kill the person who reached this island."

Hope gave him a rather dubious expression in return that clearly said she very much doubted that. Tom was a homicidal maniac, after all.

"I'm sorry, Hope; I should have said, he would not want to immediately kill the person who reached this island," Dumbledore amended his previous statement. "He would want to keep them alive long
enough to find out how they managed to penetrate so far through his defences and, most importantly of all, why they were so intent upon emptying the basin. Do not forget that Lord Voldemort believes that he alone knows about his Horcruxes. Undoubtedly, this potion must act in a way that will prevent me taking the Horcrux. It might paralyze me, cause me to forget what I am here for, create so much pain I am distracted, or render me incapable in some other way. This being the case, Hope, it will be your job to make sure I keep drinking, even if you have to tip the potion into my protesting mouth. Do you understand?"

Hope's eyebrows disappeared into her hairline, recalling the conditions he had made her agree to before they had left, and all she could do was sigh.

"Do I have your word, Hope, that you will do all in your power to make me keep drinking?" he pressed.

Hope nearly acted on the grain of defiance inside her that made her so sarcastic and rude in the presence of the headmaster. She still didn't really like him, but, as the saying went, he was a necessary evil with all the knowledge he possessed…but force-feeding him a potion that might affect him adversely…that wasn't really something she wanted to do.

Still, she had given her word. "Fine," she said and Dumbledore dipped the goblet into the potion, lifting it to his lips and downing it rather quickly. This occurred three times more before Hope could see a more obvious affect.

Dumbledore's legs proved quite weak when he fell against the basin, gasping as though he had run a marathon, his eyes closed but twitching like mad.

Hope reached out a tentative hand. "Er…Professor? Are you alright?" This seemed a rather stupid question once it had left her lips, as he was obviously wasn't alright, but Hope couldn't help asking.

"Professor?" she asked loudly and Dumbledore took in a shuddering breath and spoke.

"I don't want," he said, speaking in a terrified tone that Hope found scarier than she should have. "Don't make me…"

Hope steeled herself and took the crystal goblet from him, spooning a generous portion of potion into it.

"…don't like it," Dumbledore whimpered, "want to stop…"

"I know," Hope said calmly, "this will help." The lie stung her lips unlike any before, because of the effect it was having on him. She tipped the contents of the goblet into his mouth.

"No," he breathed as she dipped it into the basin and refilled it. "I don't want to…I don't want to…Let me go…"

"I can't," Hope told him, honestly this time as she lifted the filled-again goblet. "You have to drink this."

Dumbledore hardly seemed aware of her, much less what she was saying. "Make it stop…make it stop."

Hope took advantage of his open mouth. "This will help," she told him, forcing him to drink the contents of the goblet one more, but this time, once he had finished, he screamed loudly in the silence and Hope gripped her ears suddenly, wincing at the noise. When the scream had abated and she had released her ears, she could hear that the mumblings had returned.
"No, no, no, no, I can't," he begged an unknown force, "I can't, don't make me, I don't want to..."

Hope held the goblet to his lips once more and he drank, though, this time, his knees buckled under him and he collapsed on the ground beside the basin, trembling like a leaf in the wind.

"It's all my fault," he cried, throwing Hope through a loop as she knelt down beside him.

"What's your fault?" she asked, forgetting what she should have been doing briefly. "Professor?"

"It should have been me," he sobbed, "I didn't mean for any of it! Please make it stop, I know I did wrong, oh please make it stop and I'll never, never again..."

Hope could say that she had never pitied the headmaster before, but in that very moment she did. Perhaps something terrible had happened in Dumbledore's past like how her parents had been killed.

She cupped the goblet in her hands. "This will help," she told him, lying through her teeth as she lifted the goblet to his lips once more, emptying it down his throat.

Dumbledore shrank, still shaking, appearing almost as though he was afraid of the shadows. "Don't hurt them," he begged Hope, his eyes looking right through her and seeing someone else entirely, "don't hurt them, please, please, it's my fault, hurt me instead ..."

"I won't," Hope said, still having no idea of what someone had done to 'them' as she forced another goblet-full of potion down his throat.

This, unfortunately, caused him to wail loudly and throw himself forward on the ground like a child, but had it been a child Hope wouldn't have been quite so concerned or disconcerted.

"Please, please, please, no...not that, not that, I'll do anything..."

He clung to her wrist as she forced more potion past his lips.

"No more, please, no more..." He sobbed, releasing his grip on her wrist in favour of curling in on himself.

"Only a bit more," Hope promised him, tipping the potion into his gasping mouth.

The more potion she gave him, the worse off he became, which, she suspected, had been Tom's intention and it made her think that the chances of anyone going into the cave alone was likely to leave it without assistance.

Dumbledore was screaming now as though burning from the inside out, clawing at his sides. "I want to die! I want to die! Make it stop, make it stop, I want to die!"

Hope tried to ignore the true pain in his voice as she had him drink once more. The potion was nearly gone. "You need to drink this, Professor, it will help."

"KILL ME!" He screamed once he had swallowed.

"One more, just one," Hope promised, scooping the last of the potion into the goblet, ignoring how the chain of the locket within rustled from the movement of the goblet. Dumbledore obediently drank the last of the potion, but when he finished he collapsed on his side, unmoving.

Hope went white. "Please don't say that I just killed the headmaster," she muttered to herself as she reached over to turn him so his face was facing upwards. "Professor? Can you hear me? Rennervate!"
Dumbledore roused briefly, filling Hope with more relief than she'd ever felt (imagine being known as the girl responsible for Albus Dumbledore's death), rasping out one word: "Water."

"Right, water," Hope said, wiping the inside of the goblet with her sleeve as she took out her wand at long last (here was to hoping she didn't get another notice from the Ministry for using magic outside of Hogwarts when he wasn't yet of age. "Aguamenti!"

The water vaporized and Hope stared at the goblet for a brief moment before knocking it against her head in aggravation. "Of course," she bemoaned, "Tom must have spelled it against water…" Which would force one to drink from the lake… Hope peered over the edge cautiously, but she could still see them, the bodies.

"Better not," she decided, raking a hand through her hair. She dared not break the surface of the water, even if it was what Dumbledore needed. It might be best to just wait…

But luck was not on her side and her wand began to roll across the flat ground.

"No!" Hope lunged for it, snagging the carved wood barely before it hit the water, but the tip caused ripples across the lake.

Hope's breath caught in her throat as a pale and wet hand grasped her wrist from beneath, trying to pull her under when the 'attack' rune on her palm glowed with heat and the body was forced suddenly away from her, but the chill that sank in through her arm did not leave.

"Inferi," Hope breathed when more bodies lifted out of the water, moving towards her and the barely breathing Dumbledore. How could it be anything else? But where did Tom get so many bodies? At the same time she didn't want to know.

Oh, what had Snape said about Inferi? What was the thing they feared most? Forget Snape, what was it that Dumbledore had said before?

"However, like many creatures that dwell in cold and darkness, they fear light and warmth, which we shall therefore call to our aid should the need arise."

They were crawling towards her, some close enough to grasp the edge of the small island of stone, when Hope finally remembered her wand.

"Incendio Maxima!"

The explosion of fire from her wand tip nearly sent her flying back into the water, and she was only saved from this by colliding painfully with the basin. Hope crumpled to the ground, her back aching as she groaned, trying her best to right herself as she grabbed the chain of the locket, thrusting it deep into her free pocket as the Inferi cowered in the face of fire.

"Professor? Professor! We've got to go!" Hope insisted, standing and pulling on his good arm so she could hook it over her shoulders and thus assist him in walking.

"The locket," he murmured as she helped him get situated in the boat, keeping a weathered eye on the Inferi, ready to use her fire spell again if need be.

"I've got it," Hope said, "don't worry." She hopped on behind him as Dumbledore leaned heavily against the prow, his exhaustion clear as Hope blasted away the insistent Inferi that were still making an attempt at boarding them as they moved slowly across the lake.

But they did not bother them once they reached the opposite shore, but Hope's heart couldn't stop...
hammering against her chest.

"I am weak," Dumbledore said in a voice that wavered, apparently startled by this pronouncement.

"Could've fooled me," Hope couldn't help but be sarcastic even as breathless as she was, bracing her hands against her knees as he leaned against the cave's wall. She missed the light upwards twitch of his lips. "I can Apparate us, I suppose, once we get up to the surface…" Hope hadn't been old enough to take the exam, but she was quite capable of Apparating (though she found it to be incredibly uncomfortable).

"Come on…" Hope took his arm again, moving towards the roughly carved stairs they had descended before.

"The protection was...after all...well-designed," Dumbledore admitted, his voice nowhere near as strong as it had been before. "One alone could not have done it...You did well, very well, Hope..."

"Don't get ahead of yourself," Hope told him with a grunt, pulling him with difficulty up the stairs. "You're still in my bad books."

He couldn't help but release a small chuckle at that. "Naturally."

Getting out of the cave was the difficult part, but once they were breathing the salty air, Hope secured her grip on him and turned with a loud crack, leaving the cave entirely.
Fall From Grace

Everything went to hell when Malfoy spotted Ron, Ginny, and Neville patrolling the area outside the Room of Requirement and the trio had barely any time to lift their wands when he threw something up and into the air; Hope would be so ashamed by their reaction time.

Blackness exploded around them and they were left blind.

Ron swore loudly. It was Fred and George's Peruvian Instant Darkness Powder if he had to wager a guess, which meant they would have to get out of the corridor in order to see again, but that didn't stop them from trying *Lumos*, or *Incendio* (the second one was quickly vetoed when Neville's fire grazed Ginny's arm, making her cry out in pain.

"Follow the sound of my voice!" Ron yelled at them, not daring to try to hit Malfoy and whoever was with him for fear of hitting his sister or Neville.

"Ron!" Ginny reached out blindly for him, finally managing to snag his hand before he yanked on the back of Neville's robes, pulling him towards what Ron hoped was a clear hallway.

Neville coughed violently as they reached a corridor unhindered by darkness.

"I think it's safe to say Hope wasn't wrong about Malfoy," Ron said, expelling some powder he had choked on.

Ginny nodded faintly. "You don't think the people he had with him were Death Eaters, do you?"

"It couldn't be anyone else," Neville said and Ron hummed in agreement.

"We need to find the others," Ron decided, "the castle's probably going to be under attack very soon."

The sound of quick feet had them all on edge and wands gripped tightly in their hands, ready to fire off a quick succession of spells when Remus barrelled into view followed quickly by Bill and Tonks.

"What happened?" Remus demanded.

"Death Eaters are inside the castle," Ron told him as he tore the Map open, searching for their quickly moving steps easily on the Map. "They're heading towards the Astronomy Tower!"

The Order members turned in that direction and Ron gave Ginny a look. "Ginny, I need you to run and find the others, tell them about the Death Eaters and where they are."

Ginny looked as though she quite wanted to argue, but she was silenced with a look.

"You're the fastest of the three of us, and you don't make as much noise as us," he told her.

Ginny's eyes hardened and she nodded seriously as she raced off per his orders.

"Come on, Neville," Ron said, stowing the Map, "let's go make those Death Eaters regret they came here."

Neville grinned in a feral manner that was rather reminiscent to Hope as they ran in the direction that Remus, Bill, and Tonks had gone in, pushing themselves to run faster than they had ever run at the distant sound of spellfire.
"Avada Kedavra!"

Neville pulled Ron just barely out of the way of a killing curse while firing off his own. "Expulso!"

The Death Eater was violently blown back against the wall with such force that the wall behind him cracked. Neville didn't have time to see if he was dead, but that didn't stop the bile from rising in his throat.

The Death Eaters seemed to have scattered, leaving only three near the base of the Astronomy Tower. It was a bit unfortunate for them, Ron thought, perhaps they didn't realize that so many would be out in the corridors, because soon after another DA patrol had joined into the fray, Daphne, Dean, and Terry.

After that Ron lost track of time, far more intent on avoiding the Killing Curses that were being thrown carelessly about by the Death Eaters, who might have been outnumbered, but were clearly very good.

He whipped around as a man dressed in dark cloak descended from the Astronomy Tower only to have his life quickly snuffed by one of his fellows who had been aiming for Remus.

Bill had disappeared down the corridor giving chase after one of the Death Eaters who'd gotten away, but Ron didn't dare to leave and see where his older brother had gone.

"Dean!" Daphne's scream distracted him as he watched his dorm-mate fall and his blonde-haired girlfriend race to his side.

From where he was, Ron couldn't tell if it was serious or not, but whatever he'd been hit with had caused red to bloom over his arm (he suspected it was a graze) and Daphne retaliated with a vicious slash that rendered the Death Eater, Macnair, to collapse, blood spilling out onto the floor.

"Oi!" a familiar voice screamed. "Reducto!"

The ground exploded, sending debris everywhere, the blast directed towards the Death Eaters who took the brunt of it, but Ron saw that Neville had taken a gash to his leg, however, he did not seem to be particularly hindered by it as the appearance of Ginny, Luna, and Hermione joined the fight.

Malfoy, who had been cowering behind a suit of armor, suddenly made a break for it, disappearing quickly up the stairs that led to the Astronomy Tower and after a few moments had passed (or had it been longer?), several Death Eaters followed him, the last flinging up a barrier that Neville rammed into when he tried to follow after.

It expelled him back so powerfully that he flew into the opposite wall, the wind knocked out of him as he choked, trying to regain his breathing and Luna screamed his name.

Why did Dumbledore and Hope have to be out of the castle? Of course, strategically it made a great deal of sense; eliminating the strongest players from the equation could only help you in the long run.

"Ron, duck!"

Ron reacted in time for his girlfriend to throw a *Petrificus Totalus* over his head to collide with a Death Eater that had been in his blind spot, fixing him as stiff as a board as he fell on his face.

Ron shook it off as best as he could, firing a spell towards the massive Death Eater causing the most damages.
Hope was frozen and immobile in the Astronomy Tower, unable to do anything over than breathe and blink as she looked upon the scene before her from under her invisibility cloak.

Malfy…she would have never expected this of him, but he had disarmed the already weak headmaster, intent on killing him no doubt, but he was drawing it out as though out of great reluctance.

"There is little time, one way or another," Dumbledore said simply to the boy who's wand was still trained at him, and Hope had to wonder if he was capable of using the Avada Kedavra. You had to mean it, much like the Cruciatus. "So let us discuss your options, Draco."

"My options!" Malfy snarled, tightening his grip on his wand. "I'm standing here with a wand -I'm about to kill you—"

"My dear boy," Dumbledore smiled indulgently, looking more like himself since they'd left the cave, albeit for the weakness in his stature and pallor to his face, "let us have no more pretence about that. If you were going to kill me, you would have done it when you first Disarmed me, you would not have stopped for this pleasant chat about ways and means."

He did have a point. If anything, the likelihood of him actually cursing was decreasing as time went on.

"I haven't got any options!" Malfy snapped, his face shining in the eerie lighting of the Dark Mark that had appeared over the castle before Hope and Dumbledore's return. "I've got to do it! He'll kill me! He'll kill my whole family!"

"I appreciate the difficulty of your position," Dumbledore said, sounding a bit detached to the situation (or maybe that was the effect of the potion? It was difficult to tell.). "Why else do you think I have not confronted you before now? Because I knew that you would have been murdered if Lord Voldemort realised that I suspected you. I did not dare speak to you of the mission with which I knew you had been entrusted, in case he used Legilimency against you, but now at last we can speak plainly to each other...no harm has been done, you have hurt nobody, though you are very lucky that your unintentional victims survived...I can help you, Draco."

"No, you can't," Malfy disagreed, his whole body trembling as he attempted to keep his wand straight. "Nobody can. He told me to do it or he'll kill me. I've got no choice."

"Come over to the right side, Draco," Dumbledore coaxed, "and we can hide you more completely than you can possibly imagine. What is more, I can send members of the Order to your mother tonight to hide her likewise. Your father is safe at the moment in Azkaban...when the time comes we can protect him too...come over to the right side, Draco...you are not a killer..."

"But I got this far, didn't I?" Malfy said quietly, as though stunned by his own brilliance. "They thought I'd die in the attempt, but I'm here...and you're in my power...I'm the one with the wand...you're at my mercy..."

It certainly did seem that way to Hope, but Dumbledore disagreed.

"No, Draco," he said. "It is my mercy, and not yours, that matters now."

But before anything else could be said, the sound of quick footsteps up the stairs stalled any sound from the pair as four unfamiliar figures banged open the door as they entered.

They were all Death Eaters…but how had they gotten past the combined forces of the Order and the DA? Hope swallowed thickly, fear pooling in her stomach as she thought of the words Malfy had
said earlier: "Someone's dead. One of your people...I don't know who, it was dark...I stepped over the body."

Two of the four must have been related with their similar stumpy appearances and eyes much too small from their faces.

The man gave an excited giggle that could hardly be counted as anything but a hiccup. "Dumbledore cornered! Dumbledore wandless, Dumbledore alone! Well done, Draco, well done!"

"Good evening, Amicus," Dumbledore said patiently, as though he had been expecting the man's sudden appearance in his school (which Hope found rather unlikely). "And I see you've brought Alecto too...charming..."

Hope suspected that to be the woman whom she had labelled as the man's sister, the same woman who gave a small noise at the name.

"Think your little jokes'll help you on your death bed, then?" Alecto hissed, her yellow teeth bared. Dumbledore arched an eyebrow at this. "Jokes? No, no, these are manners," he corrected.

"Do it," the third figure said, his voice a dark shuddering rasp and stinking of the scent Hope knew well now, the scent of blood. Was he the reason someone was dead?

"Is that you, Fenrir?"

Hope started as much as she could in her immobile state and she was quite certain that she would have growled. Fenrir Greyback was the werewolf who had bit Remus as a child, the bastard.

"That's right." Fenrir grinned his sharp teeth. "Pleased to see me, Dumbledore?"

"No, I cannot say that I am," Dumbledore said, a corner of his lip drawing downwards slightly at the sight of the werewolf.

That only made his grin widen. "But you know how much I like kids, Dumbledore," he said in his raspy voice.

"Am I to take it that you are attacking even without the full moon now?" Dumbledore asked conversationally, and Hope couldn't help but marvel at how he could be in such a situation. "This is most unusual...you have developed a taste for human flesh that cannot be satisfied once a month?"

"That's right," Greyback smirked. "Shocks you, that, does it, Dumbledore? Frightens you?"

"Well, I cannot pretend it does not disgust me a little," Dumbledore had to concede, and for once Hope was in complete agreement with him. "And, yes, I am a little shocked that Draco here invited you, of all people, into the school where his friends live..."

"I didn't," Malfoy hardly dared to whisper. "I didn't know he was going to come—"

"I wouldn't want to miss a trip to Hogwarts, Dumbledore," Greyback uttered in his coarse voice. "Not when there are throats to be ripped out...delicious, delicious..."

Hope could feel goosebumps rising over her skin at the tone of voice he was using as he described kids as food. Bile rose in her throat.

"I could do you for afters, Dumbledore..."
Hope threw up a little in her mouth.

"No," the last one, who had remained silent until now, spoke, and Hope's eyes flashed to him.
"We've got orders. Draco's got to do it. Now, Draco, and quickly."

But Malfoy's resolve had been wavering the longer the conversation had stretched on.

"He's not long for this world anyways, if you ask me!" Amycus chortled, jerking his head towards
Dumbledore. "Look at him –what's happened to you, then, Dumby?"

"Oh, weaker resistance, slower reflexes, Amycus," Dumbledore said vaguely. "Old age, in
short...one day, perhaps, it will happen to you...if you are lucky..."

Hope suspected he wouldn't be.

"What's that mean, then, what's that mean?" Amycus snarled angrily. "Always the same, weren't
yeh, Dumby, talking and doing nothing, nothing, I don't even know why the Dark Lord's bothering
to kill yeh! Come on, Draco, do it!"

Hope's breath caught in her throat suddenly at the sound of the fight going on below and a familiar
voice yelled, "They've blocked the stairs –Reducto! REDUCTO!"

Remus!

"Now, Draco, quickly!" The burly Death Eater with the harsh face snapped before Greyback took a
step forward.

"I'll do it," he said with a fierce grin, only to be blown back by a spell from the fourth, the blast
rustling Hope's cloak just slightly.

"Draco, do it, or stand aside so one of us—"

Another set of footsteps put Hope on edge when the familiar figure cloaked in billowing robes. Hope
watched Snape carefully under the cloak for what he would do next.

Let us see who is right and who is the fool.

"We've got a problem, Snape," Amycus grunted, "the boy doesn't seem able—"

"Severus..." Dumbledore called the name weakly from where he was still leaning heavily against the
wall. It was his voice that startled Hope more than anything, because in all the years she had known
the headmaster –all six of them– she had never heard him beg. "Severus...please..."

Snape's wand flashed up. "Avada Kedavra!"

Hope would have gasped if she could, stunned beyond belief as the green light she was so familiar
with connected with Dumbledore's chest, sending his body toppling over the edge of the Tower and
down towards the ground.

In that instant she gained the usage of her limbs once more and the first thing she did was clap her
hand to her mouth. She didn't like Dumbledore, she couldn't cry for him, but there were very few
people in the world worth that kind of death in her eyes, and he certainly didn't qualify.

The cloak rippled as it fell off her and the last Death Eater to leave the Tower turned quickly to see
her standing there with her wand clutched in her hand.
Fenrir ran his tongue over his upper lip. "Don't you look delicious," he purred.

Hope sneered, more grateful to have control of her body back to her again. "I really wouldn't," she warned, "I'm the niece of Remus Lupin, bitch!" She slashed her wand and he howled as she dodged past him, intent on Snape.

This was no revenge mission, this was just Hope chasing after a traitor who had finally shown his true colours, and she was going to be damned if he got away without a curse from her!

She leapt down the last few steps, racing out into the warzone that was the corridor beyond. It was a mesh of Death Eaters, Order members, Hogwarts professors, suits of armor, and DA members. Hope collided with Alecto harshly with her shoulder sending her spiralling into Ginny's hex which had her screaming.

"Hope!" Ginny yelled. "Where the hell've you been?"

"Snape?" Hope demanded instead.

Ginny pointed over her shoulder, quickly ducking a curse before bellowing one back as Hope tore after Snape and Malfoy.

"Crucio!"

Hope leapt to the side to avoid Alecto's torture curse.

"Fax!" she snarled back, delighting in how the witch's skin burned red-hot and she screamed in agony before abandoning her in favour of reaching Snape.

She nearly vaulted to the floor, her feet colliding with something, something that happened to be Neville who looked a bit worse for wear, blood and scrapes lining his face.

"Neville?" Hope paused briefly in her effort to find Snape, concern for her friend far greater.

"M'Alright," Neville told her, expelling a few coughs, "Hope…Snape n' Malfoy…ran past."

Hope nodded quickly, racing after the Death Eaters as they made their bid at escape and Remus yelled: "HOPE! Come back!"

But Hope didn't stop, she ran and ran and didn't stop, yelling "MOVE!" when a few of the formerly slumbering occupants of the castle awakened by the noise (how hadn't they been awake before now?) made their way onto the main staircase to see what was going on.

"Bombarda!" she yelled, exploding a corner of stone, quickly blocking the next curse with a shield charm.

"You have to do better than that!" she yelled after them as she pelted down the last of the stairs and out onto the terrace, her blood pulsing loudly in her ears, her feet thudding against the ground, moving quickly towards the front gates.

"Oh no, you don't," Hope snarled, raising the palm that was not gripping her wand tightly. "Attack!"

The earth exploded upwards into sharp jutting rocks not unlike the move she had used against Tom in the Atrium of the Ministry the previous year. The Death Eaters had to jump back to avoid being skewered.

One of them was not so lucky.
“Stupefy!” Hope yelled, pointing her wand at the figure she knew to be Snape, judging easily from the cloak spreading in the wind. Snape dived to the side and she missed her target by inches.

She swore loudly as Snape yelled to Malfoy to make a run for it as he turned to face her himself. Even with the distance between them, Hope could see his glittering, dark eyes.

"Cruci—"

Snape moved faster, blowing her off her feet, but she was quick to regain her feet while one of the larger Death Eater's cast fire upon Hagrid's hut as the other's blew a hole in her sharp wall. She gritted her teeth.

"Cruc—" She still couldn't get the spell out before she was knocked to the ground again.

"No Unforgivable Curses from you, Potter!" Snape roared. "Did you think—"

"Oh, please!" Hope bellowed back. "As if I haven't used the Unforgivables before, you traitorous piece of shite! You cowardly bastard!"

"Coward, did you call me, Potter?" Snape demanded. "Your father would never attack me unless it was four on one, what would you call him, I wonder?"

"Gee, I don't know," Hope yelled, throwing a curse that he quickly deflected, "It must have been the Pure-blood supremacy or the Death-Eater-in-training occupation you must have been boasting about! By the gods! No wonder my mother quit being friends with you! You are such a piece of scum to the EARTH!"

Rage coloured Snape's face briefly before his next spell sent her sprawling, pain blooming in her side before the second Death Eater, the one who had given up on attacking Hagrid (with his tough half-giant skin) to point his wand on her, and then pain exploded around her; it was a miracle she didn't scream.

It was cut off suddenly by Snape.

"No!" he shouted to the Death Eater. "Have you forgotten our orders? Potter belongs to the Dark Lord—we are to leave her! Go! Go!"

Hope lay on the ground breathing harshly before forcing her sore limbs to move so she could sit up and see the Death Eater tearing off towards the front gate as she pointed her wand at Snape.

"Deep lacerations that may induce death." She blinked. "Well, that doesn't sound very pleasant."

Ron grimaced at the thought. "Who would invent that kind of spell?" he demanded, leaning over to make sure Hope was indeed reading from the right section of the book in question, and not missing the effects of the spell entirely.

"Who would use that kind of spell?" Hermione corrected, appearing vaguely startled and unsettled at finding out what the spell caused to happen to its victim.

"It does say it 'for enemies'," Hope mentioned, arching an eyebrow towards Hermione who returned a rather incredulous expression.

"Are you telling me that you'd actually use this one someone?"

"Sectumsem—" She tried to incant the spell, but Snape sliced his wand through the air, vaulting her
to the ground for who knew how many times that night before she dragged herself up to face Snape.

"No, Potter!" he cried. "You dare use my own spells against me, Potter? It was I who invented them - I, the Half-Blood Prince! And you'd turn my inventions on me, like your filthy father, would you? I don't think so...no."

"Grow a backbone!" Hope snapped. "You've been using my father as an excuse to bully me since I was eleven! If that's the best excuse you've got then you need a reality check! What you are is a coward!"

"DON'T—" Snape's scream pierced the night, angrier than she had ever heard him before, "CALL ME A COWARD!"

Distracted in his anger, he missed the spell that was shot at him, slicing deeply into his cheek before he finally made it out of the castle grounds, past the anti-Apparition barrier.

Hope seethed where she was standing. She couldn't even revel in how right she had been about Snape. The wards were broken and the headmaster had fallen, there was much to be done.
Hagrid's wailing sobs was what drew Hope out of her trance as she looked down upon the fallen wizard. It was a corpse now, but he could have been sleeping and you wouldn't have known the difference. Hope expelled a sad sigh. Death was never a pleasant thing and the locket in her pocket weighed heavily down on her as she pressed a hand into her numbing and bloodied side.

"Hope? We need to go."

Padma was at her side, her hair tangled from the fight with cuts littering her cheeks and her exposed forearms.

"Go?" Hope asked, befuddled for a brief moment. "Where?"

Padma was already drawing Hope's free arm over her shoulder, assisting her as she pulled her unresistingly towards the castle. "The hospital wing," she told her, "everyone in the battle is up there."

Hope blinked a few times to clear her jumbled thoughts. "Casualties?"

"Neville got hit pretty bad, but he'll be completely healed in a few hours, and Professor Flitwick went down, but Madam Pomfrey says they'll both be fine," Padma told her, careful of Hope's own injury as they ascended the stairs. "Most of us just got a few scrapes, except Dean, his arm needs a lot of Blood-replenished, but no one's dead."

Hope frowned at that, turning to look at her, sensing a lie. "Someone's dead, there was a body Malfoy stepped over."

Padma's mouth was set in grim line. "He stepped over Bill Weasley, but he's not dead…he's…"

Padma swallowed thickly. "He was attacked by the werewolf."

Hope looked away, disgust and anger curdling in her stomach. That bastard!

They pushed the doors to the hospital wing open with their free hands and entered into the quite packed infirmary. Flitwick was sitting up on his bed, but Neville was slumbering on his while Luna flittered worriedly over him. Dean's arm was heavily bandaged and Daphne was sitting with him, her fingers interlocked with his free one.

Hermione saw her first, relief clear on her dust and blood smeared face, abandoning looking over the farthest bed that undoubtedly held Bill to run to her and throw her arms around her neck.

"Thank Merlin," Hermione sobbed, "you're alive!"

"Course I'm alive," Hope said thickly, wrapping an arm securely around her shoulders as they parted briefly before she was swept into a second hug courtesy of Remus.

"You little fool," he moaned, "what were you thinking?"

"You know me, Remus," she said through gritted teeth, barely restraining from hissing in pain as his arms brushed against her wound, "I don't think much…Poppy, can I get some help?"

Madam Pomfrey, who had long since ceased to reproach her for the use of her first name, seemed eager to have something to do, and Remus released her quickly, noticing her discomfort. The blood
was gone in seconds and the slash was sewn up.

"How's Bill?" she asked, moving towards the bed to see the effects of Greyback and she wasn't sure that she'd been more horrified than when she saw the bloodied slashes to his face. She raised a hand to her mouth, abhorred. "Oh gods…"

"No charm will work on these," Madam Pomfrey said sadly as she took out an ointment and a cloth to swab lightly at bloody wounds on Bill's face.

"But he wasn't bitten at the full moon," Ron croaked, fear in his voice as he clutched Hermione's hand tightly, his eyes fastening on Remus for some information that wouldn't make him fall to his knees. "Greyback hadn't transformed, so surely Bill won't be a—a real—?"

Tonks' face turned downwards to look upon Bill, sadness lining her face.

"No, I don't think that Bill will be a true werewolf," Remus had to admit, "but that does not mean that there won't be some contamination. Those are cursed wounds. They are unlikely ever to heal fully, and—and Bill might have some wolish characteristics from now on."

"Dumbledore might know something that'd work, though," Ron said frantically, looking around for the man's silver beard. "Where is he? Bill fought those maniacs on Dumbledore's orders, Dumbledore owes him, he can't leave him in this state—"

"Ron," Hope said in a weary voice that demanded silence. "Dumbledore can't help…he's dead."

A deadened silence followed her words, only broken by Remus who cried "No!" not believing her for a very brief moment, but then there was no reason for Hope to lie and her eyes did not betray her, so that could only mean one thing.

Albus Dumbledore was indeed dead.

Remus fell into a chair, bending his head forward and hiding his face as Tonks squeezed his shoulders with her shaking hands.

"How did he die?" Tonks asked, her voice quiet but easily heard in the silence. "How did it happen?"

"The *Avada Kedavra*," Hope told them, "by Snape."

A few people gasped.

"I couldn't move, he had me frozen under the invisibility cloak when Malfoy came up the Astronomy Tower and disarmed him…four more Death Eaters showed up, and then Snape came and…" Hope fell abruptly silent at the sounds of horror from the DA members surrounding them and the tears of Madam Pomfrey.

They were all shaking and afraid and that calmed Hope more than anything. Her wand was clutched loosely in her hand and her body was not trembling. Perhaps Hope had dealt with similar situations far too many times, but she was steady in the grief that settled over them.

She was calm and relaxed as Fawkes the Phoenix's elegy floated through the windows, the sound beautiful and terrible. The phoenix had no doubt discovered of his master's demise.

Hope closed her eyes for a brief moment.
Explaining everything all over again to Professor McGonagall was incredibly trying, but then she had the opportunity to ask Ron and Hermione about what had happened before she had come hurtling down the steps of the Astronomy Tower.

Ron and Hermione had barely finished explaining before Mr. and Mrs. Weasley made an appearance with Fleur, and by then the DA members that were mostly unharmed in the attack had been sent back to their dormitories.

"Fleur!" Hope went to her friend's side instantly, but Fleur barely noticed, her fearful face on her fiancé's, more scared than Hope had ever seen her appear and for a moment, Hope had to wonder if her legs were going to collapse from under her.

"Molly –Arthur –" Professor McGonagall said throatily, still recovering from the news of her old colleague's death. "I am so sorry—"

"Bill," Mrs. Weasley hardly dared to breathe as she moved past Professor McGonagall, intent on the bed her eldest son occupied. Horror lined her face at the sight. "Oh, Bill!"

"You said Greyback attacked him?" Mr. Weasley had turned his attention on Professor McGonagall, though his eyes were on his son as well. "But he hadn't transformed? So what does that mean? What will happen to Bill?"

Remus stepped forward to explain as he had before to Ron. "There will probably be some contamination, Arthur," he said. "It is an odd case, possibly unique...We don't know what his behaviour might be like when he awakens..."

"And Dumbledore..." Mr. Weasley's eyes darted between them all. "Minerva, is it true...Is he really...?"

She nodded silently, pulling out a handkerchief to wipe at her eyes again.

"Dumbledore's gone?" Mr. Weasley gasped.

Silence fell again only to be broken by Mrs. Weasley's sobs as she attempted to tend to the wounds, seemingly unaware of Dumbledore's demise or perhaps she cared more about her son in that moment (priorities). "Of course, it doesn't matter how he looks," she wept, her tears splashing down onto Bill's robes. "It's not r-really important...but he was a very handsome little b-boy...always very handsome...and he was g-going to be married!"

Fleur stiffened and Hope stepped back a little, sensing an explosion at the choice of Mrs. Weasley's wording.

"And what do you mean by zat?" Fleur nearly growled, anger rising in her voice and her face, her eyes flashing. "What do you mean, 'e was going to be married?"

Mrs. Weasley must not have realized what she had said. "Well –only that—"

"You theenk Bill will not wish to marry me anymore?" Fleur snapped, her nostrils flaring. "You theenk, because of these bites, he will not love me?"

Mrs. Weasley floundered. "No, that's not what I—"

"Because 'e will!" Fleur said with complete and utter surety, striding forward with a newfound strength. "It would take more zan a werewolf to stop Bill loving me!"
"Well, yes, I'm sure," Mrs. Weasley said, a bit befuddled by the reaction, "but I thought perhaps—given how—how he—"

Hope's eye twitched. She didn't honestly think that Fleur was so vain that she would leave Bill because of some scars.

"You thought I would not weesh to marry him? Or per'aps, you hoped?" Fleur presumed angrily. "What do I care how he looks? I am good-looking enough for both of us, I theenk! All these scars show is zat my husband is brave! And I shall do zat!"

She reached over to Mrs. Weasley and took the ointment from the older witch to take up the duty of cleaning up his slashes.

For a moment, no one spoke; no one knew what to say. Hope had been expecting Fleur to blow up at Mrs. Weasley for months, but the French witch had a great deal more restraint than Hope.

"Our Great-Auntie Muriel," Mrs. Weasley said at last, "has a very beautiful tiara—goblin-made—which I am sure I could persuade her to lend you for the wedding. She is very fond of Bill, you know, and it would look lovely with your hair."

"Thank you," Fleur said, her posture stiff and her voice curt. "I am sure zat will be lovely."

Then, as though a dam had suddenly burst, both women had thrown their arms around each other and began to sob in earnest. Hope couldn't help but stare and she wasn't the only one. Hermione was gaping slightly and Ginny and Ron were more than vaguely startled at the pair.

Ginny touched Hope's arm lightly and jerked her head towards the scarred face of her brother. "Can you help?" she asked quietly, her eyes shifting towards the runes carved into Hope's hands and forearms.

"I don't know if that will work on werewolf bites," she told her.

"Please," Ginny pleaded.

Hope nearly sighed as she moved past the two tearful women to shove up the sleeve of one of her arm and press a palm against the unbroken skin of his forehead.

"'Ope?"

Hope didn't answer Fleur's confusion as she intoned, "Heal."

She had never attempted to close a wound infected by the virus of a lycanthrope, and this was probably because doing so burned her. Her palm felt as though it was being branded, but she forced her hand to remain where it was as the width between the broken flesh lessened. She wouldn't be able to heal him completely, but she could make the cuts less pronounced.

And then Hope quickly leapt back, her hand doing more than stinging as she held it to her chest, reeking of burnt flesh as Madam Pomfrey moved to examine Bill, siphoning the blood away to see if Hope had had an effect.

Fleur broke into refreshed tears at how the slashes were smaller in diameter. "Thank you!" she cried and Hope gave her a small smile before Madam Pomfrey could tend to the burn, healing it in a second and giving her a reproachful look.

And then Hope left them all alone to move down the steps back towards the grounds where the
spikes she had created from the earth still were, one body of a Death Eater still hanging limply from a spike.

Hope avoided looking at it, if she did, she was going to be violently ill on the lawn, and she needed to fix the grounds not throw up on them.

She knelt into the ground, pressing the hand that wasn't still throbbing into the earth and after a short moment the jutting stone began to shift slowly towards the ground until only the corpse was left on the terrace.

Rushing feet had her standing and twisting around to face her opponent.

"Easy! It's just me!"

Hope blinked. "George?" she rasped.

George was looking a bit worse for wear, his hair flying in all directions and his robes falling slightly off him; he had clearly dressed in a hurry.

Hope threw her arms around him, going limp in his arms, exhaustion from the whole night catching up completely with her and she welcomed sleep gratefully.

Hope was nestled in the couch closest to the fire early the next morning, Hermione's legs tangled with hers while Ron was sitting up on the ground where he had spent an uncomfortable night.

They were all wide awake even though it was in the early hours of the next morning, because in Hope's hands was the locket, the Horcrux that had cost a life to find.

"So, that's it?" Ron asked quietly, leaning his head on his arms on the cushion as Hope unlatched the clasp that kept the locket shut.

"Shouldn't you—?" Hermione tried to stop her, but there was no need, because within the locket was a folded scrap of parchment.

"To the Dark Lord," Hope read out the unfamiliar scrawl, "I know I will be dead long before you read this but I want you to know that it was I who discovered your secret. I have stolen the real Horcrux and intend to destroy it as soon as I can.

I face death in the hope that when you meet your match you will be mortal once more.

R.A.B."

"It's a fake?" Ron asked, his eyes wide as he took the locket from Hope and Hermione took the parchment, reading over the words. "Does that mean we don't have to find one?"

"We?" Hope arched an eyebrow.

"You didn't honestly think we'd let you go off on your own, did you?" Hermione asked her. "Without us, you'd likely be dead by the end of the week."

Hope released a small laugh. "I might last a bit longer than a week."

The dubious looks made her hide her laughter.

"But we'll still have to find the real one," Hermione said, "just to be sure it was actually destroyed."
"I suppose we'll have to," Ron grumbled before quieting briefly. "I heard McGonagall asked you to speak today at the funeral."

Hope shrugged. "I might." Her mind was elsewhere; she didn't even know what she was going to say at the funeral.

"Think she knows you two weren't on great terms?" Ron asked her.

"I'm sure it's dawned on her," Hope said.

Hope was not dressed for a funeral. She was wearing the leather jacket Fleur had gifted her two years ago with comfortable jeans, and one of George's old shirts that was far too big for her.

She half thought about not bothering to go up to the podium when the stout little wizard who had been giving the speech before, but then she forced herself to stand before everyone, doing her best to ignore Umbridge and Fudge and Rita Skeeter, all whom she could barely stand and instead focus on the faces of her friends and George who gave her an encouraging look.

"I," Hope began, "wasn't on great terms with Professor Dumbledore, in fact I probably threatened him a few times, but I do that a lot, so..." A few titters of laughter came at that from the people who knew her best. "But I can be honest. Professor Dumbledore was a flawed man, he wasn't perfect, but none of us are. We've all got something, a bad quality, I suppose. Professor Dumbledore's was that he'd forsake things for...the greater good, so to speak. And he's made mistakes, I'm sure he'd be the first to admit that, but he's also had a great many accomplishments...someone once told me that he didn't care if they took away all his titles as long as they kept his Chocolate Frog card." Her eyes found Bill's where he was sitting beside Fleur, scarred but healthy and he managed a slight smile as laughter rippled. "So I thought I'd read what he's got on here... 'Albus Dumbledore: Considered by many the greatest wizard of modern times, Dumbledore is particularly famous for his defeat of the dark wizard Grindelwald in 1945, for the discovery of the twelve uses of dragon's blood, and his work on alchemy with his partner, Nicolas Flamel. Professor Dumbledore enjoys chamber music and tenpin bowling.'"

She got a few laughs at the last bit.

"And I'm sure if he was here he'd have said something completely mad like: nitwit, oddment, and tweak."

Professor McGonagall laughed wetly into her handkerchief as Hope descended, and she wasn't the only one.

Hope sat down beside her Head of House and did something daring and offered her hand to the older and tearful woman, but she took it, squeezing Hope almost painfully with her grip as Dumbledore's body was encased in the white tomb.

"Professor," Hope said once the funeral had ended and people had begun to move away, "I won't be returning for term this fall."

Professor McGonagall wiped her face before expelling a sigh that shook with grief. "I-I had expected it," she choked out, before clearing her throat, "Weasley and Granger have already declined as well."

Hope's lips twisted into a smile as they both stood and Hope hugged her tightly. "Take care of yourself, Professor."
"I should say the same to you," Professor McGonagall reproached her as Hope released her and Hope smiled again as she strode off across the lawn to link hands with George and pull him away from his twin.

"If you're going to try to break up with me, you'll fail at it," George warned her as they came to a stop just before the Black Lake.

"I suppose it would be useless," Hope mumbled, "I'm moving back in with my aunt, it's all been arranged...since most people think I still live there."

That, George had been expecting.

"It's not like you'll be there very long," he said bracingly, tucking a lock of dark hair behind her ear.

"He's going to come after you, you know," Hope told him, cutting across his next words.

His eyes hardened as he lifted a hand to her cheek. "I know," he told her, "but it would take more than a Dark Lord to stop me from loving you."

Her eyes filtered into the bright green he was so fond of and a tear that had clung desperately to her eyelash fell and George smeared it with his thumb.

"I love you," she said, "her voice raw with emotion, "more than all the stars in the sky."

George didn't understand the significance of the phrase but he still leaned forward to kiss her. It was not filled with passion as they usually were, but gentle and light, a promise.

And then he released her, lifting her hand to his lips to kiss her knuckles in a gentlemanly fashion that made her laugh as he let her go.

George was almost immediately replaced by Ron and Hermione.

"Told you it wouldn't work," Ron told her and Hermione nudged him with her elbow.

"Ron!" she admonished, but Hope smiled as she watched the love of her very short life lope back to his friends and brother.

"I should have known he wouldn't agree," Hope laughed, "it kind of makes me a little happy that he didn't."

Ron and Hermione said nothing to that.

"So," Hope said, her eyes flickering between the pair, "you told Professor McGonagall that you aren't coming back."

Hermione gave her a look. "We did tell you that we weren't going to be leaving you on your own, remember?"

"Yes," Hope said, digging her feet into the sandy banks of the lake before walking a bit into the water, allowing it to soak into her shoes through her socks to her toes. "I just didn't think you were going to do it so suddenly."

"Well," Ron said with a helpless shrug, "we figured that we might as well get it over with."

Hope released a short laugh.
"How are the Dursleys going to feel about you moving back in?" Hermione asked Hope apprehensively.

"Well, it's not going to be for very long," Hope said, "and Petunia knows that the wards are stronger if I'm there…I sent her a letter, besides, I'll probably be off visiting the two of you to prepare for Horcrux hunting, I suppose."

"Mum won't be pleased," Ron grinned, "I haven't told her that we've resigned as students."

"Will the school even stay open, though?" Hermione asked.

Hope shrugged. "Dunno. I hope so."

"So," Ron added, "what'll be our first plan of action, and is the DA involved?"

"I suspect it might be," Hope acquiesced as she stepped out of the water to loop her arms with Hermione and Ron's. "But then we'd have to set up headquarters somewhere that's protected and safe."

"Are there many places like that?" Hermione asked.

Hope's grin on her face widened so much that Hermione and Ron thought it might split her face. "I can think of one place that's far better protected than Hogwarts…it's not nearly as big, though." She glanced between them. "Are you sure you want to stick with me?"

As though they could read minds, both Ron and Hermione smacked her on the side of the head.

"Ow!"

"You said to us once before," Hermione said, her eyes glinting dangerously as she gave her friend a fierce glare, "that there was time to turn back if we wanted to. We've had time, haven't we? And we choose you!"

"We're with you whatever happens," Ron agreed.

Hope couldn't help but smile at that, grateful of the boy who had sat with her on the Hogwarts Express and the girl whom she had helped save from a mountain troll.

"Well, come on, then," she said, "we have plans to make."

And together they turned their backs on the Black Lake and made their way arm in arm towards the castle, for it would be a long time indeed before they crossed its threshold again.
The last of Hope's vault had been drained, well, the one that she currently had access to (the others wouldn't be open to her until she turned seventeen and that was two weeks away), and more than half of it had been switched for Muggle money, since it was better to travel and buy things by Muggle means, as uses of magic could still be tracked.

Ron, Hope, and Hermione were all currently holed up in Hermione's room since it was probably the safest place to not be overheard by irritated relatives (such as the Dursleys or the Weasleys).

Hermione looked into the brown bag and stared. "That's a lot of pound notes," she told Hope where she was sprawled on the floor with Crookshanks draped over her leg, purring loudly.

"I do have a lot of money, remember?" Hope reminded her, "the other bag's got the Wizarding currency."

Hermione nodded seriously.

"But where exactly are we going to fit all of this?" Ron questioned, looking over the compiled list that included, just to name a few: clothes, food, books, and money. The list was actually rather long.

Hermione held up a rather inconspicuous beaded bag. "Undetectable Extension Charm," she said proudly.

"You are amazing," Ron told her in awe and Hermione blushed even before he kissed her cheek. But he flew quickly away from her (amidst laughter from both girls) when there was a polite knock on the door before it opened to reveal Hermione's mother bearing a tray of snacks.

"Do I want to know what you three are up to?" Mrs. Granger asked them, taking note of the various parchments and books covering the floor.

"No—"

"Not particularly—"

"It's really boring—"

Mrs. Granger arched an eyebrow that clearly said she didn't believe them, but she still left them with to their business but with some juice and cheese squares that Ron seemed to be fascinated with.

"You were saying something about books," Hope mentioned, "Horcrux books, but I didn't think there were any."

"Well, er, there weren't any in the library," Hermione admitted, pink suffusing across her face. "Dumbledore removed them all, but he-he didn't destroy them."

Ron abandoned the cheese to goggle at his girlfriend as if he had never seen her clearly. "How in the name of Merlin's pants have you managed to get your hands on those Horcrux books?"

"I, well—" Hermione appeared rather flustered. "Dumbledore must have taken them off the shelf after Voldemort read them, but he didn't destroy them, so I just did the Summoning Charm on them after the funeral and they zoomed out of Dumbledore's study window right into the girls' dormitory."

"Is that why you took so long coming down to the common room?" Hope asked.
Hermione nodded her head.

"It just occurred to me that the more we knew about them, the better it would be... and I was alone in there... so I tried, and it worked. They flew straight in through the open window and I packed them," she admitted, "I can't believe Dumbledore would have been angry, it's not as though we're going to use the information to make a Horcrux, is it?"

"Hermione," Ron snorted, "do we look like we're judging you?"

Hope sniggered into her juice. "So, what did you find?"

Hermione stood to pull a book she had hidden under her bed, touching it as little as possible. It was thick and bound with black leather.

"Secrets of the Darkest Art," Hope read out the faded title.

"It's a horrible book," Hermione said with a look of displeasure, "really awful, full of evil magic. I wonder when Dumbledore removed it from the library...if he didn't do it until he was headmaster, I bet Voldemort got all the instruction he needed from here, since it gives explicit instructions on how to make a Horcrux."

"Why did he have to ask Slughorn how to make a Horcrux, then, if he'd already read that?" Ron asked, eyeing the book warily.

"That was about what would happen if you split your soul seven ways," Hope corrected.

"If you do all that, you know, split your soul and hide the piece an object...can you even put yourself back together?" Ron asked.

Hope shrugged. "I dunno."

"There is actually." Hope wasn't even surprised to discover that Hermione had the answer. "But it would be excruciatingly painful."

"How so?" Hope asked, a frown marring her forehead.

"You've got to really feel what you've done. There's a footnote. Apparently the pain of it can destroy you. I can't see Voldemort attempting it somehow, can you?"

"No," Hope and Ron said at once.

"But how do you destroy them?" Ron added. "It's not like we should just go around carrying bits of Voldemort's soul with us."

"Has the book got anything about that?" Hope asked hopefully. That would certainly make it easier.

"Yes," Hermione said with a grimace, "because it warns Dark wizards how strong they have to make the enchantments on them. From all that I've read, what Hope did to Riddle's diary was one of the few really foolproof ways of destroying a Horcrux."

"A basilisk fang can destroy a Horcrux, but is it the only thing that can?" Hope asked, snagging the cheese cube Ron was reaching for.

"Oh, no," Hermione said, screwing up her face in thought. "But it does have to be something so destructive that the Horcrux can't repair itself. Basilisk venom only has one antidote, and it's incredibly rare—"
"Phoenix tears," Ron agreed. He had been holding Hope when the Fawkes had cried onto her wound, thinking, rightly so, that she was dying.

"Exactly," said Hermione. "Our problem is that there are very few substances as destructive as basilisk venom, and they're all dangerous to carry around with you. That's a problem we're going to have to solve, though, because ripping, smashing, or crushing a Horcrux won't do the trick. You've got to put it beyond magical repair."

"And you're saying once we do that, we destroy the bit of soul?" Hope asked.

"Quite effectively," Hermione agreed.

Ron checked his watch. "Guys, I've only got another forty-five minutes until Dad wants me back…"

"Right," Hermione agreed, "we should get to sorting…I'm thinking no to Defensive Magical Theory."

Hope scowled at the book. "The real question is why didn't you throw that out before sixth year?"

"I can't throw away books!" Hermione sounded horrified as Ron howled with laughter.

Hope knew she'd left something at the flat, several somethings, and all of them books. She'd been putting off visiting her boyfriend because she was basically keeping a very big secret from him and the Order and she wasn't completely certain that Moody wouldn't use her boyfriend to get her to talk.

"How the hell did you get this far back?" Hope grunted to herself as she reached an arm under the couch for the book in question.

She froze suddenly at the sound of a low appreciative whistle behind her. "Very nice…"

Hope groaned loudly. "You're looking at my arse again, aren't you?"

"Is there a way to answer that without getting punched?" George asked her, leaning against the wall, his eyes focused on her bum, ignoring how she flipped the bird at him with one of her hands before she managed to snag the spine and pull the book out with a noise of triumph.

George arched his eyebrow. "All that for a book?" he asked.

"Well," Hope said, running a few fingers through her hair, "you never know, it might be important."

"What's it on?"

"Something," Hope said evasively. "You know, Dark magic and stuff…it might be useful to have…"

"You're trying to run me in circles," George accused her as he pushed off from the wall to walk up to her.

"You're the one asking questions," Hope replied, jutting out her chin defiantly, "did Moody want you to get answers out of me?"

"They all want to know what Dumbledore told you," George admitted carefully, "but I turned him down."

His finger was running along the underside of her arm.
"Oh?" Hope said, startlingly aware of just how close he was to her with his other arm around her waist. "And why's that?"

"You know why," George barely breathed, his lips teasing hers just slightly and Hope swallowed, cursing how badly he affected her still after all this time.

Hope's fingers curled into his hair and she couldn't help but grin. "Is this you being my knight in shining armor?" He always had been protective of her.

"Not really," George said, the blue of his eyes darkening slightly as he leaned down to whisper into her ear. "Knights are honourable, and I've been thinking about doing less than honourable things with you."

"Oh!" Hope burned bright red at his words and she was certain that he could practically feel the heat coming off her skin as he leaned down further to press kisses against the flesh of her jugular.

They had never broached the issue of sleeping together, but Hope would be lying if she said that she didn't dearly want to. She had been in love with George for as long as she could remember and she was going to be legal in a matter of weeks, and then she was going to be gone, off with Hermione and Ron.

"What if," Hope said, her face still a bright beacon, "I was perfectly alright with you doing less than honourable things with me?"

That stalled George and he leaned back to look her in the face, disbelief lining his own. "You're being serious," he said, cupping her chin with his hand.

"Of course I'm being serious," Hope scoffed, standing on her tip toes suddenly to press a kiss under his jaw that she knew he liked. And then another and another before she leaned back exaggerating a pout. "Unless... you don't want me?"

"You know, I was right about you," George decided with a loud groan. "You are a tempting little she-devil!"

"So is that a yes or a no?" Hope asked, before silencing his reply with her lips as he shrugged off his robes.

"Merlin, yes, woman," he groaned against her lips, lifting her by the waist so that she could wrap her legs over his as he struggled to kiss her at the same time as he tried to walk to the bedroom.

They parted briefly as Hope pulled his shirt off his head before returning to kissing as he pressed her back into the mattress. Hope was already breathless enough with anticipation and his kisses were not helping her, but she enjoyed his attention far too much to complain.

She gasped when he released her. "Gods! You've never kissed me like that!"

George smirked roguishly. "I'm guessing you liked it?"

"Mm-hm," Hope hummed, "now get back down here!"

George obliged her, leaning down to kiss her just as deeply as before as though seeking to draw her into him, and Hope didn't mind that at all.

The rest of the night passed in a bit of a blur and Hope's memory for time lapsed somewhere around the time George managed to pull her shirt off, and she definitely lost track by the time their trousers
joined the shirts on the floor.

She was sure she going to be hoarse the next day from all the noise she had made the previous night, and sore beyond belief, but that was not something she thought about particularly in the throes of passion.

Hope was content to lie in George's arms just for that night, feeling protected and safe for what felt like the first time in a very long time.

And at long last, Hope allowed herself to close her eyes and let sleep take her once more, dreaming of the scene she had seen in the Mirror of Erised so long ago, of the boy with her hair and George's eyes.

"Are you sure this is the right place?" Ron called down from where he was standing on a hill ahead of Hermione and Hope. They were deep in the Forest of Morea, searching for the safe place that they would be staying in after leaving the Burrow (if things went according to plan, but they usually didn't).

"Yeah!" Hope called up to him, consulting the map that detailed the area surrounding them. "We've just got to reach the edge of the cliff before we head down, there's a passage there."

"Did you enjoy your time with George?" Hermione asked innocently and Hope stiffened. Hermione gave her an unsurprised look at how Hope had reacted. "Hope, I'm not blind, and you're walking stiffly…"

Hope blushed. "I did enjoy my time with George, thank you very much," she sniffed.

"Good thing Ron isn't down here, or he'd pitch a fit," Hermione said conversationally.

"I can't believe I'm having this conversation with you of all people," Hope groaned.

"Are you calling me a prude?" Hermione demanded, but her eyes were glinting playfully.

"What? No, no!" Hope quickly shook her head. "But…you know…shouldn't you be asking what I was thinking or if I used protection?"

"I know exactly what you were thinking," Hermione retorted wryly, "and I'm going to assume you're still on that contraceptive potion."

"I am," Hope grumbled, huffing in irritation and Hermione sniggered.

"I'm not going to judge you," she decided, "I think we've all got enough on our plates, besides… George does wonders on your personality!"

And then she grinned ducking away and Hope thought about it for a second before her eyebrow twitched and she raced after her friend. "Oi! That was an insult, wasn't it? Hermione!"

Hermione sniggered as Hope caught up to them as they stared over the edge of the cliff to the water below.

"Didn't you almost drown in that?" Ron asked her.

"Good times, good times," Hope agreed before crooking her fingers at the pair. "Come on, this way."
"Wouldn't it be better to just go in through the front door?" Hermione asked as they descended the rocky slope towards the bank of the lake.

"You don't have the right blood for it," Hope told them, "only blood relatives of Slytherin are allowed through the front gate."

Her boots sloshed in the wet dirt as they reached the bottom. "Which means we'll have to take the secret passage in."

"Is this passage underground?" Ron asked, kicking a bit of muck off his shoe as moved towards dryer earth.

"I suppose it depends on what you view as underground," Hope had to concede, holding up the map once again for reference. "It's close now."

Ron frowned upwards. "How big did you say this place was?" he asked.

"The size of a small castle," Hope said, "but you won't be able to see it, Pithos is well hidden. You can only see it if you know about it."

"We know about it," Ron pointed out.

"If you know about it and are a blood relative," Hope corrected herself. "Which means Tom won't be able to find us."

"How do you know he doesn't know about it?" Hermione asked with a light frown.

"Because Salazar said I was the first person into the antechamber in the Chamber of Secrets," Hope said as they came to a stop on the opposite side of the chasm. She handed the map to Hermione as she felt against the rocks. "And the map was hidden there, remember? Hermione found it."

"Ah, here it is!" She grasped and pulled and Ron and Hermione jumped back at a cracking sound.

Hope stepped back to see a bit of the cliff-side shift as if opening a door and she looked back towards Hermione and Ron. "Come on, you two! Where's your sense of adventure?"

"I think you've got enough for all of us, I think," Hermione told her faintly as Hope fished a miniature torch out of her pocket, small enough to fit in her hand (since she couldn't use Lumos like the other two with the Trace still on her).

"You guys are no fun," Hope grumbled, climbing inside. "We haven't got all day!"

Two lights shone brightly in the tunnel as three moved carefully through it until they came to its end.

"It's a dead end?" Ron asked in dismay, staring at the flat slate of a rock before them.

"Don't be ridiculous," Hope said, taking back the map briefly before shining her light around the stone as though searching for something.

"There!" Hermione said suddenly, pointing her lit wand towards the where she could see a carved snake.

Hope knelt in the ground so that she was level with the snake. It wasn't a handle or anything like that, so Hope stood up again, the Parseltongue curling her tongue. "Open!"

The stone shuddered and melted away at the word, revealing another passageway.
"I'm starting to get a fear of long, dark tunnels," Ron whispered as Hermione slipped her hand into his.

"Why is it that no one appreciates my adventurous nature?" Hope complained to no one as she walked until her feet met a spiralling staircase. Hermione and Ron followed her up it until they came to a stop once more as Hope turned a wheel on the ceiling, a wheel that looked similar to the ones on Muggle bank vaults, before pushing it open and pulling herself up into a brightly lit room.

Ron followed her quickly, holding a hand out to Hermione to pull her up and they couldn't help but gaze around in wonder. There was something about the place that was so much greater than Hogwarts ever could have been.

Beautiful Greek pillars held the ceiling up and several staircases spun around from the main level and far, far upwards. Light filtered in through the windows, both stained glass and not, casting dancing colours across the floor and walls.

"It's beautiful," Hermione hardly dared to utter as she twisted around to take everything in.

"Isn't it?" Hope asked, beaming brightly. "I've never been inside, but I think there are three floors, so that leaves lots of room, and there's got to be a massive library!"

Ron snorted at how Hermione perked up at the mention of 'library'. "Library?" she asked eagerly. "Well, then, let's go exploring!" She tugged on Ron with one arm and Hope with the other as they began their exploration of the place that Salazar Slytherin had once called home.

The level beneath the main one held the baths (which looked vaguely reminiscent of hot springs, if you asked Hope, who had to resist the urge to leap down into one, after heating the water, of course) and the kitchens. The main level held little more than a commons area, several suits of armor, and a great, long table, and the library itself, which had shelves reaching so high that Hermione was going to need a ladder to reach them (luckily, there was one resting by one of the shelves). Hope had to manually pull Hermione away, with the assistance of Ron, in order to get her to explore the rest of Pithos.

There wasn't much to the rest of Pithos, though, other than a large number of rooms, that is.

Hope pressed open one door cautiously to look inside, impressed by how clean the castle was even though it had not had any occupants for many centuries, but she suspected that might have had more to do with the magic than anything else.

The room smelled like salt from the sea, and it was clearly the theme of the room with various blues and greens and a huge anchor sitting in a corner like a trophy. Hope arched an eyebrow but then she saw the empty cradle by the window.

This room must have belonged to Nelda, the eldest child and only daughter of Salazar and Morea.

_Nelda was wild-spirited and the sea had been calling her name since she was young enough to understand what the sea was and old enough to swim. As soon as her magical core had matured she had disappeared into the ocean like a Nereid seeking Poseidon. She returned years later, a calmer more aware of the world woman than I had expected, Salazar had written. The spirit of the sea was with her as much as the calling of the earth, and it was those two qualities that led her heart to Edric._

Hope's fingers brushed against the spiral carvings that were spread across the surface of the great chest that rested at the end of the large bed. She paused for a brief moment to deliberate, and then she
chose to flip the trunk open.

The clothes were remarkably similar to that of which Hope expected a pirate to wear (Hope couldn't help but snort a little at that; she was related to a former pirate! Well, it certainly explained why her family was so rich); loose shirts of varying colors with sleeves that belled out, dark breeches, and stiff binding of sorts that reminded Hope a little of a corset, which she had –thankfully– never had the opportunity to wear.

Underneath Hope found another prize, two blades shaped like snakes, beautifully crafted and with such detail. They were sisters to the knife she had discovered at Hogwarts the previous year that she knew to belong to her grandmother, Morea.

"Hope!" Ron's voice called suddenly, jerking her out of her trance and Hope quickly returned the blades to the chest, latching just as quickly. "Hermione! Where are you? We need to start heading back, or Mum'll know something is up."

Hope pulled the door shut behind her as she followed the direction that his voice had come from stepping lightly down the curving staircase until she was one the main floor once more.

"Where does your mum think you are right now, anyways?" Hope asked him, her lips twitching slightly in amusement as Hermione rushed out of the library, clearly having lost track of time (Hope sniggered at how she gazed longingly behind her, obviously wanting to return to whatever she had been reading).

"She thinks I'm out with Fred and George," Ron said, his lips twitching slightly. "If I told her that I was meeting you two, she'd probably have sent some of the Order members to tail us."

"Probably," Hermione said and Hope hummed with agreement.

"So," Hope said, waving a hand around the castle, "what did you two think? Good place to hide out?"

"Definitely!" Hermione said, beaming brightly.

"It helps that there's so much space," Ron said, bobbing his head, "its not cramped like Grimmauld Place…and it's a lot more liveable." Grimmauld Place hadn't cleaned up very well, and Hope knew it wasn't being cared for very well with Kreacher at Hogwarts.

"Good," Hope said with a grin, "now, let's get you back before the Mother Hen becomes too overbearing."

"A few years too late for that," Ron said and Hermione stifled her amusement.

It was almost easy to forget the reasons that might lead them to hiding out in the Pithos, such as being on the run from Death Eaters, and it was something that would soon be brought home to the trio.
The Dursleys were as difficult as she had expected them to be, though she had told them everything up front, so it wasn’t as though they were walking around blind. Hope wanted to bang her head against the wall when Vernon had said they weren’t moving because this was clearly a plan to get the house; Hope had to point out that she had a flat with her boyfriend and a house that her godfather had left her, so there wasn’t really a reason for her taking the house.

In the end, it was Dudley who convinced them, and for once in Hope's life, she was grateful for him.

And then the doorbell rang and the moment was over.

Hope opened the door to reveal two familiar figures through their association with the Order. Hestia was just as pink-cheeked as she had been when they had first met, and Dedalus was as excitable as he had been when he bowed to her in a shop as a child.

"Hope Potter!" Dedalus cried, exaggerating a bow as though Hope was royalty. "An honour as ever!"

Hope couldn’t help but give them both a smile. "Thank you both for doing this, I suspect that my relatives might be a bit hard to handle."

"Not at all," Hestia assured her as Hope allowed them to pass her to head into the sitting room where the three Dursleys were still situated.

"Good day to you, Hope Potter’s relatives!" Dedalus said exuberantly, beaming at them all, though they clearly weren’t sure how to react to that. "I see you are packed and ready. Excellent! The plan, as Hope has told you, is a simple one. We shall be leaving before Hope does. Due to the danger of using magic in your house –Hope being still underage it could provide the Ministry with an excuse to arrest her –we shall be driving, say, ten miles or so before Disapparating to the safe location we have picked out for you. You know how to drive, I take it?"

The last question was directed toward Vernon who blustered at being asked whether or not he could drive, of all things. Of course he could drive!

"Very clever of you, sir, very clever," Dedalus said with a wink, clearly thinking that Vernon was taking to him, but Hope very much doubted that with the look on Vernon’s reddening face. "I personally would be utterly bamboozled by all those buttons and knobs."

And then Dedalus turned round to Hope. "You, Hope, will wait here for your guard. There has been a little change in the arrangements—"

"Guard?" Hope repeated, her eyes narrowing and the wand holster on her arm feeling uncomfortably tight and the metal around her fingers that made her two rings feeling very cold. "Wasn’t Mad-Eye going to Side Along-Apparate with me?"

"Can't do it," Hestia said curtly, her lips in a grim line. "Mad-Eye will explain."

Hope eyed the pair shrewdly. "This doesn’t have anything to do with why Hermione took my motorbike and told me she was going to add a few enchantments to it?"

Her friend had been very evasive about the matter and Hope had had to take a cab back to Number Four.
"It might," Dedalus conceded before Hestia elbowed him in the side. "They'll explain…and we're operating under a very tight schedule. We are attempting to time your departure from the house with your family's Disapparition, Hope, thus the charm breaks the moment you all head for safety." Hope nodded as he twisted around to speak to the Dursleys. "Well, are we all packed and ready to go?"

It dawned suddenly on the four that were related that they were expected to say goodbye and it was hard to tell which of them wanted to do it even less than the others.

Surprisingly, Vernon took initiative. "Well," he coughed, "this is goodbye, then, girl."

"I suppose it is," Hope said a bit awkwardly. She had been expecting Petunia to say something before they made to leave the house, but she seemed to be avoiding looking at Hope for too long.

"I don't understand," Dudley said suddenly, pointing at Hope in incomprehension. "Why isn't she coming with us?"

Hope choked, coughing to clear the air that had caught in her throat. "Er, Dudley, I've got my own plans for keeping myself safe."

"But where're you going to go?"

Petunia and Vernon mouthed wordlessly at their son who had never shown an inkling of interest in his cousin's safety.

"But surely you know where your niece is going?" Hestia asked suddenly, completely startled by the lack of attention Hope was receiving from her relatives.

"Certainly we know," Vernon scoffed, his small eyes scrutinizing her. "She's off with some of your lot, isn't she? Right, Dudley, let's get in the car, you heard the man, we're in a hurry."

"Off with some of our lot?" Hestia demanded, her eyes flashing, but Hope was unfazed. "Don't these people realize what you've been through? What danger you are in? The unique position you hold in the hearts of the anti-Voldemort movement?"

"Well, not really," Hope acquiesced. "I think they rather think I'm not worth much, actually—"

"I don't think you're not worth much," Dudley told her to her continued surprise.

Hope raised her eyes to meet his, surprised at his words. It wasn't as though they'd talked much, if at all, since the Dementor incident before her fifth year. She had thought he was a great deal afraid of her still, but apparently not.

"Thanks, Dudley," she said finally.

"You saved my life," he said, regaining a bit of his voice.

"Well, just a little," Hope admitted.

Vernon cleared his throat uncomfortably from the doorway. "Are we going or not?" he demanded. "I thought we were on a tight schedule!"

"Yes—we are," Dedalus agreed, stepping forward from where he had been watching the exchange between Hope and Dudley in what must have been half-fascination, half-befuddlement. "We really must be off. Hope—"

Hope took his hand when he offered it.
“—good luck. I hope we meet again. The hopes of the Wizarding world rest upon your shoulders.”

"Lovely," Hope said dryly, earning a small giggle from Hestia as she grasped her hand as well.

"Farewell, Hope," Hestia said. "Our thoughts go with you."

"You two look after yourselves," Hope said before nodding towards her aunt, uncle, and cousin. "And keep an eye on them."

"We'll watch them like a hawk," Hestia promised before following Dedalus out into the fading sunlight.

This left Hope with Dudley and Petunia, and it was Dudley that held out his hand to her.

"You sure you're not suffering from something?" Hope couldn't help but ask. "This is the most you've ever been civil with me."

Dudley gave a careless shrug at that. "Well, see you, Hope."

Hope shook his hand a bit cautiously. "I guess that all depends…but you take care of yourself, Big D."

And then Petunia was the last one left. Hope wondered if she was going to say anything to her when she turned around.

I guess not.

"Don't die," Petunia said suddenly and Hope looked up and grinned, though her aunt could not see it.

"You know me, Petunia, I don't really die easily."

Petunia's lips twitched briefly, but Hope did not see the nearly-there smile as she leaned against the doorway to watch her relatives drive away with their guards in tow.

It was strange how it almost made her sad to see them go.

The first thing she heard that signified the arrival of her guard was the loud hum of the motorbike's engine. Hope opened the door to see Hagrid sitting astride her magically-enlarged bike (that better be reversible!) and several people dismounting from brooms and Thestrals.

She could make out Hermione, Ron, Fred, George, Mr. Weasley, Bill, Fleur, Moody, Kingsley, Tonks, Remus, and, curiously enough, Mundungus Fletcher, and embraced most of them (avoiding Moody and Mundungus for good measure) as they entered into the empty sitting room.

"You couldn't just say you were taking the bike for this?" Hope demanded of Hermione. "What on earth did you do to it?"

Mr. Weasley coughed uncomfortably behind her. "I'm afraid that was me," he admitted, "but don't worry, I'll have it back to normal in no time." After tonight, he meant.

"Kingsley," Hope added as George wrapped his arm securely around her shoulders. "Aren't you supposed to be guarding the Muggle Prime Minister?" The Auror had been all over the news as the head of security for the prime minister.
"He can get along without me for one night," Kingsley assured her with a small smile. "You're more important."

Hope couldn't help but laugh at that as George kissed her cheek.

She arched an eyebrow at him. "Is this why you've been all secretive about how I was leaving here?" she asked him. "Because you knew Mad-Eye wasn't going to be able to do the Apparition?"

"Maybe…" George wheedled and Hope rolled her eyes for good measure.

"Alright, alright, we'll have time for a cozy catch-up later," snarled Moody over the noises all their voices together created before he could turn to Hope and begin to explain things. "As Dedalus probably told you, we had to abandon Plan A. Pius Thicknesse has gone over, which gives us a big problem. He's made it an imprisonable offense to connect this house to the Floo Network, place a Portkey here, or Apparate in or out. All done in the name of your protection, to prevent You-Know-Who getting in at you. Absolutely pointless, seeing as your mother's charm does that already. What he's really done is to stop you getting out of here safely."

"Well, isn't that just so sweet of him," Hope drawled sarcastically and a few people sniggered. Moody ignored her.

"Second problem: You're underage, which means you've still got the Trace on you, the spell that detects magical activity around under-seventeens, the way the Ministry finds out about underage magic! If you, or anyone around you, casts a spell to get you out of here, Thicknesse is going to know about it, and so will the Death Eaters. We can't wait for the Trace to break, because the moment you turn seventeen you'll lose all the protection your mother gave you. In short, Pius Thicknesse thinks he's got you cornered good and proper."

"Which is why we've got a motorbike, Thestrals, and brooms," Hope surmised.

"Correct," Moody nodded, "we're going to be using means of transport that the Trace can't detect. Now, your mother's charm will only break under two conditions: when you come of age, or you no longer call this place home. You and your aunt and uncle are going your separate ways tonight, in the full understanding that you're never going to live together again, correct?"

Hope glanced to George out of the corner of her eye, seeing how he was fighting to keep a straight face. Not everyone in the room had been aware that Hope and George had been living together for the past year.

"Yes," Hope said.

"So this time, when you leave, there'll be no going back, and the charm will break the moment you get outside its range," Moody told her in his growling voice, "We're choosing to break it early, because the alternative is waiting for You-Know-Who to come and seize you the moment you turn seventeen."

"The one thing we've got on our side is that You-Know-Who doesn't know we're moving you tonight. We've leaked a fake trail to the Ministry: They think you're not leaving until the thirtieth. However, this is You-Know-Who we're dealing with, so we can't rely on him getting the date wrong; he's bound to have a couple of Death Eaters patrolling the skies in this general area, just in case. So, we've given a dozen different houses every protection we can throw at them. They all look like they could be the place we're going to hide you, they've all got some connection with the Order: my house, Kingsley's place, Molly's Auntie Muriel's –you get the idea."
Hope arched an eyebrow at this, beginning to see a few issues with his plan.

"You'll be going to Tonks' parents. Once you're within the boundaries of the protective enchantments we've put on their house you'll be able to use a Portkey to the Burrow. Any questions?" His blue eye whizzed around in its socket.

"That's all good and well," Hope said slowly, "but there's only one of me, and my look is a bit distinctive—when I don't change it, I mean—(Tonks with her pink hair winked at her), the Death Eaters will still know it's me, even if I'm surrounded by you lot."

"Ah, I forget to mention the key point," Moody said with a wide grin that made his face a bit dangerous-looking in the light of the lamps. "Fourteen of us won't be flying to Tonks' parents'. There will be seven Hope Potters moving through the skies tonight, each of them with a companion, each pair heading for a different safe house."

Moody pulled out his familiar flask and Hope recognized as the one Barty Crouch Jr. had once drank Polyjuice Potion out of.

"Are you completely mad?!" she demanded, finally detaching herself from George. "Polyjuice Potion! No! Absolutely not!"

"I told you she'd take it well," Hermione said with a sigh and Ron was rather unsurprised by her reaction.

"You think I'm just going to give you my hair and let you go out there with my face and risk your neck by pretending to be me—!" Hope said, aghast and adamant.

"Well, none of us really fancy it, Hope," Fred assured her. "Imagine if I had to tell Angie that she had to marry me with your face."

Hope glared, unamused by the joke, even though a few laughed at it.

She uncrossed her arms. "Well, you're not getting any of my hair, so I guess you're out of luck."

"Because there's obviously no chance at all of us getting a bit of your hair unless you cooperate," George replied with a snort.

"George…" Hope warned.

"Yeah, thirteen of us against one bird who's not allowed to use magic; we've got no chance," Fred added, grinning widely at her. "Because we're obviously not as strong as you, it explains a lot, really."

"Really witty, Fred," Hope said, her eyes narrowing. "You're hilarious."

"If it has to come to force, then it will," Moody told her darkly. "Everyone here's overage, Potter, and they're all prepared to take the risk. Let's have no more arguments. Time's wearing on. I want a few of your hairs, girl, now."

"If any of you die for this," Hope growled, "I reserve the right to say 'I told you so' to your corpses."

Ron hid his snort behind his hand as Hope pulled two flyaway strands from her head, folding them a few times so that they could fit into his flask. A few moments later it appeared as though they would be drinking molten silver.
Hope would have felt sorry for them if she wasn't so irritated.

"Right then, fake Potters line up over here, please," Moody told them, sloshing the silver mixture around in his flask as he moved.

Hermione, Ron, Fred, George, Fleur, and Mundungus all lined up to drink the potion, and Hope felt it was a rather surreal experience to watch them all turn into her.

A thought suddenly occurred to Hope and she glared at Moody. "You better be transfiguring their clothing," she snapped, "or, so help me Mad-Eye, I'm going to curse you until you're blind in your only good eye!"

Moody chuckled lightly at the threat, but he did as she asked, and a second later the other Hope Potters were wearing exactly what the real one was.

"I have a new appreciation for you, Hope," Ron told her seriously, "being this short—"

"And here I thought you were going to mention the breasts," George said, motioning towards his with a wink to his girlfriend.

Hope slapped a hand to her madly blushing face. "First of all," she said, carefully controlling herself, "I am not that short—"

"Shorter than us," Fred and George said one as Fleur walked back and forth in her newly transfigured clothes, while Hermione leaned back to watch the show.

Tonks hit Mundungus as he tried to look down his shirt with a glare on her face.

"Secondly," Hope said hotly, "there is nothing wrong with –that!"

The boys sniggered (except for Ron who kept respectfully out of the argument for fear of Hermione's anger) and George gave her a look that said quite clearly, "I would know all about that."

Hope's face enflamed further and the adults allowed themselves a few chuckles as the rucksacks and owl-filled cages were handed out; Hedwig eyed the fake owls with a look that could only be described as disgust.

If Hope had known the plan, she would've sent the owl out for the Burrow the other night, but, oh well.

"Now," Moody said once everyone had what they needed. "The pairs will be as follows: Mundungus will be travelling with me, by broom—"

"Why'm I with you?" Mundungus demanded, straightening the leather jacket that must have been uncomfortable to him but perfectly fine to Hope.

"Because I need to keep an eye on you," Moody snapped. He didn't bother to turn around, but his eye swivelled as though looking through his skull at him. "Arthur and Fred—"

"I'm George," he said when Moody gestured toward him.

"No, you're not," Hope said in annoyance. Even when the twins were her it wasn't difficult to tell them apart by subtle cues. "That's Fred, the one on the far left is George."

George winked and gave a flirty wave.
"Enough messing around!" Moody snapped at Fred, who held up his hands in surrender. "George, you're with Remus. Miss Delacour—"

"I'm taking Fleur on a Thestral," Bill told him, throwing a fond glance to his fiancée. "She's not that fond of brooms."

Fleur beamed at him, her eyes soft in a moonstruck expression that Hope wondered for a moment if she'd ever given George.

"Miss Granger with Kingsley, again by Thestral—"

Hermione expelled a silent sigh of relief at that as she went to stand beside the dark-skinned Auror.

"Which leaves you and me, Ron!" Tonks beamed at the youngest Weasley male, and Ron gave her a weak sort of grin, no doubt wondering if her clumsiness affected her while she was in the air.

"An' you're with me, Hope. That alrigh'?'" Hagrid asked her. "We'll be on the bike, brooms an' Thestrals can't take me weight, see. Not a lot o' room on the seat with me on it, though, so you'll be in the sidecar."

"Wonderful," Hope said, looking out the window to see her expanded motorbike.

"We think the Death Eaters will expect you to be on a broom," Moody told her, "given your Quidditch abilities. Snape's had plenty of time to tell them everything about you he's never mentioned before, so if we do run into any Death Eaters, we're betting they'll choose one of the Potters who looks at home on a broomstick. Alright then," he straightened up, pulling the empty rucksack that had once held fake owls in cages and other rucksacks over his shoulder as he stumped off towards the door, "I make it three minutes until we're supposed to leave. No point locking the back door, it won't keep the Death Eaters out when they come looking. Come on..."

Less than three short minutes later, Hope had her rucksack and stowed under her legs with Hedwig who looked a little more than vaguely uncomfortable. Hope felt the same way.

"Arthur's done a bit o' tinkerin'," Hagrid told her once she was situated, removing her wand from the holster and holding it tightly in her grip. "It's got a few tricks up its sleeves now. Tha' one was my idea." Hope frowned at the new purple button that had been added in the day she hadn't had the bike in possession; she supposed that if it saved her life then she couldn't really complain.

"Please be careful, Hagrid," Mr. Weasley requested with Fred standing beside him, his wand out as well, like everyone getting ready to leave Number Four. "I'm still not sure that was advisable and it's certainly only to be used in emergencies."

Well, that wasn't very promising, was it?

"Alright, then." Moody said, checking his watch to see if they were in the clear yet. "Everyone ready, please. I want us all to leave at exactly the same time or the whole point of the diversion's lost."

The motorbike roared into life, sputtering briefly before it managed it.

"Good luck, everyone. See you all in about an hour at the Burrow. On the count of three. One ... two...THREE."

And as they all rose up into the air, someone cried out an alarm and Hope's eyes jumped to the air above them where more than twenty figures on brooms cloaked in dark robes hovered.
"Forward, Hagrid!" she yelled, and the half-giant took that under advisement, shooting forward and then up instead of rising straight into the battle.

A flash of green just missed her and Hagrid did a barrel roll that nearly unseated her but caused Hedwig enough discomfort that she managed to peck the latch open and flutter out into the air.

She could barely make out the yells and curses that were thrown around the others.

_Don't think about that_, Hope reminded herself, _don't think about that. You've got three on your tail_.

"Bombarda!"

One of the Death Eaters was blown back by the explosion, losing his broom with a cry as he flailed his arms and legs, falling down and down until Hope lost track of him.

Hedwig ducked under a flash of green aimed towards her as she flew above the motorbike.

Hope chanced a glance back. The others had raced off in different directions with a few cloaked figures tailing them much like they were tailing Hope and Hagrid.

"Veer left, Hagrid!" she yelled and a violent red slash just barely missed them, or so Hope thought when she cried out in pain as though something had cut into her shoulder.

"Sorry 'bout that!" Hagrid yelled over the engine.

"Drive! I've got them!" Hope called, twisting around to throw another curse. "Stupefy!"

Another had joined them to replace the one that had fallen and all three flew in different directions to avoid it.

"Hang on, Hope, this'll do it for 'em!" Hagrid pressed on one of the other new buttons, this one bright green and the smoke out of the exhaust pipe solidified into a wall that one of the Death Eaters collided into with a sickening crunch.

But this did not stop the other two.

"Avada Kedavra!" Hope yelled, the spell just missing one of them as Hagrid flew into a thick cloud, guided through only by Hedwig in front of him. "Stupefy!"

Her stunner met with a jet of green, creating an explosion of sparks.

"Hold on, Hope!" Hagrid roared as he pressed a finger to the one button that Mr. Weasley had said not to use unless for emergencies. Hope now knew why.

From the exhaust this time came a great burst of flame as hot as dragon's breath (and Hope knew all about that) that acted both to deter the remaining Death Eaters and it forced them forward faster than the bike was capable of going at its top speed.

The sidecar shook violently.

"HAGRID!"

He didn't respond fast enough so she had to jump from the sidecar to his back, clinging to his coat, she didn't look up in time to see the flash of green heading towards her.

But Hedwig did.
Hope glanced back in time to see her beloved owl collide with green and her heart stopped in her chest.

"No!" she screamed as Hedwig fell limply through the air. "No! HEDWIG!"

But it was no use.

Hope glared viciously at the one who had thrown the curse. "Avada Kedavra!" This time, the curse hit him in the face and he fell out of the air, leaving only one.

Hope raised her hand, and the rune for "protect" warmed on her palm as two more Death Eaters joined. "Protect!"

A bright blue shield buffeted around the motorbike like a dome, protecting them from harm when a voice said, "That's her, it's her, it's the real one!"

"Fuck!" Hope swore as she dropped the shield to see that the Death Eaters had vanished; that didn't bode well for anyone.

"Hope, what's happened?" Hagrid yelled back to her. "Where've they gone?"

Hope opened her mouth to say she didn't know, glancing around feverishly in case the Death Eaters came back, but there was nothing but the empty air.

How odd.

"They're just gone," Hope said, completely befuddled. "Are we close yet?"

"Nearly there," Hagrid told her, "Hold on!"

Hope jolted in what little of a seat she had as the fire exploded out of the exhaust pipe once more, shooting them so far forward that Hope almost fell off, and would have done so if not for her stubborn grip on the bike.

"We're nearly there, Hope!" Hagrid shouted from in front of her. "We've nearly made it!"

The fire faded and the bike began to drop in altitude, getting slowing closer to the ground, but still being far enough away that if they fell they might cause serious damage to themselves.

A jet of red light soared over her head to connect with Hagrid's back and the large man slumped forward in his seat as they began to plummet towards the ground in earnest.

"Oh, shite!" Hope manoeuvred herself so that she could grip the handles, Hagrid pushed slightly back in the seat to accommodate for her. She pulled up, forcing the bike to level out when a white-hot pain burned across her forehead as though a brand had been pressed to it, Hope could barely see…

Her eyes widened. She must be seeing things, the pain was messing with her head, she decided as she looked to her left. There was no possible way that Tom could by flying without the use of a broom or anything similar.

But he was.

Hope could clearly see his pale face, his red eyes gleaming in triumph as he raised his wand to her with Hope in far too much pain to move…
A green flash missed her, connecting with the metal of one of the handles, causing sparks to fly off.

"Mine!" Tom screamed, his voice eager. At long last, he would be able to kill her, his sworn enemy…

Tears leaked out of Hope's eyes at the effort of keeping them slightly open, turning Tom into a blur of black, white, and red. This did not help.

"Avada—"

Her wand warmed in her hand, pulling her so that she could point it at her deranged cousin-of sorts, shooting golden fire from the tip. Hope blinked, her sight clearing a little as she stared to see the flames push Tom back with an enraged cry of "NO!"

But before he could do anything else, Hope and the still unconscious Hagrid passed through a barrier and Hope could no longer control the bike which was trembling with strain.

It crashed into the ground and sent her flying, her consciousness fading with the loud crack and the pain that bloomed in her leg.
Andromeda Tonks heard them crash before her husband. She saw how the huge mass that couldn't have been anyone but Hagrid lay with the motorbike that had once been her cousin's while the thin form had been thrown violently to the side, staying limp against the ground, unmoving.

"They've crashed, Ted!" she yelled to her husband. "They've crashed in the garden!"

She was out the door faster than he was, on far more nimble feet, reaching the smaller form first.

Andromeda recognized Hope Potter easily with her signature long dark red hair falling out of its plait and the lightning bolt scar on her forehead. She was unconscious but breathing shallowly, mud splattered across her clothes and skin.

Andromeda expelled a small sigh as Ted ran to where Hagrid lay, pulling out her wand to do a quick diagnostic spell over her body before murmuring a spell that straightened the broken bone in her leg and soothed the bruised ribs with a casual flick.

It also had the unintended effect of awakening her.

Hope's eyes flashed open and she flung herself back, wandless and in the presence of an unfamiliar someone.

"Calm down," Andromeda said, "I'm Dora's mother, Andromeda."

"Andromeda?" Hope gasped her name out, her heart still beating frantically in her chest as she searched for her wand.

"Your wand's over here, lass," Ted said, lumbering over to meet her, holding the carved wood gently in his hands as he held it out to her. Hope practically snatched it out of his hands as Andromeda moved to check over the half-giant.

"Hagrid?" she asked breathlessly, still winded from the fall.

"Hagrid's fine," Ted told her as he took her hands, helping to pull the almost-seventeen-year-old girl into a standing position. "The wife's seeing to him now. How are you feeling? Anything else broken? I'm Ted, by the way, Ted Tonks, Dora's father."

Hope blinked owlishly, the stars dancing before her eyes in a dizzying fashion before they managed to stay still.

"Easy, now," Ted warned her, keeping a careful hand on her shoulder in case she fell back to the earth. "That was a nasty crash you just had. What happened, anyway? Something go wrong with the bike? Arthur Weasley overstretch himself again, him and his Muggle contraptions?"

Hope shook her head, regaining a bit of her breath. "It was an ambush, Death Eaters, we had five on our tail (or was it more?), killed about three…"

"Death Eaters?" Ted demanded. "What d'you mean, Death Eaters? I thought they didn't know you were being moved tonight, I thought—"

"Oh, they knew," Hope said darkly as she tripped over to where Hagrid was finally coming round as Ted ran inside to grab the Portkey.
"He'll be fine," Andromeda told her and Hope swallowed thickly when she met her eyes, because the likeness between Andromeda and her sister Bellatrix was startling, but Andromeda's features were kinder, softer, and a bit more delicate.

"Hope!" Hagrid cried, gripping her so tightly that Hope swore that her ribs were bruised once more. "Blimey! I thought we were both goners!"

"Nearly," Hope told him wryly, not even bothering to cover up her relief.

"What about Dora?" Andromeda asked, having been restraining herself from asking until now, when her desire to hear if her daughter was alive was far too great. "You said you were ambushed; where is Nymphadora?"

Hagrid shrugged helplessly.

"We couldn't see very well," Hope said, "she might have made it to the safe house…my friend Ron was with her."

She had nothing that could assure them and she could see the worry and fear on both their faces. Hope did not even know if her friend was alive, let alone her distant cousin.

"We'll send word," Hope blurted, "once we get back to the Burrow, I'm sure Tonks-Dora is fine—"

"Dora'll be okay, 'Dromeda," Ted agreed, squeezing his wife's tense shoulders soothingly. "She knows her stuff, she's been in plenty of tight spots with the Aurors." Ted held out the Portkey to Hope and Hagrid, which happened to be a small hairbrush.

"This Portkey'll take you to the Burrow," he told them as Hagrid pulled himself into a standing position with difficulty. "It's supposed to leave in three minutes, if you want to take it."

Hope nodded, returning her wand to its holster, and hoisting the rucksack more firmly on her shoulders as Andromeda turned on her heel to return to the house to fear for her daughter and perhaps hide her face.

"Thank you," Hope said to Ted, "for everything."

He gave her a slight smile. "Don't worry about it." He gave Hagrid a look that might've meant "Keep an eye on her," but Hope couldn't have been sure.

"Wait a moment," Hagrid said, making Hope pause and look at him. She had everything, so they couldn't be missing anything, apart from the bike that would need serious repairs before it could be used again. "Hope, where's Hedwig?"

Hope blinked rapidly, the tears welling in her eyes against her will. He must not have heard her scream over the sound of the engine, or if he had, it hadn't registered. Her poor, overprotective owl.

"Sh-She's," Hope's voice choked, "she's dead." Her voice was too hollow to belong to Hope. There was no dry sarcasm or wry lilt that her words were often accompanied with. Losing Hedwig stung almost as much as losing Sirius, and she'd known Hedwig more than two years longer.

She wanted to cry, but she could only permit a few tears past and she bowed her head, well aware of Ted's presence as well as Hagrid's.

Hagrid tried to pat her shoulder in a soothing manner but it nearly made Hope's knees buckle from the force of it.
"Never mind," he told her, his black eyes sad. "Never mind. She had a great old life—"

"Hagrid!"

The half-giant just barely managed to get a finger to the Portkey in time for the pair to be pulling into nothing.

Hope's knees collided with the ground and she struggled to right herself as Hagrid pulled her to her feet by the scruff of her neck in time to meet to eyes of Mrs. Weasley and Ginny who had come running out of the Burrow at the sight of the pair.

"Hope?" Mrs. Weasley's eyes frantically traced over Hope's pale cheeks, the ratty plait from which her hair was tumbling out of, the various cuts and bruises she had sustained, as well as the various slices through her jacket's shoulder blade, bleeding seeping into the fabric underneath (but Mrs. Weasley didn't see the blood and Hope had far too much adrenaline pumping through her veins to notice it). "You are the real Hope, aren't you? What happened? Where are the others?"

"What?" Hope asked blankly, looking about as though expecting the other members of the Order and her friends to pop out of the tall grass. "No one else is back yet?"

Fear claimed Mrs. Weasley's face.

"We lost track of everyone," Hope told the two Weasley women, "I don't know how they figured it out, but they knew I was being moved tonight—it was an ambush, we killed about three that were on our tail before Tom got to us—"

Ginny lifted a hand to her to her mouth, her eyes wide and scared. Hope knew that despite everything, Ginny would have preferred to be out there with them, like she had been during that battle in June at the Astronomy Tower, that way she would have at least had information; waiting was worse.

"Well, thank goodness you're alright," Mrs. Weasley said, hugging her briefly before running inside to grab Hagrid a brandy at his request (for medicinal purposes was probably only half the reason he wanted it).

"Ron and Tonks should have been back first," Ginny told her quietly, "but they missed their Portkey, it came back without them." Two objects lay on the ground not far from where Hope and Hagrid had landed, an oil can and an ancient sneaker which she gestured towards next. "And that one should have been Dad and Fred's, they were supposed to be second. You and Hagrid were third and…if they made it, George and Remus ought to be back any minute."

Hope exhaled loudly through her nose, the frantic beating of her heart not helping her nerves in the slightest. No news was better than bad news.

"Mum!" Ginny suddenly screamed and Hope jumped violently at the sight of Remus and George (the Polyjuice and Transfiguration on his clothing having worn off) appearing out of a bright blue light, crumpling to the ground with Remus supporting George.

The blood drained from Hope's face at the sight of the scarlet painted down the side of her boyfriend's neck, pouring from the gaping hole on the side of his face where his ear should have been.

But his ear was gone.
"Ohmigods!" Hope gasped out as she rushed forward to help Remus haul her unconscious boyfriend through the Burrow's door to lay him on the sofa in the sitting room.

Hope made to kneel beside him when Remus grabbed her by her jacket and forced her against the wall, pain shooting through her back from the move.

"What're you doing?" Ginny demanded, aghast, reaching for her wand at the move.

"Oi!" Hagrid cried, just as appalled by Remus' behaviour as he attempted to force his way into the house. "Le' go of her! Le' go of Hope!"

"The first time Hope Potter visited my office at Hogwarts, she gave me something, what was it?" he asked her. "Answer me!"

Dazed from pain and seeing George's wound and the entire events of the night, Hope had to blink a few times to focus.

That had been her first date with George…she'd been rifling through her photo album that Hagrid had given her when she'd seen Remus Lupin's picture in her parents' wedding photo.

"Let me know when you're done with that," she had said after she gave it to him, "I'm going to want it back."

"A-a photo album," Hope managed to choke out before he released her.

"I'm sorry," Remus apologized quickly, "but I had to check. We've been betrayed. Voldemort knew you were being moved tonight and the only people who could have told him were directly involved in the plan. You might have been an impostor."

Hope shook her said, disagreeing. "I don't think so. They may have known what day I was being removed, but Tom only caught up to me when we were almost to the Tonks' place."

"Voldemort caught up with you?" Remus demanded, shocked by this new information. "What happened? How did you escape?"

Hope sighed, glancing beyond Remus to where Mrs. Weasley was attempting to staunch the blood pouring from the hole that had been George's ear.

"I don't know, maybe it was because I was the only Hope Potter using the Killing Curse, or maybe because I was the only one using blood runes," Hope said before pushing past him to kneel beside the sofa, taking George's limp hand in both of hers and pressing kisses to it, blinking harshly.

"Will he be alright?" she asked Mrs. Weasley who gave her a sad look in return.

"I-I don't know," she said helplessly, pressing thick gauze to the wound in an effort to stem the flow of blood when the spell to do so wouldn't work on the injury –no doubt because of the Dark magic.

"There's no chance of regrowing the ear," Hope could hear Remus saying, "not when it's been cursed off." And that meant her blood runes would be out of the question.

Hope's shoulders were trembling, her tears blurring her vision until she couldn't hold them back any longer, a small sob escaping her lips.

She couldn't lose George, not the way she'd lost her parents, Sirius, and Hedwig.

"Georgie?" she whispered numbly, smoothing a few fingers over his clammy cheek. "Wa-Wake up,
He stirred faintly at the sound of her voice, but his eyes did little other than flutter as Mrs. Weasley removed the gauze and siphoned away the blood that had dried on his neck, curling her fingers soothingly into her son's hair.

There were other voices outside now, some of the others must have shown up and then shouting ensued following the kitchen door being forced open.

"I'll prove who I am," Mr. Weasley snapped, "after I've seen my son, now back off if you know what's good for you!"

"Arthur!" Mrs. Weasley cried as her husband came into the room. "Oh, thank goodness!"

"How is he?" Mr. Weasley asked anxiously as he fell beside Hope who dared not to leave her silent vigil as Fred gazed over the back of the sofa, more shocked than Hope had ever seen him, seemingly incapable of forming words.

Fred's fingers fist the fabric of the back of the couch and Hope reached over to squeeze on his hands. His eyes flashed up to meet hers, taking in the tear that had traced down her cheeks when a soft groan had them all twisting their heads violently towards George.

"How do you feel, Georgie?" Mrs. Weasley asked, her fingers still smoothing through her son's hair.

Hope released both of the hands that she had been holding as George raised his to touch lightly at the space on the side of his head where his ear had once been.

"Saint-like," he breathed and Hope's heart nearly stopped.

"What's wrong with him?" Fred rasped, fear overtaking his features. "Is his mind affected?"

"Saint-like," George said, the eyes that had been little more than a sliver of blue opened completely, his lips twisting upwards slightly. "You see…I'm holy. Holey, Fred, geddit?"

Mrs. Weasley burst into tears and Hope buried her face in her hands, muttering, "You bastard!"

But the comment seemed to have brought some life and relief into Fred.

"Pathetic," Fred said to him. "Pathetic! With the whole wide world of ear-related humor before you, you go for holey?"

"Ah, well," George said, nearly shrugging but thinking better of it as the slightest movement sent a ripple of pain through him, grinning widely at them all. "You'll be able to tell us apart now, anyways, Mum."

His mother gave him a very wet smile as he turned his eyes on his girlfriend (it must have been, since the potion had worn off a bit ago) who's face was hidden behind her hands, but her shoulders were shaking.

"Don't tell me you're crying over little old me?" he asked her and she removed her hands to glare at him with angry eyes, though the tears ruined the image.

"Of course I'm crying over you, you idiot!" she snapped. "Who else am I supposed to cry over when my boyfriend's missing an ear and its all-my-fault!" Hope punctuated the last three words with bangs of her fist into the couch.
"I thought we went over that," George said, narrowing his eyes slightly. "We're all overage, we knew what we were getting into."

He raised a bloodstained hand to her cheek and Mr. and Mrs. Weasley moved slightly away to give the two a bit of privacy while Fred went off to ask Ginny for the details of what he'd missed.

Hope trapped it to her cheek with her own hand, kissing his palm. "I know, but…" Hope's eyes flickered to the gaping hole in the side of his head. She sighed. "At least you're not dead."

He winked at her. "I'd be a pretty sexy ghost, though."

Hope choked on her laugh before leaning down suddenly to kiss him until he was breathless and dazed, something that didn't all-together have to do with his blood loss.

She parted from him at the sound of Hermione's voice and she stood, passing Fred. "Keep an eye on him, will you?"

Fred nodded as she ran out the door to see where Hermione and Kingsley had dismounted from their Thestral.

"Hope!" Hermione screamed at the sight of her and then she was running to her friend, throwing her arms around her and gripping her fiercely. "Oh, thank Merlin you're alive!"

"I should be saying that to you," Hope disagreed as they parted.

"What's wrong?" Hermione asked, seeing the dried tears on her cheeks and the smudge of blood from George's hand. "What's happened? Is—?"

"George has lost an ear," Hope choked out.

Hermione gasped, holding a hand to her mouth in horror, but she was distracted from speaking by the sudden appearance of Ron and Tonks, their broom skidding into the ground before they managed to reach their significant others.

Ron stumbled as Hermione threw her arms around him as well, sobbing in earnest relief into his shoulder as he held her, while Remus and Tonks shared a heartfelt kiss that made Hope feel awkward with George injured and inside.

"Are we the last one back?" Ron asked once they parted.

Hope shook her head, eager to give some kind of news. "Bill and Fleur and Mad-Eye and Mundungus aren't back yet…how many did you have on you?"

"About four," Ron replied.

"Plus Bellatrix," Tonks interjected, pink in the face from her husband's attention. "She wants me quite as much as she wants you, Hope. She tried very hard to kill me. I just wish I'd got her, I owe Bellatrix. But we definitely injured Rodolphus...Then we got to Ron's Auntie Muriel's and we missed our Portkey and she was fussing over us—"

Hope's forehead was still throbbing something fierce as Tonks asked them to recount what had happened when they'd gone in opposite directions. Kingsley disappeared through the front gate to Apparate off to Downing Street to return to his job of protecting the prime minister. But they were still missing four.
Hope went inside and Ginny was leaning against the sink in the kitchen, biting on the tip of her thumb.

"Are you alright?" Hope asked her.

"I wish Seamus was here," she said, her brown eyes hundreds of miles away, "he'd tell me—"

Ginny's voice caught in her throat.

"You're worried about Bill," Hope guessed. Ginny bobbed her head. "I'm sure they just missed their Portkey." She gave the younger red-haired girl a one-armed squeeze when a loud cry was uttered at the sight of a Thestral making it through the barrier carrying a head of blonde and red, both of which dismounted rather quickly.

Ginny and Hope were following after the majority of the Burrow as they pooled outside in time to hear Bill's words.

"Mad-Eye's dead."

That couldn't be, Hope thought as she gaped at him. The idea of Mad-Eye Moody being anything but alive, growling Constant Vigilance, and full of fire was hard to believe. A man like Mad-Eye didn't go down easily in a fight.

"We saw it," Bill told them all. Tonks began to sob as Remus held her tightly; she had known the old Auror the best out of them all. "It happened just after we broke out of the circle: Mad-Eye and Dung were close by us, they were heading north too. Voldemort –he can fly– went straight for them. Dung panicked, I heard him cry out, Mad-Eye tried to stop him, but he Disapparated. Voldemort's curse hit Mad-Eye full in the face, he fell backward off his broom and– there was nothing we could do, nothing, we had half a dozen of them on our own tail—"

Not a minute later Hope was holding a glass of fire-whiskey in her hand, her back leaning against the frame of the kitchen door, just barely outside the room as they all raised their glasses with a lament of "Mad-Eye."

Hope drank hers thickly, grateful for the warm scalding fire down her throat that combated against the icy fear in her stomach.

"So Mundungus disappeared?" Remus asked suddenly as Hope rubbed a hand to her forehead while the other dug under her jacket to her back. She pulled her hand back to see blood on it. Hope blinked a few times before wiping the blood on her jeans, still staring in front of her.

"I know what you're thinking," Bill said quickly, cutting across Remus, "and I wondered that too, on the way back here, because they seemed to be expecting us, didn't they? But Mundungus can't have betrayed us. They didn't know there would be seven Hopes, that confused them the moment we appeared, and in case you've forgotten, it was Mundungus who suggested that little bit of skulduggery. Why wouldn't he have told them the essential point? I think Dung panicked, it's as simple as that. He didn't want to come in the first place, but Mad-Eye made him, and You-Know-Who went straight for them. It was enough to make anyone panic."

"You-Know-Who acted exactly as Mad-Eye expected him to," Tonks agreed, rubbing the tears away from her cheeks and leaving behind a stain of raw red. "Mad-Eye said he'd expect the real Hope to be with the toughest, most skilled Aurors. He chased Mad-Eye first, and when Mundungus gave them away he switched to Kingsley..."

"Yes, and zat eez all very good," Fleur said, her blue eyes narrowed and glaring at them all, "but still..."
eet does not explain 'ow zey know we were moving 'Ope tonight, does eet? Somebody must 'ave been careless. Somebody let slip ze date to an outsider. It is ze only explanation for zem knowing ze date but not ze 'ole plan."

"I don't believe that," Hope said, turning her head slightly to look at them, aware she had their complete attention. "The only one who didn't know the whole plan is me, and I really don't think I told Tom about that."

Fleur's cheeks flushed a faint pink.

"Besides," she added, turning back, "Tom has other ways of gathering information, he's highly intelligent and relentless."

Her eyes shifted back to them all once again. "I trust everyone in this room, I know none of you would betray me."

Hope didn't trust a lot of people, but she could say that the people in the room had at least a bit of her trust, some more than others.

"Well said," Fred said, his voice piercing the silence.

"Yeah," George agreed, winking at Hope, "'ear, 'ear."

She almost smiled but then she caught sight of Remus' expression and she sighed. "You're going to make the same mistake Sirius did," she told him.

"And what's that?" Remus asked.

Hope gave him a shrewd stare. "Thinking that I'm too much like Dad."

Remus looked away and Hope knew she'd hit the nail on the head.

He and Bill stood and left soon after to search for Moody's body, and Remus pressed a kiss to her aching forehead before Disapparating with Bill.

Should she really stay? Hope wondered as she sloshed the alcohol around in her cup. But the Trace was still on her it wasn't as though she could get very far before he would find her. Hope felt more cornered than she had ever been before.

"Wait till it gets out yeh did it again, Hope," Hagrid's voice brought her out of her thoughts. "Escaped him, fought him off when he was right on top of yeh!"

"I didn't," Hope said, blinking a few times as she downed the last of her drink and moved forward to place the empty glass on the table. "That was my wand, it just pulled my arm towards him and spouted these golden flames at him."

"But that's impossible," Hermione said. "You mean—"

"I know what I mean!" Hope snapped in irritation. "I was nearly blind from pain, I wouldn't have been able to accurately aim, let alone with a spell I don't even know."

"Often, when you're in a pressured situation you can produce magic you never dreamed of," Mr. Weasley said reasonably. "Small children often find, before they're trained—"

Hope scoffed loudly. "I'm not a child and I know what I saw! If you don't want to believe me that's fine!"
An uncomfortable silence settled after her words, but Hope didn't give them much thought, leaning a hand against the doorframe, her head positively spinning now, even before it seared again.

And then Hope could no longer maintain her weight on her two feet. She fell to her knees and then pitched forward, falling onto her side, pain cocooning her and voices echoing in her head and around her as people rushed to her side.

"You told me the problem would be solved by using another's wand!"

"No! No! I beg you, I beg you..."

"Hope! Hope, can you hear me?"

"You lied to Lord Voldemort, Ollivander!"

"I did not...I swear I did not..."

"Was she hit? Where's the blood coming from?"

"You sought to help Potter, to help her escape me!"

"I swear I did not...I believed a different wand would work..."

"Hope! Don't you dare close your eyes!"

"Explain, then, what happened. Lucius' wand is destroyed!"

"I cannot understand... The connection... exists only between your two wands..."

"Get her jacket off! And get me some Blood-Replenisher!"

"Lies!"

"Please... I beg you..."

Everything was a blur of colour when her head was lifted carefully and a potion was forced past her lips. She swallowed with difficulty before her consciousness left her for the second time that night.
When Hope awoke again, she was bathed in darkness.

"Had a nice rest?" a familiar voice asked her and Hope turned to see George lying beside her, his bandaged head propped up on a thick pillow.

"What happened?" Hope asked fuzzily, raising her hand to rub at her eyes.

"You passed out," George told her, "blood loss from the wound on your shoulder…that you didn't tell anyone about."

Hope winced at the accusation in his voice. "Oh, that," she said lamely. "I was a little distracted."

Hope moved so that she was laying on her side on the expanded couch. She raised a hand to his cheek. "How do you feel?"

"Lopsided," he grinned, and she rolled her eyes.

"Be serious," Hope admonished.

"I am serious!" He pulled her close, his hand easily slipping under the hem of her shirt to cup her hip in a familiar movement that Hope had grown far too used to.

"You're never serious," Hope complained as she sat up on the expanded couch. "Come on, I want to have a look at your ear."

"Or lack of one?" George offered.

Hope frowned. "I suppose…Now, c'mon, you have to get up, the only light is in the kitchen."

She tugged on his arm, but to no avail and she could see his eyes twinkling in the shadows. "What if I don't want to move?" he asked her and Hope could practically hear the grin in his voice.

Hope released a small noise of startled surprise when he pulled her back to him.

"Shouldn't you be bending to my every wish?" George asked with a smirk as she grumbled into his chest.

"Oh, yeah?" Hope asked, pulling herself up again so she was sitting on her legs beside him.

"According to who?"

"Probably Merlin," George said, tilting his head back slightly on the pillow.

Hope spared him a soft smile that he alone had ever seen and he traced its curve with his fingers.

"There…I haven't seen that smile in a while," he mused softly.

Hope flushed at his words. "Oh, shut up," she said, bending down to silence him as he opened his mouth to speak again. Her lips were soft and gentle on his, careful, he noticed, but George had never liked careful. He drew his fingers up to tangle in her long, thick hair, turning the kiss fiery and insistent.

Her resolve snapped easily, and it was something he greatly enjoyed breaking especially since it usually involved her forgetting to do something by spending time with him.
His ear (or simply the side of his head) was still throbbing when he left her gasping lips to trail hot fire down her throat.

"George," she moaned, struggling to keep her voice quiet in the face that they were in a house where George's family lived, fast asleep probably since it was before dawn if he was to guess, and then she placed herself out of reach of his lips.

"It's hardly fair if you're doing all the work," she told him, her lips, instead moving under his whole ear to trace kisses along his jaw's underside. George's eyes fluttered closed even before releasing a small moan of his own as nipped lightly at the spot he'd always been receptive to.

Then she leaned back, smirking. "Now you're coming into the kitchen so I can have a look at your head."

George groaned at the loss, but this time he complied when she pulled him unresistingly towards the kitchen table where she sat him in a chair as she unwound the gauze that had been tightly wrapped around his head.

"Is it bothering you?" Hope asked him.

"A little," George admitted as she peeled it away completely to see if anything had changed overnight. Blood had leaked from the wound, staining the area around and the gauze. "How bad is it?"

Hope tilted his head more towards her so that she could see it better, and then she sighed. "It could have been worse," she told him, "it looks like the bleeding's stopped…but it would probably be safe to have Angie check you over--I mean, later today."

George hummed in agreement as she pulled out a rag and run it under the water before turning back to him. "I'm going to try to clean it up a little, but…tell me if it hurts?"

George arched an eyebrow at her. "Maybe I should get injured more often."

Hope gave him a sardonic look in reply. "Maybe I should straddle you," she said, "that might make it easier for me to see."

George winked at her roguishly. "Well…if it helps you, it helps me."

"You're impossible," Hope told him as she leaned over him, wiping the wet rag gently against the dried blood.

George didn't speak for a long moment, thinking hard.

"We should get a house after all this," he said and Hope paused to look back at him.

"Is there something wrong with the flat?" she asked in confusion.

"No, the flat's fine," George said with a careless wave of his hand, "but you know a house is more private…permanent."

He could see her smile as clear as day. "And where would we live?" Hope asked.

"Obviously somewhere where we couldn't be mobbed by all your adoring fans," George said, wincing slightly as the rag came too close to his wound.

"Oh, shut up," she told him as she dropped the rag in the sink, taking a fresh gauze and wrapping it
around the injury, taking his hands and helping him into a standing position, since his balance had been impaired by the loss of his ear, until they reached the couch.

Hope gave him a smile as the laid down once more. "Do you remember that time in first year when you found me at the viaduct? And you asked me what I saw in that old mirror?"

George chuckled softly. "Yeah. I also remember you saying something along the lines of 'maybe I'll tell you one day.'"

"Something like that," Hope agreed.

He grinned widely. "Are you going to tell me now?"

Hope rolled her eyes for good measure. "The first time I looked in the Mirror of Erised," she said after a short stint of silence, "I saw my parents."

George's eyes softened, his fingers winding into hers.

"And then I saw me," Hope said, remembering the image clearly, "but older, and I was holding this little boy…you know it didn't really dawn on me until later how much he looked like you."

For a moment George digested that information and then an ear-to-ear grin split across his face.

"I knew you had a crush on me when you were eleven!"

"Shut up!" Hope snapped, pink splashing across her cheeks. "I did not!"

"Are you asleep?"

"No, are you?"

Hope snorted at the question as she curled herself further into his side, one arm sprawled over his chest while one of his was looped loosely over her shoulders, his finger brushing a smooth circle into her skin, making goosebumps arise.

"I blame the potions," Hope said sagely.

"I thought you woke up at ungodly hours," George replied reasonably as Hope shifted slightly so that he could bury his face into her neck.

"Well, that too," Hope conceded before grinning, "but when have I ever woken you up at ungodly hours."

"Hmmm…I can't remember," George breathed into his skin. "I'm sure you did at some point."

Hope snorted. "I'm sure that happened…this is of course coming from the man who likes to start the day with snogging in bed." She would've given him a mock-stern look if she could've seen his face.

She could feel his smirk against her jugular before he gave it a few kisses for good measure before leaning back with a barely perceptible groan. "There is nothing wrong with snogging in bed, I am very fond of that pastime."

Hope snorted. "You would be."
And then she fell silent as thoughts crossed her mind.

"Will you keep yourself out of trouble when I'm gone?"

"I always keep out of trouble," George replied with a wink.

"George." Something in her voice drew him up short and he lifted his eyes to meet hers. "I'm serious. Tom has to know by now and you and I have been together for so long... he might come after you — and Fred because you two are identical."

George raised a hand to her cheek. "We'll be fine, you know how good Fred and I're at making quick getaways."

Her lips twitched briefly at that as a bit of sunlight peaked over the horizon to filter through the kitchen windows.

George groaned, falling flat on his back, covering his face with his hands to shield it from the sun. "Oh, great. It's morning."

"It's been morning for awhile," Hope told him rather sardonically as she sat up in the expanded sofa. "I'll go and grab some of your clothes from your room." She leaned over to give him a light peck on the lips before pulling herself into a standing position.

"Take too long and I'll fall back asleep," George warned, his arm still over his eyes.

"No, you won't," Hope replied lightly. "Or you'll have my wrath to face."

George glanced over his arm briefly. "Is that supposed to frighten me?"

Hope released a small laugh that echoed quietly in the silence before she turned to head up the stairs. The house was still asleep so Hope was careful as she ascended the stairs to what was Fred and George's room but now currently only held Fred.

She opened the door as quietly as possible before riffling through the drawers for some spare robes.

"Shouldn't you be sleeping?" a voice proclaimed from the bed as Fred blinked his eyes open blearily. "What're you doing up?"

"I'm looking for some clothes for George," she told him. "Since he probably wants to take a shower and change out of his things."

"Oh, right," Fred said, sitting up and rubbing at his eyes to clear them before looking at her seriously. "How is he?"

"Well, he's still got his humour, so that's good," Hope said, running a hand through her hair briefly before she pulled some clothes free of the dresser. "His... head is still bothering him, but he says it hurts less than before."

Fred sighed in relief. "That's good."

"You would think so," Hope said dryly, a flush adorning her cheeks. "But your brother is very... convincing."

"Ah," Fred said with a snort, "can't say I'm surprised."

"Oh, shut up," Hope said, her face bright red. "I'm just going to go and, er—"
"Maybe you two should shower together and save water," Fred said innocently.

Her hair burned bright ginger and she became even more flustered. "I—well—he—I mean—"

Fred sniggered as Hope beat a hasty retreat out the room, almost tripping down the stairs in her haste to leave, before ducking her head back in when he called her back.

"Do you even know what time it is?" he asked her, his eye twitching slightly as he glanced out of the window to where it could clearly seen as barely morning.

Hope grinned devilishly. Obviously she had made just enough noise wake him up just to annoy him; he should have expected this, it was Hope after all.

"You're a she-devil," Fred told her bluntly.

"That's what George says," Hope replied cheerfully before shutting his door as he groaned, flopping back onto his cushions.

He was resigned to the fact that one day he was going to have her as a sister-in-law. Personally, he would have thought her attracted to trouble (not to be confused with Trouble which was used often in reference to his twin) would have been a turn off for George, but his twin had always loved a good mystery.

And Hope Potter was full of mystique.

If there was anyone who was unwilling to allow Hope, Ron, and Hermione to their plans of leaving, it would have to be Mrs. Weasley.

Ron had warned her she would make an attempt to dissuade her from leaving, so Hope wasn't entirely surprised when she caught her on her own as she tried to fix her beloved motorbike.

Of course, the damages weren't so bad considering the events of the battle, and Hope had for the most part fixed it by the time Mrs. Weasley joined her. Grease and oil was smeared across her cheek and fingers and her locks were hiked up in a loose bun and the colour a combination of deep blue and aquamarine.

"Ron and Hermione seem to think that the three of you are dropping out of Hogwarts," Mrs. Weasley said as she joined her and Hope didn't even bother to look up from her task of replacing the tires with ones that Tonks had dropped off for her earlier.

"We are," Hope said, not needing a reason to lie, especially at this point.

"May I ask," Mrs. Weasley said, straining to keep her voice light, "why you are abandoning your education?"

Hope was tempted to say, "You can ask," but she restrained herself.

"There are things we have to do," Hope said evasively, her lips twisting slightly as she fixed the second tire in place.

"And what are these 'things' that you have to do?" Mrs. Weasley asked in a demanding voice.

Extracting information wasn't really one of her strong suits, Hope thought.
"Things I'm not willing to divulge," Hope said as she straightened up to give Mrs. Weasley a flat stare.

"Well, frankly, I think Arthur and I have a right to know," Mrs. Weasley said coolly, "and I'm sure Mr. And Mrs. Granger would agree!" Hope wondered if the woman knew that Hermione had Obliviated her parents and sent them packing for Australia.

She also wondered if the woman realized how much she sounded like her children back in the summer of fifth year when no one was willing to tell them anything. Hope enjoyed how the tables had turned.

"Well, I'm sorry you feel that way, but you won't be getting anything out of me," Hope told her resolutely as she wiped her hands. "We have to do it, since no one else can, which is why we're leaving—"

"Which is absolutely nonsense!" Mrs. Weasley told her fiercely and Hope had to force herself not to sigh at the woman. "I don't see why you have to go! You're barely of age, any of you! It's utter nonsense, if Dumbledore needed work doing, he had the whole Order at his command! Hope, you must have misunderstood him. Probably he was telling you something he wanted done, and you took it to mean that he wanted you—"

"I'm not doing this because it's what Dumbledore wanted," Hope told her through gritted teeth. "I'm doing this because someone's got to, and the less people who know about it, the less likely it will be that Tom will find out about what we're up to."

But Mrs. Weasley's glare was unwavering and Hope met it this time with one of her own.

"With all due respect," she said slowly, "I'm capable of making my own decisions, you lot can't keep hiding me from Tom and hope that that'll work."

Images flashed before her eyes, Sirius fighting to protect her before he was sent right through the Veil, the flash of green that had taken her mother away from her as she stood protectively over her crib, her father's voice as he tried to hold Tom off and give her and her mother time to escape…

"It's time I start doing something that means something," Hope told her, wiping her hands on her pants. "I'm going to be on the front lines doing something about this war even if none of you are up for it, because I've got my own little army."

Mrs. Weasley mouthed wordlessly at Hope for a moment. She couldn't quite recall when Hope had gotten so grown up, but she knew that it hadn't been as recent as she would like to believe. It would've had to have been around the time that her name had come out of the Goblet of Fire, Mrs. Weasley had surmised, when she had undoubtedly felt well and truly alone.

But Hope hadn't seen what the First Wizarding War had done to the world, she only knew of its results, of how it took her mother and father from her, dumping her onto the doorstep of a family that barely knew of her and didn't try to delve any deeper, but Mrs. Weasley remembered. She remembered the first time the Order of the Phoenix had been created, and she remembered clearly the point at which she lost everything.

The day she was told her brothers Fabian and Gideon had been killed by Antonin Dolohov.

"They went down fighting," she was told, "they are heroes."

But she hadn't wanted them to die as heroes, she had wanted them to live on to know their nephews and niece, some of which would never recall their smiles or laughs or the amusing little tricks the pair
had come up with to keep the children entertained when she and her husband were far too exhausted from many sleepless nights.

But here stood Hope, the daughter of two who died protecting her until their last breaths, her green eyes shadowed from the events in her life that had robbed her of whatever innocence she had possessed to begin with, scars littering her body including the obvious ones on her arms and hands that she had put there herself.

Mrs. Weasley didn't have to wonder how Hope had brought so many to her side, for she had a similar leadership quality to Albus Dumbledore himself, but she couldn't help but wonder if it would be right to just step aside and let Hope be the master of her own fate?

"So we are planning a rebellion?"

It was well past their bedtime, so to speak, which meant it was the perfect time to have private conversations…or at least semi-private. Currently their grouping in Ginny's room consisted of Hope, Ginny, Hermione, Fleur, Ron, Fred, and George. At this point, Fleur had been made an honorary member of the DA, which explained her presence (apart from the fact that she was sleeping in the room with the three other girls until the wedding; Hope couldn't understand why, it wasn't as though Fleur and Bill hadn't lived together and slept in the same bed before).

A *Muffliato* to the door courtesy of Hermione was probably the only reason they were speaking normally, with several wand tips lit to force the darkness away slightly so they could see each other's faces slightly.

"Don't be ridiculous," Hope scoffed at Ginny's question before grinning widely, "I'd say more of an uprising."

The twins couldn't help but snort at that.

"Because that's not subtle at all," Fred said good-naturedly.

"Voldemort is trying to take over the world," Hermione pointed out, "is subtlety really necessary at this point?"

"There's always room for subtlety," George nodded approvingly while Ron rolled his eyes.

Hope ignored them. "Obviously we'll have to be working in two separate…factions, I suppose, since some of us are going to be at Hogwarts and some are going to be out…I suspect the majority of us at Pithos are going to be either Muggle-borns or people that've already graduated."

"And zis Pithos is safe?" Fleur asked just to be certain.

A smirk spread across Hope's lips. "Oh, definitely. I might even wager it's safer than Hogwarts this term."

Ginny couldn't help but groan at that. "So unfair! Pithos sounds amazing and I'm the only one still in school!"

"Seamus is still at Hogwarts," Ron pointed out, his eye twitching slightly out of irritation towards the boy he had once caught snogging his sister behind a tapestry that hid a secret passageway.
"You know what I mean," Ginny retorted, rolling her eyes, "you're all going to be kicking Death Eaters' arses and I'm stuck in Hogwarts, how unfair is that?"

"Hogwarts might be a little dangerous too," Hope had to add, "I get the feeling that the school is the real prize for Tom."

It had been the place that he had called home, Hope knew well enough, and he liked it so much that he had once asked to remain there for the summer holiday. Hope remembered well the conversation he had had in the memory she had seen during her second year.

Hope nodded to Fred and George. "Aren't you two planning something with Lee?"

They both gave her feral grins in reply and Ginny rolled her eyes as Ron sighed, Hermione arched her eyebrows, and Fleur giggled.

"Everyone with a coin has coordinates plugged into them, so to speak," Hermione explained for Hope. "They don't lead directly to the Pithos...considering the extensive protections around it..." Several pairs of eyes glanced towards Hope who buffed her nails on her shirt and whistled innocently. "Everyone with a coin has a different password that will allow you to get in, they're all connected to mythology of some sort."

"Of course they are," George said as Fred snorted.

"Don't get your coins mixed up," Hope told them, ignoring her boyfriend and his twin, "or you're not going to be allowed inside, but the coordinates and the passwords won't be released until we make it to the Pithos, and I'm not sure when we will, it might take a little while..." Contemplation coloured her eyes briefly.

"When are you planning to leave?" Fleur asked her, her accent as thick as ever.

"After the wedding," Ron said, "don't worry, we'll be there to see you and Bill exchange your vows."

"Hope has to be there," Hermione pointed out, "she is the Maid of Honour, you know."

"Which means you have to dance with Charlie," Ginny sniggered and the other Weasleys fought to contain their amusement so that even with the Muffliato up, the other occupants of the house wouldn't hear. Since Charlie and Hope were the respective Best Man and Maid of Honour, they were expected to share one dance.

Hope glared at George whose face was turning bright red in the effort to keep quiet; Charlie wasn't exactly well known for his dancing skills. "Keep laughing and I won't dance with you," she threatened and that shut George up immediately.

"And 'e 'as not seen ze dress yet," Fleur added smugly. "'e will miss out on quite a bit."

"Why? What's with the dress?" Fred asked in confusion.

"Obviously she looks very hot in it, Fred," Ginny said, grinning widely as she fastened her eyes on Hope, whose cheeks were flushing pink as her boyfriend eyed her appraisingly.

"All of you shut your mouths," Hope warned, "or I will shut them for you!"

Now they really were struggling to keep their silence; it was a miracle that no had noticed by now what they were up to.
"You make it too easy," Ron mentioned, only to find himself on the receiving end of her glare, but he had long since been desensitized to its effects.

"I think I've seen enough of you lot for the night," Hope sniffed. "I'm going to bed."

She pulled the blanket on her camp bed over her head trying to ignore the noises of amusement.
Hope had to hand it to Mrs. Weasley, she was very good at keeping her, Hermione, and Ron away from each other at all times, though there wasn't much less to plan, so it wasn't as though she was throwing a wrench into their plans. For some reason they had to manually clean the Burrow before the Delacours arrived.

Hope was almost certain that more than half of the chores they had been given were ones that could be done faster with a wand, but maybe that had been Mrs. Weasley's point.

Still, she couldn't help but be relieved when the Delacours finally arrived within the protective barriers and Hope found herself suddenly assaulted by something small and blonde.

"'Ope!"

"Gabby," Hope laughed, switching to her a-bit-rusty French, "look at how much you've grown! How old are you now?"

"Eleven," Gabrielle said bashfully as she beamed up at her from where she was hugging her tightly.

"No!" Hope cried dramatically as Hermione snorted, understanding a bit of the French as well, while Madam and Monsieur Delacour greeted their daughter and the assorted Weasleys plus Hope and Hermione. "It cannot be! Are you lying to me?"

Gabrielle burst into giggles as she shook her head. "Nope," she sang, "I just turned eleven! And I've been accepted into Beauxbatons!"

"That's fantastic," Hope told her as the silvery-blond quarter-Veela released her and Apolline joined them.

"'Ope," she said musically, "eet 'as been too long!"

Hope smiled before kissing both her cheeks as she did similarly to her own cheeks. "Hello, Madam, enjoying the lovely English weather?"

Monsieur Delacour released a booming laugh at her words.

"Eet is vairy different from France," Apolline told her, ignoring the laughter of her husband. "'Ow 'ave you been? I understand zere was some…unpleasantness?"

Hope's faltered slightly as Gabrielle began to swing her arm in a child-like manner, sparing a half-glance towards her boyfriend, who Apolline realized after a closer glance was missing an ear. "There was," Hope conceded, "but that's all over now." She forced a bright smile onto her lips. "We have a wedding to worry about, did Fleur show you what the bridesmaids will be wearing?"

"No," Apolline lamented as they were led inside, "but I trust you did not let my daughter choose any atrocious gowns, no?"

"Maman!" Fleur complained from the back of the group with her fiancé who chuckled softly at her words. "Ze are fine! Ze are perfect!"

"It's very flattering," Hope agreed, "Hermione and Ron both said it looked lovely."

Apolline nodded approvingly, as though the opinion of two barely legal witch and wizard mattered
"How come Ron got to see you in this dress before me?" George asked her, waggling his eyebrows at her as he rested his arm comfortably around her waist.

"That might've had something to do with you being at work," Hope replied, leaning up on her tip-toes to kiss his cheek. "And no, I'm not going to put it on before the wedding."

"Aw…" George pouted, but Hope didn't even blink an eye as she settled into the conversation in the kitchen concerning the wedding preparations while a majority of the Weasleys (and Hermione) disappeared off to do other things. Hope suspected that Ron and Hermione were going to use some time to themselves since Mrs. Weasley was distracted.

"Ope will enter first," Fleur was explaining to her parents, "since she eez ze Maid of 'Onour, and then Gabrielle will follow after."

Monsieur ran a hand through his youngest daughter's hair. "You will be on your best be'aviour," he told her seriously, "for your sister."

"Oui, Papa," Gabrielle said, bobbing her head in agreement, grinning widely at Hope who smiled reflexively in return. It seemed so trivial, a wedding, especially when one considered just how important finding Horcruxes was. But it was also nice in a way to forget about one's obligations and just enjoy the moment, and weddings were important.

Hope glanced down at her finger where the coiled snake still lay after all these years, on the finger where one day her engagement ring would rest, if George had his way. But that could be years away; who knew how long it would take them to find and destroy those Horcruxes?

It was better to live in the moment, as Sirius said.

"And then, of course, there's the first dance between the new husband and wife," Mrs. Weasley explained to the French mother and father of the bride and Fleur bounced happily in her seat at the mere thought of her marriage in two days. "And then there will be the dance between the Maid of Honour and the Best Man…" Mrs. Weasley winked at Hope who gave a mournful sigh in return.

Charlie had warned her about how terrible he was a dancer. Hope could only sigh; at least George was a better dancer…and speaking of George…

"Hey, Hope, d'you got a minute?" Fred asked, poking his head into the kitchen. "George needs some help with—" Fred made a circular motion around his own head and Hope stood immediately before realizing she was actually in the middle of something.

"You don't mind, do you?" she asked the Delacours, but they were quick to wave her off, and Hope raced up the stairs to glare at George. "What in the ruddy hell are you doing?"

"It's irritating!" George complained, withdrawing his little finger from the wound.

"Well, that's only going to make it worse," Hope told him as she shoved his finger under the water, removing the blood from it before examining the hole. "Angie said it'll feel a bit uncomfortable for a few hours, but if you're lucky it'll be healed by tomorrow."

"Is something wrong?" Ron's voice asked from the door to the bathroom, looking a little worried towards his older brother's injury.

"Your brother is just picking at something that ought not to be picked at," Hope told him shortly as
she grasped George's hands and forced them down so he couldn't touch the injury. "He'll be fine once he listens to what Angie told him."

Ron nodded and disappeared out of the door.

George raised a hand towards his ear and Hope glared. "You want something to do with your hands, fine!" She forced them to her waist. "There! Don't move them!"

Her boyfriend grinned widely, gripping her hips easily. "Do you have any idea how sexy you are when you get all hot and bothered?"

"And you're on the receiving end of my fire? Are you sure your brain hasn't been damaged over the years?" she replied sardonically as she rewrapped the gauze around his head carefully.

"Maybe," he drawled, winking at her and Hope didn't even try to resist rolling her eyes.

The next day was Hope's birthday, her seventeenth, and thus, the most important, and, truth be told, she had almost forgotten about it when she descended the stairs, still thinking about the dream she had just had, the name Gregorovitch resonating in her skull when she found herself suddenly assaulted by a head of bushy hair.

"Happy Birthday, Hope!" Hermione cried as she beamed, hugging her friend.

"Oh, yeah," Hope said, blinking a few times, "that is today, isn't it?"

Ron snorted from behind her as he came down the stairs. "Trust Hope to forget when her birthday is."

Hope ignored that as she jumped down the last step to land on the back of a one-eared wizard.

"George," Fred said, his eyes wide and his voice fearful, "I don't want to alarm you…but you have a just-became-legal witch on your back."

George went stock still. "Oh, no…what do I do?"

"Hold still," Bill advised from the table grinning widely, "maybe she'll lose interest."

Hope scowled as her friends burst into laughter and Ginny tried to stifle her own into her eggs. "You're all so hilarious," she said dryly as she dropped back to the ground and pulled out her wand threateningly, "but I can use this on you now!"

Laughter bubbled around them at her words.

"That's why we have our secret weapon," Fred told her, grinning brightly.

"Secret weap-mmph!" Hope's confusion didn't last very long as George swooped down to kiss her until she was breathless.

"Don't make me hit you," she warned him.

"But then you wouldn't get sixteen more kisses," George told her, waggling his eyebrows at her in a suggestive manner.

"I hate you."
"No, you don't."

And then Hope dodged around him to find a seat, pulling some eggs and sausage towards her.

"Arthur told me to wish you a happy seventeenth, Hope," Mrs. Weasley told her, still chuckling at the antics that had ensued briefly. "He had to leave early for work, but he'll be back for dinner. That's our present on top."

Hope blinked and looked at the pile of presents sitting at the end of the table. "Oh!" she said. "I've got presents!"

"Because turning seventeen isn't all that important." Ron rolled his eyes and Hermione elbowed him in the side.

"Oh, shut up, you lot!" Hope said as she pulled the small package Mrs. Weasley had indicated forward, removing the packaging around the gift and holding it up to the light. It was a truly lovely watch that looked a bit older than the one Hope remembered Ron getting for his birthday, with worn golden plating and stars moving in a clockwise manner instead of the hands that were typical on Muggle watches.

"It's traditional to give a witch or wizard a watch when they come of age, I'm afraid that one isn't new like Ron's, it was actually my brother Fabian's and he wasn't terribly careful with his possessions, it's a bit dented on the back, but—"

"It's beautiful," Hope told her quietly. Sirius had mentioned once back in fifth year that he was going to come up with something 'a million times better than a watch' for her when she came of age. She hadn't really understood what he meant at the time. "Thank you," she told Mrs. Weasley, meeting her eyes and the older witch's softened.

Hope opened Hermione and Ron's next, which happened to be two items. The first was a Sneakoscope, a spinning top that only spun around on its tip and light up and whistled when someone untrustworthy was around. She arched an eyebrow at Hermione who grinned sheepishly. "I figured one day you're just going to get too paranoid to even leave the house," she said innocently, causing more laughter to spread out.

The next was a Foe-glass, a sort of mirror that showed the enemies of the owner. Hope gave the pair the best unimpressed look she could manage. "Are you two trying to tell me something?"

"Like what?" Ron asked innocently.

"Like I'm becoming as paranoid as Mad-Eye?" Hope asked.

"Maybe," the pair wheedled, sharing grins as Hope rolled her eyes, moving on to the next present, which happened to be from Bill and Fleur, her sturdy leather jacket carefully repaired and a rare book on Ancient Greek runes that Hope had dying to get her hands on, but was restricted from doing so since only those with Curse-breaker Licenses could purchase it.

"Nice," she told them, her eyes lighting up in excitement and she almost opened the book right then and there and would've if George hadn't coughed lightly to get her attention. "Oh, right." She blushed and the twins laughed.

Monsieur and Madam Delacour had gifted her an athame inscribed with runes ("I don't really see why you need another dagger, you've got two already." "Be quiet, George!") Fred had given her a rather large box of Weasleys' Wizard Wheezes products filling with Hope considered to be the more useful of their products, including ones of defence and protection, and Ginny had gotten her some
rather nice fingerless motorcycle gloves to go with her jacket.

And then all that was left was George's, which was rather unfortunately missing.

"Alright, where's it, you bastard?" Hope asked, crooking her fingers towards him in a "gimme" gesture, ignoring the admonishing noise Mrs. Weasley made at the word.

"I can't give it to you," George told her, a grin twisting onto his lips, "since you're already wearing it."

Hope froze and looked down at herself for anything that she didn't recognize when her eyes fell on a leather strap around her wrist. Hope brought her wrist up, twisting the strap around slightly until she could see the bronze cursive lettering bound to it: Erised.

She went still and silent and for a very long moment everyone in room thought George had done something wrong and then Hope flung her arms around his neck, hugging him fiercely and then she leaned back to give him a kiss that had nearly everyone looking politely away.

"I thought you might like it," George said, looking appropriately winded before he twisted his wand in the air, "but, just in case."

A bouquet of flowers bloomed into being, a bouquet of blue irises and Hope, beaming, took them, inhaling their sweet scent deeply.

"Come on, now, George," Bill said, leaning his elbows on the table, "you're making the rest of us look bad!"

Hope hid her smile in her flowers as George tried to inform him that he was clearly the best boyfriend in the world, and thus a competition between those in their respect relationships ensued. (It only ended once it was decided that Mr. and Mrs. Weasley clearly had the best relationship.)

By dinner, Hope had been kissed a total of seventeen times by George, most of which were stolen when they'd been sent to pick some nice apples from the small orchard that was barely inside the protective barriers. As soon as dinner came around, Hope was in a very good mood.

The party was out in the garden, since there were far too many people to permit it to be hosted in the Burrow, what with the eight Weasleys, Hermione, Hope, the four Delacours, Remus, Tonks, Angelina, and Hagrid. The table was bathed in light from several violet lanterns that Fred and George had enchanted to hover above them.

The only person they were still waiting for was Mr. Weasley, who was only a little late, and Mrs. Weasley was still putting the last touches on Hope's cake (Hope had been shooed forcefully from the kitchen when she had attempted to duck inside).

George's hand was smoothing circles into Hope's denim-clad thigh as she explained to Gabrielle what was in each dish that she didn't recognize, and while he made a joke towards Angelina about his twin.

It was only then when Mrs. Weasley finally made herself known, with what Hope assumed to be the cake, but it hardly looking like a cake, more like a gigantic Snitch that was covered in runes –Hope suspected that was why Hermione had been enlisted to help.

"Wow, Mrs. Weasley," Hope said, blinking owlishly at the cake, "that looks brilliant!"
"Oh, it's nothing, dear," Mrs. Weasley assured her. "Did you want to open the last of your presents before Arthur shows up? He might be a little late."

"Oh, sure," Hope said. Hagrid had already given her his, a moleskin pouch which could hide things within that only the owner could remove.

"Here's mine," Angelina said, holding out a small box, trying to keep a straight face as Fred sniggered beside her.

Hope took it cautiously. "Is this going to blow up in my face?"

"Would I give you something that explodes?" Angelina asked innocently.

"Should I answer honestly?" Hope asked George, making him laugh, but she opened it all the same and suddenly the humour made sense.

"Ah," she said dryly, lifting the tarot cards up, "really?"

Angelina burst into giggles, her shoulders shaking with strain of trying to keep them quiet.

There was only one other thing in the box, a small fabric bag, and Hope poured out what was within with interest. They were a number of emerald onyx smoothed stones with a rune carved into each. They were runestones, generally used for decision-making and communication.

"This is...interesting," Hope said finally, before replacing them into the bag once more.

"Thought you might like it," Angelina smirked before Hope moved on to Tonks and Remus' gift which happened to be a second wand arm holster that could double as a knife holster (and Hope was starting to get a fondness for sharp objects), and a long duster coat that was a dark reddish colour.

"Ooh! This is nice!" Hope stood up so that she could pull it up over her shoulders, even though it was a bit thicker and sturdier than the current weather required, but Hope couldn't resist.

"Told you she'd like it," Tonks said, nudging her shoulder against her husband, brightly beaming at him (though Hope suspected that her mood wasn't entirely to do with Hope liking their gift) and Remus smiled fondly as Hope twirled around in her new coat, looking every bit like her mother.

Hope hugged Tonks around her shoulders and kissed Remus on the cheek before returning to her seat.

"I think we'd better start without Arthur," Mrs. Weasley said finally as George returned his hand to Hope's thigh and Hope twisted to whisper into his ear.

"If you're trying to get a reaction, you'll have to try harder," she told him.

He grinned. "Oh, really?" George kissed her cheek, his hand slowly inching up her thigh from where it had been positioned close to her knee. Her heart beat a little faster and she swallowed thickly as she dropped her hand to clamp down on his.

"That wasn't an invitation," she told him, slightly breathless.

"It was a challenge," George said when they were all distracted by the sight of a silvery-blue creature streaked across the lawn to rest in the air over the table. It was a weasel and from its mouth came Mr. Weasley's voice: "Minister of Magic coming with me."

Hope stiffened at that, her eyes finding Hermione and Ron's both whom appeared shocked and
apprehensive; the last time Hope and Scrimgeour had crossed paths had been at Dumbledore's funeral, after the trio had made their plans, and it hadn't been on good terms.

"We shouldn't be here," Remus stood, looking rather apologetic and regretful as he kissed Hope's forehead. "I'm so sorry—I'll explain some other time—"

Hope opened her mouth to say something, looking particularly annoyed (though, this had more to do with the Minister than to do with Remus and Tonks).

"We'll talk tomorrow!" Tonks called over her shoulder as she and Remus disappeared into the darkness, vanishing at the sound of a loud crack, only a second before another crack could've been heard just outside the gate.

Mr. Weasley strode forward with Rufus Scrimgeour at his side and George's hand instead linked with Hope's fingers, the Minister walking with as pronounced of a limp that Hope had once been known for.

"Sorry to intrude," Scrimgeour said gruffly, his eyes drifting to rune-covered Snitch cake that Mrs. Weasley had made. "Especially as I can see that I am gate-crashing a party…Many happy returns."

Hope did not speak, her eyes narrowing slightly as his yellowed eyes fell on her.

"I require a private word with you," the Minister told her swiftly in a tone that brooked no argument. "Also with Mr. Ronald Weasley and Miss Hermione Granger."

Ron's arm where it rested securely around Hermione's shoulders tightened. "All of us?" he asked as Hermione drew a hand up to rest them on top of his. "Why?"

"I shall tell you that when we are somewhere more private," Scrimgeour told the three decisively. "Is there such a place?"

Mr. Weasley almost jumped at the question aimed towards him. "Yes, of course, the, er, sitting room, why don't you use that?"

"You can lead the way," this was directed towards Ron who kept his face carefully blank but Hope knew from the twitch in his jaw that he was irritated at being ordered around in the home he grew up in by someone other than his parents. "There will be no need for you to accompany us, Arthur."

George released his grip on her hand and Hope stood in time with Hermione and Ron to head back into the house and the sitting room, where their interrogation would no doubt begin.

Ron and Hermione sat comfortably on the sofa while Hope perched on the couch's arm as Scrimgeour sat down in the armchair opposite them, his face impassive.

"I have some questions for the three of you," he said and the three in question shared a glance, "and I think it will be best if we do it individually. If you two—" Scrimgeour gestured to the girls. "—can wait upstairs, I will start with Ronald."

"No," Hope said, cutting easily across him as Hermione frowned in agreement, clasping Ron's hand with her own as if to cement her firmly at his side. "You'll have to speak to us together if you want to speak to us at all."

Cold yellow eyes met frigid green.

"Very well, then, together," he said grudgingly. "I am here, as I'm sure you know, because of Albus
Dumbledore's will."

Hope arched an eyebrow, Ron narrowed his eyes, and Hermione blinked twice.

"A surprise, apparently," he said, noting their reactions. "You were not aware then that Dumbledore had left you anything?"

"No," Hope said shortly, "but that doesn't explain why whatever he left us wasn't given away after the funeral." She gave him a rather direct look, but it was Hermione who answered.

"They must've wanted to examine whatever he's left us," she said before frowning at the Minister. "You had no right to do that."

"I had every right," Scrimgeour remarked coolly, his eyes training on her instead. "The Decree for Justifiable Confiscation gives the Ministry the power the confiscate the contents of a will—"

"That law was created to stop wizards passing on Dark artefacts," Hermione said, unimpressed by his actions, "and the Ministry is supposed to have powerful evidence that the deceased's possessions are illegal before seizing them! Are you telling me that you thought Dumbledore was trying to pass us something cursed?"

"Are you planning to follow a career in Magical Law, Miss Granger?"

"No, I'm not!" Hermione said hotly, stiffening her spine at his words (though Hope knew very well that was her plan). "I'm hoping to do some good in the world!"

Ron sniggered at her words and Hermione's cheeks flushed a faint pink.

Scrimgeour withdrew a roll of parchment from within his cloak and a small black pouch, turning his attention first to Ron.

"Would you say you were close to Dumbledore, Ronald?"

He was fishing for information, Ron could see that well enough. He honestly hadn't been, but Scrimgeour would find that strange, considering how the former headmaster had left him something in his will.

"I suppose," he said, and, thankfully, Hope and Hermione acted as though this was not news to them, "I mean, we talked an awful lot about chess and strategy..." This, of course, was a complete lie, but who was going to tell the Minister that. "I like to think he liked me."

Scrimgeour contemplated the three of them as though waiting for one of them to break, but they didn't offer anything else, so he unrolled the scroll of parchment and from it:

"The Last Will and Testament of Albus Percival Wulfric Brian Dumbledore'...Yes, here we are... To Ronald Bilius Weasley, I leave my Deluminator, in the hope that he will remember me when he uses it."

The Deluminator, as it was said to be called, happened to be a thin silver contraption, held easily in one hand, not unlike a cigarette lighter, if a bit rounder in the base, capable of sucking the lights from a certain area or room with a single click, something Ron was quick to demonstrate.

"That is a valuable object," Scrimgeour said, nodding towards the Deluminator. "It may even be unique. Certainly it is of Dumbledore's own design. Why would he have left you and item so rare?"
Ron could only shrug his shoulders with an expression of polite confusion. "I couldn't tell you, he never mentioned anything about a Deluminator to me."

Scrimgeour considered his response for a brief moment before he turned his attention to the next line on the will.

"To Miss Hermione Jean Granger, I leave my copy of The Tales of Beedle the Bard, in the hope that she will find it entertaining and instructive."

He held out a book that Hope remembered well from when George had first gifted her a copy in her first year, but this one must've been the un-translated version, since the title was written in runes rather than the English that Hope was used to.

Hermione took it, running a few fingers over its frail binding as she did so.

"Why do you think Dumbledore left you that book, Miss Granger?" Scrimgeour pressed.

"I—" Hermione fumbled briefly. "He-he knew I liked books."

"But why that particular book?"

"I don't know," Hermione said, frowning a little at the title, no doubt mentally deciphering the runes. "He must have thought I'd enjoy it."

"Did you ever discuss codes, or any means of passing secret messages, with Dumbledore?" Scrimgeour asked her and Hope dutifully hid her snort as she met Ron's eyes; it was a book of fairytales, Hermione might not have realized that, but surely Scrimgeour did.

"No, I didn't," Hermione said, expelling a long sigh. "And if the Ministry hasn't found any hidden codes in this book in thirty-one days, I doubt that I will."

And then Scrimgeour turned his eyes back to the will a third time.

"To Hope Lily Potter, I leave the Snitch she caught in her first Quidditch match at Hogwarts, as a reminder of the rewards of perseverance and skill."

Hope remembered well that Snitch, she had almost died choking after she had taken a flying leap—rather painfully, she remembered—onto George's broom.

Scrimgeour held the small Snitch in his hand, its wings fluttering slightly as it was removed from the pouch, as though merely bringing it into her presence had revived its spirit.

"Why did Dumbledore leave you this Snitch?"

"Maybe he thought it liked me," Hope said with a smirk and the Minister gritted his teeth so as to restrain himself from saying anything too overly bad.

"I notice that your birthday cake is in the shape of a Snitch," Scrimgeour scrutinized her instead. "Why is that?"

Ron rolled his eyes and Hermione released a short snort. "Oh, it can't be a reference to the fact Hope's a great Seeker, that's way too obvious. There must be a secret message from Dumbledore hidden in the icing!"

Hope's lips twisted upwards into a smile as she glanced out of the corner of her eye towards her friend.
"I don't think there's anything hidden in the icing," he said, a bit sourly, Hope thought, "but a Snitch would be a very good hiding place for a small object. You know why, I'm sure?"

"I can't imagine—" Hope started to say in a sardonic tone, when Hermione gave an answer.

"Because Snitches have flesh memories," she said.

"What d'you mean?" Ron asked, looking at his girlfriend in a similar manner that Hope currently was, with an expression of complete befuddlement.

"A Snitch is not touched by bare skin before it is released," Scrimgeour told them, "not even by the maker, who wears gloves. It carries an enchantment by which it can identify the first human to lay hands upon it, in case of a disputed capture. This Snitch will remember your touch, Potter. It occurs to me that Dumbledore, who had prodigious magical skill, whatever his other faults, might have enchanted this Snitch so that it will open only for you."

Hope reached out and grasped the Snitch tightly before releasing it so that it could flutter around her head like a halo. She arched an eyebrow towards Scrimgeour who looked a bit aggravated that nothing had happened. "Is that it?" she inquired, itching to be out of his presence.

"Not quite," Scrimgeour said, his teeth grating together a bit at her attitude (he wouldn't have been the first to complain about it). "Dumbledore left you a second bequest, Potter."

"Oh?" Hope asked.

"It was the sword of Godric Gryffindor," Scrimgeour told them, but he didn't remove it from the pouch like the others, so he clearly didn't have it. "Unfortunately, that sword was not Dumbledore's to give away. The sword of Godric Gryffindor is an important historical artefact, and as such, belongs—"

"It belongs to Hope!" Hermione insisted, shifting slightly in her seat as Ron scowled at the Minister. "It chose her, she was the one who found it, it came to her out of the Sorting Hat—"

"According to reliable historical sources, the sword may present itself to any worthy Gryffindor," Scrimgeour said shortly. "That does not make it the exclusive property of Miss Potter, whatever Dumbledore may have decided."

"Right by Conquest states that it belongs to her, as the last surviving heir of Salazar Slytherin," Hermione couldn't help but point out, "it came to her even though there was a blood feud between the families, and as such, belongs to her!"

Ron blinked and stared at his girlfriend. "Merlin, Hermione, what do you do in your spare time?"

Hermione blushed and Hope cracked a grin that disappeared as Scrimgeour continued to speak.

"That is a matter to be contested at a later date, now—"

"No, I don't know why Dumbledore left me a sword and a Snitch," Hope said annoyed by his constant questioning, "just like I don't know why Ron was left a Put-Outter or Hermione a book on children's stories. Maybe you should have tried to pry the Snitch open with the sword while you still had the chance!"

"Hope," Ron hissed in warning.

"This is not a joke, Potter!" Scrimgeour was practically seething now. "Did he wish to give you that
sword, Potter, because he believed, as do many, that you are the one destined to destroy He-Who-Must-Not-Be-Named?"

"Because slashing a sword at him works so well," Hope snapped. "Believe me, I've tried! But you know what really gets me? I thought you were going to be better than Fudge, I thought you were actually going to do something to help the situation, but you hide behind your title just like he did and cover up everything that goes wrong, lulling the rest of us into a false sense of security!" Hope stood, fire in her eyes. "You want cooperation from us but you don't offer anything in return? Tell me, are you as much of a fool as you're portraying, or are you worse?"

Scrimgeour's face had gradually reddened and his wand tip burned a small hole in the midsection of Hope's shirt and Hermione and Ron had their wands out in seconds.

"Oi!" Ron snarled. "Keep away from her!"

Hermione made a noise of affirmation.

Hope regarded Scrimgeour coolly. "I wonder how bad it would look if it was revealed that the Minister for Magic attacked the Head of a Noble and Most Ancient House?"

That was the Slytherin in her just peeking around the edges, making it quite clear of just how difficult she could make his life. She was both a powerful ally and a feared enemy, and it was clear what part she considered him to be.

"You will regret this," he told her.

"I really don't think so," Hope told him levelly, her eyes morphing in a serious slate-grey as she wrenched the door open. "You can see your way out."

He cast one last glance at her—long red hair tangled, eyes a fierce red, scar standing out on her forehead—before he limped out of the door and past the small gathering of people who had entered the house at the sound of noise.

Hope Potter was made of iron and steel that wouldn't yet rust.
Exchanging of Vows

George was in for quite the surprise when he finally saw Hope in her bridesmaid dress, and he was almost certain that he gaped at her for a good two minutes.

The golden cartouche he had given her when she turned thirteen was bound tightly to her neck, the small rectangular pendant brushing against the hollow of her throat, her rings still adorned her fingers, but it was not the jewellery that caught him, it was how the dress flattered her. It was sleeveless, baring her fair shoulders (and her tattoo, but most didn't know about it), the bodice defined and modest as the silky golden material wrapped around her abdomen to tie in a loose bow at the side of her waist. The fabric fluttered around her legs, barely hiding her knees with her feet nestled in golden heels.

And she hadn't even noticed him staring.

"Red is too distinctive," she said to his mother who was contemplating her with worry, "and there's going to be enough gingers at the wedding, and blondes, so I was thinking of something more like this—"

Hope screwed up her face slightly, making the contours of her face a bit sharper and more elfin than she had ever looked, her eyes becoming a deep, dark, impossible blue, as her wavy red hair melted into golden-brown curls.

"Can you tell it's me?" Hope asked, her voice only a slight degree higher than her earthy voice had ever been.

"No," Mrs. Weasley said honestly, a bit relieved, "at least that's one thing we don't have to worry about…how are things with Fleur?"

"Her mum's helping her into her dress now," Hope said brightly. "I should probably head back too, since guests are probably going to start showing up sooner or later." Hope winked at George when she saw him in the doorway, still at a loss of words as she walked out the door towards the marquee.

In the time it took Mrs. Weasley to blink, her one-eared son had disappeared after his girlfriend. Mrs. Weasley sighed and smiled; ah, young love.

George pulled Hope towards the hidden corner of the Burrow where they would be out of sight of the great white tent that held where the wedding would take place, and Hope made a small noise of surprise that was quickly silenced by a kiss.

"This is sudden," she managed to say when he released her, her fingers grasping onto his dress robes.

"Is it?" George asked with a smirk. "Do you have any idea how sexy you look right now?"

"I wasn't going for sexy," Hope complained, looking vaguely annoyed, "I don't want to distract from Fleur—"

"You won't," George said, burying his face into her shoulder as his hands ran down her sides to cup her silky waist, "I'm the one who thinks you look sexy." And he was sure that she would hardly distract from the bride whom all the focus would be upon.

"Oh," Hope said vaguely as his kisses trailed up to her lips again, capturing her mouth in a soul-
searing kiss that for the first time in a very long time had Hope weak in the knees, his teeth tugging at her lip, warmth curling in her stomach—

"Hey! *Hope!* No snogging, Fleur sent me to grab you!"

Hope blinked owlishly as they parted to stare at Ginny who was in a soft blue dress that looked beautiful on her and didn't at all clash with her hair, and was scowling at the both of them.

George seemed unperturbed by his sister's ire, but Hope, appearing very flustered, took a few steps away from him, straightening her curls into a manageable mess that looked less like she'd been snogging a member of the bridegroom's family.

"I swear, it's like you two haven't seen each other in months," Ginny said, rolling her eyes at the former-red-head as she dragged her towards the marquee. "Or you're addicted to snogging."

"Well," Hope grinned widely, taking the opportunity given to her, "your brother is a good snogger…"

"Ew-ew-ew!" Ginny shuddered, wincing her eyes shut as she screwed up her face in disgust. "I don't need to hear that! My poor virgin ears!"

"Like you haven't snogged Seamus," Hope said in a dry manner.

Ginny ignored that comment. "Anyways, Great-Auntie Muriel has shown up with her goblin-made tiara for Fleur, if she says anything to you, don't take it to heart."

"What would she say?" Hope asked, flummoxed as they neared the marquee.

"Well, who knows?" Ginny shrugged her shoulders. "But she's already told me my dress is too low-cut and my hair looks like a birds nest."

Hope looked her friend up and down. Ginny's dress was far more modest than Hope's and nowhere close to being low cut (though she was sure Seamus would've appreciated it, since he would be showing up as Ginny's 'plus one') and her hair had been tastefully styled in a kinked fashion.

"This aunt of yours must be blind," Hope decided at long.

"That's what we all think," Ginny agreed brightly, "I'm just waiting around to hear what she has to say about you."

Hope arched an eyebrow before snorting.

"What's your name, again?"

"Elle Avis," Hope said primly. The name 'Elle' was a play on 'Elpis,' her ancestral name, while 'Avis' had been the family her many times great-grandmother had been born into, but very few people would know that and no one outside the Weasley family, Hope was sure (if one included Hermione in that grouping).

"This'll be fun," Ginny grinned, nodding towards a figure ahead of them where a plump elderly witch as moving at a very slow pace away from the room that Fleur had been getting dressed in when Hope left not long ago. The witch had small beady eyes and a red nose like a bird's beak. "Auntie Muriel! I'm not sure you've met the Maid of Honour, Elle Avis?"

Muriel looked Hope up and down, gruntin in disdain. "Eyes too big, far too thin for childbearing,"
she said as she passed her and Hope gaped at her, insulted.

"Far too thin for childbearing?" she repeated as Ginny burst into restrained giggled. "Why, I oughta —"

Her cheeks enflamed to a red; why on earth would she have to think about that at seventeen!

Fleur had been positively radiant when Hope stepped in to see if she needed anything, and after fixing a few hairs that had been misplaced, Hope ducked out to join the Weasley males at the entrance to the marquee where they were waiting to escort guests.

"Miss Avis!" Fred cried dramatically, bowing lowly to her. "Always a great pleasure to have you in our sights!"

"You flatter me too much, Mr. Weasley," Hope said airily.

"He needs to flatter someone so he can keep it up when Angelina shows up," Ron said, yawning widely. "Are you here to keep up company, because we are bored."

"Hm…maybe." Hope said, pulling her deck of tarot cards out of seemingly nothing. "Want to pick a card?"

Fred and George sniggered as Ron contemplated her for a moment, but it was better than being bored, so when she fanned out the cards, he pulled out one that was close to the centre, lifting it up to his eyes. "The Chariot, what does that mean?"

Hope took it from him, screwing up her face as she recalled her memory. "Determination," she told him, "you will face opposition but still achieve your goal with strength of will-power."

"Wonderful," Ron said dryly as she shuffled again and offered them to Fred who eyed her for a short moment before taking one.

"The Wheel of Fortune," Hope hummed as she took the card back, "indicates that times are changing and that you should change with them. The good and the bad will pass."

George took one barely after she finished shuffling.

"The Magician –you should make better use of your skills, there are new beginnings heading your way and new expectations."

"Don't tell me this is how you spent last night?" George asked, arching an eyebrow. "Memorizing the meanings of tarot cards?"

"Well, it was the hen party, in a way," Hope said with a shrug. "It's just a good bit of fun, I wouldn't read too much into it."

"What card did you get?" Fred asked her and Hope grinned in a feral manner, a grin that didn't much suit her face now that it didn't look like it usually did.

"Death," she said, the cards disappearing inside the folds of her dress, "and, you know what your aunt said to me when she saw me?"

"Something rude, no doubt," Ron said, "but don't take it personally, she's like that too everyone."

"Ginny mentioned that," Hope said wryly, "but your aunt said 'eyes too big, far too thing for
childbearing."

George choked on the air and Fred smacked him on the back to get him breathing again as Ron looked anywhere but at her, ducking around to assist a few Veela cousins to their seats just to get away from her, and Hope glared after him when Remus and Tonks entered.

"You two aren't going to jump another fence, are you?" Hope asked a bit mutinously and Remus laughed.

"Not this time," he promised, giving her a hug and kissing her cheek as she did the same to him before hugging Tonks who was currently blonde and Hope just couldn't accept it.

"The Ministry's being very anti-werewolf at the moment," Tonks explained as Hope led them to their seat.

Hope snorted at that. "When aren't they being anti-werewolf?"

Remus and Tonks had to concede to that.

"As soon as Tom's at least six feet under," Hope grumbled, "I'm taking up my seat in the Wizengamot and repealing some of those prejudiced laws."

Tonks grinned widely. "Mum can help you with that!...And shouldn't you be with the bride?"

"In a little bit," Hope admitted, twirling in her dress. "What d'you think?"

"You look lovely," Remus told her.

"No, no," Tonks corrected with a wink, patting her husband's arm, "you look hot, Ho- I mean, Ellie, don't let anyone tell you different."

Hope laughed.

"We actually had something we wanted to talk to you about," Tonks added, pulling her closer so they speak lower. "How would you feel...about being a godmother?"

Hope's eyes widened at the words, glancing between the two, and suddenly it made so much more sense why Tonks had been practically glowing. "Oh my gods," she said, her eyes dropping to Tonks' stomach. "You'repregnant!"

"Yup!" Tonks said proudly.

"And-and the lycanthrope virus...it's not passed through the genes," Hope said, stuttering a little as she wracked her brains. "Oh, that's amazing!"

Remus was looking happier than Hope had seen him in a very long time. "So you'll be godmother?"

"I can't believe you remembered when I said that to you," Hope laughed at Tonks who flushed lightly. Hope had told her nearly a year ago now that she was going to knock some sense into Remus for her in exchange for being named godmother; Hope had almost forgotten about it, to be honest. "But yes, I'll do it! Congratulations!" She hugged them both together before releasing them and jabbing a finger at Tonks. "Don't you dare drink any alcohol while I'm gone!"

Tonks gave a mocking salute while her husband shook his head in exasperation as Hope disappeared into the growing crowd, barely having time to greet Luna who had come with her father, a rather eccentric man that explained a great deal about Luna's...peculiarities, and Viktor Krum, whom Ron
still had a bit of a dislike towards, even though he was currently dating Hermione who wouldn't look twice towards anyone, even famous Quidditch players. (Luna recognized her regardless of what she looked like, but Viktor only did when she winked at her eyes turned green briefly)

Hope took the much smaller bouquet compared to Fleur's from Apolline, straightening her dress and Gabrielle's when the music started up.

Fleur was a mixture of excited and nervous, chewing on her lip nervously.

"You'll be fine," Hope told her, leaning forward to kiss her cheek gently and not ruin her make-up. "Besides, I'm one going out first!"

Fleur laughed throatily and Hope was waved forward.

Hope took a deep breath and entered into the aisle of the marquee, well aware of how many eyes turned towards her as she moved carefully towards the front where Bill was standing at the altar with Charlie off to the side slightly.

George grinned roguishly at her as she passed him by and Hope's lips widened into a smile as she came to a stop at her spot, Gabrielle following a few seconds afterwards, and then it was Fleur's turn, and she swept into the room, radiating pure light as though she was a Greek goddess in human form.

Fleur had never looked more beautiful than in the moment when her eyes met Bill's and she beamed even more brightly, the black phoenixes on her pure white dress rippling as she moved forward so that it almost looked as though they were alive.

And then the world seemed to fall away, as though Fleur and Bill were the only ones that mattered and Hope glanced towards George, knowing the feeling.

After Hope had stumbled her way through giving a relatively nice speech and then a dance with Charlie (after the dance with the new husband and wife, of course) before she found herself back in George's arms once again as the other members of the wedding dissolved into conversation, drank their champagne, or danced around them.

"You know there was this rather beautiful bird I saw at the wedding," George told her innocently as they twirled around several of the guests.

Hope bit her lip to keep from smiling. "Is that so?" she asked lightly. "And what, pray tell, did this beautiful bird look like?"

"Well, she was the Maid of Honour to the bride," George said in a thoughtful manner, "so she would be hard to miss…and she was wearing a gold dress an awful lot like this one…” He smoothed a thumb against her fabric-clad hip, no doubt wishing he could touch her bare skin.

"Was she?" Hope asked, spinning her fingers into his hair.

"She was," George hummed in agreement before leaning down to whisper into her ear, "but I think it would look a lot better on the ground."

Hope's face flushed a fiery colour that she had to force down, gritting her teeth with effort. "George. Fabian. Weasley. If there was no one around, I would have punched you by now."

"And that's why I say these things to you when we're in public places," George said, smirking in amusement.
"Because this is all a game to you," Hope said dryly.

"Some things," George had to agree, "getting you incredibly embarrassed is one of my favourite games."

"I gathered that." Hope gave him a flat stare as they narrowly avoided an elderly couple on the dance floor that was doing little more than swaying on their feet.

"What gave it away?" George demanded with an air of drama.

"It must have been the years of experience," Hope laughed, looping her arm around his neck as he dipped her back suddenly before returning her to her feet.

"Have you seen the way the Maid of Honour is draping herself over my great-nephew? Unseemly!"

The croaky voice of George's Great-Aunt Muriel made Hope frown and George scowl. "Ignore her," he advised, "she doesn't even like me or Fred much, which might have something to do with us letting off a firecracker under her seat at Christmas awhile back."

Hope laughed as Fred and Angelina walked onto the dance floor, hand in hand, Angelina looking particularly lovely in a deep violet gown that nearly brushed against the floor, several shades off from Hermione's lilac dress.

"You'll get word to us, won't you?" George asked her suddenly and she fastened her eyes on him again. "When you're at that safe house of yours, the one we'll meet you at?"

"I promise," Hope said, cupping her hand over his cheek before she smiled. "We won't be apart as long as we were last year."

George chuckled softly. "I hope not; last year was almost unbearable."

"What about you, Fred and the others?" she asked quietly as a Weasley cousin and his dark-haired partner swung a bit close to them. "Do you have a safe place in the meantime?"

"We'll be fine," he told her, "we're working on an idea that might come into play a bit sooner than we'd expected."

"Anything you're willing to share?" Hope was grinning widely.

"Not at the moment," George replied with a wink before parting from her as the song came to an end. He lift her knuckles to his mouth to press a lingering kiss to her knuckles before striding off to find his brother, leaving Hope to search for Ron and Hermione.

They weren't as difficult to find, mostly because of the shade of Hermione's dress rather than Ron's hair, which was practically camouflage with the sheer number of Weasley relatives at the wedding. They appeared to be in the middle of an intense conversation with Seamus and Ginny.

"Is something wrong?" Hope asked as she came up beside Seamus who jumped a bit wildly. He narrowed his eyes suspiciously at her and Hope smiled disarmingly. "I have a wand, Finnigan, surely you know how well I am at using it?"

Realization dawned in his eyes. "Ah," he drawled, "the goddess in the box."

"I'll stuff you in a box," Hope said sweetly and Seamus released a short laugh. "So, what's going on?" Her words abruptly sobered the four. "What's happened?"
"Dean had to make a run for it," Seamus said, lowering his voice carefully, "some Ministry workers came to his house, probably making up something like he'd broken the Stature of Secrecy, or something to that effect, but he left before they could drag him out."

"We do know that You-Know-Who's taken over a good bit of the Ministry by now," Ron pointed out.

"Targeting Muggle-borns would probably be his first step," Hermione agreed, looking a bit apprehensive, as she was the only one in the group with 'inferior blood,' as some said.

"Is Dean going to be safe on his own?" Ginny asked in concern, her arm squeezing her boyfriend's waist from where she had her arm wrapped.

"All the Muggle-borns I had talked to had been preparing to go into hiding anyways," Hermione said, "I'm sure Dean was ready when they came…but can he really last that long before we reach Pithos?" The last part was directed towards Hope who frowned intently.

"Dean's clever," she said finally, "he's going to have to be on his own for a bit, he doesn't know Parseltongue, so he wouldn't've been able to enter, anyways, even if he had the coordinates."

Seamus wrinkled his eyebrows slightly and Ginny leaned close to his ear to explain the plan of sorts and then he arched an eyebrow. "Is that what you've been doing all summer?"

The three shrugged as one.

"Some," Ron had to admit. "But we've been…kind of busy."

"Really?" Seamus said sardonically. "I wouldn't have guessed."

Ginny snorted and Hope sniggered while Hermione tried to stifle her giggles to little avail.

"Any other surprises?"

"We have enough food to feed a small army," Hope told him, trying to keep a straight face.

"But is it enough to feed Ron?" Seamus queried.

"Oi!"

Hermione had tears in her eyes from laughing that it took her a good minute to recover her wits and they all shared a brief moment of amusement, but then that moment was over as something silvery-blue seamed to leap gracefully through the air. Hope dug under her dress to where she had strapped her wand holster so that it could be hidden well without it being noticeable that she was wearing, removing her holly wand as the silver-blue streak solidified into a ghostly lynx that opened its mouth to utter words in the voice of Kingsley's low timbre: "The Ministry has fallen. Scrimgeour is dead. They are coming."

"They are coming," echoed several times before the light from the Patronus faded and disappeared.

Scrimgeour dead? Hope released a short breath. It hardly seemed possible, she had only just seen him the day before! Who had gotten to him that soon?

Hope shook her head. That didn't matter, none of that mattered right now; it seemed that Hope, Ron, and Hermione were going to have to leave sooner than they had anticipated (though only by a matter of hours).
The long silence stretched on until it could no longer at the sound of a scream of fear piercing through the air, and it was that more than anything else that caused the panic to spread like a disease through the body unencumbered, and the five who had been standing together found them forced into several different directions by the crowd who began to rush at the scream.

"Hope!" Hermione screamed, reaching for her as she fought against the crowd, loud cracks of Apparition and Disapparition filled the air as she grasped her wrist tightly before the turned, whipping around in search of their red-haired friend (and boyfriend to one of them).

"Ron!" Hope yelled. "Ron!"

She had to divert her attention briefly as a dark cloaked man aimed a wand into the air. "Bombarda!"

And he was sent flying backwards by an explosion that nearly ripped completely through his abdomen, but Hope didn't have much time to think about that as Hermione erected a quick barrier as a Stunner passed a little too close for comfort.

"Protego!" Remus shielded his wife as Tonks fired off spells faster than Hope could even think of casting them (no doubt from her Auror training), and Hope could see Seamus pushing Ginny down and out of the way of a stray Avada Kedavra.

"Ron!" Hermione called, relief colouring her voice as she finally managed to catch sight of her boyfriend, not far away. He had sustained a cut on his hand, from which blood was falling freely, but Hope was almost certain in was a graze when he grabbed Hermione's arm with his unwounded hand and Hermione could at last turn on the spot and Disapparate away from the fight.

Hope didn't know if Fred and George were safe. She didn't know if Remus and Tonks were safe, or Mr. and Mrs. Weasley, Bill and Fleur, Angelina, Lee, Seamus, Ginny, Charlie, Gabrielle and Monsieur and Madam Delacour were safe. She didn't know anything. All she did know was that the wind was being squeezed out of her and when Hope opened her eyes, she found herself in an unfamiliar place with only her two friends by her side.
It was a mixture of Death Eaters and Ministry employees that Mr. Weasley stiffly saw out of his home, after their rather extensive search, which included them running into the bedridden ghoul that had taken Ron's room to act as his double (very seriously ill, or so it seemed), for Hope, and George as well, (this came as no surprise to the man; You-Know-Who had surely caught on to their relationship by now), but neither were anywhere to be seen.

He returned to the sitting room where the silence hung in the air, no one daring to break it with their words.

Monsieur and Madam Delacour had taken Gabrielle up to Ginny's room for a moment to calm her out of the hysterics that had ensued. Bill was holding his new wife, his arms wrapped securely around her waist as Fleur stared off into space, her face fierce and her dress streaked with blood and dirt. Charlie had his shaking mother in his arms, rubbing soothing circles into her back. Ginny was gripping Seamus' arm tightly, their fingers so closely interlocked that you could see bone where the skin drew taut.

"Lucky they got out when they did," Charlie said gruffly as Mrs. Weasley began to calm, her forehead resting against the shoulder of her second eldest son.

"Lucky ze were planning to leave," Fleur corrected thickly and Bill kissed her head.

Charlie frowned slightly. He hadn't talked with Hope that long ago, and, truth be told, they didn't speak a lot in general, and it had been a first time in a while during the dance between the Best Man and Maid of Honour.

"Oh, sorry," Charlie apologized quickly when he trod a bit on her foot, "I'm really not that great of a dancer."

"Ever heard of practice?" Hope asked archly, a small smirk forming on her lips. "Any luck growing your hair back?" Mrs. Weasley had chopped it rather short soon after his arrival at the Burrow.

"No," he said, chuckling softly as they spun around, "any luck getting together with Ron and Hermione?"

A small scowl darkened Hope's face briefly. "I'll give your mother one thing," she grumbled, "she is very good at keeping us busy."

"Oh, she excels at that," Charlie had to agree. "But at least she didn't pitch a fit when Ron told her he was dropping out."

"I heard it was a very near thing," Hope replied wryly. "That her face went all red."

Charlie shrugged. He wouldn't have known anything about that, he hadn't arrived to the Burrow until a bit afterwards, and by then his father had to explain the situation to him. He stepped on her foot again.

"You should have seen her when Bill told her he was going to work in Egypt, or when I told her I'd been accepted into the Dragon Preservation Program in Romania," he said instead, dipping her back slightly only to pull her upright swiftly again, well aware of George's eyes on him, watching his every move like a hawk.
"Was it explosive?" Hope sniggered, imagining it quite well. Mrs. Weasley rather had a reputation for blowing her top.

"Very," Charlie told her as they twirled around a few couples. "I'm surprised she didn't yell herself hoarse."

"Probably a spell," Hope said conversationally before her smile faded. "Are you going back to Romania after all this?"

"I have to," Charlie said, "it'll look a bit suspicious if I don't show up for work, even with all the business with You-Know-Who."

Hope nodded in understanding.

"What about you?" he added. "Any destination for you, Ron, and Hermione in particular?"

She flashed him a smile. "Oh, you know, living off the land, off in the wilderness telling ghost stories around a fire—"

She had been remarkably carefree, if you asked Charlie, but perhaps that was more to do with the plan she and her friends had carefully concocted. And Fred, George, Lee, and Angelina had had a plan that was similar in nature, he was certain of, but he thankful that they had all gotten away when they had the chance. Even if his mother hadn't been on board with their plan, she had to agree that it was better from them to be gone than captured.

"Seamus," his father said suddenly, "would you like to use the Floo to return to your home?"

It was like everyone had forgotten about the Irishman wizard that Ginny was clinging to, and several pairs of eyes turned in his direction, as though surprised to see him there.

"Oh, yeah," the young man said, his accent coming out a bit thicker than usual, "that'd be great, thanks, Mr. Weasley."

The others turned away politely as Ginny gave him a kiss that was hardly appropriate to be seen in front others.

"Keep your galleon on you," she whispered for him alone before taking a step back and Seamus nodded seriously.

"I'll keep my ears open for anything," he promised, both to her and the rest of those gathered in the sitting room. Ginny nodded, biting on her lip slightly as she watched him walk out of the room and towards where the fireplace and Floo powder was.

A moment later Ginny could hear some indistinct words and the roar of the flames, and then she sat down hard on the couch as her father came to secure his arm around his daughter.

"It's alright," he said, "Seamus will be fine."

But Ginny wasn't really as worried about Seamus as she was some other people she knew.

The small compact mirror in her hands was as cold as when Hope had given it to her earlier that evening.

It took a surprising short time for them all to chance out of their robes and into more casual dress, and by then Hope had changed her looks again to pin-straight black hair and pale green eyes and had
moved her holster back to her arm again, which was hidden under the long duster coat that Tonks and Remus had given her.

The coat did not prevent Hope or even Hermione from getting cat-calls from some very drunk men on the opposite side of the street of Muggle London (Tottenham Court Road, Hermione had called it).

"Oi! Fuck off!"

"Ignore them," Hermione said as she grabbed one of Hope's arms as Ron grabbed the other to keep from going over there to give the men some permanent brain damage, before deciding to take a short breather in a small café that currently held no customers.

"Should we try to contact Mum and Dad?" Ron asked as he pushed away his cappuccino, his lips curling in disgust as Hope sipped her Chai Tea.

"Not visibly," Hope said, frowning into her terrible tasting tea, "they'll probably be watched very closely, we'd be better served to use the mirror I left with Ginny."

"Why don't you call her now?"

Hope arched a sardonic eyebrow and Hermione shook her head. "No," she said seriously, "we need to find a safe place to lie low before we head off towards Pithos, and it'll probably be better to use the bike for that."

"Pithos is hours away, and in the middle of a forest," Ron pointed out.

"Would you rather Apparate there and be disoriented that an enemy could sneak up on you?" Hope asked and Hermione hummed in agreement.

"But where should we go?" Hermione asked in worry. "Voldemort's taken over the Ministry and we hadn't planned to go to Pithos until a bit later."

The bell on the door rang uncomfortably and Hope glanced up briefly to see two men enter dressed in identical blue uniforms.

"Wouldn't it be safer to just go straight there?" Ron asked, barely above a whisper and Hope became uncomfortably aware of the unwavering attention of the two men sitting in the booth opposite them.

"No," Hope said, drawing her arm out inconspicuously straight when she abandoned all pretence, her wand shooting into her hand before they had time to draw theirs. "Expulso!"

But they were only a half-step behind her, blowing back her curse so fast that Hermione, Ron, and Hope had to dive out of the booth, and it resulted in a loud yell of pain from Ron as he was hit in the backlash, earning a cut slicing through his shin.

"Stupefy!" Hope just barely caught the blonde Death Eater she now recognized to be Antonin Dolohov (possibly because the last time they had crossed paths back in her fifth year, she had relieved him of his wand arm), his stumped arm giving him away easily.

"Confringo!" Ron yelled towards the second Death Eater, but his aim was a little off, but he still managed to burn his arm terribly that he released a short scream of agony, giving Hermione just enough time to throw a Petrificus Totalus his way, sending him to the floor as stiff as a board.

"Everyone alright?" Hope grunted as she pulled herself upright to survey the damage. The waitress
had been knocked out in the crossfire, at least, that was what it appeared to be (but she didn't look to be dead, so that was good), and the attacks from both sides had done some serious damage to the walls and booths.

"I'll let you know when I can feel anything in my leg," Ron said through gritted teeth as he pulled himself up into a standing position and Hermione lurched to his side so that he could lean some of his weight on her.

"How did they find us?" Hermione demanded of Hope who had bent over the second Death Eater, whom she recognized to be one of the Death Eaters in the Astronomy Tower back in June…Rowle, she thought his name was. What are we going to do?

Hope leaned back, away from Rowle, whose eyes were following her movements rapidly. "We need to get out of here, get somewhere safe, but first we should probably wipe their memories…Hermione, can you clean up?"

"Yeah, sure," Hermione said, her voice shaking a little as she switched her wand from the arm that was bracing Ron to her weaker hand, but it had no effect on how thoroughly clean the café became.

Hope pointed her wand at Dolohov as Hermione lumbered forward with Ron to point hers at Rowle, both girls intoning "Obliviate," before doing the same to the waitress and setting them into booths to make it seem like they hadn't even been there.

"But how did they find us?" Hermione insisted, her question still not answered. "You don't still have the Trace on you, can you, Hope?"

Ron shook his head a few times. "She can't have," he denied. "The Trace breaks at seventeen, that's Wizarding law, you can't put it on an adult."

"But what if the Death Eaters have found a way to put it on a seventeen-year-old?" Hermione countered with worry laced through her voice.

"But Hope hasn't been near a Death Eater in the last twenty-four hours," Ron said. "Who's supposed to have put a Trace back on her?"

"It can't be the Trace," Hope decided, "but it's something, something that can be tracked."

"We need to get out of here," Ron said, "find a safe place to hide. Give us time to think things through."

"I think we should go to Grimmauld Place."

Both her friends looked at her like she was mad, but Hope had been on the receiving end of the look for so long that she hardly noticed.

"You can't be serious," Ron said.

Hope could've made a joke about Sirius, but she restrained herself.

"Snape can get in there!" Hermione added.

"Mad-Eye put up jinxes after Dumbledore died," Hope said, glancing between the pair of them, "besides, where else are we going to go?"

Hermione pursed her lips, but she had to agree that Grimmauld Place was probably their best option.
Hope cut the engine of the motorbike as they slowed to a stop just outside Grimmauld Place, at the spot between Numbers Eleven and Thirteen where the worn Number Twelve was visible to them alone.

Hermione hopped uncomfortably out of the side-car to help Hope assist Ron in climbing off the seat directing behind her as they made their way towards Number Twelve and then safely inside, but for a moment, they didn't move, the eerie silence hanging around them like the ratty curtains that hid Mrs. Black from view.

"What is it?" Hermione asked Hope, taking note of her apprehension.

"It's just…where are the jinxes?" Hope asked quietly, as though speaking too loud would activate them.

"Maybe they're only activated if he shows up?" Ron offered, trying not to lean as heavily on Hermione.

"Maybe," Hope frowned a little, gripping Ron's arm that was over her shoulder as well as Hermione's, taking one tentative step forward, and thus activating whatever defensive measures Mad-Eye had put in place.

"Severus Snape?" The familiar croak of Mad-Eye Moody made them all jump.

"We-We're not Snape!" Hermione choked out before Hope could manage it, and then speaking became entirely too hard to do as their tongues curled backwards in their mouths.

Hope hacked several coughs as her tongue returned to its normal position.

"That m-must have b-been the T-Tongue-Tying Curse Mad-Eye set up for Snape!" Hermione gasped out before they all fell into abrupt silence at what must have been another one of Mad-Eye's jinxes.

This one took the misty form of the deceased Dumbledore only greater and more terrible than Hope had ever seen him. His arm outstretched towards Hope whose eyes positively bulged.

"I didn't kill yo—"

The figure burst into smoke at the word 'kill' and for a moment more the three didn't move.

"I'd kill Mad-Eye if he wasn't already dead," Ron said sourly and the two girls had to agree with him for a moment.

"Come on," Hope said, tugging on one of Ron's arm, "let's get into the kitchen, we can look at your leg there."

"Great," he said dryly as Hermione did a quick check to see if they were as alone as they appeared (and, thankfully, they were), wincing as his leg collided with the troll leg umbrella stand.

"If you've got Ron, I'll send Ginny a mirror message and let her know we're all still alive—"

"Will you ask about—?" Ron said suddenly as his girlfriend began to pull him in the direction of the kitchen.
"Yeah, I've got you," Hope said, waving her hand carelessly as she pulled out of the small compact mirror that now did more than connect to Angelina's. "Ginny Weasley," she said clearly, and miles upon miles away a nearly-sixteen-year-old witch was running into her parents' room, yelling for them to not go to sleep just yet.

"Ginny!" her mother cried, vaguely startled by the noise her daughter was making, fear overtaking her face briefly. "What is it?"

"It's Hope," she said, holding out the mirror which had been expanded to a larger size and her father grabbed the mirror to see a familiar green-eyed young woman.

"Mr. Weasley," she said, her voice relieved, "I am the daughter of James and Lily Potter, a metamorphmagus, and we once had a conversation about George Weasley in your Ford Anglia before my second year."

"I remember," Mr. Weasley said, expelling a sigh with his wife.

"Is everyone safe?" Hope asked, glancing up slightly towards a distant noise that none of the three could make out.

"We're all safe," Mrs. Weasley said for her husband, "most of the wedding guests Disapparated before they arrived—"

"It couldn't have been just Death Eaters," Hope said, scowling at something they couldn't see.

"There were some Ministry workers mixed in," Mr. Weasley acquiesced as Ginny moved so Hope could barely see her in the frame. "They didn't even know that you were there, so that worked in our favour...there's a rumour floating around that they tortured Scrimgeour to find out your whereabouts, but he never said."

Surprise coloured Hope's eyes.

"What about Ron?" Mrs. Weasley said suddenly. "And Hermione? Are you all safe?"

"For now," Hope said. "Ron's banged up his leg a little, but it's nothing that can't be healed in a second, Mrs. Weasley, Mr. Weasley, there's something you might want to tell the others."

"What's that?" Ginny piped up for her father.

"We tried to regroup in Muggle London," Hope explained, "but they caught up with us—"

Mrs. Weasley tried to stifle her gasp with her hand but it didn't help much.

"—I can't still have the Trace on me," Hope said, "but they found some way to track us, and I'm not really sure how, just keep the Order...aware."

"I'll let them know," Mr. Weasley said, "but you shouldn't contact us again ("Arthur!" Mrs. Weasley reproached, clearly thinking it was better if they were in contact), just to be safe, since we're all being watched."

"We'll keep it in mind," Hope promised, pausing at a male's voice in front of her. "Ron wants to know if the ghoul worked."

"It did," Ginny spoke this time, "they didn't want to get too close to him, though."

"That's good," Hope sighed.
"Hope...they were looking for you—even if they didn't know you were her—because they want to arrest you for Professor Dumbledore's murder," Mr. Weasley said quietly, and then Hope did a strange thing.

She gave a short laugh that lacked any feeling. "Of course they were." Her eyes flashed to Ginny's and the brown-eyed witch understood the silent "We'll talk soon," before they focused back on the elder Weasleys. "We'll keep each other safe. Watch your backs." And then her face vanished and the mirror shrank to compact size.

Daphne Greengrass was many things, a Slytherin, a Prefect, a witch who danced the fine grey line with Hope Potter, and now it seemed Blood Traitor was going to be added to that list. After all, she had allied herself with Hope when the truth about Voldemort had been realized, it had nearly gotten her killed more than twice. But Daphne didn't regret it, or falling in love with Muggle-born.

She'd already painted a target on her and her younger sister's back.

"Are you changed, Astoria?" she called as she shoved the last of her and her sister's clothes into the expanded bag that her mother had helped her with.

"Yeah," Astoria said, a little breathless, her fear and anxiety clear to see. "Do you have everything?"

"Everything but your Trace," Daphne said, gesturing towards her, "hand me that hairbrush."

"What're you going to do?" Astoria asked, but she did as her sister said.

"I am going to shift your Trace from you to an immovable object," Daphne said, "but if I can pull it off, it means that the Ministry won't be able to find us as easily."

"I didn't know there was such a spell," Astoria admitted.

Daphne allowed herself a wry grin. "Oh, there isn't," she smirked, "I invented it."

Astoria couldn't help but gape at her sister, but she kept appropriately silent as the older blonde made several elaborate waves of her wand.

"Mancipium signum!"

Thin blue and silver threads appeared over Astoria, like she was in a webbed cage, and Daphne was careful to drag each thread little by little towards the hairbrush, when it finally glowed brightly.

"Good," Daphne sighed in relief. "Got everything?"

"I think so," Astoria said, glancing around her room for anything she might have left behind, catching sight of the letter Daphne had decided to leave their parents who were rather unaware of their rather abrupt leaving. "Shouldn't we just tell them in person?"

"Then they would be considered accomplices," Daphne pointed out, "it's better they don't know anything, hopefully they'll be left alone."

She bent down to grab the Nimbus 2000 that she had bought over the summer (fast but not too fast for her, someone who had barely ever ridden a broomstick).

"There's a train station not far from here where Tracey is going to meet us," Daphne told her, checking her reflection in the mirror, hoping she looked like a Muggle. Her long blonde hair was hanging loose and her clothes were rather fitted to her form, but Hope's had always been as well.
"We'll plan from there."

Astoria hopped onto the broom after her sister, having carefully unlocked the latch on the window so they could easily fly through. And then they were soaring up, high up into the free air, hiding within the clouds (the downside, of course, being that it was utterly freezing).

"Do you think they got Hope?" Astoria called over the wind.

"If they'd gotten Hope, we'd know about it," Daphne called back, "they'd have wanted to gloat about it. No, I think she's probably doing what we're doing."

"Going into hiding?" Astoria offered helpfully.

"Exactly," Daphne said, her thoughts still racing at a mile a minute. Surely they hadn't caught Dean, had they? *Think positive thoughts*, she reminded herself. By now all the Muggle-borns that were aware of what was going on had gone underground.

*If Hope Potter can survive half a year without seeing her boyfriend, so can you,* she told herself as they passed over the city of Worchester. *Just focus on you and Astoria, and maybe we'll survive this.*

"We're going down," Daphne told her sister over the wind whistling past them. "We'll dismount and then walk to the train station, do you understand?"

"Yes!" Astoria had to shout to be heard as they descended rather suddenly into an empty field, just in case any Muggles saw through the Disillusionment Charm, hitting the ground so hard that their knees buckled slightly before they managed to right themselves, stowing the broom quickly.

"Come on, then," Daphne said, holding out her hand to her sister, "it's a bit of a walk."

Astoria's mouth set in a grim line as she silently agreed.
Ron woke to silence with Hermione's back to his chest and his arm curled protectively over her side, a thought that had his face flushing brightly and recoiling slightly, but gently so as not to awaken his still slumbering girlfriend.

He rubbed the sleep from his eyes with his hand as he rolled onto his back. He and Hermione had taken the floor, wrapped snugly in their sleeping bags while Hope's form had been raised above them on the sofa, swathed in thick blankets. Hope had been twitching even before she'd fallen asleep, and Ron was almost certain that it had to do with her scar but she didn't say anything so he kept his own silence.

But now the blankets had been cast haphazardly aside and their friend was gone.

Ron nudged Hermione's shoulder until she opened her eyes to stare at him blearily.

"Hm?" she mumbled.

"Hope's gone," he said, and all the traces of sleepiness had gone as Hermione sat up quickly, looking feverishly around for any trace of the red-head, but there was none.

"I'll take the first and second floors, you take the third and fourth?" Ron offered and Hermione nodded as the pair went off to search for Hope, while up on fourth floor Hope was sitting on the bed that had once belonged to her godfather, a wrapped present that had been hidden under the bed beside her as she read the letter her mother had left behind, torn just like the photograph it had been with.

Hope traced a finger over the dried ink, imagining the hand that had tidily scrawled the words about her and her father across the page.

And then Hope set it aside to pull the gift-box towards her, reading the hasty scrawl on it that been written by the hand of her godfather. It only two words: For Hope. She pulled the strings that bound it loose so that she could look within.

If she had been expecting some kind of deep letter about all the things Sirius wished he could have done, in the event that he died before he could give her the package himself, she would have been sadly mistaken, but Hope knew better. Sirius just wouldn't have been the type.

He would have wanted to give it to her himself.

Hope shook her head to clear it of the dark thoughts before she lifted the first thing out of the box. It was a red leather-bound book with a lion's head sewn into the cover. Upon opening it, Hope wasn't at all surprised to discover that it held pictures of the Marauders (Peter Pettigrew, thankfully, had walked out of each of the frames) and Lily and her friends.

She already had one photo album, but it was more focused on her parents, and it had mostly from their last year and up until a little after Hope had been born. This one, by contrast, started with them young and progressed with a few pictures of her mother and her friends thrown in. The last few pages where of her recent years, standing in her robes before the Third Task of the Triwizard Tournament with Remus, another was of when she had fallen asleep in Grimmauld Place's sitting room with her head resting on Sirius' shoulder…

Hope closed the album with a forlorn sigh before pulling the second item towards her. It was a small
package, like the kind that usually held jewellery.

She lifted the lid to see what he had left her, and she couldn't help but gasp slightly at what way within.

Sirius knew better than most people how proud she was of her lineage and his gift reflected that. It was a coiled silver snake with an emerald clutched in its jaws. It was truly a beautiful gift. Hope pricked a finger slightly on one of the sharp fangs when a sudden yell jarred her.

"Hope? Hope! Where are you?"

Hermione appeared so suddenly at the door that Hope didn't have time to respond.

"Hope," Hermione said a combination of exasperated and relieved, "we were worried! Have you been up here this whole time?"

"Mostly," Hope said, barely blinking when Hermione yelled into the corridor. "Ron! I found her!"

"Thank Merlin!" Ron's voice sounded from at least the second floor. "Tell her she's a complete git!"

"You're a complete git," Hermione intoned to Hope who rolled her eyes, attempting to gather up the box with the gifts from Sirius and her mother's torn letter and photograph. "What have you been doing? What's all this?"

"It's, er," Hope looked down at what was in her arms, "it's from Sirius…and a letter from my Mum to him."

"Oh." That pulled Hermione up short and she hovered awkwardly in front of her friend, wondering what she should say when Ron's voice called out a second time.

"Hey, I think you two need to come see this," he said and Hope placed the box on her godfather's bed as she followed Hermione out of the room and down the stairs to see their ginger friend staring at a plaque on a door.

"What is it?" Hope asked, befuddled, looking up to read the neatly etched words: *Do Not Enter Without the Express Permission of Regulus Arcturus Black.*

"I think it's R.A.B," Ron said and Hermione's mouth unhinged and Hope's eyes widened.

"Sirius' brother?" Hermione murmured.

"Sirius told me he joined the Death Eaters," Hope told them, "but after awhile he tried to back out and they killed him for it."

"And that makes sense," Hermione agreed, bobbing her head. "If he was a Death Eater he had access to Voldemort, and if he became disenchanted, then he would have wanted to bring Voldemort down!"

"D'you think the locket's in there?" Ron asked them.

None of them were speaking above a whisper, almost as if apprehension was silencing them.

"I guess there's only one way to find out," Hope conceded, grasping the knob and twisting it open carefully as if she was expecting it to be booby trapped, but it was not, so Hope swung the door completely open so that they could see the room.
It was smaller than Sirius' no doubt owing to Regulus being the second born, and he had clearly been very proud of the House he had been sorted into, and of the Pure-blood ideology his parents had thrust upon him from an early age, the same ideology that Sirius had rejected. There were a number of yellowing parchments fastened to the wall that Hermione went to inspect.

"They're all about Voldemort," she told them as the other two eyed the room cautiously (Ron actually knelt on the ground to see if there was anything under the bed). "Regulus seems to have been a fan for a few years before he joined the Death Eaters..."

"Aren't they all?" Hope asked with a frown as Ron moved carefully around the wardrobe, careful of the stray robes within, since the last set of robes he had disturbed in the house had nearly strangled him during their fifth year.

Hermione had to make a small noise of agreement.

"Shouldn't we just summon it?" Ron asked suddenly, but Hope shook her head.

"No, it's probably enchanted so it can't be summoned," she said, "the fake actually had Inferi guarding it."

"Great," Ron drawled out.

"I'm sure it won't be that drastic," Hermione told him, "since Regulus removed the real one."

They all picked a corner of the room and began to search rather diligently, but had to reluctantly agree that everything in the room was relatively worthless.

"Just because it's not in his room doesn't mean it's not in the house," Hermione said seriously, tapping her chin thoughtfully as she did so. "Whether he'd manage to destroy it or not, he'd want to keep it hidden from Voldemort, wouldn't he? Remember all those awful things we had to get rid of when we were here last time? That clock that shot bolts at everyone and those old robes that tried to strangle Ron; Regulus might have put them there to protect the locket's hiding place, even though we didn't realize it at...at..."

Hermione went stock still and Hope and Ron had to stop and stare at her.

"Hermione?" Ron asked in concern, raising a hand to cup her cheek as Hermione's dazed eyes drifted towards him. "What's wrong?"

"There was a locket," she all but whispered.

"What are you talking about?" Hope asked.

"What are you talking about?" Hope asked.

"In the cabinet in the drawing room. Nobody could open it. And we...we..." Hermione grasped Hope's arm. "And you! You had an intense headache and you had to leave, don't you remember? You and Ginny helped clean the kitchen while we did the drawing room."

"You think she was sensing a Horcrux?" Ron asked, quirking an eyebrow.

"What else could it be?" Hermione was positively beaming as she turned towards Ron this time. "She's got a connection with Voldemort that none of us understand! What if when she's in close proximity to a Horcrux, it sends off some kind of signal!"

"You're forgetting something," Hope reminded her. "I had Tom Riddle's diary with me and I didn't get a kind of headache like with that locket."
"But you were more irritated," Ron pointed out, "and a little off-balance, like you were dizzy."

Hope's lips drew downwards slightly, recalling being a bit short-tempered. "Don't tell me you're going to use me as some sort of Horcrux-detector?"

"You're the best we've got," Hermione said before they started to push her towards the drawing room, ignoring her complaints.

"Sense anything?" Ron asked once they were there.

"No," Hope said, after a long moment and both their shoulders slumped. "But there is one person who could possibly know of its whereabouts."

Hope's expression soured, her hair darkening a bit to a burgundy. She really didn't like calling him, she really didn't like him in general, but she still opened her mouth and said loudly: "Kreacher!"

The house-elf's appearance followed a short crack and he glared at Hope with an unflattering look that Hope barely took notice of. She hadn't seen much of the house-elf since she'd ordered him to go and work at the Hogwarts kitchens the previous year.

"Mistress," Kreacher said in a dull and low voice as he bowed, not looking her in the eye as he muttered about Hermione and Ron as though they weren't there, "back in my Mistress' old house with the blood-traitor Weasley and the Mudblood—"

"That's enough," Hope ordered in a voice that was like a chill on an already cold day. "You will not refer to anyone ever as 'blood traitor' or 'Mudblood' or any names similar, do we understand each other?"

"Yes, Mistress," Kreacher said solemnly, and Hope was sure it took great effort for him not to grit his teeth.

"I am going to ask you some questions and you are not going to lie," Hope said, the threat barely veiled and Hermione made a disapproving noise behind her, but she paid her no heed.

"Yes, Mistress," he intoned once more.

Hope removed the fake locket from where she had been keeping it in Hagrid's mokeskin pouch to dangle it in front of his eyes; she saw a flicker of recognition.

"You know what this is, don't you?" she asked, the locket swinging like a pendulum on its chain. "There was one just like it in this house, wasn't there?"

"Yes, Mistress." Kreacher swallowed thickly.

"It used to be in the drawing room," Hope continued, "did you hide it away once we'd all gone?"

"Yes," he said.

Hermione and Ron shared a look a delight; the real Horcrux, just within their grasps!

"Is it still here?" Hope asked.

"No," Kreacher said, as though the realization numbed him.

"No?" Hope repeated, the muscle in her jaw twitching. "What do you mean 'no,' Kreacher? Where is it?"
"Gone," Kreacher croaked, looking at her completely now, something he had been trying so hard not to do. "Mundungus Fletcher, Mundungus Fletcher stole it all; Miss Bella's and Miss Cissy's pictures, my Mistress's gloves, the Order of Merlin, First Class, the goblets with the family crest, and —and—"

The true horror that Kreacher felt at losing the locket came out in a scream that echoed Mrs. Black's.

"—and the locket, Master Regulus' locket. Kreacher did wrong, Kreacher failed in his orders!"

"Don't move, Kreacher!" Hope yelled as Kreacher made a sudden move towards the poker, what he had wanted to do with it never came to light because he stilled his body as though he was made of stone. "Turn back towards me." Hermione nudged her pointedly. "Please," Hope added.

Kreacher did so.

"Did you see Mundungus with the locket?"

Kreacher nodded.

Hope glanced back towards her friends. Ron looked distinctly annoyed at having some so close only to be thwarted by a thief looking to make a few extra galleons while Hermione appeared a bit upset on Kreacher's behalf.

"You're going to tell me everything about this locket," Hope told him, her tone brooking no argument.

And Kreacher opened his mouth and spun his tale of woe, of how Tom had required a house-elf, how Regulus had offered Kreacher and Kreacher had gone with Tom to the same cave Hope had journeyed to with Dumbledore before the end of the previous year, how Kreacher had been forced to drink the potion until it was gone and Tom could put the locket into the basin and refill it, leaving Kreacher behind. He told of how Regulus had told him to take him to where he had gone with the Dark Lord, telling him not to tell his mother of anything that happened afterwards, telling him to switch the locket with a fake after he had drunk the potion, and how he had to watch as Regulus was pulled beneath the surface.

After he had finished, it took a long time for him to right himself, and even longer still when Hope presented him with the fake locket that he deserved far more than she, but then he went on his way to search for the thief and bring him back to Number Twelve so that they could question him themselves.

The first thing Hope and the other two noticed over the next two days was that there were people in dark cloaks patrolling around Grimmauld Place, not trying very hard to remain inconspicuous. Hope, Ron, and Hermione decided in turn to patrol them at certain points during the day, and always under the Invisibility Cloak.

It was currently Hope's turn, and she was glaring at the Death Eaters under her hood when she caught sight of her own face looking up at her from the Daily Prophet that was left on the bench nearby.

WANTED FOR QUESTIONING ABOUT THE DEATH OF ALBUS DUMBLEDORE, was the heading above her picture and Hope arched an eyebrow. She managed to sneak it under the cloak when no one was looking and returned to the door, causing a flicker of something that one of the Death Eaters saw. He moved forward in excitement, but by then it had gone, and he had to fall back in disappointment.
"We've got some tomato basil soup," Hermione's voice called from the kitchen once Hope managed to get past Mad-Eye's protective measures. She and Ron were sitting at the long table, pouring over a few books they'd taken from the library, trying to see if there was any more mention of Horcruxes within, but they weren't having much luck.

"Are they doing anything but walking aimlessly?" Ron asked, gulping his scorching soup as Hope sat down opposite them, shaking her head and spooning tomato basil into her mouth.

"No," she admitted after a moment, "but I did swipe their Daily Prophet when they weren't looking."

"Anything interesting?" Hermione asked in a voice that said she clearly thought not.

Hope opened the paper to inspect its rather questionable information. "There's something here about Scrimgeour being replaced by a bloke named Pius Thicknesse… wasn't he the same bloke that made it so hard to get out of Privet Drive?"

"Sounds about right," Ron grunted in agreement. "I guess he's You-Know-Who's puppet, then?"

"I would assume so," Hope said.

"It's pretty clever, actually," Ron mused into his soup, "if You-Know-Who came out as the Minister, there would be panic and fear, rebellions, of course, there's going to be a lot of fear now, but with someone else as Minister leaves a bit more confusion."

Well, Tom was nothing if not clever.

"And if they put it out like Hope was responsible for Dumbledore's death, then it's like they're tearing down her image, her symbol of resistance," Hermione agreed before turning to Hope and asking, "Is there anything about what they're doing at Hogwarts?"

Hope's eyes trailed down the page.

"It says that attendance is compulsory… oh, this is just a load of dragon dung!"

Ron and Hermione both looked at her as she glared angrily at the passage before reading it out loud. "Listen to this—Muggle-born Register – The Ministry of Magic is undertaking a survey of so-called "Muggle-borns" the better to understand how they came to possess magical secrets. Recent research undertaken by the Department of Mysteries reveals that magic can only be passed from person to person when Wizards reproduce. Where no proven Wizarding ancestry exists, therefore, the so-called Muggle-born is likely to have obtained magical power by theft or force. The Ministry is determined to root out such usurpers of magical power, and to this end has issued an invitation to every so-called Muggle-born to present themselves for interview by the newly appointed Muggle-born Registration Commission."

"You've got to be joking," Ron said, his lips curling in disgust. "Steal magic? As if that was possible! How would we have squibs if magic always inherited?"

"And what about the first magic-users?" Hermione asked, looking greatly vexed. "People don't just pop into existence with Pure-blood."

"Some believe that the first witches and wizards were actually Hecate's children," Hope said mildly before Hermione glared at her. "Right, doesn't really matter…"

Whatever else that could've been said was abruptly forgotten when a loud crack filled the air and Kreacher appeared with a pile of human limbs that could have only been Mundungus, with a stench
like that, and the trio scrambled out of the chairs to stand and point their wands at him.

Kreacher gave Hope a respectful bow that was a far contrast from any of the ones Hope had received before (though Hope suspected that his improved attitude had more to do with the locket he was wearing than anything else). "Kreacher has returned with the thief Mundungus Fletcher, Mistress."

Hope gave him a slight smile as Hermione disarmed Mundungus and Ron caught him in an Incarcerous before he could make it to the stairs.

"What? Wha've I done?" Mundungus demanded loudly. "Setting a bleedin' house-elf on me, what are you playing at, wha've I done, lemme go, lemme g—"

Hope pointed her wand at him and he froze. "What haven't you done, Fletcher? Believe me, a house-elf is the least of your problems."

"Kreacher apologizes for the delay in bringing the thief, Mistress," Kreacher said solemnly in his old voice. "Fletcher knows how to avoid capture, has many hidey-holes and accomplices. Nevertheless, Kreacher cornered the thief in the end."

Hope spared him a second smile. "Thank you, Kreacher, for your help."

He bowed again and Hope returned her eyes to Mundungus who had manoeuvred himself into a sitting position.

"You're going to answer to a few things," Hope told him, her eyes like steel.

"I panicked, okay?" Mundungus yelled, glancing between all of them. "I never wanted to come along, no offense, mate, but I never volunteered to die for you, an' that was bleedin' You-Know-Who come flying at me, anyone woulda got outta there. I said all along I didn't wanna do it—"

"None of the rest of us Disapparated," Hermione said hotly.

"Coward," Ron seethed quietly beside his girlfriend.

"Well, you're a bunch of bleedin' 'eroes then, aren't you," Mundungus countered with a bit of sarcasm, "but I never pretended I was up for killing meself—"

"That's not why you're here," Hope said chillingly, "though I'd rather take Mad-Eye over you any day, at least he wasn't a lily-livered piece of shite."

Mundungus didn't even react to the insult, no doubt because he'd been called worse before.

"Well then, why the 'ell am I being 'unted down by 'ouse-elves? Or is this about them goblets again? I ain't got none of 'em left, or you could 'ave 'em—"

"Not quite," Hope said, resolving that once the whole business with Horcruxes was done and Tom dead, she was going to have Mundungus find her everything he had stolen from her. "When you ransacked this place—"

"Sirius never cared about any of the junk—"

Before Hope could offer a reply, Kreacher had grasped the handle of a saucepan and given Mundungus a sharp whack to the back of his skull and the wizard gave a loud cry of pain.

"Call 'im off, call 'im off, 'e should be locked up!" yelled Mundungus as he tried to protect his head from Kreacher's assault.
"Kreacher," Hope warned, and the house-elf paused briefly.

"Perhaps just one more, Mistress Hope," he offered, "for luck?"

Hermione hid her amusement, but Ron didn't bother and Hope's lips curved upwards. "Just one," she said.

Mundungus yelped as the pan collided with his back, sending him sprawling face-first into the floor again.

"When you ransacked this place," Hope continued where she'd left off, "you took a locket, it was silver with emeralds encrusted into it. What happened to it?"

"Why?" Mundungus asked, eyeing her suspiciously. "Is it valuable?"

"You've still got it!" Hermione was brimming with excitement.

"No, he's already been given enough money for it, haven't you, Dung?" Ron asked, narrowing his eyes.

"Nah," Mundungus said, "had to bleedin' give it away, di'n' I? No choice."

"What do you mean by that?" Hope asked.

"I was selling in Diagon Alley and she come up to me and asks if I've got a license for trading in magical artifacts," Mundungus said. "Bleedin' snoop. She was gonna fine me, but she took a fancy to the locket an' told me she'd take it and let me off that time, and to fink meself lucky."

"What woman?" Hermione asked.

"I dunno," Mundungus shrugged, "some Ministry hag…Little woman. Bow on top of 'er head. Looked like a toad."

Hope went white. It could have been anyone, positively anyone, but it just had to be Umbridge, didn't it?

Once Mundungus had been thrown out back onto the streets once more, Hope, Ron, and Hermione huddled together to make a decision now that they knew who had the locket.

"How are we supposed to get it now?" Hermione bemoaned. "We can't just break into the Ministry —"

"Who says we can't?" Hope asked suddenly, her eyes gaining a feverish light.

Ron was gaping at her now.

"Hope," he said carefully, "you're talking about sneaking into the Ministry of Magic, the place that's gunning for you! It'll be next to impossible!"

"Not if we use Polyjuice Potion," Hermione contemplated, a thoughtful expression overtaking her face.

Ron glanced between the two girls. "You can't be serious," he said, "even if we do manage to get inside, there's still a different layout to every floor and we don't know what floor Umbridge'll be on!"
"That's why we'll need someone who knows the Ministry," Hope said, wincing as she looked at Ron, "and you're not going to like my idea."

Hermione's eyes widened, realizing what Hope was suggesting, but Ron didn't understand.

"Who? It can't be Dad—"

"No," Hope agreed, "it's not your father…Ron, I'm talking about Percy."
"Percival Ignatius Weasley! I am *not* running and leaving you here on your own!"

Audrey Jennings was angry, in fact, angry didn't really cut it. *Flaming mad* might work better.

Her blue eyes were blazing as she pushed her boyfriend away from the bag that held about half of her things.

"You can't stay here!" Percy snapped with just as much fire. "Audrey, you're a Muggle-born! They are going to haul you down for show and declare you to have stolen magic! I can't let you—"

"Let me?" Audrey said dangerously. "Let me? Percy, this is insane! Even if I did get away, where would I go, hm? They can *track* people!"

"Am I interrupting?" a sudden unfamiliar voice had both their wands out in seconds, pointed towards a young girl by the door with dark tousled curls and grey eyes. Percy didn't recognize her. She was slight and thin and very short, appearing to be no more than fourteen years old.

But appearances could be deceiving, even Percy knew that.

"Who are you?" Percy demanded as she raised her arms in surrender. "How did you get in?"

She shrugged her shoulders. "The door was unlocked."

"No," Audrey said carefully and the girl's blue eyes met hers, "it wasn't, I locked it myself. You broke in."

She grinned widely, her eyes flashing to Percy. "I like her," she said, "and you're right I did break in." She winked. "I'm sure you recall how much I love my lock-picks."

Percy froze, looking her up and down for any defining features that identified her as Hope Potter, but there were none. "It seems you're making good use of your metamorphing skills," he managed to choke out.

"You know this girl?" Audrey asked as Hope leaned against the wall with a smirk on her face.

"We know each other quite well, actually," Hope said, "we were in the same House, and I'm his brother's girlfriend."

Audrey looked her up and down. "How old are you?"

"Seventeen," Hope said, gesturing down at herself, "I can appear to be whatever age I wish, it helps when the whole world is out to get you."

Now Audrey was blinking dazedly at her. "Oh," she said faintly, "you're, er—"

"Hope," she said, grinning widely, offering her hand to shake Audrey's lax one, "nice to meet you… girlfriend?"

"Er, yes," Audrey admitted a bit flustered. "Audrey Jennings."

"A pleasure," Hope said, "but I've come for your man."
"What for?" Percy asked, regaining his voice.

Hope eyed him shrewdly. "How would like a chance at redemption?" she asked. "We require someone who has intimate knowledge of the layout of the Ministry of Magic."

"We?" Percy said.

Hope's stare was unwavering and she did not elaborate, but she didn't need to; Percy knew all-too-well just how thick she was with Ron and Hermione after all these years.

"You're planning to break in?" Audrey asked instead.

"Someone in the Ministry has obtained something that is of importance only to a few," Hope said, choosing her words carefully. "In particular, my friends and I. We need it for reasons I won't specify."

"So you need someone who has inside knowledge of the Ministry if you hope to enter and leave without being caught," Percy surmised with a sigh.

"Something like that," Hope said in a disarming manner.

For a long moment Percy didn't speak; it was almost like he was weighing the risks and the benefits of her proposal.

"This isn't just a one-time thing, is it?"

"That will depend," Hope replied, canting her head slightly to the side and Percy was reminded of the little girl who had once distracted him with questions about schoolwork when his twin brothers were up to no good. "It's always good to have a man on the inside, at your own risk, of course."

Percy contemplated her and Audrey glanced between the two. She was offering him a chance at redemption, she said, and Merlin knew he regretted what he'd done, how deeply into the Ministry's web of lies he had been trapped in.

"If I agree to this," he said slowly, "you have to do me a favour in return?"

There was rustle in the space behind her and Percy blinked. It must have been the Disillusionment Charm. That explained why she was seemingly alone. Percy was certain that her two friends wouldn't have let her go off on her own, especially with so high a bounty on her head.

"And what kind of favour is it?" Hope asked.

Percy gestured towards his girlfriend. "Audrey is a Muggle-born."

Audrey threw him an outraged look, but Hope nodded in understanding. "Ah…the Muggle-born Registration."

"When you leave, I want you to take her with you," Percy said.

"Percy!" Audrey said angrily. "I told you before, I'm not running away—"

"We're not running away," Hope felt the need to point out, "we're regrouping at a safe house to mount a resistance."

Audrey gaped at her and Percy blanched. Hope could hear a faint snigger behind her that could have only come from Ron.
"But the safe house is one of the safest places you'll ever find," Hope added. "We can take her with us. She'll be better protected there than here."

"Do I even get a say in this?" Audrey demanded, her eyes full of blue fire.

Hope arched an eyebrow at her as Percy sighed, wondering what had possessed him to fall in love with such a wilful woman (he was his father all over again—it was probably a Weasley thing, going off the track records of his siblings). "Would you honestly rather be here and hunted or be safe and fighting for a good cause?"

Audrey flushed brightly. "Well, obviously the second one, but—"

Percy nodded seriously to Hope. "You have a deal."

"—I hate being treated like a child," Audrey finished with a sigh. Particularly when the one making decisions was younger than her.

"It's a nice change," Hope mused.

It was on September first that they made their move.

"There's going to be an increased presence at Platform Nine-and-Three-Quarters," Percy had explained, "I don't know why, but they seem to think you're going to try to board, and that means there will be less people in the Ministry."

"This is still completely insane," Hermione told Hope the day before.

"You've been saying that for nearly four weeks, Hermione," Hope replied as Audrey looked over their plans with an earnest eye, her things packed into a duffle that was resting on the table top. She had been subdued since Percy had kissed her farewell and Hope knew the feeling.

"The world's insane," Ron replied still frowning, "but it's better than going in and falling arse over tea kettle when we don't know where we should be going."

"Still," Hermione said, "you realize if they catch us they'll have two Muggle-borns who haven't registered, one wizard who is supposed to be at home with spattergroit, and a witch with a ten thousand galleon price on her head!"

"I thought it was a hundred thousand," Hope said mildly and Hermione shot her a glare that said that clearly didn't matter. "Besides, what's life without a little risk?"

"Longer," Audrey offered from the table and the three laughed. It was the first time she'd heard such a sound from them.

"We've got everything, don't we?" Hope asked, rubbing at her forehead in what she hoped was a surreptitious manner, pain flashing across her forehead every so often. It was more intense at night. The name Gregorovitch kept cropping up and Hope knew Tom hadn't found him yet, just like she also knew he'd killed a family of three in his search for the wizard she now knew to be a wandmaker.

"Yes, yes," Hermione agreed. Phineas Nigellus' portrait had been moved safely into the small beaded bag, in case Snape, who had recently been named Headmaster, tried to spy on them. "Everything's ready."
"Good," Hope said, "because I'm sure we're only going to get one shot at this."

Everyone nodded seriously, going over the plan at least two more times before they fell asleep.

And the next morning found Hope imitating the deep voice of a man Audrey identified to be Albert Runcorn, a man responsible for investigating Muggle-borns, before knocking him out quite sufficiently as she took his form, morphing her clothes to match his while Hermione stood as the double to Mafalda Hopkirk of the Improper Use of Magic Office and Ron as the twin to Reg Cattermole, a wizard who worked in Magical Maintenance, while Audrey stood hidden under the Invisibility Cloak.

With their disguises set, the difficult part then came the actually getting into the Ministry. There were special tokens that were used to enter into the Ministry, Percy had explained, and the entrance was a bathroom in which you would insert your token and then flush yourself in.

The difficulty had mostly to do with Audrey, who was wearing the cloak, because the cloak would undoubtedly flutter when she came out of the fireplace, so Hope pulled the chain first, after having stepped into the toilet with her larger shoes, sending herself whooshing down the tube until she was forced rather suddenly out of a fireplace only a split second before Audrey in the one beside her, and Hope saw a flash of denim-clad shins from the cloak flaring up, but it vanished in an instant, and Hope felt a tight grip on her elbow that she knew to be the slightly older witch, per the plan.

Hope walked forward, her eyes taking in the Atrium which was now so different than it had been before, darker, no doubt a reflection of Tom's regime. Hope's eyes were glued to the central fixture in the Atrium. It had once been a golden fountain that had been blown a bit apart in the duel between herself, Dumbledore, and Tom, but the new statue was worse.

It was a strangely carved black rock upon which a witch and wizard sat, as if they were the king and queen and the rock was their throne, into which the three words MAGIC IS MIGHT were carved.

"Horrible, isn't it?" Audrey murmured, her voice so quiet that Hope almost missed it. "Wait until you get close."

"Psst!" a sudden voice hissed and Hope's eyes fastened on the two familiar Ministry workers in the sea of those that were strangers and she strode purposefully towards them.

"You two got in alright, then?" Hermione asked quietly.

"Well enough," Hope said, her voice deep and gravelly.

"It's horrible, isn't it?" Hermione added to Hope, glancing at the statue with distaste. "Have you seen what they're sitting on?"

Hope had not, and she would have been glad not to, because it was not thrones that were holding the two figures up were bodies upon bodies.

"Muggles in their rightful place," Audrey offered helpfully, and Hope was sure that if she could see her face, the older witch's face would be twisting in disgust.

"Come on, let's get going," Ron muttered, "this potion only lasts an hour." And Hope had to agree as the four headed off towards the nearest lift, barely reaching one when the lifts when they were interrupted for the first time.

"Cattermole!"
Hope recognized the Death Eater, but she couldn't put a name to the face. He was the one that tried to keep Greyback in line.

"That's Yaxley," Audrey hissed for her, "he's in charge of the DMLE."

Yaxley had a face that was rather similar to Dolohov's in how it was twisted in a way, though Yaxley was light-haired where Dolohov was dark.

He was glaring at Ron.

"I requested somebody from Magical Maintenance to sort out my office, Cattermole," he nearly growled. "It's still raining in there."

"I'm, er, sure it isn't," Ron said a bit nervously, and Hope wasn't entirely sure that that was all him, because the man he had taken the form of had appeared rather skittish too. "I'll get right on that."

"See that you do," Yaxley said with a sneer. "You realize that I am on my way downstairs to interrogate your wife, Cattermole? In fact, I'm quite surprised you're not down there holding her hand while she waits. Already given her up as a bad job, have you? Probably wise. Be sure and marry a pureblood next time."

Audrey's hands was shaking under the cloak and Hope tried to remain unfazed, and Hermione barely managed that.

"But if my wife were accused of being a Mudblood," he said with disdain, "—not that any woman I married would ever be mistaken for such filth—and the Head of Department of Magical Law Enforcement needed a job doing, I would make it my priority to do this job, Cattermole. Do you understand me?"

"Yes," Ron said, his voice quiet, his head a little bowed so he didn't have to make eye contact.

"Then attend to it, Cattermole," Yaxley said with narrowed eyes, "and if my office is not completely dry within an hour, your wife's Blood Status will be in even greater doubt than it is now."

And then Yaxley left them as the lift opened and the three plus one invisible stowaway entered alone.

"That went well," Audrey's disembodied voice commented.

"Oh, no! That's why Cattermole wasn't wearing his robes," Ron bemoaned, "he was coming for his wife! What should I do? Listen to Yaxley or go find his wife?"

"I'd stick with Yaxley," Hermione advised. "We don't want to get Mr. Cattermole killed because we're looking for—" Hermione fell silent before saying the Horcrux.

"We'll have to split up," Hope sighed. "Hermione and I'll find Umbridge and you deal with Yaxley's problem."

"Yeah, but however am I supposed to stop the raining?" Ron asked.

"Try *Finite Incantatem*," Hermione offered, "that should stop the rain if it's a hex or curse; if it doesn't something's gone wrong with an Atmospheric Charm, which will be more difficult to fix, so as an interim measure try *Impervius* to protect his belongings—"

"I'd say let them stay waterlogged," Audrey muttered and Hope's lips twitched slightly into a smile. 
The lift came to a short stop with an utterance of "Level four, Department for the Regulation and Control of Magical Creatures, incorporating Beast, Being, and Spirit Divisions, Goblin Liaison Office, and Pest Advisory Bureau," as the grilles opened to allow several wizards who smelled an awful lot like smoke with purple inter-departmental memos hovering above their heads.

"Morning, Albert," one of the wizards said to Hope. He was a shorter man with an impressive amount of facial hair that Hope dearly hoped George would never strive to have. "Dirk Cresswell, eh? From Goblin Liaison? Nice one, Albert. I'm pretty confident I'll get his job now!"

Hope, not knowing what Albert Runcorn had done to anyone named Dirk Cresswell, felt it best to twist one side her mouth slightly upwards before the lift stopped again.

"Level two, Department of Magical Law Enforcement, including the Improper Use of Magic Office, Auror Headquarters, and Wizengamot Administration Services," was uttered in the same voice as before.

And Ron was forced out by Hermione and with the rest of the wizards and their memos, leaving Audrey, Hope, and Hermione alone.

"It might actually be best if I went after him," Hermione said suddenly after the grilles had already shut once more, "I'm not entirely sure he's going to get all those spells right—"

"Level one, Minister of Magic and Support Staff."

The golden doors opened and Hermione's words faded at the sight of Umbridge standing before them, wearing those ridiculously gaudy pink robes and holding a clipboard in her stubby hands.

"Ah, Mafalda!" Umbridge smiled in that simpering way that always grated on Hope's nerves, and not seeing her for more than a year had done nothing to suppress her urge to strangle the woman. "Travers sent you, did he?"

"Y-yes," Hermione said weakly.

"Good, you'll do perfectly well," she said, before turning to a man that Hope didn't recognize, but must have been someone important, going off how well-made his robes were. "That's that problem solved. Minister, if Mafalda can be spared for record-keeping we shall be able to start straightaway."

Umbridge glanced over what was on her clipboard, no doubt the list of names of Muggle-borns to interrogate.

"Ten people today and one of them the wife of a Ministry employee! Tut, tut... even here, in the heart of the Ministry!" She shook her head in a regretful manner, her bow swinging precariously from where it was perched on her stiff curls as she stepped into the lift. "We'll go straight down, Mafalda, you'll find everything you need in the courtroom. Good morning, Albert, aren't you getting out?"

"Yes," Hope said, leaving the lift with Audrey still clutching at her arm.

"What brings you here, Runcorn?" the man whose name could have only been Pius Thicknesse. His hair was long and tied back and he had a short beard that bore a few scant grey hairs, much like his dark hair on his head, and he had dark eyes that were a bit dazed, tell-tale signs of the Imperius Curse.

"I needed to go through the files that Dolores has on an Undesirable," Hope said, having worked out the response with Percy beforehand.
"Ah," the Minister nodded in understanding, "those will be in Dolores private office –I've implored her that it would be simpler to leave them to management, but she insisted!" Pius Thicknesse gave Hope a slight smile. "Try not to take too long, Runcorn, I suspect you might be needed more in the courtrooms today."

"Of course, Minister," Hope said solemnly. "Good day."

"And to you," Thicknesse agreed as he swept past her into the now empty lift, and Hope continued down the hall.

"Makes you want to smack him in the face, doesn't it?" Audrey muttered once they were alone and Hope almost smiled.

"A bit," she said. "Where's Umbridge's office?"

"Around the corner," Audrey said, "but I should warn you, there's more than a dozen witches and wizards working in front of it."

Hope smirked, shoving her hands into her pocket. "Oh, that won't be an issue." She fingered the rough black stone that could break apart into dark powder that would shroud the surrounding area in blackness. "Once I reach the door, they'll be out of commission for awhile."

And so Hope walked forward, the witches and wizards before her completely ignoring her presence as if she was as invisible as Audrey, moving with a steady patience towards the door Audrey had indicated, stopping short in front of it to read the golden plaque:

_Dolores Umbridge_

_Senior Undersecretary to the Minister_

_Head of the Muggle-Born Registration Commission_

But under that was something that made Hope's blood boil in her veins, turning into fire. She would have recognized that eyeball anywhere, if only because she had seen Mad-Eye pull it out (with a horrible squelching noise that still made her shiver) on more than one occasion.

Hope was barely thinking when she threw the Peruvian Instant Darkness Powder up into the air, exploding midair and sending them all into what seemed to be everlasting night. A few people gave cries of alarm and tried to use Lumos, but it didn't help as Hope pulled Audrey into the room.

"What is it that you're looking for?" the auburn-haired witch asked as Hope began riffling through the desk.

"Something very old," Hope said shortly, "an heirloom of my family."

"And it's so important…why?"

Hope glanced up. "Didn't Percy tell you about my psychotic cousin?"

"No," Audrey said a bit bemused, "why would he have?"

"Maybe because he's the Dark Lord that's taken over the British Ministry of Magic," Hope muttered and Audrey goggled. "It's as important to him as it is to me."

Hope yanked the eye out of the door and replaced it with a replica, shoving the real one deep into her pocket.
"Anything else?" Audrey asked in a strained voice.

"Not really," Hope said. Saying the locket was an heirloom was about as close to the truth of what it actually was.

"Are you absolutely sure it's in here?" Audrey asked her. "She couldn't be wearing it or anything?"

Hope's movements stilled as she looked up at Audrey, her mouth gaping. "Of course!" she said. "Why didn't I think of that? Come on!"

Audrey hastily threw the cloak back on and latched onto Hope as she threw open the door before closing it behind Audrey and feeling her way out of the corridor by use of the wall, allowing herself a smirk at the cries of dismay from the Ministry workers that were still trying to find a way out of the darkness.

Their hour was nearly up when Hope and Audrey made down to the Department of Mysteries where the trials of Muggle-borns was taking place. She strode purposefully down the hallway with the confidence she remembered Runcorn possessing before she'd stunned him.

Hope took a side staircase, moving up the steps at a leisure pace when she felt it and Audrey released a choked gasp beside her. There was a cold, chilled feeling that hung in the air that Hope knew all-too-well, in fact, she'd lost count how many times she'd felt the hopelessness that had been brought on by the Dementors, but Hope maintained her resolve, even though Audrey's invisible grip on her elbow tightened. They passed by Dementors and Muggle-borns who were cowering against the wall and bile curled in Hope's stomach, but she could not use her Patronus, she could not give herself away, not just yet.

Hope and Audrey entered the courtroom silently, keeping just out of sight, as Hope was completely visible, even if Audrey was not, and both peered cautiously around the corner.

Luckily both Yaxley and Umbridge were quite engrossed with their interrogation of one Mary Cattermole, the wife of the wizard Ron was impersonating, but Hermione caught a glimpse of Hope and her eyes widened slightly. Hope held a finger to her lips and Hermione gave a barely perceptible nod and a slight jerk of the head towards Umbridge.

Hope followed the direction she was indicating, releasing a short breath as she pulled back into the hidden portion of the room.

"Is it there?" Audrey hissed.

"It's hanging around her fat neck," Hope muttered, her wand sliding into her hand from the arm holster. "How good is your aim?"

"Quite good," Audrey replied dryly. "Yaxley or Umbridge?"

"I've got Umbridge," Hope said, "you get Yaxley."

"Parents' professions," Umbridge read from the parchment in front of her with a sneer, "green gro —"

Two voices yelled "Stupefy!"

Umbridge slumped against the back of her seat and Yaxley collapsed on his side as Umbridge's cat Patronus vanished and the force that had been holding the Dementors in the room at bay vanished. Hope mustered her happy memories, the faces of her friends flashing before her eyes—
"Expecto Patronum!"

The familiar silver panther burst from her wand tip and Hope found she’d rather missed its fierce presence as the panther bared its misty teeth and pounced on the Dementors that had moved towards Mrs. Cattermole, forcing them back.

Hermione ripped the Horcrux from Umbridge's neck behind them as Audrey removed the invisibility cloak, which Hope gratefully pocketed; there wasn’t going to be much need for her to remain hidden now, and they’d need to leave soon, before Umbridge and Yaxley woke up.

Mrs. Cattermole was staring at Hope as though she couldn’t believe what she was seeing. "You? But—but Reg said you were the one who submitted my name for questioning!"

"I really didn't," Hope said, her form shifting, her face thinning, and her voice lightening as she returned to the form she usually possessed, and in doing so nearly made Mrs. Cattermole faint.

"Oh, Merlin," she breathed weakly, "you're—you're—"

"Yeah," Hope said, "I get that a lot—hey, Audrey, give me some help over here!"

Audrey rushed to assist Hope in attempting to remove the chains that bound the woman to the chair, having it sorted just as fast as Hermione had time to duplicate the locket.

"I don't understand," Mrs. Cattermole said, still a bit stunned by the reappearance of the number one outlaw.

"You and the rest of the Muggle-borns are going to leave the Ministry, take your families, and go on the run. Do you understand?"

It felt strange for Hope to be the one giving the orders and having others comply, especially older more experienced people, but she was rather enjoying it.

"But how are we going to get out?" Hermione asked as she joined them, skating clumsily down the stairs from the upraised benches. "Hope, there's got to be more than a dozen Dementors out there!"

"Well, it's a good thing you and Audrey had wands," Hope said sardonically, and with a bit of effort, a hawk and an otter joined Hope's panther.

"This is the maddest thing I've ever done," Audrey muttered behind Hope as she led her out of the room, the three Patronuses leaping and gliding forward to offer protection to the Muggle-borns who were exposed.

"Then you're long overdue," Hermione murmured back.

"It's Hope Potter!"

"I don't believe it!"

"Hope Potter! Here!"

Hope ignored this. "Listen up," she called, the voices abruptly silencing as those within the room listened raptly to what she had to say, "you're all going to leave the Ministry, take your families and go into hiding—get as far away from here as you can manage, have you got that?"

There was a murmur of ascent when rushing made Hope stiffen only to relax in relief as Ron came into view, still looking like Reg Cattermole.
"Reg!" Mrs. Cattermole cried, but Audrey held her back.

"That's not your husband," she told her.

"Hope," Ron said, completely soaked to the bone from the rain that had no doubt come from Yaxley's office, "this Polyjuice isn't going to last much longer. I'd wager we've got about eight minutes –maybe less if we're found out."

"Lovely," Hope said as Hermione's otter flickered and wavered, barely managing to keep its form. "How many of you still have wands?"

A number of arms were raised.

"Find a partner," Hermione jumped in for Hope, "and get ready to run."

"Just a typical day for us, then?" Ron asked Hope with a grin, and she laughed before morphing her voice and body into that of Albert Runcorn as she crammed into the lift with a good portion of the Muggle-borns, the stragglers taking the lift opposite.

The grille doors opened and the Muggle-borns left roughly two at a time, trying to appear unhurried, and for the most part it worked until Hope, Ron, and Hermione were the last ones left, and that was when Yaxley's voice pierced the air.

"Seal the exit! SEAL IT!"

"Time to go!" Hope said, grabbing Audrey's wrist and Hermione's hand as the brunette grasped Ron's arm (Ron having the longest legs of the four of them) and they raced towards the one of the fireplaces as the others were locked down with metal grates.

Ron threw himself into one, dragging the three witches along with him and Hope could feel Yaxley grappling with the back of her cloak, and a flash of pain in her side, and then she could barely feel anything.
Safe House

Pain was blooming across Ron's arm as he sat up, disoriented, on the forest floor. It was past midday now and sunlight was filtering through the canopy of leaves above to dapple across the grass. Audrey wasn't far away, raising a hand to her head, no doubt having the same throbbing headache as he.

"Hermio—" Ron had turned towards his girlfriend who was kneeling at Hope's side and then the blood had fled from his face.

Hope was limp and on her side, her form long having returned to normal and Hermione was siphoning the blood pouring from her side to see how bad it was.

"What happened?" Ron asked, kneeling beside his fallen friend and girlfriend. "I thought we got away!"

"I tried to Apparate us straight to here," Hermione explained, her voice only a little shaky as she pulled a bottle of Dittany from her small beaded bag, having Ron unstopper it for her. "But Yaxley had a hold of Hope, so I had to take us somewhere else first –I got rid of him somewhere near the Forest of Dean before we crashed here. He must've gotten her with something before he was forced off." She dripped a few drops onto the cuts and steam issued from them as they closed and healed so that they were only dark red lines slanted against her side. Hope stirred faintly but she did not awaken.

"So she'll be alright?" Audrey asked, joining them as her headache slowly faded.

"She should be," Hermione said. "It wasn't much of an injury."

"And how far are we from this safe house of yours?"

"A good bit away," Ron told her, helping to roll Hope gently onto her back. "This is the designation point Hope programmed into our galleons, along with mythological code words for each person... you don't want to wander too far off." He raised his voice slightly as she took a few tentative steps towards a moss covered oak.

"Why?" Audrey asked, taking in the natural beauty of the forest; the sound of water rushing over rocks in a stream not far away, of birds singing in the trees, of the wind whistling as it moved past the leaves.

Hermione gave her a look. "It's an enchanted forest."

Audrey arched an eyebrow as Hermione grasped Ron's wrist, twisting it to show his pale forearm that had as deep of a slash as Hope had.

She glared at him. "Why didn't you mention this?"

"Must've slipped my mind," Ron said in a mild tone.

Hermione's glare darkened us she dropped some Dittany onto his injury, leaving only smeared blood in the wake of it being healed.

"How long do you think she'll be out?" Ron asked.
"I'd say maybe an hour, at the least," Hermione offered, "or, at least that's how long we should wait to risk moving her...we do need to speak Parseltongue to get in—"

"Parseltongue?" Audrey said bleakly. "Snake language?"

"Yeah," Ron said, "but we can get around that...Hope's talked a lot of Parseltongue in front of us."

"Should we wait until tomorrow to activate the code words, then?" Hermione asked him.

"It wouldn't hurt," Ron said as Hermione thrust her hand into her beaded bag. "Hermione, what are you doing?"

"Well, if we're going to be here for about an hour, then we should put up the protective enchantments at the least..."

"Hermione, your wand is right here," Ron said, smirking when her cheeks pinked and she withdrew her hand from the beaded bag.

"Right," she said, taking her wand from him. "I knew that."

Hermione brushed the leaves from her knees as she stood.

"We're going to take a rest before we head towards Pithos," she told Audrey who was still feeling a bit out of the loop. "In about an hour we'll head in that direction, that'll give Hope some time to wake herself up."

"Right," Audrey said, nodding as she looked around. "So, er, is this forest bad?"

"No," Hermione said with a smile, "but it was created from blood." Blood magick had just about stopped fazing her maybe last year. The Forest of Morea was literally from Morea. The forest surrounding Pithos had sprung up literally overnight (at least, according to Salazar's journal which Hope had removed from Morea's Room at Hogwarts shortly before they'd left from where she'd hidden it in her second year).

"Great," Audrey said dryly, but she still joined the brunette witch as she made a circle around Hope and Ron.

"Salvio Hexia...Protego Totalum...Repello Muggletum...Muffliato...Cave Inimiciu..." Hermione murmured. "A bloodstone with a blood rune might work better, but that's more of Hope's area of expertise than mine."

"But it's not like we're going to be here for a prolonged amount of time," Audrey agreed as they both returned to Ron's side.

"You did get it, didn't you?" Ron asked suddenly as it dawned on him the point of their efforts to break into the Ministry in the first place.

Hermione pulled the heavy silver locket from her pocket, the emeralds set in an S glittered in the light. "Yes, we got it...now all we've got to do is destroy it—"

"—and find the others," Ron agreed, and it couldn't have been made more clear to Audrey that they had forgotten her presence entirely. Audrey's eyes shifted towards the locket that had mattered so much that they had to break into the Ministry for it.

It gleamed a bit ominously and Audrey had to wonder just what it was. It had to be more than a
precious heirloom, or they wouldn't have risked their lives of it…but just what Audrey couldn't be sure.

Voices were echoing around Hope, one of which seemed to belong to her, but Hope knew that the high and cold voice was the one that belonged to Tom as opposed to her.

"Give it to me, Gregorovitch!" she hissed, lifting her pale, yew wand to point it dangerously at the man cowering on the floor before her, his face bloodless in fear and his eyes wide and terrified as he trembled something fierce. Hope didn't recognize him. His hair was as white as Ollivander's or Dumbledore's with a short but thick beard upon his jaw that didn't even come close to her former headmaster's beard.

"I have it not, I have it no more!" he cried, his English thick and difficult to understand –obviously it wasn't his native language. "It was, many years ago, stolen from me!"

"Do not lie to Lord Voldemort, Gregorovitch," Hope said quietly. "He knows... He always knows."

She gazed into his fearful eyes and then went in deeper –Legilimency, she was certain– until she was rushing down a dark corridor with a younger Gregorovitch at her side until they came out in what must have been his workshop, her eyes fastening on the golden-haired boy who was positioned on the window ledge as if ready to jump in a moment's notice.

He tossed a grin towards Gregorovitch before he leapt off and into the night.

And then Hope was back with Gregorovitch still recoiling at the sight of her.

"Who was the thief, Gregorovitch?" she demanded.

"I don't know," Gregorovitch was nearly sobbing now, "I never knew, a young man –no– please–PLEASE!"

His voice was silenced by a flash of green and Hope's eyes fluttered open. She blinked a few times to clear the sleep from her eyes before she could realize where exactly she was.

She'd woke up several times the previous night and had been slightly aware when Ron had carried her most of the way to Pithos.

Hope sat up, looking down at the blankets thrown over her, patterned like the sea. So she was in Nelva's old room, was she? Her wand holsters plus wand, DA galleon, and Snitch were sitting on the table beside the bed.

The Snitch fluttered its wings, taking a bit to the air at the sight of her coming round (Hope wasn't entirely sure that her friends had left it beside her and was almost certain that the Snitch had come itself), hovering anxiously around her head like a golden halo that dizzy cartoon characters often had around their heads.

Hope tried to ignore it as best as she could as she took the galleon in her hands before tapping at it with her wand, releasing the codes she had carefully programmed to be released to specific galleons with the help of Hermione (who had, after all, designed the coins) so that miles upon miles away witches and wizards awoke to discover a warming galleon bearing a name they would identify with and coordinates to a location.

Hope threw off her covers and raked a hand through her hair as she called out clearly, "Kreacher!"
Her house-elf made his appearance with the sound of an echoing crack. Her distaste towards the house-elf had gradually lightened after he told the three how he had come to possess the Horcrux.

"Mistress." He bowed lowly. "Was your plan a success?"

"Quite," Hope said. "Kreacher, do you know where we are at?"

House-elves might be able to get inside Pithos, but they would never be able to locate it.

Kreacher took a long pause before saying, "No."

"We are in Pithos, the ancestral home of the Slytherin family," she said, smirking at how his eyes widened in awe. "This is where we're going to be staying now, and we're going to be joined by a number of people, so I want you to clean the rooms –it's not something you need to hurry at, take your time. I expect it might take a bit of time for them all to show up."

"Of course, Mistress," Kreacher nodded before disappearing with a loud crack again.

Hope wrinkled her nose at the state of her hair. Gods above, she needed a nice long shower…or bath. Hope nearly moaned. The baths looked heavenly when they'd last visited and she suspected they were even better than they looked.

Hope's coin glowed with heat briefly as one of her companions sent her a message back.

She grinned widely as she read it.

See you soon, Mystery-Girl.

Hope stood to go to the baths when it dawned on her that she didn't exactly have any clothes, and she couldn't really go looking for Hermione (they hadn't exactly designated rooms –apart from the one Hope was in, which she had claimed as her own) as there were so many rooms that it would be like searching for a needle in a haystack. However, there was a chest filled with clothes that could probably fit her.

She contemplated the chest at the end of the bed before standing and walking over to it to search for something within to wear. She pulled out simple black breeches and a dark blue loose shirt with lighter blue wave-like patterns that must've been one of her ancestor's favourite shirts, going off of just how worn the colours were from use.

Her fingers brushed briefly against the serpentine hilts of the twin blades that she had admired before, but she didn't pick them up. She was, after all, just going to get changed. It wasn't like she needed to wander around with two swords at her hip, especially with so many protections around it.

Hope gathered the clothes up and into her arms before striding over to the door and opening it carefully and quietly, glancing down the corridor like she was going to be caught sneaking out of someone's room she wasn't supposed to be in, and the thought made her release a short laugh as she shut the door behind her.

Only this time she was the one setting the rules.

"Just how many people are we going to be housing, then?" Ron asked as he and Hermione poured over a map that had dots designated on it for where each DA member was. Audrey was chewing absently on a sausage that was almost cold –it was nearly lunch and she'd gotten out of bed late– while Hope was cutting another rune into her arm, both of them actually. She'd already carved the
rune for 'fire' into her left arm, and she was now working on 'earth' on her right.

"Well, there's the Creevey brothers," Hope said, her tongue between her teeth, her eyes focused on the task at hand, "Justin, and Dean, of course—"

"—and the members that have already graduated," Hermione added, "so that's Fred, George, Lee, Alicia, Angelina, and Katie…"

"What about the Greengrasses and Tracey?" Ron asked. "They've got to be blood traitors by now."

"I almost forgot about them," Hope admitted with a wince, "but I suppose they have been very vocal about what side they're on."

"Define 'very'," Hermione replied dryly.

"I would like to point out that your friend is carving symbols into her flesh and you two aren't even fazed," Audrey said, grimacing as Hope tied a bandage around the new rune, tying it with the use of her teeth.

Hermione and Ron shared a look.

"You get used to it after awhile," Ron said with a shrug. "I guess Hope's always been into self-mutilation."

"I guess Ron's always been into Hermione," Hope replied in a similar manner and Ron's cheeks flushed darkly as Hermione hid her giggles behind her hand. "But I will admit I have always been into George."

Her friends snorted, as there was no denying that.

"Speaking of George," Hermione mentioned, glancing back towards the map, "he…Fred, Lee, and Angelina just passed the checkpoint."

Hope pumped her fist in excitement. "Yes! Georgie's here!"

"They haven't seen each other for about a month," Ron told a bemused Audrey. "Last year was worse. By Christmas she was insufferable."

"More snogging than you've ever experienced in your life," Hope said shamelessly and this time Hermione choked on her laughter. "Well, I'm off to terrify the love of my life, don't miss me too terribly."

"Are you planning on stabbing him?" Hermione demanded as Hope holstered the two serpent blades at either side of her waist.

"Pain is terrifying," Hope said, turning her skin a sun-kissed olive, her hair bound in thick dark plait and a tricorn hat upon her head. "But no, I'm just going to freak them out when I demand their passwords."

"The pirate getup might do most of it for you," Ron muttered and Hope winked.

"That's the plan," she said before turning on her heel and walking out of the room.

Meanwhile, a good bit away from where Hermione, Ron, and Audrey were currently sitting in the dining room, were Fred, George, Angelina, and Lee who were making their way slowly but surely towards Pithos.
"Maybe Hope's having a laugh at us," Fred said, looking down the cliff that ended in a small stream. "Or we're just way off."

"Nah, can't be," Lee said, lifting his own galleon up to the light (new and improved from the old ones, as the DA had upgraded the previous year), his dark eyes narrowing at the compass feature the coin had gained once they had entered into the forest. "It's been pointing straight for the past fifteen minutes."

"Maybe we're supposed to fly across?" Angelina offered.

"You're supposed to go straight down, actually," a voice commented and the three whipped around to see an unfamiliar girl dressed as though she was from a different era, with a sword to George's throat, which explained why he wasn't talking, but not why he looked so amused.

George's eyes were on her arms, most of which were exposed, her scars clear to see.

"Well, this has escalated," he commented mildly.

She cocked an eyebrow. "I can still throw you off the cliff, Weasley."

"You can try," he dared.

A grumbled complaint escaped her lips as she sheathed her blade, and "Oh!"s of realization echoed from the three others.

"Password?" she asked. "Mister All-Knowing?"

"Pandora," George said. "Why did you give me a mortal girl as a code?"

Fred sniggered loudly with Lee while Angelina shot her fiancé a glare.

"It's supposed to be symbolic," Hope said innocently, reaching to pat his cheek with a grin before turning instead to Lee who blurted "Prometheus."

"Loki," Fred said with a smirk, his code, after all, was a trickster god.

George rolled his eyes at his twin as Angelina offered "Airmid."

"Correct," Hope said, "c'mon, it's this way."

"Hah! So it's not straight down!" Lee jabbed a finger in her direction.

"It's still down," Hope replied, snorting as she gestured a short ways away where a small path could be seen following the cliff-face. She grasped George's hand and tugged him towards the path.

"So... have you lot been keeping out of trouble?" Hope asked innocently.

"This is coming from the girl that broke into the Ministry, isn't it?" Angelina asked Fred loudly.

"It does seem so..."

"Yeah, how did you manage that?" Lee asked with a bit of interest. "I would've thought breaking in would be a bit difficult."

"Well, it might've been," Hope admitted, "if we hadn't had some inside help."
"Inside help?" George repeated. "Who? Dad?"

Hope shook her head, a faint smile touching her lips. "Don't be ridiculous, contacting Mr. Weasley was out of the question. We had Percy giving us information."

"Percy?" Fred squawked in indignation as George gave her a look that clearly said he couldn't believe what she'd just said to him.

"And he has a Muggle-born girlfriend that we agreed to bring here in exchange for helping us," Hope added.

"Are you sure this is really Percy you're talking about?" George asked dubiously.

Hope rolled her eyes up at the sky.

"Whoa! Now this is nice!"

George had his head tilted back so much to capture everything in his eyes.

"I was wondering if your little hideaway was going to be large enough for us all, but I guess it is," Fred agreed.

"And then some," Ron grinned from the table, his fork laden with some mashed potatoes, courtesy of Kreacher.

"Food!" Lee cried, clamouring towards the table which smelled quite heavenly with its potatoes and chicken. Angelina and Fred joined them, but Hope grabbed George's wrist.

"Don't you want to see where you're sleeping?" she asked, her lips curling upwards as his pulled into a smirk.

"I imagine on the same mattress as you, love," George replied as they took to the stairs, waggling his eyebrows suggestively.

To her credit, only a faint pink colour appeared on her cheeks.

"You could always sleep on the floor, Georgie," Hope grinned widely.

"Never!" George proclaimed as they took the last staircase. "You love me too much!"

"I'm sure there are some that would consider that debatable," Hope responded as she twisted the knob, pulling him inside with a swift tug to his wrist, the door clicking behind him.

And then she suddenly found her back to the door.

"If I didn't know better, I'd think you like pinning me to surfaces," Hope said quietly, tilting her head back to look up at him.

"But you know better," George said, his lips capturing hers in the heated kisses she had very much missed over the past month.

"Mm," Hope mumbled against his lips, "I know you like pinning me to surfaces…especially the bed."

She raised her fingers to tangle into his ginger locks, pulling his mouth harder to hers, releasing a soft
gasp when he nipped sharply at her lower lip. One of his hands cupped her head while the other trailed down her side until it could slip under to rove over her skin.

He drew back suddenly and Hope nearly groaned at the loss of contact.

"What's this?" he asked, his thumb moving over Hope's rather unnoticeable (a stark contrast from most of her scars) claw-like scars from Yaxley.

"I kind of got hit with a curse by Yaxley with Ron when we were making our escape," Hope admitted reluctantly, blinking a few times to clear the fog that was flooding her mind, George-induced fog.

"Feels like someone scratched you," George said, his fingers trailing over the marks lightly, sending a shiver down Hope's spine.

"Well it looks a bit like that," Hope mumbled, "…are you going to snog me, Mr. Weasley, or not?"

"Why, Miss Potter," George's intense scowl had faded into a smirk, "are you demanding a kiss from me?"

"Oh, I would never demand," Hope said in a sly manner, wrapping her arms around his neck and pulling herself further up so that their height difference wasn't quite so pronounced (though, she wasn't quite as short as everyone seemed to think *cough, Ron, cough*), her lips just inches away from his, "but I can be very convincing…"

George swallowed briefly. "Well, who's denying that?"

Hope kissed him sweetly at first, but George had never not responded to her kisses, just as she did the same whenever he kissed her. She kissed around the hole in the side of his head where his ear had once been before ducking a few under his jaw.

"Very convincing," George said, his voice a bit strained when she pulled back.

Hope laughed briefly as George pulled her towards the bed, his lips on hers before her back even hit the mattress.

"But it's not like you weren't going to kiss me to start with," Hope managed to force out in a single breath when he abandoned her lips to press kiss after kiss along her jugular.

"It's never fun if I do all the work," George muttered into her skin as her eyes fluttered shut, a low moan leaving her lips at his ministrations.

"You like doing all the work," Hope sighed, tilting her head slightly to the side, her hands digging under his shirt to run along his abdomen.

George grinned into her neck when a sudden bang on the door had them jolting in surprise.

"Oi! You two can finish your reunion later!" Fred called from beyond it, clear amusement in what they could hear of his voice. "Hermione says the three Slytherins are heading our way and Hope needs to go and bring them here!"

Hope groaned loudly, flopping back onto the mattress. "I need a rule," she complained, "that says no interruptions for if I'm snogging you and if I am, then they lose a meal."

George laughed, nuzzling his face into her shoulder briefly. "Hope, you're trying to run a resistance
here, I'm sure you can't afford to let that many people go hungry."

Hope cocked an eyebrow at her boyfriend. "Aren't you supposed to be on my side? Maybe you don't want a nice snog every now and again?" She ducked out from under his body.

"Oh, no, that I am definitely into," George corrected her, pulling her back to his chest, his mouth at her ear. "Tonight no one's going to be able to interrupt us."

The low voice he used made Hope flush.

"Well, er," she stuttered, "something to look forward to."

His laughter followed her out and she glared at Fred who was trying to swallow his fist to keep his silence.

"Not one word, not a single word," she warned.
Astoria was starving, well, at least relatively starving. Her sister may have been exceptional at spellwork, but her ability to conjure food was a bit negligible at best, and Tracey wasn't much better. The last thing Astoria had to eat was a bit of granola the previous night and it was almost midday.

Her stomach growled in protest and Astoria was almost on her knees in a bit of agony. Her feet were tired enough as it was without adding her hungry into the equation.

"Are we nearly there?" she moaned.

"For the last time," Tracey said with grating patience, "I don't know. The bloody coin doesn't say how far, Astoria, it only gives directions."

"There's a reason for that, you know," a voice commented mildly and all three girls whipped around, Tracey doing so so fast that she ended up toppling over a large root.

"Is that a pirate?" Astoria whispered to her sister who arched an eyebrow towards.

"I thought there weren't any more pirates," Daphne mumbled back. "Piracy hasn't been considered an honourable profession in a very long time."

The young woman standing before them couldn't be any older than Daphne or Tracey with dark hair and eyes, tapping a few fingers to a sword shaped like a serpent. It was a bit odd, Daphne had to admit when the girl suddenly asked, "Password?"

Oh, now it all made sense! The girl tilted her hat slightly and her eyes flashed green as she winked at Daphne.

"Er," Daphne gave her galleon a quick glance, "Macha?"

Hope nodded her head before pointing a finger to Astoria who shifted her weight slightly onto the foot that was closer to her sister.

"Isis," she said and Hope nodded.

"Wadjet," Tracey said, looking a bit annoyed, "and I've got a bone to pick with you about that; why is my name so bloody weird?"

Realization dawned on Astoria, and Daphne snorted as Hope tilted her tricorn hat back on her head, exposing her bright eyes.

"It's Egyptian," Hope said, arching an eyebrow, "like Astoria's."

"Yeah, but she's got the goddess of magic, so of course she isn't going to complain," Tracey grumbled mutinously as she pulled herself into a standing position. "But what do I get?"

"The goddess of protection?" Hope offered, a snigger escaping her mouth before she could silence it. "Most of them were assigned at random, anything from Greek to Norse to Celtic to Egyptian. You should've heard George's complaints about being stuck with the name of a mortal girl."

"I'll bet he was very irritated," Daphne said dryly as Astoria burst into giggles.

"Like you wouldn't believe," Hope said before turning on her heel, gesturing with her hand for them
"Did you lot run into any trouble on the way?"

"We had two tails in Gloucester," Tracey admitted, "we had to do a bit of train-hopping –I suppose that's what it's called– to get rid of them."

"Were they already looking for you?" Hope asked, her eyebrows creasing together as she thought hard.

"I'm pretty sure," Daphne said, "but they were pretty surprised to see Astoria with me."

"Yeah, don't you still have the Trace on you?" Hope asked the younger Slytherin in a bit of bemusement.

Astoria smirked. "Ask Daphne."

Hope slowly arched an eyebrow towards the young woman who had long since earned the title of Ice Queen of Slytherin House who barely blinked at the expression her Gryffindor friend was throwing her away.

"Not going to spill?" Hope asked, crossing her arms and grinning as they passed under a canopy of tightly interlocked trees that bathed them in shade with only a bit of sunlight filtering through.

"I will reveal that a spell was involved," Daphne responded in a sniffany voice that was intended to come off snobby and was entirely faked.

"Who else is here?" Astoria asked, pulling the attention away from her sister's spell and towards the current affairs.

"Well, there's me, Ron, and Hermione –obviously– and we picked up someone new, Audrey Jennings, and then a few showed up about a half-hour before you, and that was Fred, George, Lee, and Angelina." Hope ticked off each person on her fingers as she mentioned their names.

"Who's this Audrey Jennings?" Tracey asked suspiciously. "Are you sure she can be trusted?"

Hope gave a small shrug. "She did help Ron, Hermione, and I sneak into the Ministry, so that's got to count for something."

"Aha!" Tracey jabbed her finger at the girl garbed in pirate-style clothing while Daphne sighed and rolled her eyes and Astoria laughed. "So you did sneak into the Ministry!"

"Has the Daily Prophet reported on that?" Hope asked in confusion.

"Oh, no, they wouldn't want to admit you'd been able to get in and out undetected," Daphne said, "the most reliable source of information right now is Potterwatch."

Hope's eyebrow twitched. "Potterwatch?" she said carefully.

Astoria's eyes flashed with amusement. "Yup, it's a kind of radio programme that's dedicated to informing the public about what's really going on. Everyone's got a code name –kind of like us, but ours are much cooler–, all of them starting with R, and you've got to get the password right in order to hear anything from them."

"This wouldn't happen to be something my boyfriend and his brother and friends cooked up, is it?" Hope asked wryly.

"Oh, if we knew anything about that, we'd never admit to it," Tracey said, smiling sweetly at Hope.
who scowled at her in return.

"Which is basically saying he is behind it," she grumbled. "I'll be having words with him… *Potterwatch*? What were they *thinking*?"

The three Slytherins sniggered and smirked.

Dean wasn’t sure he’d been in a worse situation than the one he was in currently, with the whole British Wizarding community on the look-out for him and anyone else with similar blood. Honestly speaking, Dean never really knew if he was a Muggle-born or a Half-blood - he could have very well been the latter, if his father was a wizard, but he hardly knew anything about his father other than he had vanished one day and never came back.

It was a sore subject.

But Dean wasn’t as alone as one would think. He had a galleon with coordinates to a safe location and a pass-code - 'Theseus,' a rucksack full of supplies, a wand, and in his back pocket was a worn down photo of him and Daphne that Colin had taken for him the previous year. He took it out every so often to remind himself of just how beautiful his girlfriend's smile was and how her eyes would light up when she laughed, as she was in the photo.

They'd be together soon, he thought to himself as he looked across the fire, chewing his salmon slowly. He hadn't been intending to meet up with any others who were on the run, it was mere coincidence, really, and they were all a rather strange bunch; two goblins and three Muggle-borns.

"So, you three have been on the run how long?" one of Dean's fellow Muggle-borns asked the man who had been travelling with the goblins. The man that had spoken was called Ted Tonks (whom Dean had learned was the father-in-law to Remus Lupin, his former Defence Against the Dark Arts teacher).

"Six weeks… Seven... I forget," the man – whose name was Dirk Cresswell – replied, barely managing to stifle a yawn. "Met up with Griphook in the first couple of days and joined forces with Gornuk not long after. Nice to have a bit of company…What made you leave, Ted?"

"Knew they were coming for me," Ted admitted, setting down the remnants of his salmon. "Heard Death Eaters were in the area last week and decided I’d better run for it. Refused to register as a Muggle-born on principle, see, so I knew it was a matter of time, knew I'd have to leave in the end. My wife should be okay, she's pure-blood. And then I met Dean here, what, a few days ago, son?"

"Three days," Dean agreed, smoothing his thumb over his galleon. He had been following its coordinates when he'd met up with Ted, so the pair had joined forces briefly, but Dean would be heading west and Ted east towards some family friends.

"Muggle-born, eh?" Dirk asked, eyeing the dark-skinned lad as if his blood status was as obvious as the amount of melanin in his skin.

"Could be," Dean said coolly, "not really sure. My dad left my mum when I was a kid. I've got no proof he was a wizard, though…my girlfriend's a Pure-blood like Ted's wife, but I reckon she's in as much danger as me right now."

"Why's that?" Ted asked.

Dean snorted. "She's a Slytherin that publicly sided with Hope Potter, it seems to me blood-traitors have the same rights as Muggle-borns right now."
"Well, there's no denying that," Dirk grunted and silence descended once more, only to be broken by Ted.

"I've got to say, Dirk, I'm surprised to run into you. Pleased, but surprised. Word was that you'd been caught," he said lightly.

"I was," Dirk had to concede to that bit of truth. "I was halfway to Azkaban when I made a break for it. Stunned Dawlish, and nicked his broom. It was easier than you'd think; I don't reckon he's quite right at the moment. Might be Confunded. If so, I'd like to shake the hand of the witch or wizard who did it, probably saved my life."

Dean smirked behind the rim of his water bottle.

"And where do you two fit in?" Ted asked the two goblins who didn't seem to be much of talkers, if you asked Dean. "I, er, had the impression the goblins were for You-Know-Who, on the whole."

"You had a false impression," the first goblin –Griphook– said, eyeing each of the wizards in turn with a cool expression that clearly said he preferred his race over theirs but would put up with them for the time being. "We take no sides. This is a wizards' war."

"How come you're in hiding, then?" Ted pressed, honest confusion in his voice.

"I deemed it prudent," the second goblin –Gornuk– spoke, his voice much deeper than his companion's. "Having refused what I considered an impertinent request, I could see that my personal safety was in jeopardy."

"What did they ask you to do?" Ted asked, now more than slightly curious, and Dean had to admit that he was as well.

"Duties ill-befitting the dignity of my race," Gornuk said, avoiding the subject. "I am not a house-elf."

"What about you, Griphook?"

"Similar reasons," Griphook said in an agreeing tone. "Gringotts is no longer under the sole control of my race. I recognize no Wizarding master."

Dean's curiosity was piqued a bit more when Griphook said something in the goblin language, Gobbledegook, to Gornuk who released a short laugh that sounded more like a croak than anything else.

"What's the joke?" Dean asked, looking from goblin to goblin to Dirk, who in turn replied, "He said that there are things wizards don't recognize, either."

Dean blinked and thought about it for a second, but it made no sense; it was about as clear as mud to him. "I don't get it."

"I had my small revenge before I left," Griphook told them, switching back to English for their benefit.

"Good man –goblin, I should say," Ted was grinning now. "Didn't manage to lock a Death Eater up in one of the old high-security vaults, I suppose?"

"If I had," Griphook said in wry amusement, "the sword would not have helped him break out." Dirk gave a small snort, echoing the laughter from Gornuk.
Dean frowned in confusion and Ted echoed his expression.

"Dean and I are still missing something here," he said.

Griphook and Gornuk laughed loudly at Ted's words. "So is Severus Snape, though he does not know it."

Dean's eyebrows rose slightly at that. Someone had stolen something from Snape? Now that was interesting.

"Didn't you hear about that, Ted?" Dirk asked, swallowing his salmon thickly. "About the kids who tried to steal Gryffindor's sword out of Snape's office at Hogwarts?"

"What?" Dean said stunned. He remembered the sword quite well. The last time he had seen the silver, ruby-encrusted blade it had been in Hope's possession during the Third Task of the Tri-wizard Tournament.

"Never heard a word. Not in the Prophet, was it?" Ted asked.

"Hardly," Dirk said, chuckling a bit at the thought. When was the last time the Daily Prophet had reported anything that was true? "Griphook here told me - he heard about it from Bill Weasley, who works for the bank. One of the kids who tried to take the sword was Bill's younger sister."

Dean froze. Ginny? If Ginny was involved, then had stealing the sword been a request from Hope? He couldn't imagine what she'd need a sword for, though…

"She and a couple of friends got into Snape's office and smashed open the glass case where he was apparently keeping the sword. Snape caught them as they were trying to smuggle it down the staircase," Dirk explained.

"Ah, God bless 'em," Ted said fondly, sloshing the water around in his bottle. "What did they think, that they'd be able to use the sword on You-Know-Who? Or on Snape himself?"

"Well, whatever they thought they were going to do with it," Dirk said, shrugging his shoulders. "Snape decided the sword wasn't safe where it was. Couple of days later, once he'd got the say-so from You-Know-Who, I imagine, he sent it down to London to be kept in Gringotts instead."

The goblins' laughter echoed in the silent forest.

"I'm still not seeing the joke," Ted said, glancing between the goblins, and Dean was so far lost that he was probably running in circles.

"It's a fake."

"The sword of Gryffindor?" Dean asked dubiously. He didn't see how it could be; the rumour was that Hope had sliced up a basilisk and a chimera with it…maybe the real one had been switched out with the fake recently.

"Oh yes. It is a copy," Griphook said, inclining his head slightly, "an excellent copy, it is true –but it was Wizard-made. The original was forged centuries ago by goblins and had certain properties only goblin-made armor possesses. Wherever the genuine sword of Gryffindor is, it is not in a vault at Gringotts bank."

"I see," Ted grinned widely. "And I take it you didn't bother telling the Death Eaters this."
"I saw no reason to trouble them with the information," Griphook said with a self-satisfied smirk, and Dean couldn't help but laugh with the others around the fire; it felt like it had been so long since he had laughed.

"But what happened to them? The ones who tried to steal it?" Dean asked once the laughter had abated.

"Oh, they were punished, and cruelly," Griphook said in a voice that irritated Dean in how it lacked feeling, but this was a goblin after all.

"They're okay, though?" Ted asked in concern, "I mean, the Weasleys don't need any more of their kids injured, do they?"

"What d'you mean?" Dean asked with a frown, his thoughts flashing to Bill Weasley whom he had helped move to the hospital wing the previous year. "What's happened to the Weasleys?"

Ted glanced towards him. "How familiar are you with George Weasley?"

Dean's eyes widened. "He's not…dead, is he?"

"Oh, no, nothing like that," Ted said quickly to assuage his fears, "but he did lose an ear."

Dean winced. He couldn't imagine Hope taking that well, or even Fred who had a nasty habit of retaliating to any slight on his twin's behalf (and vice versa).

"They suffered no serious injury, as far as I am aware," Griphook said, referring to Ted's earlier question.

"Lucky for them," Ted sighed in relief. "With Snape's track record I suppose we should just be glad they're still alive."

"You believe that story, then, do you, Ted?" Dirk asked, his tone a bit dubious. "You believe Snape killed Dumbledore?"

"Course I do," Ted said frowning at the man. "You're not going to sit there and tell me you think Potter had anything to do with it?"

"Hard to know what to believe these days," Dirk mumbled into his drink.

"I know Hope Potter," Dean said shortly, scowling at Dirk. "And I know she had no love for Dumbledore, but she certainly wasn't going to kill him. She might even be that Chosen One that everyone thinks she is."

"Yeah, there's a lot would like to believe she's that, son," Dirk snorted, "me included. But where is she? Run for it, by the looks of things. You'd think if she knew anything we don't, or had anything special going for her, she'd be out there now fighting, rallying resistance, instead of hiding. And you know, the Prophet made a pretty good case against her—"

"When has the Prophet ever put out anything that was even close to the truth?" Dean demanded. "Besides, you're on the run, trying to go into hiding, but if she does the same suddenly she's a coward? What makes you think she isn't rallying a resistance?"

Dirk spluttered briefly and the goblins eyed Dean strangely while Ted clasped his shoulder.

"Well said!" Ted told him with a grin. "Helping Hope Potter should be our priority."
Dean could feel his galleon weighing down in his pocket.

"Hard to help a girl who's vanished off the face of the earth," Dirk remarked, his fork clinking against his plate.

"Listen, the fact that they haven't caught her yet's one hell of an achievement," Ted said seriously. "I'd take tips from her gladly; it's what we're trying to do, stay free, isn't it?"

"Yeah, well, I suppose," Dirk conceded. "With the whole of the Ministry and all their informers looking for her, I'd have expected her to be caught by now. Mind, who's to say they haven't already caught and killed her without publicizing it?"

Dean kept quiet, but he knew better. If Hope had been captured, he doubted the galleon would still work.

And tomorrow he would hopefully see Daphne once again.

"Potterwatch, George? Really?" Hope was giving her boyfriend a look as he pulled off his shirt, dressing quite shamelessly for bed in front of her. "Couldn't you be more original than that?"

"Everyone liked the sound of it," George said innocently and Hope arched an eyebrow. "What? I'm not lying!"

"Sure, you're not," Hope said dryly as she leaned against the bedpost, her arms crossed, already dressed in her usual long sleep bottoms with a loose shirt that had once belonged to George but was now so worn down.

George grinned widely at her. "You're just irritated because it's your name."

"Yes," Hope said, not even moving from her position.

"Well, it makes sense, in a way," George said, "since we are kind of watching for you."

The flames in the fireplace flickered; it was only September, but it was still a bit cool. The fire cast shadows across Hope's face, making her green eyes seem much darker than before.

"And we can report on what we do and information that the Order passes on," George continued when Hope caught him watching her, making her smile.

"How's that going to work?" Hope asked. "You, Fred, and Lee are here, how are you meant to do this radio-show if you're all in separate places?"

George winked. "Magic, love."

There was a roll of eyes in his direction as George slowly moved to stand before her, keeping her trapped to the post she had been so casually leaning against before and her eyes flickered upwards to meet his.

"You know," he said, "I barely saw you today."

"I was a bit busy," Hope replied, slightly breathless by the look he was bestowing upon her as she locked her hands on the carved wood. "You know, people showing up, me demanding the password from them...scaring a few shiteless..."

"That," George murmured, his fingers trailing lightly over the claw-like scars that ran along her side,
making goosebumps erupt over her skin, "I would have liked to see."

"I bet you would have," Hope said, swallowing thickly.

"But you know what I really want?"

"I wouldn't know," Hope managed to force out.

George smirked, pulling her against him so that he could whisper into her ear, his breath tingling across her skin. "To finish what we started earlier," he murmured.

"Is that so?" Hope whispered.

"Mm-hm," he hummed into her flesh and Hope's eyelids fluttered at the feel of his lips roving over her skin.

"You...are...impossible," Hope gasped, relinquishing her grip on the wooden bed post to wrap her arms around his neck. "Mm! George!"

George pulled back to grin at her and Hope appeared vaguely annoyed.

"That's going to leave a mark," she said, her lips twitching.

"Like I haven't left a mark on you before," George said.

"I've honestly lost count," Hope said innocently, releasing him and forcing him to release her, as his grip on her waist was ever-present, so that she might grasp his hands, pulling him back towards the bed.

George was grinning widely now. "Ooh! I like this plan. I miss snogging you in bed..."

"And in the kitchen, and on the couch, and against the wall," Hope added, recalling just how many places in the flat he had actually snogged her, and there were so many (though the flat wasn't truly that big), "and –mmph!"

He captured her lips in a kiss that strangled her instantly of her breath as they fell to the mattress in a tangle of limbs, both being far too distracted to do anything about it as George's hands raked up the length of her body and her fingers speared through his hair.

"Shut up," George gasped as his lips released hers briefly.

"You first," Hope mumbled against him, using her legs and a bit of momentum to end up on top trapping him beneath her. "Ha!"

George's hair was wild from her fingers and his eyes were over-bright as he grinned up at her. "You know I can have you pinned under me in less than two seconds, right?"

"Less than two seconds?" Hope smirked, interlocking her hands with his as she pressed them against the mattress. "My, aren't you cocky?"

George lost his focus briefly as she nipped sharply at the underside of his chin, drawing at the patch of skin with her teeth that made his mind go a little hazy before he managed to get her on her back. This was by far the most common game the two played and there had yet to be a winner (Hope would claim it was her and George would claim it was him).

"That took more than two seconds," Hope said with a snigger.
"I'm going to grind your resolve to dust, Potter," George swore.

Her eyes gleamed in the relative darkness. "You can try."
Dean hoisted his rucksack higher on his shoulder, his eyes barely straying from the galleon in his hand, the numbers and the image on it shifting so that it looked to be a compass (which was the only reason he knew he was going in the right direction). He and the rest of the group had split off three hours prior with Ted giving him a firm shake of the hand paired with a 'good luck'.

But Dean didn't need luck.

He looked around searching for this safe house within the trees and leaves, but he couldn't see anything. Dean tilted his head back; it wasn't hidden on top of the trees was it?

Somehow he doubted that, given Hermione's fear of elevated heights.

"Password?" asked an unfamiliar voice and he jerked his head down to see the person that had spoken and he had to blink a few times, thinking he was seeing things.

But he wasn't.

"Password?" she repeated, sounding a bit vexed, as though he should have answered a bit faster.

"Er…Theseus," Dean said and the girl grinned brightly, her features shifting to the familiar green eyes and long dark red hair of Hope Potter.

"Correct," she said.

Dean gave her an amused half-smile in return. "What were you going to do if I didn't have the right code?"

"I hadn't really thought about it," Hope said a bit pensively, "but I'm sure Hermione has a failsafe of sorts." She shrugged a bit unconcernedly and Dean had to give her a look of complete exasperation. But, he supposed, Hermione was well-known now for her failsafes, and he remembered quite vividly what her last one had done to Marietta Edgecombe. He didn't even want to think what she could have spelled the galleons with.

"Heard you did a runner," Hope said, crooking her fingers towards him as she began to walk forward and Dean hurried to follow after her. "Seamus will be happy you finally showed up –he's been checking in constantly over the past day."

Dean grinned widely.

"You would think the pair of you were married," Hope sniggered, giving him a sidelong glance. This time Dean frowned, his dark cheeks flushing. "We do not act like that!"

A short laugh was released from her lips. "Please, having best friends is like being married."

"You and George are practically married," Dean retorted.

Hope was remarkably unashamed by these words, George had told her flat-out that he wanted to
marry her, but there was so much still to be done before she accepted the proposal (mainly murdering her distant relative). "Well, I have been living with him for over a year," she said.

His legs stopped moving briefly as he gaped at her. "You've been living with your boyfriend since you were sixteen?"

"Technically it was right after fifth year," Hope conceded, "so I was still fifteen…"

Dean shook his head. "You are completely insane."

"It has been said," Hope agreed as they crossed a small stream via a few scattered rocks that peeked out of the rushing water. Hope, who didn't have a bag situated on her shoulder and who was much lighter than Dean, had no trouble crossing, but Dean came out with a leg of his trousers soaked through.

"You know," Hope said mildly, "there is one person who has been very concerned about how long it's taken you to show up."

Dean opened his mouth to point out that he'd only gotten the coordinates and codename the previous day, at the same moment as everyone else with a DA galleon, but then Daphne's face flashed before his eyes.

He swallowed convulsively. "How is she?"

"Why don't you ask her yourself?" Hope replied, sounding highly amused, taking a few steps to the side as a head of blonde hair appeared as the young woman it belonged to weaved through the trees, making a considerable amount of noise, her blue eyes glancing around for any indication of her dark-skinned boyfriend, and then she saw him.

And in that moment, Daphne, not at all the prim and proper that he was so used to, her hair falling out of its tight braid and light shadows under her eyes from a relatively sleepless night, had never been more glorious or beautiful in Dean's eyes.

"Dean," she whispered his name, but he still heard it even given the distance between them.

And then she was rushing towards him and he caught her as she flung her arms tightly around his neck, gripping him like he was her lifeline.

"Oh, thank Merlin!" Daphne cried. "I was so worried something had happened to you when Seamus told me you'd gone on the run!"

Dean shushed her, running his fingers through her golden locks in a comforting gesture. "It's alright," he murmured into her ear, "it's fine, I'm alright."

Hope tried to make herself as scarce as possible without disappearing too far away that they'd get lost once they'd finished their reunion.

Daphne pulled back to glare at him fiercely, but her wet eyes ruined it. "Don't you dare scare me like that again," she said in a would-be threatening manner. "Or I'll—"

What Daphne had been planning to do should he frighten her so terribly was never discovered, because Dean had cupped her cheeks, drawing her lips to his and kissing her so deeply that she abruptly forgot what she was going to say in favour of drawing him closer to her, her eyes fluttering closed.
Hope's eye twitched. They didn't seem to be planning on stopping any time soon; this must be what it was like for people to see her kiss George constantly…

"If you're quite finished," Hope piped up after a short amount of time, causing the pair to part, having forgotten her presence entirely. "You can finish all that later, after everyone's worked out what we're doing."

"What we're doing?" Dean asked blankly.

"Well, you know, creating havoc," Hope said with a sarcastic drawl, "putting a dent in the Death Eaters numbers."

"Oh, yeah," he said, the cloudiness around his brain induced by Daphne's kiss faded away slightly and he remembered just what they were intending to do here. "Right, we should probably go."

Hope sniggered but she did not disagree. "You're the last to arrive," she told him, taking them along a route through a mostly hidden behind moss.

"I gathered," Dean said, wincing his eyes slightly at lack of light the short passage had. "What exactly is this place? It's hidden really well."

"There are other ways to reach Pithos," Hope said, "but this is the fastest. Daphne, Astoria, and Tracey took the long way round."

Daphne frowned slightly at her as they moved back into the daylight once more. "They were your coordinates!"

"Details, details," Hope said airily as they descended a rocky path that led down to a beach of sea-soaked dirt and sand that squelched under their shoes as they walked to the opposite side of the gorge, atop which she could see the small castle perched, even if they could not. She slipped her hand into the crack that held the lever that controlled the hidden door.

Her old school-mate stared as the rocks parted for them. "You just really like secret passageways, don't you?"

"Who doesn't like secret passageways?" Hope asked rhetorically as Daphne hid her giggles, all three lighting their wands as they journeyed inwards until they reached the door that needed Parseltongue in order to be opened, and once they were finally inside, Dean had to blink a few times, gazing in awe around him.

"Whoa," he said slowly, drawing the word out as he gazed around. "I guess the place is big enough."

Daphne and Hope laughed and they certainly weren't the only ones as the three had come out by a long table that was filled with a good portion of the DA, mostly those that had either graduated, were Muggle-born, or, like Daphne, had chosen what was deemed the wrong side. Only two didn't fit and Dean recognized one as Fleur Delacour, the Beauxbatons champion in the Tri-wizard Tournament, the one whom Hope, Hermione, and Ron had practically adopted during their fourth year, but the other was an unfamiliar face who looked a bit uncomfortable surrounded by people who knew each other so well.

"We were about to send a search party," Ron told them with a wide grin.

"You would have gotten lost," Hope said in a despairing sort of sigh as some of the others got up to
greet Dean. "And then I'd need to waste more time looking for you."

Hope's eyes twinkled as Hermione fought to stifle her giggles.

"Hermione!" Ron whinged with a pout towards his girlfriend, but he was promptly ignored, to the amusement of his brothers.

Hope took her seat, waiting a bit in impatience for everyone to settle down after greeting Dean. Her mirror had been propped up and expanded at the end of the table where there was no one sitting and it held the images of Neville, Luna, and Ginny (who had named themselves unofficial heads of the DA in the absence of Hope, Ron, and Hermione).

"So, what's the plan?" asked Alicia once silence fell.

"The plan is cutting down Tom's forces," Hope said firmly, "and causing general chaos."

A murmur of assent followed her words.

"General chaos is what we're good at," Fred said, grinning widely.

"I'm well aware," Hope said dryly, earning a few laughs, "but it's different this time."

"Because they'll be aiming to kill," Tracey added, sobering the group.

"So will we!" Justin insisted.

Katie arched an eyebrow. "And just how many people have you killed?"

Justin flushed and Hope sat back in her chair. "Ginny, Neville, and Luna and the DA members at Hogwarts are going to gather information, and Fleur can help with that too, since she now works with some Death Eaters."

Fleur bobbed her head in agreement, her expression serious.

"And we've taken to adding graffiti to Hogwarts," Ginny added proudly. "The Carrows and Snape aren't too pleased."

Amycus and Alecto Carrow were two of the Death Eaters that had been involved in the Battle of the Astronomy Tower and they had been named the respective professors of Defence Against the Dark Arts (which was now practically just the Dark Arts) and Muggle Studies.

"Somehow that comes as no surprise," Ron said, giving his younger sister a look. Luna smiled and Neville grinned while Ginny smirked unashamedly.

"It really shouldn't," Ginny replied, "since it's me that we're talking about."

Chuckles erupted around them, and this time Hermione explained.

"And those of us here will be dealing with the Death Eaters more directly," she explained, "but some of you will be doing reconnaissance, finding out who are Death Eaters, while the others will be putting a dent in the Snatcher numbers."

"I ran into a few Snatchers," Dean added, "they're relentless, I might not have gotten away if I hadn't run into Ted."

"Tonks?" Ron asked, glancing towards Hope and Hermione who were similarly surprised.
"Yeah, why?"

"Well, he's Tonks' dad—er, Remus' father-in-law," Hermione said, correcting herself once we realized that most weren't familiar with the metamorphmagus Auror.

"Colin," Hope said, bringing them all back to the issue at hand, "I want you to be in charge of the reconnaissance group."

"Me?" Colin was stunned and excited at the same time. "Really?"

"Well, you do know your way around a camera," Hope smiled, "can you handle it?"

Colin nodded his head very fast and seriously. "I would've thought you'd do something like that…"

"Oh, no," Hope shook her head. "Hermione, Ron, and I are going to be working on a separate project."

"What kind of project?" Katie asked suspiciously.

"Something that will help put an end to You-Know-Who," Ron said.

"Then we can help," Neville insisted from the mirror.

"We're trying to keep it…in-house," Hermione said, for lack of a better word.

"Does it get more in-house than this?" Lee inquired.

"Look," Hope said, rubbing her forehead in irritation over where her scar lay—a movement that was not missed by Hermione, whose eyes narrowed slightly. "Do you know how a secret stays a secret? Because most people don't know about it!"

A few people recoiled at her glare.

"What we are doing is important, incredibly important," Hope stressed, "just like what all of you will be doing is important, and we will be helping you out from time to time, but you'll be mostly in charge of yourselves…Daphne, Justin…and Angelina are the heads for those at Pithos, alright?"

"Aw, c'mon, Hope!"

"We'd be so much better!"

Hope wasn't the only one turning a baleful eye on the Weasley twins and Fred quailed under his fiancée's glare.

After the meeting everyone branched off, most remaining to make decisions on reconnaissance and dealing with the Snatcher issue, but Hope, Ron, and Hermione congregated in the library, speaking in hushed tones as they finally had a chance to examine the Horcrux.

"It'd be a real pain in the arse if this wasn't the Horcrux," Ron grunted as he attempted to pry the locket open. "It is, isn't it?...Hope…?"

Hope's eyes were distant as she held the locket lightly in her hands, feeling its fragile beating heart—if it did indeed possess one, though that was rather unlikely—.

"Hope!"
She jerked as both of her friends shook her by the arms. "What?" she asked in a bit of confusion.

"You zoned out," Hermione pointed out. "Does that mean it's a Horcrux?"

"Well, it certainly feels like one," Hope said, examining the clasp. "You don't suppose it's locked with Parseltongue, do you?"

Hermione sucked on the end of her eagle-feather quill thoughtfully.

"I suppose it could be," she said after a long stretch of silence, "it would certainly make a lot of sense, since this was before you were born, Hope, so he would have been the only Parselmouth, that would've ensured he had the only 'key' to the 'lock,' so to speak."

"So, that means we've got a way to open it, then?" Ron asked with a grin. "That's good! Now we just need something to destroy it!"

"Yes, but it's not like we have access to the sword of Gryffindor or basilisk venom," Hermione pointed out.

"There's actually something funny about the sword," Hope mused.

Ron frowned, his eyebrows drawing together in confusion. "What're you talking about?"

"Apparently," Hope drawled out slightly, "the sword is missing."

"Missing?" Hermione and Ron repeated as one.

"I thought it was in the headmaster's office," Hermione said a bit stunned; Godric Gryffindor's sword was, after all, a priceless artefact, it couldn't just suddenly disappear.

"Well, it was, the original, I mean, but there was evidently a replica made," Hope raked a hand through her hair as she leaned on the back two legs of her chair. "Somehow the original was switched out for the fake…Ginny and some of her friends tried to steal it and Snape decided to move it to Gringotts, but Dean says that the one in the vault is the fake."

"Ginny?" Ron said. "Why didn't she mention it?"

"She probably didn't want you to worry," Hope said with a shrug, "or know she got caught."

"How were they punished?" Hermione asked quietly.

Ron froze, swallowing thickly at the thought of the punishments the Death Eaters could have come up with. The Crucius Curse was probably the most likely thing they would commit.

"Ginny wouldn't say, but I'm sure it was painful enough that she and the rest of the DA are going to be extra careful from now on."

"So, it was the Crucius Curse," Ron said lowly, and both girls looked at him.

"It could've been," Hope said carefully, watching for his reaction, because she had never seen him look so angry.

"You've experienced it," Ron pressed, ignoring Hermione's "Ron!", his eyes on hers. "How bad is it?"

Hope eyed him for a moment. There was no use in sugar-coating it; she knew Ron would see
through that.

"Imagine being stabbed over and over again with several white-hot pokers," she said finally, "and now imagine being crushed under the weight of a giant rock…those fates are preferable compared to the Cruciatus Curse."

Ron slumped back in his seat and Hermione tentatively reached a hand forward only to draw it back suddenly, feeling it wouldn't be best to do so.

"But she's obviously feeling much better," Hope reminded him, "so she must not have been under it very long, that's good."

He raised a hand to his head, cupping his forehead as he sighed. "You're right," he said after a pregnant pause, "so, what were we talking about?"

The subject change was rather obvious, especially to Hope and Hermione, but they opted not to point it out.

"We were talking about what would destroy a Horcrux," Hermione said. "There is one other thing I've read, but it would be safer that we not try it."

"Why? What is it?" Ron asked.

"It's called Fiendfyre," Hermione explained, rifling through one of the books she had withdrawn from her small beaded bag. "And it's incredibly dangerous."

"How dangerous are we talking about?" Hope asked suspiciously. "Like kill-us-dangerous or crack-the-earth-dangerous?"

"Well, I suppose that depends on the caster," Hermione said a bit wryly. "You must have complete control when you cast the spell, and the flames cannot be put out by normal or enchanted water."

"I vote we stay away from that, then," Ron said, giving his head a small shake.

"What happens if you can't control it?" Hope asked curiously.

"Then it might consume you."

"Definitely keeping away from that," Ron reiterated, "but there's got to be more to destroying them than the sword, the basilisk fangs, or that fire."

"Do you think there could be anything in these books?" Hermione asked, glancing around to the high shelves upon shelves of books that surrounded them.

"Maybe," Hope conceded, tilting her head back, "it'll take awhile to find out, I'm sure."

"We'd better get started, then," Ron said decisively.

Dryad was hidden quite well under so many protection charms that Lord Voldemort himself wouldn't have been able to see him even if he was right under his nose. Dryad –also known as Colin– was fiddling with his camera, fixing it as it had been expelling purple smoke for the better part of the past half hour.

Aurae –whose name was Alicia– was looking through the end of a telescope which held what had once been Mad-Eye Moody's eye (it was a little creepy, but they needed it more than he did),
focusing on the alley below.

"Just how many Death Eaters have we identified?" quipped Naiad (Katie) who was peeking over the edge of the roof on which they had been positioned for the past three days.

"Seventeen," Aurae hummed, one eye winced shut as she moved the telescope carefully to see down the south end of the street. "Hello…looks like we’ve got a new one…"

"Do you see the Dark Mark?" asked their fourth member, Balor (Justin).

"Hang on," Aurae said, following him as he moved, the sleeve of his arm rode up just slightly and she could clearly see the head of the snake.

"Isn't that eye supposed to see through everything?" Dryad asked.

"It should," Naiad agreed, "but we haven't figured out how to get it to work like that."

"Lucky us," uttered Balor.

"Alright, this one's definitely a Death Eater," Aurae said. "Dryad, that camera better be ready, he's going to be passing us by soon."

"Ready," Dryad said, fixing the hover charm and invisibility charm on it as he threw it into the air as though he was releasing a messenger pigeon. A very metallic and bulky messenger pigeon. The spells that had been placed on the camera caused it to break down every once in awhile, which was the only real issue they were having with it. No one had caught on to them yet, which was always a good thing.

But they still held their breath as the invisible, hovering camera hovered in front of the Death Eater, snapping a quick picture before returning to their side and spitting out a quick picture with a pitiful cough.

Balor shook the photo a few times, waiting for the picture to clear as Dryad and Aurae turned back to their respective duties while Balor and Naiad examined old and new newspapers that held the names and faces of Death Eaters.

"It looks like this is Earl Avery Jr," Naiad said after a moment.

"He's an earl?"

"Don't be ridiculous," Naiad scoffed, "it's a name, a bit old-fashioned, but it's still a name." She clicked her pen –using a quill and ink wasn't exactly a luxury they could afford where they were–and scrawled it into the space under the parchment she had pasted it to. "Anything to add?" she raised her voice slightly towards Aurae.

"Thirties to forties, I think," Aurae mumbled, still focused on him. "Stiff gait…might have a leg injury that he's trying to cover…sunken skin, obviously he's been in Azkaban awhile and it doesn't suit him."

Naiad jotted that all down.

"Alright, what do you really think those three are up to?" Balor asked once things had relaxed a bit and no more Death Eaters were visible.

No one needed to ask about just who he was talking about; there was only one group of three that he
could have been speaking of.

"Dunno," Aurae said, shrugging even as she kept her eye glued to the telescope, "but whatever it is, it's serious."

"Yeah, I saw Pwyll reading his way through his dinner," Naiad agreed with a smirk.

Dryad rolled his eyes, though he was still grinning. "I tried to sneak a glance at their notes in the library."

"And how'd that go?" Balor asked with interest.

"It didn't," Dryad said, sounding a bit put out as he shoved his hands into his pockets, pulling out some warm gloves. "They must've spelled them so that the only ones who could understand them were the three of them."

"Like shorthand," Balor arched an eyebrow, "that's very clever."

"Probably Metis' idea," Aurae said, "you know how particular she is."

"I think everyone knows that," Naiad said with a smirk on her lips. "She's got a plan for everything."

"And Elpis has a rune for everything," Aurae added.

"And Pwyll has a strategy for everything," Balor said.

"Isn't that the same thing as a plan, though?" Dryad pointed out towards Balor's words.

"No, Metis has the original plans, but then if anything goes wrong, Pwyll has a plan," he explained. "Those three need to get out more."

"Yes, but one of them is currently at his home with spattergroit, one is on the run with her parents, and one is the number one most wanted fugitive," Naiad felt the need to point out, giving the boys a firm stare.

"Good point."

Chapter End Notes

Hope –Elpis
Hermione –Metis
Ron –Pwyll
Fred –Loki
George –Pandora
Angelina –Airmid
Lee –Prometheus
Daphne –Macha
Astoria –Isis
Tracey –Wadjet
Dean –Theseus
Colin –Dryad
Justin –Balor
Alicia – Aурae
Katie – Naiad
I might be switching back to using their usual names when showing who's speaking, if it gets too complicated...
"And welcome back to Potterwatch!"

"Thank you, Rodent!"

"I told you, it's Rapier! I'd thought you'd've got the point by now. Point. Rapier. Sword…Geddit?"

Rapier said in amusement.

"You said the 'I' was sharp on Rapier! And we'd like our listeners to keep a sharp lookout for anyone behaving strangely or people covering your area that you don't recognize," River warned.

"Many regular Potterwatch listeners will know that the Ministry's host up a mass break-out from Azkaban. But for all of you new listeners, escapees include infamous Death Eaters Travers and Stan Shunpike, that you may have met on the Knight Bus," Rapier added.

"Please be careful with Stan. We're sure he's under the influence of the Imperius Curse. He is helping the Death Eaters, but we believe this is against his will," River informed them.

"Even so," Rapier said, "add him to your list of known Death Eaters and Death Eater-sympathizers: the Malfoys—"

"—the Lestranges," River added.

"—Notts, Averys, and Carrows—"

"—Dolohov and Rowle—"

"—Greyback the werewolf who shows no mercy if you're a physically fit man or a child," Rapier interjected.

"—And we mustn't forget Severus Snape," River said, "the killer of the late Albus Dumbledore."

"—no we mustn't," Rapier agreed, "and this is by far a rather incomplete list, so just be on the lookout for anyone wearing the Dark Mark."

"Know your friends," River warned, "mine have taken to issuing separate code words to each other, and be on the lookout for any signs of the Imperius Curse or Polyjuice Potion."

"And with that said," Rapier concurred to River's words, "good luck, stay safe, and support Hope Potter!"

The one thing that really had to go was the giant black stone statue that proclaimed that wizards were higher than Muggles. However, destroying it was a different matter entirely. There were anti-Apparition wards set up since Hope, Ron, Hermione, and Audrey's escape from the Ministry on September 1, so that had been out of question. What they had ended up doing was having Hermione create a small (illegal) Portkey and had Percy (who was keeping in contact rather loosely) leave it in a remote location where it wouldn't be moved.

This location just so happened to be next to one of the fireplaces as a fire poker that most overlooked, perhaps because fireplaces usually had fire pokers, but perhaps also because a Notice-Me-Not Charm had been placed on it (Haud Insignis). And it was at this location that several dark-cloaked figures
appeared rather late that night (or rather early the next morning, depending on how one looked at it).

"Homenum Revelio! No one here," a voice hissed in the silence.

"I could've told you that Loki."

"Shut it, Pandora!"

George glowered at his twin who was still sniggering after these weeks that he was the one who had the trickster god while George got a mortal woman.

"Children," Daphne said gratingly through her teeth, "focus! We're trying to destroy Ministry property."

Both twins struck mocking salutes that made the blonde wonder how Hope could put up with their antics for so long (or even Angelina, and she had more of a head on her shoulders). "Yes, Macha!"

Daphne rolled her eyes towards the ceiling and Dennis hid his giggles beside her. "Let's just get this over with and get home; the day has been exhausting enough on its own…"

The Gryffindors each took out a can of spray-paint (an idea from Dean that had been Hermione-approved) that were spelled so that the Death Eaters and Ministry workers weren't going to be able to remove whatever they wrote, while Daphne turned back to the horrible statue that lay before her.

She was incensed that anyone thought it was alright for Muggles to fall beneath wizards, it disgusted her like few things could. Muggles may not have the same skills as wizards, but that didn't make them any lesser to them than anyone else.

Which was why they were going to transfigure it into something else, permanently, and she remembered clearly the look on Hope's face when she pitched the idea.

"Really? I mean, I'm all for getting rid of the damn thing," Hope said, flicking her quill between her fingers, not noticing how the ink trailed across her parchment and onto her front. "But isn't that a bit much? We are living in a place called Pithos, after all."

"I like it," Ron said, grinning widely as Hope rolled her eyes, leaning his elbows on the book he was looking through. "It's subtle."

"Not subtle enough."

"Think about it like this, Hope," Hermione jumped in, "how many people know the tale of Pandora's Box ("Which isn't really a box!" Hope muttered in aggravation)? And how many are going to apply it to you?"

"We're adding graffiti to the Atrium of the Ministry," Hope pointed out dryly, "they're going to know its affiliated with me anyways."

"So what?" Hermione cocked an eyebrow at her. "That's what we're all about, remember? Widespread hope."

Daphne kept dutifully quiet as Hope contemplated her friends, wondering to herself how many times the pair had changed the mind of the wilful Potter.

Green eyes flashed to blue and Hope sighed. "Fine," she said, "but make that jar as Greek as possible. No half-arsing, Greengrass."
"Oh, don't you worry about that," Daphne said with a wide grin, "I'm having Dean sketch out its design for me."

And she had, as well as replicating the process once before testing it out of the stone tonight. So Daphne raised her wand high and performed several smooth arching movements, focusing both on the black carved stone and on the image ingrained on her mind.

The stone warped as though it was made of a melting substance...like black molten gold, even though there was no such thing. The witch and wizard's faces on top of the slab drooped and the Muggles in agony beneath became less distinctive until all that remained of the black was a blob hovering in the air, shapeless and formless until Daphne murmured a second spell that caused it to solidify into a midnight-coloured pithos with white Greek fret patterns across it.

The black pithos settled on the ground with a loud clunk from the weight and Daphne turned to survey the messages that the others had painted across the walls.

"The Resistance stands tall," was her favourite, by Fred. George, on the other hand, had chosen a more proverbial phrase that had been a suggestion from Hermione, their ever-literate friend, "Hope springs eternal." And then you had Dennis who went with the simple approach: "Down with the Death Eaters!"

All in all, Daphne thought their brief phrases and transfigured statue were more than enough to show Tom Riddle (since the use of his acclaimed name was now taboo, everyone at Pithos had taken to using his birth name) and his Death Eaters that he was fighting more than a group of runaways.

The Resistance was composed entirely of people willing to fight his regime tooth and nail.

Ginny and her group of rebellious teenagers were not about to be outdone by Hope and everyone at Pithos. Their efforts had been all over the newspaper, including the graffiti they had painted all over the walls of the Atrium of the Ministry of Magic (Ginny really wanted to ask how they'd managed that, but that wasn't really essential; after everything was said and done) and the alterations they had done to the statue.

Anyone who knew Hope and the mythology behind the goddess of what she was named for found the pithos jar to be hilarious.

But now it was their turn.

Officially, the group's name had been changed to the Resistance (much more macho, if you asked Ginny), but unofficially they kept the name Dumbledore's Army, simply for what it represented. Ginny knew that Hope hadn't much approved of the man when he had been alive but she was certain that Hope wouldn't have cared if they used his name to incite fear into their enemies.

Ginny pulled out a folded and particularly worn bit of parchment from her pocket.

"You're giving me the Marauder's Map?" Ginny gaped at Hope. "But-but this is yours! Your dad helped make it!"

"And my godfather," Hope agreed, "and Remus, and a traitor, but that's beside the point. You're going to need it more than me this year. I'm not going to be in Hogwarts this year, you are, and it'll be better for you to raise a little hell with it than without...that said..." Hope narrowed her eyes slightly. "Try not to lose it, I am rather fond of it."

"I promise," Ginny said. "it'll be in safe hands."
"Good."

And Ginny hadn't lied; the Map was indeed in safe hands, her hands, to be precise, and she was putting it to good use.

They weren't able to create a similar result with graffiti that the others at Pithos had, but their spells would be enough to cause a bit of a hindrance. Tonight would be just her and Luna, which worked well enough, as the pair were rather small and thus could hide easily unseen behind tapestries and suits of armor, should the need ever arise.

And Ginny would like nothing more than to be caught by the Carrows and give them more than they could chew with her, and this was mostly to do with her wanting a bit of revenge for the bruises her boyfriend was nursing for being caught by them last week. His injuries hadn't yet healed and he wasn't permitted to be healed by Madam Pomfrey.

"Ready?" Luna whispered, holding her wand aloft, its tip lit over the Map which she held in her hand.

"Absolutely," Ginny said, muttering a soft spell as she painted the words over the wall carefully until it read: *Dumbledore's Army, Still Recruiting.*

"Anyone coming?" she asked once they were done.

"No, we're clear," Luna said, giving her a slight smile, "the Carrows are patrolling the basement."

"No one else coming?"

"No," Luna said, checking several times before wiping the Map clean and handing it back to Ginny. "Stay safe."

Ginny nodded, taking it and tucking it inside her robes. "And if anyone sees you coming, hide."

Luna smiled in that disarming way that she had always done so. "See you tomorrow…I hope they have pudding."

And then she skipped away, seemingly almost careless, but Ginny knew her too well and stifled her giggles at the comment about pudding (anyone who knew Luna knew just how much she loved her pudding, chocolate pudding in particular, to be precise), and then she turned on her heel, disappearing into one of the shortcuts behind a nearby tapestry, taking it as close as she could get to the portrait hole, before walking swiftly along the corridor, glancing around cautiously before finally entering.

The common room was empty except for Seamus who was half-asleep on the couch. Ginny remembered how many times George talked about happening upon Hope sleeping on the couch, time having gotten away from her.

"Seamus? Seamus, you need to go to bed."

"I am in bed," Seamus grumbled, trying not to move his face too much and aggravate the purpling bruises further.

"You're on the couch," Ginny replied with a snort, "that's a different matter entirely."

"I was asleep," Seamus said, opening one eye to look at her.
"You were dozing," Ginny replied dryly, "that's still slightly awake."

Seamus closed his eye and rolled away from her. "You take the fun out of everything."

Ginny rolled her eyes. "C'mon, you big lug, a bed of feathers awaits."

And that was probably the only thing to get him up, but then he kissed her cheek.

"I'm glad you didn't get caught," he said.

"Me too," replied Ginny with a slight smile.

"This is River! I am happy to say I am back to hosting this broadcast! So sorry for my brief disappearance, ceding the program briefly to Rapier wasn't something I was planning on doing—"

"One would think you didn't think I could keep the show going in your absence, dear River!" cried Rapier.

"—anyways," River continued over Rapier's voice, "I was simply indisposed, assisting the Resistance, as I'm sure all of you are well aware of by now."

"But for those new listeners," a third voice interjected, Rodent, "the Resistance is the part of what is widely considered a teenagers gang, formerly known as Dumbledore's Army, operating both inside Hogwarts and beyond it. Causing general havoc and crippling the ranks of Death Eaters is what seems to be their goal...and we have a guest today, Reliant, who is a close friend of Hope Potter. How are you, Reliant?"

"Quite well, Rodent," Reliant replied.

"Good," River said, "now what can you tell us about the most recent efforts the Resistance has made?"

"I can tell you that we've been focusing on boosting the morale of the oppressed," Reliant said. "A few members painted graffiti in the Atrium of the Ministry of Magic as well as altering the unsavoury black stone statue –I'm sure if you've been inside since You-Know-Who's takeover, you know what I'm talking about– into a giant Greek pithos."

"And just what is a pithos?" asked Rapier innocently. "I've always wondered."

"It's a Grecian jar, but it's symbolic for holding the spirit of Hope inside in Greek mythology, which was why one of our members chose it," Reliant explained.

"I love it!" River cried, laughing.

"And how did our esteemed leader take it?" Rodent asked.

"Well, she did roll her eyes a bit," Reliant conceded, "but even she couldn't disagree that it was better than what it was before."

"True, true...And what kind of messages were left behind?" asked River.

"There were the typical 'Down with the Death Eaters!' and 'The Resistance Stands Tall,' but 'Hope springs eternal' was added as well, and I think that's more than enough to push aside the fear that everyone has been feeling."
"Right you are," Rapier agreed. "And I understand the Resistance has taken out more than thirty Death Eaters—and this isn't just killing, people, this is serious incapacitation, if nothing else—since they became active. What do you think about that?"

"Personally?" Reliant asked rhetorically. "We are in the middle of a war. We are facing those that will do more than Stun us. I don't like killing and I know that many in the Resistance aren't fans of it either, but we need to be rational here, there are times when killing is going to be necessary. It would be like telling Hope to battle—say—Bellatrix Lestrange with everything non-lethal—"

"I quite imagine that she'd laugh in my face if I suggested such a thing," Rodent remarked dryly.

"And Bellatrix is responsible for the death of her godfather," River added, "so I'm sure that helps."

"Exactly," Reliant agreed, "so many of us have been hurt by You-Know-Who and his followers not to consider using more damaging curses and spells."

"And that's all for today, folks! Stay tuned for our next broadcast. The code is: Elpis."

Ron rubbed at his eyes, trying not to look at the book he had been slaving over for the past few hours. "If I look at another piece of written word, I'm going to go mental…I can't find anything about a substance as powerful and poisonous as basilisk venom."

"I may have something," Hermione said, waving them towards her. "There's something here—it's not much, but it's something—about the blood of a Gorgon."

Hope arched an eyebrow. "Like a Gorgon as in Medusa with her snakes-for-hair and turn-you-to-stone-stare?"

"Sounds like the basilisk," Ron said, narrowing his eyes suspiciously at the passage, no doubt attempting to focus his eyes.

"Yes, but I remembered reading something when I was younger," Hermione insisted, "on how blood from a certain said could heal you and blood from the opposite side could kill you."

"Which would mean there is only one cure to it," Hope offered.

"Well, maybe," Hermione had to admit, "it's possible that phoenix tears have a similar affect on the poison that they did on the basilisk venom."

"But what are the chances of actually finding the blood of a Gorgon?" Ron asked, ever the downer.

"I'd imagine quite slim," Hermione said. "I haven't read of anything concerning Gorgons after the tenth century. It's possible they're extinct."

"Well, isn't that just great?" Ron said and Hermione elbowed him harshly in the side. "What? I'm voicing an opinion!"

"But no solution!"

"It isn't as though we can just wait around for the sword of Gryffindor to just fall in our laps," Hope added. "But there's got to be something else we can use to destroy Horcruxes."

"I'm not sure there is," Hermione grimaced. "But we'll just have to keep looking."

Ron groaned loudly, collapsing dramatically against the table as if her words were a death sentence.
"Did you miss the whole bit about me going insane if I looked at another written word?"

Hermione's eyebrow twitched slightly in irritation and Hope could sense an impending explosion, as Hermione rather liked the written word (if that hadn't been obvious by now).

"A few of the boys were thinking of liberating the Muggle-born fugitives that a nearby Snatchers group has caught," Hope mentioned, "maybe you'd like to join them...I'm sure they could always use an extra set of hands."

Maybe she should have been insulted by how eager to leave he was, but then he removed the Horcrux from his neck and the look disappeared. They had all agreed that simply leaving the Horcrux lying around wasn't safe, even if they trusted everyone within the walls of Pithos. And Hope had a feeling that the Horcrux had a mind of its own that could sway others. Hope had heard it song and it worried her how much it affected Ron.

Which was another good reason to get him out of Pithos for awhile; get him to clear his head and get away from the influences of the Horcrux.

"They're probably still in the dining room," Hope added, "getting ready to leave."

Ron nodded, blinking a few times to clear his head. "Alright, I'll probably see you...later?" he said this a bit awkwardly, seeing how he'd irritated Hermione (though it certainly wasn't the first time it had occurred; Hope remembered each instance quite well).

"Later," Hermione repeated, watching him go and Hope lifted the Horcrux to loop it around her neck, the emeralds in the letter 'S' glittering in the sunlight and the silver of the locket shimmering in an almost malevolent manner.

Hermione eyed it with a look of distinct distrust.

"Shall we keep looking for something on the Gorgons?" Hope asked, bringing Hermione's eyes up to hers and her friend nodded resolutely as the pair threw themselves back into their work.

In retrospect, it was a rather wood idea. Ron had been going quite mental stuck in Pithos (nothing against their safe house, it was possibly one of the best protected structures around the world he was almost certain of, but it was likely to happen to anyone who hadn't gone out in more than a few weeks, and it was almost December), and getting out and doing something certainly improved his mood.

But Ron wasn't quite sure what it had cost him.

Things had gone rather well up to a point. Lee had managed with Angelina to Disapparate the Muggle-borns to a safer place, thus leaving the Snatchers to Ron, George, and Justin.

They had put up a bit of a decent fight, speaking modestly, and the Resistance had prevailed over them, until one of the Snatchers, realizing they were going to lose did something decidedly foolish; he spoke Tom Riddle's acclaimed name.

The Death Eaters that arrived were more battle-capable than their Snatcher counterparts, and Ron ended up with a long slash down his arm and cornered to a tree.

All he had seen was the Death Eater closing in on him with his wand raised, and he could hear Fred yelling –indistinctly and with his code name, as for all anyone else knew, Ron Weasley still had spattergroit and was at home, too sick to move– but his brother was beyond him and for a moment
Ron, far too weak with his bloodied arm to even lift his wand for defence, could only think of Hermione's face, her brown eyes bright in defiance and her bushy brown curls falling over her shoulders, and Hope's words.

"If you ever need a quick getaway," she had told them all, "Flashing is the best option for you, mostly because it doesn't require a wand. You don't want to find yourself at the mercy of the Death Eaters. Don't try to go a long distance...I once tried to Flash from London to Scotland...it's not an experience to repeat. Remember that; short distance only. And know where you want to go."

Ron opened his eyes to look at where he had ended up and he realized he had broken one of Hope's rules of Flashing. He hadn't actually been envisioning a place to end up and now found himself in a place he did not recognize.

With woods and snow in every direction and face-down into that same snow that was spreading a cold feeling through his extremities. Ron tightened his grip on his wand, sanding a flash of pain up his wounded arm at the move as he sat up.

And then Ron summed up his situation with one word that he knew Hope used often.

"Fuck."
The words rang in her ears and Hope didn't want to believe them, but the facts were staring her in the face and the shame and fear on Fred's face couldn't have been faked.

"You're absolutely sure?" Hope asked, trying to maintain her calm, but it was bleeding through.

"Positive," Fred said, handing over Ron's galleon which he had been carrying in his pocket for the past half hour feeling very much like it weighed more than a sack of gold.

Hope turned it over in her hand while Hermione clutched at her cheeks, so pale her cheeks were nearly translucent, tears falling silently down her cheeks. Fred almost preferred Hermione enraged and having a row than crying silently and terrified.

"I'm going out there where he was," Hermione whispered, but Hope shot her down a fraction of a second before several others could.

"No," she said firmly, "if he Flashed away he's probably long gone. We don't even know where he is."

Her brown eyes flashed and gained a bit of her usual fire. "So we should just leave him out there?" she demanded furiously. "He's probably lost and bleeding and cold---"

"What do you suggest?" Hope snapped, her eyes darkening past Hermione's brown to almost a black; Hermione took a step back. "We don't even know where he is, where are we supposed to look? And imagine if the other side found out that we'd lost one of ours, especially when that person is riddled with spattergroit in Ottery St. Catchpole!"

A few members glanced awkwardly towards each other. It was rare enough to see Hermione and Hope getting into a verbal argument, the clashes in the trio typically happened between Hermione and Ron or Ron and Hope (though the second wasn't nearly as common as the first).

Hope pressed a hand to her forehead and Hermione's eyes flitted to the spot where her scar lay.

"I need some air," Hope said, grabbing a small pouch from the table and striding off towards the main entrance, leaving a strained silence in her wake.

"Is that really a good idea?" Audrey asked nervously.

"The protections surrounding the castle extends into the forest," Alicia said, "she should be fine."

"That's not really what I meant…"

George glanced towards Fred and it seemed as though an entire conversation passed between them without a word being spoken.

"I'll go talk to her," Fred said, surprising most of them; they would've figured that George would be the one, but they opted not to comment on it as he went after the red-haired girl.

She was remarkably difficult to find when one considered how distinctive her hair colour was, but Fred found her eventually, sitting on a large root, her hands knotted into her hair.

Fred sat beside her and she immediately said, "George, I really don't want to talk."
"It's Fred, actually," the twin coughed and Hope sighed, her head pitching forward just slightly.

"Either way," she said, "I'd really just prefer to be on my own."

But Fred just sat there, waiting for her to speak.

"Maybe I'm not cut out to be the leader of a resistance, if I lose my best mate a few months in," she muttered.

"Ron knew what he was doing," Fred disagreed as she shook a few emerald onyx stones with runes carved into them, tossing them up into the air with a few murmured words. Fred knew Angelina had meant them more as a joke, but consulting runes was an old form of magic and he was sure she'd probably read up on it after she'd been gifted them.

They all fell facing down; Fred doubted that meant anything good from how she was frowning.

"He will come back, Ron knows the way—"

"But what if he's been captured or worse?" Hope demanded now, the fears that had been silenced before now bubbling to the surface once more. "People don't all come out of war a-alive, you know." Her thoughts went to her parents and Sirius and Cedric, but Fred's went to his uncles, Fabian and Gideon.

"Hope," he said, "we all know what could happen…but we're here with you, to fight until You-Know-Who's gone, and we chose to follow you, not anyone else, so I'm pretty sure that we all think you're cut out to be the leader of a resistance."

Hope looked up at him and Fred saw that her eyes were a little red, like she had been hiding her tears until she had left for the outside.

"Better me than the Order, right?" she asked, her lips twitching just slightly.

"Oh, definitely," Fred released a short laugh. The Order of the Phoenix, while well-intentioned, had the nasty habit of hiding information rather than giving it freely, and while Hope, Hermione, and Ron didn't share much on what they were doing, they at least didn't stall them from assisting (though, this, Fred suspected, had more to do with his mother than anything else).

Her eyes grew distant for a moment, falling back to the stones in her hands.

"Will Ron return on his own?" she asked clearly, tossing them up and catching them in her hand, examining the results.

Fred glanced over the stones. "What does that mean?"

"Yes," she said with a sigh, still a bit dubious, as though barely believing the response, but her eyes glinting with determination as she shoved them in her pocket and stood.

Fred wasn't entirely sure he liked the look on her face. "What're you going to do?"

"Something remarkably foolish," Hope said with a grin, seeming more like her old self.

"How foolish are we talking?" Fred asked as he followed her back through the forest, his curiosity laced with apprehension; Hope's reckless nature was not one that needed to be encouraged.

"I'm going to summon the snake himself."
That definitely topped the list of reckless choices by Hope to date. Maybe George should have talked to her instead.

"Are you mental?"

Hope met George's gaping expression with one of resolution as she crossed her arms and jutted out her chin in defiance.

"He's looking for me," she retorted easily, "He knows I'm at least partially behind the graffiti and the Muggle-borns being released."

"And how is giving him what he wants a good idea?" Tracey asked, sitting five seats down to Hope's left. Her left arm was in a sling from her last mission and Angelina had taken her off active duty, so to speak.

"I'm going to fight him sooner or later—"

"That's not the point," Hermione interrupted, glowering. "We don't have all of them, let alone have destroyed the one we have! How are you supposed to kill him?"

None of the other members had any idea what they were talking about, as it was the only thing they were quite unaware of, and Ron, Hope, and Hermione had kept it purposefully vague.

"I'm not trying to kill him yet," Hope said through gritted teeth, "but I am trying to put a massive dent in his forces, and taking out Death Eaters that happen to be travelling with Snatchers isn't going to do that."

"You're trying to make a statement," Justin said, his eyebrows rising slightly and Hope smirked. "Imagine if it was known that Hope Potter came out into the open and attacked Death Eaters?"

"Who definitely deserve to be attacked," Dennis piped up close to the end and a few people chuckled.

"No one's really seen Hope since the Ministry Infiltration Incident," Astoria added, as the event had come to be known as such, "having solid evidence of her standing against the Dark Lord's regime would be more convincing than the behind the scenes stuff we're doing."

"But it's risky," Daphne said, giving her younger sister a shrewd glance, "it'd be far more dangerous. We don't even know how many Death Eaters would show up if you said the taboo or if he would show up."

"Either way, you'll get someone," Lee grinned, "personally I'd hope for the minions over the master."

Alicia rolled her eyes beside her boyfriend, nearly asking him to be serious for once, but giving up halfway through.

"Look, you don't have to come," Hope told George, "but I am going to Godric's Hollow and I am going to say the taboo."

George pinched the bridge of his nose as he exhaled loudly. "I'm never going to be able change your mind," he said finally.

A grin widened on her lips. "Never," she said. "So who's coming with me?"
"No one who knows healing spells best," Hermione said quickly and a few disappointed looks were thrown her way, "you're too good to replace."

"Aw, Hermione, I didn't know you loved us so much," Angelina cried, wiping fake tears from her eyes, "did you hear that, Daphne?"

"Oh, I did," the blonde assured her, "and I am so very flattered."

"Oh, shut up!"

The plans were extensive and soon they all branched off to do their different duties, leaving Hope with George.

"Using yourself as bait is…bold," he said, looking her in the eye, the colour filtering slowly from the brown they'd been before to an almost violet-blue.

"Well, I've never really done it before," Hope admitted, "I'm personally not really a fan, but people tend to get excited when it's me."

"Particularly when its Death Eaters trying to make a name for themselves," George added, "that's really dangerous."

"You know me and danger, Georgie," Hope replied easily, her lips curling, "we flirt with each other."

She leaned up on her tip-toes to kiss his cheek swiftly before moving off in the direction that Hermione and gone in earlier, no doubt back to the library once more; it seemed as though they hardly left the library these days, there was always something for them to research.

George frowned slightly. Ron's disappearance had shaken her, not as visibly as it had Hermione, but he knew her well enough to know that she was scared of what would happen if You-Know-Who himself got a hold of him, and that same thought terrified George.

But Ron was smart, he could keep his head on straight and he was sure that his brother was slowly making his way back to Pithos, though how slowly remained to be seen.

The same thought was running through Hope's mind as she looked over a map of the surrounding area.

"He can't have gotten that far," she told Hermione, "a few hundred miles maybe if he was focusing hard enough…I'd say that if he hasn't run into any trouble he'd show up in about a week, but I can't really be sure…"

Hermione chewed on the inside of her cheek as she looked over the map, wishing Ron hadn't lost his galleon during the scuffle—that way they would have been able to track him by now—but that didn't change the fact that he was far away and they were still here.

Hope rested a hand on her shoulder, squeezing it as reassuringly as she could, giving her a small smile. "He'll come back on his own," she said, repeating Fred's words from earlier, "you'll see…and then he'll be so happy to see you that he'll snog you in front of everyone…or you'll snog him, whatever's your fancy, unless you want to hit him for disappearing, and I'd be good with that too."

Hermione released a short laugh at her friend's words, though the sound came out a little choked. She was relieved that Hope was taking the positive side to things, as she usually left that to Hermione, but Hermione couldn't manage it today.
"C'mon, we've got work to do."

Still, it was a rather terrible plan, Hope would later have to concede, one forged on adrenaline and desire to do something rather than logic, but the plan was meticulous, making up for it. Though Hope would greatly feel better if she cast a few grey spells (or Dark, depending on who you were asking) at some Death Eaters.

The snow crunched under her feet and she kept her hands in her pocket, the cold air whipping her blonde curls through the air. The long red duster coat that Remus and Tonks had given her for her seventeenth kept her warm against the elements.

Hermione stepped closer to her, looping her arm around her friend's, her breath forming thick vapor in the air.

A pair of omnioculars fastened on the two forms from the roofs of several houses in Godric's Hollow.

"This is still the worst idea ever," Audrey muttered from beside Lee.

"You can't say that we don't have the advantage," Lee murmured.

"It's still a bit reckless."

Lee snorted. "Reckless is practically in Hope's genes. I'm surprised she didn't try to do something like this sooner."

"You know I can hear you," an annoyed voice uttered from inside their ears and Audrey's cheeks pinked while Lee sniggered unashamedly. It was a new combination of magic and Muggle technology that the Creeveys and the Weasley twins had been working on. Ordinary Muggle technology didn't work around magic, but the design and purpose of the earbud listening device was based on its Muggle counterpart, having been enchanted by Fred and George.

"I still think it would be better if I was with you," George's voice echoed in their ears.

"They know Hermione's with me, not you," Hope retorted, easily disregarding his words, "don't be such a worrywart."

"It's hard not to when you're being your usual self."

"Aw, Wizard-boy, you flatter me so much!"

"Can you two save it for later?" Hermione sighed, "we're trying not to stand out…"

"We're two unfamiliar faces in magical village," Hope said dryly as they walked on, her ear buzzing from the sniggers of the various Resistance members positioned in the village.

"You know what I mean," Hermione admonished, glancing towards the graveyard beyond the church. "Do you want to go in?" she asked gently, nodding towards it. "That's where your parents are, aren't they?"

Hope followed her gaze, looking upon row after row of gravestones. It seemed so strange that she had never been to see them until now. She could have asked Remus to take her, or even Sirius when he had still been alive, she was sure he would have liked to get out of Grimmauld to see James.

"I suppose," she said with contemplation, coughing lightly, "if we're trying to be inconspicuous."
But she didn't fool Hermione or any of the ears listening in. And they strode towards the open gate only to pause at the sight of a war memorial.

Hope's voice became strangled at the statue of a witch and a wizard holding a small baby in their arms. She had not been expecting to see her parents and her year old self memorialized in stone and she couldn't say she quite liked it. There was nothing wrong with the statues themselves but it was just...she would have preferred a stone that listed the names of those that had fallen in battle against Tom and his followers, so that they were no more or less than anyone else.

If only their daughter hadn't been born to be part of a prophecy, or even been born at all.

Hope walked right past it, straight into the cemetery, her eyes fastened on the names that moved by them as they walked. Abbott, Bagshot, Knighton…

"Here!" Hermione pulled her back towards a tombstone, smearing the snow away. "Oh, no, sorry, Peverell, I thought it said Potter."

But Hope followed her to focus on the name. It was nearly illegible from being so worn with age, but Hope guessed from only three names. "Ignotus Peverell," she said, "one of my ancestors…I think I inherited the cloak from him."

"Did you?" Hermione asked vaguely surprised.

"And then his brother's descendant killed my family." Hope mused, cocking her head slightly as she narrowed her eyes at the name, "what a lovely disposition Tom has."

Hermione said nothing about that, her gloved finger tracing over the strange symbol carved under the name that she was certain she had seen somewhere before but she couldn't be sure of where when Hope drifted suddenly away from her. "Er…Hope?"

She had come to a stop in front of a tombstone made of white marble that was wide enough to bear two names.

**JAMES POTTER LILY POTTER**

**BORN 27 MARCH 1960 BORN 30 JANUARY 1960**

**DIED 31 OCTOBER 1981 DIED 31 OCTOBER 1981**

*The last enemy that shall be defeated is death.*

"Oh," Hermione said weakly as Hope knelt on one knee in the snow, uncaring or perhaps not even feeling how it soaked through the knee of her denim.

The silence seemed to press down on them as Hope raised a hand to her father's name first and then her mother's tracing over the letters, she exhaled sharply and even though Hermione could only see her back which was strained to keep from moving, she knew that there were tears in her eyes. Hope didn't cry over a lot of things, but Hermione remembered how she had reacted to Sirius' death, and it had been so painful to watch, but Hope hadn't even known her parents…it wasn't painful but it was very sad.

Hope wiped her face with the back of her hand, pulling her wand out from her arm holster under her sleeve, murmuring a soft spell, laying a bouquet of white lilies on the grave before turning her back on it.
If Hermione noticed how her eyes were red at the edges, she didn’t mention it, and for that Hope was eternally grateful, taking her arm as they left out of the kissing gate they had entered through.

Hope stepped out into the middle of the street, staring forward with Hermione at her side.

"You lot ready?" she asked clearly, the sounds of assent in her ear at the question making it ring as her eyes faded from brown to green and her hair from blonde to red.

"Wands out," Hermione said.

"Wands out," Hope agreed, clenching her holly wand tighter in her hand and then, speaking into the night, "Voldemort."

For a moment nothing happened, but she suspected that had been Tom's intention, to lull his enemies into false pretences.

But let him bring the fire, they weren't afraid of getting burned.

And then the sounds of apparition filled the air. They were apparently trying to go with the tactic of outnumbering their enemies, because Hope rather thought twenty Death Eaters was a bit much.

"Well, well, well…if it isn't little Potter," a voice sneered and Hope blinked balefully towards the leader with dark hair and only one arm. Hope recognized him from the attack at Tottenham Court Road, and her own handiwork on his missing limb. "Come to surrender?"

Hope's lips curled up into a sneer and Hermione's glare became frosty. "Tell me you aren't as stupid as you look, Dolohov," she said with disdain, "or is it that you really want to lose that other hand?"

She ignored the stifled sniggers in her ear as she fingered her wand which he eyed apprehensively.

"Two against twenty's puts you at a disadvantage, don't you think?"

"Did we ever mention we were alone?" Hope asked Hermione lightly.

"You know, I don't think we did," Hermione said, playing the part quite well, "how terribly rude of us."

"Incredibly," Hope agreed, before saying the code words, "but do you know what they say about snakes, don't you?" Her eyes glinted a bright scarlet as her gaze roved over the twenty enemies.

"They can avoid being seen by hiding in the tall grass."

Then a loud explosion erupted and chaos ensued. Honestly, Hope wouldn't have been able to tell you who fired the first shot (though Colin would tell anyone within earshot that it was him, contesting against Daphne, Justin, and Katie respectively).

"Bombarda!" Hermione's well-placed curse threw Dolohov back as half the Resistance joined the front lines —so to speak— while the rest maintained their spots on the roofs for perfect vantage points to fire off their own spells.

"Concido!" Hope couldn't be sure of who she hit, but a spray of blood followed the Death Eater that it connected with so Hope assumed it was fatal with how unmoving he was.

"Llyr, get down!" Alicia yelled to Dennis who had overextended himself, leaving him wide open for the spell thrown his way when Hope barrelled into his side, sending him sprawling and taking the cutting curse to the leg, the same leg that had once been so profoundly damaged when she was ten.
Hope gritted her teeth, pulling herself up as best as she could with her injuries and managing to avoid the spellfire as much as she could.

Lee's leg had a similar gash, but his seemed much deeper than hers, requiring him to stay on the ground, Katie had a slice on her forehead that was bleeding heavily, and Hermione had angry pulsing boils on one arm and a cut into the shoulder of her opposite arm.

Hope counted five dead, seven injured and incapacitated and eight still going at it.

"Expulso!" George's curse shot one of the Death Eaters into the siding of one of the houses.

She was more surprised that no one had come to see what all the noise was about, but they were probably hiding in their houses.

Astoria was the hero of the evening, yelling out a spell in Latin that Hope didn't recognize (but one her sister had surely taught her) that released an electrical charge of some sort, taking down the remaining seven in one go. Hope couldn't help but be impressed; she needed to learn that one.

And then her scar burned like white-hot fire against her forehead.

"We've got to go," she called before they could even begin to celebrate their victory, "he's on his way here-Ah!"

Hope looked down at her leg, into which a great snake had sunk their fangs into. Not far away was a corpse of an old woman with a great hole in the side of her neck. Hope could feel the bile rising in her throat at the sight.

"You were hiding in that woman, Nagini?" she snarled out in Parseltongue as the snake released her, the venom already making it difficult for her to stand up straight.

"Whatever my master desires," the snake replied as a strong pair of arms lifted her up, the other members grabbing each other and Disapparating before Tom himself appeared and Hope was finding it quite difficult to keep her eyes open when George Disapparated with her, but she could have sworn the last thing she saw was a pair of eyes as red as blood.
Destruction of a Horcrux

It took a great deal of effort for Severus Snape to discover the location of where Hope Potter was hiding out and even more effort to find the Forest of Morea which was greatly hidden from prying eyes - for all it seemed, it looked to be abandoned, but movement caught his eyes.

A head of bushy brown hair could be seen moving in the opposite direction of him and a rustling behind a bush had him quickly disillusioning himself as a very harried Ron Weasley stepped out from behind it.

His cheeks were pink with cold and his bright hair was whipped by the wind. One of his sleeves was stained with dried blood, his injuries long since bound by the bandages Angelina had forced on each of them before they'd left.

Ron was breathless with exhaustion, but he didn't dare stop, not when he was so close to his goal. A hot bath, a soft bed, and a warm meal was something he'd been missing out on for the past few days, and Hermione and Hope, Hermione a bit more than Hope. He was sure the bushy-haired witch was worried about him (not that she needed to be, he grumbled a bit mutinously to himself, he was quite capable with his spells, thank you very much).

Well, maybe he could take a short breather, he had been walking nonstop for hours now, so Ron slumped against a nearby tree stump, his grip on his wand loose, but it tightened suddenly as a bright light weaved between the trees, coming closer to him.

He raised his wand to point at it when it peeked around the tree just opposite him and he could now see that it was a doe of a silvery-blue colour that was nearly translucent…a Patronus.

Ron frowned. That was strange; he didn't know anyone with a doe Patronus.

The doe looked straight at him and then wandered off in the direction he had been meaning to go and Ron, feeling incredibly foolish to follow after a Patronus, trailed behind it down so that they were level with the frozen lake.

He almost made to follow the beach to the hidden entrance when he saw the doe continuing across the ice to hover over one spot in particular. Ron's eyes narrowed both in suspicion and confusion, his eyes flashing to the hidden entrance and then back to the doe once more.

Ron took a leap of faith and stepped out onto the ice, moving carefully forward until he had reached its side – the doe turned its head towards him as if it could see right through him, and then it faded entirely, leaving Ron more confused than when he'd first seen the Patronus.

What had been the point of him coming out onto the ice in the first place?

He couldn't help but direct his eyes downwards and he knelt down to smear the snow away with his sleeve and then he looked through the ice, stunned beyond belief.

It couldn't have been that simple! There was no way that the sword of Gryffindor would just show up out of the blue, especially when they were looking for it to destroy the Horcruxes…

Meanwhile, Hermione couldn't remain inside for a moment longer and had opted to take a walk, perhaps a bit ill-advised when one considered just how depleted their forces currently were (some of the injuries the Resistance members had sustained would take a few hours to another day to heal), but she needed to leave, even if it was just to walk aimlessly through the forest and then circle back
to the beach.

And it was at the beach that she came across something strange, and strange things never seemed to bode well.

It was a figure wearing Muggle clothing, but that wasn't so uncommon in the Forest of Morea; most of the Resistance preferred to wear denim and jackets as opposed to cloaks, especially in this weather. His hair was bright ginger…

George hadn't left Hope's side since they'd come back and Fred was still helping Angelina with making some healing potions, that only left—

"Ron?" she gasped to herself, turning on her heel to make forwards onto the ice when the ice cracked under him and he vanished under. "RON!"

She skidded to a stop just shy of the cracks, her eyes focused on the calm water that gave no indication that he hadn't already been swept away. Hermione chanced a few moments more when hand broke suddenly from the surface and she clutched at it, pulling at it as best as she could until Ron's familiar face was exposed, his eyes almost screwed completely shut as he coughed and spluttered, pulling himself up and onto the slippery ice, his other hand holding a silver blade that Hermione had seen in Hope's hand when she was fourteen and about to enter into the Third Task.

The sword of Godric Gryffindor! Just what they were looking for!

"Ron?"

"Hermione," Ron groaned as he struggled to right himself as the ice cracked underneath their feet and then Hermione was dragging him slipping and sliding towards the edge of the ice and onto the frosty beach once more.

"Say something only you would say," Hermione nearly commanded, prodding her wand in his direction.

"Bloody hell?" Ron offered, his head a little rattled from diving down into frigid waters. "You read Hope's book—The Hobbit, right?— to me when I was in the hospital wing after being poisoned, my Patronus is a Jack Russell Terrier, and you love to fight with me."

Hermione couldn't help but splutter at how he waggled his eyebrows towards her, grinning as he said the last comment. "I do not!" she said, sounding a bit affronted.

"Yes, you do," he said, his grin widening.

Hermione wrinkled her nose towards him, scrutinizing him closely when she saw the bloodied sleeve. "What happened here?" she asked, pulling the appendage towards herself.

"Oh, I just got a bad cut when I Flashed out," Ron tried to play off his injury, but Hermione didn't buy it (big surprise, there).

"You'd better have Angelina look at it," she sniffed.

"Can you at least say that you're happy to see me?"

"I am happy see you," Hermione promised him, grasping his jacket as she leaned forward to kiss him the way she had been inching to since she had seen him on the ice. Ron responded just as eagerly, using one arm to wrap tightly around her back. "Try not to scare us like that again," she added
breathlessly once he released her.

"I'll do my best," he agreed solemnly, "so how've things been since I've been gone?"

Hermione released a nervous chuckle. "Well…"
James rushed forward, all traces of weariness gone, his hand empty of his wand. Foolish boy, did he honestly think he could hold off someone of Hope's calibre without a wand.

"Lily, take Hope and go! It's him! Go! Run! I'll hold him off!"

A high-pitched laugh left her lips at the very thought of him holding her off and one Killing Curse later James Potter fell, his eyes unseeing in death.

His wife screamed above, but there was nowhere to go. She need not worry for her life if she simply stepped aside. Hope easily pushed aside the door and all that the woman had blocked it with to gaze upon her last obstacle. Lily Potter's arms were spread protectively in front of the crib, wandless, her daughter peering through the bars of the crib in curiosity.

"Not Hope!" Her voice trembled, as it should at the sight of him. "Not Hope, please not Hope!"

"Stand aside, you silly girl," Hope ordered, "stand aside now."

"Not Hope, please no," Lily Potter begged, tears streaming down her cheeks. "Take me, kill me instead—"

"This is my last warning—" Hope sneered.

"Not Hope! Please…have mercy…have mercy…Not Hope! Not Hope! Please –I'll do anything—"

"Stand aside, stand aside, girl!"

And a moment later in a flash of green, she had crumpled, leaving the crib containing her foe now free of obstacles.

The child within was not smiling or laughing as though mistaking Hope for her mother or father, she was merely staring up at her and the expression hardly changed as Hope pointed her wand at the child.

She had never much liked children to begin with, the ones at the orphanage had grated on her nerves, killing the girl was no consequence to her.

"Avada Kedavra!" she intoned, but her spell backfired in a way she could not explain and an instant later she was nothing but fear, hate, and pain, and the pain was overflowing as the backfire caused flames to catch in the room and the girl was screaming, her fists to her head. Hope needed to find a place away from the girl who had caused her downfall…she needed somewhere safe…

When Hope awoke, she felt more ill than she could have possibly described. Sick to her stomach, feverishly hot, drowning in her own sweat, just to name a few.

George was sitting by her bedside, having dragged a carved chair from close to the fire to her side of the bed, leaning his head against his fist as he slumbered, his other hand lightly cupping hers.

Hope shifted slightly but she felt as though she was weighed down by lead, however, it was enough to rouse her boyfriend.

Blue eyes fluttered open and then he blinked in surprise. "You're awake."

Hope gave him a rather deadpanned expression in return.
George chuckled. "Definitely awake. How do you feel?"

"Lik-ke—" Hope coughed violently, her words coming out more gravelly and raspy than she had intended and George nearly knocked over the glass of water on the table before helping her swallow a few mouthfuls, "—I should have let myself be talked out of going to Godric's Hollow."

"Probably," George gave her a light laugh.

"How's everyone else?" she hardly dared to ask.

"Well, much better than the Death Eaters, I've got to say," he told her, replacing the glass of water on the table once more. "You're the worst off, Lee's going to have to stay off his leg for the next day or so, Angie fixed Katie's head wound and Hermione's boils, and Alicia's had to regrow three of her fingers, there were a few close calls though…I don't think Dennis would still be alive if you hadn't pushed him out of the way."

"He needs to work on his footwork," was all Hope said to that, neither confirming nor denying that her actions had saved his life. "Nagini bit me," she added frowning down at her leg where a poultice was bound to her ankle and a bandage to her shin.

"The snake? Yeah, but you also got hit with a Cutting Curse, but it's almost completely healed up…at least you didn't lose as much blood as Lee, that's the main reason he's not moving around much," George explained.

Hope raised a hand to wipe the tears that had mingled with her sweat.

"What were you dreaming about?" he asked cautiously. "You were screaming…and crying…"

Her shoulders shifted uncomfortably and she averted her eyes from him, not speaking for a moment. "I saw the night he killed my parents, through his eyes."

That stunned George speechless, of all the things she could have been dreaming about, that wasn't something he had been anticipating.

"It kept replaying over and over again," Hope said quietly, her clammy hands clenching into the sheet, "with me as the person who killed my parents."

The horror and disgust in her voice sent a shiver down George's spine; he had never heard her speak like that, going to show just how bothered by her nightmare (or should he say memory?) she was.

But what could he say? There was no way he could possibly compare any of his experiences in his life to that one moment in hers.

"It was like all his thoughts were mine," Hope forced out, her throat clogged with emotion, "and it made me sick."

George's fingers peeled hers from the sheet and his gaze was gentle. "That wasn't you," he told her firmly, "that was him."

Hope chewed on the inside of her cheek.

"But there's something that might cheer you up," George mentioned.

"I doubt it," Hope murmured, leaning further into her pillows as though wishing to disappear entirely into them, barely noticing when the door creaked open.
"So you're saying seeing me won't cheer you up?"

Hope froze at the familiar voice that Pithos had been sorely lacking over the past few days and then her eyes flashed on the body now sitting in George's recently vacated seat. The gangly form with bring hair and innumerable freckles dotting his face was a sore sight indeed.

"Ron!"

She hadn't realized just how much she missed his presence and wit and humour until he had gone, but now he was back! Hope flung her arms around his neck, ignoring the jolt she sent down her leg at the sudden move.

"Easy! You don't want to end up like first year, do you?"

Hope scowled sourly at him after she'd released her iron-clad grip. "Please," she said dryly, "nothing is as bad as first year."

"I think first year was actually our mildest year," Ron told her, cocking an eyebrow. "Remember what they say about trouble?"

"I dunno, you kicked him out."

They both laughed at the joke.

"Are you alright?" Hope asked, her eyes roving intently over her friend, checking for any visual injuries but she could find none. "Fred said you took a hit before you Flashed out."

Ron rolled up the sleeve of his fresh shirt (having clean clothes, a warm bath, and food was more than enough to put him in a good mood) to show a thick dark pink line from where Angelina had sewed him back together, none-too-pleased with his bandaging job.

"I lost a good bit of blood, but Angie said it could've been worse," Ron admitted, "I was light-headed for awhile, but I managed to keep myself awake when a few Snatchers ran into me. They tried to grab me, but I Flashed out before they could, the only problem was I got myself a bit more lost than I had been before."

"Well, it's a good thing you're back," Hope told him grinning widely, "we were going spare and making rash decisions."

"Like me being here would have stopped you from making rash decisions," Ron snorted, "you would've dragged me along!"

"You would've been more than happy to join in!" Hope fired back and in that moment it was almost as if Ron hadn't been gone at all.

Hope's leg healed up remarkably quickly, for which she was glad, and then she, Ron, and Hermione were back on Horcrux duty.

She swung the locket on its chain before placing it on the table. They'd forced the other members out of the dining room and up to the top level to give them some privacy.

"I suppose we'll find out soon if it really does open to Parseltongue," Hermione mused, "but who's going to stab it?"

"I vote Ron."
"Me?" Ron gaped at her. "Why me?"

"Well, you're the one who found the sword," Hope pointed out, "only people who show courage actually use it, remember?"

"Its showed itself to you twice!" Ron retorted. "You should do it!"

"No way," Hope said with a scowl, "it's got to be you."

Blue and green eyes glared at each other, each unyielding until a sudden sigh was released.

"Fine," Ron grumbled, taking up the ruby-encrusted sword that had been lying haphazardly on the table, frowning down at the unassuming locket that glinted in the sunlight that had filtered in through the windows. His knuckles were almost white around the hilt. "Tell me when."

Hope and Hermione nodded and Hermione began to count off, "Three…two…one!"

The Parseltongue word for 'Open' slithered off Hope's tongue as easily as if she was speaking English, but she knew quite well that she was not, the hissed word causing the locket's latch to unhinge and the silver oval to open to expose two glass windows within in which a pair of dark eyes were reflected, and Hope remembered the colour Tom's eyes had once been.

"Ron!" Hermione's voice jerked Hope's attention upwards to where Ron had frozen—whether it was fear or something else entirely, Hope did not know—, the sword trembling in his hands. "Ron! Kill it!"

But before Ron could do so, Tom's sickly voice echoed from the Horcrux, resonating in the relative silence.

"I have seen your heart," Tom's voice uttered, "and it is mine. I have seen your dreams, Ronald Weasley, and I have seen your fears. All you desire is possible, but all that you dread is also possible..."

"Ron! Listen to me!" Hope nearly snapped at him. "Ignore it! You need to stab it! Its playing with your head!"

But Ron didn't even seem to notice her words, enraptured by the Horcrux's speech.

"Least loved, always, by the mother who craved a daughter," Tom continued. "...Least loved, now, by the girl who would not leave her friend's side to search for you who she professed to love... Second best, always, eternally overshadowed..."

"Ron, that's not true!" Hermione gasped, but she did not move forward, or perhaps that was by the will of the Horcrux. "Ron, I love you! I wanted to look for you—"

But then her words fell short as a ghostly form modelled after herself sprouted from the glass. This Hermione glinted like moonlight just as the one opposite Hope radiated like the sun, the fake-Hermione's eyes were so dark that they were nearly black—much like Tom's, Hope could see—with a sarcastic smirk that had never looked at home on her face.

The image startled Hope but Hermione couldn't help but be aghast at the false image of herself.

"Why return?" Fake-Hermione asked in Tom's high-pitched voice. "We were better without you, happier without you, glad of your absence... We laughed at your stupidity, your cowardice...after all, what are your skills to that of the great Hope Potter? You could never compare to her, the
"Chosen One."

"She's lying!" Hope snarled. "You are just as good as me Ron! You, me, and Hermione! Now, stab it!"

She saw a flicker of something in his eyes for a brief moment before he regained his senses and slashed the sword down, shattering the glass windows and releasing a pained scream from within, causing Hermione's form to vanish, leaving them in silence once more.

Ron dropped the sword to the ground, breathing hard and Hermione went to him, murmuring reassurances in his ear as she rubbed his back soothingly and Hope gave him a smile, patting his shoulder before inspecting the remnants of the locket with her wand.

"Is it gone for good?" Ron asked shakily.

"I think so," Hope said, scrutinizing the locket, "but it was already a magical object to begin with, so maybe it can be fixed."

"Why do you want to fix it?" Hermione asked flummoxed. "That thing is dangerous."

"It's also part of my legacy," Hope spared her a glance, "let's see if it works…*Reparo*!"

The glass windows repaired themselves and broken hinge melded itself back together, the emeralds gleaming as Hope lifted the chain, looping it twice around her neck before resting it against her collarbone and though the metal felt warm, it did not hold the small heartbeat it had before and Hope knew she had succeeded.
George was sleeping easily beside her, breathing in and out deeply with one arm hooked around her waist, but Hope's eyes remained open, breathing slowly and carefully. She couldn't sleep, especially not after what had happened in Godric's Hollow and the memory of her parents' murder flashed before her eyes every time she closed them.

It was driving her completely mental and she'd barely slept over the past two days, and only a glamour charm kept everyone else from noticing. But the charm wasn't infallible and her friends were surprisingly perceptive (or not so surprisingly, when one considered just how long they'd known each other).

Hope carefully removed her boyfriend's arm from around her, easing herself slowly off the mattress, grabbing some spare clothes to throw over her pyjamas, her boots, jacket, and wand before sparing him a careful glance to see if her movements had stirred him. Thankfully he slept on and Hope smiled at how peaceful he looked before shutting the door swiftly behind her.

The castle was asleep and dark, the flames flickering lowly in their braziers, as it was still quite early in the morning —so early that the sky was still dark— and no one noticed when she left the castle itself to Disapparate on the snowy ground that lay just beyond it.

She twisted her ankle reappearing in Godric's Hollow, but it wasn't enough to make her fall over, though it was a very near thing. The most that occurred was her tripping over air and quickly righting herself and glancing around quickly to see if anyone had noticed.

The snow was falling thickly and the village bore no sign of the battle from the days previously, and thankfully it was as silent as Pithos had been when she left so Hope gained no eyes towards herself.

Hope shoved her hands in her pockets as she moved forward through the snow aimlessly, not sure where exactly to find what it was that she was looking for, but she knew it when she saw it.

The cottage that her parents had hid in with her was ruined by age, spell-damage and fire. It was small and modest, what was left it, at least, but there had only been three of them living there at the time. The shrubs and flowers that were encrusted with frost were overflowing over the gate, left unattended for over sixteen years. The most ruin was evident by the gaping hole at where Hope's room must have been which was where the spell had backfired.

It was strange to be so close to the place where it all had started, where her parents had been killed, where she'd gotten her scar, and where Sirius had given her over to Hagrid in favour of chasing Peter down.

She lifted her hands to the gate, the snow like ice against her hands and then she recoiled suddenly as a wooden sign rose out of the snow bearing the legend in golden letters:

On this spot, on the night of 31 October 1981, Lily and James Potter lost their lives. Their daughter, Hope, remains the only witch ever to have survived the Killing Curse. This house, invisible to Muggles, has been left in its ruined state as a monument to the Potters and as a reminder of the violence that tore apart their family.

Hope released a hiss of breath, raking a hand through her windswept hair when she saw the added words to the sign.

Good luck, Hope, wherever you are.
If you read this, Hope, we're all behind you!

Long live Hope Potter.

Stay safe and stay strong.

Hope released a small sob, the tears falling down her cheeks for the first time since she had that dream about that fateful night as she traced a finger over the last words that had been so clearly written in Sirius' hand.

He must have stopped by after he'd escaped from Azkaban, when, Hope couldn't quite be sure, Sirius had been off on his own for a long while. Perhaps it had been before he'd even gone to see her in Privet Drive when she'd stormed out of Number Four, or maybe after the events in the Shrieking Shack.

Hope wiped at her cheeks and pushed the gate open, steeling her nerves as she approached the door that was creaking as it was blown back and forth against the doorframe, which only added to the eerie atmosphere.

And then she set foot in the wreckage of the house that she had been carried out of at fifteen months of age.

It was dead and cold, and Hope wasn't sure what she should have expected, as the Fidelius had broken a very long time ago, but it seemed remarkably untouched, disregarding its ruined state, of course.

Pictures in frames lined the wall, some of her father with his friends and her mother with hers and a few of little Hope giggling in her frame with her parents. Clearly happier times than what Hope remembered of that age, and she would have given anything to remember anything but the bad memories of her parents' deaths.

Hope swallowed thickly, raising a hand to the picture of her parents' wedding day with their beaming smiles and Sirius and Alice standing beside James and Lily as Best Man and Maid of Honour.

And then she stepped aside to move past the dark shadow at the foot of the stairs where her father had fallen, trying not to look at the stain, her feet instead taking her to where her father had been playing with her in the dream.

She sat down on the couch, causing a cloud of dust to rise into the air, tickling her nose. Hope rested her elbows against her knees, rubbing her hands together.

What did she think she was going to gain by coming here? She could still replay their deaths in her mind.

A sigh was expelled from her lips and she flopped back against the couch, causing carved wood to peek out from the cushions and Hope extended a hand to pluck the wand out, holding the mahogany gently in her hands.

"If you'd had your wand," Hope said to herself, her voice trembling, "things would have been different if you'd just had your wand!"

She wanted to throw a fit, maybe blast the couch against the wall, toss her father's wand out of the window, scream, but all she felt was drained. All she felt like doing was going home and going back to bed, but that meant she'd just dream about it, and Hope was avoiding sleeping as much as she could dare.
But it was exhausting her and she couldn't not sleep forever.

Hope pressed her fists into her eyes, groaning to herself; either option wasn't great in her opinion. But she still had to get back before anyone had noticed she'd gone.

When Hope returned to Pithos, it was as silent as the dead (if not more so), as silent as Godric's Hollow had been. She had only been gone about forty-five minutes so it wouldn't make any sense for anyone reasonably sane to be awake at about two in the morning. Sleep was the only time when the Resistance wasn't working, it seemed, and it was highly prized.

So Hope kept very quiet as she opened the door silently and crept slowly back into her and George's room, removing the clothes she had thrown on over her pyjamas and climbing carefully back into bed and replacing George's arm around her waist.

It tightened around her instantly and Hope murmured, "Fuck."

"Are you going to tell me where you disappeared off to or the bit about you not sleeping?" George asked her.

"Ooh…how about both?" Hope asked as she turned in her arms to face him.

"Both?" He asked playfully. "It must be my lucky day."

Hope rolled her eyes at him before she raised a hand to his cheek, her eyes softening. "I love you."

"I should hope so," George told her, kissing her quickly, "so what were you doing?"

"I…I went back to Godric's Hollow," Hope admitted and George's arm tensed at her side.

"That's…a bit drastic," he told her, arching an eyebrow towards her. "What if there were Death Eaters hanging around?"

"I wasn't really thinking about that," Hope admitted awkwardly, "but I wanted to see the house, and there wasn't much else on my mind."

George didn't say anything to that, for which Hope was grateful, if it had been Hermione, she knew for certain that she would have gotten a lecture.

"Did it help?" he asked instead. "Going back?"

Hope sighed, nestling herself further into the pillows. "I thought it would, I hoped it would is probably more accurate…but it just seemed to be one whole bad memory. Maybe it was a stupid idea…"

"There's nothing wrong with going to the only place you knew with your parents," George said, leaning forward to kiss her cheek, "Mum does the same thing."

"She does?" Hope asked in surprise.

"Every year she goes to the field that she used to play in with Uncle Fabian and Gideon," George explained, leaning up on his elbows to give her his full attention. "And you look worse than she does on their death day and you spent less time with your parents than she did with her brothers."

"Thanks, love," Hope said dryly, "you sure know how to make a girl feel better."
"At least I'm honest," George smirked. "So you still can't sleep?"

"How would you feel if you saw your parents' death?" Hope replied. "I just need something else to dream about."

"And you didn't ask me?" George asked innocently.

"Oh, so you think I should dream about you instead?" Hope responded, grinning widely. "Do you remember what I said about you being cocky?"

"Do you remember how fun I am, cocky and all?" George asked in amusement, bending down to press kiss after kiss against the side of her neck.

"Mm, maybe," Hope mumbled, her eyes fluttering, "are you going to remind me?"

"It's what I do best, you know, reminders."

"I had no idea," Hope laughed as he pulled her under him. "I've missed when we could snog whenever we pleased, but now it's just work, work, work."

"That's what happens when you're the head of a resistance," George told her, his eyes glinting as he trapped her against the mattress with his legs on either side of hers. "Now, do you want to impressed by my snogging skills, or not?"

"You are a terrible man," Hope told him, tangling her fingers into his ginger locks that were getting nearly long enough to be held in a small ponytail. "And you know I stopped being impressed by your snogging skills a long time ago."

"You're getting worse at telling lies," George noticed, "if you're never impressed then you wouldn't have stuck around."

"It must be your other fine qualities," Hope said in almost a mocking manner, "and I'm sure that you have many of them."

George narrowed his eyes. "Are you making fun of me, Potter?"

"You know me, Weasley," Hope replied innocently, "would I really make fun of you?"

"Yes," he said, sealing it with a kiss, and Hope responded just as eagerly, hoping to be distracted from her nightly nightmare by the pleasant memory of George. "You're a she-devil, remember?" he pointed out in between kisses.

"Wasn't that tempting little she-devil?" Hope asked, releasing a small squeak as he ran a hand down her spine. She smacked his chest with her hand. "You know I don't like it when you do that!"

"Only because you don't like the sound you make every time I do," George grinned. "And yes, tempting she-devil, very much so."

"We'll see," Hope said with narrowed eyes, wrapping her legs around his waist, "but, then again, at least I keep things interesting."

"Interesting and troublesome are two very different things," George grunted as he threw all her weight to the side, forcing them to change positions (and thus leading to the rather endless debate of who was on top and who was on bottom).

"Are you calling me troublesome, 'Trouble'?" Hope sniggered.
"Absolutely," George affirmed, "infinitely troublesome in every possible way."

"Aw, love, you flatter me so much," Hope quipped back before leaning down to silence his next words, kissing him even as they twisted in the bed, control shifting between the pair and it was only an hour later that Hope actually fell asleep.

And this time her thoughts did not take her to Godric's Hollow on October 31 of 1981, to her parents' death with her as Tom, but come the next day (as she slept more than twenty-four hours to regain the sleep that she'd lost) she wouldn't quite be able to recall what it was that she dreamt about.

Hermione's day started off rather violently and it was Hope's own fault, even the red-head had to admit it.

"Hope? Where are you?" Hermione called as she moved through the castle, the Tales of Beedle the Bard in her hand and Ron trailing after her. "I need some Runes advice!"

"Bide the Wiccan Law ye must
In perfect love and perfect trust
Eight words the Wiccan Rede fulfil:
An' ye harm none, do what ye will—"

Hope's words were cut off as Hermione and Ron entered the dining room in time to hear her release a startled scream and go flying across the room to land in a tangle of limbs.

"Hope? What happened?" Ron demanded as they ran to her side, helping her up before any other members came to see what was going on.

"It was a stupid spell," Hope grumbled, brushing herself off, "not a spell, really, more of a—" She winced. "An incantation of…Wiccan proportions."

"Wi-Wiccan?" Hermione repeated, gaping at her. "As in one of the first magicks in the history of magic? As in 'can be unpredictable Wicca'?"

"Well, er, maybe—" Hope stammered under the glare Hermione was giving her and Ron couldn't help but enjoy the show. "Oh, come on, Hermione! Lots of magicks have bad reputation, you know, like Blood Magick!" Hope stabbed her finger towards the pair.

"Blood Magick also requires blood in order to be used," Ron pointed out, "which is why it has a bad reputation."

Hope's eyes narrowed as she pointed the finger towards him. "Oi! Don't throw me under the bus, mister!"

"Where did you find a Wiccan incantation anyways?" Hermione asked, drawing her back to the point of the argument in the first place.

"Oh, it was in one of my grandmother's books," Hope said, waving them towards a chest resting at the front of the table. "She's got loads on the subject, I think it was the thing she specialized in… which probably explains why she was so reluctant to court with Salazar."

"How's that?" Ron asked, lifting a heavy piece of crystal quartz.
"Wicca is supposed to be a devoutly pure magick," Hermione explained for Hope, "don't tell me you slept through that whole lesson in Binns class?"

"C'mon, Hermione, you know how I am in Binns class…"

"Which explains why it rejected me," Hope raised her voice slightly to be heard over Ron, before conceding, "well, slightly rejected me."

"Because you don't use magic that's all good," Hermione agreed, "the whole grey lining, right?"

"Exactly," Hope said, "it's all about not doing harm, and, you know, I've killed people before…so that has to count against me…"

Neither could say much to that, so Ron caused a distraction (and he was ever-so great at that) by reaching down and lifting a pendant from the bottom. It bore a pentacle inset with a red gem at the centre and five words circling the pentacle's points.

"Aura, Caminus, Aqua, Humus, Spiritus…Latin, I'm guessing?" Ron said, examining the carved words.

"Air, fire, water, earth, and spirit," Hope offered.

"Did you learn all this this morning?" Hermione said dubiously.

"It's not like we're getting anywhere on the next Horcrux, and we are surrounded by books," Hope gestured around them to prove a point, "but what were you yelling at me about? If it's about what happened last night—"

"It's not," Hermione said quickly before looking at her suspiciously, "what happened last night?"

Hope's face flushed red. "Nothing you need to worry about."

Ron made a gagging noise and Hope rolled her eyes towards him, clearing her throat. "What is it?"

"Look at this—" Hermione flipped the book open to The Tale of Three Brothers to show her friend the triangular eye penned into the page. "I thought it was a Rune and it was on that gravestone, the one that you said you were related to, you remember?"

"Ignatus Peverell," Hope said with a nod.

"Yes, and you know when the boys checked out Bathilda Bagshot's place, since she's—"

"Snake fodder?" Ron offered helpfully.

"—and they brought back The Life and Lies of Albus Dumbledore, that horrid book Rita Skeeter wrote on Dumbledore, since everything else in the house was practically dead," Hermione continued.

"And…?" Hope arched an eyebrow. The book had been a source of aggravation since it had been brought in.

"Well, the A in Albus in his letters isn't really an A," Hermione told her, "it's the symbol again! It has to be a Rune and you know Runes the best out of all of us."

"I've seen it before," Hope said, frowning at it, "it's scrawled onto my copy too, but it's the Peverell coat of arms."
"You're sure?" Hermione pressed.

Hope pursed her lips before pulling the large black opal ring off her finger. It had gained a crack at some point, where she couldn't be certain. "This is the ring of Marvolo Gaunt, descendent of Cadmus Peverell, it has the same mark."

"But what does that have to do with the Tale of Three Brothers?" Ron asked.

"Could the story be based on three real brothers who created three impossibly powerful items… supposedly?" asked Hermione.

"Or maybe Death actually gave them the items," Hope suggested.

Ron snorted. "Death?"

"Ron, you're talking to someone who has died and come back to life," Hope said dryly, resting a hand on her hip. "I saw his eyes in that dais when we were in the Department of Mysteries."

They were not an image one could easily forget, especially not when Hope had seen them for a brief second before her heart had restarted and she had been forced back to the world of the living.

"Ignoring the bit about Death," Hermione said waving her hand, "still, that would mean you believe that an unbeatable wand, a stone that can awaken the dead, and a cloak that can hide you from all things really exists."

"If one of them exists, why can't they all?" Hope inquired in return, replacing the books inside the chest and latching it shut. "Three is a godly number, a magical number, really. Everything comes in threes."

Hermione gave her a look of aggravation that she usually bestowed upon Luna, but Ron couldn't be surprised by that; Hermione was all about 'seeing is believing' and there were some times where Hope pushed her limits.

"We could use an unbeatable wand," Ron mentioned lightly and the tension eased and Hermione smiled and Hope released a short laugh.

"I don't think that's going to be what ends Tom," Hope mumbled, pinching the bridge of her nose, "why couldn't these bloody things be easier to find?"

For a moment Ron and Hermione had to wonder if she was talking about Horcruxes or Hallows, but they were distracted by Daphne suddenly darting down the stairs.

"Daphne! C'mere and give us some insight, would you?" Hope called over to the blonde who looked vaguely startled but complied nonetheless.

"What is it?" she asked, looking caught between a bit vexed and a bit concerned (why she was concerned, the trio couldn't tell).

"You're familiar with the Tale of Three Brothers, right?" Hope pressed.

"Sure," Daphne said slowly, her eyes flickering from Hope to Ron to Hermione. "What about it?"

"What do you know about this symbol?" Hermione asked, jabbing a finger to the mark on the page.

Daphne quirked an eyebrow, but she still lifted it to her eyes to examine the mark intently. "Oh, you mean the mark of the Deathly Hallows," she said after barely glancing at it.
"The Deathly Hallows?" Ron, Hermione, and Hope repeated dubiously.

"Have you never heard of them?" Daphne sounded surprised by this revelation; that was the way her parents had told the story to her.

"No," was the consensus between the three.

"The Elder Wand," Daphne ran a finger down the straight line, "the Resurrection Stone," The finger traced the circle, "and the Cloak of Invisibility," The finger roved over the triangle.

"Oh," Hope said, frowning at the symbol, "I suppose that makes sense…what were you coming down to see us for?"

"We've…er…we've got a bit of a problem," Daphne said awkwardly, gesturing up the stairs.

"How bad of a problem?" Ron asked.

"Is anyone injured?" Hermione queried.

"No, it's not like that," Daphne shoot her head, "you got a mirror-call from Neville."

"Neville?" Hope asked in surprise, her eyes meeting her two fellow Gryffindors at the mention of their friend who was hundreds of miles away holding down the fort with Ginny and Luna. "Why? Has something happened?"

"Its Luna," Daphne said and Hope's words died in her throat, "she was dragged off the train at King's Cross by Death Eaters."

"What?" Ron recoiled and Hermione gaped.

"He's sure it was Death Eaters?" Hope asked, attempting to keep her head on straight. Luna was one of her favourite of the members, mostly because she didn't care what anyone thought of her, even if she sounded crazy half the time.

"Positive, Rodolphus Lestrange was the one heading it is what Neville said."

"Great…just great…they could have taken her anywhere…"

"And the galleon isn't working," Daphne added, which didn't help the situation in the slightest.

Without the galleon to tell the location of their missing friend, they were lost in the woods.
Mass Breakout of Azkaban

Mid-February brought the first appearance of Hope since Bill and Fleur's wedding to the members of the Order, and if Remus was being honest, she looked to be embracing her wild side. Her hair was hiked up in a tangle of plaits and her eyes were a pale green and as intense as usual.

Hope smiled. "Hey, Remus, how's the wife?"

"She'd have been here if Andromeda had forced her to stay behind," he told her, grinning as he hugged her tightly, "but we don't want to risk the baby."

"I understand," Hope nodded, glancing beside her to where Dean was shifting uncomfortably. "I realize this is short notice, but we need your help."

Setting up a meeting between the Resistance and the Order was not only complicated but it was difficult as well. They couldn't meet at Pithos, mostly because Hope was so paranoid about who was allowed inside. They couldn't meet at Grimmauld Place because it lacked the kind of protection they needed. As a result, it had been decided to cast shielding spells over the Grangers' home, which had been vacant since Hermione had wiped her parents' memories and sent them packing for Australia.

She glanced around the room, taking in the faces of members of the Order. Hope saw that Mrs. Weasley hadn't joined them, and she was grateful for that, mostly because she knew how the older witch disapproved of her and her friends fighting in the war. There were only four of them, Kingsley, Mr. Weasley, Remus, and Bill who counted as an intermediary between the two factions.

"We want to break into Azkaban," Dean voiced beside her.

"Break into Azkaban?" Kingsley questioned, his surprise evident in his deep voice. "Why would you want to?"

"You mean, apart from the fact that dozens of Muggle-borns are being held there against their will?" Hope responded dryly. "One of ours went missing and we think she might be Azkaban."

"Might be? You don't know?" Mr. Weasley asked. "Who is it?"

"Yggdrasil," Dean said, his lips twitching slightly. "We don't know where she is and the only place we think she could be is Azkaban…and even if she isn't there, at least we'll be rescuing Muggle-borns who've been in captivity."

"It's very honourable," Remus said, glancing between the pair, privately wondering why it was that she hadn't brought Hermione or Ron instead, "but the security at the prison has been upgraded since the takeover. It's not just Dementors that are guarding it, it's Death Eaters too."

"We know that," Hope said with narrowed eyes, "and we have informants of our own, and we know the risks, we're not kids anymore, Remus."

"Well, some of us aren't legal," Dean murmured for only her ears.

"Shh!" she hissed, elbowing him in the side.

"Either way, we're going to do this with or without your help," Hope continued in one breath, "and we're all stupid enough to go through with it."
Because there really was no denying that a full-frontal assault on the prison was by far the most foolish thing the Resistance had yet attempted, far surpassing sneaking into the Ministry to graffiti the Atrium or speaking the taboo in Godric's Hollow to fight off some Death Eaters. Hope had been more surprised that no one had spoken against the suggestion. It had been Justin's idea, being Muggle-born he didn't like the idea that others of his blood status were locked away and Hermione, Dean, Colin, and Dennis were of the same mind.

Mr. Weasley, Remus, and Kingsley all shared a glance. There was really no doubt that she would go through with it; reckless moves and Hope seemed to coincide with each other, a habit that she seemed to have passed on to her friends.

"You can deliberate with the rest of the Order and get back to us," Dean interjected, nudging her in the shoulder. "We've got to go, right?"

"Yes," Hope agreed, "places to go, people to curse, you know the drill." Her eyes flickered to Bill. "Bill knows how to get in contact with me, let us know what you decide."

Before any of the men could speak, Dean and Hope had grasped hands and twisted on the spot.

"I don't understand why you didn't bring Hermione and Ron along instead of me," Dean said as they trudged through the boggy woods.

"Because Hermione and Ron wanted to have some alone time, and they haven't had much time to themselves in a while," Hope told him, "there's not really much time for romance around here, well, unless you sleep in the same room." She gave him a wink and Dean didn't even bother resisting gagging in front of her; he didn't even want to think about that. "Besides, you're one of the…calmer members of the Resistance, and you're a familiar face, so that probably helps."

"It's so nice to hear that I'm good for something," he said dryly.

"Oh, don't be ridiculous," Hope scoffed with a wave of her hand, tripping over a spare stone and barely righting herself. "You're good for a lot of things…mostly keeping Daphne in a good mood."

"Thanks," he deadpanned.

"I do my best to please," Hope gave a mocking bow towards him before checking her watch. "And it's not even lunch yet…I suppose we could see if the training room is free, if you fancy some wand practice?"

"It's not as though I had anything else planned for the day," Dean replied.

It had been a slow few weeks for everyone. Hope, Ron, and Hermione were still having no luck on finding the next Horcrux and Justin, Daphne, and Angelina were coming up dry with ways to cut down the Death Eaters numbers. The most they were doing now was copious amounts of research, potion-brewing, and practicing duelling spells.

Hope's smile widened across her lips at his words and she couldn't help but laugh, but it would be a long time before she did so once more.

The next day found Hope, Ron, and Hermione sitting in a pub with a half-eaten pork pie in front of each of them with their attention focused on the parchments that were spread across the table.

"It says that Wool's Orphanage was demolished back in 1946," Ron said, scrutinizing the yellowed paper in his hands.
"But this clipping says there was an unexplained fire," Hermione added, tapping to the newspaper article. "It was probably just easier to say it had been demolished than to say they didn't know how the fire had started."

"Were any kids killed?" Hope asked suddenly, swallowing a mouthful of pork pie. "Tom's the type to kill Muggle kids, especially ones that grew up in that Orphanage."

"No…" Hermione said slowly, looking over the words, "all the kids and the matron, Mrs. Cole were out of the building at the time."

"Lucky them," Hope said.

"And we're sure there are no Horcruxes here?" Ron asked, stabbing at his own lunch.

"Tom hated the orphanage, there's no way he would have kept part of his soul there," Hope disagreed, pointing her fork towards him. "The places he's hid them before all meant something; the shack his mother grew up in, the cave where he frightened the kids in the orphanage, and in the hands of one of his most faithful followers…I'm finding it far more likely that he hid one in Hogwarts."

"Hogwarts? But when would he have had the chance to hide something in Hogwarts?" Hermione asked. "He didn't get the job."

Hope's eyes grew distant, her thoughts far from the small pub they were sitting in.

"Hope?" Ron asked. "Hey, what is it?"

"I can sense Horcruxes, remember?" Hope pressed. "I got lightheaded around the locket, remember? And I heard this kind of song…"

"Song?" Hermione said, befuddled. "What do you mean song?"

"It's like…" Hope contemplated how to explain it, twisting her hands in the air, "hissing…only musical, I suppose? It's kind of hard to explain, but I heard it when I held the locket and when I was in the Room of Requirement."

"When were you in the Room of Requirement?" Ron asked, packing the meat onto his fork.

"When I was looking for a Pensieve to view that memory that I got from Slughorn, remember?" Hope mentioned, glancing around as if searching for someone that was listening in on them, though that was unlikely, as they had cast a Muffliato over them, keeping anyone from hearing what they were talking about. "That's where I found the Slytherin family tree and Morea's dagger, but I found something else too, I just didn't give it much thought at the time, I mean, I was far more interested with the family tree and the knife."

"A Horcrux? You found one?"

"I think so," Hope said, frowning as she tried to remember the day she'd gone into the Room of Requirement. "It was silver…with sapphires…it was a sort of tiara that was shaped like a bird."

"A bird?" Ron asked, glancing between Hope and Hermione. "So, that means it has to be Ravenclaw's, right?"

"Well, I can't imagine Helga Hufflepuff owning something with a bird when she's got a badger for a symbol," Hope replied dryly, stabbing mutinously at her food. "And obviously we can't go to
Hogwarts yet, that has to be last on the list."

"Which means we should focus on finding on Hufflepuff’s cup," Hermione added, looking far more excited than she had in a long time. "This is good, this is really good!"

"But we still have no idea where that could be," Ron reminded her. "Can we…trace it back from where You-Know-Who got it?"

Hope contemplated that briefly before flicking through her small notebook that was filled with ink splatters that formed words and numbers and rough sketches of Horcruxes.

"Tom went to Hepzibah Smith in 1946, and it was from her that he stole the cup and the locket, framing her house-elf, Hokey for her murder—"

Hermione opened her mouth, outraged, but Hope spoke over her.

"After that, I've got nothing," Hope said, sounding vaguely annoyed.

"Could he have done what he did with the diary?" Ron asked, tapping his finger against the scrawled cup. "Given it to one of his followers?"

"But he had to know that was a bad idea, after what happened to the last Horcrux," Hermione disagreed. "Would he really risk his Horcrux?"

"Destroying the diary was an accident," Hope had to concede, taking a swig of her water, "and he still thinks that he's the only one who knows about the Horcruxes, if he did trust one of his followers, it would have to be one that was most faithful."

"One that went to Azkaban after the First Wizarding War," Ron offered, before ticking them off on his fingers. "So, you've got Dolohov, the Lestranges, Rookwood, and Travers…"

"It has to be the Lestranges," Hermione said, frowning thoughtfully out the window. "Bellatrix is one of the most trusted, she's the one he had try to kidnap Hope, last year."

"Yeah, but she still failed in that," Ron reminded.

She had almost succeeded, Hope knew, it was mere luck that had saved her in the end, mere luck that had awakened her mid-Apparition.

The galleon in her pocket heated up and Hope reached down to pull it out.

"It could be the Lestranges," she agreed, looking over the words that had appeared on the coin, "but we'll have to wait on that."

"Why's that?" Hermione asked.

"Because Bill says that the Order have reached a decision," Hope said, swallowing the last of her water before tossing down a few pound notes onto the table as she pulled on her jacket. "We've got a jailbreak to plan."

"Planning a jailbreak on a weekday? Aren't we lucky?" Ron drawled sarcastically and they all shared a brief smile before cancelling their spells and disappearing from the pub with all their parchments.

The island of Azkaban was cold at any time of the year, Sirius had told her back in her fifth year, and
Hope had never had a true appreciation for the weather outside of the prison until she stepped foot on it.

The prison had thirteen levels, each with more cells than they appeared to possess. The highest profile prisoners were held on the thirteenth level, at least they had been back when the Death Eaters weren’t in control of the Ministry, but Hope suspected that the Death Eaters just shoved the Muggle-borns into whatever cell was open.

There were five different squads for the operation, each with a member of the Order along for the experience factor. The ones heading each of the squads were Hope, Daphne, Ron, Lee, and Mr. Weasley. Squad Two, the one headed by Daphne, would be the one heading in last was mostly composed of witches and wizards that knew a bit of healing. The other squads would each be starting on a different level with the use of broomsticks.

Hope was the bait, as usual, being the one with the highest bounty on her head.

She whistled loudly down the hall of the first level and the few men –Death Eaters and Ministry-sympathizers alike– down the hall looked up.

"Hi!" Hope said cheerfully. "Nice night, isn't it?"

A flash of green shot towards her and she dodged it easily by ducking into a crouch, firing off a curse of her own as her squad joined her for the assault, rushing forward with a violent yell of curses.

"Expecto Patronum!"

The silver panther leapt out of her wand in a stream of mist, pouncing on the Dementor that dared to approach her, keeping them at bay as she pulled Sirius' knife from her holster and unlocking the first cell door and pulling the Muggle-born out giving her directions to head towards the water's edge where Mrs. Weasley was waiting with a bag of unused wands that were filched from Ollivander's shop so they could Apparate away from the island.

She tossed the knife to Audrey as a flash of blue cut into her arm and Audrey took over as Hope blocked a spell aimed for Remus.

"On your right!" Justin's yell had Hope twisting on her heel and firing off an Avada Kedavra to collide with the Death Eaters face, the force of the spell sending him flying backwards and colliding with his companions as explosions and yells echoed on the levels above them.

Hope rammed her shoulder into Katie, forcing her into the side of the wall and out of the way of the Avada Kedavra, Katie barely firing off an explosive hex that blew out a portion of the wall, crumpling two more enemies.

"That's it," Audrey called over to them. "Next level!"

"One second," Justin grunted, somehow managing to get a Ministry worker in a headlock before Remus Stunned him. "I had that," he complained and Remus spared him a smile.

"Onward," Hope said, her lips twitching slightly as Squad One leapt up the stairs. "Whoa!" She pulled back suddenly to avoid the spell shot at her head. "Nice try, bastard!"

A well placed Concido to the thigh had the man screaming in pain on the ground as they entered into spell-fire once more.

Katie and Remus covered Audrey as she opened cells, freeing Muggle-borns, while Hope and Justin
acted on offense sending off spells that caused a bit of damage and blocking the ones aimed towards them in turn. Together, they made short work of the second level.

"You're getting better with that shield charm," Hope mentioned lightly as they crossed the bodies to the opposite stairwell, sparing Justin a grin.

"You know me," he said with a grin, "always—get down!"

Hope ducked on command and Justin blocked a jet of violet light with his side and Audrey fired off a second spell to silence him as Justin fell to his knees.

There was a flash of comprehension as he brought the fingers that had gone to his side up to see the blood.

"No!" Hope screamed, dropping to his side, pulling his body towards her as she pressed her hands against his side, trying to stem the flow of the warm blood that was seeping through her fingers.

Her eyes met Katie's. "Get me Airmid! Now!"

Katie dashed off, fleet-footed as the others headed up to the next level. That had been the agreement; they had come to release the Muggle-borns and even if some of them fell, they were going to complete what they'd set out to do. But Hope didn't think any of them actually considered that they could die.

Justin’s eyes found hers, brown and wide as a gasp for breath left his lips, haggard and raspy and short as if they couldn't get enough air into their lungs.

"Stay with me, stay with me," Hope murmured feverishly, closing her eyes briefly and ignoring how the blood was still continuously flowing through her hands with no indication of stopping. "She'll be along soon, I promise...Heal!"

Her rune glowed red on her skin, but it had little effect on the gaping wound, hardly healing it, no doubt due to the Dark nature of the curse (and Hope was almost certain that it was similar to the one that Hermione had been cursed with in the Department of Mysteries in their fifth year).

"I-I'm so-orr-ry," Justin gasped.

"Shut up, it wasn't your fault," Hope told him, tears stinging her eyes for the first time in a long time. "Shut up, shut up, shut up," she said in a mantra, "I should have been looking."

"M-my id-de-a," he managed with difficulty.

"We all went along with it, so you be quiet and save your strength, okay?" Hope forced a smile onto her lips just for him. It was ruined by the tears falling from her eyes. "You're-you're going to be fine, I promise."

A shake of the head nearly had her breaking down and she could practically hear their voice in her head. "Don't make promises you can't keep."

Justin raised the bloodied fingers of his hand to her cheek, painting red streaks across it and Hope's breath caught in her throat as his eyes fluttered.

"Don't you dare close your eyes!" Hope snapped weakly, but it didn't stop him from doing so and he took one last shuddering breath before his rising chest stilled and his hand fell away.
Hope couldn't stop the tears from staining her cheeks as she looked down at the lifeless body and the blood staining her hands. And then she released a keening wail that echoed in silence brought on by the end of the battle.

Hope played with the goblet in front of her as it was in front of them all. A hollow din had fallen over Pithos in the wake of Justin's death. Even Remus could have offered no words to assuage the pain that his death had brought. And Hope found his absence to affect her more than she had anticipated, mostly because she was so used to his presence and his smile as he kept things light, reminding them all that at the end of the day they all still had each other to lean on.

But he was gone.

Hope's chair scratched across the floor as she stood, blinking back tears that had been ever-present over the past two days.

All the eyes shifted to her and she knew they expected her to say something, as Dumbledore had done for Cedric's death and as she had done for Dumbledore's death.

"I do not have many that I trust," she said slowly, "but I do know that each of you here and those of us at Hogwarts have earned mine…countless times since the beginning…but if there was one of us who was honourable and courageous and strong, it was J-Justin." Her voice broke over his name. "What other reason would explain why he took a curse meant for me?" The tears clung to her lashes as she choked on her sob, swallowing it was difficulty before raising her goblet.

"To Justin," she said, and the two words were repeated around the table as each one took a drink of the Firewhiskey.

And then Ron spoke. "I remember when we first met him in the greenhouse…he was way too cheerful that early in the morning."

There were a few weak chuckles at that.

"He helped me find my way to McGonagall's class on time for my first lesson," Dennis whispered and soon there was an outpouring of stories about the Hufflepuff lad that had once run from Hope in fear, believing her to be Salazar Slytherin's heir. That time seemed so distant to her now, even though it had only been five years.

But Hope excused herself from the table quietly to walk aimlessly down the corridor, twisting her hands together as she thought hard.

Maybe if she'd been faster…maybe if she'd killed the man to start with Justin would still be alive.

Hope pressed her hand over her eyes, hiding the tears that had begun to trail down her cheeks, compressing her lips into a line as she attempted to keep them from wobbling.

How was she supposed to tell Mrs. Finch-Fletchley that her only son had been killed? How was she supposed to tell Hannah and Ernie that their best friend wasn't coming back?

Hope breathed out shakily, wiping the tears hastily from her cheeks, sniffing as she rubbed at her nose.

It was strange how she'd never really considered how some of them might die on this crusade of hers. The only life she threw around casually was her own.
But their actions had cost the life of their friend and Hope wasn't sure if it was worth it, killing Tom, if this was the cost, the loss of the friends she tried so hard to protect.
"We apologize for our temporary absence from the airwaves," River said, "which was due to some unavoidable collisions with those charming Death Eaters, but don't worry, our location is as secure as ever, and I'm pleased to tell you that two of our regular contributors have joined me here this evening. Evening, boys!"

"Hi," Romulus said.

"Evening, River," Royal added.

"But before we hear from Royal and Romulus," River continued, "we must take a moment to inform on both good news and bad news. The Resistance and the Order of the Phoenix mounted an assault on Azkaban prison to rescue the Muggle-borns trapped inside and I am happy to say the mission was a success, but at the price of the loss of Justin Finch-Fletchley who was killed in the battle. We also regret to inform our listeners of the murders of Ted Tonks and Dirk Cresswell. A goblin by the name of Gornuk was also killed, but a second goblin, believed to have been travelling with Tonks, Cresswell, and Gornuk, may have escaped.

"Meanwhile, in Gaddley, a Muggle family of five has been found dead in their home," River heaved a heavy sigh as he spoke. "Muggle authorities are attributing their deaths to a gas leak, but members of the Order of the Phoenix inform me that it was the Killing Curse, more evidence, as if it were needed, of the fact that Muggle slaughter is becoming little more than a recreational sport under the new regime."

"Listeners, I'd like to invite you now to join us in a minute's silence in memory of Justin Finch-Fletchley, Ted Tonks, Dirk Cresswell, Gornuk, and the unnamed, but no less regretted, Muggles murdered by the Death Eaters."

There was a long, pregnant pause following River's words.

"Thank you," he said thickly. "And now we can return to regular contributor Royal, for an update on how the new Wizarding order is affecting the Muggle world."

"Thanks, River," Royal said deeply. "Muggles remain ignorant of the source of their suffering as they continue to sustain heavy casualties. However, we continue to hear truly inspirational stories of wizards and witches risking their own safety to protect Muggle friends and neighbours, often without the Muggles' knowledge. I'd like to appeal to all our listeners to emulate their example, perhaps by casting a protective charm over any Muggle dwellings in your street. Many lives could be saved if such simple measures are taken."

"And what would you say, Royal, to those listeners who reply that in these dangerous times, it should be 'Wizards first'?" River inquired of his guest.

"I'd say that it's one short step from 'Wizards first' to 'Purebloods first,' and then to 'Death Eaters,'" Royal corrected. "We're all human, aren't we? Every human life is worth the same, and worth saving."

"Excellently put, Royal, and you've got my vote for Minister of Magic if we ever get out of this mess," Lee joked. "And now, over to Romulus for our popular feature 'Pals of Potter.'"

"Thanks, River," Romulus repeated.
"Romulus, do you feel that the assault on Azkaban was the right course of action for Hope and the Resistance?"

"I do," Romulus said, "however, there is no denying the recklessness of the move and it cost her one of the lives of her friends, but she and the others knew the risks going in. The group have shown themselves to be a true symbol of strength despite You-Know-Who's Dark regime, coinciding with Hope's symbol of being the 'Girl-Who-Lived', of the triumph of good and the power of those willing to fight."

"And what would you say to Hope if you knew she was listening, Romulus?" River asked slyly, his eyes flickering to where Hope was sitting not far away, flicking her quill between her fingers, not even bothering to feign disinterest in the broadcast.

"I'd tell her we're all with her in spirit," Romulus said resolutely. "And I'd tell her to follow her instincts, which are good and nearly always right...and I'd tell her to not give up."

Hope's lips twisted briefly into a smile.

"And what of our usual update on those friends of Hope Potter's who are suffering for their allegiance?" River pressed.

"Well, we have heard within the last few hours," Romulus began, "that Rubeus Hagrid, well-known gamekeeper at Hogwarts School, has narrowly escaped arrest within the grounds of Hogwarts, where he is rumoured to have hosted a 'Support Hope Potter' party in his house. However, Hagrid was not taken into custody, and is, we believe, on the run."

Hope snorted from her seat.

"I suppose it helps, when escaping from Death Eaters, if you've got a sixteen-foot-high half-brother?" River mentioned lightly.

"It would tend to give you an edge," Romulus had to concede. "May I just add that while we here at Potterwatch applaud Hagrid's spirit, we would urge even the most devoted of Hope's supporters against following Hagrid's lead. 'Support Hope Potter' parties are unwise in the present climate."

"Indeed they are, Romulus," River nodded in agreement, "so we suggest that you continue to show your devotion to the woman with the lightning scar by listening to Potterwatch! And now let's move to news concerning the wizard who is proving just as elusive as Hope Potter. We like to refer to him as the Chief Death Eater, and here to give his views on some of the more insane rumours circulating about him, I'd like to introduce a new correspondent. Rapier, what's your take on the various stories we've been hearing about the Chief Death Eaters?"

"Yes, River, I can," Rapier said importantly, joining in beside River. "As our listeners will know, unless they've taken refuge at the bottom of a garden pond or somewhere similar, You-Know-Who's strategy of remaining in the shadows is creating a nice little climate of panic. Mind you, if all the alleged sightings of him are genuine, we must have a good nineteen You-Know-Whos running around the place."

"Which suits him, of course," said Royal agreed. "The air of mystery is creating more terror than actually showing himself would."

"Agreed," Rapier hummed into his speakerphone. "So, people, let's try and calm down a bit. Things are bad enough without inventing stuff as well. For instance, this new idea that You-Know-Who can kill people with a single glance from his eyes. That's a basilisk, listeners. One simple test: Check
whether the thing that's glaring at you has got legs. If it has, it's safe to look into its eyes, although if it really is You-Know-Who, that's still likely to be the last thing you ever do."

Hope stifled her giggles on the couch at his words.

"And the rumours that he keeps being sighted abroad?"

"Well, who wouldn't want a nice little holiday after all the hard work he's been putting in?" Fred joked. "Point is, people, don't get lulled into a false sense of security, thinking he's out of the country. Maybe he is, maybe he isn't, but the fact remains he can move faster than Severus Snape confronted with shampoo when he wants to, so don't count on him being a long way away if you're planning to take any risks. I never thought I'd hear myself say it, but safety first!"

"Thank you very much for those wise words, Rapier," River said as though he hardly believed himself. "Listeners, that brings us to the end of another Potterwatch. We don't know when it will be possible to broadcast again, but you can be sure we shall be back. Keep twiddling those dials: The next password will be 'Balor.' Keep each other safe. Keep faith. Good night."

Lee cut the transmission and yawned widely, bidding them all goodnight, but Fred lingered.

"Shouldn't you be asleep?" he asked Hope, propping his elbows against the back of the couch. She certainly looked tired enough.

"Why sleep when there's so much to do?" Hope spared him a slight grin. "We still aren't any closer to finding the next Hor—" She paused, squinting her eyes at him. "I almost forgot that you're not Ron."

"Wow, you really do need some sleep," Fred told her. "C'mon."

Hope scowled at him, but she still conceded to his firm stare.

The Resistance's good luck was bound to run out sooner or later, and it just so happened to be sooner.

Outnumbered and wounded was how Hope, Ron, Hermione, George, and Alicia found themselves with Death Eaters and Snatchers on all sides.

Hope was struggling to keep George upright with the wound on his leg and one of Alicia's arms was limp at her side.

"Well, well, well, what do we have here?" Greyback purred, licking his lips as his lupine eyes flickered between Hope (who had instantly disguised herself with short, wild black curls and red eyes – the eyes were unintentional, of course, reflecting her current feelings.)

And to add even more misfortune to their situation, the sword of Gryffindor had tumbled out of Hermione's small beaded bag, having not been properly shoved within it when they'd left Pithos.

"Looks like we've caught a bunch of rebellious ruffians that've been causing the Dark Lord some trouble, boys," the head Snatcher called out, causing sniggers to erupt around them.

"Ey, boss…I think this one's the one that snapped me and Baum's wands," one of the Snatchers said, nodding his bulbous head towards Ron. "Ain't you, ginger?"

Ron's glare was as good as a confession.
"An lookit this, Greyback!" one of the Snatchers said, grinning yellowed teeth as he stooped to pick the sword up from where it had fallen, its rubies glittering in the sunlight.

Greyback took it and Hope gritted her teeth behind her lips.

"Ve-e-ry nice," Greyback murmured, lifting it up into the air as though he was an impressive figure. "Oh, very nice indeed. Looks goblin-made. Where did you get something like this?"

He pointed it towards Alicia whose face had gone bloodless.

"It was a gift," she said, keeping her voice as level as she could manage.

"Oh, yeah?" Greyback's eyes flitted towards Hope instead. "What about you, sweetheart? Anything to add?"

Hope's glare could have killed him dead if she was any angrier and George made a low noise deep in his throat.

"'Cause you look an awful lot like Hope Potter," he leered, "and we know she's a metamorphmagus."

Hope bit her tongue to keep from saying something derogatory about just how many people knew she was a metamorph; it wasn't as though she'd been hiding the skill.

She was startled by his quick reflexes as he jerked her forward by her fisting her hair back to see her scar and she had precisely two seconds to nail him in the groin, forcing him to release her quickly.

"Guess what, boys? You caught Hope Potter!"

They jeered on all sides but Hope could barely focus, the voices around her seeming so distant, she was so distant…her eyes were on a great black fortress far more impenetrable than Azkaban, focusing on one lone spire.

"Time to fly," brought her back to the present.

"To the Ministry?" the one that had been identified as Scabior asked.

"To hell with the Ministry," Greyback snapped, his eyes flashing amber and his features becoming vaguely wolf-like. "They'll take the credit, and we won't get a look in. I say we take her straight to You-Know-Who."

Hermione shifted uneasily beside Ron and Alicia inhaled sharply while George squeezed Hope's fingers so tight that they throbbed.

"Will you summon 'im, then? 'ere?"

Hope snorted loudly, unable to resist even when Ron shot a look her way. "Oh, he can't," she said as condescending as she could manage. "You need a Dark Mark for that, and he hasn't got one…isn't that right, Greyback?"

"You, shut it!" He roared at her before returning to a normal speaking tone. "He's using the Malfoys' place as a base, we'll take 'em there."

She was outside the very tower she had been looking up into to look within to see a single figure deprived of nutrients and sunlight for so long that he resembled more closely one of the dead than one of the living.
And then she was jerked by a rough hand that clapped her in iron and squeezed forcefully through the air by the sudden Disapparition, landing painfully outside wrought-iron gates like the ones at the front of Pithos that only permitted those of Slytherin blood to pass through them.

George flopped to the ground, hissing in pain and Hope followed after him, pressing her hand against his wound, mentally intoning the word Heal as the cut knit itself together.

"Thanks," he gasped as the Snatcher whose head looked far too large for his body shook the gates. "How screwed are we?"

"Very." Hope offered, glancing to see if anyone was looking as she pulled Sirius' knife from where it was usually lodged in her boot and thus overlooked by the wizards to tuck it into his shoe, pointed end up (though sheathed in leather), hiding it under the hem of his trousers.

Blue eyes met red and one red eye winked as the blue narrowed.

"State your purpose!" a loud voice echoed from the gate and Hope was startled to see it had formed a face.

"We've got Potter!" Hope was hoisted up by the chains bound to wrists that were cutting into her skin. "We've captured Hope Potter!"

They didn't have to wait very long for the gates to admit them inside, and then all of them were pushed forward with an air of excitement and impatience to be rewarded.

The skeletal man smiled toothlessly up at her, but he was little more than the shell of the man that he had once been.

"So, you have come. I thought you would... one day. But your journey was pointless. I never had it."

"You lie!" she hissed.

Hope's forehead pained like hot coals were pressed to it and she ignored it as best as she could as they were all brought in front of the manor whose doors opened to permit a familiar woman to leave. Her cold grey eyes and styled blonde hair gave her away far more than her voice.

"What is this?" Narcissa Malfoy demanded.

"We're here to see He-Who-Must-Not-Be-Named!" Greyback uttered eagerly.

"Who are you?" she asked him, her eyes sweeping over him in disdain.

"You know me!" The werewolf spat angrily. "Fenrir Greyback! We've caught Hope Potter!"

Hope was forced ahead of the others and into the light that was shining out of the manor.

"I know 'er face looks different, ma'am, but it's 'er!" Scabior offered helpfully. "If you look a bit under 'er fringe, you'll see 'er scar. And this 'ere, see the girl? The Mudblood who's been travelling around with 'er, ma'am. 'An the boyfriend 'o 'er's that disappeared! There's no doubt it's 'er, and we've got 'er wand as well! 'Ere, ma'am——"

Narcissa inspected Hope's face and for a moment Hope wondered if she didn't recognize her from their brief encounter before sixth year. There was a brief flicker of something in her eyes that Hope couldn't place before she spoke three words: "Bring them in."

"Follow me," she said, gesturing them through a long corridor. "My son, Draco, is home for his
Easter holidays. If that is Hope Potter, he will know."

Hope thought it was fairly obvious who she was by now, why have her son check? But, she supposed, the Malfoys had probably fallen from Tom's graces; they wanted to be extra sure before they contacted Tom.

"What is this?" Lucius Malfoy's familiar drawl sent a shiver down her spine as he approached with Draco beside him. Hope's old schoolmate was looking much worse for wear than Hope, but then Hope had Kreacher's fabulous cooking and the support of the entire Resistance.

"They say they've got Potter," Narcissa soothed him, stepping into place beside her husband. "Draco, come here."

Draco approached her slowly, flinching when his eyes met her red ones, no doubt reminding him of the last red-eyed person whose gaze had scorned him.

"Well, boy?" Greyback demanded.

And Hope waited for him to say something. Surely her schoolmate enemy would be able to tell her as who she was after discerning her from all the varying eye colours and different shades of hair colour she'd worn over the year.

"Well, Draco?" Lucius pressed. "Is it? Is it Hope Potter?"

Then Draco surprised Hope.

"I can't –I can't be sure," he said and Hope blinked at him, trying not to show her surprise.

"But look at her carefully, look! Come closer!" Lucius insisted, forcing his son far closer than either he or Hope wished to be. "Draco, if we are the ones who hand Potter over to the Dark Lord, everything will be forgiv—"

"Now, we won't be forgetting who actually caught her, I hope, Mr. Malfoy?" Greyback interjected, his lips curling into a sneer.

Hope's blood was thundering in her ears as Narcissa appealed to her son. "Look, Draco, isn't it the Granger girl? And two of Weasley's boys? And the girl, is she an old schoolmate of theirs?"

"I…maybe…yeah," Draco said evasively as Alicia glared daggers at Narcissa (is that what she was degraded to? Simply an old schoolmate?).

But all conversations were cut off by Bellatrix Lestrange's sudden arrival and Hope knew instantly that she had recognized her by the way her dark smile burned across her lips. "Look, Draco, isn't it the Granger girl? And two of Weasley's boys? And the girl, is she an old schoolmate of theirs?"

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And then there was a great argument about who would summon the Dark Lord that reminded Hope of two children squabbling over one toy that she couldn't help but roll her eyes.

"STOP!" Bellatrix screamed before Lucius could touch his own Dark Mark, her eyes wild and her voice piercing. "Do not touch it, we shall all perish if the Dark Lord comes now!"

Hope didn't have the faintest idea of what she was talking about and clearly neither did Lucius as she walked quickly towards the Snatcher holding the sword of Gryffindor.

"What is that?" she snapped.

"Sword," the Snatcher told her shortly and Hope, Ron, and Hermione's eyes connected and Hope
could easily read their fear; they needed the sword, if Bellatrix got it…

"Give it to me."

"It's not yours, missus, it's mine," the Snatcher replied, quite bravely—or stupidly—Hope thought. "I reckon, since I found it."

A slash of violent red sent him to the ground in a crumpled heap and Bellatrix made quick work of the other Snatchers that drew their wands on her, her superior wand skill shining through.

"Where did you get this sword?" she shrieked, looking like a vengeful Fury, her grip so tight on the sword hilt and her own wand that her knuckles were white. "Snape sent it to my vault in Gringotts!"

"It was with them! Lemme go!" Greyback snarled, and she did so reluctantly.

For a moment, Bellatrix murmured to herself, seeming quite mad before she came to a decision.

"Take these prisoners down to the cellar, Greyback," she said, her eyes flickering between Hope and Hermione and Hope could tell she was trying to figure out which of them would be better to torture; Hermione who had never experienced the pain and could possibly fold quickly or Hope who would last longer and certainly be more enjoyable…and it was more likely she knew about where the sword came from, given her past experience with it.

"All except for Potter."

"No!" George struggled against his bindings, fire in his eyes. "Take me instead, not her! Please, take me!"

Hermione, taking a moment to whisper into Hope's ear as all the eyes were on George and Ron who had joined in, just as angry. "It's a fake."

Hope had no idea how she could have come up with such a believable cover for the reason they had the sword in such a small amount of time—it had honestly slipped hers—and she couldn't help but be grateful for it.

Bellatrix smirked at the anguish on George's face as well as the others as they were carted away, leaving Hope with Bellatrix with the Malfoys.

Hope's expression was set in what seemed to be a permanent glare.

"Scared, little thief?" Bellatrix purred.

" Haven't you gotten tired of torturing me?" Hope fired back and the woman released a high-pitched giggle.

"You can never tire of torturing," she said, her eyes gleaming, "but this is strictly business…Crucio!"

Hope ducked under the spell neatly, but she could not dodge the second one which forced her to her knees, painful agony blooming around her like she was thrown in a vat of oil and being burned alive. Hope bit down on her tongue to keep from screaming and copper filled her mouth.

The spell lifted and Bellatrix braced her hands against her knees to look Hope in the eye as she breathed in harshly through her nose.

"I'm only going to ask you once…where did you get this sword?" She brandished it before Hope's eyes. "Where?"
Hope spat her blood onto her boots and Bellatrix swung a kick to her ribs, bruising her side as she tumbled onto her stomach.

She forced herself up to meet Bellatrix’s gaze once more. "If you're going to be a disgrace," she hissed, "at least do it properly."

"Crucio!"

This time, Hope did scream and she didn't notice how Narcissa looked away or how Draco flinched and covered his ears. She didn't notice the yells of her friends coming from the cellar.

"Where did you get that sword?" Bellatrix demanded menacingly, letting up the spell briefly.

"—Found-it," Hope gasped. This much was true; Ron had found it, whether or not it was outside Pithos was an entirely different matter.

Another torture curse had her falling onto her back, her body contorting painfully as she screamed in agony.

"You're a lying, filthy, Half-blood, and I know it!" She raged. "You have been inside my vault at Gringotts! Tell the truth, tell the truth!"

Hope didn't know what she was on about, but that didn't stop her from screaming as the pain returned much worse than before.

"What else did you take? What else have you got? Tell me the truth or, I swear, I shall run you through with this knife!"

"—Didn't-take-anything!" Hope rasped before choking on her pain.

"You lie!" Bellatrix shrieked. "How did you get into my vault? Did that dirty little goblin in the cellar help you?"

"What goblin?" Hope forced out. "We don't know any goblin or anything about your vault, that sword isn't even real!"

She was in so much pain, her head was throbbing and she was sure the curse had broken a bone or two of her ribcage, but she still screamed so much that her throat was raw by the next curse.

"A fake? Oh, a likely story!" Bellatrix screamed as she hit Hope with another curse.

"But we can find out easily!" Lucius said off to the side but Hope could barely focus, let alone stay conscious. "Draco, fetch the goblin, he can tell us whether the sword is real or not!"

*The skeletal prisoner was laughing maniacally at her.*

"Kill me, then, Voldemort," he cried. "I welcome death! But my death will not bring you what you seek... There is so much you do not understand..."

*His words only served to anger her.*

"Kill me, then!" The man enticed her, his eyes gleaming in the darkness. "You will not win, you cannot win! That wand will never, ever be yours—"

*Her wand flashed upwards and a flash of green flooded the room.*
Hope roused herself suddenly at a loud yell and, not knowing how much time had passed since she'd closed her eyes, she scrambled out of the way with difficulty, the sharp stabbing pain in her chest growing with each movement and exploding as she collided with Draco.

He grunted in surprise, and Hope, having a brief upper hand as her friends—somehow having managed to escape the cellar—barrelled into view and she ripped his wand from his hand to cast a quick *Relashio* to her own shackles that fell away before summoning her holster and wand, along with the wands of her friends that had been taken by the Death Eaters.

Their escape would have been difficult, if not impossible had the chandelier hanging above the drawing room not suddenly fallen, giving Hope enough time to Flash to George's arms and pass out from the pain before they all Disapparated plus one whom Hope would not learn of until the next day.
Consciousness came and went for Hope and with consciousness came pain, so she was almost glad to go without it, but at long last her eyes fluttered open.

She was looking up at an unfamiliar ceiling with a thick comforter wrapped tightly around her body. Hope gasped as she sat up with difficulty, her whole body sore.

"Non! What are you doing?" A thick voice demanded. "Zat will 'urt you, you must lie back!"

Fleur Weasley had practically pounced on her with flashing blue eyes, forcing her back into the cushions none-too-gently.

"I'm just sore," Hope told her with a croaky voice, trying to push her hands aside. "Where's everyone?"

She really needn't have asked, because as she spoke, the door creaked open to show George, Ron, Hermione, and Alicia who had all been hovering impatiently behind the door, waiting for her to awaken.

George hugged her carefully. "How are you feeling?"

"Better than before," Hope muttered into his only ear, "really sore, but I'll be fine."

Ron was as white as George, each of their freckles standing out darkly against their faces and Hermione's eyes were red. They hugged Hope next, but there was no "It should have been me." It shouldn't have been anyone, least of all Hope, and that was the truth.

"I'm going to head back to Pithos," Alicia told her after she released the younger witch. "They're all probably going mad, but Fleur wants you to rest for a few weeks and get your strength back."

"Weeks?" Hope practically moaned, though that had half to do with her ribs which throbbed suddenly and she lifted a hand to a spot.

Fleur shooed them out with her hands flapping in the air. "Ope needs rest, go now!"

"Wait!" Hermione insisted. "Er, Hope, there's something you should know…"

"What happened?" Hope asked instantly at the regret and sorrow in her eyes. "Is it the Resistance —?"

"No, its…its Dobby," Hermione told her weakly, helping her friend sit down. "He Apparated into the cellar to help us escape, and-and he helped bring us all here, but—" Hermione swallowed, blinking a few times. "I'm so sorry, Hope, but Bellatrix threw her knife and it—" Her words cut off and she fell silent.

"He-He's dead?" Hope's voice broke. She hadn't seen much of the elf, but his presence had always made her smile (discounting when he irked her with his attempts to save her life in second year). "B-but how did he even get in?"

"I called him," Ron said in a small voice. "I would've called Kreacher, but I thought they had to have known that you'd inherited him after Sirius died, and Dobby was the Malfoys' old house-elf, so…"

Tears pricked her eyes and she pushed them back with difficulty. "I want to see him," she said
"Luna's with him," Hermione said quietly, "she didn't want to leave him alone."

"Luna?" Hope blinked blearily as she took George's offered hand to pull herself up into a standing position. She had not forgotten about Luna, how could she? But of all the places Luna could have been hidden, Malfoy Manor had not even been close to the top of her list.

Standing was difficult, moving was even harder, but with George's help she made it down the stairs to see a sheet pulled over a small figure with Luna, her loose blonde curls wild and in disarray, and fair cheeks that were even more so from lack of sunlight, but her eyes had not lost their wide constant expression of surprise, humming a soft song.

She looked up when Hope moved forward and she gave her a soft smile.

Hope's heart was hammering in her chest as she lifted the sheet to see the waxen face of the house-elf that she had met when she was only twelve. His green eyes were open but the colour, the vitality, and the life had long since faded from them, his arms were just as thin and spindly as Kreacher's were, and his chest was so still.

She bit her trembling lower lip as she pressed a hand against his cool forehead.

"Bill?" she choked out his name and the partially-werewolf- mauled man stepped forward with a solemn expression.

"Yeah, Hope?"

"Do you have anything against burying a free house-elf on your lands?" Hope managed to force out with difficulty.

"Not at all," Bill said.

Hope insisted on digging the grave by hand, it just seemed to mean more than doing it with magic, but her muscles were so stiff and tight that it was nearly impossible to do, but everyone pitched in and the modest grave was dug in no time, and then it was time to put Dobby to rest.

Fleur had shrunk one of Bill's old Weasley jumpers that didn't fit him anymore, Ron had forked over his own socks, George had transfigured a small woollen hat that was placed snugly on his head, and Hope pried the black opal from her ring, the one that had been ruined some time ago and she pressed it into Dobby's hand, curling his thin fingers around it as Luna closed his eyes and they lowered him into the grave.

"I think we ought to say something," Luna said so suddenly that several of the people gathered jumped.

"Thank you so much, Dobby," she began, "for rescuing me from the cellar. It's so unfair that you had to die, when you were so good and brave. I'll always remember what you did for us. I hope you're happy now."

Hope scrubbed at her eyes as the others said thank you as well and then Hope said, "There'll never be anyone like you…goodbye, Dobby."

And then the house-elf was sealed under the ground and into their hearts.
Alicia disappeared with George to return to Pithos soon after, George only left because Daphne needed him for another mission, and she was still a higher authority in Pithos along with Angelina, but George promised to return soon to check up on Hope.

Once he had gone, Ron had cast a Muffliato over the door so he, Hope, and Hermione could have a private conversation.

"After we were dragged away from you," Ron explained, "we were taken to the cellar, that's where we found Luna, Ollivander, and Griphook."

"Griphook?" Hope asked in surprise. Bellatrix had mentioned a goblin when she had tortured her, but after that Hope had passed out and she hadn't seen him once she'd awakened. "Didn't Dean say that he'd gone on the run?"

"Yeah, and they must've caught him," Hermione sighed. "But, anyways, we couldn't just Apparate out, we didn't have our wands and we couldn't just use Sirius' knife and blunder up without a wand, that would have been suicide."

"And we had Luna and Ollivander who didn't have wands and we didn't want to get them caught in the crossfire," Ron added, "and I thought of Dobby and he came...he wanted to help so he took them here, and that was when Pettigrew came down to check on us."

"Is he dead?" Hope asked. There was no denying she hated Pettigrew for all he had done, but she wasn't quite sure how she felt about him dying.

"No, we just knocked him out," Hermione said quietly, "and then we rushed upstairs...and Bellatrix hit me with a Crucio before we managed to get away."

Hope winced and how Hermione had been when she had awakened made all the more sense.

"Bellatrix kept insisting that I must have taken something else out of her vault," she said instead, frowning thoughtfully. "She really freaked when she thought we'd been in there."

"...You don't think we were that far off when we thought that You-Know-Who'd hid one of his Horcruxes with the Lestranges, do you?" Ron guessed.

"It would explain why she was scared," Hermione agreed. "If the wizard I served entrusted me with an item like that and some kids showed up with something that came out of the same vault I hid it in, I'd be concerned."

Hope hummed in agreement before sitting up and the spare bed. "Come on, we have to talk with Griphook."

"We can talk to Griphook," Ron tried to push her back while still being gentle (it didn't really work), "you need to rest."

"Hermione's been tortured," Hope pointed out, "I don't see her resting."

"I wasn't tortured nearly as long as you were," Hermione interjected, giving her friend a firm stare, but Hope didn't back down, and they had to relent.

So, not ten minutes later, Hope, Ron, and Hermione found themselves sitting before the goblin Griphook.

"We need to break into Gringotts," Hope said without preamble. She did not bother with niceties and
she did not dance around the subject, she knew how direct goblins liked to be.

"It is impossible," Griphook intoned after a long moment as he tried to ascertain if she was being serious.

"Not if we had you," Hope corrected. "The vault we want to enter belongs to Bellatrix Lestrange and her husband…are you familiar with it?"

"Yes," Griphook said, "But even you know, if you seek beneath our floors—"

"—A treasure that was never yours, Thief, you have been warned, beware," Hope recited. "But I don’t care about her riches, we're looking for something in particular, and it's not for personal gain; we've got no choice…would you believe that?"

Griphook scrutinized her for a long moment.

"If there was a witch," he said, "of whom I would believe that they did not seek personal gain, it would be you, Hope Potter. Goblins and elves are not used to the protection or the respect that you have shown us over the years, nor that your companions have shown us. Not from wand-carriers."

Hermione and Ron shared a look over Hope's head, but she didn't take notice.

"What is it that you seek within the Lestranges vault?" he asked them instead. "The sword that lies inside it is a fake. This is the real one." His dark eyes fastened on Hope's friends. "I think that you already know this. You asked me to lie for you back there."

Hope glanced to Ron and Hermione in surprise before turning back; Griphook attesting to the sword's lack of authenticity was a great help to them.

"A cup," Hermione said, "small and golden, its worth is great only to a few."

"Indeed," Griphook said.

"Are you going to help us or not?" Ron asked a bit impatiently.

"I shall... think about it," Griphook drawled out and Ron tensed, but Hermione interjected for him.

"Thank you for your consideration," she said diplomatically and all three left, taking with them the sword of Gryffindor just in case.

"You should have let me say something," Ron grumbled as they left the room. "You know he's going to draw this out as long as possible."

"That is what goblins do best," Hope had to concede, "now on to Ollivander…do you have those other wands?"

Ron produced them from his pocket; Hope had been unconscious and Hermione had been too repulsed to take Bellatrix's so it had fallen to him (though technically it could have fallen to Alicia or George too).

They entered the next room quietly, speaking in low tones with the wandmaker who looked so weak and frail that Hope had to wonder how he was still alive.

"Mr. Ollivander...how do you feel?" Hermione asked him gently.
"Much better now," Ollivander said weakly, sparing them all a smile. "You all rescued me…thank you."

"Mr. Ollivander," Ron cut across him, his ears burning at the sincerity of Ollivander's gratitude, "we were wondering what you could tell us about these wands."

He handed the two wands taken from Draco and Bellatrix to the older wizard who examined the crooked one first, his fingers roving over the grooves that he had once carved into the wood.

"Walnut and dragon heartstring," he said decisively. "Twelve-and-three-quarter inches. Unyielding. This wand belonged to Bellatrix Lestrange."

Unyielding gave it easily away in Hope's opinion as he moved on to the second slimmer wand with a slight amount of circular detailing around the hilt.

"Hawthorn and unicorn hair. Ten inches precisely. Reasonably springy. This was the wand of Draco Malfoy."

"It isn't anymore?" Hope asked, recalling how she'd wrenched it from his grip.

"Perhaps not," Ollivander said. "If you took it, then it may be yours. Of course, the manner of taking matters. Much also depends upon the wand itself. In general, however, where a wand has been won, its allegiance will change."

Hope's eyes fell briefly to her ring without its cracked opal. "Is it possible for someone to use a wand even if it wasn't won by them?" she inquired.

"Oh yes," Ollivander told her, "if you are any wizard at all you will be able to channel your magic through almost any instrument. The best results, however, must always come where there is the strongest affinity between wizard and wand. These connections are complex. An initial attraction, and then a mutual quest for experience, the wand learning from the wizard, the wizard from the wand."

"So, you don't have to kill the previous owner in order to gain that wand's allegiance?" Hope pressed.

The question seemed to make him nervous and Hope was sure she knew why. Ollivander was the one who had sent Tom on the path of the Elder Wand, knowing it to be the most powerful wand in record, whether that record was fact or fiction had yet to be proven.

"No," he said with finality, "I should not say that it is a requirement to kill the previous owner."

"But you did tell him of a wand, didn't you?" Hope said, narrowing her eyes slightly. "A wand that passed down in blood, a wand that people would kill to have."

Ollivander had turned stark white at her words.

"He wanted to find some way to break the connection between our wands," Hope continued as though she didn't see the change in him. "He tried someone else's wand and even that didn't work… so he asked about the Elder Wand, didn't he?"

"How-how do you know this?" Ollivander croaked, but Hope didn't answer him, so he answered her question instead. "Yes, he asked. He wanted to know everything I could tell him about the wand variously known as the Deathstick, the Wand of Destiny, or the Elder Wand."
Hermione, who had always been stanch in her belief that the Elder Wand was merely a fairy tale, gaped slightly with her lips ajar.

"The Dark Lord had always been happy with the wand I made him –yew and phoenix feather, thirteen-and-a-half inches– until he discovered the connection of the twin cores. Now he seeks another, more powerful wand, as the only way to conquer yours."

"But that's not all is it?" Hope asked, her eyes glittering. It would have been strange how well she seemed to know Tom, but their paths had crossed so much that Hope knew him now as well as she knew herself.

"No," Ollivander whispered, "he does not. He is determined to possess it because he believes it will make him truly invulnerable."

"Do you think it will?"

"The owner of the Elder Wand must always fear attack," Ollivander had to admit, "but the idea of the Dark Lord in possession of the Deathstick is, I must admit... formidable."

"And you, you really think this wand exists?" Hermione asked suddenly. "Even though it's from a fairy tale?"

"It is perfectly possible to trace the wand's course through history," Ollivander told her with certainty. "There are gaps, of, course, and long ones, where it vanishes from view, temporarily lost or hidden; but always it resurfaces. It has certain identifying characteristics that those who are learned in wandlore recognize. There are written accounts, some of them obscure, that I and other wandmakers have made it our business to study. They have the ring of authenticity."

"So, it can't be just a myth?" Hermione inquired, glaring at Ron as he released a soft snort. "There is factual proof of its existence?"

"Yes," Ollivander said, smoothing his hands over his sheets. "It has a history, and that history is bloody, but that may be simply due to the fact that it is such a desirable object, and arouses such passions in wizards. Immensely powerful, dangerous in the wrong hands, and an object of incredible fascination to all of us who study the power of wands."

"Thank you for your time, Mr. Ollivander," Hope said, standing suddenly, the cogs in her brain whirring as the realization dawned on her. "We'll leave you now."

"What was that about?" Ron murmured as the door latched behind them.

"What did you figure out?" Hermione added.

"Ollivander only knew so much about the Elder Wand," Hope whispered, "so he directed him towards Gregorovitch instead, and when Tom found Gregorovitch he didn't have the wand, it had been stolen years ago by a golden-haired boy, by Grindelwald."

"Grindelwald?" Ron said aghast. "Grindelwald had the Elder Wand?"

"Until he duelled Dumbledore," Hermione realized, her eyes popping slightly, "and lost it."

*Hope was flying across the plains and the sea to a great castle in the sunlight, she was so close to her prize—*

"Dumbledore had the Elder Wand?" Ron said. "But...that would mean..."
"It's in his tomb," Hope agreed, "but it's too late, he's already there."

*She cracked the tomb and reached a pale hand down to grasp the wand from the aged professor in triumph. The Elder Wand was hers!*

"It doesn't matter," Hermione insisted. "We'll defeat him even if he's got the Elder Wand."

"It's the unbeatable wand—!"

"But he doesn't know that we know about the Horcruxes, Ron! And for all we know the Elder Wand will have the same reaction to Hope's that all the wands he's used before have!" Hermione was practically daring him to contradict her.

Hope rubbed her fingers together, practically feeling the warmth, the sense of belonging that she had felt with the Elder Wand in Tom's hand, but she couldn't tell if that was how she would have felt if she had held the wand or if it was just from him holding it.

Staying at Shell Cottage was simpler because that was where Griphook was. In the weeks following their arrival, Ollivander had been moved to Muriel's and had sent Luna a new wand and Luna had been taken to Pithos with Ginny (who, with the rest of her family, had been staying at Muriel's), who had actually snuck away to join her brothers and friends at the castle, no matter how angry her mother was.

George popped in every few days to make sure Hope and the others weren't losing their minds cooped up in Shell Cottage, but the three were kept so busy with their planning that they barely noticed. But Hope was grateful for his presence if only as a break from the preparations.

Griphook was making Fleur's life difficult and Hope, Hermione, and Ron's as well, mostly because he'd agreed to their terms in exchange for the sword of Gryffindor, which all three were quite reluctant to part with. It was all they had to destroy Horcruxes at the moment, but, if they had to return to Hogwarts for Ravenclaw's item they still had a wealth of basilisk fangs at their disposal.

"It's still not a very good idea," Hermione said late one night.

"It's not likely to get any better," Ron reminded her.

"And we need him," Hope added, and though she had remarkable respect for Ragnok, she was finding Griphook to be far more trying than she had anticipated.

A loud bang of a fist on the door had them all jumping and Hope's wand came flying from her holster into her hand and everyone else had their wands out just as quick.

"Who is it?" Bill called cautiously as he approached the door slowly.

"It is I, Remus John Lupin!" A familiar voice cried from the opposite side of the door. "I am a werewolf, married to Nymphadora Tonks, and you, the Secret-Keeper of Shell Cottage, told me the address and bade me come in an emergency!"

Bill hastened to open the door to his fellow Order member and Hope took in the man she had not seen since the mass breakout of Azkaban and ultimately Justin's death.

Remus stumbled into the room, his eyes bright and his whole face lit up like a child at Christmas. His streaks of grey and the scars that lined his face were not quite so prominent.
"It's a boy!" He told the room, still beaming widely. "We've named him Ted, after Dora's father!"

Exclamations of congratulations were thrown his way and there were a number of hugs and shaking of hands before Remus could stand before Hope.

"That kid doesn't know how lucky he is," Hope said, grinning at him as she hugged him tightly. "He's got a great mum and dad."

"And a great godmother," Remus said.

A smile curled Hope's lips. "So, who's he more like? You or Tonks?"

"He's a metamorphmagus, so I'd say Dora," Remus laughed. "He doesn't have much hair. It looked black when he was born, but I swear it's turned ginger in the hour since. Probably blond by the time I get back. Andromeda says Tonks' hair started changing colour the day that she was born."

He gratefully took the glass of wine from Bill that the wizard handed out to each of them.

It was strange to think of bringing a new life into the world when the world was so messed up, but there weren't two people more deserving of a child than Tonks and Remus, Remus who had been so afraid of having a child for fear of attacking them during the full moon.

Hope cradled her goblet of wine in her hands, but the drink remained untouched.

Teddy Remus Lupin...her godson...maybe they should have picked someone older, after all. Hope's middle name was practically reckless with the amount of trouble she had gotten into to the date, maybe they should have picked someone like Kingsley.

"Godmother, huh?"

Hope smiled at Bill as he came to stand beside her. "Yeah, that's something, isn't it? Godmother...it's a big jump for me."

"It'll be practice before you have some kids of your own," Bill said easily, giving her a sideways smile.

A faint pink spread across her cheeks at that. "Maybe," she tried to laugh it off. "But that's ages away still."

And then she stepped forward to rejoin the euphoria.
Caution of Thievery

Hope leaned against the door that shut the bathroom from view, exhaling a loud breath before calling into the room, "Hermione, you've been in there for fifteen minutes, it can't really take that long to put it—"

The door opened suddenly and Hermione stood looking very disgruntled in form-fitting black robes. "I look ridiculous," Hermione sniffed.

"Well, you won't be you for much longer, so that'll help," Hope replied, looking her over. "I could still go as her, you know."

"No, it should be me," Hermione disagreed, clasping her hand with Hope's. "You've suffered enough, I can handle being her."

"Being cutthroat and cold and heartless and stark raving mad?" Hope offered, arching an eyebrow as she crossed her arms. "It's not going to be easy."

"I'll manage," Hermione assured her, "besides, you're the one Griphook stands more than us, he won't even let us near him."

"Babysitting a goblin…good to know that I'm good for something."

"You know that's not what I mean," Hermione said, giving her a look as she took the wand holster from Hope that held one of her daggers that wouldn't look amiss on Bellatrix, binding it tightly to her forearm with the witch's crooked wand.

"I know it's not," Hope said, cradling the flask of Polyjuice Potion in her hands. She hadn't been sure that Bellatrix had left anything on her, despite their close proximity, but Hermione had carefully combed through her clothes from that night and found a single strand of bristly black hair. "I'm just thinking how difficult this is going to be…so many things can go wrong…like Azkaban."

Hermione paused in brushing her hair out of her face. "This time is different," she said quietly, "we have more Intel and there's less of us to worry about and we're going in under disguises."

Hope wasn't sure if Hermione was trying to convince her or herself, she failed either way, but Hope didn't mention it. It wouldn't do them any good to start doubting now. They needed to get that Horcrux, they couldn't afford to fail now.

"You're right," Hope said decisively. "Everything is going to work out fine and we're going to get that Horcrux."

She dropped the hair into the Polyjuice and held it out to Hermione who grimaced into it, as it was so dark it was almost a midnight black.

"To robbing the bank," Hermione lifted the flask as if toasting to their good fortune before taking a long swig, trying clearly not to gag at the taste, swallowing with difficulty. "Merlin, that's disgusting! Even worse than you!"

"Hey!" Hope gave her an affronted look.

"Don't worry," Hermione consoled her, her gaze dropping to her hands, the complexion paling and
her arms becoming a little longer like her fingers. "I'm sure all Polyjuice tastes bad."

Her eyes became deep-set and dark, her cheekbones became sharp and her face became angular.

"You look terrible," Hope told her shortly, "come on, we should leave before Griphook gets too annoyed and Ron blows a fuse."

"Because that's never happened before," Hermione said, her voice as much Bellatrix's are her face and body.

Hope rolled her eyes as she followed her Polyjuiced-friend out of the room.

"Whoa!"

Hope and Hermione started at the sudden noise, their hearts jumping in their chests.

"George!" Hope hissed, her eyes flashing a fiery blue as she clutched at her wand. "What're you doing here?"

"I came to see you." George's eyes were still on Hermione as Bellatrix. "Hermione?" he asked slowly and warily.

Hermione waved helpfully.

"Now I know you're up to something terrible," he told Hope who scowled in return.

"I'm...just going to go outside and wait with Ron and Griphook," Hermione muttered awkwardly, easing past Hope and down the stairs to make for the door.

"You're leaving with the goblin?" George asked, speaking first.

"We need his help," Hope said evasively. "Bill knows we're leaving today."

"But you didn't want to mention it to your boyfriend?" George pressed, giving her a firm look.

"It kind of slipped my mind," Hope admitted uncomfortably.

"Hope, what's really going on?"

Hope moved forward to lean on her tip toes to kiss his cheek. "Don't worry we'll all be fine."

He wrapped an arm around her waist, keeping her to him. "That's not really an answer."

"I know," Hope said quietly, resting her hands on his shoulders. "But it's all I can say for now."

And she gave him one last kiss before following Hermione's footsteps out the door, not noticing the intense frown on his face as she left.

This was by far the most insane thing Hope and her friends had done, outstripping trying to take back Azkaban, because what was crazier than robbing a bank that was run by goblins and Death Eaters?

Griphook's weight was heavy against her spine as they walked forward into the Leaky Cauldron following Hermione and the disguised Ron closely under the invisibility cloak.

Ron wasn't even recognizable with thick brown hair and beard with robes that fell to his feet and the
only way Hermione would be seen as someone other than Bellatrix was if she slipped up.

"Madam Lestrange," Tom stuttered at the sight of Hermione, bowing his head in fear and Hermione said nothing to him as she strode past, acting the part of dispassionate Death Eater. Hope thought she did it rather well, as good as Hope could have done (maybe even better, but Hope would never admit to that).

So far so good, but they hadn't yet reached the bank and Hope had a feeling that that was going to be even harder than merely looking and acting the part.

Hermione glanced at Ron out of the corner of her eye as she gingerly removed the wand from her holster.

"Tighter," Ron murmured, barely moving his lips.

"Right," Hermione mumbled, gripping the wand tightly as she tapped it against the appropriate bricks and stepping into Diagon Alley.

The street could hardly be equated to the bright and cheerful one she had first walked when she was eleven. That street had been bustling with a crowd of people with excitement in the air, very far from the silence and the fear hanging in the air. Weasley's Wizard Wheezes had been ransacked and several other shops had been boarded up, including Ollivander's (which Justin, Katie, Colin, and Tracey had once stolen a large number of wands from in preparation for the wandless Muggle-borns escaping from Azkaban). There were so many posters bearing Hope's face as well as several of her friends, each with hefty rewards (Hope's being the one with the highest, of course) that they may as well have stepped into a room of mirrors.

When a few of the figures huddled around the street saw Hermione they cowered away from her and Hope was further impressed by how Hermione barely blinked, glaring down her nose at them as if they were beneath her, a very Bellatrix-like move.

An angered man—who was also an incredibly foolish one– made a lunge at her but Ron countered for her easily, Stunning him before he could get too close to his disguised girlfriend.

"Why, Madam Lestrange!" a loud voice uttered from in front of them and they all looked towards the figure moving towards them. Hope recognized him from the many photos Colin had taken of Death Eaters and Death Eater sympathizers. That was Travers and she hoped Hermione and Ron recognized him too because she couldn't risk speaking when he was so close to them.

"Travers," Hermione responded coolly.

Travers inclined his greying head to her very slightly but enough to be considered respectful. "Madame," he said, his eyes glinting slightly. "I am surprised to see you out and about...I had heard a rumour that the inhabitants of Malfoy Manor were confined to the house, after the...ah...escape."

Hermione sneered at him, her eyes narrowing and her cold nature practically radiating from her body. "The Dark Lord forgives those who have served him most faithfully in the past. Perhaps your credit is not as good with him as mine is, Travers."

Travers started slightly, his hand automatically moving towards his wand as his eyes flashed, but then he quickly righted himself. It wouldn't do to lose your head to Tom's lieutenant, after all.

"I had also heard that your wand was lost in the...scuffle, Bellatrix," Travers continued as though nothing had occurred. "So whose—?"
Hermione withdrew the crooked walnut wand, holding it comfortably in her hand as she arched a dark eyebrow. "My wand is here. I don't know what rumours you have been listening to, Travers, but you seem sadly misinformed…on several counts."

The jibe was clear to see and Travers recoiled swiftly, his attention moving instead towards Ron who was scowling impressively at him but in a way that made it seem as though that was how his face was formed.

"And who is your friend?" He asked uncomfortably, his nose twitching as though he'd smelled something terrible. "I do not recognize him."

Which was good for them but bad for him.

"This is Dragomir Despard," Hermione informed him, gesturing towards Ron. "He speaks very little English, but he is in sympathy with the Dark Lord's aims. He has travelled here from Transylvania to see our new regime."

Hiding Ron in plain sight was the best bet, given how distinctive his features were, which ranked high on the scale, almost as high as Hope. Hope could have easily disguised herself as 'Dragomir Despard' in retrospect, but Griphook couldn't stand Ron, thus they'd had to change their plan a bit.

"Indeed?" He took the bait, not even questioning that she had been downgraded to a mere escort to foreign sympathizers. "How do you do, Dragomir?"

"'Ow you?" Ron said thickly with an accent that sounded more Bulgarian than the Transylvanian, but thankfully Travers didn't seem to notice.

"So what brings you and your –ah– sympathetic friend—" His eyes flickered over Ron with even more distaste. "—to Diagon Alley this early?"

"I need to visit Gringotts," Hermione told him without blinking an eye towards his dislike of her companion. "The Dark Lord has entrusted me with a task deemed too important for others."

"Is that so?" Travers asked, grinning in an unfeeling manner. "Even after you failed to hand over the Potter girl to him?"

Hope bit on the inside of her mouth, wondering just how Hermione was going to talk her way out of this one.

Hermione smirked. "Even if I didn't manage to bring her before him…I did manage to get her to scream…it's a pity you didn't hear that glorious sound."

A shiver ran down Hope's spine but she refrained from moving, mostly because of the goblin resting on her back. It was kind of scary just how good she was playing Bellatrix.

"I'm sorry I missed it," Travers sniggered before tipping his head before heading off.

Hope exhaled audibly. "Lucky he bought it," she murmured.

"Well played," Ron added.

"Keep moving," Griphook grunted from Hope's back and Hope rolled her eyes under her cloak and Ron and Hermione shared a glance before striding forward towards the leaning white structure, climbing the steps to where two wizards were standing like guards on either side, each holding a golden rod that made Hope uneasy.
They were Probity Probes, she remembered Filch using it on them the previous year when they entered Hogwarts. They were used to detect concealment enchantments and hidden magic, which meant they would have to dupe them to even get into the bank.

Luckily, Hope had her wand handy.

"Confundo," Hope murmured, flicking her wand under the cloak, hitting both guards with the same spell before Hermione and Ron walked right past them without them noticing as the two men blinked a few times looking a little confused.

Hope moved carefully and silently beside her friends as Griphook's grip tightened around her neck.

Gringotts was still filled with goblins –how could it not be? After all, goblins did know gold best–, but there were a number of others, including Fleur who had walked into one of the back rooms the moment Hermione as Bellatrix had entered, anger flashing in her eyes.

Hermione didn't seem to notice as she moved to stand before the counter, startling the goblin behind it badly. Hope guessed that Bellatrix wasn't one for checking on her vault personally.

"Madam Lestrange!" he stuttered and Hope couldn't blame him; Bellatrix was an impressive figure, if nothing else. "Dear me! How-how may I help you today?"

Hermione jutted out her chin and said with surety, "I wish to enter my vault."

Something about her manner had unnerved the goblin, that much Hope could see, though what exactly, she couldn't be sure. Perhaps there was something off about how she spoke…

"You have…identification?" the goblin asked uneasily and Hermione faltered, breaking character briefly, regaining her composure.

"Identification?" she demanded. "I've never been asked for identification before!"

"They know," Griphook hissed to Hope, his grip around her neck nearly strangling her. "They must have been warned there might be an imposter!"

Hope's heart leapt in her chest at how it had become apparent that more than a few eyes were watching them. The rumour that Bellatrix's wand had been stolen must have reached more than the Death Eaters' ears judging by the response.

"Your wand will do, madam," the goblin said weakly, extending a hand and Hermione handed it over reluctantly at the moment Hope cast her next spell.

"Imperio," she intoned quietly and the spell wafted over the goblin like a haze of clear mist. Hope was no stranger to casting Unforgiveables, but the ones she cast we typically a more permanent nature and were fuelled by anger. The Imperius was very different and Hope had to fight to concentrate on working the spell.

"Ah," the goblin sighed, "you have had a new wand made, Madam Lestrange!"

A muscle jumped in Hermione's jaw, keeping her from opening her mouth and saying anything that would give them away. She too seemed very aware of the attention on them –primarily her.

"Yes," she said finally. "I have."

The acceptance of this fact seemed to ease the suspicions of those around them briefly as the goblin
took a strange metal item that seemed to have no other purpose than making noise and came around the counter to lead them towards where the carts were docked.

"Wait– Bogrod!" a different goblin intervened a bit nervously, turning briefly towards Hermione with a low bow. "Forgive me, Madam, but there have been special orders regarding the vault of Lestrange."

Ron's shoulders tensed slightly, but that information was practically a giveaway that Tom had hid one of his Horcruxes within; why else would there be special orders regarding its contents?

Unfortunately –or fortunately, depending on which dilemma they were facing– the goblin, Bogrod, ignored his companion.

"I am aware of the instructions, Madam Lestrange wishes to visit her vault...Very old family...old clients...This way, please..."

The goblin started in surprise and Hope had a feeling that Bogrod was one for sticking to enforced rules.

It was only once they were behind the shut door that Hope pulled off the cloak and dropped Griphook to the floor and spoke. "I don't think they bought it," she said.

"We haven't been stopped yet," Ron reminded her.

"That doesn't mean that they don't suspect that we aren't who we say we are," Hermione disagreed. "So, what do we do?"

"Shall we get out now, while we can?" Ron added, both their eyes on Hope, waiting for a verdict.

"If we did, I doubt there'd be a chance we'd get close to the vault again," Hope said decisively, folding the cloak up and handing it to Hermione who shoved it into her beaded bag. "I think we should go ahead and get the cup."

"Good!" Griphook said, clapping his hands together, though Hope could see he was far less eager to get what they sought and far more eager to have the sword in his possession. "So, we need Bogrod to control the cart; I no longer have the authority."

Noise was increasing beyond the door as Hope directed her wand to Bogrod, narrowing her eyes as he summoned a small cart forward along the tracks to position in front of them.

"Quickly," Griphook snapped and this time the three humans plus one irate goblin and one Imperiused goblin squeezed themselves into the small and rickety cart before shooting off with a burst of speed that knocked Hope, Ron, and Hermione's backs against the cart painfully.

They went up and down and around tight curve after tight curve, gradually moving downwards, deeper beneath Gringotts than Hope had ever been, but she had a feeling that her family's vaults were located almost as deep.

A sudden waterfall startled her, soaking her clothes through and before she could utter a complaint, the cart flew off the tracks and they were pitched bodily from it to freefall downwards.

"Arresto Momentum!"

"Wind!"
Hope's rune glowed as they plummeted to the ground. Hermione's spell worked the best, lowering them carefully down to the rocky floor, whereas Hope's was just designed to protect herself.

"Everyone alright?" Hope grunted as she righted herself.

"Yeah, I think so," Ron said to her left.

"But we're back to normal," Hermione interjected and Ron felt his face for the beard that had gone as Hermione ran a hand through her wet brown hair.

"The Thief's Downfall," Griphook said (he might as well have been sneering, but Hope ignored this). "It washes away all enchantment, all magical concealment! They know there are imposers in Gringotts, they have set off defences against us!"

Bogrod was righting himself, the Thief's Downfall having removed Hope's curse and she was quick to replace it.

"We should hurry," Ron said, picking up the bag that contained the Clankers that they needed (why, Hope didn't yet know). "They'll probably show up sooner rather than later…Concido!" He shot the curse upwards towards the tracks which caused a small explosion. "That might slow them down."

"Not for long," Hermione said, adding a Protego to the mix.

Neither of them mentioned a now very pressing concern as to how on earth they were going to get out. Hope was glad neither of them mentioned it, because she had no idea how that was going to work.

"Is this vault far?" Hope asked Griphook, nodding towards the jutting rocks ahead.

"Not far, Hope Potter," he said, "not far…"

His tone made Hope uneasy as she followed him and one of the reasons was made clear to her a few moments later.

"You're got to be kidding me," she gaped, tilting her head back to take in the mass enormity of the beast chained to the ground. It was a dragon with scales so white it almost looked albino, but there was something off about its eyes…they were too opaque.

Hermione squeaked as the dragon's head rose into the air, swivelling towards them, its wings fluttering as fire and smoke left its nostrils.

"It is partially blind," Griphook informed them, "but even more savage for that. However, we have the means to control it. It has learned what to expect when the Clankers come. Give them to me."

The Clankers were in his hands within seconds and he began to shake them, an echoing noise coming from the metal colliding with each other that was hardly pleasing to the ear.

"It's been taught to expect pain when it hears the noise," Griphook spoke over it. "It will retreat, and Bogrod must place his palm upon the door of the vault."

And sure enough the dragon cowered backwards making piteous noises, trying to make itself as small as possible. Hope was unnerved by the imprisoned creature and a glance towards Hermione and Ron told her they felt very much the same. Hermione in particular looked physically ill.

They circled cautiously around the dragon to a wrought iron door that Ron then forced Bogrod's
hand against.

The metal rippled and warped only to melt away within moments to reveal the vault's contents, and Hope doubted that she'd ever been in anything that was so filled with precious metals and jewels. Anything from silver to gold to emeralds, they had it.

They entered cautiously, searching over each surface. Hope's eyes shifted from a sapphire-hilted dagger to silver plates carved with the Lestrange crest...

The soft song had begun, like a snake's gentle hiss.

"Hope, do you—?"

"Shh!" Hope hissed, waving a hand towards Hermione as she moved forward towards where the noise was coming from. Unfortunately, Hermione had to lean out of the way of Hope's hand, jostling one of the tables behind her and accidentally knocking a goblet full of gems to the ground.

As soon as it made contact with the ground, it shuddered and duplicated and Hermione leapt back into Ron with a small cry of pain as her hand made contact with a silver plate that followed the goblet's example.

"It burned me!"

"They have added Germino and Flagrante Curses!" Griphook said, though it didn't help them much. "Everything you touch will burn and multiply, but the copies are worthless—and if you continue to handle the treasure, you will eventually be crushed to death by the weight of expanding gold!"

"Fantastic," Ron said, but Hope was hardly listening, continuing forward until she saw it, a small golden cup with an engraving of a badger positioned above her head.

"Found it!" she called back to them.

"It's got to have a curse on it too," Ron said, wiping at his forehead from the heat caused by the curse.

"Does it really matter?" Hermione offered. "We have what we need—"

"The sword!" Ron said suddenly. "Then you won't be directly touching the metal!"

"It might work," Hermione agreed.

"Only one way to find out," Hope said, grabbing the sword from Hermione and attempting to run the tip through one of the handles, but she wasn't tall enough and the gold and silver was starting to pile up dangerously.

"Come on!" Hope muttered, stretching upwards. "Nearly there... got it!"

She had hooked the cup onto the sword, but she'd then lost her balance, thus throwing it into the pile of gold that was to their waists now and Hope's skin blistered as it made contact with the gold as Griphook picked up the original cup.

"Griphook!" she snapped, stumbling to stand. "Give it to me!"

But the goblin had been too greedy and Hope and her friends had been far too foolish.

"The sword," he said with a sneer and Hope gritted her teeth but this was a bargain she had to make
and she thrust the sword towards him and he in turn tossed the cup to Hermione before the pile-up of gold forced them from the inner chamber into the outer, the gold still continuously multiplying.

"Thieves! Thieves! Help! Thieves!" Griphook cried with Bogrod trailing meekly after him.

"That bastard!" Ron snapped as they freed themselves from the weight of the gold. "That unbelievable git!"

"Well, we were trying to double cross him," Hermione reminded him with a gasp as they ducking behind a few pillars as the wizard security began firing spell after spell at them.

"That's not the point!"

"We've kind of got bigger problems here," Hope felt the need to point out, firing off a few spells, on well-placed Concido blasting them all back. "We need a plan, now!"

The dragon roared loudly at the noise they were making and the presence of the goblins it clearly despised.

"I've got one," Hermione said suddenly, "but it's completely mad!"

"The world could use a little more madness," Hope called back to her, "what is it?"

"Follow me!"

Hermione ran past them to leap right onto the dragon and Hope and Ron stared for a solid three seconds before following suit. They clung with difficulty to its back spikes with spells flying through the air, just barely missing them.

"Relashio!" The chains that kept it tethered to the ground broke loose suddenly, swinging violently through the air as the dragon suddenly learned that it could freely move. And then it roared loudly in excitement, climbing upwards, clawing at the pillars and the walls as it headed towards the passage opening.

"Concido!" Hope yelled, and the passageway exploded outward, widening so that they could make it through. And once in the open air, it spread its wings and took off with its three passengers astride.
Hanging onto a dragon was not all it was it was cut out to be and Hope could feel her grip slipping from the spike she was clinging to.

"I'm not sure I can hold on much longer!" Hermione yelled over the roar of the wind.

"Me neither!" Hope added.

"Don't worry," Ron called to them, "I think it's getting closer to the water!"

"It better be within a few seconds or I'm falling!" Hermione screamed.

As luck would have it, Hermione's grip failed when they were just low enough to fall into the lake that the dragon had been slowly decreasing its height towards and Hope and Ron followed soon after. They hit the water painfully, instantly submerging and then struggling to fight to the surface.

Ron flopped onto the lake's bank, coughing and still spewing water from his throat as Hope and Hermione respectively.

"Not to hate on your method," he gasped, "but we had brooms in your beaded bag that we could have used, you know."

"Like you don't want to tell people that you rode a dragon out of Gringotts," Hermione fired back, breathing in and out deeply.

Hope groaned loudly.

"Still, we got the Horcrux, so that's good," Ron offered after they had a brief moment to catch their breath.

"But we're short a Horcrux-destroying sword," Hope reminded him, pulling herself up to sit on her knees, shivering in the cold air flowing from over the lake and brushing against them.

"Yeah," Hermione had to concede with a scowl, "but we were going to have to head towards Hogwarts anyway, since that's where the last one is, and no one's taken any of the basilisk fangs from the chamber yet."

It was doubtful any of the members of Dumbledore's Army (as they were still known in Hogwarts) had taken the fangs from the skeleton, so that was a plus.

Hope lifted the cup to the light. It was rather small and its gold gleamed in the sunlight, the light bouncing off the carving of the badger on its surface.

"Forget about the Horcrux for a second," Ron advised, "we need to worry about us."

Hope blinked in confusion and Hermione stared blankly at her boyfriend. Oh, how far they had come to not consider their well-being to be the most important.

Ron snorted, rolling his eyes at the pair. "Well, I'm sure this'll come as a shock, but I think they might have noticed we broke into Gringotts."

A smile spread across Hope's face at his words. "It might have slipped my mind," she told him as Hermione laughed, and before long Ron and Hope were echoing her with their own laughter.
"So, what're we going to do now?" Hermione asked once her giggles had subsided. "Surely he'll know that we're looking for Horcruxes now?"

"You don't think the goblins will lie to cover their arses?" Ron quirked an eyebrow towards her.

"That's not the issue," Hope said, standing up and dusting herself off. "The goblins would probably lie, if they could – but they can't, Tom's a Leglimens, he'd be able to tell if they were lying and he wouldn't be happy."

"Ah, well," Ron mumbled, "guess we're out of luck on that one…"

Hope grasped her forehead with a hand, kneeling back to the ground, her teeth grinding together painfully as she kept from crying out and then she was no longer beside Hermione and Ron and their concerned voices were gone so abruptly.

She was bathed in a semidarkness that was only lit by flickering torches that cast a reflection of fire upon the creatures cowering before him, among which was a goblin tightly holding a sword encrusted with rubies, but she didn't care for him, only the one speaking in front of her.

"What did you say to me?" she demanded, a fiery hot anger coursing through her veins in the stead of blood. Her scarlet eyes burned and her grip tightened over her wand. It was not possible!

"Say it again!" she commanded of the goblins cowering before her, speaking to one in particular, the one that had brought her the news. "Say it again!"

The goblin would have taken a step if he could've, but fear had him frozen where he stood. "M-my Lord," the goblin managed to force out with difficulty, "m-my Lord…we t-tried to st-stop them…Im-imposters, my Lord…broke-broke into the –into the Lestranges' vault…"

Something flickered in her eyes and her lips drew into a thin line. "Imposters?" she said, her tone icy. "What imposters? I thought Gringotts had ways of revealing imposters? Who were they?"

"It was," the goblin stammered as his companion with the sword shifted beside him uncomfortably, "it was…the Potter girl and two accomplices…"

"And they took?" Hope demanded, her knuckles were white from her tight grip and her voice came out in a furious hiss. "Tell me! What did they take?"

"A…a s-small golden c-cup, m-my Lord—"

The scream that left her was higher and filled with even more fury than before. How could it be? How could she have discovered her secret? She was the only one who knew of them!

She slashed her wand violently towards the goblins gathered before her, and the one who had given her the news was dead before he hit the floor. Her Death Eaters scampered towards the door to avoid her wrath, but the other goblins were not so lucky.

And she didn't notice the sword disappear as she thought of each of her precious Horcruxes. They were all well protected, she had ensured it! With many dangerous enchantments that if they didn't kill you immediately would cause you immeasurable pain and an agonizing death.

The diary was gone, a symbol of Lucius' negligence, and the cup as well, but surely the locket in the lake, the ring in the shack, the diadem in Hogwarts were still safe? She knew Nagini was, the serpent had hardly left her side and was very much alive. But she, Voldemort, must be certain. She had to know her immortality was maintained.
The girl knew of their relation, so it was possible that she had discovered the ring, though quite unlikely, given the nature of the curse she'd placed on it; she would've been dead by now. But the locket...she very much doubted the girl would have survived taking the locket...

Hope's eyes fluttered open and then gasped as though choking for air.

"What is it?" Hermione demanded. "What did you see?"

"He knows," Hope breathed in and out heavily. "The goblins, they told him about the break in...and then he killed them, the goblins, including Griphook."

"Good riddance," Ron muttered.

Hermione tossed a shrewd glance his way. "What's he doing now?" she asked Hope instead.

"He's going to check on the other Horcruxes, to make sure they're safe."

"The one at Hogwarts?" Ron pressed. "Is he going to look for that one soon?"

Hope frowned intently, trying to recall the thoughts that had flashed across her mind from Tom's. "I think he's going to look for the ring and the locket first."

A sigh of relief escaped Hermione at those words and her shoulders sagged slightly. "So we have some time," she said.

"Not a lot," Hope disagreed.

"And we've got to get to Hogwarts fast," Ron said, looking off in the distance. "He's got to be able to check the cave and the shack pretty quick."

"Not if the enchantments are still in place," Hope shook her head. "They might hold him up for a little bit, but he's going to realize sooner or later that they're gone...we need to find some way to get into Hogwarts."

"There are Death Eaters at Hogwarts," Hermione responded, "and they'll notify him with their Dark Marks as soon as you're seen!"

"Well, we still need to get inside to the fangs and we might as well get rid of the Death Eaters while we're there; there's only three of them—"

"Besides," Ron interjected, "if he does show up and he does have his army, we have the DA, Resistance, and the Order willing to fight him off."

"The last time we thought we could fight off the Death Eaters easily, Justin died!"

Hope bit on the inside of her cheek, her lips drawing downwards and her eyes closing as the image of Justin's bloodied form with his eyes glassy and his chest still flashed before her eyes.

"Tom is one person," she said suddenly, "but there are many Death Eaters...if Tom wants a battle, that's what he'll get...we're going to keep fighting, that's what Justin would want."

Hermione sighed softly. "What should we do?" she asked.

Hope's eyes glinted in the fading sunlight. "Let's mirror-call Neville and find out if Flashing is still barred by the protection barriers."
"Professor, I had this one last question that I didn't understand when you assigned the last essay," Susan Bones began after she cornered the Head of Gryffindor House with a disarming smile as Alecto Carrow strode past.

Professor McGonagall looked down at the transfiguration book that the Hufflepuff had propped open with a torn piece of parchment within that read: Is Flashing permitted with the protective enchantments? –Hope. Below were two words, yes and no. The older witch froze briefly in surprise. Did the girl really think it was such a good idea to come back to Hogwarts?

"I'm afraid you read the wrong passage, Miss Bones," Professor McGonagall told her without a hint of any indication that there was anything off. "This is the one you should have written the essay on."

And she tapped her finger against the yes and Susan gave her a secretive smile.

"I'll have the new essay on your desk by tomorrow morning," she promised, shutting the book on the parchment and making a quick escape, to where, Professor McGonagall couldn't be certain, but she knew it had to be wherever the other DA members were hiding.

She hoped that her former students had some kind of plan, though at the same time she very much doubted that they did.

They hadn't really had much of a plan to begin with, to be honest. Once Neville had gotten word to them that they could Flash into Hogwarts (how, Hope wasn't quite sure, because she'd been certain that Dumbledore had keyed it into the anti-Apparition ward after she and Ron had crashed in her second year) the decision was made. It wouldn't have been the wisest course of action to Flash directly to Hogwarts, Hope and Ron knew all-too-well that that was frankly a terrible idea, so, instead, they opted to Apparate to Hogsmeade and then Flash to Hogwarts, decreasing the distance greatly.

Unfortunately, the trio forgot to take into account the Caterwauling Charm that had been placed on the village in the event that anyone left their houses after hours.

Hope had never heard it when it was broken but the piercing and echoing scream that nearly made her ears bleed and judging by how Ron winced and Hermione covered her ears.

"This way!" Ron hissed, tugging them down the road as Hope threw the cloak over them –though with Ron's height it was difficult to not have their feet seen– as several figures spilled out of the door that led into the Three Broomsticks, but there was a good bit of distance between them and the Death Eaters as they treaded as silently as they could towards the edge of town.

"Accio Cloak!" one of the Death Eaters that was closest to their position yelled, but it was useless; the Summoning Charm had never worked on it before, even by Hope's own hand and she'd almost lost it twice because of it.

"Not under your wrapper, then, Potter?" another called before ordering his fellows to spread out. In doing so, one nearly ran right into Hope, Hermione, and Ron where they were pressed together and bent down (which was primarily Ron, as Hermione and Hope's heights weren't as impressive).

"Shouldn't we just Flash?" Hermione whispered to Hope.

"No way," Hope hissed, "I need focus for that, and have a clear idea of where I want us to end up – unless you'd rather crash into a suit of armor or go over the side of one of the staircases?"

"We know you are here, Potter, and there's no getting away!" One of the Death Eaters jeered into the
silence. "We'll find you!"

"Unlikely," Ron muttered so only Hope and Hermione could hear, but that didn't stop Hermione from covering his mouth with her hand.

"What about dementors?" came a suggestion and Hope's blood ran cold. "Let'em have free rein, they'd find her quick enough!"

There was a dull thunk and a grunt of pain and Hope had to assume that one of the Death Eaters had hit the one who had spoken. "The Dark Lord wants Potter dead by no hands but his—!

"—'an dementors won't kill her!" The Death Eater complained. "The Dark Lord wants Potter's life, not her soul. She'll be easier to kill if she's been Kissed first!"

"Fuck," Hope muttered. Anyone had to know by now that her Patronus was a panther, and if she cast it, it would give it away that they were actually there.

The cold settled in and Hope breathed in icy air, her fingers numbing around her wand as the Dementors came forward, gliding through the air towards them by sense alone. Outrunning them would be futile.

"Get ready to run," she said out of the corner of her mouth as she lifted her wand and uttered the spell when the creatures came too close for her to bear. "Expecto Patronum!"

The silver panther burst from her wand tip, sailing through the air to collide with the Dementors who scattered as Hope, Hermione, and Ron ran backwards.

"It's her, down there, down there, I saw her Patronus, it was a panther!"

There was nowhere to run when a voice saved Hope from Flashing without concentration, speaking in a low tone from the door to the Hog's Head which had opened, light spilling out onto the lawn: "Potter, in here, quick!"

Hermione practically pushed Hope into the pub and Hope dragged Ron in after her.

"Upstairs, keep the Cloak on, keep quiet!" the figure told them as he walked past them, the door shutting quickly behind him, and the three did as he asked, unnerved slightly by his appearance.

"You saw that too, right?" Ron whispered. "Doesn't he look just like—?"

"Dumbledore?" Hermione responded, just as stunned. "Could it be his brother? Aberforth?"

"I still say I saw a panther Patronus!" a voice shouted from beyond the window.

"Panther?" Aberforth demanded angrily and Hope held her breath. "It's a goat, idiot!"

"Alright, we made a mistake," a different Death Eater grunted. "Break curfew again and we won't be lenient!"

And then Hope exhaled loudly, only pulling the Cloak off them once the Death Eaters had gone.

"Close shave," Ron said.

"You're telling me," Hope replied, raking a hand through her hair, the colour lightening from the midnight black it had been before to its typical rose-red as the barman trudged up to the room they had hidden in.
His eyes were as blue as his brother's as he frowned at them all. "You bloody fools," he said in a rough voice that reminded Hope a little of Mad-Eye. "What were you thinking, coming here?"

"We have our reasons," Hope said evasively, "Hogsmeade was only intended as a pit-stop, we just didn't take the curfew curse into account."


"We have our ways," Hermione said as helpfully as Hope had been.

His eyes flickered towards her. "Not planning on using the secret passageways, were you?"

"They were sealed off, soon after the term started," Ron answered unblinkingly and Hope could see that Aberforth was surprised that they knew that.

"We've got friends on the inside," Hope told him, crossing her arms, her eyebrows creasing together as she scowled. "We're not clueless about what we're doing, you know."

"That remains to be seen," he scoffed and Hope was instantly reminded why she didn't get on so well with his brother. "You can't get into the castle, so you need to get out of here as soon as possible. Can't be done by night, you heard what happens if anyone moves outdoors during darkness: Caterwauling Charm's set off, they'll be onto you like bowtruckles on doxy eggs. I don't reckon I'll be able to pass off a panther as a goat a second time. Wait for daybreak when curfew lifts, then you can put your Cloak back on and set out on foot. Get right out of Hogsmeade, up into the mountains, and you'll be able to Disapparate there. Might see Hagrid. He's been hiding in a cave up there with Grawp ever since they tried to arrest him."

"We're not going anywhere," Hermione insisted.

"We're going up to Hogwarts," Ron added.

"Don't be stupid, boy," Aberforth said to him, his eyes narrowing behind his spectacles.

"Well, you can't really stop us," Hope mentioned, "and it's something we've got to do—"

"Got to?" Aberforth repeated. "No, what you've got to do is get as far from here as you can."

"You're not listening," Hope snapped suddenly, "we aren't leaving! We're getting up to the castle and we don't need your help to do it!"

Aberforth scrutinized her for a long few moments and Hope didn't dare to blink; it was like looking a hippogriff in the eye.

"What for?" he asked finally.

"We have to find something," Hermione said, "something that'll help defeat You-Know-Who."

"And who told you that you—" He pointed a wrinkled finger towards the three of them. "—had to do it?"

"Dumbledore," Ron admitted.

"Did he now?" Aberforth asked in an almost mocking tone. "And is finding whatever this is pleasant or easy? Is finding this thing the sort of thing you'd expect an unqualified witch or wizard to be able to do without overstretching themselves?"
Hope's grip tightened around her elbows. "Just because something's difficult doesn't mean you should give up on it," she said firmly.

"Is that so?" he asked. "He's dead, girl, don't follow his foolish crusade to your own grave; it's not worth it."

"This is," Hope said with certainty, her eyes blazing with colour, "more than you could possibly imagine, and I'm not afraid of death, I never have been...and I'm not doing this for your brother. I didn't trust him and I sure as hell didn't like him, but there are things worth protecting in this world, things worth fighting for. You're in the Order – surely you understand that?"

Hermione and Ron, who had both been silent during Hope's short proclamation, glanced towards the wizard who seemed to be weighed down to the world by so many things.

"I was," he said shortly. "The Order of the Phoenix is finished. You-Know-Who's won, it's over, and anyone who's pretending different's kidding themselves. It'll never be safe for you here, Potter, he wants you too badly. So go abroad, go into hiding, save yourself."

"I'm not that self-centred," Hope responded with a scowl. "Tom's always been after me, that's nothing new, he just wants me dead even more since we've been cutting down his numbers."

Ron smirked and Hermione hid a smile of her own.

"And what good has your so-called Resistance done?" Aberforth questioned. "We're all still under his rule, all those Muggle-borns you freed are still in hiding, this isn't a game—"

"A game?" Ron said suddenly, anger spiking in his veins. "Are you kidding me? You think just because we're seventeen or younger we don't deserve to fight for what we believe? Was it a game when we killed the Death Eaters at Azkaban? Was it a game when we had to bury our friend?"

Hermione swallowed thickly and Hope glanced away thinking of Justin. "Was it a game when Hope and Hermione were tortured by Bellatrix?"

"You may know your brother better, Mr. Dumbledore," Hermione said, sliding her hand into Ron's, "but we know our own minds and we will be going up to the school and finding what we're looking for, and we're not doing it for him...we're doing it because You-Know-Who has ruined so many lives and even if we don't kill him, eventually someone will, and we owe it to ourselves to at least try."

Ron and Hope nodded in agreement as Aberforth glanced from one to the other, from blue eyes to brown eyes to green eyes. These were no children, he knew – not anymore. They had been fighting long enough to gain a weary expression in their eyes alone. These were warriors wearing the forms of children.

Hope folded her cloak up and handed it over to Hermione to fit into her beaded bag before offering a hand to both of them, which they took without question and without even giving it a second's thought to not grasp her hand.

"What floor?" Hope asked, closing her eyes and ignoring Aberforth's presence entirely.

"Seventh floor," Ron decided, "that's where the Room of Requirement is."

"One moment," Hope said, envisioning the seventh floor in her mind and then she stepped, taking them with her through space to land neatly on the stone floor.

They were back.
The castle was as silent as the dead, if not more so. This was good for them because Hope had forgotten to ask about the rounds the prefects and professors did to make sure no one was out of bounds, and it meant there was no one for them to run into.

"C'mon!" Ron hissed under his breath, pulling them down the hall when the sound of footsteps jarred them and all three ducked for cover. Hope hid behind a suit of armor, Hermione shrunk into the shadow of a pillar, while Ron simply ducked around a corner.

"There's really no reason to hide," a familiar voice told them, "we do have the Map, you know."

Hope removed herself from her hiding place to look upon the speaker that she hadn't seen for almost a year and she couldn't help but be a little startled. "Neville?"

Neville grinned widely at her from an almost unrecognizable face. One of his eyes was swollen shut, the skin puffy and bruised and his face looked like it had been used as a knife sharpener. "In the flesh," he said before Hope wrapped her arms tightly around his neck and hugged him. Neville responded with arms just as tight, lifting her feet off the ground with the hug as Hermione and Ron came out from behind their hiding spots.

"What's happened to you?" Hermione asked as Hope was released and she gave him a swift hug of her own while Ron and Neville simply clasped hands.

"Oh, this is nothing," Neville told them, his lips curving into a lopsided grin. "You should see Seamus, he's been looking worse since Ginny didn't come back after Easter, he's gotten into loads of more trouble."

The three winced in unison, imagining how terrible their former classmate looked.

"We can talk more in a minute," Neville said, gesturing her and Hermione and Ron forward towards the blank slate of stone beside the tapestry of Barnabas the Barmy, knocking a tune into it (Hope had a feeling that was the Hufflepuffs input, since you could only enter their common room by tapping a tune against barrels; not that Hope had ever gotten in). Upon the last knock the door materialized and opened wide to permit them in only to sink into stone once they'd passed through.

"Just through here," Neville told them, grinning, "everyone's excited to see you…we sent the word out you were coming so I'd expect the Resistance to show up sooner or later—"

They stepped into the light and the muffled voices became clearer as the three looked around the room in surprise. It didn't look much like the room they'd practiced in back in Hope's fifth year. There were hammocks all around and a few mattresses for those who weren't a fan and an assortment of chairs with a bookcase overflowing with books.

"Look who wandered in," Neville called to the room, his eyes twinkling in the light and all the eyes were suddenly on Hope, Hermione, and Ron.

"Hope! It's really you!"

"Hermione!"

"Ron!"
The three had to start in surprise as they were swarmed by the remainder of the DA, including Lavender, Parvati, Seamus, Anthony, Michael, Hannah, and Terry. Hope didn't have time to ask about where Susan, Padma, and Ernie were.

"Oh, it's so good to see you!" Parvati told her as she hugged her tightly.

"We've been running low on sarcasm," Lavender added with a laugh and Hope couldn't help but join in.

"I missed you too," Hope added, adding a hug to Michael who looked pretty terrible. "It gets repetitive when you see the same people every day."

"Are you saying we bore you?" Ron asked over Hannah's head, his eye twitching.

"Can't be," Hermione disagreed, "or she would have gotten rid of George ages ago."

Laughter exploded and Hope sat down with a smile in one of the seats that had been vacated in the excitement.

"You know you could've just taken the passage from the Hog's Head to get here, right?" Neville asked her once they'd all calmed down.

"I thought there weren't any more passages?" Ron asked in confusion.

"There weren't," Anthony agreed, glancing towards Neville, "Neville's the one who made it."

"You made a secret passageway?" Hermione asked impressed.

"Well, more like asked for one," Neville acquiesced. "I'd been in here about a day and a half, and getting really hungry, and wishing I could get something to eat, and that's when the passage to Hog's Head opened up. I went through it and met Aberforth. He's been providing us with food, because for some reason, that's the one thing the room doesn't really do."

"And it wasn't like we could go down to the kitchens," Terry added, "they're keeping a close eye on how much food goes missing and the house-elves are the ones who get hit if food goes missing, so we stopped stealing from them."

Hermione looked appropriately horrified by this new information.

"And no one can get in here unless we let them in," Seamus added, "so long as one of us stays in here at all times, the door won't open to them, even if they did try, but I'm not sure they know about the Room...But it's all down to Neville. He really gets this room. You've got to ask for exactly what you need, like, 'I don't want any Carrow supporters to be able to get in,' and it'll do it for you! You've just got to make sure you close the loopholes. Neville's the man!"

Hope glanced towards her god-brother, impressed. "Wow, looks like you've really got things under control...but tell us how things are with the Carrows, you lot never mentioned much about them when you passed anything along."

The faces surrounding them darkened at the mention of the brother and sister professors.

"Well, they're not just professors," Parvati told them, "they're also in charge of discipline."

"That wouldn't be the reason some of you are injured, is it?" Hermione asked, her eyes sweeping over them.
Several toothy grins were thrown her way and she couldn't resist rolling her eyes.

"So, you've got the bloke, Amycus," Terry explained, "the one that teaches the Dark Arts –they don't even bother with defence anymore– and if you get put in detention you get the Cruciatus used on you."

"That's barbaric!" Hermione gasped and Hope's eyes turned crimson while Ron's hands clenched into tight fists.

"Yeah, most of us got used as knife-sharpeners for refusing," Lavender added with a scowl.

"And then there's Alecto, Amycus's sister," Neville said, drawing them back, "teaches Muggle Studies, which is compulsory for everyone. We've all got to listen to her explain how Muggles are like animals, stupid and dirty, and how they drive wizards into hiding by being vicious toward them, and how the natural order is being re-established. I got this one for asking her how much Muggle blood she and her brother have got." He had lifted a hand towards a deep slash against his cheek.

Hope choked on her chuckles as Hermione and Ron gaped at their friend.

"Blimey, Neville," Ron said stunned by the turn of events, "there's a time and a place for getting a smart mouth. Keep this up and you're going to start channelling Hope."

"I would have to be dead for that, Ron," Hope interjected wryly, earning a few chuckled.

"You wouldn't have stood for that, though," Neville disagreed. "And it helps when people stand up to them, it gives them hope. That's why we keep doing it. It's what you'd've done."

"I've done a lot of reckless things," Hope had to agreed, "and therefore am not a proper role model."

"Tch-yeah right!" Seamus scoffed and she spared him a smile as Ron tried to stifle his sniggers.

"Didn't you break into Gringotts?" Michael asked with a quirked eyebrow.

"Wait, how'd you know about that?" Ron asked suddenly. Their break-in hadn't really been that long ago…

"It's all over the wireless," Neville said, nodding towards the silent radio that was resting against the wall. "Did you really escape on a dragon?"

"It was Hermione's idea," Hope informed them shamelessly and Hermione shot her a look as several incredulous eyes turned towards her.

"So, are we fighting?" Parvati asked intently, pulling the attention away from Hermione.

Hope leaned back in her chair, meeting the eyes of her two friends.

"We need to get the Death Eaters out of Hogwarts," Hermione said slowly, bringing herself a little forward, "for several reasons."

"Mostly we don't want them to report back to their master of what we're doing," Ron added.

"And what are we doing exactly?" Anthony asked.

"We as in us," Hope gestured towards the three of them before gesturing to all of them, "not you—"

Complaints arose.
"OI! Shut it!" Hope snapped and silence fell. "Alright, listen up! The things that we've been searching for, the things that'll kill Tom, one's here, in this room, actually, and we need to destroy it...unfortunately Tom already knows what we're up to because some goblin blabbed." A frown marred her lips briefly. "We need to keep him out of the castle for as long as possible, keep his focus on something else..."

"Like a battle," Terry offered, grinning widely. "I like this plan!"

"Wait...where're you lot going to be during this?" Parvati asked. "There are still a lot of Death Eaters out there and I'm pretty sure he's going to bring them all to break through. Is destroying whatever this is really going to take all that long?"

"Doubtful," Ron grunted. "We'll be rejoining the fight, of course...everyone with us?"

A cheer rose up from every single member in the room, echoing on all sides, but the sound dulled in comparison to the pain the scorched across Hope's scar and her knees buckled.

The image of the Gaunt Shack flashed before her eyes and anger flooded her veins.

"Whoa!" Neville caught her with an arm around her back, helping her sit back down. "Are you alright, Hope?"

Hope gritted her teeth together to keep from crying out in pain. "I'm fine," she hissed, rubbing at the skin over her forehead.

"Hope?" Hermione and Ron were kneeling beside her with expressions of varying concern.

"He's found out the ring's gone," Hope barely breathed, "he's furious."

She was distracted from saying anything else when a cupboard door to the back opened and Fred and George came through, followed shortly after everyone in Pithos, including the new arrivals, Luna and Ginny.

"You know, breaking into Gringotts, Potter, that's the most insane thing you've done to date," George informed her as he strode forward to grasp her hands and pull her into a standing position as greetings resumed once more.

"Are you sure?" Hope asked dubiously, grinning widely up at him as she tangled her hands into his hair, not even bothering to give him a chance to respond as she pulled his head down, capturing his lips in a deep kiss.

"Alright, break it up, minors in the room!" Fred called loudly, covering Dennis' eyes with one hand and Astoria's with the other, one looking vaguely amused (Dennis) and the other vaguely annoyed (Astoria). "We don't need to see that!"

"Coming from the child himself?" Hope asked once she and George had parted.

Fred ignored that, speaking to the room in general. "Aberforth's getting a bit annoyed. He wants a kip, and his bar's turned into a railway station."

"Neville got word to us," Luna said with a dreamy smile, "and Fleur spread the word to the Order, they'll be here soon."

"I guess the whole gang's here, then?" Audrey asked, smiling brightly.
"Who're you?" Hannah asked suspiciously.

"She's with us, don't worry," Hope assured her and the Hufflepuff relaxed her stance and then everyone with galleons suddenly went for theirs as they heated up with a message.

"It's from Susan," Michael said, reading his quickly, "Snape's called for meeting in the Great Hall. Everyone's going to be there…perfect place to get the Death Eaters in one blow, hm?"

Hope's lips curled upwards into a smirk. "I couldn't agree more."

The Great Hall was darker than usual with the fire in the brackets low enough to cast an ominous shadow across the hall and everyone within it.

Susan's hand clenched tightly around her wand as Snape strode to the front of the hall to survey them all through dark eyes while the Carrows stood off to either side giving the impression of lax security with how neither one was holding their wand (but Susan suspected it wouldn't take very long for it to drop into their hands from their sleeves. Professor Flitwick was twisting his hands close to the left wall while Professor McGonagall stood to the opposite side, pale in her robes, and Professor Sprout to the back with Slughorn, twitching with every movement.

"Many of you," Snape began, "are surely wondering why I have summoned you here at this hour." He gave a short pause before continuing with his voice raised a bit more to reach the back of the hall.

"It has come to my attention that earlier this evening Hope Potter was sighted in Hogsmeade."

Whispers sprung up at these words and Ernie leant closer to Susan. "I guess Aberforth's smoke-screen didn't work," he murmured.

"I guess not," Susan whispered back. But it hardly mattered now. There was an army waiting outside the Great Hall doors ready to strike whenever the all-clear was given.

"Now…" The silence fell as he spoke again. "I mention this in the hopes that truth will not be supplanted by rumour. For myself and a few select members of the staff this comes as little surprise." Susan could see a muscle twitching in Professor McGonagall's jaw. "We have, for some time, considered Miss Potter's return to Hogwarts to be not only possible but inevitable. Consequently, in the past several months and under my specific direction, exhaustive defensive strategies have been employed to defeat any attempt Miss Potter might make to breach these walls. But know this. Should anyone -student or staff- attempt to aid Miss Potter, that person will be punished in a manner consistent with the severity of their transgression."

Susan breathed out slowly in an angry hiss and her galleon glowed with heat in her hands and words wrote across it directly from the girl herself.

"Now, then…if anyone here has knowledge of Miss Potter's movements this evening," Snape continued as he moved slowly down the aisle, "I invite them to step forward now."

"Our move," Susan hissed out of the corner of her mouth as she stepped past Ernie to sidle into the aisle, causing an outburst of mutterings.

"I have a message from Hope Potter," Susan said, her voice not even shaking in the slightest as she held up her coin and grinned. "Check mate, bitch!"

The doors swung open and a large group of people entered and at the head was Hope, just as red-haired and dangerous as she remembered.
"Hello," the Girl-Who-Lived grinned widely, "I heard you were looking for me…and I brought all my friends." Her wand twirled between her fingers as Ernie pulled Susan out of the aisle.

Snape's wand lifted, but Hope was already there with her whip of ice lashing towards him and sending him flying backwards into the wall and out of the window. She turned her wand towards the Carrows only to discover that they were already down in the distraction her spell had caused.

"Susan," Hope threw an arm around the red-head's shoulders as noise erupted, "I don't think I've ever heard you swear."

"Well, I thought it might sound more impressive if I didn't say 'b-word'," Susan offered helpfully and Hope laughed outright before releasing her to hug Professor McGonagall.

"Professor! Did you miss me?"

The Head of Gryffindor House gave her a wry smile as Hermione and Ron slipped away from the group unseen, as they'd agreed to only moments before, making for the passage that lead into the Chamber of Secrets (because there was a lot of doubt that that passage had been sealed up, and even if it had been, there was another way to enter the chamber).

"Potter, I don't know what you were thinking coming here—"

"Oh, we had to come here," Hope told her seriously, "the castle's got something that we're looking for that'll help kill Voldemort."

There was little reason to not speak the taboo, Tom was undoubtedly already on his way.

"We need you lot to hold him off until we destroy it," Hope continued, "add more protection spells, but they won't hold forever…"

She turned towards Susan and Ernie and Padma, all of who had been working on the outside, directing them back towards where the Resistance and the Order were taking up a good deal of space as Professor McGonagall spoke, addressing the crowd.

"Evacuation," she was saying, "will be overseen by Mr. Filch and Madame Pomfrey. Prefects, when I give the word, you will organize your House and take your charges in an orderly fashion to the evacuation point."

"Well, some of us are fighting!" Ernie yelled, raising his fist and a booming applause and wolf whistles followed him.

"If you are of age, you may stay," she said, though Hope got the feeling even if she tried to send them all away it would never work.

Anything else that could have been said faded quickly as Tom's voice echoed above them and around them as though he was in the very room, but if Hope knew Tom, and she did, he was far from the castle.

"I know that you are preparing to fight," he said in his soft voice. "Your efforts are futile. You cannot fight me. I do not want to kill you. I have great respect for the teachers of Hogwarts. I do not want to spill magical blood…Give me Hope Potter, and they shall not be harmed. Give me Hope Potter and I shall leave the school untouched. Give me Hope Potter and you will be rewarded…You have until midnight."

Hope's eyebrow twitched. "Oh, how unoriginal," she muttered and a little second year Ravenclaw
nearby giggled behind her hand.

She couldn't say she was really surprised when Pansy Parkinson demanded someone to grab her, the response it was met with, however, surprised her greatly. She'd lost count of how many wands had been pointed at the pug-faced girl before she and all those who did not wish to remain were taken towards the passage out to the Hog's Head.

"Alright, Angie, Daphne and anyone else with healing experience," Hope said, raising her voice, "you're with Poppy! Who's got brooms?"

"Count us in!"

Hope swivelled wildly to see Oliver Wood stepping over the threshold with Viktor Krum at his side, both with their respective Quidditch training uniforms still on and with their brooms resting on their shoulders.

"Excellent," Hope grinned, before pulling two brooms from Hermione's beaded bag, which the brunette had left with her. "Fred, George, you're joining them, and you can fight over who gets the Firebolt later…Oliver's in charge!" Dean and Lee joined their grouping.

"Kingsley's in charge of the ground troops," Hope said, waving the dark-skinned Auror forward.

"Professors Flitwick, Sprout and McGonagall are going to take groups of fighters up to the three highest towers – Ravenclaw, Astronomy, and Gryffindor – where they'll have good overview, excellent positions from which to work spells. Meanwhile Remus — He pointed out the werewolf, though there wasn't much of a need, everyone there was familiar with him. —Arthur— He indicated the ginger-haired Weasley patriarch. —and I will take groups into the grounds. We'll need somebody to organize defence of the entrances or the passageways into the school —"

"Daphne, where're those bombs?"

The blonde held up a heavy rucksack with difficulty and Hope waved those with brooms forward.

"Contained explosive hexes, various kinds," Daphne told them all with narrowed eyes, "Incredibly painful if you survive getting hit by them, but chances are you won't so just don't drop them on any allies."

"Ve'll keep it in mind," Viktor said as they each began to divvy up what looked to be a number of long cylinders, but Hope didn't judge, she had other things to worry about.

"Alright, where the hell is Ginny?" she demanded.

"Over here!" Ginny piped up from where her mother was attempting to force her to follow the last of the younger ones out and she ducked around her to race to Hope's side. "What d'you need?"

She was more than eager, though Hope had a feeling this had more to do with the fact that her mother wanted her to leave.

Hope removed from the beaded bag a jar filled with a red substance and a paintbrush and a scrap of paper on which Hope's had drawn the strongest protection blood rune and handed it to the Gryffindor.

"I want you to paint that in each corner or Hogwarts," she told her, "my blood can up the protection, but I doubt by much. I need that Map!"
The Marauder's Map appeared in seconds and Hope handed it to Luna. "You're going with her," she said.

Luna bobbed her head, clasping the old parchment in her hands when Mrs. Weasley burst out.

"Absolutely not!" she cried. "Ginny is underage! And so is Luna for that matter!"

"I'm not leaving!" Ginny seethed. "My whole family's here!" Hope wasn't too surprised that Percy was now counted amongst their number. "I'm staying and I'm fighting!"

"You most certainly are not, young lady!" Mrs. Weasley shouted.

"I am!" Ginny was so angry her face was almost as red as her hair and Seamus was grimacing to the side wondering if he should say something to calm his girlfriend down, but he obviously thought better of it. "And Hope's told me to do something and I'm going to do it without your approval!"

And with that said she raced off for the first corner with Luna hot on her heels.

Mrs. Weasley turned to glower at Hope like it was her fault that she'd raised a hellion, but Hope really couldn't be bothered. She needed to get up to the seventh floor and start searching the Room for Ravenclaw's diadem and see if Ron and Hermione had the fangs from the Chamber.

So she ran out of the hall and away from the battle preparations, leaping up the stairs two at a time as the protective enchantments glowed outside the windows.

The battle for their freedom was upon them.
It was chaotic and the battle hadn't even started yet. Ginny lost count of all the people rushing past her (the lines between students, staff, former students, and allies blurred together), though, thankfully, her mother was not among them. That surprised her, Ginny would have figured that her wilful mother would have shot after her as soon as Hope had gone; so far Ginny was lucky that she was distracted.

"Your mum is going to be furious when we get back," Luna mentioned as Ginny knelt on the ground, painting the sigil with careful fingers.

"As if that could stop me!" Ginny scoffed, leaning back slightly as the finished rune glowed red briefly to show it had taken to the stone. "She'll probably be angrier at Hope for giving me a reason to stay and then running away."

Luna smiled as Ginny screwed the top onto the jar of blood and gathered the paintbrush and scrap of parchment up into her arms as they hurried to the next corner.

"Did you ever find out if your dad's alright?" Ginny asked Luna as they skidded to a stop after manoeuvring carefully along staircases and around rushing people.

"He was carted off to Azkaban after the Resistance released everyone," Luna said sadly, kneeling beside her friend. "The security is much tighter there now."

Ginny paused briefly to look at her. Luna's eyes had always been over-bright and earnest but now they seemed to be weary and aged.

"After tonight he'll be out of there," Ginny promised, turning back to her work. "Then the only people that'll be in there are the ones who've done crimes to earn those spots."

Luna gave her a soft smile in return. Ginny and Hope were a lot alike, Luna had come to see. There was as fine a line between justice and revenge as there was between light and dark and it was that line that the two danced along. "I'm sure he will," she agreed as the last blood rune was painted on the stone and then the pair rushed to a nearby window to see its work.

A faint crimson ring had surrounded the castle, circling it at all sides, cutting off the wooden viaduct that was so rarely used these days but was still a perfect entry point for when the protective enchantments broke.

The reddish glow emanated from the circle, slowly rising up to form a dome around the structure, keeping them safe within.

Professor McGonagall saw the blood shield go up and she couldn't help but be impressed by the effects of Salazar Slytherin's blood, no matter how diluted in Hope's veins it was. And then she saw what Ginny had seen.

"Let me get this straight, Professor," Neville said, tailing after her with a beaming Seamus, a stunned expression on his face. "You really want us to do this?"

"Would you prefer the Death Eaters entering through the viaduct when the shield fails, Mr. Longbottom?" Professor McGonagall asked him shrewdly with a beady eye.
"But you want us to blow it up?" Neville had to make sure. "Boom?"

"Boom!" Professor McGonagall agreed, withdrawing her wand to assist the professors in creating a shield beneath the one Hope's blood had produced. Once hers had fallen, it would at least buy them a bit of time before they were attacked.

"Wicked!" Neville grinned widely. "How should we do it, though?"

"Why don't you confer with Mr. Finnigan?" Professor McGonagall offered with a quirk of her eyebrow towards the Irish lad's whose face had been recently healed by Madame Pomfrey. "As I recall, he has a particular proclivity for pyrotechnics."

Seamus' smile turned feral. "I can bring it down," he declared.

"Professor!"

Ginny and Luna slipped on the ground as they high-tailed towards the Transfiguration professor, breathing in and out deeply before speaking.

"The viaduct!" Ginny gasped, jabbing a finger in the structure's general direction. "We'll be wide open when the barrier falls!"

Professor McGonagall opened her mouth to explain, but Seamus beat her to it.

"We're blowing up the bridge," Seamus told his girlfriend cheerfully. "Want to help?"

Seamus' desire to explode things would have been concerning if it wasn't so typical of him; he was rather well known for blowing things up, even by accident.

"Er-sure," Ginny said, taking his hand and making a small noise as he dragged her off in the direction of the viaduct in question.

Luna's eyes flickered towards Neville and she smiled to see they were already on her as Professor McGonagall strode past them to the stone courtyard where several other professors were gathered. There hadn't been much time for them to say or do anything since she had arrived with everyone else and the battle would be starting soon…

Neville extended his hands and Luna grasped them tightly, leaning up on the tip of her toes to kiss his lips softly before pressing her forehead against his.

"I'm going to help Professor Sprout with the defensive measures," he murmured. "Stay strong, alright?"

There was no need to ask her to stay safe, safety was gone, there was no point asking her. But Luna had a good head on her shoulders and she had deadly spells in her arsenal. She knew what she was doing as much as he did.

"I will," she said, her pale eyes gleaming in the darkness. "You too."

Neville gave her a grin in response before parting to head back into the castle and after a moment Luna followed suit in the opposite direction.

Hope rushed past a great deal of people, all of which were moving as fast as she was, but a flash of red had her pulling to an abrupt stop. "Hey, Percy!"
"Wha-? Oh, Hope!" The bookish Weasley paused to swing his head towards her, his horn-rimmed glasses askew on his nose and her robe falling off his shoulder. "You haven't seen Audrey, have you? I lost track of her—"

"Was Astoria still in the Great Hall when you left?" Hope asked, skating over his desire to find his girlfriend; they had more things to worry about.

"Astoria?" Percy screwed up his face in thought. "Small blonde girl with blue eyes? The one that was standing with Luna?"

"That's her," Hope sighed. "Did she go through the tunnel or stay behind?"

Astoria was one of the youngest in their group and soon after it had been decided that the students under the age of seventeen would leave, Dennis and Colin had disappeared (thus missing the epic shouting match between Ginny and her mother about staying) but Astoria had remained to assist the Matron.

"She stayed," Percy told her, regaining his breath a bit, "I think she's helping the healers set up the Great Hall for casualties. She knows some healing magic from her sister, I think she said."

Well, at least she knew where one of them was; Hope wasn't sure the Creeveys could really stay out of the line of fire, given their personalities. But Hope wasn't about to stop them, she wasn't their parents and they didn't have to listen to her, besides, they were very good with their spellmanship.

"Thanks," Hope said as she darted off once more, taking the steps of the staircase two at a time until she had a stitch in her side. By that time Neville and Professor Sprout had passed her with mandrakes that they would undoubtedly be releasing on the Death Eaters, Hagrid had reappeared with his crossbow, and the whole castle had trembled as though shaken by an earthquake.

But the enchantments were holding so far, so that was a relief.

Then Hope rounded the corner so fast that she collided with someone else and they were all knocked to the ground.

Hope rubbed at her head, moaning slightly in pain and grimacing before she realized who she'd run into.

"Well, you lot certainly took your time!" She said as she clamoured to her feet and then her eyes widened slightly. "What'd you do? Rip all the fangs from its skull?"

Hermione and Ron were still gathering up the sharp teeth that had spilled from their arms and it indeed seemed that they had done so.

"Well, we weren't sure how many we were going to need," Ron said helpfully.

Hope gave him a blank stare in return. "It took one fang to destroy the diary, what's the use of twenty?"

"And we destroyed the cup," Hermione informed her brightly, lifting the golden cup from her pocket. "And look! It repaired itself too!"

Hope took the cup with a frown. There did seem to be hardly a dent in its surface. "Maybe the founders imbued their objects with magic stronger than what takes to make Horcruxes?"

The castle shook again and Hermione and Ron nearly lost their grip on the fangs they had finally
managed to collect from the ground.

"I'm not sure your blood barrier is going to hold for much longer," Ron told her seriously, glancing out the window where flashes of light could be seen clashing against the reddish dome that surrounded the castle.

"No," Hope agreed, wincing at the sight of an obvious tear in the shield close to where the boathouse was. "So we should get moving."

There was a silent agreement between them as they started moving once more, rushing up another flight of stairs until they came out to where the Room of Requirement door was propped open with only two people left inside.

"Tonks!" Hope said, startled by the Auror's appearance at Hogwarts, though she really shouldn't have been; Tonks wasn't one to stay out of the line of fire. "What are you doing here? You should be with Teddy!"

"He's with my mum, he'll be fine," Tonks assured her, glancing between the three. "Is everyone alright?"

"So far," Hermione admitted grudgingly as the second woman stepped forward. Mrs. Longbottom was looking a little ragged since Hope had last seen her two years previously, a few greying strands had fallen from her tight bun and her worn witch's hat was perched awkwardly on her head.

"Is the passageway shut?" Hope asked her.

"Yes," Mrs. Longbottom said. "I was the last to come through. I sealed it, I think it unwise to leave it open now Aberforth has left his pub. Have you seen my grandson?"

"He ran past a bit back with some mandrakes," Hope said, "he's probably going to be on the front lines."

"Naturally," Mrs. Longbottom nodded approvingly. "Excuse me, I must go and assist him."

"I need to find Remus," Tonks added, making to follow after the older witch.

Ron, Hermione, and Hope shared identical expressions of exasperation; Hope got the feeling a lot of people gave her that look.

"Wait-wait, Tonks!"

Tonks blinked in surprise as Hope pressed a round bottle into her hand. "What's this?" she asked, curling her fingers around the bottle that held a golden liquid.

"Felix Felicis," Hope told her shortly, pulling the Room of Requirement's door shut so that it faded into nonbeing. "Take it and give the rest to Remus."

The Metamorph gaped at her; Felix Felicis was after all a quite rare and valuable potion. "I can't—"

"Don't argue with me!" Hope jabbed a finger towards her. "I've got about ten things to worry about without wondering if my godson's going to have any parents, go!"

Tonks dashed off and Ron arched an eyebrow towards Hope. "I thought you were saving that for something special," he mentioned.

"This is special," Hope said as the door reappeared to lead them into a different room. "Who knows
"if we're all going to last the night?"

"Hope," Hermione reproached.

"I'm just saying…"

Their voices echoed loudly in the silence of the room as they entered, gazing around at the large number of items piled within. Hermione's eyes fell to the numerous books while Ron's moved towards the large, discarded chess pieces from Professor McGonagall's challenge in their first year.

"Where is it?" Ron murmured, gripping his wand tightly as echoing yells emanated from beyond the door and out into the castle that gave a small shake of strain that no doubt signified that the barriers had broken.

"Shh!" Hope hissed, closing her eyes and tilting her head slightly, listening for the song. After a moment she opened her eyes. "There!"

She moved straight ahead, weaving around an assortment of items that had Ron and Hermione stumbling in an effort to follow her.

It seemed to take a long time before Hope came to a stop in front of a table that held several beautiful jewellery pieces and the same old tapestries that were as worn as they had been the year before. Hope's hands fell to the clasp on the small chest and she unhooked it to reveal what lay within.

"Oh, it's beautiful," Hermione murmured in awe.

"Is that really it?" Ron asked as Hope removed the seemingly delicate silver diadem encrusted with sapphires. "Ravenclaw's Diadem? It's not a fake?"

"I doubt it," Hope said with a smile, "but either way, it's the Horcrux."

"Hold it."

All three of them turned around, pointing their wands towards the speaker only to find there were three newcomers.

"Well, look who's come to fight with Daddy," Ron sneered.

Draco's eyes flitted briefly towards Ron before focusing on Hope. "Where's my wand, Potter?"

"Oh, well, I don't really know," Hope said thoughtfully, "maybe I snapped it…"

Fire flashed in his stony eyes at her words. "What?" he demanded.

Hope moved the diadem from where it was hidden behind her back to nudge it against Hermione.

"Well, it wasn't as strong as mine," Hope said, twirling her own between her fingers, stepping forward as Hermione managed to snag the diadem from her. "I can see you've borrowed someone else's, whose was it?"

"My mother's," Draco said stiffly.

"Shouldn't you three be off grovelling to your master?" Ron asked with disdain, keeping the attention off Hermione as much as possible.
"We're gonna be rewarded," Crabbe said with an almost childish glee. "We 'ung back, Potter. We decided not to go. Decided to bring you to 'im."

"Well, isn't that good of you," Hope said dryly.

"We was hiding in the corridor outside," Goyle interjected. "We can do Diss-lusion Charms now! And then you turned up right in front of us and we followed in and you said something about a die-dum! What's a die-dum?"

"Scatter on my mark," Hope muttered out of the corner of her mouth before raising her voice. "Nothing you need to worry about, I really don't think your tiny brain could handle it."

Anger twisted on his face, but before anything could be done, Hope flicked her wand, creating a small explosion that blew several items into the air, giving Hope, Ron, and Hermione cover to dart off in opposite directions.

"Stupefy!"

Draco just barely dodged Hermione's curse, attempting to fire off one of his own only to have it ricochet off Hermione's shield.

"Avada Kedavra!"

Ron dived to the ground, missing death by mere inches and Hope toppled into a table to aid it shooting over him and past her to create a black mark in one of the already quite burned couches around them.

"Expelliarmus!" Hope shouted before Draco could utter a curse towards Hermione and the wand flew out of his hand as sparks sprayed behind Hope where Ron was clashing his curses with Goyle.

"HOPE!" Hermione screamed suddenly, pointing towards Crabbe with the hand that was clutching the diadem.

Tendrils of flames had left his wand to flare up, hot and dangerous as Hope ran forward to grab Hermione's arm, pulling her back towards her.

"What the hell?!" Hope demanded.

"That's Fiendfyre!" Hermione said over the sound of the items within burning. "Cursed flames! If it touches us, we're dead!"

A scream of pain diverted them as Crabbe tried to outrun the fire he had created, but it had already burned through his lag and when he fell it consumed him entirely.

Hope gaped for a brief moment before pulling Hermione back to Ron as the flames got larger and came closer, ignoring how Draco and Goyle had done a runner despite the fact that the flames were blocking the exit.

"You wouldn't happen to have read anything on its countercurse, would you?" Ron asked weakly, coughing on the smoke.

"Do I have to know everything?" Hermione retorted a bit vexed.

"Er, Hermione, I don't want to rush you, but we are moments away from being incinerated," Hope mentioned.
Hermione screwed up her face thinking very quickly before her eyes widened in realization and gave her wand an elaborate swish. "Sisto Ignis!"

The flames paled in colour and shrank in size suddenly until it snuffed itself out and the three could breathe fresh air.

"If I ever complain of your studiousness," Ron said after a short pause, "you set me right and remind me of this day."

Hermione gave him a small laugh that was muffled quickly when he kissed her swiftly, and then her cheeks burned red.

Hope rolled her eyes to the ceiling as she took the diadem from Hermione's grip and pulled a fang from the beaded bag.

She raised her hand and brought it down to collide with one of the wings of the bird. The blackish substance that had left the locket when they destroyed the Horcrux seeped out of the metal. The diadem broke apart with a small scream before repairing itself.

The noise had forced the pair apart and Hermione's eyes were over-bright and Ron's ears red.

"This means that all that's left is the snake!" she said excitedly.

"Yeah, but he's not going anywhere without it," Ron said, "how're we supposed to get close to him?"

Hope said nothing, examining the diadem silently. The best course of action would probably be to hand herself over to Tom and kill the snake then, but Ron and Hermione would never agree to that.

The sound of coughing and retching behind them stalled her thoughts.

"What should we do with them?" Ron asked.

"We don't have time to worry about them," Hope disregarded as another explosion rocked the castle.

"And Malfoy's down a wand," Hermione added. "We've got bigger problems."

So they headed out of the room and down the stairs in a rush, ending up in the line of fire.

Hope jerked Ron's head down as Crucio flew past and then her heart stopped, because she had chanced a glance outside the window in time to see a ginger on a broom crash into the ground and cause a large explosion as soon as he collided.

No, no, it couldn't be!

"Hope! Get down!"

Hermione threw her weight against her friend and they both went down, missing the green curse just barely.

Ron blew the Death Eater back with a well-placed Dirumpor that sent a spray of blood through the air to paint the walls.

Hope didn't have time for this. It could have been Fred, it could have been George, either could be alive or dead, but she didn't have time to worry or grieve. They could be alive.
"Avada Kedavra!" she snapped towards the dark-hooded man behind them, trying to take them by surprise.

Most of the noise of spellfire was coming from ahead of them where Percy, Charlie, and Dean were releasing spells faster than Hope could blink. Dean was the one doing the most damage, but it hardly deterred the Death Eaters.

A few of the men had lost their hoods and one Hope recognized as Pius Thicknesse, the current Minister for Magic and Tom's puppet.

"Hello, Minister!" Percy yelled over the noise. "Did I mention I'm resigning?"

His next spell sent the wizard into the wall, a dribble of blood leaking from his mouth.

Charlie released a short laugh and even Dean had to smile before something went terribly wrong.

The wall exploded, showering them with stone and debris and sending them all flying.

Hope opened her eyes, her head throbbing from a cut on her temple that was staining the side of her face with blood and she had sustained several gashes to her arms.

"Hermione? Ron?" Hope croaked. "You alright!"

A keening sound of pain drew her short and she crawled in its general direction until she came across Hermione with blood soaking her jeans from a cut to her thigh with a few to her face, but that wasn't what was causing her pain, it was her arm; it was bent out of shape and the bone was protruding from her skin.

"Oh gods!" Hope gasped. "Er, hang on, let me see if this'll work…" She held her hand over Hermione's wounded arm. "Heal!"

Hermione screamed as the bone popped into place, the arm bending back into shape and the spot where bone had poked through healed.

Her friend gave a sigh of relief as most of the pain disappeared.

"Ron?" Hope called, standing up. "Charlie? Dean? Percy?"

Hermione heard a groan and turned back to where a groan had come from and she paled.

Dean was slumped to the wall bleeding profusely from a wound on his stomach, and while she attempted to stanch the flow of his blood with her own hands.

A tuft of ginger hair caught her eye and she knelt quickly, pushing the rubble from his torso and smearing the dust from his face.

Charlie Weasley's chest did not move, his eyes, barely open, did not blink, and his lips were still curved upwards in a slight smile. Hope drew her hand away from the back of his head, pulling back blood as she covered her mouth with her other hand, closing her eyes and trying to keep the bile from leaving her throat.

She hadn't known Charlie as well as his other siblings, but that didn't mean his death upset her any less.

"I'm sorry," she whispered softly, wiping the tears from her eyes, "I'm so sorry."
"Ron? Charlie?" Percy was stumbling about, blood painting his right arm that held his wand loosely and then he caught sight of Hope kneeling beside his older brother's fallen form and fear entered his face.

"No-no-no!" Percy lurched forward to his brother's side, shaking him so hard that his bloodied head lolled on the ground. "No! Charlie! No!"

An echoing boom distracted Hope as the recently unearthed Ron joined Percy, looking just as stunned, tears streaking trails against his grimy cheeks.

"Hope! I need you!" Hermione finally snapped, jerking her friend out of her reverie as the screams rang in her ears. But Hope still complied, stumbling towards Hermione dazedly to fall to her knees on the opposite side of Dean.

"His heart's barely beating," Hermione told her frantically. "And the blood won't stop, we need to get him to Angie."

"He won't last that long," Hope said, steeling her nerves, "we-we need to patch up his wound...help me straighten him out?"

Hermione and Hope moved Dean as gently as they could manage so that he was lying on his back.

"Dean? Can you hear me?" Hope asked him loudly and Dean stirred briefly, his bloodstained lips parting slightly.

Hope took the blood staining the floor and painted it across the back of Hermione's hand.

"What're you doing?" Hermione demanded, startled.

"Blood runes are stronger if they're carved into your skin, but blood works well enough," Hope murmured feverishly. "Ready?"

Hermione had seen Hope use blood magick more times than she could count, so she simply nodded stiffly as Hope placed her hand almost on top of Hermione's.

"Heal," they said together.

Dean breathed in sharply as the gaping wound knit itself shut and Hermione's shoulders sagged in relief.

"He's going to live?" Hermione breathed.

"If he's very lucky," Hope said and Hermione's eyes moved sadly to where Charlie lay unmoving, unaware of his two brothers sobbing over him.

Anger had sharpened Ron's mind and Hope had never seen the level of ferocity that he was displaying as they barreled through the corridor.

Percy had left moments before to chase down Rookwood who had been responsible for blowing out the corridor that had killed Charlie and Hope had chanced a glimpse into Tom's mind, showing her he was hiding in the Shrieking Shack (much to their aggravation because he wasn't even coming out to fight them).

They had ducked and dived and twirled out of the way of lethal curses thrown their way, but it was chaos. Though that should have been expected, it was a war after all, yet somehow it had come
unexpected to Hope.

The body count was something that wrenched at her heart more than she ever thought possible.

Anthony Goldstein was lying against the wall, his wand still clenched in his hand, blood staining his chest and his eyes wide.

Fenrir Greyback was kneeling over Lavender Brown's unmoving body before Hermione threw a curse at him, sending him flying out of a window.

The sound of explosive hexes hitting the ground shook the castle, and the Acromantulas scurried towards safety within the castle which distracted Death Eater and Hogwarts allies alike.

They only vanished after Hagrid made an appearance, taking him with them.

Abandoning their mission briefly, Hope ran after him screaming into the night. "HAGRID, WHAT'RE YOU DOING?!

Ron grabbed her around the waist, pulling her back and lifting her feet off the ground and keeping her out of the way as a giant made a swing at them before Grawp entered the picture, yelling fiercely and unintelligibly.

"We have to get to the Whomping Willow," he yelled over the noise. "Hagrid can take care of himself."

Hope nodded reluctantly and the three of them streaked across the ruined courtyard across the sprawling green towards where the Whomping Willow stood.

She couldn't think about Fred and George whose fates were unknown, or Charlie, Lavender, Anthony, and the countless others who had fallen.

She couldn't allow herself to consider the man she loved was dead, she refused.

She couldn't allow herself to consider her other friends being felled by death, she refused.

They came to a sudden stop just beyond the Whomping Willow that was for the most part clouded in the darkness with its branches swaying innocently in the wind.

Correction, Hope and Hermione stopped – Ron, on the other hand, lurched forward to throw himself against the knot of the tree before the branches could barely move towards him.

Hermione gaped at him as the tree stilled and Hope settled for simply staring at him.

"We haven't got all day." Ron snapped and they both moved forward to enter into the damp tunnel that led up into the shack.

Hope threw the cloak over herself as they took the tunnel that came out before the room that was occupied, hidden only behind a crate through which Hope peered as Ron and Hermione kept out of sight.

"I have a problem, Severus," Tom was saying and Hope scrutinized what little she could see. From what she could tell, it was just Tom, Snape, and Nagini who was resting comfortably around her master's shoulders.

"My Lord?" Snape asked in confusion.
Tom fingered Dumbledore's old wand – the Elder Wand – with his thin and pale fingers. Hope found it didn't look very at home in his grip.

"Why doesn't it work for me, Severus?" he asked softly and Nagini swivelled her head towards the dark-haired Death Eater, her slit-like eyes focused on him as her tongue flicked out from her lips.

"My – my Lord?" The incomprehension was evident. "I do not understand. You – you have performed extraordinary magic with that wand."

"No," Tom disagreed swiftly, disdain on his face. "I have performed my usual magic. I am extraordinary, but this wand... no. It has not revealed the wonders it has promised. I feel no difference between this wand and the one I procured from Ollivander all those years ago."

Hope gritted her teeth together, pressing a hand to her forehead silently, trying to soothe away the pain, but it didn't help; Tom was too angry, too furious.

"No difference," Tom breathed.

Hope could practically sense how this was going to end, and it wasn't going to be good for Snape. She had never liked him to begin with, but Tom's wrath wasn't something you wanted to experience in your lifetime.

"I have thought long and hard, Severus," Tom continued as though there wasn't a tension hanging in the air. "Do you know why I have called you back from battle?"

"No, my Lord," Snape said, inclining his head in respect, "but I beg you will let me return. Let me find Potter."

"You sound like Lucius," Tom disregarded him. "Neither of you understands Potter as I do. She does not need finding. Potter will come to me. I knew her weakness you see, her one great flaw. She will hate watching the others struck down around her, knowing that it is for her that it happens. She will want to stop it at any cost. She will come."

Hope glared so hard at his pale face that she dearly wished he could feel it. Unfortunately, he wasn't lying. It was irritating how well he knew her.

"But my Lord, she might be killed accidentally by someone other than yourself—" Snape pressed only to be cut off quickly.

"My instructions to the Death Eaters have been perfectly clear," Tom said sharply. "Capture Potter. Kill her friends – the more, the better – but do not kill her... But it is of you that I wished to speak, Severus, not Hope Potter. You have been very valuable to me. Very valuable."

Hope's jaw clenched as he mentioned killing her friends, but she dutifully kept her silence, listening and watching intently.

"My Lord knows I seek only to serve him," Snape said in a humble manner that didn't suit him. "But- Let me go and find the girl, my Lord. Let me bring her to you. I know I can—"

"I have told you, no!" Tom's voice echoed around them and Hope couldn't tell if that was due to his magic or simply amplified in his anger. "My concern at the moment, Severus, is what will happen when I finally meet the girl!"

Snape had been moving around up to this point and now Tom's scarlet eyes fell to him.
"My Lord, there can be no question, surely –?" Snape prompted.

"—but there is a question, Severus." Tom smirked. "There is… Why did both the wands I have used fail when directed at Hope Potter?"

Apparently that fact still frustrated him, but Hope had nearly forgotten about it.

"I –I cannot answer that, my Lord," Snape said, his voice just a hint of how uncomfortable he was with the line of questioning.

Hope frowned; did he know why all other wands failed?

"Can't you?" Tom asked coldly, suppressing his rage effortlessly. "My wand of Yew did everything of which I asked it, Severus, except to kill Hope Potter. Twice it failed. Ollivander told me under torture of the twin cores, told me to take another's wand. I did so, but Lucius' wand shattered upon meeting Potter's."

"I –I have no explanation, my Lord," Snape said, but Hope could tell that Tom had long since stopped believing a word he said.

"I sought a third wand, Severus," Tom said, tracing a finger along the side of the carved elder wood. "The Elder Wand, the Wand of Destiny, the Deathstick. I took it from its previous master. I took it from the grave of Albus Dumbledore."

The words seemed to unfaze Snape, but Hope thought his sallow skin looked nearly translucent, as though the reminder that he killed Dumbledore made him sick.

"All this long night when I am on the brink of victory, I have sat here," Tom murmured, "wondering, wondering, why the Elder Wand refuses to be what it ought to be, refuses to perform as legend says it must perform for its rightful owner... and I think I have the answer."

Hope's eyes widened behind her hiding place; was he talking about the bit that required the previous owner to be dead?

"Perhaps you already know it?" Tom mused, tilting his head slightly to the side in a manner similar to Hope. "You are a clever man, after all, Severus. You have been a good and faithful servant, and I regret what must happen."

"My Lord—" Snape said quickly.

"The Elder Wand cannot serve me properly, Severus, because I am not its true master. The Elder Wand belongs to the wizard who killed its last owner," Tom said, confirming Hope's fears. "You killed Albus Dumbledore. While you live, Severus, the Elder Wand cannot truly be mine."

"My Lord!" Snape brought up his wand to protect himself, but it wouldn't be enough.

"It cannot be any other way," Tom told him remorselessly. "I must master the wand, Severus. Master the wand, and I master Potter at last."

And then he flicked his wand and a gash appeared on Snape's throat, not yet enough to kill, but enough to entice the serpent who had slipped from Tom's shoulders to slither across the ground to where Snape had fallen, pressing a hand to his wound.

"Nagini," Tom murmured before switching to Parseltongue. "Kill."
Nagini shot herself forward, her fangs stabbing into Snape's flesh not once, not twice, but three consecutive times. Without the antidote to her venom, death would be swift (Hope remembered how touch-and-go it had been when Mr. Weasley was attacked).

"I regret it," he said without feeling before Nagini returned to his shoulders and he disappeared in a loud crack.

Hope waited a brief second before pushing the crate aside and pulling herself into the shack.

Severus Snape was half-delirious when he saw a blurry head of dark red hair and green eyes approaching him. He knew it was her, the daughter of his nemesis and his closest friend. She looked more like her everyday and it had been like looking on a ghost when she had strode into the Great Hall earlier.

He knew it was her but for a brief moment he imagined it was Lily beside him, Lily with her kindness, goodness, and sincerity.

But Snape still had a job to do, even if he would be dead soon.

He grasped her jacket as tightly as he could manage with his weakening grip.

"Take…it," Snape forced out with difficulty, gasping for breath, "take…it."

The memories were leaking out of whichever opening they chose, from his eyes, mouth, and ears and the memories flashed before his eyes as though he was reliving them all over again.

He could hear the sound of a flask being opened and a hand covered his.

Lily's daughter was indulging him one last time and her eyes were the last thing Snape saw before he simply floated away.
The Death of Hope Potter

George could feel the blood wet and hot against his skin and his ear was ringing (the only one he had left) as he stumbled through the wreckage. He didn't seem to be majorly injured, but there was a painful throbbing that had enveloped him.

He tried to ignore it as best as he could manage.

"Fred!" He yelled his brother's name. "Fred! Where are you?"

A soft grunt directed him to a rock pile that his twin had landed apparently quite painfully on.

"Oh, I think I broke something," Fred groaned as he sat up. His face was almost recognizable with the cuts and grime smeared on his face. He didn't look as bloody as George was sure he looked, but he certainly seemed to be in more pain.

George fell to the ground to roll under a stray *Avada Kedavra*, firing off a curse blindly in the direction the Killing Curse had come from. He didn't know or care if it hit as he crawled over to his brother.

"Can you move?" he asked.

Fred's face contorted in pain as he gripped his leg. "I can barely feel my leg," he said through gritted teeth, "unless I move. Ooh, that's painful."

"Well, we have to move," George said shortly. After all, they were still in the line of fire, but then suddenly even that didn't matter as Voldemort's voice echoed overhead as though it was descending from the heavens and just like that, all fighting ceased.

"You have fought valiantly," his voice resonated around them. "Lord Voldemort knows how to value bravery. Yet you have sustained heavy losses. If you continue to resist me, you will all die, one by one. I do not wish this to happen. Every drop of magical blood spilled is a loss and a waste. Lord Voldemort is merciful. I command my forces to retreat immediately."

George and Fred shared a glance. *Merciful?* That was likely.

"You have one hour. Dispose of your dead with dignity. Treat your injured...I speak now, Hope Potter, directly to you. You have permitted your friends to die for you rather than face me yourself. I shall wait for one hour in the Forbidden Forest. If, at the end of that hour, you have not come to me, have not given yourself up, then battle recommences. This time, I shall enter the fray myself, Hope Potter, and I shall find you, and I shall punish every last man, woman, and child who has tried to conceal you from me. One hour."

The air was filled with the cracks of Apparition as the Death Eaters disappeared from Hogwarts.

"I think it's safe to say that your girlfriend hasn't given herself up yet," Fred muttered.

"Yet being the operative word," George added, looping Fred's arm over his shoulder and pulling him upright with a yelp of pain.

"Fred! George! Where are you?"

"Was that Ginny?" Fred asked, squinting his eyes.
"Ginny!" George raised his voice slightly. "We're over here!"

There was an influx of people struggling back towards the large doors that led into the castle and into the Great Hall, some helping their injured companions, others carrying the dead and sobbing profusely, but Ginny managed to make it past them and run to them.

Her eyes were red from crying and her freckles stood out on her face that was so pale, and that was what concerned George the most.

"You're alive," she burst out in relief, pressing a hand to her heart as though it was threatening to leap out of her chest. "Oh, thank Merlin, you're alive!"

"Who isn't?" Fred asked, fear clenching around his heart.

Ginny's words caught in her throat and her lips trembled as the tears she tried to hold back fell freely. "It's-its Charlie," she cried, trying to stifle her sobs behind her hand as her brothers stared, at first too shocked to breathe and then reality came crashing down on them.

Hermione and Ron entered the Great Hall without Hope. She couldn't bear it; she couldn't bear to look upon all the lives she had cost, she couldn't bear to see who she counted as friend was no longer breathing.

She was trembling and she could barely breathe as she heard Mrs. Weasley's wail upon the discovery that her second child was dead.

Fingers clenched tightly around the flask that held the memories Snape had given her as he lay dying. And she took one step back and then another before turning away, taking the steps up to the Headmaster's Office slowly, half desiring for answers and half fearing what she would learn.

Her footsteps echoed in the silence, but all she could her was her heart racing, the sound thudding in her ears.

She strode up to the gargoyle that guarded the small spiral staircase, expecting it to question her for a password she did not have, but it did not. Instead, as though sensing the emotions simmering just beneath the surface of her skin, it moved swiftly to the side, permitting her safe passage.

The office was nearly as dark as it was outside with only a few candles lit to give light of any sort.

Dumbledore's various silver instruments had remained undisturbed over the past year and all the portraits were void of their occupants who had gone, no doubt to watch the battle unfolding from other portraits strewn throughout the castle.

The silence helped; she was sure that any hint of a noise might set her off. Hope swallowed thickly as she unlatched the cabinet that held the Pensieve that Hope had journeyed into many times the previous year.

She unscrewed the flask's top and tilted it, the silvery-blue substance pooling into the basin, their essence glimmering faintly in the darkness. Hope didn't even hesitate as she bent her head forward to touch the contents of the basin and then she was falling forward, down, down, down…

Snape was young, a miniaturized image of his current self and he was hiding behind some bushes to avoid being seen by the two girls swinging on the swing set, even if they were the only ones playing on the playground.
One was red-haired with green eyes that crinkled as she laughed while her sister had blonde hair and wore a sour expression.

The red-haired girl swung her swing so high that one might worry that she might do herself damage if she fell.

A similar thought had occurred to her sister, it seemed. "Lily, don't do it!"

But her words came too late and were of no concern, for as soon as Lily released her grip on the swing, it was almost as though she had flown through the air to land lightly on her feet with a great laugh.

"Mummy told you not to!" Petunia berated her younger sister as she finally slowed her swing to stomp towards her. "Mummy said you weren't allowed, Lily!"

"But I'm fine," Lily disagreed, still exhilarated from her short leap. "Tuney, look at this. Watchwhat I can do."

Her sister's nervousness at Lily's callous display of magic was obvious but that didn't stop Lily from showing her her next trick. She held a flower out to Petunia, the petals curling inwards and outwards.

"Stop it!" Petunia cried taking a step back.

"It's not hurting you," Lily countered before dropping the flower to the ground.

"It's not right," Petunia said, half-uneasy, half-doubtful. "How do you do it?"

"It's obvious, isn't it?"

Both girls started at the voice as Snape stepped out from behind the bushes. Petunia ran for cover, but Lily stood her ground.

"What's obvious?" Lily asked dumbfounded.

"You're," Snape swallowed briefly, "you're a witch."

Lily recoiled, stung by his words as though there was nothing more insulting than calling someone a witch. "That's not a very nice thing to say to somebody!" she bit out, striding off after her sister who had begun headed for home.

"No! Wait!" Snape cried, his cheeks alight with flush that could have been from embarrassment or nervousness as he trailed after them. "You are. You are a witch. I've been watching you for a while. But there's nothing wrong with that. My mum's one, and I'm a wizard."

The idea seemed to humour Petunia who laughed at his words. "Wizard!" she guffawed in incredulity. "I know who you are. You're that Snape boy! Why have you been spying on us?"

"Haven't been spying," Snape said with a scowl towards her, his lips curling into a sneer. "Wouldn't spy on you, anyways, you're a Muggle."

The disdain for the word could not have been mistaken and Petunia could see she was being insulted and she wasn't going to stand for it.

"Lily, come on," she said, "we're leaving!"
And Lily followed after her without a glance back to Snape whose shoulders sagged in disappointment.

Lily was playing with a stray tree branch between her fingers, picking at its leaves until it was bare as Snape sat across from her.

"...and the Ministry can punish you if you do magic outside school, you get letters," Snape was telling her.

"But I have done magic outside school!" Lily fretted nervously.

"We're all right," Snape assured her quickly. "We haven't got wands yet. They let you off when you're a kid and you can't help it. But once you're eleven and they start training you, then you've got to go careful."

Lily flicked the branch thoughtfully for a brief moment. "It is real, isn't it?" She pressed. "It's not a joke? Petunia says you're lying to me. Petunia says there isn't a Hogwarts. It is real, isn't it?"

"It's real for us," Snape told her with certainty. "Not for her. But we'll get the letter, you and me."

"Really?" Lily breathed in excitement.

"Definitely."

"And will it really come by owl?" Lily asked eagerly. The prospect of such a thing occurring seemed to excite her even more.

"Normally," Snape acquiesced with a shrug. "But you're Muggle-born, so someone from the school will have to come and explain to your parents."

"Does it make a difference, being Muggle-born?" Lily asked apprehensively and Snape lifted his gaze to look open her, her green eyes bright and excited and her fair cheeks flushed.

"No," he decided after a short silence. "It doesn't make any difference."

"Good." Lily's tense shoulders loosened, relieved at this bit of information. Her attention drifted away before returning swiftly. "How are things at your house?"

His eyebrows pulsed together and his lips drew down as he thought of his parents. "Fine," he said shortly.

"They're not arguing anymore?" Lily asked curiously.

"Oh yes, they're arguing," Snape corrected, digging his fingers into the ground and shredding the grass between them. "But it won't be that long and I'll be gone."

"Doesn't your dad like magic?" Lily asked with a frown of her own.

"He doesn't like anything, much," Snape snorted.

"Severus?"

"Yeah?" Snape asked with the slightest of smiles.

"Tell me about the dementors again," Lily said, her eyes intent.
"What d'you want to know about them for?" Snape asked her, his dark eyes pools of confusion.

"If I use magic outside school—" Lily began apprehensively.

"They wouldn't give you to the dementors for that!" Snape appeared startled at the prospect. "Dementors are for people who do really bad stuff. They guard the wizard prison, Azkaban. You're not going to end up in Azkaban, you're too—"

Whatever she was was never discovered as they were interrupted by Petunia and Snape caused a branch to break off above her with a burst of accidental magic, leaving Snape alone as Lily went off to comfort her sister.

"I'm sorry," he said as soon as the portrait hole opened to allow him to see an incensed Lily Evans, fifteen years old and with green eyes flashing with anger.

"I'm not interested," she said coolly.

"I'm sorry!" Snape insisted.

"Save your breath," Lily replied frigidly. "I only came out because Mary told me you were threatening to sleep here."

"I was," Snape said quickly. "I would have done. I never meant to call you Mudblood, it just—"

"Slipped out?" Lily demanded incredulously, crossing her arms as her scowl deepened. "It's too late. I've made excuses for you for years. None of my friends can understand why I even talk to you. You and your precious little Death Eater friends ¿ you see, you don't even deny it! You don't even deny that's what you're all aiming to be! You can't wait to join You-Know-Who, can you?"

Snape wanted to deny it, but the words wouldn't leave his throat, too tainted with the lie.

"I can't pretend anymore," Lily sighed. "You've chosen your way, I've chosen mine."

"No— listen," Snape said frantically, "I didn't mean—"

"—to call me Mudblood?" Lily finished for him. "But you call everyone of my birth Mudblood, Severus. Why should I be any different?"

And with that she slammed the portrait shut in his face.

Snape was older now and had fallen to his knees wandless and with fear pumping through his veins in the absence of blood.

"Don't kill me!" he pleaded.

"That was not my intention," Dumbledore said swiftly as he approached, his wand tip glowing, making his beard streak silver and his spectacles reflect the light eerily. "Well, Severus? What message does Lord Voldemort have for me?"

"No —no message," Snape stumbled over his words, white-faced and terrified. "—I'm here on my own account! I —I come with a warning —no, a request —please—"

Dumbledore's eyes narrowed as he took in the wizard who had once been his student. "What request could a Death Eater make of me?" he inquired.
"The –the prophecy...the prediction...Trelawney..." Snape gasped out.

"Ah, yes," Dumbledore said conversationally, but he did not relax his grip on his wand, nor did he loosen his stance. "How much did you relay to Lord Voldemort?"

"Everything –everything I heard!" Snape said fearfully, his eyes bulging in their sockets. "That is why –it is for that reason –he thinks it means Lily Evans!"

"The prophecy did not refer to a woman," said Dumbledore, "but a girl, a child born at the end of July."

"You know what I mean!" Snape snapped. "He thinks it means her daughter, he is going to hunt her down –kill them all—"

"If she means so much to you," Dumbledore spoke coolly, his eyes glinting beyond his spectacles as the leaves rustled in the trees above them, "surely Lord Voldemort will spare her? Could you not ask for mercy for the mother, in exchange for the daughter?"

"I have –I have asked him—" Snape admitted before he was cut off.

"You disgust me," Dumbledore said, looking at him with so much distaste that Snape flinched. "You do not care, then, about the deaths of her husband and child? They can die, as long as you have what you want?"

Emotions roiled inside Snape, but at last he spoke. "Hide them all, then," he said, his voice broken. "Keep her –them— safe. Please."

"And what will you give me in return, Severus?" Dumbledore inquired of him.

"In –in return?" The thought had never occurred to Snape. "Anything."

Snape appeared to have aged very much in a short amount of time. His dark hair hung over his face and his eyes were ringed red.

"I thought...you were going...to keep her...safe..." he whispered.

"She and James put their faith in the wrong person," Dumbledore said regretfully. "Rather like you, Severus. Weren't you hoping that Lord Voldemort would spare her?"

Snape swallowed thickly, his heart throbbing in his chest.

"Her girl survives," Dumbledore informed him. "Her daughter lives. She takes after her mother very much in her appearance. She inherited her mother's red hair and her eyes. You remember the shape and colour of Lily Evans's eyes, I am sure?"

Something snapped inside him and suddenly he was yelling. "DON'T! Gone...dead..."

"Is this remorse, Severus?" Dumbledore asked in open curiosity, interlocking his fingers.

"I wish...I wish I were dead..." Snape choked.

"And what use would that be to anyone?" Dumbledore disregarded, his words cutting like ice. "If you loved Lily Evans, if you truly loved her, then your way forward is clear."

"What –what do you mean?" Snape asked, numbed by his pain.
"You know how and why she died. Make sure it was not in vain. Help me protect Lily's daughter."

"She does not need protection," Snape refuted. "The Dark Lord has gone—"

"The Dark Lord will return," Dumbledore informed him quietly, "and Hope Potter will be in terrible danger when he does."

There was no way he couldn't say yes, it was Lily's daughter after all.

"Very well. Very well. But never—never tell, Dumbledore! This must be between us! Swear it! I cannot bear...especially Potter's daughter...I want your word!"

"My word, Severus, that I shall never reveal the best of you?" Dumbledore seemed to be exhausted by his request. "If you insist..."

"—mediocre, arrogant as her father, a determined rule-breaker, delighted to find herself famous, attention-seeking and impertinent, never listens to instructions, appalling attitude—"

"Yes, she is a bit of a puzzle, isn't she? Solving her will be no easy task, but some might say you only see what you expect to see, Severus."

"—Yet you confide much more in a girl who is incapable of Occlumency, whose magic is mediocre, and who has a direct connection into the Dark Lord's mind!"

Snape was irritated, his eyes flashing as he pressed his hands against Dumbledore's desk, ignoring Fawkes' soft trill from his perch.

"Voldemort fears that connection," Dumbledore corrected him. "Not so long ago he had one small taste of what truly sharing Hope's mind means to him. It was pain such as he has never experienced. He will not try to possess Hope again, I am sure of it. Not in that way."

"I don't understand," Snape said in incomprehension.

"Lord Voldemort's soul, maimed as it is, cannot bear close contact with a soul like Hope's," Dumbledore explained. "Like a tongue on frozen steel, like flesh in flame—"

"Souls? We were talking of minds!" Snape countered.

"In the case of Hope and Lord Voldemort, to speak of one is to speak of the other."

Dumbledore sighed sadly. "They are more alike than I'd like to admit, but I have only myself to blame...but Hope must do something, what, she must not know, not until the last moment, not until it is necessary, otherwise how could she have the strength to do what must be done?"

"But what must she do?" Snape demanded.

"That is between Hope and me. Now listen closely, Severus. There will come a time—after my death—do not argue, do not interrupt! There will come a time when Lord Voldemort will seem to fear for the life of his snake."

"For Nagini?" This information came as a surprise to Snape.

"Precisely," Dumbledore smiled tightly. "If there comes a time when Lord Voldemort stops sending that snake forth to do his bidding, but keeps it safe beside him under magical protection, then, I
think, it will be safe to tell Hope."

"Tell her what?" Snape asked, his voice strained.

The aged headmaster leaned back in his chair, weary with what he was going to tell him. "Tell her that on the night Lord Voldemort tried to kill her, when Lily cast her own life between them as a shield, the Killing Curse rebounded upon Lord Voldemort, and a fragment of Voldemort's soul was blasted apart from the whole, and latched itself onto the only living soul left in that collapsed building. Part of Lord Voldemort lives inside Hope, and it is that which gives her a connection with Lord Voldemort's mind that she has never understood. And while that fragment of soul, unmissed by Voldemort, remains attached to and protected by Hope, Lord Voldemort cannot die."

"So the girl...the girl must die?" Snape asked quietly.

"And Voldemort himself must do it, Severus," Dumbledore added. "That is essential."

Snape couldn't quite get the words out, disbelief colouring his voice. "I thought...all those years...that we were protecting the girl for her. For Lily."

"We have protected her because it has been essential to teach her, to raise her, to let her try her strength," Dumbledore replied smoothly. "Meanwhile, the connection between them grows ever stronger, a parasitic growth. Sometimes I have thought she suspects it herself. If I know her, she will have arranged matters so that when she does set out to meet her death, it will truly mean the end of Voldemort."

Disgust curdled in Snape's stomach. "You have kept her alive so that she can die at the right moment? You've been raising her like a pig for slaughter!"

Hope's knees trembled with the strain of keeping herself upright as she braced herself against the wall, retching.

It was all so clear to her now, the connection between her and Tom, how she could sense the Horcruxes...it was because she was one as well.

She wiped her mouth, gasping for breath as she released gut-wrenching sobs. The whole day had gone from bad to worse. She'd lost friends as well as allies and she had become the thing she hunted.

"It's alright," a soft murmur came from behind her, and Luna came into view, a slice across her cheek and with eyes that understood so much.

She hugged Hope tightly, smoothing her hands down her back in a gentle motion that she must have picked up from her mother. Hope's tears soaked her shoulder as she attempted to control her breathing.

"I-Is George—?" Hope couldn't ask the question completely, her throat was too clogged with emotion.

"He's alright," Luna told her once she had calmed enough to release her. "Fred had a badly broken leg, Oliver's worse off with his burns, but Madam Pomfrey says those'll heal in a few days."

"What about Remus and Tonks?" Hope rasped, wiping at her eyes.

"They're lucky, really lucky," Luna said thoughtfully. "Remus has some internal damage and Tonks has to regrow the bones in her left arm, but they're going to be fine."
Hope sighed in relief, bracing her hands against her knees. "Thank the gods," she murmured. She could still see Charlie's stilled body, Anthony's bloodied chest, and Lavender's sightless eyes.

They were dead at was all her fault.

She could feel more tears welling in her eyes.

"You're going, aren't you?" Luna asked quietly. "You're going to hand yourself over."

Hope smeared the tears across her cheeks, taking in a deep shaking breath.

"If I don't, you lot won't be able to kill him," Hope said, inhaling sharply through her nose. "I'm trusting you to finish what he started."

Luna blinked furiously. "We won't stop until he is nothing more than a bad memory."

Hope smiled wetly as she looked upon Luna who had grown the most out of the Resistance. "Thank you," she said, "will you walk with me…i-I'm not sure I can make it on my own."

Luna locked her fingers with Hope's in a way that spoke volumes of her character. Hope wasn't sure anyone else would have been alright with her walking to her death, but Luna was different, she understood without knowing all the details.

Hope's wand had been returned to her arm holster, hidden from view just as her cloak was and her hand instead gripped tightly the golden snitch that Dumbledore had gifted her as they descended the stairs, past the broken courtyard to the sprawling green land that had been decimated in the attack.

There were several stray bodies, but only one Hope recognized.

"Not Colin," she murmured horrified, causing the young man kneeling beside him to look up. Even in the darkness she could tell it was Neville.

"He, er, must've gotten past the others at the Great Hall when they tried to make them take the tunnel," Neville said, clearing his throat as Luna and Hope stopped and Hope fell to her knees.

In some ways Colin's cold corpse was far worse than any of the other ones had seen up to this point. Colin had been one of the most eager of the DA and he had been a constant—sometimes irritating—fixture in her life. She remembered how his whole countenance brightened when he smiled and how relentless he was.

Hope pressed a hand to his cheek, her renewed tears falling to his bloodless cheeks. "I'm so sorry," she choked in a whisper.

Luna was still standing behind her with a hand pressed to her mouth. Colin had been one of her classmates, after all.

"Hope," she said gently after a moment, nudging her back and Hope knew she was running out of time.

"Right," Hope whispered, standing swiftly, "I need to get going."

"Get going?" Neville repeated, looking from Hope to his girlfriend. "You're not thinking of handing yourself over?"

"I need you to do something for me," Hope said, not giving him an answer.
"Anything," he said and Hope was distantly reminded of Snape desiring to protect her mother.

"Tom has a snake, Nagini, he hardly goes anywhere without it," Hope said carefully, "Ron and Hermione are going to try to kill it, but…"

Images flashed before her eyes, products of her own fears, of Hermione and Ron unmoving with their blood pooling around them.

"—but if they can't," Hope said thickly, "I need you to."

"Please don't go," Neville breathed, his eyes imploring her. "We need you."

Hope looked worse for wear, the side of her face caked with dried blood with a number of cuts and bruises littering her body. Her long hair was tangled and her eyes sad, tired, and red from her tears.

Hope smile at him, but he could see how much she was holding back. "You don't need me," she promised. "You can make a difference as much as I could, Neville…I am proud—" She swallowed, the tears trailing down her cheeks, "—to be your god-sister, and I know they're proud too."

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

Nothing could stop him from embracing her tightly as if he wished to hold her there for eternity to keep her from moving forward. But he had to release her to greet Death on her own.

Luna's grip on her was vice-like as they approached the edge of the forest.

"Can you tell George something for me?" Hope asked her once they'd reached the point where they had to part.

"Of course," Luna said.

A fond smile past Hope's lips. "Tell him…I wish we could have had more time, but he made my life complete…Tell him I love him more than all the stars in the sky."

Luna nodded, rubbing at an eye from which a tear had escaped.

"And you better name a kid after me," Hope said suddenly, "'cause I'm fucking worth it."

Luna released a surprised laugh that faded quickly as Hope turned away to stride purposefully into the forest without a goodbye…but Hope had never been good at those.

The blonde-haired Ravenclaw wrapped her arms around herself, murmuring the lullaby she had sung under her breath throughout her mother's funeral surface to send her off to the heavens peacefully. But her voice shook too much for the words to be made out.

Hope's hand was weighted down with the black opal that had been hidden in the Snitch, the real one, the one Dumbledore had unrightfully stolen from her.

It worked, the Resurrection Stone, they were with her now, like an honour guard. Her parents and Sirius to Cedric, Justin, and those that had fallen in the chaos of the battle in the night.

Their presence kept her stance straight and strengthened her resolve.

She stepped silently through the forest, remembering the trail distantly as leading to the place where she had accidentally Flashed in her first year, the first place she had come face to face with Tom.
"No sign of her, my Lord," a familiar voice grunted and Hope imagined a man with a stump for an arm from her curse from fifth year.

"I thought she would come," Tom mused, "I expected her to come…I was, it seems…mistaken."

"There's a first time for everything," Hope said loudly as she stepped into the clearing. "But you weren't wrong."

Red eyes met green and Hope couldn't look away, even as Hagrid, who must have been caught by the Death Eaters as the Acromantulas dragged him away, yelled for her.

A smile twisted across his lips and he breathed her name. "Hope Potter," he said, "The Girl Who Lived."

Hope closed her eyes and the last thing she thought of as light flashed beyond her eyelids was of George's smile and Ron's laughter and how Hermione's eyes glimmered when she was amused.

And then it was all over.

Hope Potter was dead.
Death Is Not the End

George heard Luna's words, but he couldn't accept them.

There was no possible way that Hope Potter, fiery and fierce and dangerous Hope Potter could be gone, dead like Charlie and countless others.

"No," he said, shaking his head quickly, "you're wrong, Hope wouldn't do that, she wouldn't give up —!"

"Hope didn't give up," Luna said somberly, her grey eyes downcast. "She trusted that we'd be able to finish the job without her…she trusted in us."

Remus' face was tight in grief, his eyes hidden behind his hand as his shoulders shook and Tonks held him tightly with her good arm, looking just as bad.

It was Hermione and Ron that were the worse off. They had gone swiftly past the denial that George was in to unquenchable sorrow.

Hermione's sobs were loud and echoing, only silenced by Ron's chest as he kept her to him with a tight grip, his face twisted as his own tears fell. It was a kind of sadness that was painful to look at.

The knowledgenumbed George more than anything else in the world, that Hope would not walk through the great doors again, that she would never smile or laugh or offer a witty comment.

George pressed his hands into his eyes, feeling the tears forming at long last, his heart throbbing painfully in his chest.

All those times they'd talked about their future…getting a house that offered privacy, him popping the question to her once Voldemort was gone…maybe even children…he had never considered that they wouldn't be making it out alive. Hope had always been too good, too good to be killed, but walking to her death was a bit typical.

She wouldn't have wanted a fuss and she wouldn't have been stopped even if George had been there. She was too headstrong for that.

George felt as though something had ripped him apart from the inside and there was no returning from a pain so great as that.

His eyes fell to Charlie whose face was so peaceful that he might have been sleeping, if not for the blood and the pallor of his skin.

Hadn't they lost enough already?

Hope's face was pressed against something, something that felt like grass and she opened her eyes.

She was surprised to find herself alone in a meadow of yellowing grass. Hope sat up, looking around in confusion. This was definitely not where she had been a few moments ago. There was no Tom, no Death Eaters, no wailing Hagrid…nothing but silence.

The wind whispered faintly as she stood, looking around for any sign of life, but there didn't seem to be much. She took a step forward only to stop suddenly at the sight of something so revolting that
she could hardly look at it.

The form was small and curled in on itself, red and bloodied and raw-looking, moaning with every breath. Hope had never seen such a thing.

"It is alright to be sickened by it."

Hope jumped at the sudden unfamiliar voice behind her. The voice was deep and rich like the earth and suited the man it belonged to, though calling him a man might have been pushing it just a little.

His eyes were darker than black and his bronze hair fell loosely around his fair face, his wings of midnight protruding from the back of his toga.

He was beautiful and Hope recognized him from back when she was ten.

"Thanatos," she murmured his name in awe.

"Well met, Hope Potter," the god of death said, his lips curling into a slight smile. "We have been expecting you."

"You have?" Hope couldn't help but ask as the god gestured for her to walk with him. "I-I don't understand…anything…I wanted to live, but I let myself die…and I still feel sorry for him." That was the most aggravating part about the whole matter. She both hated him and pitied him; there was no in between.

"You have known tragedy, Hope Lily Potter," Thanatos said, his dark solid onyx eyes on hers and Hope couldn't for the life of her look away. "But true tragedy occurs when you strip away all that makes you human, and that is why you pity Tom. Because of all your flaws and the magic you use, you have never once considered ripping yourself apart and putting yourself back together in a way that you would deem better."

"You're talking about his soul," Hope said.

"In part," her ancestor conceded, "however, the effects of his Dark Magick altered his body as well, just as the Ancient Arts have left their marks on you."

One of his thin pale fingers brushed along the inside of her wrist, over the rune for 'heal' and the touch was colder than ice.

"But, I don't understand," Hope said, her eyebrows joining together in confusion. "I meant to die…Doesn't that make me dead, as well?"

Thanatos cocked his head slightly to the side, his loose bronze locks rustling at the move. "Hope," he said, "do you understand how you survived the Avada Kedavra?"

"My mother died for me," Hope said automatically, "her sacrifice protected me."

"Yes," Thanatos agreed, "Lily Potter's final act caused Tom's Killing Curse to backfire and destroy most of him, creating a Horcrux inside you by mere accident—"

"Yes, yes," Hope said impatiently, "but am I dead?"

The death god's lips twisted upwards slightly. "I would rather say not."

Hope scowled at him. "You must work hard at making no sense."
Thanatos released a deep laugh that resounded in the silence.

"Your actions in going to Tom defenceless, intending to be killed, only ripped away the very thing that had attached itself to you sixteen years ago," Thanatos explained. "Your actions purified your soul."

"But I'm not dead?" Hope asked flummoxed.

"How can you be dead if the protection of your blood resides within both of you?" the god asked and Hope's eyes widened. "Your blood was taken from you when you were fourteen, he took it believing it would strengthen him more than anyone else's, simply because your existence was an impossibility, it was the blood of a child who had survived the Killing Curse. In doing so, he took Lily's enchantment unto himself, keeping the both of you alive."

Hope mouthed wordlessly at him before scrutinizing him intently. "How do you know all that? Surely gods don't take so much interest in the affairs of mortals?"

"Not typically," Thanatos conceded, "however, one tends not to look the other way when matters regard those of their blood."

Now Hope was gaping at him, stunned beyond belief. "I'm related to you?" Salazar Slytherin was one thing, but Death himself was something entirely different.

"Indeed," he said smoothly, "Through my son, Ignotus."

"The Deathly Hallows," Hope realized, "they were gifts for your children."

"Greatly misused gifts," Thanatos agreed, his eyes flickering downwards to where the Resurrection Stone rested in her golden ring. "But yes. They have been used selfishly in the past, particularly the Elder Wand that I had carved with such care for my eldest, Antioch…but I had a hope that they would all one day pass to one who wouldn't not use them so foolishly."

Thanatos surveyed her for a long moment. "And here we stand."

Hope spared him a slight smile.

She could have asked him about why her wand had a nasty habit of destroying the wands Tom used against her other than his own, but in the end, it didn't really matter, did it?

"Where are we?" Hope asked. "It's not Elysium...is it?"

"No, this is the Fields of Asphodel," Thanatos said, glancing around the plains aimlessly. "It is where one comes when they have done neither good nor bad...you may think of it as a limbo of sorts, and it is where Tom Riddle will remain for all of eternity for his crimes."

"But not me?" Hope asked.

"If it is what you wish, you may return," the god told her, "or you may go to Elysium and be with your parents, just as you always dreamed...you don't need to make your decision yet, but there is someone who wants to see you."

A figure was moving through the field towards and Hope pressed a hand to her mouth as he came closer, his grey eyes just as bright as they'd ever been and his dark hair falling loosely over his shoulders. He grinned widely at her and Hope ran forward.
"Sirius!" She flung her arms around his shoulders, hugging him tightly as he wrapped his arms around her back, lifting her off the ground.

"Hey, did you miss me?" he asked her.

"Of course I missed you!" she said once they released each other. In death, Sirius looked younger and happier, like the ghostly visage that had walked with her in the forest.

"Your mum and dad would've come to see you, but only one of us was allowed and I knew you best."

Hope smiled fondly before the smile fell slightly. "I'm sorry you had to die for me," she said quietly.

"Ah, but that's the best way to die!" Sirius said with a wink and her lips twitched.

She had grown so much since he'd last seen her. Hope was no longer a blossoming girl, but a woman in full bloom. And she looked more like her mother but at the same not at all.

"Are you here to convince me to stay?" Hope asked.

"No," Sirius said, taking her hands in his, feeling the blood runes that had been so carefully carved into her skin. "I think there is still so much for you to do, your parents and I don't need you here, but everyone in Hogwarts does…Ron and Hermione need you, and so does George."

"Oh, so you approve of him now, do you?" Hope inquired with a quirked an eyebrow.

"Just a little," he said, grinning widely at her.

Hope's eyes glimmered thoughtfully and she nodded, the image that the Mirror of Erised had shown her as imprinted in her mind as the day she first saw it.

She kissed his cheek. "Bye, Padfoot, take care."

And then she turned away to walk backwards until a bright light encompassed her and pulled her downwards.

She breathed as shallowly as she could manage so as not seem as though she was breathing at all, not that they had yet taken notice. The spell had thrown her back so she had landed face-first against the earth with her hair fanning out around her and her arm tucked awkwardly against her abdomen.

Hope wasn't sure what she expected, but maniacal laughter was high up on the list. However, all she heard was uneasy whispers.

"My Lord... my Lord..." Bellatrix spoke tenderly and Hope imagined that perhaps Tom had fallen after he cast his curse at her and she was attempting to help him, but Tom didn't much like it when people helped him. "My Lord..."

"That will do," Tom snapped and several branches snapped under feet, no doubt from Death Eaters moving away from him. "I do not require assistance…the girl…Is she dead?"

No one spoke. Perhaps they were too frightened to approach her to find out.

"You, examine her," Tom order to someone that Hope didn't dare open her eyes to see. "Tell me whether she is dead."
That could prove problematic, Hope knew, because she couldn't very well stop her heart on command. If worst came to worst, she could always Flash out.

Slim arms helped roll Hope onto her back, her head lolling from the movement. A hand pressed against Hope's heart, taking note of the heartbeat and Hope waited for it to be shouted back to the others.

But then the person whispered, leaning down close to Hope. "Is Draco alive? Is he in the castle?"

It was Narcissa, there was no way it couldn't be.

And Hope barely breathed an affirmative.

"She is dead!" Narcissa called back to the others who shouted in great joy and euphoria. Lights flashed in front of Hope's closed eyes and loud bangs were heard, as though there was no greater triumph than the death of a seventeen year old girl who had caused their master much ire.

"You see!" Tom's high voice echoed over the noise. "Hope Potter is dead by my hand, and no one alive can threaten me now! Watch! Crucio!"

Hope strained to keep herself from moving as the curse threw her through the air, but, strangely enough, she felt no pain, none at all. Perhaps because she had 'died' by that wand, but Hope didn't truly know.

"Now," Tom's glee could hardly be contained, "we go to the castle, and show them what has become of their hero."

George released a yell of pained grief and made to run forward as Voldemort and his army stepped into the grounds, Hope carried limp and unmoving in Hagrid's arms as the half-giant tried to stop crying, but Fred grabbed one arm and Ron the other.

Yells of outrage and sorrow filled the air that were as terrible as his own, but Voldemort silenced them with a spell.

"SILENCE!" he called. "It is over! Set her down, Hagrid, at my feet, where she belongs!"

Hope's hair rustled in the air as Hagrid placed her gently on the ground before he was forced back.

"You see?" Voldemort demanded, gesturing to the corpse of George's love. "Hope Potter is dead! Do you understand now, deluded ones? She was nothing, ever, but a girl who relied on others to sacrifice themselves for her!"

"She beat you!" Ron's voice broke through the silencing spell and chaos raged from the defenders of Hogwarts in the absence of their leader.

"She was killed while trying to sneak out of the castle grounds," Voldemort told them, a dark smirk twisting his lips. "killed while trying to save herself—"

"Liar!" Luna screamed, barely heard over the noise when Neville ran forward only to be swiftly disarmed and sent to the ground.

Voldemort laughed, tossing aside Neville's wand with a careless motion.

"And who is this?" he jeered. "Who has volunteered to demonstrate what happens to those who continue to fight when the battle is lost?"
Bellatrix released a noise similar to a laugh, but it was something George doubted she was capable of making. "It is Neville Longbottom, my Lord!" she cried. "The boy who has been giving the Carrows so much trouble! The son of the Aurors, remember?"

Neville's whole body tensed in anger as he pulled himself upright.

"Ah, yes, I remember," Voldemort mused. "But you are a pureblood, aren't you, my brave boy?"

"What's it to you?" Neville responded in a cold and hard voice that hardly suited him.

Voldemort considered him. "You show spirit and bravery, and you come of noble stock. You will make a very valuable Death Eater. We need your kind, Neville Longbottom."

Neville laughed loudly, something Hope too would have done. "I'll join you when hell freezes over! Resistance!"

His shout was answered by a cheer from every single member and all those allied with them, unable to be kept quiet by the Silencing Charm.

Voldemort's eyes narrowed and his lips thinned. "Very well," he said coolly. "If that is your choice, Longbottom, we revert to the original plan. On your head…be it."

He waved his wand and out of nothing formed the Sorting Hat, old and patched as the day it had been put on George's head.

"There will be no more Sorting at Hogwarts School," Voldemort declared. "There will be no more Houses. The emblem, shield and colours of my noble ancestor, Salazar Slytherin, will suffice everyone. Won't they, Neville Longbottom?"

Neville went ramrod straight as a Body-Bind Curse was placed on him and Ginny grasped Luna's arm as she fought to do something.

"Neville here is now going to demonstrate what happens to anyone foolish enough to continue to oppose me," Voldemort continued, speaking to them all as the Hat became alight in flames.

"Neville!" Luna screamed, but attention was quickly diverted when Grawp made a sudden appearance, angry at how Hagrid was being treated by the Death Eaters.

Chaos erupted and only a few people saw Neville break himself from the curse and withdraw a ruby-hilted sword from the hat which he used to slice off the head of Nagini.

And no one saw when Hope's body vanished from view.

Dodging around people in the middle of a battle while wearing an invisibility cloak was next to impossible if you asked Hope. There were so many separate duels going on as she tried to make it to Tom's side, but yell had her pulling to a startled stop.

"NOT MY DAUGHTER, YOU BITCH!" Mrs. Weasley roared, drawing her wand on Bellatrix who laughed at her audacity to challenge her to a duel.

"OUT OF MY WAY!" Mrs. Weasley yelled to anyone who tried to assist her and Hope couldn't help but be impressed by how she was holding her ground against a witch that was capable to duelling three at once.

The curses parting from their wand tips were deadly ones, Hope could tell, but Mrs. Weasley held up
"What will happen to your children when I've killed you?" Bellatrix goaded with a sneer as she neatly stepped out of the way of a Killing Curse that Hope was surprised that Mrs. Weasley had cast. "When Mummy's gone the same way as Charlie?"

Her words lit a fire in Mrs. Weasley's eyes. "You—will—never—touch—our—children—again!"

And then her next curse shot through Bellatrix's arms to collide with her chest; she crumpled instantly and Tom released a scream of rage at the loss of his lieutenant.

Tom turned on her, but before a curse could be thrown, a sharp jagged rock burst from the earth separating Mrs. Weasley and Tom, and it was only then that Hope removed her cloak.

"You!" He roared as the rock descended to the earth once more. "Impossible!"

"It's Hope!"

"Hope!"

"She's alive!"

"Hi," Hope said, grinning widely, twirling her wand between her fingers, "you know it's very rude to throw around Killing Curses to people that don't deserve them, don't you?"

There were titters of laughter at her words and Hope winked to George who looked appropriately dumbstruck.

"Greetings from beyond the grave!" Hope yelled to all that were gathered. "Kill me once, shame on you, kill me twice, that's still shame on you because if you couldn't do it right the first time why should get a second chance?"

She could hear more laughter now; her sarcasm was good for, if nothing else, easing the tension.

"You were dead," Tom seethed.

"Was I?" Hope asked thoughtfully. "I suppose I was. I ended up in the Fields of Asphodel and had a nice long chat with Death himself." She gave him a mock pitying expression. "It must be a real disappointment for him to have a descendant that fears dying."

Tom gave no reaction other than gritting his teeth.

"Your Horcruxes are gone, Tom," Hope said, grinning widely. "You're just as mortal as the rest of us, and this time it's you who will taste death."

"I?" Tom scorned. "You are foolish if you think you will defeat me, you, the girl who has survived by accident, and because Dumbledore was pulling the strings?"

"You think it was an accident when my mother gave up her own life for me?" Hope laughed humourlessly and the silence around them filled the air as everyone waited and listened. "You think it was an accident that when I came to you wandless and ready to die that you failed and I lived? Open your eyes!" she snapped. "Didn't you think it was strange that your spells weren't working on them? Didn't you think it might've had something to do with me sacrificing myself for them the way my mother did for me?" Her eyes narrowed. "Or did you miss that completely?"

"You dare—" Tom seethed.
"Oh, I dare," Hope smirked, "I always dare because that's what I'm good at. I know things you only dream of knowing and I am better than you because of one simple thing."

"Is it love again?" Tom sneered. "Dumbledore favourite solution, love, which he claimed conquered death, though love did not stop him falling from the tower and breaking like an old waxwork? Love, which did not prevent me stamping out your Mudblood mother like a cockroach, Potter—and nobody seems to love you enough to run forward this time and take my curse. So what will stop you dying now when I strike?"

"I have a heart," Hope continued, speaking over him, "and I have a soul untainted by your Dark magic, so I guess you could say that we are ALL BETTER THAN YOU!"

She raised her arm and the defenders of Hogwarts roared in approval.

"You bound your followers to you for the desire of power and a lust for darkness, but mine are not bound," Hope spat the word as if it sickened her, "they are my friends whose loyalty and honour is incontestable. We are so much more than you could have ever dreamed of."

Tom's lip curled in disdain.

"You want to know something else, dear cousin," Hope said, exhaling sharply. "You want to know why the Elder Wand never worked for you? It's because I am its true master."

Tom's stance became rigid.

"That night in the tower Draco Malfoy disarmed Dumbledore and the wand fell to him, but I took his wand from him when I was in Malfoy Manor," Hope said smirking, "now, do you want to find out if it'll kill the Master of Death?"

For a moment nothing was said and nothing was done, but as the sun crept over the horizon to brighten the colour of her hair and the shade of her eyes just as it illuminated his pallor and deepened the red of his eyes.

Then they moved at once.

"Avada Kedavra!"

"Expelliarmus!"

The spells of green and red collided, turning the centre to golden fire. Hope's wand shook in her hand but then the Elder Wand flew out of his hand and Hope caught it as the Avada Kedavra hit its mark and Tom Riddle fell to the ground, at last mortal in death.

Hope had barely managed to strap both the wands to her two arm holsters when a great cheer rose from the Hogwartians accompanied by the cracks of Apparition as the Death Eaters still standing left in defeat, no doubt to go into hiding.

And then people were rushing towards her and Hope threw her arms tightly around Hermione and Ron who reached her first, gripping them tightly as the screaming of elation echoed on all sides, and then George was there, kissing her fiercely, and then Neville and Luna and Ginny, and the rest of the Weasleys, and the professors...everyone was there, drunk on their own happiness.

But a voice whispered in her mind, I can't stay.
"Minister for Magic, that's impressive," Hope said as they walked through the rubble.

"Indeed it is," Kingsley spared her a grin. "It was quite unexpected."

"I'm sure you'll do perfectly," Hope countered with a grin that faltered. "There was something you wanted to ask me?"

"I am well aware of how adept the Resistance was at tracking Death Eaters," Kingsley said slowly, his deep voice resonating.

"You need some help tracking down the ones that fled," Hope surmised, "what about I just offer myself?"

"I wouldn't ask that of you," Kingsley said quickly, surprised by her answer.

"You don't have to," Hope smiled sadly, "but I can't stay here…not after everything that's happened, and I might as well do something that's helpful."

She looked so much wearier than the rest of them once you got close to her and Kingsley almost suggested that maybe she just needed rest, but this was Hope Potter he was talking about, James' daughter.

So he conceded.

"Do me a favour and don't let them know until I'm gone?" Hope asked jerking her head back towards the Great Hall before walking off without a glance back, heading off to the courtyard and Disapparating in a loud crack, leaving Hogwarts and everything she loved behind.
Returning Home

Hope never thought she'd walk down the aisle in a dress like the one she was wearing. It was so beautiful and perfect, moulded flatteringly to her figure.

A smile graced her face as she moved forward, taking careful steps forward and she looked to the side and started.

Justin was standing loosely, blood staining the front of his dress robes and pouring from his smiling mouth.

Hope took another step to find herself looking upon a bloodless Colin giving her a mocking salute. Then Lavender was beaming with her throat ripped out and Anthony was winking with blood seeping from a hole in his chest.

And then she came up to the family section.

Charlie's head was soiled crimson as he smiled with Sirius and her parents who were just as pale as Colin.

Hope averted her eyes and looked down at herself, a horrified gasp parting from her lips as she lifted her hands to find them smeared with red, the same red that was splashed across her dress.

"Are you really Grey, Hope Potter?" a voice questioned. "You've got an awful lot of blood on your hands...maybe what you are is Dark?"

Darkness shrouded her on all sides and Hope released a scream as she fell only to jerk awake suddenly, gasping for breath.

She floundered as she reached for her wand, light immediately showering the room as she attempted to get her breathing under control, but that was more difficult than it appeared.

It wasn't yet light out and it wouldn't be for a few more hours at least, but this was typical of Hope these days, even if Greece was two hours ahead of Britain.

Hope sighed and rolled herself out of the bed to search for the light-switch. It wasn't as though she was going to get any sleep, so she might as well get some work done.

After three months since she had left Hogwarts to hunt down the Death Eaters, Hope was finally down to the last one, Peter Pettigrew. It was fitting that he was last and it had come as no surprise to her when he had been on the list of those that had fled. He was a coward through and through, that much had been obvious to start with.

Hope yawned widely, trying not to think of the reoccurring nightmare of the wedding as she stretched her body out before striding into the cramped bathroom.

She had been keeping her hair a dark blue and her eyes a muddy brown since the day she had left, perhaps because that was how down she felt even with Tom dead, and it was easier to pass herself off as Agathe from the café liked to call 'an enthusiastic cosplayer'. The red hair and green eyes were far too much of a giveaway, because even in Greece her name was famous.

But what no one saw were the heavy circles under her eyes, what no one heard were her yells as she awakened from a fitful slumber. Being awake was a daydream to her slumbering nightmare, that
much Hope knew.

Hope raked a hand through her wild hair to hike it up into a high ponytail that swished in the air as she walked back to the small desk she had been working at earlier that night. The map of the world she'd pasted to the wall upon her arrival was covered with dots in different areas of the world, places where she'd tracked Death Eaters down in. Anywhere from Germany, Russia, Libya, Chile, Bulgaria, Belize, to the United States of America, and anywhere in between.

Their efforts had become increasingly inventive and Hope had almost gotten herself killed five times, but in the end they still were sent off to the British Ministry gift-wrapped in a box (figuratively speaking, of course – Hope wasn't much of a gift-wrapper).

Hope tugged on the end of her ponytail, looking at the pictures she had taped to the wall beside the map and sighing sadly. Hermione and Ron's smiling faces were present in one while the second one held her and George, laughing loudly.

She hadn't honestly been expecting to be gone so long, but time had gotten away from her and a number of the Death Eaters were particularly difficult to track down.

Hope had missed all the funerals and award ceremonies that had occurred in her absence, and she was sorry about that, especially about Charlie's; she knew how much George looked up to his older brother and that he might've liked her to be there, but she couldn't have been.

She straightened the papers on the desk, searching for what she'd been looking over before she'd gone to sleep.

The last trace of Pettigrew had been in Larissa, heading towards Athens.

Why he'd been heading in that direction, Hope didn't particularly know or care. But she did know that he would be sticking to the outside of town as much as he possibly could, perhaps staying in his animagus form. It was easy to overlook a rat.

Hope changed into fresh clothes quickly, pulling her two wand holsters onto either arm, one holding her holly wand with Sirius' dagger on the underside and the other holding the Elder Wand and her rune dagger on its underside.

Both were hidden under her red duster coat as she pulled it up over her shoulders.

"Time to hunt a traitor," she murmured to herself as she twisted the door open and stepped out into the early morning darkness.

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**Girl Who Lived to Woman Who Vanished?**

_In the wake of Hope Potter's victory over the Dark Lord on May 2, there was one thing that was nearly palpable and that was relief. However, almost immediately afterwards, our Savior vanished entirely. The newly elected Minister for Magic and associate to the witch, Kingsley Shacklebolt, had released the statement that she was assisting the Auror Office in tracking down the Death Eaters that escaped in the chaos caused by You-Know-Who's death._

_All the same, it has been over three months and there is no sign of our Savior. The rumor is that she went missing in Rome, but even that is speculation. With the Death Eater trials fast approaching, one has to wonder if she will return to take the witness stand for the atrocities committed. Of the Death Eaters convicted of aiding You-Know-Who during the Second Wizarding War, several are Potter's old classmates, including Draco Malfoy, scion of the Malfoy family, to which Potter is_
"They've run the same article for months now," Daphne complained, dropping the copy of the Daily Prophet onto the table they were sitting at outside Café Wicca on Diagon Alley.

"It's not as though they have any new information," Neville had to concede, grasping the paper and pulling it towards him as he chewed on a roll. "Ron says the only time they know where she is is when she sends trussed up Death Eaters."

"How is Ron doing in the Auror's Office?" Dean asked curiously, tapping his fingers around his butterbeer.

"He got to skip the two year training program that new recruits usually get," Hermione said, sipping her tea, "but he's still doing more paperwork than fieldwork."

"That's got to be annoying," Daphne said, scrutinizing the customers eating around them. "Weren't Ginny and Luna supposed to join us?"

"Ginny's off with Seamus, I dunno what they're doing," Dean said, screwing up his face, trying not to imagine what his best mate was doing with his girlfriend.

"And Luna's off with her dad doing some research on a Snarkledobber," Neville added.

Hermione snorted. She wouldn't argue with the strangeness of the Lovegoods, but you had to admit that 'Snarkledobber' was a weird name for a creature.

"Shouldn't her dad be taking it easy, though?" Daphne asked. "He was in Azkaban for several months, even if it's been three since he was released."

"He's doing loads better, last I saw him," Neville admitted, "he's still a little weak, but not enough that he can't move about. He'd probably rather be doing research on a creature than nothing."

"Probably," Hermione said, "if he's anything like his daughter." Which was incredibly likely.

"Do you think she's going to come back?" Dean asked suddenly. "Maybe she just decided to up and leave."

"She wouldn't have left without saying goodbye if it was for good." Neville refuted with surety, "she wouldn't have left without saying goodbye if it was for good."

Hermione hummed in agreement. "She's probably on her way back now," she said, though it sounded more like she was trying to convince herself than anyone else.

"How's George been handling it?" Daphne asked. "I mean, he lost his brother and then Hope vanished…that can't have been easy."

"I've never heard him mention it, actually," Hermione said with a startled realization. "But he is quieter…and he looks bit more tired, especially when you consider him and Fred side by side, I think it's because of the PTSD."

"PTSD?" Neville said the letters slowly with a blank expression, "what's that?"

"Post-Traumatic Stress Disorder," Dean said for Hermione, "you hear about soldiers suffering from it."

"It's why most of us wake up from nightmares every night," Hermione offered a rather basic
explanation of the disorder. "It's brought on by traumatic events, whether you're seeing them or experiencing them."

"Ah," Daphne said, nodding her head slightly. There was no denying that they'd undergone a traumatic event. People didn't just snap back from wars; if only that was possible. She and Astoria had been mostly out of the direct line of fire, but that didn't stop her little sister from waking up terrified in the middle of the night as though a Death Eater was in her room, aiming an Avada Kedavra at her.

"Did you ever smooth over that thing with Gringotts?" she asked, changing the subject. "You know, since you broke in and stole from them?"

"Yeah," Hermione said with a light chuckle, "they made us sign a silence agreement which basically says if we tell anyone how we got in, we'll lose our rights to any of the vaults we own with them… It's more damaging to Hope, but oh well."

"How would they know that you told anyone, though?" Neville inquired, taking a swig of his butterbeer.

"Magic, Neville," Hermione smirked and they all laughed.

The world was so strange to them now. They were adults, witches and wizards who had fought for their freedom. Hermione was going to be repeating her last year at Hogwarts. Dean was going to start his new job as an Obliviator the next day. Daphne was going to study at home and take her NEWTs early (or late, given how she'd lost a year). Neville was studying to become a Herbologist (and perhaps one day take up the post of Herbology teacher) while Luna was intending to become a Magizoologist. Seamus was going to be working with Dean in the Department of Magical Accidents and Catastrophes (which was ironic since he was the one usually causing accidents and catastrophes). Ginny was still determined to be a Chaser for the Holyhead Harpies.

"It's strange to think after this year we'll all be done with school," Hermione mused thoughtfully.

"Well, I expect we'll find something to distract ourselves with," Dean snorted into butterbeer.

"Yeah, Fred and Angie getting married is something to look forward to," Daphne said mildly with a grin. "I can only imagine what it'll look like."

Ostentatious came to mind.

Hope had to give him credit for originality if nothing else. None of the other Death Eaters had tried to throttle her, least of all with a hand made of silver.

But if you thought Hope was going to allow herself to be strangled by the man who had single-handedly caused the death of her parents, you were sadly mistaken.

She brought her leg up to knee him in the groin and he doubled over instantly, crumpling into the grass in a moan of pain.

"You're pathetic, Pettigrew," she spat, her eyes flashing a vibrant crimson that had him flinching away from her, no doubt recalling the last one to wear a similar colour. "What would James think of you trying to kill his only daughter? Especially after I saved your life in my third year, you owe me a life debt."

Pettigrew's face turned a ruddy shade as he floundered before relaxing, but that was when things
went wrong and his silver hand drew upwards his throat, gripping his neck as tightly as it had gripped Hope. It startled her more than anything, but she didn't make any move to stop it from claiming his life.

It must have been a fail-safe that Tom had added when he formed the hand for Pettigrew, in case he ever showed anyone mercy.

Pettigrew's eyes begged her, but Hope's own hardened.

"This is what happens when you betray your friends, Wormtail," she said coldly, "Karma's a bitch, isn't she?"

She couldn't feel bad for him as he slumped forward and moved no more, not after he had ruined her life, because he was just as bad as Tom in some ways.

Hope wondered if that made her a bad person.

"Tea for one."

Agathe, a bright-eyed witch who always wore her hair in a girlish braid beamed at her favourite customer at the café as she slid into one of the bar seats. "English! And here I was missing my favourite pirate look-alike!"

Hope rolled her eyes for good measure. She wasn't sure how the witch had come up with 'English' being a good nickname for her, but Greece was for the most part Greek, so it made sense in a way.

"I'm the only pirate look-alike around," she corrected her and she wasn't wrong there.

"Psh, that's 'cause you're the only one who stands out," Agathe scoffed as she poured her a fresh batch of tea, then concern flickered in her eyes once she noticed the bruised ring around Hope's throat.

"I could get you something for that," she offered, "it looks like it hurts."

"It'll fade," Hope disregarded as she pulled her rucksack up to rest on the seat next to her. "This is my last time here, I'm heading out after I've had my tea."

"Damn, and I was getting so used to you being around," Agathe complained before giving her a wink that said she didn't mean it. "Got any reason to head home?"

"You mean apart from my friends?" Hope asked.

"And your boyfriend," Agathe sang and a smile lit Hope's lips.

"And him," Hope laughed, "the Death Eater trials are at noon and I want to make it back to give my own witness statements, and, you know, show everyone I'm not dead."

Agathe snorted. "That'll be a comfort to the press. 'Hope Potter discovered to be alive and well even after reports of her being alive and well'."

"The press likes to repeat things when they have nothing new to offer," Hope mused, her lips twitching.

"Do they ever!" Agathe chirped as she rushed off to fill another customer's coffee cup before returning swiftly. "But I guess you get more of it since you're, you know, you."
"I've had so many speculations about my relationship with George," Hope said with a wide yawn, "and then I had public slander and libel when I was fifteen, that was pleasant…and then they played kiss-up when I was sixteen…and now they're hailing me as a saint."

"Wow, and I thought my life was hard, however do you do it?" Agathe drawled.

"Generally I stay out of the public's eye," Hope snorted, "I'm a very private person."

"Clearly," Agathe said dryly, "I've hardly gotten anything out of you about your past and I've known you a whole month."

"A whole month? You don't say."

"I like you, English," Agathe laughed, "you keep things real with the sarcasm."

"One of my finer qualities, I assure you," Hope said, taking a sip of her tea as an order came up and Agathe had go and take it out to a family of four sitting in the corner booth. One of the children, a young boy was gaping at Hope in her strange garb as if she was the coolest thing he'd ever seen.

"And you haven't talked to any of your friends in three months?" Agathe added as she slid back behind the counter.

"Nope," Hope said, taking another sip of her scalding tea.

"Damn, girl! You better snog your boy something fierce!"

Hope choked on the tea, only managing to get it down with a bit of luck before she coughed and gasped for breath. "Er-what?"

Agathe burst into giggles. "Oh, you should've seen your face! It was glorious!"

Hope wondered what had ever possessed her to befriend someone as mad as Agathe Xanthus, even if they only knew each other for a month.

She checked her watch; it was almost time for her to go.

Hope dropped a few coins onto the table. "Well, I've got to get going," she said, "the sarcasm and the tea were great, Agathe."

"Don't be a stranger!" Agathe called as she gathered up her things and threw open the door to the bright sunlight. There really was nothing like Greece; Hope would miss it, but maybe she'd come back another time for something other than Death Eater hunting.

Hope would kill to swim in the Aegean Sea.

"Are you an Auror?" a voice asked and Ron didn't even bother to look up from the pile of parchment he was reading over to be sent off Head Auror Robards.

"Depends who's asking," he said, for the most part ignoring the speaker.

"I'd like to report the death of a known Death Eater," they said.

"Which one?" Ron asked tiredly; they'd been getting an awful lot of those reports lately and only about half of them were true.
"Peter Pettigrew."

Ron paused his quill, causing a blob of ink to appear on the parchment and then he lifted his eyes to look at the speaker and jolted in his seat.

There was Hope, looking her usual with her worn jeans and long red duster coat and her green eyes crinkling at the corners as she smiled.

Ron was around the desk in seconds, hugging her fiercely enough to make her laugh and respond just as tightly.

"Where the hell have you been?" he demanded.

"Here, there, almost everywhere, really," Hope had to admit, "that's not really the point—"

"That's exactly the point," he snapped suddenly, "you didn't say goodbye, you didn't tell us you were okay—"

"You're right, I didn't," Hope said shortly, interrupting him, "but I didn't want anyone to know where I was, Ron, because at first I didn't even know if I was coming back."

A stunned expression overtook his face. "What d'you mean you weren't sure you were coming back?" he demanded. "Hope, your friends are here, your home is here!"

"As well as a daily reminder of everything I've lost, and I know you lost Charlie, and I'm not saying that his death means any less, because it doesn't," Hope said quickly, "but you've never had people look at you the way they look at me...I've lost my parents, my godfather, and my friends...didn't you think I wanted to be left alone for a while?" Her eyes beseeched him, glinting blue briefly in light from the artificial windows.

Ron considered her. The weeks following the battle had been the most difficult. Ron hadn't been able to come down the stairs without hearing his mother crying over something of Charlie's that she'd unearthed and by then Ron had been all dried of his tears and all he'd been left with was a numbing pain. He'd spent a great deal of time on his own, he couldn't deny that, so he couldn't fault Hope for wanting to get away from it, but staying close to the matter by helping to lock up the other Death Eaters that had vanished after You-Know-Who had fallen.

Then he sighed.

"I forgive you," he told her, and her shoulders sagged a little in relief. The movement was almost imperceptible unless you knew her as well as Ron did and knew all the quirks and small gestures she made. "Just, next time give us a heads-up, alright?"

"I'll keep it in mind," Hope said with a smile.

"You missed your birthday, you know," he told her.

"I was kind of busy at the time," Hope chuckled awkwardly.

"Have you seen George yet?" Ron asked her instead.

"No, I decided to come here first...do you know when the Malfoys are being tried?"

"The Malfoys?" Ron frowned as he thumbed through one of his rolls of parchment. "It started about two minutes ago, but why do you want to know?"
"'Cause I'm going to go in there and try to save their arses, that's why," Hope told him shortly as she waved over her shoulder. "See you soon!"

Ron could only stare after her in exasperation. She'd barely been back five minutes and she was still trying to save people; falling back to old habits, it seemed.

Draco Malfoy had felt anxious before, but he had never been in a courtroom filled with witches and wizards who would decide the fate of him and his parents.

He glanced to his mother out of the corner of his eye, the manacles that kept him chained to the chain rustled as he moved his wrists slightly and his mother nodded reassuringly, though how reassuring could she have been if she might be sent to Azkaban as well?

"Disciplinary hearing of the tenth of August," Kingsley's voice proclaimed, calling silence to all those speaking around them, "into offenses committed against fellow wizards and witches and against Muggles, under the Decree of the Use of Unforgiveables and the Muggle Protection Act by Lucius Abraxas Malfoy, Narcissa Belvina Malfoy, and Draco Septimus Malfoy, residents of Malfoy Manor, Wales."

"Interrogators: Kingsley Sanders Shacklebolt, Minister for Magic; Elaine Jane Hughes, Head of the Department of Magical Law Enforcement; Percy Ignatius Weasley, Senior Undersecretary to the Minister. James Jackson Donahue, Court Scribe—"

"Witness for the defence," a loud voice echoed as someone made it past the doors to stride forward, causing an outburst of muttering and Draco twisted to look to her, stunned beyond belief.

"Hope Lily Potter," she said clearly, "or Elpis Slytherin, I'm not too fussy on which is used."

She glanced over Draco's head to his mother and gave her a deliberate wink.
Reunions of Friends

Hope leaned an arm against Draco's high-backed chair, hardly glancing towards him as the courtroom members calmed and one of the reporters covering the trial flashed their camera. She didn't even blink and Draco found it a bit unnerving.

"The Wizengamot recognizes Lady Hope Potter as a witness to the defence," Kingsley intoned in his deep voice with an illustrious wave of his hand. "You may proceed."

"Draco Malfoy and I are not friends," Hope affirmed to the room. "We have always been…rivals of sorts."

Her eyes fell to him briefly before she cleared her throat. "So believe me when I say that without his actions I would not have been able to defeat Tom Riddle, otherwise known as Voldemort."

Whispers and flinches were seen at those words, particularly the Dark Lord's name. Draco started, his chains rattling as he moved, but his mother shot him a quelling glance and his movements stilled.

"In our sixth year, Draco Malfoy was branded with the Dark Mark and given a personal task, to kill Albus Dumbledore…unfortunately he was a rather unskilled assassin," Hope said, her eyes flickering towards pale-faced lad.

For a moment all that could be heard was the sound of quill scratching against parchment as the scribe attempted to capture every word.

"His first attempt resulted in the hospitalization of Katie Bell," Hope continued, "it took her half the year to recover…his second attack was done to spite me. I had taken the form of my friend Daphne Greengrass and attempted to ward him off, since I was sure he was up to something, but it backfired and both Daphne and Astoria were hospitalized. The last attempt at poisoning resulted in Draco duplicating a special mead that Professor Horace Slughorn was planning on giving Albus Dumbledore as a gift. One of the bottles ended up in the hands of Ronald Weasley who had just come of age and he nearly died."

"You are not positing good points for Mr. Malfoy," Kingsley pointed out.

"I'm getting to that," Hope said and she couldn't help but roll her eyes, consequently, she missed Percy hiding his smile behind his hand.

"By failing to kill Albus Dumbledore, Draco allowed him to impart knowledge to me, knowledge that aided me, and that concerned Horcruxes…as I've no doubt that you have been made aware of." She arched an eyebrow towards the Minister who nodded; Hope had a feeling that Hermione and Ron had informed him of all that had transpired concerning the fragments of Tom Riddle's soul.

"And when a small group of the Resistance was captured and sent to Malfoy Manor, he was reluctant to identify me, and by me disarming him in battle led me to become the master of the wand Tom had taken, thus making it less willing to work for him and leading to his downfall…you could say, indirectly, that Draco Malfoy assisted in the downfall of Tom Riddle," Hope conceded.

Narcissa's shoulders sagged slightly and Lucius released a small sigh of relief; if nothing else, his love for his son was true.

"Your defence of Draco Malfoy is noted."
"Narcissa Malfoy lied to Tom after his Killing Curse failed to kill me," Hope continued, moving onto the second chair. "She told him I was dead, thus allowing me time to confront him when he believed I was gone for good…and she bears no Dark Mark, so that ought to tilt in her favour."

"Your defence of Narcissa Malfoy is noted."

Hope inclined her head and stepped to the side respectfully and Narcissa sighed, but it wasn't as though she'd been expecting Hope to speak for Lucius, not after their history. Still, she knew the odds weren't in favour of her convicted Death Eater of a husband.

"The court will reconvene in fifteen minutes," Kingsley declared before banging his gavel and Hope swept out of the room to wait against the wall.

"You've really taken to being Minister," she complimented the dark-skinned man, her lips twitching into a smirk as he strode forward with a laugh of his own.

Kingsley hadn't changed much in three months. He still had a golden earring dangling from one of his ears, but he had a much more impressive aura than Hope could ever recall him having.

"And you are quite adept at capturing criminals," he complimented, giving her a swift embrace. "Are you certain you don't wish to join the Auror Office? They could use someone with your skill set."

"I'm sure they could," Hope sighed, "but I was turned off from the Auror's division awhile ago…and I've still got to pass the rest of my NEWTs before Gringotts will accept me into the Curse-breaking Program."

Kingsley considered her. "What punishments for the Malfoys would you request?"

Hope jerked her head up, looking vaguely startled by his words. "The whole point was to leave the decision-making up to you!"

"You're Lady Potter," Kingsley reminded her, "you have a seat in the Wizengamot and therefore a vote."

Her lips mouthed wordlessly as she tried to formulate a response before sighing so deeply that her shoulders sagged. She had almost forgotten about all that business with her family title; there hadn't been much use of it when she'd been on her own. "Lucius should be sent to Azkaban," she decided, "his crimes are numerous enough, Draco…house-arrest and probation is what I'd go with and probations, and Narcissa committed no crimes herself, so maybe just letting her off? I dunno, do what you want, I've got a ginger to apologize to."

She gave him a jaunty wave before heading off in the direction of the lift without a glance back.

Weasley's Wizard Wheezes had regained its lustre and popularity now that the danger had passed, so it was very packed when Hope entered, keeping her hood up as she manoeuvred around everyone to reach the desk behind which a wizard in a magenta robe and clashing bright hair with one ear had his back to her as he rifled under the counter for something.

Hope removed her hood and drummed her fingers against the counter's surface.

"You still got those Daydream Charms?" she asked.

"Unless we've run out," George said without turning around. "Were you looking to order some?"
"I would be," Hope smirked, "if I hadn't been the inspiration for them."

Something clattered to the floor as George froze before standing up and turning slowly around, his eyes widening as he actually listened to her voice this time.

"Hi," Hope said, grinning at him in a cautious manner, careful of how he might react to her sudden reappearance.

"H-Hi."

It'd been awhile since she'd heard him stutter.

"I wasn't sure you were coming back," he said after a short silence.

"Neither was I," Hope said, leaning her weight against the counter, "but I'm glad I did."

"So am I," George grinned briefly as he stepped around the counter to enfold her in a tight hug and Hope responded just as tightly.

Hope had missed being in his arms more than she ever thought she would, which was strange since she'd been away from him for longer stretches of time before.

"I'm sorry it took me so long," she murmured into his only ear, "Pettigrew took longer than I thought to find."

George pulled back to look at her, catching sight of the bruises around her throat easily; a mere hour had not dissipated the darkened colour. He raised a hand, stopping short of touching the injury.

"Did you get him?" he asked.

Hope grimaced, remembering how Pettigrew had looked to her, his eyes bulging and lips gasping and his own hand throttled the life from him. "More like he got himself."

George's eyebrows drew together in confusion, but a glance towards her face told him maybe it wasn't best to ask.

"I was kind of expecting you to be angry," Hope admitted after a moment, "that I left, I mean."

"Oh, I was, for awhile," George had to admit, scowling slightly, "but it wasn't like I –like any of us could have made you stay…you're very…strong-willed."

Hope's lips twisted upwards into an amused smile. "Yes, it seems that Weasleys have a type."

"Ha-ha," George retorted in a deadpan, before reaching out to snag her waist, jerking her to him. Hope barely had time to release a noise of surprise before his lips were on hers.

It seemed like an age had passed since they had last kissed, but Hope had been a bit too busy to think about such things when she had been searching for Death Eaters.

It had only plagued her mind once she had returned and he didn't disappoint—not that he ever had.

She curled her fingers into his robes, sighing against his mouth, not really caring if they were making a scene or not. One of his hands tangled into her hair as he pulled her deeper and deeper into the kiss until she was completely breathless.

"Hey, George, did you find the—" Fred had come out of the back room, his robes singed and
Hope and George broke apart to look down at his twin brother.

"He hasn't gotten clumsy while I've been gone, has he?" Hope mused thoughtfully.

"I suspect it's the wedding plans going to his head," George contemplated as his brother clamoured to his feet, grumbling at the pair for making fun of him.

"It is not!" he insisted. "I am ready to be a married man, I tell you! But you!"

He jabbed a finger towards Hope in an aggressive manner and Hope barely blinked. "Where the hell have you been, Potter? I've had to deal with a thoroughly depressed George without you, probably because of you, now that I think about it..."

"I've been off hunting down Death Eaters," Hope said dryly, "did you think that was only going to take a few weeks, Fred?"

"No," the ginger admitted, "but an owl would have been nice."

Hope shrugged. "I was a bit too busy to owl—"

"Excuses!" Fred declared in a manner that made George snort and Hope roll her eyes.

"Can't you just say 'I'm glad you're back' like a normal person?" she asked, her eyebrow twitching slightly.

"Of course not!" Fred cried. "Who would want to be normal?"

Hope's lips twisted upwards, laugh escaping her lips at his words. The laughter built until she was actually bent over and Fred looked at her oddly.

"It wasn't that funny was it?" he asked George who could only shrug as Hope regained herself and stood straight once more, wiping the tears that had leaked out of her eyes with the back of her hand.

"Sorry," Hope chuckled, "I haven't laughed like that in awhile."

"Clearly," George said and she shot him a look out of the corner of her eye.

This time Fred gave her a hug and reminded her that he was glad she came back.

"Ginny's birthday party's tonight," he added once he'd released her, "are you going to show up?"

"Probably," Hope said, checking the date in her head mentally, and it was indeed August 11. "She'd kill me once she found out I showed up the day of her birthday and didn't stop by."

"Probably," the brothers agreed as one.

"There's a few things I've got to do before I see your sister, though," Hope said, checking Fabian Prewett's battered watch.

Getting into Hogwarts was remarkably simple for one who had Founder blood. She knew the secret passages had been unsealed shortly after the events of May 2, but she had only needed to walk through the front gates.
They didn't carry as many protections as they had in her sixth year when positively everyone and everything was screened for potential Dark items, with Tom gone and his Death Eaters behind bars, there wasn't a need for as many protective measures.

The drying mud of the path that the Thestral-pulled carriages took only clung slightly to the bottom of her boots as she took the path up to the castle in silence.

It was eerie without the sounds of schoolchildren, but Hope didn't mind too terribly as rain began to patter down on her.

The castle had been repaired since she had last seen it in its demolished state; that was good… Hope had considered aiding in the process with her blood, but her desire to leave had been stronger.

She took the steps up into the castle, shaking out her wet hair as she did, wringing the water from her locks briefly before continuing inside.

The doors to the Great Hall were open but there was no one within, but this didn't come as much of a surprise to Hope, after all, it wasn't like the professors actually lived in the castle; they probably had lives outside Hogwarts.

Her footsteps were the only sounds heard as she walked the halls, trying not to imagine them how she'd seen them last with bodies strewn about.

Hope shut her eyes hard, rubbing at them with her hands as a hiss of breath left her lips.

"Hope?"

She jumped at the sound of her name, removing her hand and opening her eyes to see Professor McGonagall looking at her as though she'd never seen her properly.

"Geez, Professor, do you actually live here?" Hope blurted out and Professor McGonagall gave her a sardonic look in reply.

"As Headmistress I have to be here for an extended amount of time," she said.

"I guess you're down two teachers now," Hope mused, stuffing her hands into her pockets as she approached.

"Only one actually," Professor McGonagall corrected, "Remus has signed on for Defence Against the Dark Arts, I only need a Transfiguration professor to replace myself, and there are several people lined up for it."

"Probably because it wasn't the cursed teaching position," Hope released a light laugh, "but Remus is going to be teaching? That's great… You probably wouldn't've found anyone better."

"I suspect not," Professor McGonagall agreed. The list of Defence professors they had gone through over the course of Hope's school career and well before had been abysmal at best with most hindering rather than helping those that they taught. Prime examples of that were Dolores Umbridge and Gilderoy Lockhart.

"Have you seen him?" she asked. "Remus?"

"No," Hope sighed, "I only just got back… I saw Ron in the Auror's Office before I headed down to the courtrooms, and Fred and George at their shop…and I thought I'd drop by and see how things were…did you get the gifts I left?"
Professor McGonagall's lips twisted in amusement and she gestured for her to follow her.

Hope did so until they came to one of the many glass cases in the wall. Most of the trophies around the school were within the trophy room, but not a lot of people went in to see those who had been granted awards (Hope, Ron, and Hermione had at least one for extraordinary services to the school from back in their second year), so there were a number of glass cases throughout the castle.

In this glass case in particular rested Rowena Ravenclaw’s diadem on its velvet case, Helga Hufflepuff’s cup against golden silk, Salazar Slytherin’s locket against his coat of arms, and with Godric Gryffindor’s sword propped against the side.

"The locket's obviously a fake," Hope said, her eyes roving over the replica she’d left behind, "since it's a family heirloom…thank you for keeping them together."

A plaque underneath read: Gifted to Hogwarts School of Witchcraft and Wizardry by Hope Potter, Ron Weasley, and Hermione Granger.

"How could we not?" Professor McGonagall questioned. "They are the four Founders, after all."

Hope smiled, turning towards her slightly.

"How are you, Hope?" her old Transfiguration professor asked.

"I'm…" Hope contemplated her words briefly. She couldn't very well say fine, no one would believe her. "I'm doing better," she decided, her smile becoming a bit tired. "I can at least sleep through part of the night… I think being back home will help."

"I'm sure it will."

Professor McGonagall had had her own share of nightmares, none, though, as bad as she suspected Hope's to be.

She opened her mouth to say something when a low growl was uttered from Hope's stomach and the young woman's cheeks flushed brightly.

"Sorry," Hope apologized with a bit of an embarrassed chuckle, "the only thing I've had all day was a cup of tea… I was going to head into the Three Broomsticks for a bite… did you want to join me? I can wow you with my adventures."

Her eyes twinkled hazel and Professor McGonagall was reminded of how her father tried a similar tactic to get out of a bad grade, but it had never succeeded.

"I was just heading in that direction," Professor McGonagall said, "and I would like to hear what one of my favourite students has been up to." She wasn't one to show favouritism, but it had been a joy to teach Hope and her group of friends, just as it had been a joy to teach the Marauders.

"Aw, Professor, you make me blush!" Hope grinned widely at the elder witch who gave her an expression in return that appeared to be her trying hard not to roll her eyes; an admirable feat, truly.

It seemed like things were getting back to normal, at least, in some ways. She had only been gone three months, so it wasn't nearly enough time for people to forget her, and she would see the rest of her friends soon enough.

"Hope Potter returns as witness in Death Eater Trials," Hermione read out the headline on the
Evening Prophet, an irritated frown on her face as several red-heads moved around the kitchen setting the food on the table for Ginny's birthday. "If she's back why hasn't she stopped by?"

Hermione had missed her friend, deeply. She could have used her help when she went to find her parents so that she could reverse the memory charm she'd placed on them.

"It's not like a lot of people have seen her," Ron reminded her, "I only saw her because she was looking for the courtroom that the Malfoys were in."

Ginny scowled at the mention of the Malfoys. "Why would she want to play witness for the Malfoys? They don't even like each other!"

Seamus reached across the table to grab the paper from Hermione who made a noise of irritation as Ron snorted.

"It says she vouched for Narcissa Malfoy who told You-Know-Who she was dead when she really wasn't…"

"That I could understand," Hermione said, "but she and Draco have always rubbed each other the wrong way."

"…there's something here about how his actions indirectly led to the downfall of You-Know-Who, so they're only going to charge him for the poisoning attempts against Katie, Daphne, Astoria, and Ron," Seamus continued.

"How nice of them," Ron drawled out.

"And you know she went to see George right afterwards," Hermione continued as if they hadn't been talking about the trials.

"Of course she did," Ginny snorted, curling a strand of her hair around her finger, "they're practically engaged."

"Engagement without a ring to prove it," Seamus agreed, throwing his arm over Ginny's shoulders, making her grin when he kissed her cheek.

"She's got plenty of rings," Hermione said, waving her hand carelessly.

"And one of them is the Resurrection Stone," Ron pointed out.

"We don't know that," Hermione sighed in a manner that said they'd had this argument before.

"She did say she was the 'Master of Death'," Ginny pointed out, "and that's what you get when you have all of them together."

"And she mentioned Death himself…that doesn't strike you as a little strange?" Seamus offered.

"It could have been metaphorical."

There was a knock at the door that Mrs. Weasley went to answer, having been listening to her children and their significant other's conversation with an amused expression on her face.

Then she opened the door and a gasp escaped her lips as she enveloped the figure into her arms.

"Oh, Hope!" she breathed. "We've all been so worried! Thank goodness you're alright!"
"'Course I'm alright," Hope scoffed as she returned the hug only to be released as the woman clasped her cheeks looking for injuries, "this is me we're talking about...how about you, Mrs. Weasley? How are you?"

Charlie's death had numbed her, and it would be awhile yet before the thought of her second born's death didn't bring tears to her eyes. Mrs. Weasley swallowed thickly, her lower lip trembling slightly.

"I'm managing," she acquiesced as the children became louder as they laughed behind her, clearly not noticing who had come to the door. "Do come in, they've just been complaining about how you haven't shown up."

Hope released a short laugh. "Of course they have."

She stepped through the threshold, inhaling deeply as Mrs. Weasley shut the door behind her. It smelled like gun powder, spices, and magic...it smelled like home.

"Come on," Hermione snorted, "Death? He's just a story in a morbid fairytale—"

"That was one of my favourites," Ginny retorted, shooting her a look when a voice interrupted them. "He isn't much of a conversationalist, to be honest."

One could have heard the crack of their necks as they all twisted their heads in the direction of her voice.

"Hope!" Hermione nearly screamed her name as she shot out of the chair to hug her so tightly that Hope wheezed.

"Geez, Hermione, you could kill someone with that grip," she complained, rubbing her ribs once she was released.

"Serves you right!" Hermione declared. "You should have told us what you were doing! We would have come!"

Hope gave her a wry smile but she said nothing as Ginny came next. "Seventeen already," Hope chuckled, "and you're nearly as tall as me."

"Oh, shut up," Ginny snorted, "you know I stopped growing a long time ago."

"Such a pity," Hope lamented before Seamus offered a hug. "And how are you Seamus? Still burning things to the ground?"

"Ha-ha, very funny," he said, "no actually, I'm not."

"That's some impressive restraint you're displaying."

Laughter echoed around the Burrow at that, and it felt for a moment as if Hope had never left, and she found that she'd quite missed feeling at home in her surroundings like she did now.
Haunted

It was comforting to be surrounded by so much noise after the relative silence she had experienced for the past two months. But it also made her a bit anxious and she twisted her hands under the table, smiling easily as Ginny waved her arms in exaggeration and they all laughed.

If it had been two months previously, her friends would have seen her jumping at every little noise.

"You have to tell us what happened after you went into the forest," Hermione added, the desire for knowledge practically overflowing. "You left before we could ask—"

Hope opened her mouth to speak when another knock came at the door.

"Remus, Tonks, so good of you to come!"

Hope started at the mention of the two she had been particularly worried about seeing. Her departure had been quite sudden and she hadn't said goodbye to anyone apart from Kingsley and she had barely known of the fates of her friends.

Tonks' hair was a bright sky blue that matched that of the small bundle in her arms and Remus looked younger, the scars on his face less prominent.

"Hope?"

The young woman stumbled gracelessly to her feet before rushing forward to throw her arms around the man she regarded as an uncle. "Remus!"

"Thank goodness you're alright," he sighed, "I've been worried out of my mind."

It was something Hope thought perhaps her father would have said (she could always ask him, she surmised, after all, she did possess the Resurrection Stone, but, as it had been said before, it did not do to dwell on the dead and forget to live), and she blinked rapidly against his shoulder.

"I'm sorry," she said thickly into the fabric, "I should've said what I was doing…I thought it would be harder that way."

Remus sighed as they parted and he got a good look at the girl who was practically his niece. Her scar was hardly hidden from view as it had been the whole year, before the war she had shied away from showing it, a reminder of her past that graced her dreams, turning them into nightmares, but not now. It was as though she had grown into it, much like how Remus no longer saw her as wearing her mother's face but her as being entirely herself.

The traces of James and Lily would always be present, but nothing would overpower the vitality and singularity of her spirit, and it suited her entirely too well.

Her blood runes carved into her arms trailed up to disappear under her sleeves and Remus couldn't be sure when they stopped, but that was her business and no one else's.

"You always did what you thought was right," he said decisively, "even if no one else agreed."

Her eyes gained a slight twinkle and she spared him a grin. "Because who doesn't love a good argument?"

Several eyes were directed towards Hermione and Ron (who had entered shortly after Hope's arrival,
his shift at the Auror's Office over) and Hermione flushed brightly and laughter filled the room again, making little Teddy Lupin fuss in his mother's arms.

Hope hugged her fellow Metamorph carefully and one-armed so as not to dislodge her godson.

"We were thinking you might've holed yourself up on an island in the middle of nowhere," Tonks mused.

"I was only on an island for a week," Hope sighed sadly, "chasing a lead that led nowhere...but the view was marvellous, I must say." The lead had actually gone somewhere, but unfortunately, a Nundu had beaten her to it. Nundu, being possibly one of the most dangerous creatures known to wizardkind, were well known for killing those they came into contact with. This one had not been subdued for very long several years previously, so it had been decided to place it on an unpopulated island, unfortunately for the Death Eater. Luckily, Hope had escaped its wrath on her broom.

She smiled brightly at Teddy who smiled at her just as much. He turned his eyes green and his hair red to match her and Hope laughed.

"Takes after his mother," she said with a grin.

"And his godmother," Tonks agreed proudly, shifting her young son in her arms. "Would you like to hold him?"

The prospect suddenly worried Hope who had never held a child in her life, and perhaps might not hold one of her own. Her smile faltered.

"I wouldn't know how," she admitted.

Tonks smiled kindly. "I'll show you, come on."

She pulled the younger witch away from the crowd and towards a more secluded portion of the kitchen, transferring her son carefully to the arms of his godmother who cradled him gingerly as though he were more fragile than china.

Pale eyes watched Hope's face as rocked the baby gently, her green eyes never leaving his face, but Tonks could tell something was wrong.

"What is it?" she asked quietly. "Is it George? Was he angry with you for leaving?"

"No-I mean, yes, he was, but we're fine," Hope said distractedly, biting on the inside of her cheek uncomfortably. "You know George and I always talked about starting a life together and—"

"Dear Merlin," Tonks balked, "you're not pregnant already, are you? You've barely been back half a day!"

Hope scowled. "I'm not pregnant."

"That would have made for a very busy afternoon," Tonks retorted, her lips twitching as Hope's cheeks burned. "So, what is it, then?"

Hope expelled a sigh through her nose. "I went to see a Muggle doctor while I was...away," she admitted, lowering her voice carefully. "Because—"

"Because you want to have kids one day," Tonks murmured. "What did they say?"

Hope swallowed thickly. "There was a lot about significant scarring and...he said it might be
difficult for me to conceive…so I thought I'd go by St. Mungo's and see if that can't be fixed by magical means, but I can't exactly go as myself." Her shoulders sagged. "I'm too noticeable."

"You could ask Angie to take a look at you," Tonks offered, squeezing her arm. "I'm sure it'll be fine; my mother had the same problem after she had a run-in with some Death Eaters a few months before she and Dad conceived me. And look how well I turned out!"

A smile twisted Hope's lips faintly.

"You'll make a good mum," Tonks added and Hope smiled more firmly than before, thinking of the little boy she'd seen in that mirror so long ago, the little boy who had her eyes and George's smile.

Things calmed down once Fred and George arrived, figuratively speaking, as the Weasley twins tended to bring more chaos than anything else. But George's presence calmed her already frayed nerves from being around so many people and she couldn't very well leave.

She was sure he knew from how tightly she was holding to his hand under the table.

Remus and Tonks left rather early, having their son as a perfect excuse and Tonks forced Hope to promise that she'd come by to see them soon before they left.

Mr. Weasley looked tired when he showed up, but he was very happy to see her alive and well. Bill and Fleur couldn't make it, being on an excavation in Egypt, and Percy was busy with work but sent his regards.

Hope breathed slowly in and out, simply listening as her friends filled her in on all that had happened in her absence. It was relieving not to have to speak, but sooner or later they were going to come back to Hermione's question from earlier, and that prediction came true sooner rather than later.

And there was no running away.

"Luna went down with me because I was afraid of going on my own," she said first, not knowing exactly where to start, "after I watched Snape's memories, I knew I'd be going down there on my own."

"We would've gone with you," Ron told her, his serious face reflecting the topic.

Hope released a short laugh, she really couldn't help it. "No, you wouldn't," she countered, "you would've Stunned me until everything was over." Her smile flickered and faded. "Luna…Luna didn't like it, but she understood, and she walked down with me because I knew I wasn't going to make it on my own."

Hope's eyes glinted and Ginny wondered if she was remembering how it felt to walk to her death, leaving everything behind.

"You didn't need me," Hope said quietly, forcing a smile back in place. "I knew you'd be fine without me."

"But we didn't want to be," Seamus said, narrowing his eyes slightly, "you're our leader, Hope."

There was no past tense.

Her lips curled into more of a true smile, but she didn't argue the point.

"After…the Avada Kedavra was cast, I woke up in a field."
"A field?" Hermione asked in interest. "What field?"

"The Fields of Asphodel," Hope said, "and there was this...thing there, it was sickening...the part of Tom's soul that was inside of me."

"What'd it look like?" Ron asked, his eyes wide, his thoughts more along the lines of a shard of glass. Ron didn't know much of soul magic, but he supposed Hope might know a bit more on the subject.

"Like something small that had been flayed," Hope said dryly and several at the table leaned back slightly. "And that was when Death showed up."

"Was he hot?" Ginny asked shrewdly and laughter rippled as Seamus gave her a look. "What? It's an honest question! He is a god, after all."

"Yes," Hope laughed, "I suppose he was...though I'm not sure I can say that."

"Why? Think he's listening in?" Fred joked.

"You'd think Death would have better things to do with his time," George added.

"Well, he certainly knows how to keep an eye on me," Hope grumbled under her breath. Ginny goggled at her. "Death keeps an eye on you? Why?"

Hope shifted slightly in her seat. "Well, it's not like that was the first time I'd seen him," she admitted, "I was ten the first time around, and then I saw him in the veil—"

"Wait...you saw him after your accident before first year?" Ron asked, stunned.

"Yeah," Hope said, shrugging her shoulders, "but it was only for a few seconds."

"You're unbelievable," Hermione said shaking her head as Hope took a swig of pumpkin juice. "That's what I'm told," she said, rather unconcerned by this knowledge. "So I had a nice chat with Death about why I was there and then he let Sirius come and see me."

She smiled softly and the others did not speak, understanding just how much that had meant to her. "He said he approves of you, by the way," Hope added to George, a grin gracing her lips at those words.

"Really?" George asked as his twin snorted.

"This much," Hope said, creating about an inch of space between her thumb and forefinger and laughter enveloped the table.

George pouted. "I suppose that's better than nothing."

Hope continued with the end of the tale. "I was offered a chance to go on to Elysium, where heroes go when they die...where my parents are, or I could go back...seeing as I'd left you all to finish a war, I was more inclined to go with the second."

"But what was that bit about Voldemort being related to Death?" Hermione asked, no doubt having ran Hope and Tom's words from that die in her head over and over.
"Oh, well, Death had three children, Antioch, Cadmus, and Ignotus, whom he gave three gifts," Hope explained, "the Elder Wand, the Resurrection Stone, and the Cloak of Invisibility…we are both descendants of the same god, but very distantly…I suspect there's not much blood left from him (and by blood, I don't really mean blood, since I clearly don't have ichor running through my veins)."

"You have got to be kidding me," Seamus said.

Hope shrugged. "I guess it makes a bit of sense, given how many times I've escaped death."

Well, she wasn't wrong there.

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After dinner, Hope and George went on a walk by moonlight through Ottery St. Catchpole and a bit beyond it, seeming not to notice when they passed the last of the lampposts that illuminated the darkness.

Being with just him was more calming than being at the Burrow and Hope kept her arm looped around his, leaning into his side.

"I would've gone with you," he said quietly, "when you left, I would've gone with you."

Hope's grip on his arm tightened briefly. "I didn't want to take you away from your family," she said, "you'd just lost Charlie…it was better that I do it on my own." Hope hadn't lost anyone in her family to the Second Wizarding War…she had no family to lose, and she had ensured Tonks and Remus' survival with her Felix Felicis.

"I'm sorry," she said, "About leaving without a goodbye…I didn't think it would take so long." Of course, she had expected it to take a bit of time, but not necessarily three months.

"I know," George sighed. "But…it would have been nice to have someone who understood dealing with death with me."

"There's no one way to deal with it," Hope said, running her free hand through her hair. "And it's not something you want to be good at dealing with… I've got as many nightmares about that night as anyone else."

George was sure she did, she looked worse than him, though he'd never say that. The shadows under her eyes were more prominent in the darkness and exhaustion that lined her face was just as obvious.

"Come home with me?" he asked her.

Hope blinked, looking at him, her eyes reflecting the moon as she did so.

"I might keep you up," she said, "I have…intense nightmares."

"Join the party," George said and even though it wasn't really humorous for them to be suffering from post-traumatic stress, Hope released a small laugh.

"Sleeping in a comfortable bed would be nice," she mused, "and being beside you would be even better."

George grinned widely and Hope couldn't help but wonder the last time he'd smiled like that. She suspected it might have been a little before she left, after Tom's death. Either way, she hadn't seen it in a while and she wasn't at all surprised when he bent his head to kiss her.
Hope was running along an endless corridor that was darker than night with doors illuminated by the
glow of the torchlight.

She grasped the knob of the door closest to her and wrenched it open.

The air smelled like ash and a baby was screaming.

Hope looked around, recognizing the room that had been hers when she was barely a year old. Her
mother was sprawled on the ground beside the ruined crib that had once held her child but was
empty now as the younger Hope had made her way from it to crawl towards her fallen mother.

Unintelligible sobs left her plump lips as she remained unresponsive to her cries. Lily Potter's green
eyes remained open, reflecting the fire that had begun to spread. And the sound of rushing feet
startled Hope as her godfather barrelled into view, younger than Hope had ever seen him, his grey
eyes wide and afraid.

Hope shut the door as he called her name.

She continued down the corridor, choosing a second door on the left side.

It opened onto the Hogwarts Express and Hope hardly recognized herself.

She was eleven and so very small and younger than she remembered appearing. In her hair she still
wore a strand of beads and leaning against the cushion was her old cane. Hope's younger self's eyes
seemed too green and too big for her face as she looked up to meet the gaze of Ron's younger self.

"D-Do you mind if I join you?" he asked her, his nervousness palpable. "All the other compartments
are packed."

Hope shut the door, remembering her easy reply, and opted to continue down the hall once more to
open another door.

She pushed it open to see herself at thirteen, bright-eyed and pink-cheeked as she laughed at George
outside her room at the Leaky Cauldron.

"But," she said lightly, "I must be crazy to put up with you for so long, Weasley."

George, shorter and slimmer and with more of a glint in his eyes smirked at her words. "Oh, you
must be?"

"Yes, I—" She started only to find herself cut off by a sudden kiss that stole her breath away.

Hope shut the door abruptly, smiling at the memory; it was one of her fondest, she was sure.

But she didn't linger, grasping the next door.

She and Cedric were bathed in darkness, wondering if this was a part of the Third Task and then a
flash of green shot out to claim Cedric's life as she looked on in horror.

Hope left that room quite fast, practically running to the next door, but it seemed as though all the
happiness had been snuffed out of the doors she now opened.

Hope was fifteen, thin and pale, running towards the Veil, Sirius' name springing from her lips in a
cry of horror, reaching for him as Remus pulled her back.

"SIRIUS!"
It was almost as painful to see it second-hand as it was to experience it first-hand.

Hope shut that door a bit too hard and as her eyes flickered open, she realized she was shaking like a leaf.

Hope's return was sudden, though not entirely unexpected, was the decision that Neville came to. She wasn't much for leaving loose ends, particularly not when they concerned the Death Eaters and Death Eater sympathizers.

A transcript of the first of the Death Eater Trials, the one that had tried Lucius, Narcissa, and Draco Malfoy, had been printed word for word in the Daily Prophet. He had been quite surprised, after all, you would have been hard-pressed to find someone who knew them in Hogwarts who wasn't aware of the rivalry between Hope Potter and Draco Malfoy. For her to speak for him...he had to have done something exceptionally significant...unless it was the favour towards his mother that Hope had been hoping to clear (life debts could make anyone's life complicated).

Neville supposed that she might be called forward as a witness for the other trials, and he had been anticipating on meeting her at one of them before it had been decided that she would meet him and several other Resistance members for lunch.

And it was on his way there that he caught sight of her crimson hair, in the centre of a circle of very fascinated children.

Several of them had small books and self-inking quills, so that led Neville to presume they'd wanted an autograph, Hope was rather famous after all. But as he drew closer, he realized it wasn't just that. The attention was on her blood runes that were visible on her exposed arms, her long duster-coat no longer hiding them as she carried it under her arm.

"What's that one do?" a small girl with brown eyes asked, prodding at one on the centre of her palm.

Hope's eyes twinkled as she smiled. "It means 'protect'," she said, "and it creates a shield around me or anyone else I wish to protect."

"That's so cool!" the girl gasped, her eyes wide.

Neville doubted the child realized that in order to gain such an ability she would have to cut the symbols into her skin...but that was a problem for her mother.

"Can you use fire?" one of the boys, a few years older than the girl, but still young enough that he wouldn't be going to Hogwarts yet, asked, his blue eyes bright in awe.

Hope considered him briefly, no doubt thinking of how she could use the element in a way that wouldn't be harmful to the environment and then she stood up with a murmur of 'fire'.

One of the runes on her forearm glowed as she brought a tight fist close to her lips only to open it and blow air from her lips.

A tendril of flame escaped as though she was breathing fire only to fade quickly into nothing.

"So cool!" he crowed.

"Run back to your parents," Hope said, still laughing at his response, "and try not to tell them that I nearly burnt the tops of your heads, alright?"
Answering laughs made her smile as they waved her goodbye, darting down the street to where they had presumably left their parents, abandoning them for something far more exciting.

"I wouldn't have pegged you for using your runes for kid's amusement," Neville said mildly as he came up behind her.

Hope whirled around to grin at him. She looked better than Ginny had described; it certainly seemed as though she'd gotten a few good nights of rest since her return. Neville himself was still dealing with the aftermath of the Battle of Hogwarts, and wasn't at all surprised to learn that she had somewhat similar problems.

"Neville!" Startled—but very pleased—surprise coloured her eyes and a split second later all the eighteen year old wizard saw was red as she grasped him tightly, hugging him fiercely. "It's so good to see you!"

Neville responded with a grip just as tight. "I knew you'd come back," he told her stoutly.

Hope gave a shrug with one shoulder at that. "You would've been the only one," she said.

He snorted. "I doubt that."

A laugh escaped her lips. "Well, maybe a few other people," she said, feeling as though the day was entirely too bright. She'd seen Angelina earlier who had fixed her up and given her a clean bill of health after she'd made Hope drink a potion that was a sticky blue and tasted like mud. "So, how have you been?"

And she took his arm as they walked down the street and Neville told his tale of all that she had missed in her absence.
Gift of Moonstone

Hope didn't leave the flat all that much once word got out about just where she lived; it was quite hellish, to be honest, and it made Hope wish where she and George (and consequently Fred and Angelina) lived had never been made public.

She stirred the eggs thoughtfully in the pan, listening to the sizzling in the silence of the morning. They'd talked about getting their own place before, somewhere no one would find them, but neither had brought it up since her return to London. Maybe she should mention it…?

"Have you seen my robes?" George called from the other room, searching for his ostentatious magenta work robes for the shop. He peeked his head around the corner and was momentarily distracted by Hope—not having looked up to answer—with her wild red hair, kinked from sleep, in a ponytail and wearing one of his old shirts that fell slightly off one shoulder and went to her mid-thigh, exposing her creamy legs.

"They're probably in the bathroom, drying after your little incident with that new potion," she called back, cracking another egg into the pan and poking at the sausages with her spatula.

"Ah," George said, disappearing to look in the bathroom, where he did indeed find his robes.

He grabbed them and moved as quietly as he could into the kitchen once more to wrap his arms around his girlfriend's waist, leaning his head onto her shoulder, kissing her cheek. "I love you."

"You're just saying that because I'm making breakfast," Hope responded with an eye roll, tossing a dash of pepper onto the eggs.

"You're just saying that because I'm making breakfast," Hope responded with an eye roll, tossing a dash of pepper onto the eggs.

"Nope," George hummed, grinning against her neck as she shivered. "I can prove it."

Hope smiled. "I might burn breakfast, love, where would you be, then?"

"Smug and more cocky than before," he assured her, pressing kiss after kiss against the curve of her neck, feeling her pulse thrum just under her flesh from his ministrations.

Hope swallowed thickly, trying to focus on the sizzling eggs and keeping the sausages from burning, but it became increasingly difficult.

"Y-You are terri-ible," Hope said, her words stuttering slightly as her eyes fluttered, barely managing to shut off the stove.

"You like it," he grinned and Hope laughed. The sound was strangled and replaced by a moan. "George…"

"Mm?"

Hope twisted in his arms to wrap hers around his neck, drawing his face down to hers. "Don't tease me," she whispered against his lips before hers met his.

George's fingers tangled into her hair and Hope allowed him to distract her from getting back to finishing cooking breakfast. His tongue moved over hers and her teeth tugged at his lower lip. He groaned and their breaths intermingled.

She was so distracting that George almost wanted to take a half day and drag her back to the
bedroom and have his way with her, and he was quickly forgetting why it was that he shouldn't do that.

His shirt bunched around her waist as his fingers splayed over her spine.

Her fingers gripped his robes.

"I love you," he breathed against her lips.

"Don't I know it," Hope replied just as breathlessly, pressing kisses along the underside of his jaw. She grinned as he hissed out her name and stumbled back against the counter.

She drew back suddenly and he couldn't help but groan at the loss of contact.

Hope smirked, removing a plate from the cupboard and tipping half of the eggs and sausages onto it. "You're going to be late," she told him lightly as she handed him the plate and a fork. "And you owe me dinner."

George blinked, swallowing a bit of egg. "Why not lunch?"

"Because I'm going to the Greengrass Estate," Hope hummed, putting the eggs and the uncooked sausage away. "Daphne's going to show me how to act more like a proper Pure-blood lady."

"There's nothing proper about you," George mentioned, his eyes glancing up and down her frame.

She swatted him, turning back to get a second plate for herself.

"We should get our own place," he said so suddenly that she looked to him in surprise.

"We should," she agreed, looking around the flat. It wasn't as disorganized as it had been in her absence, but it still feels a bit small to her. "There's a shop in Diagon Alley that has a listing of houses for sale, I can grab some…" She frowned, searching for the right word. "Considerations?"

A laugh left George's lips.

"Anything in particular you want in a house?" Hope asked, her eyes glinting mischievously.

"A big shower might be nice," George said, always ready to play her game.

Her cheeks flushed, knowing quite well where his mind had wandered. "Big shower, check."

"And a large bed."

Hope snorted. "You do know that we'll be buying our own furniture, don't you?" She smiled slyly, drawing at the collar of his robes to pull him slightly downwards as she leaned up to kiss him sweetly. "But," she said between kisses, "I wouldn't mind a larger bed."

George grinned against her lips. "I bet you wouldn't."

Hope drew back to straighten his hair, as it had become messy from their earlier snog.

"Get to work, you terrible man," she laughed. "I'll be back for dinner, so you better be planning something good."

Contemplation crossed George's face. "I've got something up my sleeve," he promised and the small ring box in her pocket felt heavy.
"May I help you, Lady Potter?"

Hope could see where Astoria and Daphne had inherited their mannerisms, going off of how stoic and polite their father was, but thank the gods they had more feeling than a stone.

"Your daughters—" Hope started to say, but before she could say anything else, a sixteen year old Slytherin with long blonde hair raced across the room to hug her tightly with an exuberant cry of "Hope!"

"Astoria," Hope hummed as Lord Greengrass' eyebrows rose at his daughter's antics; she doubted he'd ever seen her break decorum, "aren't you the picture of loveliness?"

She winked at her and Astoria laughed as Hope turned back to the Lord. "Forgive the intrusion," she said, "but Daphne invited me over to discuss decorum in the Wizengamot."

And how clearly lacking in it she was, Daphne had pointed out rather bluntly, and she wasn't completely wrong, if Hope had to be frank. Hope was very upfront, but in the Wizengamot it was sometimes about how you weaved your words and Daphne did that far better than Hope.

"I see," he said, only half understanding as his eldest daughter descended an elegant staircase, and Hope had to marvel the estate's interior, it certainly was something. "Daphne, it seems your guest is here."

"Yes, Father," Daphne intoned and her father narrowed his eyes suspiciously before moving silently to return to his previous business. It was only once he'd gone that Daphne finally cracked a smile.

"I'm glad you could come," she said, looping one arm through Hope's while Astoria loops the other with her own. "I've been driving myself mad here with only Astoria."

"Hey!"

Hope's eyebrow rose at her words. "Haven't you gone out with the Resistance members? Or Dean?"

"Sometimes," Daphne admitted, "but mostly I spend my time studying for my NEWT exams, I'm planning on taking them come December."

Hope's eyes drifted out of focus. Hermione was going back to Hogwarts to complete the year she'd missed, but Hope knew beyond a doubt that if she went back she'd suffer from intense nightmares and be constantly mobbed by her classmates. No, better not wake the sleeping dragon.

"I'm thinking of doing something similar," she said, "Professor McGonagall asked if I was coming back this year…but that's definitely not happening."

Astoria sniggered. "Afraid of being mobbed by your adoring fans?"

"Yes," Hope said flatly, "exactly. The press has taken to camping outside the shop in the hope of seeing me leave it…can you believe that? Isn't there any privacy anymore?"

"Not likely," Daphne conceded. "But at least you can change how you look so they wouldn't be able to tell if it was you leaving."

"Thank the gods that Dorea Black married Charlus Potter is all I'm saying," Hope had to agree with her there.

"It's just going to be me and Tracey in Slytherin," Astoria bemoaned as they entered into a room that
Hope immediately categorized as the sitting room. "From the Resistance, I mean…that'll be boring."

"But Luna's going back." Daphne reminded her and Astoria brightened at the mention of her wide-eyed friend.

"So, what do you need to know about behaving like a lady?" Daphne asked towards Hope.

"Basically anything you can tell me," Hope said with a sigh, "I want to overturn some laws, particularly the ones that isolate lycanthropes like it's their fault they've been infected, which is absolutely outrageous if you ask me."

"No kidding," Astoria muttered, "does that mean Remus can't teach at Hogwarts this year?" She had been looking forward to it; he was her favourite Defence Against the Dark Arts professor to date, but they hadn't had many good ones, so it wasn't hard to be impressive.

"Oh, no, he's still teaching," Hope assured her with a slight smile. "Professor McGonagall told me he's taken the teaching post up officially; he'll be teaching you come September."

Astoria sighed in relief and Daphne couldn't help but throw a smirk her sister's way.

"So, the first thing about being in court," Daphne began as Hope sat on top of the table, "is you have to have manners, obviously. Subtlety is an art and manners are a part of it. It's about how you act more than anything."

"Everyone knows how I act," Hope said dryly, "and it's with a lot of wit and sarcasm."

Astoria couldn't help but smother her giggles at that, because Hope wasn't wrong, in fact, she was quite well known for being sarcastic (to the point of earning several detentions in a row for it).

"If you want to earn favours you have to learn how to stroke a few egos," Daphne warned, "especially if you're trying to overturn those werewolf laws; they all passed with almost a complete majority on the part of the Wizengamot."

Hope grimaced. She knew all too well how the British Ministry for Magic viewed werewolves, it was what made it so increasingly difficult for Remus to get a job once it had been discovered what he was.

Umbridge was mostly to blame for the sheer number of laws that had been passed in recent years that made life more difficult for those not technically considered human (including werewolves, centaurs, and goblins). She had been in the process of declaring Metamorphmagi as Beings, which would have given Hope, Tonks, and little Teddy less rights than the average witch and wizard (and would have permitted others to refer to them as 'it').

Hope suspected that Tom had been partially behind it as well; anything to make his enemy's life difficult.

"And you can't lose your temper, it shows you're not a mature adult that can handle criticism."

Hope scowled at her Slytherin friend. "Are you saying I don't handle criticism well?"

"Your words not mine," Daphne smirked and Hope's scowl darkened.

"I think that's a yes," Astoria added helpfully and Hope threw her a glare only to earn her a laugh in return from the younger blonde-haired girl.
Hope gave a loud sigh; what on earth had she been thinking when she agreed to this?

"I'm screwed," George said adamantly over the simmering potion. "How the hell am I supposed to propose if she makes it so difficult to come up with the perfect way to do it?"

Fred snorted, stirring the simmering potion which bubbled an ominous violet beneath them.

"What did you do?"

Fred shrugged his shoulders. "Got down on my knee at Hogsmeade Station, since that's where Angie and I first met."

George's face fell. "We met in a zoo, that's no good; it's too unromantic."

"You're really worried about this, aren't you?" Fred asked, looking over his twin. George almost looked as bad as when he'd figured out he was crushing on his brother's best mate. The stunned realization had almost caused him to reel over the staircase because he hadn't been paying attention to where he was going.

"Of course I am!" George said hotly. "This is important! I want her to remember how I propose to her for years! It can't be something simple!"

"Well, what does she like?" Fred knew of a few things the Potter liked, after all, he'd seen George come up with enough gifts to earn him a smile from her that could outshine the sun.

George frowned thoughtfully. "Irisis," he said immediately, "the colour blue, the stars, Ancient Runes –particularly things that are Greek or Egyptian–, old-fashioned things…her family, but most of them are dead and I've already asked Remus for her hand…"

"When did you do that?" Fred asked, pausing his stirring to look to his brother in vague surprise.

"Before I lost my ear," George said, his fingers probing in a circular motion around the healed hole where his ear had once been. Before they'd slept together, but he kept that to himself.

"Well, I suppose you've always been a bit mad for her," Fred conceded as the door to the back room opened and they both looked up to see Angelina grinning tiredly at the pair of them.

The lime green uniform that healers at St. Mungo's wore didn't suit her at all, but at least she'd finished training and was now working full time as a healer.

"Hey, babe," she murmured, kissing Fred lightly, her exhaustion clear.

"Hey, gorgeous!"

A laugh escaped Angelina at his enthusiastic reply. "Are you boys up to some more trouble than usual?" Her eyes shifted to the bubbling potion in front of them.

"George is trying to come up with the perfect way to propose to Hope," Fred confided.

Angelina's eyes widened in surprise. "You haven't done it yet? With the way you two have been acting, I would've thought you'd popped it when she first came back."

George scowled and Fred sniggered. "They were probably busy doing other things."

"Oh, shut up," George snapped as Angelina laughed with her fiancé. "Remember how long you had
that ring before you proposed to Angie?"

Fred's laughter abruptly cut off, but Angelina's gained in volume.

"Have you come up with an ideas?" she prompted George and the twin eyed her suspiciously, trying to decide if she was making fun of him or was trying to help him.

He conceded defeat. "I'm making dinner for her tonight," he said, "since she made breakfast…but just dinner doesn't seem very good."

"She'll probably like it because it's just the two of you," Angelina reminded him. "She'd hate to go out and have you propose where reporters could see you and have the news out before the next day."

That, George had to agree, was completely true. A reporter would shove their camera in Hope's face before she'd have a chance to reply to his question and start demanding answers from her. George's shoulders sagged just imagining how angry she'd be; thankfully he hadn't considered proposing in a rather public place.

George didn't want something simple, but Hope liked simple things, simple things that were heartfelt.

"I'm sure I'll think of something," he muttered to himself. He'd been planning on buying her a bouquet of blue irises anyways; her eyes always lit up when he got her the flowers.

*Flowers, check.*

*Food, check.*

His eyebrows creased together as he thought hard. Should he bother with candles? That would be romantic, wouldn't it? But would Hope like it was the real question…George decided that they couldn't hurt.

"Do you want to leave early?" Fred asked, cocking an eyebrow towards his twin, trying not to smile too hard, but George didn't seem to notice, far too lost in thought.

"Maybe a little," George muttered more to himself than to Fred as he mulled over what he would be needing for the night.

The kitchen was a little cluttered, so he could probably clean up a little before she came back…when did she say she was coming back from the Greengrass'? George couldn't quite recall if she'd given him a time.

But she was stopping by the real estate shop down the street to collect a few 'considerations' as she had said for where they could live.

That could take up a bit of time, depending on how many potential houses she was looking into, and there was no knowing how long she'd be at Daphne and Astoria's place.

Irises…he could start there.

George practically skipped out of the back room and Angelina and Fred shared a glance.

"I swear they're *practically* married," Fred declared.

"What's another ring?" Angelina added with a smirk, referencing the assortment of rings Hope wore on a daily basis.
How did Hope have so many bloody books? George would never understand, but he knew how excited she could get about Ancient Runes, it was honestly easier to look at the sun than to look at her when she got extremely excited about Ancient Runes.

But when she kissed him enthusiastically, he was all up for that…and anything that followed.

At any rate, Hope's books were nearly everywhere, and she seemed to have picked up a few more when she was gone for two months…they were going to have to invest in a library at that new house they were planning on getting, or they were going to find themselves drowning in books.

As he lifted a few books, something small fell to the ground, making a metallic noise as it collided with the ground.

George placed the books down as Hope's black opal ring spun several times before coming to a stop and he knelt to grab it.

"Well, this is unexpected," a voice suddenly said from behind him and George stood quickly, twisting around, his eyes wide at the sound of a voice he hadn't heard since he was seventeen.

There were three of them, all an opaque transparent colour.

Sirius Black looked younger than he'd ever seen him appear, as though he had never endured more than a decade in Azkaban. He grinned roguishly before sharing a glance with the man beside him.

The second man had a similar appearance to Sirius in that they were both tall and both with dark hair, but this man's eyes were hazel like Hope's would sometimes flash and his face was thinner. Still, George hadn't expected James Potter to look so…young, even though he'd known all along how young Hope's parents had been when they were killed.

The third was the only woman and her similarities with her daughter were pronounced, from the red of her hair to the green of her eyes. George kept trying to fit Hope in Lily Potter, looking for the blood runes carved into her arms that weren't there and the scar on her forehead that was gone and she didn't have the same mischievous smile that Hope had.

"Er…hi," George said awkwardly, not accustomed to having ghosts in his flat.

James cocked an eyebrow. "So this is the boy that's sleeping with my daughter?" He smirked with Sirius as George turned bright red.

Granted, he wasn't really lying, and George and Hope had first slept together when she was a few weeks shy of being legal…

"Stop that," Lily scolded, swatting her husband's arm as he sniggered with his best mate. "The two of you are terrible! Your daughter's been with him for longer than you and I were together!"

The reproachful glower made James smile sheepishly at his wife. George hid his eyes behind his hand, willing his embarrassment to cease.

"We've heard a lot about you, George," Lily added, sparing him a smile. "Sirius likes to carry tales."

George glanced towards the Marauder in question, narrowing his eyes suspiciously. Perhaps he'd told them of the time he'd walked in on them in Grimmauld place when Hope and him had fallen asleep on the chair in her room, or maybe how he'd had to yell through the door when they were snogging for them to stop and go to bed (clearly in two very different beds).
"You don't peek?" he asked in surprise. "I would've thought you'd be watching her every day."

"We would if we could," James said, sounding annoyed. "But there are rules down there for the dead, we're only allowed to watch during significant moments...like dying for example."

George grimaced, thinking about Luna telling him that Hope was gone.

"Anyways," Sirius added, a glint in his practically-see-through eyes as he looked around the kitchen, "making my goddaughter a special dinner, are you?"

He waggled his eyebrows suggestively and George opened his mouth, but whether it was to defend himself or deny the truth was never discovered as the door knob twisted and Hope entered with a thick folder under her arm.

"Sorry I'm late," she said over her shoulder, not noticing the company. "Daphne went with me to the shop and told the witch that we were lesbian lovers looking to buy our own place and I don't think I've ever seen anyone so scandalized –thank the gods I went in as a brunette or it'd be all over the Prophet by...the..."

Hope had shrugged off her red duster coat and turned around to see the three ghostly mirages in the kitchen. Her eyes widened. "Er...are we performing a séance?"

"You left your ring," George said, holding it out to her as an answer.

"Ah," Hope said, slipping it easily onto her finger, her eyes still focused on the ghosts hovering before them. "Did you accidentally summon my parents and godfather for a reason?"

She was looking at him curiously and George swallowed thickly.

"Yes, actually," he admitted, taking her hand and looking squarely at the pair whose attention had been entirely focused on their child, as if seeing her was something they would never get enough of.

He had had everything planned out, the flowers, the food, the ring...but what Hope would have wanted was to hear her parents agree.

"I would like to marry your daughter."

Hope's heart fluttered in her chest and she couldn't bite back a gasp of surprise. He'd told her he wanted to marry her, of course, and she'd always said if he asked her again after Tom was dead, she'd say yes, but it had still slipped her mind.

James and Lily shared a glance.

"Our daughter," Lily's voice caught slightly before she continued, "she's our greatest joy."

"Not just anyone is deserving of her," James added, scrutinizing George intently, "but from the tales Sirius has told...you're the best man for the job."

"I --wait, what?" George gaped at Sirius before accusing him. "You hated me!"

Sirius shrugged his shoulders. "I'm obligated to hate anyone who snogs my goddaughter."

Hope released a sigh. "Sirius..."

"I'm not lying!"
"Completely mental," Hope grumbled under her breath, almost missing how George had pulled out a small box and knelt before her.

The ring was beautiful. The gem was moonstone that glittered in the light set on a silver band that twisted elegantly near the top with smaller moonstone carved into the shape of stars on either side of the circular stone.

Hope was sure she'd stopped breathing.

"Hope Potter," he said her name in a way that made her want to move closer and drag him to her, "I've known you since I was thirteen and been completely mad for you since I was fifteen…I already know the answer to this, so—"

She laughed as she hit his arm. "You jerk! You're supposed to ask the woman, not assume the answer!"

Lily's eyes glittered and James grinned widely as Sirius sniggered.

"Marry me, Mystery-girl?" George asked, his eyes never leaving hers.

"Yes, Wizard-boy," Hope said, beaming impossibly brightly. "Yes!"

And then he slipped the ring at long last onto her finger and kissed her until she forgot the world entirely.
Once word got around about Hope's engagement to George, it was complete pandemonium.

_Saviour Engaged to Long-time Boyfriend, George Weasley_

_Rumours have been flying for weeks concerning the relationship between Lady Hope Potter and businessman George Weasley. Potter and Weasley have been a hot item since Potter's third year and Weasley's fifth year. Schoolmates of Potter and Weasley claim that it wouldn't have been surprising to discover that the two were engaged._

_Potter and Weasley were spotted in Diagon Alley on their way back to their flat above Weasley's co-owned shop Weasley's Wizarding Wheezes with his brother Fred Weasley, with Potter sporting a new accessory. When pressed about the ring, neither denied the engagement. The wedding has no set date._

Hope scowled at the printed words as though wishing they would just disappear, but there was no denying the truth behind them, especially when the moving picture had gotten her moonstone engagement ring in all its glory. However, she recalled that when the press hounded her and George about the ring –on a date, no less; Hope and George had both been deeply annoyed by that– that they had both responded with 'no comment.'

"If you glare any harder at that paper, it's going to curl up into a smouldering ruin."

Hope looked up from the paper to Hermione who had strode back towards her with the form she had to fill out for taking her NEWTs separately, as opposed to going through school for another year (which she was sure would excite everyone but her).

"I wouldn't be against it," Hope had to concede as she took the form with a grateful smile as Daphne smirked beside her, her legs crossed and her foot jerking every so often to a tune only she could hear. "But what's just so annoying is that they're putting these words in our mouths when we clearly haven't said anything."

"Well, that's the press for you," Daphne sneered as she took the paper from Hope, glancing through it with disdain. "You know they listed the Greengrasses as Death Eater sympathizers last week? Like Astoria and I didn't fight for the Light side despite our neutral upbringing…unbelievable."

Hope made an annoyed sound in the back of her throat as Hermione sat down on her opposite side, watching as she filled out the parchment that would exempt her from attending Hogwarts as she took the NEWT exams at the Ministry.

And all three girls were all too aware of the attention they had garnered by those waiting in the lobby with them.

Hope made sure not to bother looking up from her parchment as she checked off the necessary classes that she still needed to take NEWTs in - Astronomy, Charms, Defence Against the Dark Arts, History of Magic, Potions, and Transfiguration.

"I forgot you took Ancient Runes in advance," Hermione mused, "did you ever find out what you got on it?"

"An O, obviously," Daphne said rolling her eyes on the red-head's opposite side, and Hope didn't bother denying it.
"So...how does this work?" Hope asked, clearly her throat as she nudged Daphne in the ribs. "You can take the exams spaced out or all at once?"

"Yeah," Daphne agreed, pulling the parchment towards her, "here's what you should do...take Astronomy and History of Magic first since they're softer subjects...and do it like at the end of September and then do...Charms and Transfiguration at the end of October, and Defence Against the Dark Arts and Potions at the end of November, that's what I'm doing."

"Sounds like a plan," Hope said, frowning intently at the parchment as she checked off the dates for each exam. "Is that what you're doing, then?"

"Something similar," Daphne had to concede, "but obviously I don't need as many classes as you."

"And I don't suppose you'll tell us what Unspeakables actually get up to once you are one?" Hermione asked dubiously, leaning forward to catch Daphne's eyes.

Blue eyes glittered. "Nope," she said, her lips twisting into a smirk. "We sign a contract and everything."

Hermione rolled her eyes and Hope sniggered as she stood to hand over the parchment to the secretary who was still stunned by her presence in the room (Hope didn't understand that at all, it wasn't like she wasn't human or anything).

And then she left with Hermione and Daphne still arguing over Daphne's future occupation whilst Hope watched on with a smirk, but then Hermione took the lift to the Auror Office to meet Ron for lunch, leaving the two alone.

"So, how're you?" Daphne asked her suddenly. "Things with you and your fiancé still hot and heavy?"

Her smirk widened as Hope's cheeks flushed faintly. "George and I are fine," she said shortly as they took the stairs in the stead of the lift that took far too long and was far too cramped. "We think we've come up with a place to live, actually, so we're going to go check it out on Saturday."

"That's nice," Daphne hummed, "I still think you should have been more into that whole lesbian lover thing, it would have sold it better."

Hope choked on her air and Daphne whistled innocently when she gave her a look of exasperation.

Ridiculous things made George happy, like how he could feel the band of the engagement right on Hope's finger as they interlocked hands walking down the cobbled road.

"What is it?" Hope asked, catching sight of the expression on his face and arching an eyebrow in curiosity.

"Oh, nothing," he said innocently, leaning down slightly to press a kiss to her cheek.

"Mnhm," Hope hummed dubiously, but she still tilted her face towards him more and smiled. "You're being awfully affectionate today."

George gave a dramatic gasp, clutching his chest with his free hand as though she had physically wounded him. "How can you say such a thing?" he cried. "I'm affectionate every day!"

"Sure you are," she drawled, rolling her eyes for good measure as his laughter echoed in the silence
that hung around them.

The small town that their prospective home was located in was called Ravensgrove, and was quaint and certainly had a similarly homey feel to it like Ottery St. Catchpole did. There were a few shops and houses closer to the centre of the Wizarding town, but they had long since passed out to nearly the edge of it, searching for the house in question.

It was a good distance away, thus fulfilling Hope and George's idea for being a bit away from prying eyes, carving out their own piece of the world.

It was very pleasant to look at from the outside was Hope's first assumption, though it was very clear that it hadn't been in use for a number of years. However, Hope thought the ivy growing up one side gave it character.

It was made of bricks that were dark in some places and brightly coloured in others, showing the effects of the elements on it. The shingles on the roof curl outwards and the windows have rounded tops.

And Hope was immediately in love.

"Pretty nice looking on the outside," George concurred with her thoughts as he withdrew an old-fashioned key from his pocket, passing her a wink.

They were only given the key for the day, after that, if they didn't return it to the agency the key would emit a sharp whistling noise that wouldn't stop until it was returned. So Hope and George opted to make the best use of their time.

The door swung open with an audible click before them, allowing them entrance within.

There was no furniture within, making it clear that whoever had last owned it had cleared it out of anything that could have been of value, and that was fine with George and Hope, as they'd prefer getting their own furniture (as it would hopefully be their home soon).

The main floor included the stripped sitting room that was large and spacious with a grand fireplace that made Hope think of the Gryffindor common room, the kitchen and dining room, and a small library that had nothing on the Hogwarts library, but was still large enough to contain a good number of books. The kitchen had a lot of cupboards and the counters are smooth, made of something that's a variety of colours that Hope couldn't quite pick out but suited the kitchen well when compared to the carved wood of the cupboards.

Hope's fingers traced over the carvings; some were of flowers, others were simple, like ferns, but she could already see herself falling in love.

She took the stairs two at a time, releasing her grip on George's hand to dart to the second landing.

There were only two floors, which was a bit typical for houses that were unlike the one that George and his siblings had grown up in, because it was frankly a bit ridiculous just how many floors there were at the Burrow.

There were six rooms, which would have been strange if one thought about how it looked from the outside, which was much smaller than it was from the inside. Obviously magic played a part.

The master bedroom was her favourite, partly because she knew it would be where she and George would spend a good deal of their time and also because she could imagine where everything would be.
There was a bathroom connected to it (unlike the other rooms which would have to share either the one bathroom in the hall or the one of the first floor), and Hope's face flushed slightly to see that the shower fulfilled the requirement that George had requested.

George leaned against the door frame, watching her in silent fascination at the almost childish glee as she inspected everything. It was an expression that had often accompanied her discovery of new runes and anything that had to do with the Ancient Arts that she was so fond of.

"I guess you like it?" he asked as Hope bounced on the tips of her toes, coming back to him with a grin in place on her lips, well aware that he'd been watching her but far too used to his attention to care, interlocking their fingers as her bright eyes met his.

"Can we get it?" she asked, the words so close to becoming pleading that George nearly considered exploiting it, but the house was important to both of them; having their own place was a new prospect of adulthood that they were both fully intending on exploring.

"So that's a yes?" he asked, referring to his first question.

"Do you like it?" she countered with her own.

George had considered the property. There was lots of space both inside and outside, which meant room for Quidditch games that they along with their friends and family had neglected during the wartime. And he had several ideas for what they could bring to the house.

"If you're happy," he said, "I'm happy."

Hope's fingers left his hands to hook into his belt-loops (something he often used to his advantage on her) and drag him closer. "That's not an answer," she murmured against his lips in a distracting way that made George count to ten in his head to keep himself from catching her chin and kissing her soundly.

"Yes," he formulated the answer against the corner of her lips that twitched upwards slightly. "I like the house."

Hope hummed something, no doubt ready to offer something else to say, but she turned her head in just the right way for him to kiss her the soundly way that he had been denying her and all her words were silenced.

The tombstone bore the name Justin Finch-Fletchley and it was one of the nicest tombstones Hope had seen yet, the name artfully carved with the words of a bible verse underneath that she didn't recognize.

She had spent the better part of the day visiting the others she had known that had died in the events of the previous year, all of the burials she had missed when she was away. That was the only regret she'd had about leaving when no one was looking, but she knew that if she'd stayed for them Ron and Hermione would have caught on to her plan and it would have never been put into fruition.

Hope laid the last of the flowers she had brought with her (which had been a fair few when she'd begun and had slowly dwindled down as she visited each gravestone, starting with her parents) against the ground before the stone.

The flower, like all those except for the ones she'd left at her parents, was a yellow rose, which was meant to symbolize friendship.
"I'm sorry I haven't come by sooner," Hope said, biting on the corner of her lip and blinking rapidly. "Things have been...crazy... I would've come to the burial, I know you deserved it more than most, but there were still Death Eaters to catch, but I've been back for awhile and I know I should have visited."

Hope was crouching with her arms wrapped around her jean-clad legs, her cheek resting against one knee as she considered what else to say.

"Hermione's going back to school," she told the stone, "I've got no idea why...I'm not going back, not after everything that happened; Daphne and I are taking ours at the Ministry before Hogwarts' Christmas break starts...with some luck I could be working for Gringotts by January."

She played with the rings on her fingers, an expression of contemplation clear on her face. She'd lost count just how many times she'd considered using the ring to see the people that had died, but she knew better.

Ron had asked her once about seeing Charlie but she'd rebuffed him, because seeing the dead so soon after their death would keep them alive in a way. She had spoken with Thanatos only once after their initial meeting and that was when he had given her that warning, and Hope had taken it to heart.

And Ron hadn't pestered her afterwards when he'd seen the sombre look that had overtaken her face.

Hope twisted the band of her engagement ring slightly. "George proposed, by the way," She said, with a light huff that betrayed her small chuckle in the quiet, "Fred told me afterwards he was really freaking out about it...nearly blew up the workshop."

She tugged slightly at the grass with her fingers, frowning for good measure. She hadn't told anyone much about what had happened in Justin's last moments. Not the words he'd said, and certainly not how his bloodied hand had painted red across her cheek. It was a movement she had been familiar with as George often did the same when he lifted a hand to cup her cheek.

It had stunned her when he'd done it, but she still didn't know what to make of it.

"Fred and Angie are getting married in December," she continued as though her thoughts hadn't been sidetracked, "and everyone's getting on with their lives...but we won't forget you, any of you, I promise."

Her lips twisted into a faint smile as she stood, releasing her grip on the grass and watching the yellow rose flutter as the wind picked up briefly. She turned around and blinked, surprised to see a girl standing there with a small bouquet of poppies in her hand.

The girl could have easily been mistaken as a red-head, but Hope could tell her hair was a distinct strawberry-blonde just as her eyes were brown. Her eyes were wide as she took in Hope.

"Are you—?" The girl looked her up and down, taking in the green of her eyes and the precise shade of red that her hair was. "Are you Hope Potter?"

Hope blinked. "I am," she said.

Annette Finch-Fletchley appraised her silently. Her older brother had described her well. She certainly had an aura of badassery (that wasn't a word but Justin had rolled his eyes for good measure), as Justin had said, with eyes that seemed old and a scar like lightning on her forehead.

"I'm..." Annette's words caught in her throat as she glanced towards the gravestone.
"You're Annie?" Hope guessed, tilting her head slightly. She had never personally heard much about Justin's younger sister, but she did overhear him in Pithos several times mentioning how 'Annie' would kill him.

"Er, yes," the girl said awkwardly. "Hi."

Hope's lips twitched briefly. "Hello."

Annette hovered on her own two feet a bit awkwardly. When the letter had come in for her from Hogwarts, her parents were adamant after what had happened to Justin, she wasn't going. But Annette had heard so many stories over the years about what Justin had learned how to do, just like she had heard about Hope Potter's misadventures.

Her father wasn't very impressed with the girl, stemming more from Hope not coming to his son's funeral; he viewed it as a personal slight.

But as Annette watched and listened to Hope speak to her brother's gravestone she saw the grief and sorrow.

"It's nice to meet you," Annette said.

Annette's mother was a kind-faced woman, whom Justin had clearly inherited many of his features from, particularly the blonde hair and brown eyes. Being a Muggle, she had several questions for Hope, some about her son, and some about Annette's chances of being a normal child.

Professor McGonagall would have answered all her questions fairly easily, Hope had pointed out, and would have done it more efficiently, but Mrs. Finch-Fletchley had been insistent.

Hope knew she had gone through it before with Justin, but she got the feeling Mrs. Finch-Fletchley wasn't keen on losing another child to the Wizarding world.

Hope drummed her fingers against the cup of tea that sat between her hands, warming her palms as she sat across from the woman and her daughter.

"Magic can be unpredictable," she said after a moment of pursing her lips. "It can be out of control… I understand that you might not want to let her go to Hogwarts given…" It became hard to swallow and Hope covered it with a hasty gulp of tea. "But Hogwarts gives your daughter a place to practice control over her magic in a controlled environment."

She sounded more like Hermione, she thought to herself, but that was fine.

Mrs. Finch-Fletchley blinked rapidly, thinking of her late son, too, Hope gathered. "And what would happen if Annette can't control it?"

Hope thought about when Hermione had shown her and Ron the chapter in the Life and Lies of Albus Dumbledore about Dumbledore's sister Ariana, with her magic exploding around her.

"Think of magic like a muscle," Hope decided instead, "you need to exercise if you want to keep in shape, right? Magic's the same, if you don't exercise it in the appropriate ways, it'll find a different outlet, and that's bad."

Hope didn't think she was really explaining magic very well, but it would have to do.

"I see…" the older woman said, her eyes sliding to her daughter whose eyes shifted between looking
at her mother and looking at Hope. "Annette…if you want to go, you can." The very words seemed to completely exhaust her but Annette positively beamed and that made up for it.

"Oh, thank you, thank you!"

Hope gave her a small smile of her own and Mrs. Finch-Fletchley could see why Justin had liked her so much.

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Hope was tired, hungry, and craving some warmth when she set foot inside the flat once more (as they couldn't immediately start living in the house yet, it needed a bit of touch-ups and furniture first), but she looked for George first, and thankfully he wasn't all that difficult to find, being sprawled on his back on the couch with his eyes closed, giving off the impression of sleep when Hope sat down on a spare bit of couch near his hip.

She had discarded her leather jacket by the kitchen and leaned forward to undo the zippers on her boots as an arm wrapped around her waist loosely.

"Mm, you're home late," he mumbled as she dropped the boots to the ground and crawled on top of him to nestle her head into the crook of his neck.

"I had some flowers to give to some old friends," she murmured and George stiffened, knowing just what she meant by that. "It looks like Justin's sister will be attending Hogwarts this term."

George arched an eyebrow despite his eyes being closed. It wasn't common for Muggle-borns to come from the same household (meaning siblings or cousins), but after the Creeveys, George knew better than to question it.

And then he jumped suddenly, his eyes flaring open at the feel of her cool fingers under his shirt.

"Merlin, woman! You're freezing!"

Hope laughed. Generally it was the other way around with George's fingers splayed over her stomach as she squirmed and whined about the cold.

"Then warm me up, Wizard-boy," she said with a kiss to the edge of his jaw, releasing a noise when he flipped them (though it wasn't entirely unpredictable, given his penchant for pinning her to anything from the wall to the bed).

"That's Wizard-man, to you," he grumbled into her neck, littering her skin with kisses all the way up her chin to her lips once more, breathing harshly against her mouth.

"Wizard-man..." Hope mused, giving him a chaste kiss. "I don't like the sound of it...Wizard-boy sounds much better."

Blue eyes glittered. "You know I can change your mind." His teeth nipped at her lower lip, making her eyelids flutter.

"That would defeat the purpose, don't you think?" she inquired breathlessly, her fingers trailing up over his back to tangle with his hair and George blinked.

"What're you—" And then he didn't have much time to speak as her lips drew on his, teeth nipping and tongues tangling together.

Later he would cede defeat for symbolism and she'd laugh at his dramatics.
Preparations

How Hope and George managed to keep the knowledge that they were moving out of the flat a secret from the rest of the world was a marvel. But the Weasley family wasn't likely to spill such details to the public; they understood all too well how much Hope desired privacy. And Hermione and Daphne were very good at keeping secrets.

They bought the house on the same day that they'd inspected it. It could have been considered a bit high priced, but Hope was a Lady of a Noble and Most Ancient House and George was a co-owner of a lucrative business.

Then there was the matter of furnishing it, which was why they were currently still living at the flat. It had been decided that the best course of action was to buy from a Muggle store.

Once they'd finally managed to put down the soft carpeting in the sitting room, both Hope and George collapsed on the flooring.

"I would take you on this carpet," George groaned, his fingers splaying into the carpet.

"As flattering as that is," Hope returned dryly, "I'm not trading friction burns for great sex."

She turned her head to look towards her fiancé who was grinning widely and waggling his eyebrows suggestively.

"Oh, shut up," she muttered, "Aren't we trying to get this room finished by the end of the day?"

"Mmhm… but you can be very distracting," George returned, his eyes raking over her form with appreciation.

"You're just full of great compliments today, aren't you?"

"I always compliment you!" George burst out.

Hope laughed at the betrayed look he was now wearing as he pulled himself to sit with crossed legs on the soft carpeting they'd just managed to stick to the ground with a Semi-Permanent Sticking Charm, and she crawled over to straddle his hips, wrapping her arms around his neck.

"Aw, Georgie, are you feeling like I don't appreciate you enough?" She asked, her eyes a sparkling hazel and her lips forming a sly smile.

"So much so," he declared, arms automatically wrapping around her waist, a few fingers lightly tugging on the end of her loose plait, his lips teasing hers just slightly.

"Mm…how much?" Hope murmured against his lips, her fingers digging into his bright locks as she rested all of her weight on her knees and leaning over him so he had to tilt his head back to keep their lips aligned.

George tried to keep his thoughts from getting distracted, but it was a truly difficult task, particularly when they were in this position.

"Weren't you against doing this?" he felt the need to point out, skating easily around her question. "Or are you trying to seduce an engaged man, Miss Potter?"

"It all depends on who he's engaged to, I suppose," Hope mused, "but there's nothing against a good
snog." Her eyes were twinkling even as she made a small noise from him twisting them around and pinning her to the floor.

"A good snog, Potter? Is that all I am?"

"Maybe," Hope wheedled, smirking widely as her nails dragged lightly against his scalp, sending a tingle down his spine. "Want to convince me otherwise, Weasley?"

"Oh, Mystery-girl," the words were nearly purred into Hope's ear and her eyelids fluttered closed, her breath hitching slightly, "you know just how convincing I can be...why play a game you know you're going to lose?"

"I'm very stubborn." Hope raised a hand to trace lightly around the spot where his ear had once been and he shuddered against her. Once the wound had healed, Hope had discovered how sensitive he was where his ear had once been.

"Tempting little she-devil," he groaned into her neck. "Why do you do this to me?"

"This is pretty mild," Hope countered, "considering the marks you leave on me."

George's grin was easy to feel against her skin before she threw all her weight against one leg so she ended up as the one on top.

"I forgot how much I like this position," she said, grinning down at him cheekily.

"Liar," George accused, his hands sliding up to her waist, but making no move to dislodge her. One of his hands trailed down one thigh while hers rested on his chest, curling under the collar of his shirt, just barely touching his skin.

"We are never going to get the sitting room finished at this rate," Hope said, swallowing thickly as she shook her head to clear her thoughts.

"Who cares?" George muttered, lifting the fingers at her waist to trace over the line of her jaw.

Hope leaned into his touch briefly before scowling. "Nope, we're not doing that, at least not until the sitting room is finished."

"What? But we haven't even kissed yet!"

"You've got memories of years of kisses to draw on," Hope responded dryly. "If we keep distracting each other, we're never going to finish this room, and I'm working on the library when you're at work tomorrow, remember?"

George removed his hands from her to rub at his eyes with a groan. "When did we decide to become grownups?"

"Growing old is mandatory, growing up is optional," Hope pointed out, pulling herself off her fiancé's lap. "And that's what you make a profit from, isn't it?"

"Minor details," George replied, waving a careless hand as he did so, pulling himself up so that he was sitting once more. "I'm going to laugh in Fred's face when he and Angie finally get their own place."

The corner of Hope's lips twisted upwards slightly. "I guess they're going to stay there after they're married?"
"For a little while," George said, pulling the miniaturized couch set they had bought previously with the carpeting from his pocket. "Angie wants to wait until she's officially a Healer before getting a place of their own, and that'll happen a few weeks before the wedding…I think they'll wait until around February or March before they start looking."

Hope hummed, pulling out her wand, ready to move furniture or blow a hole through something, whichever came first.

"I got you a key home!"

This was how Hope was greeted the next day by a very cheerful Luna with a home-warming present in her arms. Hope blinked for good measure as she looked down at the item. It had a few hooks for keys and it had an old feel to it that made Hope wonder where she got it.

"Er, thanks," Hope said, taking the gift with a smile as she opened the door wider and the wild-haired blonde stepped through. "And thanks for coming to help, Luna, I know you'd probably rather be looking for some strange mysterious creature…"

"Oh, that's alright," Luna said dreamily, "Dad and I aren't set to go looking for anything else until Christmas break."

Hope couldn't imagine why she'd want to be trudging around in snow when it was so cold; the redhead would rather be wrapped in a thick blanket close to the fire, cuddling with George (who was very good at cuddling).

Luna's eyes swept over the finished sitting room with interest.

Contrary to popular opinion, the pair had managed to not become distracted with each other after the initial incident. The room had clearly been inspired by the Gryffindor common room, but that was fine with both of them, as the common room had always had a homely feel to it.

There was a long couch, a loveseat, and two poufy armchairs positioned in a half circle in the general area of where the fire was, but not so close that they were overcrowding it (as it had often seemed in the common room). They were all made of a rich red material and there was a window seat with cushion that was a similar colour.

"I like it," Luna hummed approvingly and Hope smiled.

"Right now we've only got the most basic wards up," she told her younger friend. "We haven't come up with a complete list of who's allowed in here yet, so we're trying not to bring too many people here before we finish with it…you're actually the first person to see it."

Luna's eyes fixed her with an unblinking stare; if Hope wasn't so used to it, she would have been quite unnerved. She looked like she was attempting to formulate a response, but couldn't come up with one.

"C'mon, I'll show you where the library is." Hope turned, making a gesture over her shoulder as she led Luna forward.

The flooring had been replaced by mahogany panels, and they were smooth against Hope's bare feet as they walked inward. She and George had put down half of the panels the previous night, something Ron thought as strange since it would be easier to just use magic completely, but there was something satisfying about doing it mostly themselves (and Hope refused to live in a house that was built primarily with magic; that wouldn't end well).
The library was one of Hope's favourites in the house. It had a window seat much like the sitting room and it had a small room off of it that George had jokingly called her office, but Hope was honestly considering it.

"I don't need a lot of help," Hope admitted, even as she looked at the boxes filled with books, "and it's more of Hermione's thing, but she had a thing with her parents, besides you're probably better at sorting…didn't you make a directory of those creatures you and your father are looking for?"

Luna bobbed her head in understanding, unfolding one of the cardboard boxes to peer within with interest. "So, how do you want these sorted? According to subject?"

"If you don't mind," Hope said with a sigh, plopping down onto the ground beside her. A good portion of the books were ones she had never read before, some of them being gifts for her birthday that she had missed whilst chasing down Death Eaters, and some were taken from her vaults that she had missed during her initial sweep.

They continued mostly in silence, and neither particularly minded.

"Looking forward to going back to Hogwarts?" Hope asked suddenly, placing her copy of *Ancient Magical Languages* in the Ancient Runes pile.

Luna considered her answer. "I am looking forward to seeing everyone again," she said, her eyebrows wrinkling together slightly, "but I'm also afraid of going back there."

Hope understood that as well as anyone else. It was one of the reasons she hadn't wanted to go back to Hogwarts, and she truly admired Hermione for going back, she was the stronger one of the two. Hope couldn't handle being in that castle for that much of an extended amount of time.

"It's alright to be afraid," Hope said, reaching forward to pat the knee of Luna's bright blue trousers. "We all saw people die that night…I'm afraid to go back."

Luna's blink conveyed her surprise. "Really?"

"Why do you think I'm opting to take my NEWTs outside of school?" Hope asked rhetorically. "Besides, it's easier for me to sleep when I know George is beside me…we help each other when we wake up from nightmares."

"It must be nice," Luna mused thoughtfully.

"You don't tell your father about your nightmares?" Hope asked, honestly surprised.

Luna separated Hope and George's old school books into their appropriate piles. "I've had nightmares since I was a child," she confided in Hope, "but at the time Dad was suffering too…so I didn't want to make more trouble for him."

Hope knew she was speaking of when her mother had been killed by a spell backfire.

"Maybe you should try talking to him about it," Hope suggested. "It might help to have someone to talk to."

"Did it help you?"

Hope gave her a short nod, standing to place the books pertaining to Egyptology on the shelf.

"I don't think George would admit it, but it helped him too."
Luna gave her a soft smile in return.

Teddy Lupin babbled brightly at her as she cradled him gently in her arms, cushioning his head carefully as his mother watched on.

Clearly caring for a child was as strenuous as Hope had heard, as the circles under Tonks' eyes were thick from sleepless nights.

"My son is unfortunately quite nocturnal," Tonks gave a tired sigh, slumping into the sofa, her eyes fluttering shut and her hair gaining a few turquoise strands.

Teddy was surrounded by strangely haired women today. Hope's hair was set in short lavender curls with bright blue eyes, and it was more than enough to fascinate him.

"I hear some kids are," Hope hummed, rocking the baby carefully in her arms as he babbled incoherently at her.

"You are completely right, Teddy," she cooed, her eyes colouring an orange that the boy quickly replicated. "Mummy should get some sleep, shouldn't she?"

Tonks gave a soft laugh, running a hand through her pixie styled hair.

"Thanks for coming over," she said as Teddy calmed down, "Remus needed to go to Hogwarts for some meeting about classes at the start of term."

"You know I'd be happy to watch him," Hope told her as Teddy smacked his lips loudly, blinking tiredly. "Once the house is finished, of course. It's not like I'm going to be doing anything other than studying until December."

"We may take you up on that," Tonks replied with a smile. "And I know how much Teddy wants time to spend with his godmother." Her eyes were twinkling as she looked down at her son fondly.

They didn't speak for a few minutes.

"Do you think you and Remus will have any more kids?" Hope asked her suddenly.

"We haven't really talked about it," Tonks admitted almost as an afterthought, "but I think Teddy might like to have a playmate one day...why do you ask?"

Shoulders lifted and fell in a shrug, though careful not to jostle the baby in her arms. "I was just wondering if because you're a Metamorphmagus that all your children will be."

"It is possible," Tonks conceded, bobbing her head, "but my children would also be half-Werewolf."

Hope arched an eyebrow. "You're saying its possible you could have a kid with wolfish characteristics?"

"Well, maybe...lycanthropy can't be passed on to children," Tonks gave her a wink, "as you're already aware of, but it's possible that since Remus is a Werewolf that it could overpower, I suppose, the Metamorph gene that gives us our abilities. Theoretically, we could have children that are both Metamorphmagi and children that have no ability to change their appearance whatsoever."

"Theoretically?" Hope sniggered.

"Don't quote me on this, I only had this conversation with Angelina Johnson a few months before
Teddy was born."

Hope remembered that day. Remus had gotten a request to Pithos for a Healer, and the only one with experience and with knowledge of lycanthropy was Angie.

"Is she still working on that lycanthropy cure?" Hope asked curiously. "I haven't gotten around to asking her…"

"Oh, she's still working on it," Tonks said with a note of fondness in her voice towards the younger dark-skinned witch. "The last time I saw her she thought she was getting very close to a breakthrough."

A sigh was expelled from Hope's lips. "That's good," she said.

"How are you and George doing?"

"I feel a mighty need to snog him when he gets back from work," Hope muttered, more to herself than Tonks who burst into giggles and then had to stifle them with her fist.

"Well, who doesn't want to snog the man they love?" she retorted. "I've heard rumours of a wedding before the year is out…." She gave her cousin a look.

"If you read it in the *Daily Prophet*, I'd take it with a grain of salt," Hope muttered mutinously. "I swear I could read more factual information from the *Quibbler*, and that's saying something…don't tell Luna I said that."

"Of course not!"

"We were thinking more of an autumn wedding, actually," Hope said, her eyes fixed on Teddy who was tugging on one of her fingers with his pudgy ones. "We're not sure where to do it yet…but I think the Forest of Morea is one of the most beautiful places in the world, so George might agree to do it there, but that's still up in the air…either way, it won't be happening until next year, so you only need to worry about getting a dress for Angie and Fred's wedding."

"You'll probably be an accomplished Curse-Breaker by then," Tonks said for good measure as she held out her arms and Hope carefully deposited her child into them.

"Here's to hoping," Hope said with a small chuckle as she checked her watch. "I should probably get going if I want to get any studying in before George comes home."

"We'll talk later, yeah?" Tonks asked, kissing her cousin's cheek as the former Gryffindor did the same.

"Soon," Hope promised as she pulled her jacket up and over her shoulders.

Hope felt him before she heard him where she was in the kitchen, wiping down the counters that had accumulated grime and dust in the years that the house hadn't been in use.

The arms wound around her waist and a kiss was pressed to her cheek.

"I was wondering just where my future wife could be," he murmured playfully in her ear.

"How long did it take you to find me?" Hope asked instead, leaning her head back to rest on his shoulder, her eyes glittering.
"Not that long," George hummed. "I see you had a productive day."

His gaze had fallen to the new panels beneath their feet and Hope grinned widely. "And the library's done so the first level is almost completely finished."

"Did you do any studying today?" her fiancé asked, waggling his eyebrows at her in a way that made her laugh.

"Don't you know it," Hope said, turning in his arms to wrap hers around his neck. "You know, I've been thinking about you all day, Mister Weasley…"

"Have you, Miss Potter?" George responded in a voice that was low and told Hope that he had been thinking about her as well.

"Oh, yes," Hope murmured, curling her fingers into the hair at the nape of his neck, "and you know what I remembered, Weasley?"

George hummed against her lips in a way that made them tingle. "What did you remember, love?"

"I really like your hair this long," Hope deadpanned and George had to lean back to release a shout of laughter.

His hair wasn't as long as it had been in her fourth year, but it was just long enough for Hope to be able to tangle her fingers into his hair, and she certainly enjoyed doing that.

"Is that all you were thinking about me all day?" George asked, his eyes glinting a darker blue as Hope leaned securely against the counter she had just wiped down.

"Possibly," Hope admitted, "I was also thinking about how angry my fiancé will be when he finds out I'm running off with you."

"Oh? Are you running off with me now?" he inquired, tilting her chin with one finger.

"Perhaps," Hope said, one hand changing from carding through his hair to following the line of his jaw to the opposite side of his head where his ear should have been and she smirked as his weight fell against her slightly, trapping her to the counter (but she didn't really mind, that was usually how it went).

He nuzzled against the curve of her neck in retaliation. "I think we're straying away from the point, love."

"Point?" Hope tilted her head slightly at the feel of his kisses descending on her throat.

"That you've been thinking about me all day, Hope," the way he uttered her name made her eyes flutter close and induced a shiver that travelled slowly down her spine. "And I'm dying for a kiss."

"Is that all?" Hope smirked, but it was quickly swallowed by the lips ravishing hers. She dragged him closer to her, one arm locking securely across his shoulders whilst the other knotted further into his hair. Hope hardly noticed when his hands at her hips lifted her to position her on the top of counter.

He moaned into her mouth as their tongues tangled together and for a moment there was nothing but tongues sliding over one another, sucking and licking in a way that still made Hope's knees weak (so it was good she was on the counter or George would have had to hold her up), teeth nipping and biting, and lips coming together.
There was nothing elegant about the way George and Hope kissed, and it certainly wasn't the same every time. But George and Hope were like creatures of fire, like phoenixes on their Burning Day, and their love and passion for each other reflected that.

Hope hardly realized that George had locked her legs around his waist but then they were moving and she did notice that.

Lips trailed across his jaw to pay an extraordinary amount of attention to the spot high on his neck just under his jaw, impossible to hide unless with the use of a Glamour Charm (Hope still remembered the first time she'd left a mark on him and he hadn't put the charm on and had come down to the Great Hall with a bruise on his neck that had Fred howling).

George subsequently almost crashed into the wall and Hope grinned against his flesh as he groaned before finally managing to pin her to one of the couches.

"You are terrible for my health," George grated.

"You knew that when we first started dating," Hope pointed out before dragging him down for another kiss.
The flat was bare, barring the necessities it had been bought with, the last of the boxes piled close to the door as Hope and Angelina looked upon the (for the most part) empty flat.

It looked like it had the day George had bought it, without even a hint of the owners that had come before.

Hope was kind of sad to leave it behind, having so many good memories within its walls, but it wasn't like the flat was going anywhere, as it technically came with the shop.

"You know, you can always spread out a bit more now that you've got two flats," Hope said, turning to speak more directly to Angelina, who had the morning off and offered to help her pack up the last of the things in the flat to be taken to the house while Fred and George were at work.

"We could," Angelina agreed, taking out the silverware from one drawer and, for lack of a better place to put them that would keep them together without much trouble, putting them in an empty mug bearing the logo for Puddlemere United that Oliver had gifted George an age ago. "But we'll be moving out on our own at some point too, so it's better to keep the chaos contained, if you know what I mean."

She gave Hope a look and her former teammate released a bright laugh.

"Oh, I know exactly what you mean," she assured her, "I'm pretty sure it's a Weasley twin thing."

"No doubt," Angelina said, bobbing her head in agreement, dark eyes trailing over to Hope as she dug under the sofa to pull out a long forgotten book, sniggering when she caught sight of the title, *Hogwarts: A History*.

Of course.

"Do you still have nightmares?" Angelina asked her suddenly and Hope's grip on the book's binding grew dangerously tight.

"Do you?" she asked evasively in return.

Green eyes met brown with ease.

"It used to be every night," Angelina said, closing the cardboard box over the last of Hope and George's cutlery, "…right after the Battle, I mean, but after awhile it got better, once every few weeks, now."

Hope said nothing to that.

"But it's different for you, isn't it?"

The red-haired girl stiffened her spine, unable to stop the reflex. "What makes you say that?"

Angelina gave a seemingly careless shrug, but Hope knew better. "You've dealt with this kind of stuff more than any of us—"

"You mean the death and dying bit or the killing people bit?" Hope asked.

Angelina threw a scowl her way. "Both, I guess."
She wasn't wrong. Hope had experienced more than her fair share of pain and death in her lifetime, enough to set her for a few decades at least. She didn't know how she would be able to keep herself together if Remus hadn't been able to pull through, but he had.

"I have nightmares about walking down the aisle," Hope said finally and Angelina looked up in surprise at the admission; Hope wasn't one for admitting weaknesses. "As I get to the front I see everyone in their dress robes—"

"How is that a nightmare?"

"Because Justin is pouring with blood and Colin's as pale as Death, and Lavender's throat is ripped out, Anthony has a hole in his chest, and Charlie's head is bloodied."

She said the words all very matter-of-factly, so as not to become affected by them, but they made Angelina gape at her.

The Healer couldn't imagine an image like the one she was describing. It would freak her out so much she probably wouldn't want to get married to Fred; she was amazed that Hope agreed to marry George despite the nightmare.

"That's terrifying," Angelina told her with certainty.

"Tell me about it," Hope muttered with a sigh, raking her fingers through her hair, turning it brown just briefly before returning its colour slowly back to her typical dark red.

"But let's talk about something a bit more cheerful...like your wedding!"

Angelina gave her a blank look. "We were just talking about your wedding nightmare and you want to talk about my wedding?"

A snort escaped Hope's lips before she could stop it. "I haven't had that nightmare in a few days, so don't worry, besides, I haven't heard all that much concerning your wedding."

"Really?" Angelina responded with a bit of disappointment.

"I'm sure it's just because it's August," Hope promised quickly, "when is the exact date? George only said it was in December."

"December 19," Angelina said, plopping down on the couch beside her. "But school's still technically in session, so McGonagall is going to have the guests that are still going to school floo to the Burrow."

"So are you doing what Bill and Fleur did, getting married at the Burrow?"

"Oh, no," Angelina assured her quickly with a wave of her hand, "there's this old church that no one uses in the Liverpool that I loved when I was a kid, that's where the wedding is going to be, the Burrow is just the meeting place for us all to get ready...and speaking of getting ready, do you have a dress yet?"

"Not yet," Hope said with a half-smile. "But I'm sure I'll have one by the time the wedding rolls around, don't worry...I'm thinking the dress'll be blue."

"The colour of George's eyes?" Angelina cheeked, eyes glittering darkly.

"No, obviously not," Hope scoffed, "that colour's too dark for a wedding, I'm thinking a lighter and
softer blue...have you got your dress already?"

"Have I got my dress already? What kind of person do you take me for?"

It was obviously rhetorical and Hope smirked.

The first thing Hope and George did after they finished the house was invite all their friends and family to it. It was the first time since the Battle that so many members of the Resistance and the Order of the Phoenix were in one place.

Remus and Tonks were there too, along with the whole Weasley brood, and everyone at some point had made their way over to the Lupins to coo over their son. Kingsley had even stopped by for a few scant minutes, even though Hope was certain that the Minister was very busy, and when he left there were a few biscuit crumbs on his richly coloured robes.

Daphne and Dean came together with Astoria and Luna, and the younger of the four had their heads together over the sweets table, theorizing about creatures that no one believed existed.

It was nice that Luna had found a kindred spirit in Astoria.

Daphne and Dean were as thick as thieves as they'd ever been, and it seemed the war had only brought them closer.

"This is for you," Daphne told Hope, tossing a small box towards her as she detached her fingers from Dean's.

"What for?" Hope asked, a bit flummoxed as she undid the paper around the box.

"Birthday present," Dean answered for his girlfriend, "since, you know, you weren't here of it."

Hope cocked an eyebrow at the pair for good measure as they grinned at her. "Are you blaming me for not being able to celebrate my birthday because I was off trying to catch rogue Death Eaters?"

"We wouldn't blame her for that, would we?" Daphne asked Dean slyly, a smirk curling her mouth.

"Oh, absolutely not," Dean agreed cheekily.

"You two are absolutely terrible," Hope decided, "who thought it was a good idea for you to join forces?"

"We did."

Hope rolled her eyes for good measure as she pulled the box's top off, eyebrows raising high on her forehead at what lay within.

They were earrings, silver loops shaped with snakes.

"Of course," Hope said faintly amused by the gift. "Because nothing says I'm proud to be the descendent of Salazar Slytherin than various jewellery shaped like snakes."

"Maybe you just like snakes," Dean said innocently.

"Besides, there's nothing wrong with having good taste," Daphne concurred and Hope shook her head in exasperation.
They really were too terrible when they combined their forces.

She shut the lid and thanked them, moving on to greet a few of her and George's other guests.

Fleur was with Hermione and Padma, checking out the library with fascination.

"Zis eez lovely," Fleur told her when she joined them, "so many books! 'Ow many are on Ancient Runes?"

"A fair few," Hope shrugged with a sheepish smile, "and I've got some on ancient history that I haven't completely read through…so at least I'll have something new to read once I finish up all my exams."

"That's a plus, I'm sure," Padma drawled, fingering a book of constellation interpretation. "I may have to steal some of your books, Hope, these look amazing!"

"Me too," Hermione added, grinning as she pulled out a book detailing the duties of each department in the Ministry for Magic. (Hope couldn't even remember where she'd gotten that book, but it seemed likely that it had once belonged to her mother or father)

"No problem," Hope said, "just let me know first."

Padma saluted, but the other two were too enthralled by the books in their hands to give their friend an answer, but Hope didn't mind; this was Hermione and Fleur, after all.

Dennis was hovering far from the centre of the sitting room when Hope returned, leaning against the wall with his fingers playing against his bottle of Butterbeer.

"Are you alright, Dennis?" she asked him, regretting it when the smaller boy gave a violent jump at the noise, upending some of his drink onto the carpeting, but Hope made it disappear with a wave of her wand.

"Oh, sorry," he said quickly.

"Don't worry about it," Hope said waving off his concerns. "How are you? I haven't seen much of you since I got back…"

Her concerned eyes filtered a silvery-blue that wouldn't have looked out of place on Luna's face.

"I've been…at home," the young Gryffindor admitted, glancing over the room at the many people of different backgrounds speaking and laughing together as though none of them had suffered a loss, but the death of his brother weighed heavily on his.

Hope's expression grew soft. "How are your parents holding up?"

Dennis swallowed thickly. "Some days are better than others," he admitted throatily. "Mum's taking it the worst…I was thinking of taking the year off, you know, to stay behind and help them, but Mum and Dad wanted me to go, since I've got the OWLs to take…"

Dennis had missed out on his fifth year when he'd been out at Pithos with the older members of the Resistance and the ones that were Muggle-born.

Hope nodded in understand. "You know, you don't have to stay here if you don't want to," she reminded him, nodding towards the door where it was open from people going in and out over the course of the night.
"No, its fine, really," Dennis assured her, "I needed this, getting out and seeing everyone… reminding myself that there are still good things in the world."

Hope remembered the small bright-eyed boy who had easily been the youngest of the original Dumbledore's Army, and she couldn't help thinking of them all, it was him who seemed to have sacrificed the most from his childhood.

"Alright," Hope said, squeezing his shoulder, "you know you can always talk to me, alright?"

She had the most experience of them all with dealing with loss, after all.

Dennis opened his mouth to agree when there was a loud yell of "Michael, you sly bastard!"

Ernie had apparently eaten a Canary Cream by mistake, more specifically, one that Michael had given him. Ernie was a puffed up canary and Ginny had fallen off the armchair howling with laughter while Fred and George voiced their approval of the use of one of their joke products.

And this was so much better than dwelling on all that they had lost.

"George…George…come on, love, you have to get up, you've got work today."

George groaned, rolling over in the bed to where the sunlight wouldn't hit his face, squinting his eyes open to look at his fiancée, who was (sadly) already fully clothed, wearing her favourite leather jacket and her hair –currently a strawberry-blonde– in a loose plait over one shoulder.

"I'm the owner," he complained, burying his face in the pillow, "if I don't want to show up for work, I technically don't have to."

"Georgie, you're only the co-owner," Hope reminded him.

"I am the true genius behind Weasley's Wizard Wheezes!"

She gave an exaggerated eye-roll at those words. "I'll be sure to let Fred know that the next time I see him."

The only indication he gave that he heard her was a grumble garbled by the pillow.

"I'm taking Annie to Diagon Alley to buy her things for Hogwarts," Hope told him and he lifted his head.

"Annette Finch-Fletchley?" he asked.

Hope had visited the little girl a few times over the past few weeks, telling her more about the Wizarding World than her brother had been able to before his untimely death.

"Yeah, her mum asked me if I would." Hope twisted the engagement ring around on her finger. "I don't think she wants to go to Diagon Alley, she thinks it might remind her of…you know."

George arched an eyebrow. "And she trusts you with her kid?"

"Well, I've had several long conversations with the woman, so I gather that yes, she trusts me with her kid," Hope said dryly, leaning down to kiss George's lips chastely. "Maybe I'll bring you some lunch after we're through."

"You are the most beautiful and lovely fiancée I could ever have," George told her with absolute
certainty and Hope rolled her eyes again.

"You're laying it on a bit thick, don't you think?"

"Not at all," George swore and Hope smiled, giving him another quick kiss, waggling her fingers in farewell as she took the stairs down to the main level of the house before heading out the front door and revving up her motorbike and fastening the helmet over her head.

It took about fifteen minutes through the air for Hope to reach the Finch-Fletchley's house. Annette's father's car wasn't in the driveway, which made Hope sigh in relief; the man didn't much like her and the first and last time she'd been in his presence, he hadn't responded well to her presence.

But Annette's face in the window as she waved ecstatically to Hope made it worth the effort.

"Mum! Hope's here!" Hope could hear from within as Hope cut the engine and pulled off her helmet, making her way past the tulips to the door that was quickly thrown up by Justin's little sister.

Annette's hair was in a similar braid, though hers was tighter than Hope's, without a hair out of place, her brown eyes bright.

She threw her arms around Hope's middle and Hope gave her a slight smile in return. "Hey, Annie —"

"Can we leave now?" Annette was dancing up and down on the balls of her feet, excitement clear as her mother came to the door with a distinctly harried expression.

"She's been excited since she woke up this morning," Mrs. Finch-Fletchley told Hope was a soft smile.

"I can see that," Hope said, blinking rapidly down at the energetic eleven year old. "You're sure you're fine with me taking her? A bike's more open than a car."

Mrs. Finch-Fletchley glanced towards the dark motorbike that Hope had parked in the driveway.

"Is it enchanted?"

"Well, yeah, of course it's enchanted," Hope said with a sheepish grin. "Safety spells, invisibility spells, speed charms, the defensive measures that were put on it last July…she's pretty safe."

"Good," Mrs. Finch-Fletchley gave a short sigh of relief and Hope thought she'd been reconsidering letting her take her now only child to Diagon Alley, but it couldn't have been made plainer that going to Diagon Alley terrified her.

"Can we go now?" Annette pressed.

"When should I expect her back?" Mrs. Finch-Fletchley asked over her daughter's begging.

"Well, if it's not busy, I should have her back to you around lunch," Hope said, glancing at the watch that had once been Fabian Prewett's. "I'm meeting my fiancé for lunch."

"You're getting married?" Annette's eyes were wide, fastening on the moonstone ring Hope was wearing and Hope released a small laugh.

"Not just yet," she promised, turning back to her mother. "We'd better get going if we want to miss the rush."
In a short matter of minutes, Hope and Annette were on the bike with their helmets over their heads as they soared high into the air. Even with the helmet on Hope's head, she could hear Annette's euphoric laughter, and she could probably say with certainty that the girl had never been quite so high up before.

But eventually the fun had to end and they had to make their descent, down into the centre of London, a feat that wouldn't have been nearly as possible if Hope didn't have a button to activate the invisibility spell.

Annette followed her after her as Hope returned the bike to her pocket in miniature, gripping her hand tightly as they weaved through the busy Leaky Cauldron to come out to the alley on the other side.

"Let's get started, shall we?"

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**HOGWARTS SCHOOL of WITCHCRAFT and WIZARDRY**

**UNIFORM**

*First-year students will require:*

1. Three sets of plain work robes (black)
2. One plain pointed hat (black) for day wear
3. One pair of protective gloves (dragon hide or similar)
4. One winter cloak (black, silver fastenings)

*Please note that all pupils' clothes should carry name tags*

**COURSE BOOKS**

*All students should have a copy of each of the following:*

- The Standard Book of Spells (Grade 1) by Miranda Goshawk
- A History of Magic by Bathilda Bagshot
- Magical Theory by Adalbert Waffling
- A Beginners' Guide to Transfiguration by Emetic Switch
- One Thousand Magical Herbs and Fungi by Phyllida Spore
- Magical Drafts and Potions by Arsenius Jigger
- Fantastic Beasts and Where to Find Them by Newt Scamander
- Spellfire: A Guide to Self-Protection Against Dark Forces by Samson Spellman

**OTHER EQUIPMENT**

1 wand

1 cauldron (pewter, standard size 2)
I set glass or crystal phials

1 telescope set

1 brass scales

Students may also bring an owl OR a cat OR a toad

PARENTS ARE REMINDED THAT FIRST YEARS ARE NOT ALLOWED THEIR OWN BROOMSTICKS

"Do I really need all of this?" Annette asked, consulting her list and marking off the telescope and brass scales as they were packaged by the owner of the shop they were in.

"You'll use the telescope at least once a week, if not more, for Astronomy, and the brass scales are used to measure ingredients in Potions, so yes," Hope said with a smirk as she shrunk the items, forking over enough coins to cover the purchase, "they are necessary."

"What House do you think I'll be sorted into?" Annette asked when they left, heading towards Ollivanders to get her a wand.

"I think that is your decision," Hope replied, taking Annette's hand as the crowd of people thickened on the street. It made her glad she had forgone her usual appearance, it would have caused a pandemonium and Hope didn't need that on top of the crowd.

"Aw, come on, Hope!"

"I'm serious!" Hope said with a small laugh. "You will be placed in the House that suits you best; no one is ever Sorted into a House they aren't suited for."

Annette pouted just a bit more, in time for them to make it to the wand store as a small boy left it with his parents.

Hope grabbed the door before it slammed shut after them, ushering her younger companion inside.

She remembered the first time she had come into the darkened shop with Hagrid. It had been just strange, just as eerie as it had been then. However, there were black burns on the floor and walls from spellfire from when Mr. Ollivander had been taken by Death Eaters.

"Now, Mr. Ollivander's a little strange," she whispered to Annette, "just take him in stride, alright?"

"Miss Potter, I was not expecting you."

She let out a startled squeak and Annette burst into stifled giggles as a man appeared out the darkness, white hair wild and pale eyes like wide moons.

"Mr. Ollivander," Hope attempted to control her breathing, "oh, hey…didn't see you there…"

"I was under the impression your wand was still working for you," Mr. Ollivander continued.

"Oh, it works fine—" Hope nudged Annette's shoulder, pushing her forward and thus directing his attention to land on the brown-eyed girl. "This is Annette Finch-Fletchley."

"Ah…Justin's sister," Mr. Ollivander mused and Annette flinched. "I remember your brother's wand well… Oak, nine-and-a-quarter inches, very pliant, with dragon heartstring…let me see if I have a wand for you…"
"Er, okay," Annette muttered as he took a few quick measurements with his measuring tape, only to disappear into the back of the shop.

"A little creepy," Hope conceded when Annette glanced towards her, "he's got this habit of remembering every wand he's ever made and who purchased it...he told me what wands my parents bought from him when I first bought my wand...that's a bit freaky to an eleven year old."

And then he was back, standing in front of Annette so suddenly that she couldn't help but jump, even as he extended the wand to her.

The wand was smooth with slanted lines carved into the hilt.

"Oak, ten and a half inches, very swishy, unicorn tail hair," he said and Annette took the wand in time for a few orchids to burst from the tip.

Mr. Ollivander clapped his hands in excitement. "Ah, a perfect match on the first try!"

Hope stared at the wand dubiously. "I must've gone through at least thirty before I found my wand," she muttered to herself, shaking her head as she handed over seven galleons to cover the cost of the wand.

And then they were both out in the bright sunlight.

"On to Flourish and Blotts," Hope said pointing Annette towards the bookstore in the opposite direction, "then we have to hurry you back to your Mum, I don't think she's going to be happy with us taking so long."
"Love, you here?"

"Upstairs," Hope's voice called from the second level, echoing off the walls, and George took the stairs two at a time until he reached the master bedroom, and, by extension, the bathroom.

He quirked an eyebrow at his fiancée. "Do people usually take baths at four in the afternoon?"

Hope cracked an eye to look at him. "Bathing is good for the soul, Georgie."

George laughed.

Hope's hair was swept up into a high bun and her body was hidden under the water by a multitude of bubbles.

George knelt down beside the tub and flicked a few bubbles at her face, making Hope's face pinch as she screwed her eyes shut to keep the bubbles from getting into her eyes.

"Had a good day?" he asked her.

"Pretty good," Hope said with a yawn, "at least I didn't have people all come up to me when Annie was with me." She leaned her head back and closed her eyes. "Gods, if only I didn't save the Wizarding world."

George gave a light laugh. "If only," he said, "then you wouldn't have to deal with obsessed fans."

Hope sighed. "But at least we could have a bit of peace and quiet."

"Peace and quiet? What's that?" George laughed and Hope opened her eyes to roll them towards her fiancé.

"Haha, very funny," she drawled. "What about you? Have a good day?"

"Well, I didn't blow up," George said and Hope couldn't help but laugh.

"That's always a good thing," she responded.

"I thought so too."

Hope raised a hand to cup his cheek, and if he minded the soapy water, he didn't mention it. "I love you," she said.

"I know," he replied, his brow furrowed a bit in confusion. "What's that all about?"

The red-haired witch gave a loud sigh. "Angie thinks I should tell you about my problems."

"Your...problems?" George repeated a bit dubiously.

As far as he knew, the only problems Hope was suffering from were chronic nightmares that were slowly getting better.

"How do you feel about kids?" Hope blurted, before quickly explaining at the stunned look on his face. "I mean, not now, obviously, but at some point..."
George smiled, leaning in to kiss her. "Our babies would be too pretty, admit it."

Hope blinked and then she laughed, practically howling against the edge of the tub.

"Admit it!" George laughed. "You know I'm right! A bunch red-haired green-eyed misfits who – oh…" Realization dawned on him. "They're going to be a bunch of troublemakers."

"Well, given the kind of trouble their parents got up to in school," Hope said, rolling her eyes for good measure, "I'm pretty sure it would be impossible for them not to be."

George gave a grudging nod, his half-smile failing slightly. "Why did you want to know how I felt about kids?"

Her smile fell and her eyes drifted, something that caused anxiety to balloon inside of George.

"I've been in a lot of…terrible situations," Hope said slowly, choosing her words carefully, "I was worried that my body might be too damaged to – you know – carry a baby to term."

Stunned realization overtook his features and George sank down to sit rather than kneel beside the tub.

"I saw a Muggle doctor while I was away," Hope barrelled on, "they thought it might be a bit… difficult to conceive with the amount of significant scarring I had."

"Had?" George's attention grasped to that single word. "But you don't anymore?"

"I had Angie give me a once over when I came back," Hope said with a small shrug that sloshed the water in the tub a bit.

George gave her a slightly exasperated look. "So you were just trying to give me a minor heart attack?"

Hope couldn't stop her laugh. "No, of course not!" she denied, but she was smiling, so George didn't believe her for a second. "I just thought I should tell you… if you were worried in any way."

Also, she had been feeling off in not telling him about that bit. They were a couple, after all, what affected Hope affected him as well. And her ability to bear children had been something neither had discussed much, aside from the image Hope had told him that she had seen in the Mirror of Erised.

She still dreamed about that scene sometimes, but most of her dreams were the sort that plagued and usually ended with jolting awake in bed.

The nightmares, at least, weren't nearly as bad as they had been before, and Hope still jotted down in a small journal what occurred in each of them, which was a little helpful, making the dreams seem less real and more of a creation of her own mind.

"You'd tell me if something else was bothering you, right?"

"What else could be bothering me?" Hope asked, her brow furrowing slightly and George released a small chuckle, pulling himself up into a standing position.

"Just checking," he said, "I'll get started on dinner."

Hope's eyes glinted and she smirked. "What if I wanted to come down as I am, wearing absolutely nothing?" she asked cheekily.
George was momentarily thrown. "Er, well, I certainly wouldn't complain."

Hope sniggered. "Don't worry, I'll be wearing clothes."

He threw an eye-roll back in her direction before exiting the bathroom swiftly and leaving her to her business and Hope sat in the water for a few seconds longer before pulling herself out and wrapping a towel securely around her body.

Hogwarts was silent, but Hope had been expecting that. Most of the professors had gone home for the summer, and if Professor McGonagall was in the castle, Hope didn't see any sign of her as she stepped through the gates and walked up the sprawling grounds towards the stone courtyard.

When she took to the staircases, the noises her footsteps made were painfully loud, the sound typically masked by all the other steps of students taken with hers.

But now it was just Hope, and she preferred that better; this was a task meant only for her, a private family matter.

*I need to find the Room of Hidden Things,* Hope thought walking past the blank patch of wall opposite the tapestry of Barnabas the Barmy.

*I need to find the Room of Hidden Things,* she thought, passing it again.

*I need to find the Room of Hidden Things.*

And then Hope wrenched the door open and disappeared inside.

It was as she remembered, though, the last time she had been within in, she hadn't had as much time to look around, more focused on her task of finding the diadem. The air still held a stale stench of something that had been burned, undoubtedly from Crabbe's Fiendfyre curse during the battle.

But Hope disregarded that, stepping through the various discarded objects searching for one in particular.

She hopped over a giant chess rook and knocked over a candlestick which rolled against the nearest shelf that held several questionable substances within the vials that rested in it.

A hint of light reflected off a mirror mounted on the wall, but it wasn't the mirror that Hope was looking for. She moved around a towering stack of cauldrons, rounding a few more corners before she found what she was looking for.

The Mirror of Erised had hardly changed since the last time she had seen it, though that had been a very long time ago indeed. It was still standing on a pair of golden clawed feet that matched its intricate golden frame. Carved into the frame that was spread across the top were letters and words that once made no sense to her: *Erised stra ehr uo tbe cafru oyt on wohsi.*

*I show not your face, but your heart's desire.*

Hope looked into it and couldn't stop the smile as she saw her friends spilled out on her home's sprawling terrace, her children playing not far away. This was perfection, or as close to it that Hope could imagine her getting. And that was just fine with her.

She withdrew her wand from her holster and smiled at the mirror. "You're coming with me." And then she gave it a tap and shrunk it until it easily fit in her palm.
And then she left the way she came, the mirror tucked in her pocket, exiting out the front gates, before sealing them behind her and twisting on the spot, disappearing from Scotland and reappearing in a very different but very familiar forest.

The Forest of Morea was warmer than it had been when she, Ron, Hermione, and Audrey had first arrived there, but then they had come a bit later in the year.

Sunlight filtered through the leaves, dappling the ground with shadows as she walked, mud squelching under her boots. It didn't take her long to reach her destination.

The castle was just as she remembered: hidden under protective charm under protective charm, with ivy growing up its side, twisting and tangling.

She waved her hand in front of the serpentine wrought iron doors and they glowed briefly before parting to allow her entry.

The last time she'd been to the castle had been directly after the battle and she'd been in a hurry to grab all of her things. But at that time the castle had still had so many others' things in clear view, and now it was clear that that was no longer the case.

All the chairs were pushed in against the long wooden table, though the circular burn remained from a mishap of a potion that Daphne had concocted. All the books were neatly in their places on the shelves rather than tossed haphazardly across the table like they had been the last time Hope, Hermione, and Ron had been in the library (though, that mess had probably been entirely their fault). All the doors were securely shut, hiding the rooms within. All the baths were calm and unused.

You would think that no one lived there, which was true for most days, but it had been many witches and wizards' home for almost a year, and there really had been no place better for them all to hide, as the Resistance had all agreed once they'd arrived.

The mirror felt cold in Hope's pocket as she took to the stairs, searching for one of the rooms that hadn't been meant to house guests to the family, and it didn't take nearly as much effort as she originally thought to find one.

Her hand clenched around the doorknob and she opened it to reveal a room of unused furniture hidden by white sheets. It was an eerie image, but it was also the best place for her to rest the Mirror of Erised.

She might have thought its abilities aweing but it was also ensnaring and Hope remembered all too well when she had been obsessed with. People could waste away just by focusing only on the image within.

It may not have been Salazar's intention when he crafted the mirror, but there was no changing the mirror's dark side.

Hope placed it on the ground and returned it to its true size once more before taking a spare sheet and throwing it over the mirror, hiding it from view.

"A wise choice, I think," a voice commented behind her and Hope froze briefly before recalling the familiarity.

"Checking up on me?" she asked instead, turning to spare the god of death a grin. "Thought you said you weren't going to do that."

Thanatos smiled faintly. "I try not to."
His solid onyx eyes seem to gleam as he stepped more fully into the light. His toga was blacker than midnight and Hope could see the line of tension in his shoulders.

"Breaking your rules?" Hope arched an eyebrow. "That's never a good sign."

"I am not doing this for myself," the god said.

"You rarely do," Hope responded, crossing her arms for good measure. "So, what is it?"

"It's me."

Hope started at the second voice as a cloaked figure moved forward, drawing their hood off to reveal the face hidden beneath and Hope couldn't stop herself from gaping and staring.

"You?" she said, aghast at their identity. "But—"

"I need your help," they said. "And you need mine."

Her dark choppy hair was soaked from the rain, much like the rest of her body as she moved from Knockturn Alley to Diagon Alley, noticing that far less people seemed to pay attention to that fact that would have been years ago, but there was one's attention she had, one who had followed her while she did her business in Knockturn Alley.

Her fingers itched for the wand hidden in her sleeve, but she did not reach for it.

But she did pause suddenly, putting the weight on her heels, making her shadow fear she was going to turn around and thus giving him enough time to duck for cover.

However, she did not turn, all she did was pause in the middle of a busy street, telling him that she knew exactly what he was doing, and then she walked away with a smirk on her face that knew too well, a smirk that he missed entirely.

Hope was wet and cold and would honestly prefer to be at home with a textbook open on her lap, but not even she could resist a summons from the Minister himself.

Though, she had never actually tried that...maybe next time.

"Oh, Lady Potter!" The secretary stuttered out her title when she stepped off the lift (from which she'd gained equally annoying stares and pestering). "Minister Shacklebolt said to go right in—"

Hope brushed past the woman's desk to yank the door open and shut it swiftly behind her as she glowered at the minister.

"Kingsley," she said, as mild as she could manage, "you are aware that I have NEWT exams coming up, don't you? Maybe you don't have any to worry about, but I do."

"I apologize," the dark-skinned man replied with a startlingly grave tone. "I wouldn't have called you here if I didn't have any other options."

Hope came to a stop in front of his desk, her brow furrowed as he gestured to the open seat, which Hope took. "What is it, Kingsley? You look worried."

"Worry is one thing I've got plenty of," the ex-Auror had to agree, and that really didn't help. "We only just finished one war, I'm not eager to start another one."
That had Hope's eyes as round as saucers. "Another war?" she repeated. "What are you talking about? Everything's peaceful now."

Though, she wouldn't be the best to judge that, given how Hope preferred her own solitude to being out in the open (though, for some reason, reporters were still staking out at Weasley's Wizard Wheezes in the hopes of catching a glimpse of her, even though Hope didn't live above the shop anymore and didn't visit George much at work).

"Yes," Kingsley conceded, "or so it seems."

Hope arched an eyebrow.

"I fear there will be a coup," he continued.

"From who?" Hope asked, remaining dubious. "Tom's dead, the Death Eaters are locked up—"

"It's not them I'm worried about," Kingsley replied. "We have a number of children of Death Eaters in our employ who—"

"Came over to your side once the war was over," Hope finished with a sigh, running a hand through her tangled, wet locks. "Look, that's what they do, that's what most of those Death Eaters did last time around, so why did you agree to it?"

Kingsley had lived through two wars, surely he knew better than to trust that strategy?

"I agreed because the war had put a serious drain on our resources and forces," Kingsley spoke, leaning back against his chair, "I couldn't afford to discriminate. And that's why you're here."

Hope turned her confused eyes a bright blue.

"I need to know who among those that work for me can be trusted," he said seriously, "and I need it to be someone that works outside the system but still abides by its rules."

She raised a hand to scratch her eyebrow. "So, what, you want me to be a sort of...consulting detective?"

He gave her a bland stare. "If you want to think of it that way, yes."

Hope could feel her exasperation rising. "I'm sure that there are better qualified people—"

"To find out the truth? Who better to do that than one who has actively sought out the truth even when others denied it?"

He'd backed her into a corner and Hope couldn't help but hate him for that.

"I'm guessing you have a list of people you want to have me check out?" Hope asked, rubbing at her eyes before Kingsley stood, crooking his fingers towards her as he moved towards a door to what Hope had originally thought to be a closet, but within was a large pile of boxes filled with paperwork.

"You'll start right away?" Kingsley surmised as Hope gaped at the workload.

"Er, I suppose that I'll have to," she said, after a long moment of staring at the boxes upon boxes. Just how many people did Kingsley suspect of taking part in a potential coup? There couldn't be that many children of Death Eaters, could there?
Either way, Hope had her work cut out for her.

Hope Potter, consulting Auror…just great.

George popped his head into Hope's study to see her sitting on the floor with a pen tapping against her lips as she mouthed words to herself. The wall across from her was blanketed with pictures and parchment and little notes here and there and string connecting certain pictures to one another.

It looked rather chaotic, but George was sure it made more sense to Hope.

"It's something Kingsley's got me looking into," Hope mentioned, taking note of his presence.

George cocked an eyebrow. "Thought you weren't ever going to work for the Ministry?"

Hope groaned, tugging her hair up into a high ponytail. "I'm not, I'm just consulting on something that's got his attention…on the plus side, at least I'll get paid for my efforts." She tossed him a smile. "Not that we actually need the money."

And that was true. Hope had a great deal more than a small fortune and George was very well off from the profits of his and Fred's shop.

"I'll be done for the night soon," Hope promised, throwing another smile his way, but there was something fairly off about it, even if George didn't comment on it.

Later, he wondered if he should have.

It was the first time all the Weasleys had been together in awhile, even since Hope had gotten back from her stint as a hunter of Death Eaters, and each of the Weasleys had brought their significant others to dinner at the Burrow, which meant that the kitchen had to be expanded in order to fit them all, all fourteen of them.

Seamus was debating Ireland's chance in the next Quidditch World Cup that any of the Weasleys nearest him were only so glad to weigh in on, Hope was deep in a conversation with Angelina about her wedding plans, Hermione was complaining to Percy about the laws that still didn't prevent the abuse of House-elves.

"And I'm already starting to miss meals where we didn't have to fight to be heard," Hope laughed beside George and he squeezed her shoulder where his arm was thrown over them, leaning close to her ear in order to be heard without difficulty and Hope could feel goose-bumps rise up induced from his breath alone.

"We can have a late night dessert when we get home," he suggested, with just a hint of a suggestive purr that had Hope's cheeks flushing, but only a faint pink that could have been overlooked if Fleur was giving her a knowing glance from across the table.

Hope elbowed him in the side, even as he ducked to press a quick kiss to the side of her throat.

"Coming through, coming through!" Mrs. Weasley –Molly, Hope had to remind herself, as the red-haired witch had insisted upon, now that they were going to be family– sang as she suspended the main dishes in the air with an elaborate wave of her wand, before they lowered carefully to the table. "All right! Dig in, you lot, there's plenty to go around!"

Hope was sure George had something to do with it, but somehow she ended up with food on her
plate, and she eagerly speared some potatoes, plopping them into her mouth.

However, they barely lasted five minutes before there came a loud rap on the door and Hope dropped her hands under the table, gripping her wand tightly out of reflex but knowing it would not be needed. Instead, she pulled something small and round from her pocket, clutching it in her hand tightly.

Arthur reached the door, opening it to reveal a young man wearing the Auror uniform. "Can I help you?" he asked carefully.

"Pardon me," the man said, "but I'm here for Hope Potter."

Hope's expression didn't change, and that was the first thing Hermione and Ron noticed; she had been expecting an interruption that pertained to her.

"I beg your pardon?" Arthur said.

"She's under arrest for murder, treason, burglary, among other things," he said and those around Hope erupted immediately in outrage. George clenched his arm painfully tight about her and Hope scowled.

"Enough!" she snapped and the noise faded.

"But it eez not true!" Fleur insisted heatedly.

"I can handle this," Hope pressed, standing and forcing George's arm to release her. "Really."

"Ron," she added, "you'll need to inform Kingsley that the coup isn't against him, it's against me."

"Wait-what?"

Hope's eyes met the Auror's. "Only a fool shows their hand so early in the game, but we will see who is a fool, and who is dead."

And then she dropped the orb in her hand and disappeared as smoke enveloped her, trying not to hear the anguished call of "Hope!"
Elysium

Time froze from the moment the orb collided with the ground; Hope wasn't sure how its creator had developed it, but she definitely wanted at least twelve like it.

The Auror was frozen at the door and George half out of his seat, and Hermione with her mouth open in anger.

Hope was sorry she had to leave in such a way, but it was unlikely that she would have been able to leave in any other way.

"I'm sorry," Hope murmured, reaching out a hand to cup George's cheek fondly. "I'll be back when it's safe, I promise."

And then she apparated away to the location they'd agreed to, morphing her features as soon as she arrived.

"You're early," her companion said from where they were leaning against Hope's motorcycle. "I thought we were going to meet up in an hour."

"Things change," Hope said shortly, taking the small bag that they threw her, tying it to one of her belt loops. "We'd better get going if we want to make good time before the night is done."

They nodded in understanding, hopping onto the bike as Hope revved the engine, lurching them forward before shooting up into the air.

Hope gritted her teeth together. She could remember exactly when her life started to go downhill again, and that was exactly two nights ago:

"Breaking your rules?" Hope arched an eyebrow. "That's never a good sign."

"I am not doing this for myself," the god said.

"You rarely do," Hope responded, crossing her arms for good measure. "So, what is it?"

"It's me."

Hope started at the second voice as a cloaked figure moved forward, drawing their hood off to reveal the face hidden beneath and Hope couldn't stop herself from gaping and staring.

"You?" she said, aghast at their identity. "But—"

"I need your help," they said. "And you need mine."

It was a face that Hope had grown very accustomed to seeing across table at the diner during her month in Greece. It was the face of the witch Agathe.

Agathe's red hair –nowhere near the dark color of Hope's usual, but, at the same time, not close to George's bright ginger– was tied in its signature double braids, only this time instead of hanging loose, they were wrapped intricately around her head and her usually bright blue eyes were somber.

"How did you even get in here?" Hope demanded, her wand jumping to her hand in her unease.

"Through the front door," Agathe said, looking at her oddly. "Like most people would, I expect."
"You're lying," Hope snapped. "The only person who can come through the main door is me because—"

"You're related to Salazar Slytherin, right?" Agathe guessed, crossing her arms. "Well, so am I."

Hope's jaw dropped before she scowled. "No, you're not because the whole line died out, I checked, Tom and I were the last Slytherins, the descendants of Cadmus and Ignotus Peverell."

"Well, I'm the descendant of Antioch Peverell," Agathe said shortly.

"He didn't have any kids!"

"He didn't know anything about his child when he was killed!"

"Ladies, if you would please calm down," Thanatos said suddenly, making both girls reel back in surprise, since they'd practically forgotten that the god was still there. "Hope, I can confirm what Agathe says. She is the descendant of Antioch Peverell and thus me."

Hope breathed in shakily before her eyes became cold blue ice and Agathe was grateful that her gaze was not on herself but instead on the god. "I had another cousin and you never thought to mention it?"

Thanatos, for his part, appeared to be rather unperturbed in the face of her rage. "You had been rather preoccupied with killing your last relative, if you'll recall."

Hope was unamused. "Oh, you mean the Dark Lord that murdered my parents and tried to kill me several times, caused the deaths of many others and led the Death Eaters who in turn caused the deaths of several of my friends? That last relative?"

The god coughed lightly and Agathe rubbed at the back of her neck, jumping when Hope whipped her head around to look at her. "What's your last name?"

"Oh, Blackwood," Agathe said startled. "Does it matter?"

"Not really," Hope said, scrutinizing her with narrowed eyes, "did you get it from Damian and Nelda?"

"Dunno," Agathe responded with a small shrug, "I think we took the name Blackwood after Antioch was killed."

Hope raised a hand to rake through her dark red locks, releasing a sharp sigh from her lips. "I'm guessing you aren't here because you were in the neighborhood and decided to pop by for a cuppa."

"No," Agathe said, suddenly looking as though she had aged ten years as she slumped down into the nearest seat and it was then that Hope noticed just how weary she was. There were dark circles under the eyes that seemed to be red from crying and though her cheeks were remarkably fair, now they were even more so. "Something terrible has happened."

"Something terrible?" Hope asked, not quite understanding. "What do you mean 'something terrible'?"

Agathe gave a sad sigh and withdrew a folded up newspaper and held it out to Hope and Hope took it with a bit of confusion.

Apollo's Oracle was the name of the newspaper and in large letters it proclaimed: "Ritualistic Murder
Six year old witch Hemera Blackwood was found stabbed to death at an altar…"

Hope looked up from the paper to see Agathe pressing a shaking hand to her mouth. "Was Hemera…your…?"

"M-My niece," Agathe said, her words choking in her throat briefly before she blazed on, "she was my brother's daughter. Her mother died due to complications during her birth and my brother was killed in the line of duty –he was an Auror in Greece– a few months ago." She swallowed thickly. "She'd been out playing and wandered past the wards when I wasn't looking…and when w-we found her, it-it was too late."

Hope's mouth set in a grim line. "I'm sorry," she said, and she meant it, if Thanatos was to be believed—and he was– then the little girl would have been her relation as well. "Do you know why she was killed?"

"She was a sacrifice to open the Gates of Tartarus," Thanatos answered for Agathe who was struggling to regain control of her emotions, her niece's death clearly still weighing down on her.

"The Gates of Tartarus?" Hope sounded out the phrase carefully. She knew what Tartarus was, of course, it was the Greeks' version of Hell, but she didn't know anything about it having any gates.

"The Gates of Tartarus were sealed many centuries ago," Thanatos said, "by the sacrifice of Iolanthe Peverell, my great-granddaughter. The Gates hold all the ancient monsters of Greece at bay."

Hope leaned back in her seat, her eyebrows furrowing together.

"All the children of gods found themselves at attacked at one point in their life in Ancient Greece," the god explained with surprising patience. "The Gorgons, the Nemean Lion, the Mania, and so much more thirst for the blood of the gods and even if they were killed, they could reform, which was a growing concern for the children of the gods. They wanted to live in peace, but they were living in fear for their own lives."

Hope listened patiently to the somber tone in which Thanatos told her the tale.

"Eventually a settlement was made high in the mountains, warded against the monsters, allowing them to live in peace, but even that peace could be shattered, and only Iolanthe was willing to make it permanent. She willingly gave her life so that the Gates could be shut. It takes a life to open the Gates of Tartarus, you see, and it will take another to shut it."

Hope sagged against her chair, looking nearly as exhausted as Agathe. "I just got out of one war, Thanatos, and you want me to walk right into another one?"

Agathe wanted to be furious with her. Her niece was dead! But she also knew the story of Hope Potter, of the girl whose parents had been killed right in front of her, the girl who had lost her godfather and close friends to war and carnage, the girl some say even died and came back.

If there was one person who knew suffering, it certainly was Hope Potter. She had worked hard for peace, and she had barely gotten a chance to enjoy it.

"Why come to me?" Hope asked, glancing between the pair. "I barely know anything about…about all that…I don't have any special powers."

Thanatos chuckled softly. "I'm afraid you are quite incorrect. You inherited a great deal from me, dearest, you just choose not to use it."
He gestured to Agathe to give an explanation. "Descendants of Thanatos can use Necromancy, go into Death Trances, have a touch of death…lots of stuff. You'd think it would be stronger if you were the first generation, but it doesn't really work like that…and Thanatos says you're the strongest of his descendents, and there's so few of us left."

Agathe gave a small sigh. "Besides, you're the only one the Order will accept."

"The Order?"

She nodded. "The Order of Olympus. They're twelve members of families descended from the gods. I've never met them, I'm not a part of it and its been inactive since the Gates were shut the first time around. There were more children of gods, then, though, I'm not sure how many are left."

*How many who haven't been killed* went unsaid.

Hope crossed her legs, shifting uncomfortably, a frown marring her lips. "This place that's supposed to be safe," she said. "Why haven't you gone there?"

"No one can get in, not since Iolanthe had the Gates shut," Agathe pressed. "They're warded against anyone but her heir. Please, won't you help us?"

Hope shut her eyes and slumped forward, pinching the bridge of her nose between her fingers. In that instant Hope wished that she was selfish. She had self-preservation, sure, it was probably the only thing that had kept her alive this long, but it wasn't in Hope's nature to not help someone when they asked her (though, she did sometimes refuse based on who was asking her and what they wanted).

But here was Agathe, her distant relative just as Tom had been, still pained from the loss of her niece, wanting to keep others like her safe.

And Hope knew that Agathe was better than her by that alone; for Agathe there was no question of what was to be done, but for Hope, she wavered.

She had died enough in this life to last a lifetime, and she had certainly died enough for the Wizarding world.

"I'm not dying again," Hope said sourly. "I've done that two times already and it's not something I'd like to repeat."

Agathe arched an eyebrow, her lips twitching briefly before they smoothed into a thin line. "The one that killed Hemera…he's the one who should pay with his life." Tempered anger gleamed in her eyes, and it was a look Hope had grown accustomed to seeing in the mirror.

"Why did he open the Gates in the first place?" Hope wondered.

"I have a theory," Agathe said darkly, "but it isn't good."

"Let's hear it anyways," Hope said, despite it.

Agathe tugged on a few loose strands of her hair. "There is a group that opposes us, they have no name, at least, not one that's been recorded. They consider us children of the gods blights, stains on humanity, dangerous and…wrong." Her eyes were as frigid as a snowstorm. "They've been killing us for as long as there have been children of gods, and we have retaliated in kind. They're the ones to blame for all this."
Hope could understand her anger. This group had caused her niece's death and robbed her of any semblance of safety she had possessed.

"All right, then," she said, "when do we start?"

If there was one thing Hope knew for certain, it was George was going to be furious with her for running off again out of the blue.

She sighed.

Hope undid the latch on Nelda's trunk, opening it for the first time in months to see that which lay within.

She removed the pirate garb that Nelda had been so fond of when she'd been alive, placing the folded clothes gently beside her before removing what she had been searching for, her ancestor's twin blades.

There was nothing like them, that was to be sure, with their hilts carved and smoothed into the shape of serpents. Their eyes were small emeralds, opaque from the dust that had accumulated over the years, and from their mouths extended blades of Aegean Metal.

Hope drew her wand from her holster. "Tergeo!" she murmured, siphoning off the dust and grime, leaving the blades gleaming as the day they had been forged. The blades were still connected to a belt that Nelda had probably found it easier to simply remove the belt, than each blade individually.

And so she stood, pulling the belt around her, making the sheathed swords whack against her legs from the action, which she ignored as she buckled the belt, which was clearly meant to be worn high up on the waist.

Hope looked into the full-length mirror.

She looked ridiculous.

"You'll have to leave the name Hope Potter behind," Thanatos had said. "It is not safe, not now."

Hope pointed her wand down at herself and the clothing changed.

A black material covered her arms and hands, hiding her blood runes under fingerless gloves. With a tunic of blood red and dark trousers, she didn't look much like herself, but she still had the face to worry about.

She came closer to the mirror, pulling on one of her ancestor's long duster coats, not unlike her own red one, but this one was simpler and a dark shade of grey. Her eyes swirled from sharp green to icy blue, the same color as Agathe she realized later, and her hair darkening to black.

Agathe knocked lightly on the door before poking her head inside, staring at her in surprise. "Wow, you can barely recognize you," she said.

"That is the point, isn't it?" Hope asked.

"Well, yeah," Agathe agreed, "I guess being a Metamorphmagus is really helpful when you're on the run."

"You have no idea," Hope murmured, contemplating her image before glancing towards the painting of Nelda against the wall. She'd found it in one of the unused rooms, clearly Nelda hadn't liked to
have her own image watching her as she slept. As it was, the young woman in the painting was sleeping, and that was fine with Hope, all she needed was her likeness.

Nelda's nose was longer than Hope's and had higher cheekbones and arching eyebrows. She was very…aristocratic in her appearance, but Hope surmised that was to be expected, given her lineage.

"My fiancé will not be pleased," she muttered, twisting her engagement ring around her finger.

"Well, my boyfriend's not too happy with me either, if it's any consolation."

Hope spared her a small smile. "So, what's the plan?"

"This is outrageous, and you know it!"

"He's my superior, what am I supposed to do?"

To no one's surprise, Hermione and Ron were fighting again, but, then again, who could blame them for that, given the current state of affairs.

They'd relocated to Hope and George's place, and 'they' included those at the dinner who had been closest to Hope, which were: Hermione, Ron, George, Fred, Angelina, Ginny, and Seamus.

"He accused our best mate of treason among other things, Ron!" Hermione raged. "This is Hope we're talking about! You know she didn't do any of that!"

"Well, technically, she did," Ron retorted. "We all did those things during the war, but I want to know what she was talking about a coup for…what coup?"

"She was working on something," George said, his eyesight coming into focus as he blinked, looking up from where he was sitting hunched in an armchair close to the fireplace. "Kingsley gave her something that he wanted her help on…"

"Why didn't he just ask one of his Aurors to do it?" Angelina pressed. "Surely he's got enough of them?"

"Unless he didn't think he could trust them to do it," Ron countered, turning to his brother. "What exactly was she working on?"

George's eyebrows drew together as he thought hard. "She didn't really say, only that Kingsley had given her something to look into and she was going to be paid for the job…she had pictures and information pasted against the wall in…in her study." Realization dawned in his eyes as he lurched to his feet, making speedily for the library and the door just beyond it.

He flicked on the switch, allowing light to spill into the room and illuminate it.

"It's all gone!" he said, a bit stunned.

"You think she took it all with her?" Fred prompted.

"Where else would she have put it all?" Ron wondered. "Whoever she was investigating must be the reason she's disappeared."

"It's all very strange," Seamus said, glancing around the blank room.

"Strange?" Ginny asked. "How can it be strange?"
"Well, it's what she said: 'Only a fool shows their hand so early in the game, but we will see who is a fool, and who is dead'...I'd wager that whatever she's involved it is pretty dangerous and that Auror is probably involved too."

Hermione groaned, rubbing her hands into her eyes. "It's like it's a conspiracy! How on earth did Hope get herself involved in something like that?"

But no one in the room could quite say.

George had raced up to the bedroom to check—even though he knew the chance of her being there were very low—only to find most of her clothes gone and her rings in the jewelry box on the vanity. That itself was the most concerning thing, because George could only count a handful of times he had seen his fiancée without her trademark rings.

Except for the Gaunt ring, it was gone.

Where are you, Hope?

Hope liked Greece, she really did, the beaches, the ancient architecture...what wasn't to love? But what Hope didn't like was climbing mountains that seemed to go on for miles with rather steep cliffs that would spell an end to both girls.

She had tried to fly as close to their destination as she could manage, but the bike had started malfunctioning, so they had to land.

"Are you sure you know where you're going?" Hope asked from behind Agathe, leaning a hand against the rough cliff-face.

"Don't worry," Agathe called back. "Me and Galen used to hike up here with our mum when we were kids. We knew the path by heart by the time we were thirteen."

Galen, Hope presumed, was the dead brother.

"There's an outcropping ahead that we can rest under, come on!"

Hope was in good shape, used to running and firing off spells on the fly, but she marveled at Agathe's ability to move so swiftly, and she all but collapsed when they arrived at the outcropping.

"Galen was my brother," Agathe said while Hope regained her breath, as a sort of explanation from what she'd said earlier.

"I'd gathered," Hope replied, taking a long gulp of water from her bottle.

"I'm sorry," Agathe said suddenly, "you uprooted your life and you still know barely anything about me."

Hope shrugged. "You didn't seem too keen to talk."

Agathe looked away and Hope knew why.

"My mum's name is Thalia," she told Hope, to her surprise, "when we were both young she enrolled us in the Athene Academy, I'm not sure you've heard of it—"

"I've heard of it," Hope promised. The academy was probably one of the most famous in the world and one of the most controversial for how young the students started and finished.
"I got out around fourteen, a little later than usual, and I started work as a Rune Analyst—"

Hope chuckled suddenly. "Well, I guess we're not all that different, then; I'm studying to be a Curse-Breaker."

"Oh!" Agathe supposed she should have guessed that from the blood runes her very distant cousin had carved into her skin.

"How old are you?" Hope asked curiously. "You look around my age…"

"I'm eighteen," Agathe said and Hope nodded in understanding as they stood to begin walking again. "Thanatos told me about you after you left Britain, he told me that you would be coming here, so I dropped everything and got a job at a diner."

Hope looked to her oddly and Agathe smiled sheepishly. "You were the last other descendant of Thanatos that we knew of…Hemera wanted to meet you but Mum told her no." Agathe sobered and Hope's smile fell.

They walked in silence for a bit before Hope spoke again. "These monsters that are loose…how can they be killed? Even if it's only temporary."

Agathe was glad for the change in subject. "Definitely not magic, I dunno how many people tried their hand at that, but they all died. Mostly we use Aegean Metal, or Aegean Iron, depending on who you ask. Supposedly the metal was cooled in water from the River Phlegethon, which is why monsters can be killed by it, since the water came from Tartarus."

The rocks chipped under their boots.

"Galen was taught swordplay and I chose the art of the bow." There was a glimmer of pride in her eyes at that. "I guess it kind of makes sense that you would choose the same. It's the way we Blackwoods partner."

Hope froze. "I wouldn't want to—"

"It's fine," Agathe assured her with a faint smile, "you are a Blackwood too, I'll just tell everyone you're my long-lost sister."

"I would've been fine with cousin," Hope muttered, a bit flustered. "I've never had a sister before."

"Neither have I." Agathe looked to her and their eyes met. And Hope could see some similarities between her and the girl she was only just beginning to know, even though they were only distantly related. "But Mum's going to love you. You've got enough fire in you."

"Thanks…I think," Hope said, scratching her cheek uncomfortably.

"Don't worry about it," Agathe said, releasing the first laugh that Hope had heard since the Grecian witch had popped back into her life. "My mother has an abrasive personality, but she's very sweet, you'll see."

"She's coming here?"

Agathe arched an eyebrow. "Well, the line of Thanatos does come through her, so she's one of the descendants of gods in need of protection."

"What about your dad?" Hope asked and immediately regretted it from how the witch's blue eyes
darkened as she scowled.

"He left us when we were kids, hopefully he's dead."

So, no love lost between father and child, it seemed. Hope found it was probably better to leave things like that; it wasn't like she had any experience with bad fathers, since hers had died for her.

"How were things when you went back?" Agathe asked her. "You were worried about how your friends would take it, weren't you?"

"Well, they weren't too pleased with my disappearing act," Hope said, rolling her eyes for good measure, "but they never are. I had to act as a witness of the defense in a trial for a family that were Death Eaters but helped me kill Tom in the end, though some could say that was pure coincidence…"

"And what do you say?"

Hope shrugged. "I say it takes guts to lie to a Dark Lord…and some people deserve second chances…but I'm sure everyone's going to be even more furious this time around. Last time I voluntarily vanished, now I'm technically on the run."

"Better to be on the run than to be dead," Agathe said sagely.

And she wasn't wrong.

"Looks like we're here."

They rounded up the path to come out on top of the mountain with fog billowing around them, cloaking the structure within and Hope squinted her eyes to see the Greek pillars with many buildings and moss climbing up the sides.

"Welcome to Elysium."
Hope wasn't certain that she had ever seen anything quite so beautiful—if a bit eerie—and she couldn't stop staring at the mountain establishment.

The worn Greek pillars peeked through the fog and the rounded roofs over carved houses. Hope had seen that type of building when she'd made her way through the Cycladic islands, but she hadn't expected to find them here, high up in the mountains.

"Wow," she said in awe, "its…its beautiful."

"Is it?" Agathe sounded wistful and Hope turned to look at her, noting the distant look in her eyes as she gazed in the general direction of Elysium, yet saw nothing.

"You can't see it, can you?" Hope surmised.

"No." Agathe sounded a bit bitter and Hope couldn't help but feel awkward; Agathe must have come up the mountain often as a child, but here was Hope, barely with any knowledge of the life that Agathe had lived with, seeing what she hadn't been able to. "Only Iolanthe's heir can get in…Mum tried and so did Galen and I, but we could never get through, and we can only see a hint of the establishment when the sun is in the right position."

And the sun was now being hidden behind the clouds.

"Agathe!" came a sudden call and both young women jolted in surprise, twisting to look to see who had spoken and Hope could detect a shiver of fear down Agathe's spine as the speaker came around the bend they had just climbed around.

The woman was older, with the same vibrant red hair as Agathe though now it was streaked with grey and cut above her shoulders, and with piercing blue eyes that would have put Albus Dumbledore to shame.

There was a dagger holstered to her thigh and another on her arm with a blade positioned on her hip. If people thought Hope looked dangerous when she was wearing her weapons, then this woman was positively lethal.

"Mum!" Agathe choked. "I—er—"

Thalia Blackwood strode forward, ignoring Hope—for which she was grateful—to hug her daughter so tightly that Agathe was actually gasping from the air being forced out of her lungs.

"You foolish girl!" Thalia murmured. "Do you have any idea how worried I was when you disappeared? I just lost H-Hemera! I can't lose you too, Aggie!"

Hope turned away discretely, feeling very much like she was intruding on a private moment.

Agathe swallowed thickly, blinking furiously as she buried her face into her mother's shoulder. "I'm sorry, Mum…but I had to do something."

Thalia released her daughter and cupped her cheeks with her hands, giving her a sad smile. "Of course you did," she sighed, before glancing to Hope, taking note of the lightning bolt scar on her forehead that still had trouble masking with her Metamorphosing.
"Hope Potter?" she said her name in surprise and Hope cleared her throat a little.

"Er –hello," Hope said awkwardly.

Thalia eyed her and Agathe with a shrewd stare. "Did Thanatos have something to do with this?"

"Well, he was involved," Hope had to concede and Agathe couldn't hide a snort. "And he does have a habit of showing up when I least expect it."

"Yes," Thalia said dryly, "he does that."

There was a familiarity in the manner in which she spoke about the death god, the kind of which that Hope couldn't hope to replicate, especially since she spoke so little to him. She was certain that the god was more family to the Blackwoods than she was.

"I'm Agathe's mum, Thalia," she said, giving her a kind, motherly smile that Hope didn't feel she deserved.

"Hi," Hope said, extending her hand to the woman, but Thalia bypassed her to envelop her in a tight hug that had Hope staring at Agathe over her mother's shoulder with a distinct 'help me' expression on her face that had Agathe giggling.

"There were stories about you we heard down here," Thalia told her once she'd released the young witch, "we didn't have any idea that we were related until Thanatos showed up."

"Well, I didn't have any idea that we were related until Agathe showed up in Pithos claiming to be descended from Antioch Peverell," Hope informed her a bit sheepishly.

Agathe sighed. "Thanatos just likes to be cryptic and vague and doesn't tell things frankly."

"Yeah, I got a bit of that impression from him," Hope said dryly.

Thalia's eyes flashed to Agathe, fastening a powerful gaze on her that Hope was sure would be able to pull the truth from her lips without the use of Veritaserum. "What exactly happened?"

It didn't take too long for both young women to inform her of the situation they had found themselves, explaining how Agathe had told Hope about the Gates of Tartarus opening, the creatures from within that had been unleashed, how they'd agreed to leave the previous night but had to bump up their plans when an Auror had come to arrest Hope.

"Arrest you?" Thalia repeated the words strangely. "Whatever, for?"

Hope shrugged her shoulders. "The usual; war crimes. Things I did during the war that were technically voided since they happened during the war, but I got the feeling that he just wanted an excuse to take me in."

Thalia cupped her chin thoughtfully. "And this Auror…did you know him?"

Hope snorted. "I don't know all that many Aurors, so no, I didn't recognize him."

It was clear that the information did not bode well.

"Agathe said that there's a group that opposes the children of the gods…could they be Aurors?" Hope asked, formulating her words carefully as she watched Thalia's shoulders sag at the mere prospect.
"Having them all be Aurors would be much too obvious, but I wouldn't put it past them to have a few in the department...of whichever government they are with," Thalia said, rubbing at her brow tiredly.

Hope was startled when she realized just how bone-deep exhausted the older woman was. Her eyes were red from tears and there were thick grey crescents under her eyes; the death of her granddaughter must've have been terrible, Hope couldn't imagine that kind of pain.

Then Thalia nodded to the serpentine blades at Hope's hips. "Can you use those?"

"No," Hope said honestly and Thalia gave her a grin that was faintly reminiscent of a wolf and was both deeply unnerving and fearsome.

"Don't worry," she said, "you will learn to."

"Mum," Agathe complained, "you're freaking her out."

"Only a little bit," Hope acquiesced. She had met some dangerous people in her lifetime, but most of them hadn't really looked the part, not like Thalia did. Possibly the only thing that could make the clearly seasoned warrior more frightening would have to be a spray of blood across her face and clothes.

"At least you're honest," Thalia said, looking her up and down, eyeing the blood runes carved into her arms with interest. "So, what name are you going by now that you can't be Hope Potter?"

She had a rather blunt way of speaking that made Agathe sigh once more before Hope gave her a small smile in return. "I'm going by Nelda Blackwood."

"The sea-witch?" Thalia said with her surprise evident. "She's a bit of a myth around here, even after all these centuries."

"Really?" Hope didn't know all that much about her, other than what Salazar Slytherin had written in his journal about her leaving when she fell in love with the sea only to return later, marrying the first mate of her ship, Damian Blackwood.

Thalia opened her mouth to explain further when all three turned their eyes south as the ground beneath their feet grew warm and shook violently for a few moments.

"That'll be another monster coming through the Gates," Thalia said with a sigh.

"Does it always do that?" Hope asked blankly.

Agathe gave her the answer, "You can only feel it if you're a descendent of one of the Underworld gods, like Thanatos or Melionē...there's a good couple of them."

Melionē...the bringer of nightmares...she had never sounded like someone that Hope would have wanted to cross; she had enough bad dreams as it was.

"We should get moving," Thalia said, pinching Hope's elbow when she continued staring at the ground. "We're nearly at the wards around Elysium, you'll need to reactivate them in order to allow other descendants through."

"I don't really understand—" Hope tried to explain, but the woman gave her a knowing smile. "Don't worry," she said, "you will."
The two Blackwoods watched as she disappeared into the fog, and a contemplative frown graced Thalia's face.

"She isn't quite what I'd expected," she conceded to her daughter.

"No, she isn't," Agathe agreed.

"How did you convince her to come?"

Agathe gave her mother a flat stare. "I asked her and gave her the facts up front, Mum, I didn't tell her one lie."

If there was one thing Agathe had learned about Hope during their brief conversations, it was that she hated being manipulated (though, Agathe wasn't quite sure who it was that had manipulated her), and Agathe had needed her help, so not lying to her wasn't that big of a deal.

Still, she couldn't imagine uprooting her life like Hope had at the mere request of someone she barely knew.

Hope was a better person than Agathe was, that was for sure.

Thalia's eyes softened as she wrapped an arm around her daughter's shoulders, squeezing them for comfort.

"Ajax will be fine."

"Mum, I'm not worried about Ajax," Agathe frowned at the mention of her boyfriend.

"Yes, you are, you're just pretending you're not," her mother corrected for her before growing more somber. "Aggie, did you even go to see her grave?"

Agathe's tears clung desperately to her eyes. "What's there to see?" she managed to choke out. "It's a gravestone like any other. Made from the same stone as her brother's and sister-in-law's no doubt, engraved with the symbol of Thanatos, the upside-down torch.

But what was the point in going to the graveyard knowing her niece's mutilated corpse was rotting beneath the ground.

"Aggie," Thalia said her name gently and Agathe jerked herself away from her mother.

"It's my fault that we're in this situation," she said through numb lips, "I should have kept a closer eye on her, if I had—"

If she had, then no one would have been able to take her sweet, innocent niece and sacrifice her like a slaughtered animal for the gods.

Agathe's tears spilled over and she pressed a hand to her mouth, bile rising in her throat.

"Aggie, they were watching us, that's the only reason they were able to grab her," Thalia consoled, combing her fingers through Agathe's bright hair. "They took Hemera because she was the easiest target."

It was so simple to forget that Thalia had once worked in law enforcement on a specialized force that dealt with undercover operations (Jason joked about her mother being an assassin, but Thalia's laugh had been a touch too feral to consider it to not be true). The way she spoke about operations and strategies was in a tone of experience.
"Hope Potter is a war-hero, and you are Rune Analyst, and me, I'm a retired Operation Specialist," Thalia pressed. "What are the chances of anyone managing to sacrifice us without much of a fight?"

Pretty slim, Agathe had to concede.

"This family has always had a history of tragedy, Agathe, and we are no different than our ancestors."

But Agathe wished they could be.

Upon crossing the wards' line, Agathe and Thalia disappeared entirely, and Hope tried not to be unnerved by their sudden disappearance. So she swallowed her reservations and walked on, tripping through a stream before she made it to the edge of the cluster of buildings.

She wasn't sure what she was expecting...some kind of wrought iron gate with Elysium in Greek lettering, perhaps, but there was no gate, that would imply that at some point Elysium would be closed to others, but Hope got the feeling that Elysium was open to all.

And what was beautiful to Hope, many found to be creepy or eerie, and, in a way, that was what Elysium was. It was broken down, some buildings ruined, some bearing scorches from fire or slashes from claws; it would be more accurate to describe it as a ghost town.

The dead trees with their gnarled branches creaked in the wind that sent a shiver down her spine as she took one step and then another, glancing around in the silence for any sign of what she was even doing there.

"Maybe this is just ridiculous," Hope muttered under her breath, "maybe there's nothing here and I'm just—"

But then she paused, looking towards the building in the centre with its highly-mounted slanted roof over a balcony...on which she saw a flicker of an image, one that vanished a moment later.

But it was enough to pique Hope's interest, so she moved forward, keeping her eyes fixed on the balcony—and thus almost falling on her face from the loss of focus—until she reached the door, which she promptly ripped off its hinges from the rotten wood.

"Sorry," she whispered, laying the crumpling door against the side of the building before stepping cautiously inside, already holding her wand in her hand, illuminating the darkness before searching for the steps that led up to the balcony that she had seen.

Before she could even attempt to climb the staircase, though, a voice spoke from behind her.

"You don't want to attempt that, those stairs are hardly trustworthy."

Hope twisted violently to fix her eyes on the speaker.

She was mostly transparent, like all the ghosts Hope had seen before, though some hints of colour were still visible. Her hair had the same bronze curls that Thanatos sported, but her eyes were pale, nothing like his perpetual black.

"You're Iolanthe Peverell," Hope realized, stunned by how young she was. How old had she been when she died? Her early twenties?

"And you're Elpis," Iolanthe responded, her voice echoing strangely in a manner that had more to do
with the fact that she was dead rather than being in a place where sound echoed quite well, "the last of my line."

"So it seems," Hope said carefully. "I'm –er– I'm here to reactivate the wards around Elysium."

Iolanthe gave a solemn nod. "I thought you might be…I felt the Gates open once more."

"You could feel them?" Hope asked, gaping at her.

The ghost shrugged her shoulders carelessly. "My death tethered my soul to the Gates in the event they opened once again…and the only reason one of my line would return here would be to activate the wards that make Elysium a safe haven to those of gods' bloodlines."

"Why wouldn't anyone from your bloodline want to come back here?" Hope asked, flummoxed as she relaxed her wand arm.

Iolanthe arched an eyebrow. "I did die here, Elpis," she said rather blandly and Hope flushed, making her laugh. "This place holds bad memories for the Potter family…my daughter was barely four when I sacrificed myself for the good of Elysium."

Hope swallowed, her tongue thick in her mouth, clogging her throat. "I'm sorry," she said honestly, "it's difficult to grow up without a mother's love."

Iolanthe sighed sadly, glancing over Hope. "I suppose you would know, wouldn't you?" And she raised a hand that Hope automatically leaned away from, but it was clear that the movement had been to brush away a stray strand of hair that had fallen from her fishtail-braid. "My Elizabeth had hair like yours, as dark as night."

She sounded so wistful that Hope wasn't quite sure what to say.

"I sense you have a home elsewhere," Iolanthe said, drawing herself back to the present and drawing her hand back to scrutinize Hope, "so why have you come? A sense of duty?"

A wry smile flitted across Hope's lips. "People…people usually expect me to help them…I don't get a lot of people asking me for help…besides," she gave a small shrug, "Agathe's part of my family, no matter how distantly related we are, and family is important to me."

Most of her family was dead and those people she did regard as family weren't technically related to her and she'd always wondered what it would be like to have a family of her own, people she could call her own blood.

"Good," Iolanthe said, giving her a mysterious smile that gave Hope the eerie feeling that the question she'd asked her was a test of sorts and Hope had passed with flying colours. "Follow me."

And Hope followed her into one of the rooms that were blocked by ragged tapestries that crumpled into dust when Hope touched them, making her cough and sneeze and curse Iolanthe for her ability to walk through things without needing to touch them.

When she'd managed to clear the air of particles she was likely to choke on, she stepped into the room, surprised to find that it was empty, save for a small ornate chest nestled in the centre of the room.

Iolanthe pointed towards it. "You'll find what you're looking for in there."

Hope gave her a strange look, but she still knelt in the dust, fiddling with the lock, hardly blinking
when she felt the sharp prick, sharp enough to draw blood, before the lock gave a click and the chest creaked open.

Inside there was a single item, a thick golden chain that ended with an opaque bulbous bauble that was shaped a bit like a teardrop.

"It requires your blood," Iolanthe added as Hope lifted it to find the top of the bauble came off to reveal a hole.

Hope rolled her eyes towards the ghost, because that really hadn't crossed her mind; practically everything she did these days required blood.

She set down her wand, pulling her dagger from her arm holster and adding a slice to her pricked finger, watching the blood swell from the cut before dripping into the bauble, turning its colour blue once it had been filled to the top and Hope screwed the top on, letting it swing from the chain, glowing eerily in the light.

"The gem is called the Soul of Elysium," Iolanthe told her. "It is what keeps Elysium safe. It repairs and brings life to that was destroyed here, it gives power to the wards."

"This little thing can do all that?" Hope asked doubtful. Generally items tethered to wards were often very large and impossible to move, which was why they were called relics…and the kind of power Iolanthe was talking about made it difficult for Hope to believe that something so small could contain so much.

"Why don't you look outside and see?"

So Hope stepped out of the room and out of the house entirely only to do a double-take.

What was once broken had been renewed. What had once been burned was now unblemished. What was once dead trees and plants were now living and in full bloom.

If Hope didn't know any better than she would have thought she'd stepped out of a house in a completely different area.

Now this was what Elysium looked like.

"Unbelievable," she breathed, before turning back to Iolanthe who gave her a knowing smile, raising a hand to hover over the gem in her hand still glowing faintly with a hidden power.

"The Soul is also beacon that tells those descendants of the gods that Elysium is safe once more," she said before becoming grave, "but be wary, this gem is powerful and dangerous and there will always be others that seek it within these wards; some never approved of Thanatos' line being entrusted with it."

"I'll keep it safe," Hope promised her.

"Good," Iolanthe said, closing her eyes and exhaling and it seemed to Hope that all the tension had gone out of her transparent body, before she smiled at Hope. "Take care, Elpis, your friends are with you."

And then she faded entirely, as if all that she had been was a wisp of smoke.

"Wow! This place is huge!"
Hope could hear Agathe's voice from where she was and she moved forward to meet them halfway.

Daphne was awoken so suddenly by her mother that she automatically reached for her wand before she managed to get the light turned on.

"Mum!" she complained, throwing an arm over her eyes, hiding from the light. "I just got to sleep, what in—"

"Get up right now, Daphne, and don't you dare argue!"

Daphne blinked at the firmness in her mother's voice and she withdrew her arm to wince her eyes open.

Her mother was positively feverish, something Daphne would have never thought possible of her; Callista Greengrass was the epitome of cool and collected. Her blonde hair was falling out of the elegant knot she'd been sporting all day and she'd exchanged her high-quality robes for a practical, if a bit feminine, tunic and trousers, something Daphne had never seen her mother wear.

"Mum, what's going on?" she asked, startled by her mother's behaviour and her code of dress.

"We're leaving, so get dressed and get your things packed," Callista said shortly.

"Leaving?" Daphne said blankly, still not moving. "Why?"

"It's not safe here right now," Callista said quickly, "not for you or your sister and not for me."

"I don't understand," Daphne said as her mother pulled her out of bed in time for Astoria to stumble through the gaping door, yawning widely.

"Wazzgoing on?" she slurred.

"Why isn't Dad coming with us?" Daphne pressed and Callista sighed.

"Because your father isn't a descendant of Adrestia, goddess of balance."

Both daughters stared at their mother. "What?"

Knowing that Hope was a descendant of Thanatos was one thing—it was hardly surprising, given the sheer number of times she'd managed to escape death by a mere inch— but Daphne herself? Impossible.

"The Gates of Tartarus are open, I'd love to explain this to you in detail, but we just don't have time...where did you stay when you were on the run with Lady Potter?" Callista pressed as she tossed so clothes towards Daphne before packing the rest into her bag.

"We're not telling you!" Astoria said aghast. "Hope'll kill us!"

"Astoria!" Callista barked and Astoria recoiled against the wall.

"I can get us there," Daphne said, her eyes flickering from Astoria—loyal to a fault Astoria— looking at her in outrage to her mother, practically overflowing with fear. "Hope can't be mad about us using it for an emergency."

"Good, now get dressed. We're leaving in ten minutes."
And before they left, Daphne held the flat medallion of tiger-eye that Dean had given her and
murmured a single word to it: “Pithos.”

Miles away a dark-skinned boy read those words off his own and dressed in a hurry.

It would only be days later that Dean Thomas realized what he had gotten himself into.
The Truth of the Matter

If there was one place that Dean had been expecting returning to so soon after the war's conclusion, it was Pithos. Pithos had been great, wonderful, even, and Dean didn't mind returning to it, but he had expected his time there to be over and done once Voldemort was dead and Hope had vanished off to round up the last of the Death Eaters.

In more ways than one, Pithos might've been considered better than Hogwarts, but that might've had more to do with the fact that they didn't really have anyone telling them what to do or where to be. It was true that Hope, Ron, and Hermione were technically in charge of the Resistance, but they'd been off doing their own research most of the time, leaving Daphne, Justin, and Angelina in charge, though they were more often than not in charge of themselves.

But if there was one thing that Dean hated, as he trudged through the wet mud from the recent rainfall, struggling not to drop his rucksack every time he slipped in the much, it was that Pithos was so difficult to find, which had made it the perfect place to hide out when they were on the run, but now it was just making it harder to reach his girlfriend.

And Dean didn't have those coordinates to go off this time; he was doing it all from memory, and that wasn't helpful. But it wasn't as though he hadn't traipsed through the Forest of Morea several times before.

He came along the edge of a cliff-face that overlooked the lake that Hope had once claimed to have almost drowned in, though Dean didn't really have a reason to not believe her, Hope had a tendency to get herself into trouble by doing absolutely nothing, before taking the sloping path that led down from it.

His boots sank into the wet sand as he made his way along the bank of the lake towards the cliff on the opposite side –impossible to reach unless by walking across the beach and thus they would always know if anyone was coming–, searching for the crack in the crevice, hooking the lever that opened the hidden tunnel with his fingers and giving a sharp tug so that the rocks parted to allow him passage inside.

He lit his wand as the dark closed in around him by the shutting of the stone behind him.

"It's not for the claustrophobic," Hope had admitted more as an afterthought, "but hopefully you won't be staying in the tunnel very long."

Once he reached the hall's end he hissed the only word in Parseltongue he knew from Hope making them all practice it until they could get inside Pithos without her having to say the word every time.

The wall slid away to allow him up a short spiralling staircase and out the trap door before he was yanked up into the castle by a very strong arm, and the next thing he knew, there was a foot at his throat and spear aimed at his throat.

"Mum!" came a familiar yell. "What're you doing?"

Dean chanced a glance over to see Astoria, her blue eyes blown wide as she gaped at her mother and her sister's boyfriend.

"You did you find us?" Callista Greengrass spoke with an aggressive note and Dean wondered faintly if she'd ever met Hope, because his old classmate had a tendency to point sharp objects at people in just the same manner.
"Mum! That's Dean! Daphne's boyfriend!" Astoria snapped. "Daph probably sent him a message of where to find her!"

If Dean had to wager, he'd say probably the only reason the older witch hadn't killed him yet was because of her presence. "Er, yeah, she sent me a message using the pendant." He nodded down to it where it rested against his chest.

Callista gave him a glance of warning as she knelt to have a look at it just as Daphne came barrelling into view. Her blonde locks were falling out of her hastily-done braid, flying over her shoulder as she came to a stop, only breathing a little hard from the short jog, goggling at her mother where she had her boyfriend pinned.

"Mum! Get off him!"

Callista ignored her daughter briefly, smoothing her thumb across the surface of the tiger-eye pendant so that it revealed the last message sent, and she could read off a single word: Pithos.

Then she removed her foot from his throat, allowing him to sit up, rubbing at his neck and giving her a slight glower for his troubles.

"My apologies," she said smoothly, "but I had to be sure you hadn't tracked us some other way."

Daphne flew to Dean's side, throwing her arms over his shoulders and breathing in his familiar scent.

"Who would be tracking you?" Dean asked blankly.

"She hasn't quite explained," Astoria interjected in annoyance, crossing her arms as she came closer, giving Dean a smile.

"This doesn't have anything to do with Hope's disappearance, does it?" Dean asked in confusion.

Three blonde heads whipped to look at him.

"She's gone missing again?" Daphne said, not surprised anymore, just a bit resigned at the ex-Gryffindor's tendency to vanish off into the misty moor.

"Yeah, it was all over the Evening Prophet… didn't you see it?" Dean asked in surprise.

"Not really," Astoria admitted, "it was kind of late getting to the manor, I think, I don't think Daddy was reading it at dinner…"

"Well, some Auror tried to accuse her of all the crimes she committed during the war," Dean explained, "you know, the ones she was all acquitted for after the war ended, and then she just disappeared."

Daphne inhaled sharply, her eyes fluttering closed. That was what Hope was typical of doing, so it came as no surprise. This was the girl who had stood and fought in the stead of running for so long, and it had clearly run her ragged.

"So, why exactly did you disappear in the night?" Dean asked curiously.

Both blonde-haired girls looked to their mother with identical stares, clearly waiting for her to give the proper explanation.

Callista gave a small sigh before gesturing them towards the long table that had once been used for the Resistance's mealtimes.
"How much do you remember about the Greek Myths?" Callista asked her daughters.

Astoria's eyebrows furrowed. "The stories you and Daddy used to tell us before bed? Like Orpheus and Heracles and Atalanta?" Atalanta had been her favourite when she was young since there weren't all that many mythical heroes that had been girls.

"Yes," Callista said, "exactly like that... a very long time ago the gods descended on the earth, sometimes with a vague interest in mortals, sometimes to sire children... those children are known as demigods, half god, half mortal, and these type of people did exist at one point in time."

Dean's eyes widened, but Daphne and Astoria had had a few hours to get used to the idea.

"I'm sorry," Dean said bleakly, "I could have sworn you said the gods were real."

Dean, of course, was no stranger to Hope invoking gods' names; he'd heard her swear by Hades and Zeus more times than one.

"They've, for the most part, removed themselves, but yes, it's true," Callista said, narrowing her eyes towards him. "And with the gods there are scores of monsters that would like nothing better than to sink their teeth into those with even a drop of godly blood."

"Monsters?" Astoria squeaked, her eyes wide. "What kind of monsters?"

And Daphne reached over to link her fingers with her sister's squeezing them for good measure.

"Wouldn't we have heard of monster attacks though?" Daphne demanded before their mother had any time to answer.

Callista cleared her throat loudly.

"Er, I think there's a bit more to the story," Dean muttered and Daphne swatted his shoulder.

"After some time in ancient Greece there was a protected settlement created where the children and descendents of gods could be safe to live and grow," Callista explained patiently. "For awhile this was the only place where they could do that... and times went on until the ownership of the settlement known as Elysium passed to a young woman named Iolanthe Peverell, the great-granddaughter of Thanatos."

"Peverell?" Daphne started in surprise. "Isn't that an old family?"

She didn't remember much about the family, only that there were no longer any bearing its name. Daphne had heard the name dropped a few times when Hope, Hermione, and Ron were working hard on their secret assignment, but that was the only thing significant about it she could remember.

"Its extinct on the male line, but yes... Iolanthe made the ultimate sacrifice in giving her own life to seal the Gates of Tartarus, to keep the monsters locked deep down... but, unfortunately, the Gates are open once more, which means there is no safety for myself or for you two."

"Is that why Daddy had to stay behind?" Astoria asked, confused. "Because he's not part-god?"

"No, there is nothing that bars ordinary human beings from entering Elysium, but people tend notice if a lord disappears," Callista said dryly. And they had no way of knowing who would be looking for those with godly blood. Daphne was studying at home this year, and it would be easy to pull Astoria's record from Hogwarts, claiming that she was still suffering from chronic nightmares due to the war; there weren't many older Hogwarts students attending school this year anyways because of
the effects of the war.

"I'm going with," Dean said suddenly and Callista rounded on him. Her eyes were very similar to Daphne's, but where Daphne's were icy, Callista's were as frigid as a winter night.

"This doesn't concern you," she said, "you have no ties to the gods; we do."

"No, but I've got ties with Daphne," Dean said, crossing his arms, his eyes steely, "and I've fought with her and Astoria before; you haven't."

He wasn't wrong. Daphne and Astoria were some of the most valuable members of the Resistance because their knowledge of healing; the loss of healers would have been quite significant.

"Skill in magic is of little use to creatures such as these," Callista snapped, one hand forming into a firm fist. "These monsters don't care about collateral damage, only that they kill their targets!"

Dean crossed his arms. "Safety in numbers, then."

"You are a remarkably foolish boy!"

Dean didn't even twitch. "Ma'am, I love your daughter, and both of them trust me. You can't say that it wouldn't be better to have someone they can trust with them."

Callista's eyes darkened noticeably as she looked him over, knowing he wasn't wrong; her girls weren't warriors, but they were healers.

"Can you use a spear?" she asked him.

"No," Dean said honestly, struggling to catch the one she tossed to him, the very same one she had aimed at his throat earlier.

"You're going to learn for my daughters' sakes as well as your own," she told him shortly.

The water flowing from the waterfall was soothing to Nelda's nerves as she stared out into the relative darkness.

The stream that she'd tripped through on her way to Elysium emptied into a lower cavern that could be entered from the side of mountain, and Nelda needed a place to just get away for awhile.

Her fingers drew out the only thing she'd kept from her old life, tracing over the delicate design of the Celtic tree of life that George had given her when she turned fourteen. Nelda smiled briefly, remembering the day clearly in her mind.

"So this is where you're hiding," a voice commented, making Nelda jolt in surprise, looking up to see a figure step lightly over jutting stone until she was standing before Nelda.

Thalia Blackwood had exchanged her typical garb for a more official tunic, but Nelda could still see where her daggers were strapped and the blade at her waist gleamed in the semi-darkness.

Nelda said nothing, so Thalia merely moved to sit down beside her with an exaggerated groan.

"No one's shown up yet," Thalia informed her, "but Aggie thought you might need some company."

"I'm fine," Nelda said, her eyes focused on the pendant her fiancé had given her, the violet shine almost invisible in the cavern.
"Nelda," Thalia took the time to Nelda's false name (trying to get her used to it, she was sure), "I know this is such a strange thing to you...I know it's all very new to you...but you are not doing a bad thing."

Nelda gave a loud sigh, slipping the pendant down the front of her shirt. "I disappeared into smoke, my fiancé has no idea where I am, and neither do my best mates, and I really don't think they're going to be pleased with me when I finally do come back, and I don't even know when that is!" Her voice rose gradually, echoing in the cavern.

She couldn't help but think of Angelina in her white dress, walking down the aisle to bind her life to Fred's come December...what if Nelda missed that? What if Nelda missed too much to pick up the pieces of her life again? What if...What if George—? Nelda didn't even want to consider that.

Thalia reached over to squeeze Nelda's hand, giving her a kind motherly smile.

"I don't know either," she said, "but there's no one who wants the Gates of Tartarus shut more than us Blackwoods, Nelda."

Nelda raised a hand to pinch the bridge of her nose.

"And I know it's hard to wrap your mind around us –Aggie and I–"

"I've just—" Nelda cut across her before pausing when the emotion clogged in her throat. "My family died a long time ago...all I thought I had was a distant cousin on the Black line...ignoring Tom, of course." Thalia noticed how Nelda's jaw tightened. "My family are the people who have stuck by me, but they're not my blood...I guess I'm just not used to the idea of having a family like you and Aggie."

Thalia's gaze softened.

"We're not going anywhere," Thalia promised, "Blackwoods stick together even through death."

Nelda snorted. "Which is ironic, seeing as you're related to the bloke."

Thalia laughed with her. "Yes," she said with a bit of amusement, "I'm sure he'd the origin of the phrase."

"It wouldn't surprise me," Nelda said. Thanatos might have been a bit cryptic and eternally vague, but Nelda also got the feeling that he liked to have things named after him.

"Is Aggie going to introduce me as her sister?" Nelda asked Thalia, her eyebrows furrowing.

"She doesn't have to, not if it makes you uncomfortable," Thalia said easily and Nelda admired her for how easygoing she was.

"I don't mind," Nelda said, chewing on the inside of her cheek briefly. "but...if you don't mind...I think I'd like to just call you 'Thalia' for now...my mum was kind of extraordinary."

"I don't mind," Thalia promised, "but it would be an honour to share a daughter with a great woman like your mother."

Nelda gave her a small grateful smile as the woman stood, holding out her hands to Nelda. "Now, come on, I need to ingrain some swordsmanship in you before anyone shows up."

A sigh left Nelda, but she grabbed the hands extended to her all the time to use their strength to pull
herself upright. "You can try, but I'll still take throwing a dagger over swords any day."

"I respect that," Thalia smirked, "but throwing daggers only gets you so far, and a sword can save your life."

Nelda was doubtful and it showed, making the witch laugh, securing an arm around Nelda's shoulders. "One day I'm going to have to tell about when Galen first started off…his failures were spectacular and hilarious in retrospect…"

Nelda thought she knew stress before, but she couldn't have been more wrong. She remembered what it was like studying for the OWL exams well into the night, she'd been fourteen and under-qualified in the Triwizard Tournament, she'd fought against Death Eaters in the Department of Mysteries, she'd walked to her death, and she'd fought against Tom himself.

And here Nelda was, acting as Caretaker to more people than she could count—there weren't really all that many people, it was just that Nelda was trying to be in too many places at once—and she hardly knew what she was doing.

The Council of Olympus were apparently considered to be the 'Elite' comprised of the children of the main gods, the Olympians, and they were among the first to arrive and the first to complain about anything that the Blackwoods had done. Nelda was their scapegoat of choice, as a particular piece of contention between them appeared to be that a descendant of Thanatos was wearing the Soul of Elysium when it should have been one of the more privileged.

Nelda just wanted to beat their faces into one of the Grecian pillars.

"Miss Ellie?"

Nelda looked down to a young girl with dark skin that gleamed in the sunlight, contrasting the bright blue of her eyes; she was a very pretty little girl. And the little girl was holding on tightly to the hand of a boy a year or two younger with dark curls and a complexion a few shades lighter.

"Are you Miss Ellie?" the girl asked, gazing at her intently and Nelda smiled as she knelt down.

"Yes, I am," she said. Ellie was obviously short for Nelda, but it wasn't as though Nelda hadn't gone by the nickname before, like when she had used the alias Elle Avis. "What's your name, sweetheart?"

"Jolene," the girl said stoutly, "and this is Jacob…are you going to send him away?"

Nelda's brow creased. "Why would I send him away?"

"He's normal," Jolene said, "some guy in the square said you're sending away the normals."

Nelda's smile stiffened. "No, those that aren't related to the gods but have family that are may stay here as long as they like Jolene."

"But he said—"

"He was probably just a member of the Council that's annoyed with me, Jolene," Nelda promised kindly, "your brother can stay with you as long as you like."

Jolene's smile was bright and airy before she rushed off with her brother tailing her, it was only when she was gone that Nelda's smile fell and she palmed her blades in contemplation.
"Where's the fire?" Agathe asked, popping up at her elbow as though materializing out of nothing.

"Do you think I could get away with killing several members of the Council?" Nelda mused thoughtfully.

Agathe snorted. "Not for long... they do love their batch of lies and deceit."

"Why did I agree to do this?" Nelda groaned, rubbing at her forehead tiredly as the gem around her throat gleamed.

"Because you're a good person who won't cast all these innocent people to be killed by monsters," Agathe informed her brightly and Nelda couldn't help but glare.

"I hate you," she told her sister and the girl only snorted.

Things were not going very well for Dean Thomas, and he was sure he'd dealt with enough of battle when they'd been climbing their way up the mountain. If he was younger he would have questioned if it was really worth it to stick his neck out, but Dean was older and Daphne was worth all the trouble in the world.

But nothing was quite so terrifying as a beast appearing out of shadows with fur as black night, eyes as empty as a starless sky, and two heads.

It lunged at them before Dean could breathe and Astoria released a sharp scream as Callista threw her spear so that it lodged in its shoulder, but that only made the creature angrier, before a sudden arrow pierced its chest, followed by a few crossbow bolts. The creature gave a roar as it shattered into dark mist, fading into nothing, and leaving only the weapons behind.

They all turned to look and for a moment, the only thing that Dean could see was a flash of long crimson hair and the first thought that entered his mind as the two figures came down the path to join them was that one of them was Hope, and then he got a good look at her.

They were roughly the same height, but this girl's hair wasn't nearly the same colour of dark red that Hope's usually was, and it was bound in a tight braid. Her features were softer and her eyes a little rounder, her nose a bit straighter. But there was something about her that reminded him inherently of Hope Potter.

She grinned widely at Callista. "Nice spear toss, you'd have my mother jealous. I'm Agathe, by the way, Agathe Blackwood, but everyone calls me Aggie."

"A pleasure," Callista said smoothly, "I'm Callista Greengrass, and these are my children, Daphne and Astoria, and Daphne's boyfriend, Dean."

Dean gave a small salute.

"This is Ajax Moswell," Agathe added, gesturing to the young man beside her with the crossbow resting on shoulder. His dark hair was long enough to be held at bay by a ponytail and his eyes were so brown they were almost black. He was a contrast to his companion who was fair where his complexion was darker. "My boyfriend," she added, "he's not that great of a shot—"

"Babe," Ajax's eyes glittered, "be thankful I actually hit something this time... a healer is useless in the field."

"You are not useless," Agathe admonished, "you've just got terrible aim." Then she focused her
attention on the ones standing in front of her. "Come on, we'll take you to Elysium. My sister's kind of in charge of the whole thing…she's not too happy about everyone pulling her in every direction."

Ajax coughed politely as they started to walk again.

"I mean, she wants to kill every member of the Council of Olympus," Agathe corrected and Callista gave a small smirk at that.

"What's the Council of Olympus?" Dean hissed to Daphne.

"No idea," Daphne whispered back.

"I did not agree to this!" came an annoyed voice, and stomping through the mist came another girl with dark hair in a fishtail plait and blue eyes positively frosty. She was holding one unsheathed serpentine blade in a hand, which she pointed at Agathe. "I need Thalia, where is she?"

"Supply run?" Agathe offered helpfully. "You haven't killed anyone yet, have you?"

"Not yet," the girl grumbled, "but I am seriously considering it."

She couldn't have looked more different to Hope with the shape of her eyes and her nose, and the curve of her cheekbones and the scar running through one eyebrow and eye, but Dean knew that voice anywhere.

"Hope?"
On September first Annette Finch-Fletchley mounted the Hogwarts Express with apprehension in her heart and in her eyes.

Ginny Weasley looked a little like Hope, but Annette knew well enough that she wasn't her and there was a tightening in her jaw and around her eyes when she'd questioned where the witch was, because Annette knew that Hope had promised to take her to the station herself only to have her mother tell her that she would be doing it instead.

"Knowing her," Ginny had said, "trying and failing to stay out of trouble."

The response had made Annette's brow wrinkle in confusion, not quite understanding, but now wanting to speak up.

But where exactly was Hope Potter?

"Um…well, this is awkward," Nelda said, scratching her cheek as she sheathed her blade at her hip.

And it certainly wasn't a situation she had anticipated finding herself in, for all intents and purposes it would have been as though Hope Potter had completely vanished from the realm of the living. The chances of their being any other children of the gods in Britain was next to zero as, according to Thalia, because of how the British Magical Government was so stuck in the tenth century most tended to avoid it; Nelda couldn't blame them, there were laws that had been passed that made her want to disassociate with the British Magical Government entirely.

But if there were several people that Nelda wasn't expecting to see, Dean Thomas and the Greengrasses were definitely at the top of the list, and they were standing, staring at her like she was the strangest thing that they had ever seen before.

"It was the voice, wasn't it? I knew I was missing something—" Nelda had the wind forcibly knocked out of her by a small blonde torpedo.

"Hope!" Astoria cried as she threw her arms around the dark-haired witch with enough force that Nelda actually stumbled a bit.

"Just a little louder, Astoria," Nelda grumbled, "I don't think Zeus can hear you."

"Why do you look like that?" Daphne demanded once her younger sister had released her friend from her death grip.

"Well, seeing as Hope Potter's face is rather well known it would have been odd if I showed up looking like Hope when I'm calling myself Nelda Blackwood—"

"Maybe saying your real name out here in the open isn't the best option," Agathe pointed out mildly, tugging on the end of her braid.

"Probably," Nelda agreed sheepishly. "Most people in Elysium call me Ellie, which is fine, you know, short for Nelda, short for Elpis, I'm not too picky."

"Why can't you go as Hope?" Dean asked flummoxed as he moved forward to give his old classmate a swift hug.
"Too dangerous right now," Nelda sighed before extending a hand to the older blonde-haired woman that could have only been Daphne and Astoria's mother. "Hello, you must be Lady Greengrass."

"Yes," the woman took her hand, giving it a small squeeze, "Callista. Thank you for reopening Elysium."

"My pleasure," Nelda said, eyes flickering towards Agathe, "though my sister should take the credit, she was the most convincing."

"Sister?" Daphne demanded, looking from Agathe to Nelda, but neither offered any explanation.

"Ellie, we should probably get moving," Ajax added, moving a hand to rest on the small of his girlfriend's back.

"Yes, overexposure, you're right." Daphne noticed how Nelda's hands wrapped tightly around the hilts of the serpentine blades at her sides. "Elysium isn't too far away, come along." She gave a jaunty whistle and started to walk off.

"Is she all right?" Dean asked Agathe who gave a small sigh.

"I think she's mostly running on fumes at this point," she said, "and the Council of Olympus wasn't pleased centuries ago when Thanatos' granddaughter was in charge and I think they're even less pleased with his descendent."

So the group moved to catch up with the quickly moving young witch.

"How did you get a sister is what I want to know," Daphne asked her friend, not noticing how Agathe's brow creased with annoyance.

"Aggie and I are actually distantly related," Nelda said with a smile, dropping a light hand to Agathe's arm which made the annoyance fade a little.

"You mean like you were distantly related to Voldemort?" Astoria asked archly.

Nelda's smile became a trifle bit pained. "Yes, exactly. Thanatos had three sons by our mutual ancestor Adeliade Peverell: Antioch, Cadmus, and Ignotus Peverell. Tom was the descendent of Cadmus, I'm the descendent of Ignotus, and Aggie here is the descendent of Antioch, who I didn't realize had any kids until recently…who's your godly ancestor?"

"Adrestia," Callista answered for her daughters and Ajax's eyes widened with interest.

"Ooh!" he said. "The goddess of balance! I don't think we have any from her line in Elysium."

"A lot of the people in Elysium are from the minor gods," Agathe added, "so you'll fit right in."

"What about the major gods?" Dean asked faintly, almost tripping over his feet and still trying to wrap his mind around the idea of gods having children with mortals (he didn't know why he was having such a hard time accepting it, that tended to happen a lot in Greek myths).

"Very arrogant," Agathe and Nelda said as one only to laugh.

"The descendents of the major gods almost completely make up the Council of Olympus," Nelda explained. "They like to think themselves as the elite of those in Elysium because their blood is purer than ours." She arched an eyebrow at Daphne, Dean, and Astoria. "Sound familiar?"
It should have; it was that line of thinking that had brought so many to Voldemort's side during the war, and it wasn't a way of thinking that could be eradicated overnight.

"They don't approve of Ellie running the show," Ajax interjected. "Probably because she's what we call a late bloomer, learning about the gods late on."

"And probably because my skill with a blade is negligible at best," Nelda agreed. "But that's what I've got knives for."

Dean rolled his eyes, knowing far too well of her love of knives; she was rather well known for always having one on her at all times.

"I keep things running in Elysium," Nelda explained, "but Thalia's the one in charge of the training and missions."

"Missions?" Astoria asked in confusion.

"The monsters of Tartarus are still active, yes?" Callista surmised and the others jolted in surprise, nearly forgetting that she was there in her silence and she gave them a thin smile.

"Very active," Agathe agreed solemnly. "There've been sightings all over the world but the attacks by them are being written off as simple maulings or random killings…the longer the Gates of Tartarus are open the more mortals and the descendents of the gods are at risk." There were lines of misery on her face that Daphne couldn't understand but Nelda reached a hand down to squeeze Agathe's fingers in comfort. "They don't stay down for long and they're attracted to godly blood, and if not godly blood, magical blood, and if a non-magical gets in their way, well that's collateral damage."

Daphne lifted her eyes to stare at the pillars and the rounder roofs and slanted-tiled roofs of the buildings hidden in the mist.

"Welcome to Elysium, now let's get through the wards before anymore monsters show up."

Elysium was bustling with people, which didn't surprise Callista very much; the line of the gods was not so easily broken. She could see a garden in full bloom with a pair of young boys kneeling with their hands in the earth, making the plants grow. She could see an old woman with a cane that was tipped with a spike in case any monster got the drop on her. She could see a young man yelling for bandages.

"And that's my cue," Ajax said, ducking a kiss against his girlfriend's lips. "Later, babe." And he disappeared after the man.

"I guess he could only take so much of us making fun of the major gods," Nelda mused thoughtfully. Agathe snorted. "I'm sure he'll recover."

"Is it always this busy?" Astoria gasped, buffeted by the crowd.

"Can't be sure," Nelda said, "Elysium's only been open a few days and we're still getting some stragglers in…maybe it'll calm down in a week or so…hey, Siobhan, have you seen Jolene?" she added, grabbing a brown haired girl with a dust of freckles across her nose and a stripe of blue in her hair before she could pass her by.

"The last I saw she was in the plaza!" Siobhan called before disappearing a moment later.
"No I'm not," a young voice piped up and Daphne blinked, looking down at the speaker. She was young with frizzy curls and right blue eyes that were impossibly bright against her dark skin. In her hands was a clipboard and tucked behind her ear was a charcoal stick. "Miss Ellie, you're back!" She threw her arms around Nelda's legs.

"I was only gone a few minutes," Nelda laughed, leaning down to ruffle the little girl's hair. "Anyone new show up?"

"Nope!" the girl popped the 'p' with a grin.

"This is Jolene," Nelda added to the confused witches and wizard. "She helps me keep track of everything going on in Elysium."

Jolene beamed proudly.

"These are the Greengrasses…plus Dean," Nelda told Jolene ("Hey!" Dean complained). "I believe they will be in need of a house, what do we have for them?"

The little girl held up one finger, digging out a rough aerial sketch of the expanse of Elysium and spreading it on the ground, skimming her charcoal pencil over it until she found an appropriate house. "Left past the plaza, five houses down," she said before folding it up and making a note on the clipboard.

"Jolene! Come along!" came a call from the crowd and Jolene brightened, leaving without a second glance back.

"She reminds me of Hemera," Agathe said wistfully, a dark sorrow tainting her eyes.

Nelda chewed on her lip before turning to Callista. "The plaza takes you through the crowd, there's a fountain at its centre, just take the left path and five houses down like Jolene said. I'll swing by later to give you lot the rundown."

"Thank you," Callista said gratefully, gripping her spear tightly before hiking her bag higher on her back and gesturing for her entourage to follow after her, and they did, but Daphne chanced a glance back to where Nelda and Agathe were standing. Agathe had a hand over her mouth, trying not to let her shoulders shake and Nelda swept her into a hug, whispering something that must have been soothing in her ear.

At that distance they really did look like sisters.

Agathe fell asleep on the couch in front of the fire that night, leaving Nelda to drape a blanket over her in case she got chilly while she slept.

The day hadn't been so bad for Agathe, but there were times when her sadness for the loss of her niece were so painfully clear and painful to watch. It wasn't something that you could get over in a hurry; Nelda remembered just how long it took her to get over Sirius' death or all those that had died during the war. It wasn't easy, but the pain faded eventually into nothing more than a sorrowful memory of something long passed.

"You should be Auntie's sister," a voice told her quietly and Nelda jerked in surprise, twisting violently to look to the speaker only to feel her heart jump up into her throat.

There was a ghostly image of a small girl with bouncy curls and bright eyes and she gave Nelda a shy smile, but Nelda was more distracted by the red stained across the front of her sundress. When
her parents and Sirius had appeared as apparitions, they didn't have a mark on them, but that might have been because her parents had been killed by the Avada Kedavra and that curse left no mark, whereas Sirius had simply fallen through the Veil.

"E-Excuse me?" she rasped in shock.

The girl propped her elbows on the armchair's arm (which she didn't seem to go through, though she might have just made it look as though she was leaning against it when she really wasn't), her eyes fastened on Agathe.

"Auntie Aggie is so sad," she said quietly, "her and Grandmama…will you tell them that it's not their fault. Blackwoods have a natural curiosity." The second bit sounded a bit like a quote, and Nelda wouldn't have put it past Thalia to say it.


Hemera's cheeks dimpled; she must have truly been an adorable child. "Hello, Auntie Hope."

Nelda smiled sadly, reaching a hand out only to stop a few inches short of cupping her flesh, because she knew her hand would seep right through.

"You should be Auntie's sister," Hemera told her seriously as Nelda drew the hand back feeling the ice-cold feeling of Death—a warning from Thanatos.

"Your aunt is already telling everyone we are sisters," Nelda said blankly and Hemera shook her head in exasperation.

"Telling something and being something are different," the little girl insisted, stamping a foot noiselessly. "Auntie likes you, don't you like her?"

"Of course I like her," Nelda said a little irritated, "she's my family…but she doesn't know me like a sister does." Ginny and Hermione were far closer to being her sisters than Agathe was, and there was no blood between them.

"Sharing is caring," the dead girl sang at such a pitch that Nelda had to glance feverishly to where Agathe was sleeping, but the red-haired girl barely stirred before breathing in and out deeply. "Family's family," she insisted after a moment of silence. "You trust family."

And then she faded leaving Nelda in contemplation as Agathe finally roused herself into wakefulness.

"Did I fall asleep?" she asked around a yawn.

"Hm? Oh— yeah, you did," Nelda said a bit disjointedly, distracted by her own thoughts, something that Agathe was quick to catch onto.

"What is it?"

"Aggie…I want to tell you something," Nelda said slowly.

"Tell me what?" Agathe asked.

"Everything."

"I hate politics," Nelda grumbled, stirring honey into her porridge, making Agathe arch an eyebrow
while her mother read the paper, ignoring the sisters to the best of her ability; this was about as
domestic the Blackwoods had been since Nelda had first met them.

"You're a lady in the British Wizengamot," she pointed out.

"That doesn't mean I've ever voted on anything or had to direct a council!" Nelda's voice was rising
gradually and Thalia put down the paper, removing the reading spectacles from her nose to look on
Nelda.

"Ellie, you were the leader of the Resistance, you've been inspiring people for years and you've
made it very clear that you care very little for the Council of Olympus," Thalia said patiently.

"People weren't usually stupid enough to keep coming back for a smack in the face, though," Nelda
complained, "at least my allies were competent."

Somehow they'd managed to overrule her in commanding her to be part of the first meeting since the
reopening of Elysium. Nelda was incensed about the whole thing, especially since she'd been
avoiding the members of the Council of Olympus like the plague (the last one who'd gotten into a
verbal spat with her had ended up in the medical ward with her dagger in his side).

Nelda was still learning about the world of the Greek gods as well as using a sword, Thalia wasn't
about to let her go out to slay monsters with Agathe without at least some adequate knowledge of
using her swords. And Agathe refused to go out with anyone but Nelda ("Blackwoods fight with
Blackwoods," she had insisted).

Daphne was far better with the sword than Nelda was, which was irritating because Nelda had at
least a few days on her friend, but Nelda also preferred using her fists and throwing her daggers, so
that might have had something to do with it.

"It's just a meeting," Thalia added, "besides, you're the one who's really in charge here. You make
the decisions."

Nelda raised a hand to the blue bauble resting against the hollow of her throat. It felt heavy and cold
against her skin and she remembered the first time a member of Council of Olympus had demanded
she remove it and give it to someone actually worthy of it.

"A mere descendant of a minor god being named its keeper is an insult," she had spat at her precisely
two seconds before Nelda had socked her in the cheek without a single shred of remorse.

"Maybe you should go with her, Mum?" Agathe suggested, swallowing some toast.

"I'm sure Ellie knows what she's doing," Thalia countered. "A few over-entitled pricks shouldn't faze
her, it isn't as though she hasn't dealt with them before."

Nelda snorted. "No truer words have been spoken." Nelda had never really had any trouble with
making herself heard.

She pulled a folded picture out of her pocket, taking a brief few moments to look upon it,
memorizing George's smiling lips and his laughing eyes as he wrapped his arms around the Hope in
the picture. Nelda's heart ached.

"All right, better get this shit done," she said, gulping down the last of her juice.

"Go get 'em! Show them what going against a Blackwood woman means!"
Nelda laughed and rolled her eyes.

She schooled her expression into a smooth mask before striding into the room, taking note of the figures already sitting in their respective chairs.

"I would invite you to sit, but it appears that you decided to get the meeting started without me," she said sharply, resting a hand on her hip. "Which is ironic, given how much effort you put into dragging me here."

Nelda knew she could look dangerous when she wanted to, and today she most certainly looked dangerous. With the scar ripped through her eye and eyebrow, the dark tunic and robes she was swathed in, and the twin serpentine blades at her hips.

"It's not as if you had anything better to do—" the first woman on her right hissed. She was the one Nelda had ended up punching and her name was Seraphine and she was the great-great-granddaughter to Demeter.

Nelda held up one hand to stall the flow of her words, her blue eyes narrowed and positively frigid. "Oh, I'm sorry," she said, the words edged with poison, "but forgive me if I'm wrong, but I'm the woman who uprooted her life to give you ungrateful pricks a safe place to lick your wounds."

"How dare you!" thundered a man with thick beard, full and grey like his eyes, this was Ajax's grandfather from whom he and his mother were estranged (Nelda couldn't imagine how difficult it must be for him being so close to the man that had made his mother's life so miserable after she had married his father), the descendant of Zeus. "Know your place!"

"Fuck off!" Nelda positively snarled. "And sit the hell down, Storm-spawn!"

Silence fell around them and Nelda revelled in the atmosphere she had created. It was nothing like dealing with the Order of the Phoenix or the Resistance or even Dumbledore himself back when he's still been alive.

Nelda hadn't minded the Order too terrible and she'd actually liked the Resistance and Dumbledore had at least had some self-control that these people clearly lacked.

And it was nice to not confine herself within the Light spectrum that those in Magical Britain so often placed her in because of her accomplishments.

"I am the one in charge here!" she snapped. "I keep the wards up so everyone within the borders can sleep safely at night including your ungrateful hides! It was my ancestor who gave her life to keep this place safe for centuries! And if I went whining to the person in charge of my safety every time something I didn't approve of occurred then I'd become a pathetic snivelling coward like at least half of you!"

Maybe Nelda should have laid off the sheer amount of insults she'd thrown at them in one sitting, but Nelda was too aggravated to care even as noise exploded around her.

"ENOUGH!" she roared. "I have just about had it with all the arrogance from you lot that I am this close—" she held up her forefinger and thumb up with barely any space between the two "—to just tossing you outside the wards and being done with it!"

"You wouldn't do that!" a young man by the name of Katar, a descendent of Apollo, insisted, stunned by her words.
"I am in charge of the safety of everyone in Elysium," Nelda snapped, struggling to keep her voice level. "You threaten their safety everyday; you attempt to sanction missions outside the wards without the approval of Thalia Blackwood, who, I shouldn't need to remind you, is the only one in charge of such assignments because of her history."

"Momma's girl," Katar muttered to the woman beside him.

"I'm sorry?" Nelda turned swiftly on her heel, her wand arm tense. "Have you got a problem with my mother having more experience than you, what, how long have you been out of a cradle? A month?"

Katar stood so that he towered over her but that did little to faze Nelda, she was far too used to people towering over her; she was tall but she wasn't that tall and George had always been of a greater height than her.

"Unless you've got anything of substance to add I suggest you sit your arse down and continue being remarkably unremarkable," she snarled.

There weren't very many who could handle the magnitude of the rage that her glares held, and none of them were in Elysium so it gave her some pleasure to see him stumble over his words before returning to his seat.

"And since I have been given no proof that this Council is, in fact, of some use in any way, I am disbanding it," Nelda said, for once surprised at her own gall.

And she didn't much care for the outburst that followed.
Nelda hated swords, let it be known. Well, she didn't hate swords, she could handle them well enough, swords were far better than a bow (no offense to Agathe, but they just weren't Nelda's thing).

"I hate you," Nelda ground out, clashing one blade against Thalia's.

Thalia was only using one hand to block Nelda’s strikes, compared to Nelda's two, which went to show just how strong Thalia was and weak Nelda was by comparison.

"No, you just hate swordsmanship," Thalia corrected with a laugh, throwing her weight forward to send Nelda sprawling backwards with a loud groan. "You're very resistant to swordsmanship… Galen took to it like a fish to water." Thalia's eyes grew sad at the mention of her dead son.

"Maybe I'm just better at using magic than I am at using a sword. Give me a dagger and I'll nail a fucker in the throat."

"So violent," Thalia laughed. "Don't worry, you'll get the hang of it; I'm not letting you out of Elysium until you can hold your own."

"I'm the one in charge here," Nelda complained.

"I'm in charge of training, my dear, and you are untrained."

"Sometimes being untrained is good," Nelda countered, pulling herself to her feet and rubbing at her shoulders, feeling the tension beneath the skin.

Training with Thalia was something Nelda liked to compare to dying. Agathe and Galen had been lucky since they had their training spread out over years but Nelda didn't have that luxury. Compacted training was less than ideal, but Nelda was easily the least trained individual in Elysium.

"You're raw and full of fire but that only gets you so far," Thalia mentioned, her eyes sweeping over Nelda’s form, taking note of what side Nelda favoured and bruises that were forming. "Why don't you take a break…I'm sure you have other leaderly things to do."

Nelda glared, wiping her hands on her pants before sheathing the single blade into the belt at her waist, making her other blade swing against her leg. She pointed two fingers to her eyes before flicking them back towards the older witch, who could only laugh as Nelda stumbled out of the training arena to almost run into Dean.

"Whoa, there, you all right?" he asked, raising a hand to steady her, but Nelda didn't need it.

"Nothing some ice won't fix," Nelda said, still rubbing at her shoulders, glancing to him. "What about you? Are you all right?"

There were some shadows under his eyes and he gave off the appearance of being very put-upon.

"I could use some good sleep," Dean conceded and Nelda snorted.

"Couldn't we all?"

A Harpy had collided with the wards at three in the morning, bringing its flock with it and fifteen of Thalia's best-trained went out to turn them to dust. There were no casualties, but the wounds were
"Are the girls still in the medical ward?" Nelda asked, twisting her braid behind her head into a tight bun.

"Yeah…I guess here even a little healing training goes a long way."

"Looks that way," Nelda muttered, rubbing a hand over her transfigured scar. A majority of those in Elysium were trained in the physical arts, those that were healers were rather slim.

Her eyes flitted to where the gates to Elysium were and she gave a small sigh. "Dean, do you ever think about running away from your responsibilities?"

"All the time," Dean laughed. "Why?"

"Back when I was a kid everyone told me I was supposed to be this great saviour, so that's what I became…Aggie asked me to come here and do this…but I really want those damned Gates shut so I can go home to George." Her eyes implored him and for a moment he saw a flicker of green. "Does that make me a bad person?"

"Of course not," Dean was quick to deny, squeezing her shoulder in comfort. "I'll be glad when this is all over, though. I'm pretty sure that Mum is going to kill me either way."

Nelda said nothing to that, chewing on the inside of her cheek.

He squeezed her shoulder again, drawing her eyes up to meet his. "There's nothing wrong with wanting a quiet life, you know."

Nelda smiled. "I suppose not. But, honestly, I think we've dealt with enough chaos to last us a lifetime and if–after all this is said and done–someone comes up to me and says they've got a problem that needs fixing, then I'm going to run as fast as I can in the opposite direction."

Dean couldn't help but snort at that. "I'd be running with you."

"Yeah, but you didn't have to come with the Greengrasses," Nelda pointed out.

"You didn't have to reopen Elysium," Dean countered. "So I guess we're both suckers for doing the right thing."

Nelda gave a small jerk of the head, conceding the point when Agathe came rushing up with a wide grin on her face.

"Hey, some Hermes kids got the Globe working and they think we can track monsters down now!"

"That's great!" Nelda couldn't help but be pleased. Monsters could track by their sense of smell but the children of the gods hadn't really had any way to gain the upper hand, not since the equipment that their ancestors had used was in such disrepair.

The Globe was basically that, a globe made from Aegean Metal that had once spun in an off-kilter motion, broken and creaking with every movement.

It was helpful, having the Globe functioning, but Nelda had more than one problem to be dealing with, with the Others being at the top of her list.

"Come and see!" Agathe curled her fingers inward, gesturing for Nelda to come and see and Nelda took one step forward before turning back.
"The library still has records from the last time the Gates were open, doesn't it?"

Dean had done his time as a soldier long before he'd found himself thrown into another war, but he'd follow Daphne through hell itself, even if he wasn't much of a warrior. Nelda had recognized that right away and asked him to be her second, mostly because she didn't trust a lot of the people that resided in Elysium. And it just so happened that Dean spent an awful lot of time in Elysium's library which mostly consisted of rather ancient texts, since Elysium had been closed for several centuries.

Dean blinked, his eyes shifting to where the small library was located. "There should be...why?"

"Can you go and see if you can find anything on the Others?"

Dean arched an eyebrow. "Sure...see you at lunch?"

The work that the descendents of Hermes had put into repairing the Globe was quite substantial.

"You two have outdone yourselves," Nelda mentioned, her eyes just a little wide as she took it in.

The Globe was moving slowly on its axis to show small glowing red dots on various continents.

The eldest of the two beamed proudly with a smear of grease on his cheek. "We thought it was well worth the effort."

Nelda winced as the soles of her feet burned as another monster made its way through the Gates.

"It most certainly is," Thalia agreed, clearly pleased as she examined the Globe up close.

"The problem is just how many monsters we have to deal with," Louis, the younger of the two at only twenty to his brother's twenty-five, said, grimacing at the number of dots. "They're going to keep coming until we get those Gates under control."

"One problem at a time," Thalia said sagely and Agathe rolled her eyes towards her sister, making Nelda smile just slightly. "We can get on top of the monsters, or, at least try to until we can get a handle on the Gates."

Nelda didn't think the odds were evened very much in their favour. Some monsters were nearly three times a resident of Elysium's size, and Nelda had lost two residents in the last week. She hadn't really considered just how dangerous it was being the descendant of Thanatos until she'd had to see those two bodies torn apart while their families wailed in grief.

Being Nelda Blackwood, she found, was rather exhausting, especially when the disbanded members of the Council of Olympus were looking to blame everything that went wrong on Nelda's poor management. If people died, it was Nelda's fault, if more monsters showed up, it was Nelda's fault, if the Gates were still open, it was Nelda's fault.

She was actually getting quite sick of it, but there were better things to do than listen to incensed pricks who'd been ripped of their elitist status.

Kicking monster arse was definitely at the top of her list.

"I can't believe you started an illegal defence club under your teacher's nose!" Agathe had to hide her snorts into her cup of pumpkin juice, while Thalia sat with an amused smile on her face as she sharpened her knife.
The Blackwoods were settled around the fountain for lunch and Nelda's pasta that she was spinning around on her plate was definitely getting cold, but she didn't seem to notice.

"Well, it wasn't like she was going to teach us anything of value," Nelda responded with a shrug. "All theoretical and no practical? You know I'm an action person."

"I dunno," Agathe said in a considering sort of voice, "you seem to be doing fine not being out in the field."

"That's only 'cause Mum won't let me out," Nelda complained jabbing a fork painted with alfredo sauce towards Agathe who squealed when the sauce came close to her, which was a rather ironic reaction given how Agathe was about blood, and by that, she meant that Agathe didn't really care about getting blood on her clothes.

It was a slip of the tongue, calling Thalia 'Mum', but it wasn't like the woman didn't refer to Agathe and Nelda as her two daughters or that she didn't treat Nelda like she was her own, because she did, and Thalia was absolutely wonderful, making Nelda wish she'd found her family sooner than a few weeks ago.

Thalia looked at her sharply, her surprise as clear as day, but she didn't comment on it, especially when Nelda slipped back into calling her 'Thalia' a moment later.

"Besides, who in their right mind believes that theoretical is going to cut it in the real world, which, by the way, Umbridge didn't apparently believe in!"

Agathe swallowed her gulp of soup before laughing, but Nelda was still sure that it blistered her throat on the way down.

Thalia clicked her tongue in disapproval. "The sheer number of Defense professors you went through is concerning enough but the government appears to be entirely worse."

"Oh, you have no idea," Nelda said, the smile dropping from her lips. "There's a lot of laws that favour wizards over Muggles in the violence committed against Muggles, and then there's more favouring Pure-bloods over Muggle-borns...and then there's the whole business with werewolves." Nelda shook her head. "I was actually going to try and dismantle a good few of the laws after I passed my NEWTS...oh, shit, I completely forgot about them!"

Agathe positively howled with laughter and Thalia allowed herself an amused snort. "Well, dear, you have been trying to keep an establishment running, I think we can forgive you for your memory lapse."

"Oh, when I get back I'm probably going to have to take my exams all at once," Nelda bemoaned, ignoring Thalia as she came to that realization.

"Really? That's what you're worried about?"

"Hey, Miss Rune Analyst! Some people took a year off from school in order to fight in a war!"

"Hey, I think I found something!"

Both girls looked up in surprise when Dean barrelled into view, closely followed by a wary Astoria who appeared to be considering dragging him off to the medical ward to be checked for mania (not to be confused with Mania that were the spirits of insanity) as he raced to their side.

"You found something?" Nelda repeated as he dropped ceremoniously to sit beside her. "With the
research into the Others?"

Dean bobbed his head excitedly with a wide grin on his face, setting down the books and parchments in front of him. "Oh, yes," he agreed, "I definitely found something."

"He also lost something," Astoria added petulantly behind him, "nearly a whole day of sleep, Ellie, working on that project."

"I've got this, Astoria," Nelda promised with a small smile and the Slytherin gave a small huff before stomping off to find a healer to badger (at this rate, it was going to turn out to be Ajax, and he wasn't going to be very pleased). "All right, Dean, what'd you find?"

"Okay, so back when the Gates were opened the first time, Iolanthe tasked a close friend with discovering the identities of those from the group of part-god-haters aka the Others. This friend was named Damon Locus, son of Hypnos."

"Locus?" Thalia leaned forward with interest, abandoning her blade to focus on the conversation with earnest. "That family's been dead for generations."

"Probably died with him," Dean conceded before continuing on. "Anyways, this bloke Damon, he had a talent for hypnotizing people and getting them to tell them everything they knew…he was so good at it, apparently, he once managed to hypnotize Athena for a brief amount of time in order to get information on the families in the Others group."

"Hypnotize Athena?" Agathe said doubtfully. "That doesn't seem likely."

Dean shrugged. "That's what the entry said, maybe it was a gross exaggeration, maybe Athena actually helped him of her own volition, I don't know, I just know what's written. Anyways, he found the names of each of the families of the Others and they're all listed in his journal, but before he could do anything with the information, Iolanthe decided to close the Gates herself."

"So his research was thrown aside," Thalia sighed.

Dean shifted uncomfortably where he was sitting, leaning in one direction and then the other. "There's…er…there's more."

Nelda arched an eyebrow.

"Damon was in love with Iolanthe," Dean told her, "he writes about her a lot in his journal, even sketched her likeness a few times…and he says that Iolanthe asked him to help her complete the ceremony to seal the Gates of Tartarus."

There was silence that followed his words, silence that would have been better suited in a graveyard.

"Are you…are you saying that my many times great-grandmother asked him to kill her?" Nelda asked in a bleak tone, a lump of lead settling in her stomach, thinking back to May when she'd asked Luna to walk with her to her death.

"Will you walk with me…I-I'm not sure I can make it on my own."

Had Iolanthe been the same? Afraid to leave her husband and daughter behind but knowing that her death would save the lives of many?

"Yes," Dean said solemnly, "that's exactly what I'm saying."
Nelda's tongue was thick in her mouth as she tried to comprehend the words.

"And it's not like we can ask him—"

"Yes, we can," Agathe insisted so suddenly that Nelda jumped, turning to look at her. "Necromancy is a simple art for those with Death in their blood."

"But this is a very different matter," Thalia countered, her words sharp as she stared down her daughter. "Damon Locus is one of two spirits that cannot be summoned through conventional means. He and Iolanthe Peverell are tied to the Gates, you can't merely summon them from the depths of Hades."

"Maybe if we had more than one Necromancer—"

"Agathe!" Thalia barked and Agathe recoiled sharply with a flinch. "You cannot summon someone who is tethered to the Gates of Tartarus, you will need to enter Hades if you wish to speak with Damon Locus."

Dean's eyebrows rose high on his forehead and Nelda's lips parted in surprise while Agathe positively gaped.

"You mean...we have to go into the Underworld?" Nelda said weakly.

She'd seen the Underworld twice but only been once, and that had been in the depths of her own mind, it wasn't close to physical.

"It's the only way you'll get the answers you're looking for," Thalia agreed before narrowing her eyes, "and I absolutely forbid it, you two. The Underworld is not a kind place."

"And there's something else," Dean piped up, drawing their eyes to him. "The lists of the families that belonged to the Others...nearly all of them have died out. I'm trying to track down three more family trees, but it looks like if there are any descendants of those families then there's got to be less than ten still alive."

Less than ten? Then why go through all this? Why open the Gates at all?

"You know Mum is totally against this, right?"

"All the more reason to do it!"

Nelda shushed Agathe as the pair looked over an ancient text on Necromancy, holed up in Nelda's room.

"All I'm saying is that Mum might be right about the Underworld," Nelda said quietly as Agathe flicked through the pages. "It could be dangerous."

"It also could hold the answers to all of our questions," Agathe insisted. "You can't say that we don't need help."

Nelda thought about the little boy that was brutally mauled when he stepped too far outside of the wards.

"All right," she said with a sigh, "I'm in. Now, how do we do this?"

"Well, in order to enter the Underworld, you need a few things," Agathe said, reading the ancient
Greek text without much difficulty. "You need a kiss from a love, a bone from a dead relative, and some of your own blood."

"George's going to be pissed at me when I drop by for a snog and run off," Nelda sighed, "but I'll worry about that later…how do you feel about robbing my dad's grave?"

Agathe was vaguely startled by how nonchalant Nelda was about it. "Um, I guess I'd be fine."

James Potter was the only one that was related to the pair of them, but Nelda didn't think that she was going to like digging through her father's coffin.

The things they did for answers.

George had developed a bit of a sixth sense over time as Hope's boyfriend (and then fiancé), maybe that was just her paranoia getting into his head, but George could tell when he was being watched and definitely when he was being followed.

The figure in a dark cloak had kept eyes on him after he had locked up the shop for the night, tucking his key into his robe's pocket before keeping his hand there, clenching tightly over his wand as he started to walk away.

His shadow followed him and George could feel the hairs on the back of his neck standing on end as they grew closer and closer until George ducked into an empty alley, turning swiftly on his heel to grab them by the front of their robes, jerking them against the side of the building and pressing a wand to their throat (you could say he'd picked up a few of Hope's tricks).

"Who are you?" he growled. "And why are you following me?"

"Well, you certainly know how to treat a girl, Wizard-boy," came an amused response, bypassing his question entirely and George's heart leapt to his throat as a hand–a hand with blood runes carved into the flesh–rose to rip back the hood of her cloak.

George saw the tumble of long dark red hair and then the impossibly bright green eyes.

"You are a rotten woman, Hope Potter," he gasped finally, dropping his wand into his pocket to cup her cheek as she smiled impossibly wide. "Do you have any idea how worried I was?"

"Well, the thought had –mmph!" Her words were strangled as his lips met hers, his fingers tangling in her hair and Hope's eyes slid shut, tilting her head slightly and standing on her tip-toes, spinning her arms around his waist.

She was alive, she was well…George tried his best to drink her in once he released her, memorizing the dishevelled quality he'd left her hair in, and the red of her cheeks at the heat of his kiss.

"Where've you been, Hope?" he pressed. "I've been so worried! We all have!"

"Sh!" Hope held a finger to his lips to silence him, glancing around uneasily. "I've been all right…but I miss you, Georgie, I miss you so much."

Then George got a better look at her. There were shadows under her eyes and there was an exhausted sag in her shoulders.

"But why did you leave? That Auror didn't have anything on you," he insisted. "We were all pardoned for the crimes we committed during the war."
"I know, but he wasn't after me for that," Hope sighed, bringing a hand to his cheek and he caught it, holding it there. "George, I've gotten myself into another war."

Blue eyes widened as rain began to sprinkle down on them. "What? Why? Look at what the last war did to you, did to us!"

"I know what the last war did," Hope's voice became suddenly cold, "but this is an entirely different kind, George, this is a war of monsters and men, one that was the making of the gods…I couldn't just let people die knowing I could help."

George leaned his forehead against hers, closing his eyes so as not to see the defiance glowing in her eyes. This was the Hope he remembered, the one caught between Light and Dark, centred on the Grey line, the one willing to do anything for her friends.

"For now it's too dangerous for me to be here, to be with you," Hope whispered, leaning back to look him in the eye. "I won't risk your life…and I promise you, I'll come home when it's safe for the both of us."

"And when will that be?" George pressed, kissing her lightning bolt scar. "I miss you, love."

Her arms around his waist tightened. "I miss you too…and I hope this will be over with soon…we have some promising leads and its possible that we might find a way to end this very soon."

She kissed him again and George savoured the taste and the feel of her lips against his. "George Weasley, I want to marry you and no war with Tartarus itself is going to stop me from doing that!"

George gave a small laugh. "I'll keep you to that."

And then her let her go, pulling up her hood and disappearing down the street, before leaning heavily against the wall, fisting at his hair.

She was alive, she was well…but what the hell had she gotten herself into?
"You know, grave-robbing seemed like a better idea in theory."

Nelda cast Agathe an incredulous glance. "What? Now you're backing out?"

They were in the middle of the Godric's Hollow graveyard and had long since passed the monument to Nelda's family. It was strange to Agathe, to read the praises scrawled on the post, the praises heaped on Nelda. No wonder she'd been so reluctant to get involved with Elysium; it looked like she'd experienced a lot of pressure as Hope.

"We are digging up your dad," Agathe pointed out. Nelda had a better relationship with her father than Agathe did with hers, and Nelda had only spoken with hers long after his death.

"Oh, it's fine," Nelda said, shrugging her shoulders. "I mean, he's been dead since I was one, I don't think he's really going to mind."

"I'm pretty sure it's more of the principle of the thing," Agathe muttered as the light shone over her companion.

It was simple to say that Nelda was her sister, but it was something else to feel as though she truly was her sister, her blood. Her mother had had a sister once, and that sister had died for her in the middle of a duel during an uprising in Greece. Thalia Blackwood always spoke highly of Aglaea (for whom Agathe was slightly named for) and she always defended her to others, despite her not being there to hear it.

There were some days that Agathe felt she knew Nelda quite well, but then there were others where she felt like she was drowning in the sea while Nelda paddled to shore safely in a small boat.

Because Agathe and Nelda were nothing like Agathe and Galen. They led two very different lives and had very different experiences.

Sometimes Agathe felt Nelda was a bit resentful of having to uproot her life for the sake of others.

"You're over-thinking it," Daphne had said to her once, her blue eyes serious. "I've known her a long time—sure we weren't really close until fifth year, but what's that matter?—and trust me, she wouldn't do this for just anyone. She had a plan, you know, her and George, and then you showed up and she threw all those plans away. Her problem is she's just too damn noble."

"I don't—" Agathe started, faintly confused.

"Let me put it to you this way," Daphne snorted. "If she likes you, then there's nothing she wouldn't do for you. We once raided Azkaban prison because we thought Luna Lovegood was among the imprisoned. People were hurt, some very seriously, and we won the battle, but a friend of ours, Justin Finch-Fletchley was killed protecting her exposed back. That's the kind of thing that haunts you for years. Then we lost more friends in the Battle of Hogwarts and she just ran away from it all. She chose to bury herself in tracking down traitors rather than facing the trauma of what happened; she wouldn't throw herself in another war for anything less than a really good reason."

"You saying you wouldn't dig up your dad?" Nelda quirked an eyebrow towards Agathe and the blue-eyed witch stiffened at the mention of the man.

In all reality, Agathe didn't remember all that much about Nileas Ganis, he left when she and her
brother were still very young. Galen would've remembered it better, but he had never spoken of the incident when he was alive, always maintaining a frosty demeanour about their father, one that Agathe had quickly adopted.

"I'd crush his bones to dust," she responded decisively, and if the answer was strange to Nelda, she didn't comment on it, opting to hop down into the unearthed hole, prying the coffin's lid open to reveal what was inside.

The coffin was larger than the typical, that much Agathe could see, since it housed two skeletons, not the typical one. Together in life as they were in death… Agathe couldn't help but give a small smile; that was romantic.

"How long have you and Ajax been together?" Nelda asked her, leaning over the skeletons, murmuring a death prayer that Agathe was almost certain Thalia had taught her, one that was spoken to the corpses that were unearthed after death.

"You want to ask me that now?" Agathe asked bemused, looking down at her sister. There was dirt under her nails and streaked across Nelda's cheeks. She didn't know why Nelda had insisted on actually digging up the coffin rather than using magic, but she got the feeling that Nelda liked to get her hands dirty, to actually work for what she wanted rather than always take the easy way out. "In the middle of graveyard?"

"The graveyard has character," Nelda said stoutly and Agathe rolled her eyes.

"Three years," she said finally, "we met after I had a minor accident with an ancient artefact…I didn't find out he had godly blood until Mum met him and recognized his name."

Nelda plucked two finger bones loose, holding them out to Agathe, who took them while Nelda latched the coffin once more.

She was surprisingly collected about the whole matter, but Agathe noticed how she gave the coffin a fond pat before pulling herself out and using her wand to replace the dirt.

"It would have cut down the time to do that before, you know," Agathe mentioned, pocketing the bones as she cleaned them up as well.

"My dear baby sister, you've got to enjoy the finer things in life," Nelda said with a grin, throwing her arm around Agathe's shoulders.

"You worry too much, dear little sister," Galen said, dark eyes glittering as he smiled.

Galen would've liked Nelda.

"What you consider the finer things in life are very different from what I consider to be the finer things in life," Agathe pointed out as they made their way out of the graveyard and into the empty street.

Britain was cold and Agathe didn't know how Nelda dealt with so much of the chill, but, she supposed, it might have been an acquired taste…though it couldn't be cold all the time.

"Experience does that," Nelda said sagely as they passed under another dimly flickering lamppost. "Come on, I know a tavern that's open all night."

"Why in the name of the gods—?" Agathe muttered in exasperation as Nelda tugged her forward.
"Ron, Hermione, and I came here a few times when we were making plans last year," Nelda said, pointing the sign out. "They make a truly spectacular pork pie."

"At one in the morning?" Agathe asked archly as the bell on the door jingled when Nelda wrenched it open.

There was a distant softness in Nelda's eyes, a look that Agathe knew to associate with her friends, the ones she missed more with every passing day. It really was no wonder Nelda was always working when she made time for Agathe; she wanted to go home, and she wanted to do it soon. And Agathe got that too; she wanted nothing more than to go home as well.

There was only one other customer, a young man nursing a glass of scotch at the bar's counter when Nelda and Agathe made their way to an empty booth, placing their order with the particularly put-upon waitress.

Nelda glanced around surreptitiously, flicking her wand covertly to cast a muffling spell over them as Agathe pulled a thick tome out of her bag.

The cover was cracked and black and it bore no title, but it didn't need to, the image of the skull on the front was fearsome enough.

"Okay, so we've gotten the kiss of loved one, the bone of a family member, and our own blood is no problem...now all we need is to find out where to go to get into the Underworld."

"You mean you can't just walk into it?" Nelda asked as their pork pies came and she stabbed her fork into the pie in front of her, helping herself to a generous portion. "Isn't that the way it was done back in the day?" And by that, Nelda meant 'back in Ancient Greece'.

"That was a long time ago, Ellie," Agathe snorted, rolling her eyes for good measure as she swallowed some food greedily.

"It's been a long time since the Gates of Tartarus were open, yet here we are, fighting monsters like it's a normal Friday for us."

The red-haired Greek witch snorted again. "Anyways, there aren't too many places left where you can go in order to get to the Underworld and they're really obvious."

"They are?" Nelda asked, eyes widening in surprise before narrowing in suspicion. "They haven't got skulls all over them, have they?"

"I think that might be a bit much," Agathe laughed, flipping through the pages gingerly so as not to tear the delicate pages before turning the book towards Nelda. "This is what the openings look like."

Nelda pulled the book towards her with interest. She knew some of Ancient Greek—it was almost a requirement if you wanted to go into a field that specialized in Ancient Runes— but not at the level that Agathe possessed, being a fully realized Rune Analyst. Many of the symbols around the carefully etched image against the parchment weren't ones that she recognized but the words weren't important, the image was.

Blue eyes fastened on the image, tracing over the firm stone arch, grey and sturdy with what appeared to be a flimsy curtain hanging over the exposed area beneath the arch.

"Can't you hear that?"

_She stepped into the room and the others fell silent as she approached the only thing that resided_
within it; a crudely carved massive stone arch from which a dark ripped and ruined veil hung.

"I think there's someone behind that," Luna whispered, and as quiet as it was, her voice echoed a bit loudly in the silence. "Don't you?"

Hope nodded numbly. Could it be Sirius? Hiding from his captor to allow his wounds to heal? To wait for someone to save him?

"Hello?" she called softly, but the veil only fluttered, slight whispers coming from it drawing her forward.

"Hope, there's nothing there!" Hermione insisted, grabbing at her friend's arm while Ginny grabbed Luna. "Hope—"

Hope recoiled suddenly, seeing something within the veil that sent a wave of fear over her that had nothing to do with their situation at all. She'd just seen a pair of black, endless eyes…and it wasn't the first time she'd seen them, either. They were the last thing she saw before she flat-lined in the ambulance after she was in that car accident.

"What is it?" Luna murmured dreamily as if the veil was coaxing her.

"It's Death."

"I…I've seen this before," she said with stunned realization and Agathe choked on her pork pie before gaping at her.

"You have? Where?" she demanded.

"The Battle of the Department of Mysteries…my godfather fell through and he didn't come back out…" Nelda's eyes drifted out of focus briefly, her thoughts thousands of miles away on Sirius Black until she shook her head to clear her thoughts. "I think the Unspeakables have been studying it for years…"

"Does that mean it's in the British Ministry for Magic?" Agathe asked animatedly, her eyes brightening with her wide smile. "Can you get us in?"

"You're talking to someone who broke into the Ministry once when it was taken over by a Dark Lord," Nelda sniggered. "Yeah, I can get us in, no problem."

"Tonight?" Agathe pressed and Nelda arched an eyebrow.

No one at Elysium was aware that they had left, especially since they had vanished when night had fallen and had left another of Agathe's ingenious creations behind, something Agathe had called a gollum that mimicked the appearance of a human but only in a slumbering position –good for sneaking out, but little else–, there were still some kinks in the design that needed to be worked out…

"I figured you'd want to do it another night," Nelda mentioned. "It's already past one and we don't know how long it's going to take to get into the Underworld to speak with Damon Locus, anyways."

"We still have a few hours before Mum notices we're gone, either way." Agathe gave a shrug, remarkably unconcerned. "Besides, you want answers as much as I do…answers mean we can go home, answers mean you can go back to George." There was a slight bitterness in her voice that was impossible not to pick up on.

Nelda paused, sitting down her cup of water on the table with a loud thunk. She reached a hand out
to Agathe and the girl took it, blinking a few times.

"Hey, do you remember when we first met?" Nelda asked her with a small smile that Agathe replicated.

"Vividly," Agathe managed despite the lump in her throat, "sloshing hot tea across the front of a customer isn't something you tend to forget."

"I still have the burns," Nelda joked and Agathe laughed, knowing quite well the burns had been healed in seconds.

"Back then I didn't have any idea who you were," Nelda said patiently, "I didn't know we were related...I didn't know that you'd dropped everything to take that job just to see me...the only thing I was concerned with was hunting Death Eaters—"

"A noble cause, I'm sure." Agathe was smirking now and Nelda gave her a scowl.

"Yes, I want to go home and be with the man I love," Nelda continued, doing her best to ignore her. "I miss him...but I'm not just going to forget you and Thalia, you're my blood and I would be happy to be your sister."

"Really?" Agathe's eyes gleamed.

"Here." Nelda pulled her dagger out of its holster on her arm –her wand remained neatly where it was– to drag it across her palm, bisecting the 'protect' blood rune that she had carved there so many years before, handing it off to Agathe to do the same, which she complied with just a bit of confusion.

Then Nelda interlocked her fingers with Agathe's.

"Blood to blood," she said.

"Blood to blood," Agathe promised, wincing as the cut seared briefly before healing. "You didn't have to do that," she pointed out.

"No," Nelda said, eyes flickering towards the man paying for his drink and leaving suddenly, though it looked to Nelda like he hadn't drunk a sip since they'd arrived. Her eyes narrowed. "I wanted to...now, come on, we've got a tail to investigate."

She tossed a few coins down before running out the door, leaving Agathe to race after her.

Nelda was difficult to see in the darkness. Her red hair would have been far more striking, but Nelda Blackwood wasn't a Metamorphmagus and Nelda Blackwood had had black hair since birth.

But it didn't take too much effort in order to track her sister down; a young man with a knife to his throat was easy to see under the flickering lamplight.

"Once is a curiosity, Auror," Nelda purred dangerously. "Twice is a coincidence. Give me an exceptionally good reason why I shouldn't gut you here and now?"

Agathe couldn't be surprised by the response, she had once seen Nelda threaten to hang Katar by his intestines from the citadel, but she had yet to see Nelda do more than stab anyone through the hand and twisting the blade when they were annoying her.

"Kill me and you don't get any answers, how's that?" He was breathless and Agathe could see a
Nelda arched an eyebrow, not taking her eyes off him as she tilted her head towards Agathe. "Sister of mine…what do you say? Shall we hear out what he's got to say?"

The young man shot his eyes to Agathe, surprise clear on his face and Agathe considered him.

"Perhaps," she said, "but I should warn you my sister has terrible track record about people who displease her getting off easy."

The Auror swallowed thickly as Nelda withdrew her dagger from his throat, but she didn’t bother to take a step back.

"I know you're Hope Potter," he blurted out and Nelda flexed the arm holding the dagger.

"Start talking," she hissed.

"My –my superior tasked me with surveilling you after the end of the war," he explained, swallowing thickly. "He never said why, so I assumed it had something to do with ascertaining your mental state, several others had a similar job—"

"They were assigned to make sure veterans were right in the head?" Agathe was repulsed.

"To make sure it was safe for others to be around them," the Auror gave a weak correction. "Then he told me to go and find you that night to arrest you but you got away, and when I told him…it—it was like it was exactly what he was expecting. I knew something was off when I received the orders—I couldn't just arrest a war hero!—but he was my superior, what was I supposed to do?" There was a hint of a plea in his voice that made Nelda scoff.

"And who exactly is this 'superior' of yours that's got it out for me?" Nelda demanded.

"His name is Nileas," the Auror said thickly, "Nileas Blackwood."

Agathe went positively white and Nelda started in surprise, shooting a stunned glance towards Agathe who lurched forward to grip the front of his robes. "You're lying!"

"It's no lie!" the man's voice rose in pitch. "That's his name! Now I have to go before anyone realizes something's wrong!"

"Not before you explain how you found us!" Nelda pressed.

"It's a tracker spell, it can last up to three months and this was the first time you left Greece, so I followed you to Godric's Hollow," he explained quickly, his tongue making him stumble over his words.

"That doesn't—"

But he'd snaked his way out from between them, taking a few short steps away from them before Disapparating.

"All right, who the hell is Nileas Blackwood?" Nelda demanded.

"He's no Blackwood," Agathe uttered venomously. "He lost whatever right to that name the day he abandoned my mother, brother, and I."

Realization shone in Nelda's eyes.
"We really need to get into the Underworld," she decided.

Breaking into the Ministry for Magic wasn't very difficult, but why would it be? It was peacetime now, there wouldn't be any need for extra guards. The pair didn't speak as they took the lift down until the disembodied voice said: "Level Nine, Department of Mysteries."

"Do you know your way around here?" Agathe asked as they came out in a long hallway.

"Well, at the time I was more preoccupied with a different matter," Nelda muttered before pulling out her wand. "Point me!"

The wand spun in her hand like a compass, directing them to the first door, and Nelda knew it was the right one immediately at the sound of whispers flooding around them.

"What is that?" Agathe whispered as they stepped into the room.

"The dead, I suppose," Nelda said, rubbing at her forehead as they came closer to the centre of the room, the whispers giving her a small headache; warning or coaxing? Nelda couldn't tell.

They approached the stone arch and Agathe looked on it in awe. "It's beautiful," she said, and, in a way, it was. There was something darkly tragic about it, but maybe that was just the way Nelda felt, as the last time she'd been in the same room as it, her godfather had lost his life.

"Think we can pass through without dying?" Nelda asked.

"Pay the ferryman," Agathe said as an answer, taking out one of the bones her sister had given her, handing it back to her and taking one in her own hand, giving her palm another generous slice and gripping the bone tightly. "Shall we, sister?"

Agathe extended her hand to Nelda and Nelda didn't even consider not taking it when she grasped it and they both leapt forward into the veil.

The first thing Nelda felt was a rush of cold weighing down on her lungs and it was startling and just this side of painful, but she didn't feel any less alive than she had before.

The bone in her hand turned to ash and the blood dripping from her hand faded with the soft weight against her lips disappearing.

"You should not have come here, children of Thanatos."

Agathe's grip tightened over Nelda's hand as a figure stepped forward.

The fashion of his clothes was very old, centuries past at the least and his light hair fell in loose waves around his semi-transparent face.

"I'm sorry," Agathe said, regaining her speech first, "do you know us?"

The man's smile was brittle. "It is hard not to," he said. "You are Thanatos' descendants…and you are Iolanthe's." He pointed to Nelda who started in surprise at the soft look in his eyes.

"Are you…are you Damon Locus?" she asked him.

"Indeed I am," the man said. "But my identity matters not, it is not safe for the living to enter the Underworld, it never has been."
"It's been done before," Agathe replied stoutly.

"The more godly blood you have, the easier it is to remain in this realm as a living being," the ghost explained patiently, "but the pair of you have far too little between the two of you, you cannot remain here for long."

"Then you're going to answer our questions and be quick about it," Nelda said in a no-nonsense manner that Hermione would have been proud of. "You do know that the Gates of Tartarus are open again, don't you?"

He gave her a bland stare. "My soul is tied to the Gates themselves, young miss, appearing before you is taxing enough."

Well, death certainly hadn't stalled the sass dripping from his tongue.

"The last time the Gates were opened it was because of the Others," Agathe blazed on for Nelda. "You were in charge of finding out their identities—"

"It will do you no good," Damon interrupted sharply. "All but one of the families are dead, I have watched their lines die out."

"And the last one?" Nelda pressed.

"You will find the one who opened the Gates has a personal vendetta to fulfil," Damon replied, his eyes shifting between them, "and the pair of you are about to make a very foolish mistake, but I will commend you for your loyalty."

"What d'you mean?"

"Mistake? What mistake?"

"I have already said too much," he cut them off and a second later they were both flung backwards, back through the veil, crumpling to the ground.

"And I thought Thanatos was cryptic," Nelda muttered in annoyance, rubbing her head as she sat up, trying to ignore the unease coiling in her stomach.
Nelda knew better than most that Halloween was just bad luck. The worst things always seemed to happen on it, and it was only a few days away.

And it didn't help that Nelda and Agathe were no closer to finding out the true source behind the opening of the Gates of Tartarus.

It had been almost two months since she'd left her life behind to help the last descendants of the gods, and Nelda was determined for it not to hit three (she'd disappeared for three months once and that had been terrible enough and she was going to be back in her fiancé's arms by November if it killed her).

"No matter how fast you work, the results are going to be the same."

Daphne had her legs propped up on Nelda's desk as she poured over the research Dean had done on the Others. There was very little on the subject, but that came as no surprise, the Others were all practically dead by now. He'd probably found more on the subject than she had, and that helped, but not as much as Nelda had hoped.

And then there was the whole business with Agathe's father's involvement that Agathe didn't even want to think about, but Nelda couldn't stop thinking about it. Was he a minor player or a major one in the part that was played in the opening of the Gates? Was he an unimportant player who had an odd interest in putting Nelda behind bars?

"You're not helping," Nelda muttered.

"Probably because I'm the voice of reason," Daphne said, rolling her eyes. "Didn't you get info from that Damon guy? Isn't that more helpful than what we've got?"

Daphne was being remarkably blasé about the whole thing, especially with how she'd freaked out about it when Nelda had told her what she and Agathe had spent their whole night doing. ("First of all, what the fuck? Second of all: WHAT THE FUCK?!"), but then again, she'd had some time to come to terms with it. Though, that hadn't stopped her from knocking Nelda upside the head for leaping through the Death Veil.

"Not really," Nelda sighed, leaning back in order to meet Daphne's eyes. "The bloke must have been taking a cue from Thanatos, because all he was was cryptic and gods knows Thanatos excelled at that…Damon said that all but one of the family lines was dead without descendants, and that the one who opened the Gates had a personal vendetta…and that me and Aggie are about to make a foolish mistake."

"Something to look forward to, I'm sure, but you're always making mistakes, so that's not really helpful."

Nelda felt a spike of annoyance as she scowled towards the blonde. "Really, thank you, Daphne, for your kind words," she drawled out.

"Just telling it like it is," Daphne sniggered, taking a swig of some pumpkin juice. "You're expecting too much."

"What're you going on about?" Nelda's eyes narrowed in suspicion.
"You want to go home," Daphne pointed out, "you're like us, cut off from our family and friends, and you want nothing more than to go home, but miracles don't happen overnight."

Nelda chewed on the inside of her cheek, staring blankly down at the notes Dean had scrawled out for her. She tried to remember George's last kiss, his arms around her, his fingers tangling in her hair…god she missed that man.

"The problem is you're too focused, if you ask me," Daphne mentioned lightly.

"What's that supposed to mean?" Nelda asked flummoxed. "Too focused?"

"Yup," Daphne agreed before downing the last of her juice. "You're a woman of action, Ellie, what you need is a good monster slaying."

Nelda arched an eyebrow, taking note of Daphne's current condition. She'd just gotten back from Germany that morning from a run-in with a few Mania, and it showed. There was a bandage wrapped around the length of her arm, hiding the healing burns from sight and she had a slowly fading bruise high on her cheek.

"And how is a good monster slaying going to make a dent in what I'm trying to find out?" Nelda asked, her words slightly petulant.

"Not a damn thing," Daphne said with a wide grin. "But I can't handle you being a scholarly without a side of kick arse, so next patrol you and Aggie are coming out with me and we're going to slice and dice some monsters…for health reasons, of course."

"Obviously," Nelda said with a such a dry impersonation of Snape that Daphne couldn't help but laugh. "What other reasons are there?"

But Daphne offered no reply to that, merely flicking open the newspaper with an interest that might have been feigned, but Nelda had returned her eyes to Dean's notes and thus missed the look.

"So it looks like the Ministry has decided you were kidnapped by a Death Eater sympathizer and have now unleashed a manhunt," the blonde remarked conversationally.

Nelda snorted. "Given their track record with the truth, that hardly comes as a surprise."

"Makes you wonder how everyone's going to react when you show up again."

"I won't care," Nelda said, tossing her long braid over her shoulder. "I'll be holed up in my house with George to keep me warm."

"You two are so cute that it's sickening," Daphne replied, her words dripping in saccharine. "If I could get away with it, Dean and I would be shagging in his room right now."

"Daphne!" Nelda said in exasperation.

"What? Like you don't want to do the same with George?" Daphne arched an eyebrow. "It's too bad Mum's always around or—"

"All right, you've made your point," Nelda said, her cheeks flushing at her friend's insinuation. But, despite Daphne's assumption, sex wasn't quite the first thing on her mind, his presence, on the other hand, was.

Nelda sighed; she really missed that man.
"It isn't safe? What kind of response is that?"

Fred was staring at his twin with wide eyes from across the bubbling cauldron before them and George could only give a helpless shrug of his shoulders.

"I don't even know," he sighed, rubbing at his eyes, the fumes from the potion making them sting until Fred grasped his arm tugging him back a few steps, making him realize he'd been standing far too close to the cauldron. "She was more concerned for me, I think, for all of her friends, rather than herself, which comes as no surprise…"

Fred couldn't help but snort at that. It was classic Hope, after all, placing everyone's wellbeing above her own; was it any wonder Hermione and Ron always complained about her being noble?

"But the war destroyed her," George muttered, stirring in a boomslang skin into the mixture, making the potion turn a pale blue. "She gets more nightmares than I do, and hers are far worse…why would she throw herself into another one?"

"A very good reason?" Fred offered helpfully, tossing in a few chunks of a diced crocodile heart that made sickening splashes as they went into the potion, turning it a faint red. "You know what she's like…headstrong, stubborn, more than willing to help a friend…"

George gave a loud sigh. "Sometimes I hate that about her."

"No you don't," Fred snorted, "you just hate that she's gone right now, but she's coming back."

George hummed in agreement when there came a sharp knock on the door and Verity's head peeked around the door, her blonde curls moving perkily with the movement. "Misters Weasley? There's an Auror here about Miss Potter."

A crease formed on George's brow as he frowned before stepping back away from the potion in order to follow Verity out to the main desk.

The Aurors were easy to spot with their long brown trench-coats; Fred always joked that Ron would look easier on the eyes wearing one and Ron always threatened to shove his head through the nearest wall.

"I'm George Weasley," George said, leaning against the counter, "can I help you?"

The first was older than the second with dark eyes and a heavy jaw, but the second was closer to George's age and his eyes darted around nervously, like he'd rather be anywhere than there.

"I'm Auror Blackwood," said the first before gesturing to his companion, "this is Auror Winston."

George arched an eyebrow. "That doesn't explain why you're here."

Auror Blackwood's muscle in his jaw jumped and George could have sworn he had almost smiled and not in a nice way. "You are the George Weasley that is Hope Potter's fiancé, yes?"

George arched an eyebrow. "That doesn't explain why you're here."

Auror Blackwood's muscle in his jaw jumped and George could have sworn he had almost smiled and not in a nice way. "You are the George Weasley that is Hope Potter's fiancé, yes?"

"On the good days," George replied before repeating, "but that doesn't explain why you're here."

And it didn't. The last anyone had seen of Hope had been the night she'd left when the young Auror Winston had come to arrest her, and there was no one around when Hope had come to see him, her eyes wide and her cheeks flushed, worry and fear rolling off her.

"Let's not play games, Mister Weasley," Auror Blackwood remarked and the blood in George's
veins turned to ice, even if he gave no indication of it. "I know Hope Potter came to see you five nights ago."

George's eyes narrowed and his grip on the counter turned painfully tight. "What happens between myself and my fiancée is no one's business but ours."

And if there was one thing that Hope and George liked, it was their privacy. It was the reason why only family and close friends knew where they lived and why the address was completely restricted unless the Minister gave his permission.

Auror Blackwood didn't even blink, it was like that was the answer he was anticipating. "If she tells you where she is, let us know."

"I'll keep it in mind," George said dryly before showing them the door and Auror Winston seemed relieved that nothing else had come from the brief interrogation, if it could have been called that. That made another frown form on his lips.

What exactly had Hope gotten herself mixed up in?

Daphne was back in the medical ward getting her healed burns checked, so Nelda found herself back in the plaza, perching on the edge of the fountain as she read through one of Agathe's old books, but she found herself distracted as Jolene played an elaborate game of tag with Siobhan. Siobhan had longer legs, but Jolene was fast so they balanced each other out.

It was nice to hear laughter given the situation they were all in.

"Do you mind?" came a thick voice that reminded Nelda just a bit of Fleur as she tilted her head to look on Jolene's mother, Manon.

"Not at all," Nelda said, moving her clutter in order to allow the woman to sit with her.

Manon and Jolene shared the same dark coloring, but where Jolene's eyes were bright, Manon's were dark.

"It's good for her," Manon commented, her eyes trailing after her daughter as he stepson wandered towards her on stumbling feet, tripping on a loose stone and tumbling towards the ground before she reached out an arm to sweep him up into her arms. "To relax, I mean."

Nelda nodded in agreement.

Manon, like the Greengrasses, had left her husband behind—at his request—to seek refuge within Elysium's walls. Jolene was hers from a previous marriage and Jacob was from her husband's previous marriage, which was why he didn't have a drop of godly blood in his veins.

"Elysium is a very peaceful place," Manon mentioned lightly and Nelda arched an eyebrow.

"Yes, I suppose, when there aren't patrols rushing about or people being carted off to the medical ward, it can be a bit peaceful," Nelda acquiesced and Manon released a short laugh.

"There are some who wouldn't mind staying here year-round," Manon mentioned vaguely and Nelda turned to look on her.

"Really?" she asked doubtfully. "Given the reason why you came here?"

Manon gave her a kindly smile. "Elysium means safety and security and there are some of us who
are very lucky to gain that."

Nelda hummed thoughtfully, her mind a million miles away.

Monster hunting, Nelda found, was not all it was cut out to be. In fact, it was exhausting and stressful than she would have thought, though that might've had something to do with the fact that Nelda would much rather be back looking into the events around Hemera Blackwood's death because she was certain that there was something to be discovered in that report.

But no, Nelda was out with Daphne and Agathe and Ajax, trying to distract herself from the research, because if she was distracted then maybe the answer would come to her, but Nelda didn't have high hopes.

"What exactly is the creature we're hunting?" she asked, her swords already out and weighing down in her hands while Daphne was positioned with her spear poised over one shoulder, her eyes darting around the forest.

They were in Ireland this time around and it was frigid for October, but Nelda wasn't sure if that was how it usually was in October in Ireland.

There was frost in the grass, making it crunch under their feet as they moved carefully forward.

"Keres," Daphne said, tensing at the sound of something snapping, only to discover it was Nelda stepping on a branch, "spirits of violent death."

"Lovely," Nelda drawled, glancing back to where Agathe and Ajax were positioned in order to provide back up; besides, the bow and crossbow were both long range weapons, they'd be useless in hand to hand combat. "Reminds me of why I stay in Elysium all the time."

Daphne rolled her eyes towards her friend. "You stay in Elysium all the time because you're the person that's keeping it running—"

"Barely," Nelda muttered and Daphne ignored.

"—and Thalia wasn't about to let you out if you were going to run right into danger without any idea how to use those swords."

"Just 'cause she cleared you two weeks ago," Nelda grumbled petulantly which only made Daphne snort in amusement. "What do these Keres even look like?"

"Not sure." Daphne shrugged. "There's less on the creatures that weren't main fixtures in myths, I mean, I've heard more about the Nemean Lion or Cerberus than Keres."

"Well, that'll be something to look forward to."

"Maybe you could use some kind of death-sense to find them." Daphne waggled her fingers for emphasis and Nelda gave her a flat stare.

"I don't think that's actually a thing…besides, I haven't shown hardly any inclination towards Necromancy or any of what Mum calls the Death Arts."

"Really?" That drew Daphne up short and she fixed her eyes on Nelda. "Doesn't that bother you?"

Nelda shrugged. "I have Blood Runes, so I think that makes up for it, besides Agathe's got enough skill in using the Death Arts to make up for it."
Yet Thanatos had called her the most powerful of his descendents…but Nelda had to wonder if he'd been laying it on thick or if he'd been talking about her magic? She'd probably never know.

"You inherited a great deal from me, dearest, you just choose not to use it."

There was a whisper around them, a faint cackle in the air that made both girls pause and look around in apprehension.

"What're the chances that Keres are invisible?" Nelda inquired, shifting with Daphne moving cover her back.

"At this point? Highly likely."

Nelda narrowed her eyes to train them on the fog that had long since settled on the trees and around them. If she focused hard enough then maybe she could see a hint of a form hidden in the fog, but they were moving too fast.

Then something shot out and sliced against her upper arm, sending her flying into a tree with a sharp grunt of pain.

Daphne reacted faster than Nelda, swinging her spear down to lodge in the rough area of where whatever struck her must've rested, because a moment later the Keres gave a scream and faded into shadow, leaving them with at least two forms hidden in the fog, hissing angrily to one another at the death of their sister.

"You'll pay," a voice hissed.

"With your lives!" another added, coming closer to Nelda's position and it was only by forcing herself into a standing position and blocking with her blade that Nelda was spared what might have been a painful death, if the sound of metal against metal was any indication (was it metal? Nelda didn't even know…maybe Keres possessed razor-sharp claws?).

"You will fail," the Keres whispered and Nelda could have sworn that she could see a sunken pair of pale gleaming eyes and a superior twist on bloodied lips. "The Gates will remain open, daughter of Thanatos."

"I'm not his daughter," Nelda remarked frostily, straining to combat against the weight the Keres was pushing against her, glancing towards where Daphne was, doing her best to dodge the attacks that she couldn't see, but she had blood running down the side of her face and there was red staining her leg. "Why do you want to be here, anyways? Tartarus not chaotic enough for you?"

The Keres gave a cackle of amusement. "There is more blood of the innocent to drink outside the Gates…there are more youths to slaughter…we will bathe the world in blood!"

Well, from a certain standpoint that might sound a bit reasonable, since these were spirits that had been locked up for centuries upon centuries. Wanting to bathe the world was probably the most reasonable goal a hoard of monsters could have.

But Nelda liked the world the way it was. "No thanks," she bit out as she brought the second sword up, slicing through something that she couldn't see and the Keres faded into darkness with a scream that rang in her ears.

A moment later Daphne had dispatched her own. "You all right?" she called, fingering her leg gingerly as she limped towards Nelda who pulled her arm across her shoulder, ignoring how it tugged at her injured arm.
"I'll live," Nelda said, her eyes focusing on a point that couldn't be seen in the distance. "I'm more worried about Aggie."

Daphne's brow furrowed in confusion. "What d'you mean?"

"I mean, she's got this protective complex," Nelda drawled out. "If we were attacked, she should have shot a few arrows but there aren't any arrows. No crossbow bolts either."

An unsettling silence descended.

Agathë blinked a few times as she roused herself, her head aching as she sat up, looking around in confusion, and doing so rattled the shackles encasing her wrists and locking them against the table.

She'd never been in an interrogation room before, but she was certain this was what it looked like.

The last thing she remembered was seeing Nelda thrown by the Keres, she'd been raising her bow to fire off an arrow when something had hit Ajax and she'd looked to her side in time to see him slump to the ground, unconscious, only moments before the same had been done to her.

If Ajax was wounded there was going to be hell to pay, and if Nelda was seriously wounded by the attack, she was going to summon all of her strength and banish whoever had stopped her from aiding her sister to the depths of the Underworld –Tartarus, if she could manage it.

But the fact remained that she had no idea who had gotten her.

"Good, you're awake."

The voice, low and deep, was familiar in the deepest parts of her memories, the ones that had often accompanied a fatherly ruffle of her hair and a smile…before Agathë had learned better.

She glowered viciously. "Hello, Father," she said.

"Agathë," Nileas spoke her name in a way that made Agathë want to retch; only her mother, Galen, and now Nelda were allowed to speak to her in that way. "You've gotten yourself into a bit of trouble."

"Are we talking about me being Thanatos' blood or the fact that you kidnapped me and knocked out my boyfriend?" she snapped back. "It must be quite something for an Other to end up siring two children by a descendent of a god."

Nelda had slaved over discovering the identity of the last Other, as it would mean finding out the true reason for the opening of the Gates of Tartarus, but she had hit so many dead ends that she'd nearly given up hope, but Agathë had toyed with a different idea.

What if her father was an Other, the last Other? What if the reason he had left his family was because he had discovered whose blood they held? What if he'd been horrified to discover that he'd helped further a god's line? What if the reason Hemera had left the family wards was because she had recognized his face from the pictures that Thalia kept of her husband for the sake of remembering the good times? What if that was his way of punishing the Blackwoods? Killing Hemera and opening the Gates of Tartarus.

Agathë felt cold fury washing over her and she could see a warped reflection of her face in the shine of the table, she could see the blue of her eyes had darkened to the same solid black that Thanatos possessed, the color leeching from her skin as thin black fracture-lines appeared, like she was
breaking. She had seen Galen look like that once, and it had been terrifying, as much as seeing it on herself.

"You killed your own granddaughter!" Agathe snarled, feeling her anger building and turning to rage as she thought about little Hemera with her bouncy curls and her bright eyes, little Hemera with her bloodied chest and sightless eyes… "How could you? She was just a little girl!" Tears were spilling over and Agathe didn't care.

"A necessary death," Nileas said blandly and Agathe could feel bile rising in her throat.

"A necessary—?! Why you—"

Her father cut across her. "Yet, it's your fault for allowing the girl to wander, Agathe, her death was swift, but yours will not be."

"What are you even talking about?" Agathe croaked, her emotions roiling inside her beyond her control.

His dark eyes, the very same ones that Galen had once possessed, but they did not hold any of his warmth. They were cold and calculating, like everything that had been done had gone according to plan.

"Making amends," he said, sliding a parchment across the table towards her.

Ron Weasley was still working in his desk when the doors of the lift were thrown open and a woman strode angrily out to march into the Auror Office, which was mostly empty given how late it was.

He knew from just looking at this woman that she was seasoned by war and the suffering it brought. In that essence, she was similar to Hope, but that was where their similarities ended.

This woman had long dark hair bound in a tight fishtail plait and her eyes were blue and frosty. She was garbed completely in black, but that just made her weapons clear to see; two serpentine blades at her hips, one dagger at her back and another on her arm. This was not a woman to be toiled with.

"I am Nelda Blackwood," the woman said, her voice sharp and commanding, ringing with a familiarity that Ron could not quite place. "Release my sister, or feel my wrath."
Agathe's Fate

Agathe had barely signed her life away when the door banged open and framed in the doorway stood her sister, radiating anger, which was no less impressive than how Agathe had looked a few moments previously, even without the appearance of death.

"This interrogation is over," Nelda said, her words frigid, and Agathe had a feeling that if they had been chipped from ice they would have been warmer.

"Yes," Nileas said, "it is." And he slid the parchment across the table towards Agathe as he used his wand to unlock her shackles and Agathe stood quickly, rubbing at her wrists. "I will be seeing you tomorrow, Agathe, don't be late."

He swept out of the room and Agathe found she was standing on legs too weak to hold her upright.

"Aggie—" Nelda moved forward and grasped her elbows. "What happened?"

"My own—my own father," Agathe whispered, her words breaking even as they left her lips, "he killed her! Hemera's dead, and it's all my fault!"

"Don't say that!" Nelda spun her arms around her sister, smoothing circles into the red-head's back as she trembled. "What happened to Hemera wasn't your fault, what happened to Hemera was his. He's the one that killed her, not you."

"I should have kept a closer eye," Agathe whispered before drawing herself back. "And I'm going to make it right."

"Make it right?" Nelda said blankly. "What're you talking about?"

Then there was a flicker of realization that briefly coloured her eyes their typical green. "Aggie, what've you done?"

Agathe held the parchment out to her and Nelda took it, reading its contents over with horror in a matter of seconds.

"Aggie, this is a duelling contract," she hissed. "A duelling to the death contract, Aggie! With swords!"

"I know what it says," Agathe sighed. "Are you insane?" Nelda shook the parchment in front of her sister's eyes. "We always joke about your skill in swordsmanship! You're an archer, not a swordsman!"

"I know that," Agathe said hotly. "But at least if I die at the altar then the Gates will be shut."

Nelda shook her head, her words caught in her throat as she tried to make sense of what Agathe was saying. She wasn't entirely sure that Thalia could survive losing another child, another of her blood so soon after Hemera's death. Nelda didn't think she could handle it if someone else died on her, someone else she called family.

"Oh, Aggie…" Nelda murmured sadly, rubbing at her eyes tiredly. Agathe was far too selfless for her own good. "You don't have to take the fate of the world on your shoulders."

"Neither did you," Agathe countered, her blue eyes sharp as they met Nelda's, "but you did it
anyways, because you knew it was the better choice."

Nelda hated Agathe in that moment, but then the moment was gone and Nelda couldn't help but feel like there was something missing deep inside her.

"Come on," she said instead, wearier than she'd ever been, "let's go back to Elysium."

And Nelda was going to find a way to keep Agathe safe if it killed her.

It took some time for Thalia to manage to slip the dreamless sleeping potion to Agathe, enough to knock her out well past the time of the duel, only to descend the stairs to find Nelda pouring over the contract, exactly where she'd left her.

"There aren't any loopholes," Thalia mentioned, sitting down in an exhaustive manner across from Nelda. The shock that her husband had killed their granddaughter had been shocking enough but to find out that he was an Other and wanted to kill their daughter as well…Thalia was in horrified agony and was trying to keep a lid on her emotions, but it wasn't working very well.

Thalia had buried far too many members of her family…if she lost Agathe as well…Thalia hid her face behind one hand.

"The contract prohibits me from taking her place as her second," Thalia remarked sadly, "Nileas knew I would, that's why he wrote it that way."

"It prohibits you from taking her place," Nelda agreed, "but it doesn't say anything against me doing it."

She remembered what she had told Agathe when she had come to her in Pithos back in the end of August: "I'm not dying again. I've done that two times already and it's not something I'd like to repeat."

"Hope Lily Potter, don't you dare!"

Nelda flinched at the use of her true name –she hadn't heard it since Dean and the Greengrasses had arrived at Elysium– but she didn't back down. "You said I'm better than Agathe at swordsmanship!"

"Not by much," Thalia responded, her eyes sharp with warning.

"And the duel bars the use of wands for magic," Nelda added, "so I can use my Blood Runes without any trouble if I have to."

Thalia gave a sigh, pinching at the bridge of her nose. "This is a terrible idea and it's not going to end well."

Nelda set down the parchment to look on her seriously. "I've watched a mother fall apart once before because she lost her child, but you've already lost so much, I won't let him take your daughter from you too."

"Oh, Hope," Thalia breathed, lifting her hand from her face and Nelda saw tears in her eyes. "I may not know you as well as I'd like, and the reason we were thrown together was terrible, but you're my family too…"

Nelda chewed on the inside of her cheek. "I'll be careful, I promise, Mum, I'll remember what you taught me."
And then she kissed the older woman's top of her head and for the first time since she'd started calling Thalia 'Mum', she didn't think of Lily Potter.

The altar was very large, that was the first thing Nelda had noticed when she had arrived at the designated meeting-place that Nileas had specified, that and there was a rather obvious discoloration on the stones that she knew came from Hemera.

She twisted the carved black stone on her thumb, turning it thrice in hand and the image of the little girl took up residence beside her.

"Will you get him for me?" she asked Nelda. "For auntie? For all the people that died because of him?"

Nelda nodded, swallowing her nerves.

"You took her place," Hemera said, tilting her head to look up at Nelda.

"What're sisters for?" Nelda muttered, fingering her blades where they were strapped at her sides.

Hemera smiled brightly, fading into mist as a crack filled the air from an Apparation and Nelda saw the man (monster) in question striding towards her, an expression of confusion on his warped face at the sight of someone who wasn't his daughter.

"Where is she?" he demanded.

Nelda didn't even blink. "She couldn't make it, my name is Nelda Blackwood, I'm her second."

His eyes narrowed at the last name. "I made the contract with Agathe Blackwood not a second rate bastard."

"Aw, what's the matter?" Nelda purred with a smirk on her lips. "Afraid of being beaten by a girl with twice as many swords as you? Maybe I should run back and get Aggie if you're that easy to kill."

He gritted his teeth and Nelda's smirk widened; if there was one thing that Nelda excelled at, it was pissing people off with her sarcasm (she considered it a unique skill-set).

"As Agathe Blackwood's blood and sister, I can take a challenge on her behalf," Nelda continued as the clouds darkened above them. "Unless you've got a problem with that?"

She arched an eyebrow and his eyes narrowed, then he unsheathed her blade which held a simple hilt but the blade was nothing like Nelda's own slender ones, no doubt owing to his strength. "Once I run you through, little girl, I'm going after her," he warned.

"Wow, you really are a terrible father," Nelda gave a humourless snort. "What kind of father wants to kill his own child, his own blood?"

"Someone who knows they are blights on mankind," Nileas sneered.

"You are sick in the head," Nelda decided, pulling the twin blades from her own sheaths, giving them both an experimental swing. "Let's get this over with, I hate long waits."

For a moment, neither moved, just standing and sizing one another up as the rain started to sprinkle lightly down on them, but then Nileas moved forward, swinging his sword forward and clash against Nelda's pair and she struggled against his strength, bettering hers against his, digging her feet into the
ground to keep from being forced back.

He was good, there was no denying that. Maybe he’d learned from Thalia at some point, Nelda knew that she had taught a swordsmanship class at one point, but Nelda had been taught by Thalia too.

She threw her weight forward with enough force to make him take a step back, but the movement was hard won as a fist swung forward, knocking her squarely in the jaw.

Nelda spat at him, raising her heel to bring it down on his knee before they separated. If there was one thing she wasn't afraid to do in the middle of a duel, it was playing dirty.

"Is that the best you've got?" she asked, despite the aching in her jaw.

She curled her fingers inwards, gesturing for him to come forward and they began again.

It was as hard as Nelda had imagined, going against someone that had strength on their side, but Nileas was nowhere near as good as Thalia was, which was a comforting thought to Nelda as she earned a slice down her arm as his blade came a little too close for her liking, just as he earned a stab in the side for his own efforts.

Nelda's arm stung and the rain coming down harder now wasn't helping, but she wasn't about to let up. If she died, what was going to stop him from tracking down Agathe, killing her, and making it look like it was justified (who would suspect a killer with a badge?)? If she died, she was never going to see George again, or listen to Hermione and Ron squabble like they always did.

"You're good," Nileas conceded before grinning in a way that made Nelda think of Bellatrix Lestrange, demented and thinking they were superior. "I'm better."

"We'll see about that," Nelda retorted, slashing her swords forward, teeth bared and gritted together.

It was hard and her arms were starting to tremble with the strain of the onslaught, but Nelda didn't dare let up. All she needed was one well aimed blow to offset him so she could gain the upper hand and drag him to the centre of the altar and deal the last one.

"The only way the sacrifice will work is if they are killed in the altar's centre," Thalia had warned her as she smoothed Nelda's plait in a motherly gesture. "The Gates will settle for nothing less."

She had made the Gates sound sentient, but Nelda knew better than to argue with Thalia.

Nelda spun, clashing the sword in her left hand against his before using her spare one to slash against his midsection in a movement he could not block, and one he was far too slow to block at any rate, his arrogance slowing him down.

His eyes widened and he looked down at the blood blooming across his shirt, losing his grip on sword, but then he grabbed the hidden dagger in his sleeve, stabbing it into her abdomen. Nelda released a short pained gasp, but the pain was dulled by the adrenaline rushing through her system.

Moving fast, despite the jarring pains of the wounds he'd inflicted upon her, she grasped the back of his shirt and dragged him to the centre of the altar and dropped him down to the ground.

"Agathe is my sister," she told him coldly, "and you've done enough damage to her…but you should know that you were killed by Hope Potter."

Her hair flooded red and her eyes became green as his widened before she drove the sword home.
There was a warm ripple in the air and Hope Potter could have sworn that she saw an image of great gates swinging shut in the rain and two figures, one male and one female, giving her nods and kind smiles as they faded away.

Agathe was furious as she tore down the streets, making her way into the medical ward.

"I'm going to kill you!" she swore, stabbing a finger towards her sister who was sitting on a cot while Ajax bound a bandage tightly around her midsection.

Hope looked worse for wear, her soaking hair red and falling down her back, framing the bruise on her face and the few cuts. Agathe could see a few more bandages to add to her collection; there was another one on her arm, one on her thigh, and the one around her midsection.

"Because I haven't already had someone try to kill me today," Hope said, arching an eyebrow, wincing as Ajax pulled the bandage too tight.

"You are so stupid!" Agathe said furiously, stomping her foot angrily on the ground. "What were you thinking! I was ready!"

Hope shrugged. "Someone's got to save your skin once in awhile, Aggie, and it looks like I've volunteered myself."

Ajax rolled his eyes. "Are you sure you don't want me to heal these up? I'm not sure the stomach wound is completely healed..."

"Well, I might as well look the part when I tell the Aurors that I killed one of their own," Hope said, hissing a breath.

"You're going to do what?" Agathe demanded as her mother entered holding a rucksack that she was certain held all of Hope's things. "Are you crazy?"

"They're going to find out about it eventually, I might as well be up-front about it," Hope said, unconcerned. "Don't worry about it, I'll be fine."

Thalia shook her head sadly and Agathe wondered if she was mourning the death of her husband.

"And I'll head over to St. Mungo's afterwards, I promise," she added when Ajax was less than enthused.

"Mirror-call if you have any problems," Ajax said finally, "I've got to go and help Mum pack up."

News that the Gates had been closed spread like wild-fire, and the lack of dots on the Globe had only proved that. Within half an hour Elysium was at half-capacity and Hope couldn't bring herself to be surprised.

She undid the thick chain around her neck, handing it off to Thalia. "This is for Manon," she told her and Thalia's eyes widened in surprise. "I think she's best suited to be in charge of Elysium now, don't you think?"

Thalia's mouth softened. "I'd think there's no one better."

"Good," Hope said, pulling herself upright with a bit of difficulty, before grasping the straps of the rucksack. "I'll send you some mirror-calls, promise."

"Don't be a stranger," Thalia added, hugging her tightly. "My daughters have a tendency to get a
little over their heads."

"I'll keep it in mind," Hope laughed while Agathe squawked in indignation behind her.

It was cold and raining but Hope wanted nothing more than to return to Britain where she had no doubt that the weather was much the same.

_George_

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Ron dropped his wand when the lift doors opened and out stepped Hope Potter, soaked to the bone, bruised and bloody but grinning widely.

The girl beside her, who he was sure was the very same that had been arrested shortly the previous night only to be released just as quickly, gave a sigh when all the working Aurors froze at the sight of her. "You weren't kidding."

"Kill a Dark Lord and see how Greece treats you," Hope said before beaming at Ron. "Hey, Ron!"

"I'm going to kill you," Ron decided, gaping at her.

"Ironically, it wouldn't be the first time today," Hope remarked before grunting as he wrapped her in a tight hug. "Which is also why I'm here."

"What're you talking about?" he asked her as he drew back as the Head of the Auror Office, Gawain Robards drew closer.

"I'm here to report the death of an Auror," Hope said shortly, looking towards Robards with eyes narrowed with interest. "Nileas Blackwood."

The girl behind her shifted uncomfortably.

"Blackwood was one of my best," Robards said, his dark voice regretful. "How did he die?"

"I killed him," Hope said without preamble and Ron stared at her. "After he challenged my sister to a duel to the death."

"I'm sorry, what?"

"Did I stutter?"

"Hope," the girl tugged on her arm, "maybe you should show them the contract?"

"Oh, yeah, maybe I should," Hope agreed, unzipping the rucksack in order to pull the parchment from her rucksack and handing it over. "There you go."

"Duelling is illegal in Britain," the Head Auror remarked as he took the parchment from her.

"Then it will interest you to know that we were duelling in the Grecian Isles and that he killed a six year old witch more than two months ago," Hope said unblinkingly.

Robards looked down at the contract. "Weasley, make sure she doesn't go anywhere, murder is still a crime and I don't care if she's a war hero."

Ron swallowed. "Yes, sir."
George, you need to get over here, Hope's back and she's just copped to killing an Auror!"

George had rushed out of the shop to Apparate to the Ministry for Magic and his incessant foot tapping in the lift had been enough to annoy no less than three witches and two wizards, but he didn't care; Hope was back!

"It's okay to admit you missed me, Ron."

"I don't have any idea what you're talking about," his brother countered, "I hardly noticed you were gone."

"Aw," Hope laughed, "Aggie, would you have noticed if I was gone?"

"We live in different countries," the second voice pointed out as George entered to see Hope and another red-haired girl sitting across from Ron. "I'm not sure I would notice."

"Ouch," Hope winced before looking up and grinning so widely that it seemed to split her face as she saw George. "George!"

The movement she took to draw herself out of the seat was slow and sluggish, but then she moved forward to throw her arms around George with a light laugh, and he did the same, sagging in relief.

"You're all right, aren't you?" he murmured before pulling back to examine her bruised face. "What happened?"

"Oh, you know," Hope said airily, "a small duel to the death, nothing I couldn't handle."

The girl beside her snorted. "Coming from the girl who took the duel that was for someone else."

Hope grinned. "This is Agathe Blackwood, we all call her Aggie, and she's my sister."

"She's –I'm sorry, what?" George looked from one witch to the other. From a certain standpoint that might look a bit similar. They both had red hair, but Agathe's was brighter than Hope's darker locks, but where Hope's eyes were green, Agathe's were blue.

"Well, technically we're distant cousins," Agathe informed him, "but we figured why stop there?"

"She's also a Rune Analyst and a fabulous archer without much skill in using swords," Hope added, giving the blue-eyed girl a wink. "Hence why I took the duel in the first place."

"I'm so confused," George sighed.

"Don't worry, it's going to get worse," Ron said, rubbing at his head, "I don't even understand half of what she said about why she was gone in the first place."

"I thought it was rather simple," Hope said, still hanging onto George who couldn't quite bring himself to let her go. "And with the Gates of Tartarus closed, it means I can come home without worrying about monsters showing up to rip out some throats."

She was saying words, but they didn't make any sense to George.

Then Hope leaned up on her tip-toes to press a kiss to his lips and he responded eagerly, tangling a hand into her wet hair as Ron groaned behind her.

"Have you really got to do that here?" he demanded, but the ignored him in favour of gripping each other more tightly. "Some people have to work here, you know!"
Agathe sniggered as Robards made his reappearance, blinking in surprise at the scene before him. It took him exactly five seconds for him to make a decision about what to do.

"Weasley," he said, "when Potter isn't quite so…busy, inform her that she's cleared of the charges but she'll need to write a report."

"Yes, sir," Ron promised, "though they're not likely to part for a few hours at this rate."

They parted to glower at Ron. "Hey, I haven't seen my girlfriend for awhile either, you know, she's still at Hogwarts."

"And whose fault is that?" George retorted as Hope bent forward with a wince, probing lightly against her midsection, a movement that Agathe caught before either of the boys.

"Hey, you all right?" she asked, brow furrowed in concern.

"I think my wound opened," Hope said with a groan and George' arm around her waist steadied her. "Maybe I should have just had Ajax done a more thorough look over…love, fancy taking me to the hospital?"

"Sure," George said easily. "How bad is it?"

"Well, my legs are getting weak, so that might be a bad sign," Hope joked and George rolled his eyes and nodded to Ron.

"I'll let everyone know where you've gone, and that you're back," he added, "they'll probably come rushing over."

"Something to look forward to," Hope drawled as she securely wrapped her arm around George's, stumbling a little as she leaned heavily against his side, and she almost didn't feel it when George twisted, pulling her along with his Apparation. There was a dull ringing in her ears and the temperature felt a bit warm.

She didn't even notice that she'd fallen until she caught sight of the obnoxious green uniforms that the healers wore through hazy eyes.

"It's okay, Hope, I've got you, you're going to be fine." Hope could make out a dark blur but she was sure that it was Angelina, and that was comforting enough.
Agathe reminded George a bit of Hope, sitting across from the cot with her chair pulled flush against the side of the bed, her legs crossed and propped up onto the bed, it was a closeness that Hope would only afford her closest friends. She was stubborn like Hope, that much he knew from watching her verbally berate the last healer that had been assigned to Hope tried to have her removed ("The only healers that have any right to bodily remove me are Angelina Johnson or Ajax Moswell, and since you're neither why don't you back the hell down!"), and it was a streak a mile long.

"I don't understand half of what you just told me," George said finally after Agathe gave him the long explanation of just what had occurred in Greece over the past two months.

"Yeah, most people don't," Agathe admitted, scratching her cheek awkwardly. "It took some time for Hope to wrap her head around it, and I don't think she completely understood it even with two months under her belt."

He looked back to Hope's face as she slept on. Her cheeks were pale and they had to keep giving her Blood-replenisher potion every time the venom from the stab wound on her abdomen made the wound reopen. It was like what happened to his father back in seventh year all over again. The healers weren't sure what kind of venom had been on the knife she'd been stabbed with and they were working overtime to find out.

"She must like you," George mentioned, glancing away from Hope's face, the brow furrowed as her eyes moved feverishly behind closed eyelids. "Why else would she drop everything for someone she hardly knew?"

Agathe gave a half-shrug. "Family's family, I guess." She glanced up to the clock with a sigh. "Ajax said he'd try to get me an update on the antivenin, but that was an hour ago…I can't imagine it being that hard, though I wouldn't know anything about that, being a Rune Analyst and all."

George arched an eyebrow in amusement. "My father was in a similar situation a few years ago."

"How long did it take them to find an antivenin to the snake venom for him?"

"A couple of weeks," George had to concede, stroking the back of Hope's hand with his thumb.

"Hence why Ajax took a sample." Agathe shook her head. "You Britons don't have our resources; you're rather behind the times."

George arched an eyebrow.

"Is she complaining about British Wizarding inadequacy?" came a dry voice and two pairs of blue eyes snapped to Hope who had shifted her shoulders slightly, blinking her eyes open just slightly to fasten on George who couldn't help but release a breath of relief.

"Oh, Wizard-boy, you look worried," she said, closing her eyes and smiling, "don't worry, if I saw a face like yours, I'd think I'd made it to Elysium."

Agathe sniggered loudly and George's lips twitched slightly. "Is that a round-about way of calling me an angel, Mystery-girl?"

"Well, I wouldn't go that far," Hope said, slits of green appearing as she smiled, "you're a siren, Georgie, seducing unsuspecting sailors."
"Wow, she's really doped up on potions," Agathe laughed and George raised her hand to his lips, pressing a kiss to her hand.

"I'm gonna marry you," Hope added and George started in surprise and then he grinned widely.

"Oh, yeah?" he asked. "Is that so?"

"No, wait…" Hope frowned, clearly trying to think hard. "That came out wrong…will you marry me?"

Both of George's eyebrows rose. "I thought you already were?"

"Am I?" Hope's brow knotted. "I'm keeping my name."

"I didn't honestly think you were going to take mine, to be perfectly honest," George snorted, reaching a hand out to smooth through her hair and Hope's eyes fluttered shut and she smiled but it was the kind that said she was on the brink of falling asleep again.

"Tell Aggie not to worry," she murmured, slurring her words together, "she's always worrying…about things…"

Agathe gritted her teeth together slightly in annoyance and exasperating as Hope slipped back into a slumber once more. "I always worry? That's likely."

George smiled, pressing a kiss to Hope's brow as she breathed in and out deeply. "Don't worry, that tends to happen with her."

"So I've gathered," Agathe said dryly, pulling a small compact mirror out of her pocket bearing the Greek Isles Magical crest. It was glowing faintly and pulsating in her hands. "I have to take this, I'll be back in a bit."

She left behind her coat and bag behind, opening the door quickly and disappearing before George could even blink and George couldn't help but smile in amusement.

Worrying had never been much of Hope's forte, she tended to leave that to everyone else, in her mind it was better to jump into the thick of things, as long as one held a certain degree of caution.

George pulled a small box out of his pocket, flicking it open lightly to reveal the two rings that Hope had left behind, her serpent ring that she'd worn since she was eleven—not unlike the Resurrection Stone, in that respect—and the engagement ring that George had given her.

He slipped the rings onto her fingers and she didn't so much as stir, even as he leaned forward to press a kiss soundly to her cheek.

"I'll be here when you wake up," he promised even though she was too deep in sleep to hear him.

"I'm looking for my daughter, Hope Potter, she was admitted here a few hours ago."

Angelina paused briefly at the voice, turning to stare at the speaker. By now she was familiar with Agathe Blackwood (how Hope disappeared for two months and reappeared with a sister was something she wasn't going to even begin to understand), and the woman at the front desk bore a striking resemblance to her (or was it the other way around?) with the same fiery hair and blue eyes.

"Ma'am," said the woman behind the desk dryly, "everyone in Britain knows that Hope Potter's parents died when she was one year old. You're not fooling me and I can call security if I have to."
Blue eyes narrowed and Angelina could see her arm tensing, no doubt ready to pull out her wand and start cursing and Angelina thought it best to divert that as much as possible.

"Excuse me," she said, striding forward, "you wouldn't happen to be Thalia Blackwood?"

The woman drew her back straight, stepping out of the line to where Angelina was standing. "I'm Thalia, yes."

"Your daughter told us you were going to show up sooner or later," Angelina said with a smile, "she's up with George, they're keeping Hope company."

Thalia gave a relieved nod. "George…the fiancé, yes?"

"That's right," Angelina said. "I'm Angelina Johnson, by the way, I'm the one in charge of Hope."

Thalia appraised her and Angelina couldn't blame her; she still had another year before she could be considered a full-fledged healer.

"She was lucid for a few moments about an hour ago," the dark-skinned witch explained, consulting the clipboard in her hands. "She made it very clear that the only healers she'd permit to look after her were myself, Hogwarts' matron Madam Pomfrey, and someone called Ajax Moswell…that and she really hates being put on so many potions, she thinks they addle her brain."

Thalia gave a soft chuckle. "That doesn't surprise me."

Angelina gestured her towards the lift, pressing the correct button that sent them jolting in the correct direction.

"How is she?" Thalia asked, the smile falling slightly.

"She was admitted with some blood loss from the wound on her abdomen and it was only after the wound reopened that it was discovered that whatever she'd been stabbed with had been laced with a kind of venom we haven't seen before," Angelina told her in what Fred affectionately called her 'business voice'. "We have to keep giving her Blood-replenishers to keep her from bleeding out while we try to find an antivenin…Agathe said Ajax had a friend who could help with that so he took off with a sample."

Thalia arched an eyebrow, as if to say that that didn't really help her with how well Hope was doing.

"She's mostly sleeping, especially since her previous healer gave her enough potions to knock out a hippogriff," Angelina's words were spoken with a bit of annoyance. "I'm trying to limit the potions, mostly because I know what she hates and likes potion and healing-wise…the scratch on her arm is going to scar, though, she should had it looked at earlier but—"

"But she chose to just have Ajax bandage it so she could return home sooner," Thalia added with a small sigh.

"I'm not really surprised," Angelina sighed, "Hope's gotten a lot of scars over the years, most of them being by her own hand, I don't think she minds too terribly, and George is far too used to her having scars to really care."

That appeared to faintly amuse Thalia.

"Er, I know this might seem a bit inappropriate to ask," Angelina said, tugging on one of her dreadlocks, brushing it over her shoulder, "but did you blood-adopt Hope while she was missing?"
It was clear by the surprise on her face that whatever she had been expecting Angelina to ask, it wasn't that. "Oh, well, Aggie and Hope bonded more than me," she had to concede, rubbing over her palm in a straight line, a faint mark that Agathe and Hope bore on their own hands. "I think...I don't think she had of a family growing up, did she?"

The lift open and they both stepped out.

"Not really," Angelina agreed, "I think the first thing she said about her aunt and uncle to me was that she couldn't wait until she was legal so that she could move out...of course, a lot of the old families are inter-related, so she's got a few relatives here and there, actually, she's probably really distantly related to George, which is hilarious, now that I think about it."

Thalia gave a small chuckle, pausing in the middle of the hallway. "You and her must know each other quite well, then."

"Well, we did go to school together," Angelina said with a sheepish smile, "and we were in the same house and on the same Quidditch team...but dating twin brothers helps. I'm marrying George's brother in December," she added.

"Hope mentioned it," Thalia said with a smile, "she didn't want to miss it, that's why she was always so busy trying to...trying to get everything sorted so that she could come home."

Angelina didn't say anything as they continued to walk down the corridor.

"Besides, Hope's at the age where she doesn't need a mother to look after her," Thalia sighed, "she's already an adult, she's got her own life."

"Her fiancé's mother has tried to mother her too, but that's never ended up well," Angelina agreed, "but family means something to Hope and if she willingly calls you 'Mum' I'm pretty sure that's something big."

And then she opened the door and ushered her inside.

Angelina watched from the doorway as Thalia leaned to press a kiss to Agathe's brow as she slept on, leaning back in her chair (she had looked pretty exhausted when she'd shown up with Hope and George, probably a sleepless night the night before...) before moving towards the witch on the cot.

Hope was awake, that much she could see, since George was resting his head on his arms at her side and she was lightly carding her fingers through his hair. Her eyes gained a light when she saw Thalia and Angelina couldn't quite remember seeing a look like that on her face before and Hope smiled when Thalia did the same towards her.

So Angelina shut the door to give them some privacy.
my wounds keep opening up but, you know, that's a minor issue.

Ginny tossed an exasperated look towards Hermione who couldn't help but echo the sentiment before opening the door to enter the room.

The hospital room itself was rather large and singular, no doubt owing to Hope and George being wealthy enough to afford it, and there were several people already inside.

George was in the chair drawn to Hope's left and there was an unfamiliar girl with a long red plait and blue eyes clear under her fringe at her right. Angelina was speaking quietly to a woman with similar features in the corner who had a small frown on her lips. Remus and Tonks were there, Tonks with her arms around young Teddy, bouncing him in her arms while Remus – clearly having just left his class for the day – leaned an arm against the cot, clearly acting the part of 'questioning father'.

"A minor issue?" Remus' eyebrow twitched. "A serious case of blood loss is a minor issue?"

"Considering the chaos I get up to?" Hope asked archly, "I'm pretty sure, yeah."

There had been an overbed table moved to the cot and a parchment thick with ink had been spread over it, with the Auror crest on it; she was filling out a report of the events that occurred while she was gone, no doubt, particularly since she had killed an Auror.

"Besides, it's not really that serious," Hope grumbled, "what's serious is why the hell you're still here."

She was glowering at the young red-haired witch at her side and she blinked in surprise. "Where else would I be?" the witch asked flummoxed.

The glare deepened and Hope tilted her head to look towards the unknown witch speaking with Angelina. "Mum," she said, surprising both Hermione and Ginny, "can you please tell Aggie to get to work before she's fired and that I'll be fine."

The witch lifted her eyebrows in amusement. "You heard your sister, Aggie."

"Mum!" The girl known as Aggie complained loudly.

"I really doubt that Hope will be going anywhere," the older witch assured her, "besides, your sabbatical ended two days ago and Rune Analysts are very important."

The younger of the two unknowns grumbled mutinously under her breath, but she still yanked on a light jacket – not a coat, Hermione noticed, despite how cold it was outside, being November – and grabbed her bag before pointing a finger at Hope. "Don't go anywhere," she warned, "or I'll challenging you to an archery contest."

"That's fucking outrageous!" Hope yelled after her as she brushed past Hermione and Ginny to make her way out of the door, and then she flopped back against the cushions to give Remus a firm stare. "See?" she said. "I am perfectly fine apart from bleeding from my abdomen, the other guy looked worse, trust me – oh, sorry, Mum!" She cast an apologetic glance towards the woman who gave a small sigh, a weight of sorrow in her eyes.

"It's all right," she assured her before glancing towards the pair frozen at the doorway. "I think you've got some friends that were a bit worried about you, though."

"That's everyone I know," Hope complained before sitting up and taking notice of the two and then
her smile was blinding. "Hi!"

Hermione surged forward first to carefully but tightly throw her arms around Hope's shoulders to give her a firm hug, not even caring if she jostled George lightly to the side by doing so (and judging by the short breath of amusement he released, he didn't much mind either).

"Why is it that every time I turn around you're running off to do something dangerous?" Hermione demanded heatedly as Ginny plopped herself on the bed close to Hope's legs.

"It wasn't that dangerous until the tail-end," Hope countered easily, her eyes glittering like emeralds when the two parted. "I mostly stayed within the wards and let everyone else do the fighting… because someone wasn't about to let go out with my swords and zero skill in swordsmanship."

She shot a glance towards the woman she called 'Mum' –Hermione was definitely going to ask her about that later, when Hope had answered the vast number of questions Hermione had left– but the woman ignored her.

"Swordsmanship?" Ginny repeated a bit dubiously as Hermione finally relinquished her hold on Hope –almost upending her inkwell over the almost completely filled report, but there were enough witches and wizards in the room to prevent that from occurring–, allowing Hope's eyes to fasten on Ginny. "What sword? Not Gryffindor's one, right? Because that's back at Hogwarts."

Godric Gryffindor's sword was the only one that anyone had seen her use and Hermione could vouch for that, so she could understand why Ginny was so confused.

"No, Nelda Blackwood's," Hope corrected, leaning forward to look around Remus before grimacing sharply in pain and relaxing against the pillows which was facilitated by George drawing her lightly back. "Salazar's first born. She was brilliant with her swords, unfortunately, I'm not so much, besides, I was in charge of keeping everything up and running while everyone else was running around stabbing haphazardly—" Her words ended in a small hiss. "If anyone tells you stabbing doesn't hurt, call their bluff," she said after a short moment, before catching the look on Remus' face. "I'm fine," she assured him, "I'll be good as new, you'll see."

Remus gave an exhausted sort of sigh that said he clearly thought that he should be used to this kind of attitude by now and he raised a hand to pinch the bridge of his nose. "I swear James wasn't this bad," he muttered under his breath, making Tonks chuckle and Hope cry indignantly "Oi!"

"If this is what I get for coming back, I'll stay away next time," Hope muttered, sinking deeper into the cushions as the laughter belled out around her.

"You will find the one who opened the Gates has a personal vendetta to fulfil," Damon spoke with a voice that echoed in the darkness, his form fading and flickering slightly as he did so, "and the pair of you are about to make a very foolish mistake, but I will commend you for your loyalty."

She clashed the sword in her left hand against his before using her spare one to slash against his midsection in a movement he could not block, and one he was far too slow to block at any rate, his arrogance slowing him down.

His eyes widened and he looked down at the blood blooming across his shirt, losing his grip on sword, but then he grabbed the hidden dagger in his sleeve, stabbing it into her abdomen.

Hope's eyes fluttered open and she breathed in and out deeply, blinking a few times as the fog over her eyes was lifted and she found herself in her hospital room with a layer of darkness surrounding her. George was still at her side, a thought that had her casting her eyes over his slumbering form
fondly, but there was another figure at her right, practically bathed in darkness.

"Well met, dearest," Thanatos said and Hope closed her eyes briefly, clearing her thoughts before opening them once more to look on him.

"You're still here," she said, keeping her voice quiet so as not to awaken her fiancé, "I thought I might have been hallucinating."

The god's lips curled in amusement, but even the smile didn't make him less god-like. "I'm afraid not, granddaughter."

Hope rolled her eyes. "Aggie and Mum have known about you for awhile," she said after a moment, green eyes fixing on impossibly black ones, "why didn't you do the same for me?"

Thanatos' smile stiffened and he settled himself into the vacant seat at her side. "There were certain complications," he said finally.

"Complications?"

"The Blackwood line has always celebrated their ties with Death," he explained carefully, "they have never had to hide who they were. In your case, your father knew very little about his relation to me, if at all, and with how your relatives reacted towards your magic, I deemed it safer to wait until you were older, old enough to comprehend what you were."

Hope swallowed thickly. "I used to dream when I was a kid about some long-lost family members coming to take me away from the Dursleys." Thanatos said nothing to that. "Are there rules that gods have to follow about their descendants?"

"Yes," Thanatos said, his tone rather flat, "and that is why I didn't tell Thalia of your existence until Tom had passed into my realm."

Hope gave a small sigh. "Aggie and I made a short visit to the Underworld."

"Yes, I'm aware." There was a distinct note of annoyance resonating in the god's voice, but, true to Hope's typical behaviour, she ignored it.

"Damon said we were going to make a mistake," Hope continued, "what was it?"

Hope hadn't really given it much thought until now but her cognitive function was being inhibited by some potions, so that was likely why she couldn't come up with the answer.

Thanatos pulled himself upright in a single movement that was all fluid and grace. "Agathe's was that she entered into an agreement knowing full well that doing so would kill her, yours was the same."

Hope gave him a smirk. "Admit it, my plan was better."

Thanatos couldn't help but shake his head. "I will never grow tired of mortals with their foolish endeavours," he said with a chuckle before dropping a hand over Hope's and sank into her skin from the touch. "Farewell, Elpis Slytherin, may your spirit rest in the fields of Elysium."

It sounded very much like a final farewell as Hope watched him fade into shadow and Hope very much doubted she would see him again until she had passed on from the world.

But death was an eternity, life was brief, so Hope would enjoy every second of hers.
When Hope awoke again, the room was empty and dark, and everyone had gone. Hope didn't mind too terribly, she had never been much of a fan of large gatherings, but the sluggish feelings deep in her veins probably helped.

"Did I pass out again?" she muttered and George, who had been sitting with the familiar The Hobbit open on his lap, looked her with a small smile.

"More like you fell asleep after they gave you another Blood-replenisher," he corrected, snapping the book shut as he set it on the bedside table. "Fred stopped by while you were out of it and told me to tell you that if you do that again, he's going to have to duel you."

Hope's eyebrows arched. "Well, that'll be interesting."

George shook his head and gave a small sigh and she couldn't help but furrow her brow in confusion.

"What is it?"

Her fiancé pulled himself up into a standing position in order to lean against the bed, curling a lock of her hair around her finger. "I get that you left for a good reason," he said and Hope could feel dread bubbling in her stomach, "but marriage is about compromise and sharing burdens."

Hope tried to clear her hazy head. "I think it's a bit easier to cut everyone off and run," she said in a considering sort of voice.

George pressed a hand to his eyes. "Hope…"

"No, listen to me," Hope insisted and he rested his eyes on her. "Before I came to Hogwarts, I didn't have anyone, it was just me, and then when I got to Hogwarts and I made friends…it seemed like the decisions ultimately caused others deaths…I mean, there was Cedric who only took the Cup with me because I convinced him to, and then there was Sirius in the Department of Mysteries where he wouldn't even been if I hadn't run off, or the kids that died in the Battle because of my insane idea to taunt Tom."

"That wasn't your fault," George insisted, "you didn't make them choose anything, that was them. They chose to do those things because it was the right thing to do."

She breathed out sharply. "Still, when Aggie came to me asking for my help, telling me what had been done to Hemera…I couldn't not go, and I didn't want you to get hurt because of me again."

Her eyes lingered on the hole on the side of his head where his left ear should have been.

"Getting hurt for each other is what partnership is," he pointed out.

Hope gave him an odd look. "According to whom?"

George smiled and that told her as much as she could have guessed. "You're an impossible man," she decided.

"You keep telling me that," George agreed before leaning his head forward to press his brow to hers, murmuring, "Will this be the last time you disappear off into the blue without a word to your darling..."
fiancé?"

Hope allowed herself a brief smile. "Gods, I hope so," she said, "I'm officially retiring from the whole saving people thing, it's much too exhausting. I think I'll leave the adventuring until when I'm a Curse-breaker."

George smirked and quirked an eyebrow. "Finally going to settle down with dear old Georgie?"

"It's on my list," Hope grinned widely, shifting slightly in the bed, "right under snogging you something fierce."

"Is that so?" There was a glint in his eyes that made her smirk, ready to open her mouth and give a witty reply.

But he didn't give her time to answer as he took her cheeks in his hands and pressed a light kiss to her lips, but Hope wasn't having any of that. She brought her hands up to tangle up in his fiery strands, bringing him closer to her, skin to skin, like puzzle-pieces, half-pulling him onto the cot with her.

She couldn't even feel the wound on her abdomen as George responded in kind, his lips teasing hers, coming close and drawing away before she could claim a passionate kiss from him once more.

"Tempting little she-devil," he breathed in her ear and Hope didn't bother to deny it.

"All I want is a decent kiss," she pouted, "is that too much to ask?"

"You're the one in the hospital, love, not the other way around," George smirked in reply. But there was something in the lightness of his touch and the look in his eyes that she knew all too well.

"You are a cruel man," Hope decided.

"You're the one who ran off for three months, came back, and then ran off for two more months," George pointed out and Hope opened her mouth to counter but instead she sank into the cushions once more.

"All right, you have a point," she muttered.

"I know," he grinned, his lips grazing over her pulse-point on her throat, feeling how its rate picked up by that merest touch as they drew their way up her throat, over her jaw to make their way to her mouth as she swallowed thickly.

"That's not playing fair," Hope pointed out, barely breathing against his mouth.

"When have I ever played fair?" And then he kissed her and Hope's eyes fluttered shut, gasping against his mouth when she found herself lacking the air needed to breathe.

"You know what I missed?" George asked, nowhere near as breathless as she was, and it was something she'd always hated about him.

"W-What?"

"Waking up to you looking like this," he said, his smirk roguish and Hope couldn't help but pink slightly.

"I'm going to kill you," she threatened weakly, falling back to her usual threats of harm against him, but that only made him laugh.
Being in the hospital with a stomach wound that wouldn't shut wasn't all bad, Hope had come to realize. George dropped in at mealtimes, mostly because Hope had kicked him out knowing he would be bored out of his mind in a matter of hours.

One of the issues, however, was that Hope had missed the dates when she'd planned to take her NEWTs for History of Magic and Astronomy, as well as Charms and Transfiguration, and Hope was determined to finish the NEWTs before December (she had far too much things to do in December as it was).

"You don't seem too worried about your exams."

Hope lifted her eyes from *A History of Magic* to Thalia, who had volunteered to sit with Hope as she was retired from the Greek Isles Auror Department and didn't mind keeping an eye on Hope, especially since Hope had a tendency to sneak out. "History of Magic and Astronomy are easy subjects for me, I had to read up a lot on History when I was doing research for my Ancient Runes NEWT and I had a bit of an obsession with constellations when I was younger – star gazing – so Astronomy's not that difficult either."

Thalia was looking through one of Hope's photo albums that Hope had given her as a way to show her what it had been like for her growing up, flicking through the pictures with interest. "Star-gazing, huh?"

"George takes me star-gazing," Hope said with a nod and a small smile, "of course, we only have to step outside to get a stellar view, so that's nice."

It made her glad that they lived so far out of the public's eye that the sky was open and clear, unhindered by too many trees or buildings, it was one of the things that made the pair of them choose the house in the first place; neither of them liked the attention.

"George seems very sweet," Thalia added, smiling as she passed over a picture from back when Hope was thirteen, George's arm around her shoulders, flurries tangled in her hair as he kissed her cheek and she laughed with her cheeks bright with colour. "You've been together awhile."

"Let's just say he's had to deal with a lot of craziness because of me," Hope muttered, running a hand through her hair, smoothing any tangles that had formed.

"Have you two picked a date for the wedding?"

The question jarred her out of her thoughts and Hope found herself looking on Thalia in surprise. "Well, not really, I mean, things were kind of crazy, you know. After I got back from hunting down Death Eaters that ran after the Battle there was the whole testifying in I don't know how many trials, and then there was getting our own place because the press kept hanging out outside of the shop, then I was trying to get ready for the NEWTs, then Aggie swept me away on an adventure of Greek proportions…so, no, we haven't really discussed it."

Thalia gave a small amused chuckle. "Maybe you should, unless you plan to stay engaged until the day you die."

Hope pointed towards her with a look of honest contemplation. "Now there's an idea," she said, "one that'll drive the press up a tree, so it's a definite plus…I wonder if George would go for it, though…"

No one should ever underestimate Hope Potter's willingness to aggravate the press.
"Ah, probably not," Hope lamented after a moment, "oh well."

She sank back into the cushions, twisting her engagement ring around her finger as she did so; she hadn't realized how much she missed having it and the serpent ring adorning her fingers until they were in their rightful places once more.

"Angie and Fred were engaged for a short while before they actually set a date," Hope added, "so I'm not really too concerned...the only ones I think who really rushed into marriage were Bill and Fleur."

"Fleur...that's the French champion for the Triwizard Tournament that you made friends with, yes?" Thalia prompted, her fingers turning the pages over until she reached the ones of Hope's fourth year.

Fleur was easy to pinpoint in the pictures; tall, beautiful, blonde, and known for wearing blue.

"Yeah, that's her," Hope smiled, "I actually set her up with Bill in the first place, and I've sworn never to let that go."

Thalia arched an eyebrow. "That sounds like an interesting story."

"Well, the Champions had to have a date to the Yule Ball and Hermione was going with Viktor Krum and Cho Chang was going with Cedric Diggory...of course, George was digging his heels but I knew he was going to ask me –he likes making me sweat, and that hasn't really changed–, but Fleur wasn't sure who to take as her date because she's part-Veela."

"Ah!" Thalia remarked in surprise. "Supposedly the offsprings of Harpies and Sirens."

"Really?" Hope couldn't help but stare at her. Of course, the Siren part made sense in how Veela had an Allure and how it managed to seduce others, but then again, so did the Harpy part, as Hope still remembered the Quidditch World Cup when the Bulgarian's Veela mascots had gotten so angry that they had become distinctly bird-like. "Huh."

"There's no way to prove it, of course," Thalia added with a careless wave of her hand, "but rumours still spread; personally, the Veela of Greece have always been rather proud to be considered as having a possibility of being part Siren."

"Ah, yes, drowning men, I can relate."

And Thalia couldn't help but laugh as the door to the hospital room entered and George stepped around the corner, eyes lit up and with a smile on his face (he didn't seem to ever not have a smile on his face these days).

"I come bearing gifts," he promised, lifting a bag with the Three Broomsticks logo (he'd gone all the way to Scotland?) and Hope could smell the fish.

"Fish and chips!" Hope gave a delighted sigh. "Why haven't I married you yet?"

George snorted, stepping completely into the room. "It might have something to do with you bleeding through the gown."

"If I had a gown," Hope added as he set the bag of boxed food down on her lap, stooping to kiss her lightly.

"I think I saw a very familiar red-head heading this way," George added.
"I'm going to assume you mean Aggie," Thalia remarked dryly from her seat. "Between our two families, I believe it is rather difficult to differentiate based on hair colour."

"We Weasleys have a number of fine distinguishing qualities, I can assure you," George said in a would-be-snooty tone, his nose high in the air, which only made Hope laugh and Thalia chuckle as the door opened a second time.

Agathe entered, her hair caught up in a bun held at bay only by a number of pins, breathless like she'd been jogging. The Department of Curse-breaking in Greece didn't really have a dress code, but Agathe chosen to wear a crisp pantsuit as opposed to sloppiness in her code of dress. Her bag swung precariously on her shoulder as she shut the door behind her.

"This place is a bloody maze," she complained, pulling herself onto the edge of the cot, close to where Hope's feet were, not even caring about the consideration that she might be squashing Hope's toes. Hope decided they had spent far too much time together. "Did the room move?"

"No," Hope said, looking a bit confused, "but I suppose the bed could've been moved while I was out of it…" Though it's something she didn't sign off on and George certainly wouldn't have agreed to it.

"You haven't been moved, trust me," George assured her as she pulled one of the boxes towards herself.

"Her name's not on the room," Agathe mentioned, snagging a chip from Hope before the witch could stop her. "Other patients have their names on their rooms."

"I kind of don't want to be mobbed," Hope said, batting Agathe's hand away as it came back for seconds.

"Oh yeah…the whole Woman-Who-Conquered thing…"

"Is that what they're calling me now?" Hope looked faintly disconcerted at the prospect.

"No," George and Thalia assured her as one.

"They had to do it because the press got wind of you being here," George said, watching her as she took a bite of fish, only to choke before swallowing thickly.

"They what?"

"What can I way, love? You're famous." It was clear he was annoyed about the matter but also amused by her response, and that didn't help. "People talk and you've got one of those faces."

"Aw, love, you're so sweet on me," Hope batted her eyelashes at him, causing a snort to erupt from his lips.

"Kingsley also thinks you should release a statement…'to sate their curiosity' was his exact wording."

The expression that warped Hope's face gave off the distinct impression that she'd rather disappear for another two months than have to explain anything to the press.

"He did say it would probably be best not to mention the, er, Gates of Tartarus," George added, glancing to the other ladies in the room.
"A sound request," Thalia said dryly.

Enough had died as it was because of those blasted gates, if you asked Hope. It made sense that Kingsley wanted her to give some sort of explanation, after all, witches didn't up and vanish for two months for no reason.

It was the lesser of two evils, she supposed, giving the press some details now as opposed to later when they kept hounding her constantly –and she had no doubt that they would– was probably the safest course of action.

"How is Kingsley?" she asked George. "He owes me some galleons, you know, for solving his traitor problem."

Whenever Hope brought up Nileas Ganis –because he didn't have a right to the name Blackwood after all that he’d done– there was always a bit of noticeable tension. And that was understandable, after all, Thalia had loved him once and Hope was sure that Agathe must have at least had one fond, though hazy, memory of her father before he'd vanished from their lives. It caused Thalia more pain that it did Agathe, knowing that Nileas was the cause behind everything for the past two months. Agathe's hate had burned longer and far hotter.

"He might have mentioned something about that," George laughed as Hope helped herself to some more fish. "He also read your report and I don't think I've ever seen anyone so confused in my life, and that's saying something, seeing as I confuse a lot of people."

Hope rolled her eyes at the ceiling while Thalia and Agathe gave a few chuckles of their own. "And here I thought I was the most confusing thing in your life, Wizard-boy."

"Not even close, Mystery-girl," George promised, his eyes glinting as he gave a loose lock of her hair a small tug.

"You two are adorable with your pet names," Agathe said, her tone dripping in saccharine as she pressed her hands to her cheeks.

They both glared, which only caused laughter to bubble from her lips as the door was opened once more and this time Ajax entered, still wearing his work scrubs that told the ones in the room that he must have just run from the hospital in Greece that he worked at.

In his hand was a flask of an eerie green substance. "Guess who's got an antivenin?"

"Gimme!"

Hope's hands shot out eagerly towards the vial, disregarding the food on her lap in a heartbeat, which went to show just how much she hated being confined to a hospital bed.

And she downed in a single instant, disregarding that it might not be completely healthy for her, and that told George far more than anything she'd said how much trust she had for them. But it would still take some getting used to.

The wound on her stomach ended up scarring, but that didn't come as much of a surprise to Hope, especially with how it had kept opening and being forced closed over the past few days. The mark the Keres had left on her shoulder would remain as well, but Hope had never had a problem with scars.

Her eyes fell to the belt on the bed that Thalia had left for her, the one that held both of Nelda's
serpentine blades.

"You should keep it," Thalia had said, "even if you never use them again. They are your heritage, you should pass them on."

So Hope tightened it around her waist before pulling her favourite red duster coat over her shoulders, flicking her long hair out from under the collar and striding out of the room to where George was waiting for her.

"Ready to brave the masses?" he asked.

"Ready to go home," Hope said instead, linking her fingers with his as she grinned, "and make the next few months up to you."

"Now that is something to look forward to." George gave her a roguish wink before ducking to press a kiss under her ear, his lips lingering and causing a blatant stare from a healer passing by.

"George!"

When he pulled back, his eyes were twinkling. "There, healthy colour in your cheeks."

Hope huffed in annoyance, but she couldn't deny that a bit of colour might showcase her as being in better health, despite how fair she usually was.

Then she tightened her fingers over his as they opened the door into the main lobby of St. Mungo's and it was then that Hope found herself quite incapable of seeing straight, mostly because of the flash bulbs going off and there was a dull ringing in her ear caused by the shouting of questions that Hope couldn't even hope to comprehend.

"Pipe down!" George yelled before Hope could manage it herself and she arched an eyebrow. "All yours," he said with a wave of his arm towards the reporters that had suddenly fallen silent (she couldn't blame them, she could count on her hands the number of times she'd seen George yell like that and still have fingers left over).

"One at a time," Hope decided, conceding there would be no getting out of it now that they were here. "You in the green."

A horrendous shade of green, to be sure, but that was beside the point. The wizard had a quill poised over a roll of parchment. "Lady Potter, can you tell us what you've been doing for the past two months?"

Hope took a deep breath. "I can tell you that I felt threatened enough to leave my home and stayed with some relatives while trying to sort things out."

"By sort things out, do you mean your engagement is off?" piped up an aggressive witch with blonde curls in the back.

"We're still engaged," George remarked a bit vexed.

"The things that needed to be sorted out were some family matters," Hope added, her voice remarkably similar to his with a vein of annoyance running through it.

"Everyone knows your family is dead!"

Hope resisted whipping out her wand –or, better yet, her dagger– and threatening the man who had
spoken within an inch of his life. How she felt must have shown on her face, because the man took a quick step back.

"Most of family is dead, yes," Hope agreed (the response, she realized later, sounded a bit like how Thalia would have responded), "but I have two distant cousins in Greece that I have blood-adopted with."

More questions were shouted at that bit of information, probably because it was so very hard to believe that Hope had any surviving relatives at all, but over the chaos could a single voice be heard: "What do you have to say about the rumours concerning your part in the death of distinguished Auror Nileas Blackwood?"

And Hope couldn't help but release a sharp laugh. "Distinguished? Incredibly doubtful. The man you call Nileas Blackwood doesn't exist, the Blackwood family line has been cut down to two–three including myself–and no longer holds any males to continue it. The man you are speaking of is Nileas Ganis, a former resident of the Greek Isles who walked out on his wife and two children and killed his only granddaughter Hemera. He is the same man who challenged his last living child, Agathe Blackwood, to a duel to the death, one that I took in her stead."

There was nothing but the sound of scratching quills against parchment, clearly taking down her words eagerly.

"Were you admitted into St. Mungo's because of the injuries you sustained in the duel?" a young man with a thick voice asked to her left.

"Yes, I was," Hope said, feeling George's hand tighten over hers. "I was being treated for a stab wound from a dagger that had been laced with a venom that kept eroding the skin to keep the wound open…well, I can't say I'm not used to a little pain at this point."

There were a few titters of amusement from the younger reporters in the grouping.

"Now, I have a date with my fiancé, so goodbye!"

And Hope tightened her grip on George's arm as he twisted suddenly, pulling her away from the crowd and out of the hospital entirely to reappear outside their house and Hope hadn't realized just how much she'd missed it.

"Oh, do we have a date, now?" he asked, grinning widely at her, spinning his arms around her waist.

"I thought I was making up lost time with you, love?" Hope responded slyly, standing on her tip-toes and winding her arms around his neck.

"I can't wait," George said, his voice heavy and Hope could feel some heat return to her cheeks before he kissed her, and all Hope could feel was her mouth on hers and cold wind around them as she responded eagerly.

And it was moments like that that Hope wanted to last for an eternity.
George was the first one to wake up to sunlight pouring through the window, filtering through the crimson curtain that had been drawn in the night. It was still early, he knew, about the time he usually woke up to help Fred open the shop…well, maybe he'd slept in a little…

He sat up in the bed, raking a hand through his hair before glancing to his side. Hope was still fast asleep beside him, curled in the opposite direction with an arm tucked under one pillow. The sheets were swathed around, yet at the same time, some of her skin was exposed, predominantly her back. The blooming blue iris on her shoulder was as clear as day (There had been more than one occasion where he had traced its outline with his mouth until Hope had twisted to knot her fingers in his hair and kiss him with a fierce fire), even with her long hair spilling around her.

George knew Hope's body far too well, he knew her scars and imperfections as well as he knew his own. He traced his fingers over the claw-like scars on her side that she had gotten from Yaxley during her sudden departure from the Ministry with Hermione, Ron, and Audrey the previous year, and Hope shifted under his touch, but she didn't awaken. He pressed a kiss to one of the iris' petals just to see what she would do.

Hope didn't start to rouse until a few moments later –she always was an early riser–, turning her head towards him with a sleepy smile and he wrapped an arm loosely around her waist, moving to nuzzle his face into her neck.

"Morning, beautiful," he hummed and Hope laughed, curling her fingers into his hair as she turned back towards him. The sheets still protected her modesty, which George thought was a tragedy (though it would take very little effort to remove them).

Her fingers trailed from his hair to smooth over the line of his jaw, thumbing the small mark just under his jaw that she had left on him the previous night.

"You're adorable," she said like she wasn't sporting a love bite at the base of her throat and another along her collarbone.

"I am not!" George responded, mock-affront colouring his voice, his body caging her to the mattress, but when had Hope ever minded that.

"You so are," Hope sniggered, "and I love you for it."

"I am a sexy beast!"

"Of course, love."

George pouted, dropping his weight onto her in retribution and Hope released a small "Oof!" but she didn't voice any complaints.

"I don't remember you complaining last night," George mentioned before ducking forward to trail hungry kisses up the line of her throat and to the edge of her mouth, which curled at the attention.

"You can be adorable and be sexy," Hope smiled, "there's no need to pick and choose."

Her eyes swept over his bared flesh with a bit of amusement, taking note of the light scratches on his
back and what looked to be something akin to a bite mark on his shoulder. Judging from that alone it could easily be assumed that Hope was the more aggressive of the two in bed, but, like it had been since the day they'd met, the pair always struggled for control, and George wasn't a stranger to marking Hope. (Besides, most of his marks were hidden by those damned sheets)

"Don't you have work today?" Hope asked as his face fell against her chest with an audible groan.

"No," he lied and Hope smiled.

"You should go get ready," Hope said, carding her fingers through his hair as his arms dug under her to trail lightly up the divots of her spine; that didn't help things. Hope predictably arched in his arms. "I'll make breakfast."

He lifted his head, his eyes glittering. "Are we doing lunch together?"

"Sorry, no dice," Hope replied regretfully, "after I study for a few hours I'm heading over to Athens to have lunch with Aggie...I think she also has something she wants me to look at too...she was very vague on the mirror..."

George groaned. "Your sister is trying to steal you away from me!" he declared.

"This coming from the man who sees his own brother every day?" Hope arched an eyebrow for good measure.

"I admit to nothing," George said, finally drawing himself off of Hope and striding shamelessly towards the closet, not caring that he was naked; it was only the two of them in the house, after all, and Hope had never minded. He tossed her a roguish wink over his shoulder. "You could always join me, you know."

Now that was a bad idea waiting to happen. Hope could vividly remember the last time George had enticed her into the shower –for conservation of water's sake, obviously– and George had ended up being over two hours late to work on one of the busiest days yet. Fred had tossed her a look when she had dropped by for lunch that clearly said he thought it was all her fault.

"Better not," Hope sighed, pulling herself out of the bed, still clutching the sheets to her despite knowing full well he had seen everything there was to see before, and bending to grab her pyjamas where they had been discarded the previous night. She stood on her tip toes to kiss his lips lightly. "Or you'll never get out of the house," she said with a sly smile.

George disappeared behind the door with a muffled complaint that only had Hope laughing more as she tugged his overly-large shirt that she tended to sleep in over her head, searching around for the bottoms –and knowing full well that George would definitely not mind her not wearing them– before making her way down the stairs.

It was blissful, being back home, but Hope would probably enjoy it more if she didn't have her exams stressing her out.

She'd only just taken her Astronomy and History of Magic NEWTs, and that left her with the Charms and Transfiguration exams at the end of the week, and Defence Against the Dark Arts with Potions at the end of the next week. It was a completely hectic schedule, but at least Daphne was sharing her suffering.

Really it was their fault for dropping everything to take off to Elysium (though if they hadn't, they'd be facing death by the hands of monsters, so it seemed a bit like a no-win scenario, but Hope's whole life had seemed a bit like a no-win scenario, if you asked her), forgetting about those pesky little
But it wasn’t like Hope wasn’t unfamiliar with anything that was covered in those books, what she really needed was a review of everything. Besides, Gringotts had already expressed a heightened interest in hiring her; there weren’t exactly all that many people going out of their way to study the Ancient Arts, and just because the British Ministry for Magic was labelled it a Dark Art didn’t mean that anyone else had done the same.

Hope cracked the eggs and stirred them together before dumping the contents into a skillet on the stove, poking at it absently as she picked up the envelope on the counter, pulling out the card within.

*You are cordially invited to attend the marriage of Fred Weasley and Angelina Johnson on December fifth at six o’clock in the evening at West Yorkshire’s Chapel.*

Hope smiled.

The chapel had been out of use for years, but Angelina had always liked it when she was young, and Fred probably would’ve married her at the Burrow if that was what she wanted—though, that would be where the reception was— and he’d only been so happy to comply to her simple request. Of course, that didn’t mean the chapel was run-down, only that it had a bit more of a rustic feel. Angelina had walked past the chapel a great deal when she was younger and it had left a bit of an impression on her.

And the wedding party was going to be a bit larger than previously anticipated, if Angelina’s vexed expression when she and Fred had arrived the previous night to have dinner with Hope and George was any indicator, though that might have had something to do with how both were important in the ending of the Second Wizarding War.

There were several very important figures to be in attendance. Hope herself drew enough attention, but Kingsley would be attending as well, and he was the Minister of Magic, and all the members of the Order of the Phoenix and the Resistance were invited.

The Daily Prophet had been all over being the ones to document the wedding, but the only photographer allowed at the wedding was going to be one of Fred and Angelina’s choosing, particularly since they knew how untrustworthy the Daily Prophet could be.

Hope ran a hand through her hair, brushing her locks out of her face before adding sausages to the mix as George made his way down the stairs. She glanced towards him only to laugh at the look on his face.

"What’s the matter?" she asked. "Fred mad at you for being late to work?"

"More like annoyed," George conceded, fixing the clashing magenta robes over his shoulders, ducking forward to kiss her lightly on the cheek. "He and Angie are going to be gone for a few weeks after the wedding, but some of that will end up being on WWW’s Christmas holiday, still, he’s going to have me in charge of things while he and Angie are off on their honeymoon, which isn’t *that* big of a deal…"

Hope’s lips curled as he rambled on a bit absent-mindedly as she turned off the stove and reached for a plate to shovel half the eggs and sausages onto.

Fred and George didn’t really need to work, but she knew well enough that they liked to have some level of control over their inventions.

"You’re going to burn yourself, love," Hope mentioned as he swallowed a mouthful of the eggs,
despite her taking them off the stove only a few moments earlier.

"No time," he said around the eggs before giving her another kiss and dashing off with a shout of "See you at dinner!" leaving Hope a bit flummoxed, amused, but flummoxed as she went off to find one of her books.

The Department of Curse-Breaking in Athens, Greece was rather renowned for its rather large collection of ancient artefacts, which were showcased in their museum once they were through being examined and catalogued, and it wasn't amiss to find others examining the collection of artefacts, but rarely did someone do it within the walls of the Department of Curse-Breaking (the museum was a separate entity), where the displayed artefacts were waiting to be moved to the museum.

Director Galen Argyrius narrowed his eyes slightly in suspicion, taking note of the figure examining a scroll from Ramses II's tomb. All that could be seen from his position was her long dark red hair falling down her back, with her coat looped under her arms, into which had been carved a vast number of runes that caused his suspicion to change to intrigue.

"It's a rather fascinating piece, wouldn't you agree?" he asked her and the young woman started, turning towards him in surprise. She had green eyes and a scar the shape of a lightning bolt on her forehead that made it clear who she was, but Director Argyrius wasn't so rude as to point it out. "Director Galen Argyrius," he said, extending a hand to her and she took it with a firm grasp.

"Hope Potter," the woman replied with a slight smile, "forgive me, I was waiting for my sister—we're having lunch together—and I got a bit distracted." The smile turned a bit sheepish.

"We don't mind," he assured her, gesturing towards the entirety of the department, where several groups of people could be seen hard at work and others rushing about. "Artefacts are meant to be marvelling.

Hope gave a hum of agreement.

"Though, I must admit I'm a bit surprised," he added and her eyes, which had drifted back to the papyrus, snapped back to him, "the British government has always labelled the Ancient Arts as a Dark Art…"

"Oh, you mean my blood runes." Hope flexed her arms, making the carefully carved sigils shift. "I've never put much stock in their laws concerning the Ancient Arts, besides, I was about fourteen or fifteen when I started carving them and no one's really mentioned it…apart from my friends complaining about me mutilating myself…"

Now that was a bit amusing to say the least.

"Hey, there you are!"

The director turned to see one of his Rune Analysts, Agathe Blackwood, rushing forward, her boots causing her to skid across the floor. And it was only when she had come to a stop that she realized just who Hope was talking to.

"Ah! Director Argyrius!" she choked. "This is, uh, surprising."

The man arched an eyebrow and Hope stifled a snort. "RA Blackwood, I hope you're aware that I'm the one that hired you."

Agathe's face lit up bright red. "Well, I, it's just…I'm just going to go out to lunch with my sister, I'll
be back in an hour!" And then she was tugging Hope towards the door, barely giving Hope any time to call over her shoulder, "It was nice to meet you!"

He could faintly hear threats of murder under the Rune Analyst's breath, but Hope didn't appear too concerned as she was steered out of the building.

"Okay, so we need to be able to do non-verbal spells…" Hope said, her wand twisted up in her hair as she looked through the charms books, "but that's not really an issue, we've been doing non-verbals for awhile now."

Daphne hummed in agreement, hiking her hair up into a blonde ponytail, letting it whip her face as she shook her head back and forth. "I think the real issue is going to be the spells themselves and remembering the movements of the wand."

Hope chewed on her lip. "You're probably not wrong."

"Still, I think the likelihood of us failing these tests on Friday are pretty slim," Daphne added, "I think we'd had to do pretty downright terrible in order to fail."

"Just give me an A and I'll be set for life," Hope repeated under her breath, praying to Hecate loud enough to make Daphne snort.

"Don't tell me you're going to be pulling a few more all-nighters like last time?"

"All-nighters…the good old days," Hope gave a mournful sigh before uttering a loud complaint when Daphne threw her book to collide with Hope's forehead. "OW!"

"You know pulling all-nighters isn't that great of an idea when the exam is days away!"

"It's never stopped me before!" Hope declared, despite very vividly recalling how she'd been the day she'd had to take her exams, and half-dead might have been a better description of how she'd felt at the time, though the exam results had been worth it, Hope had found.

"Probably because you're the only one stupid enough to try it," Daphne retorted dryly as Hope tossed her book back towards her.

Their study session wasn't going too terribly, if Hope didn't say so herself. They'd covered a majority of the exam material in a matter of a few hours, that is, when they weren't being distracted by other things. Hermione had mirror-called once or twice to see how they were getting on with studying (being the type who had memorized their study schedules), and George had once to check and see how they were.

"It's a singular talent, I'm sure," Hope short back before pulling her book up both to look over a passage and to use the book as a shield if Daphne felt the need to throw her book towards her head once more.

Daphne snorted as the front door opened and shut again and a moment later George appeared, taking note of Hope, Daphne, and the mass of books surrounding them as they sat before the fire.

"Hello, Daphne," he said before crouching down to kiss Hope's brow.

"George," Daphne responded without so much as a blink.

"Busy day, ladies?"
"Something like that," Hope sighed, rubbing her hands into her eyes, "let's just say when I'm done with all these exams, I'm going to be very happy."

"Then you've got to apply to Gringotts for a job," Daphne pointed out.

"Gringotts already wants me!"

"And the Department of Mysteries wants me but I've still got to apply like every other normal person that wants a job." Daphne's eyes rolled for good measure. "Though, it certainly does help."

Hope tilted her head back to pout petulantly to George. "Do you see what I had to put up with all day?"

"I'm sure it was so hard for you," George said with a light laugh, sitting down on the couch she was leaning against to smooth a soothing circle into her shoulder.

"So hard!" Hope lamented and Daphne laughed while George snorted.

"So, I guess your study session went well?" he asked.

"Oh, we've got this, no worries," Hope assured him.

Less than two weeks later Hope was seriously regretting her life choices.

"I told you all-nighters were a bad idea."

"Shut up."

If she was to look at Daphne, she would have seen her former-Slytherin friend in a remarkably similar position to hers. Between the pair of them, they looked like they needed two full days of sleep to recover the time they'd lost in studying when they could have been sleeping, and maybe a few meals added to the mix.

But they'd managed it, they'd completed the last of their exams, hopefully with flying colours. Now all that was left to do was wait until their results were finalized, hence the reason why they were meandering in the lobby of the Department of Magical Education, waiting for their results that day rather than waiting a few days.

"Is Astoria going back to Hogwarts?" Hope asked Daphne after a moment of silence and Daphne blinked in surprise.

Astoria would have attended her sixth year at Hogwarts if the whole Gates of Tartarus issue hadn't forced her and her sister and mother to seek refuge at Elysium, though Hope had never really seen her complain about it. But Hope did know that since the Gates had been shut Astoria had been given lessons at home by a tutor given how behind she'd gotten while at Elysium. (Hope could relate, Elysium had completely fucked up her schedule)

"I think she's planning on it," Daphne said with a frown, "I don't think Mum or Dad care if she'd rather stay home all year or go back to school, though, I think they like it when we're out of the house...they're a pair of disgusting saps." She made an exaggerated face of disgust as she thought about it, making Hope laugh.

"Like you and Dean, aren't?" she prompted.

"Dean and I are tasteful," Daphne said primly, leaning back in her chair in a way that made her look
proper and not sloppy (how she managed it, Hope wasn't quite sure, but it was likely that being raised Pure-blood might have had some effect). "And I'm going to move in with Dean once the Department of Mysteries hires me."

Hope didn't comment on her certainty; the Department of Mysteries did want her, after all.

"Isn't he sharing a flat with Seamus?" Hope asked, furrowing her brow as she thought hard.

She'd only been to the flat once, and she'd been a bit surprised by the size, but then again, it had been clearly made for two people, as opposed to her and George's old flat above the shop which had been made for one person—or a couple.

"Yes," Daphne said, smirking, "but he won't say anything especially if Ginny comes and stays the night."

Hope shook her head at the knowing glint in Daphne's eyes. "So that's a roundabout way of saying he doesn't mind having to live with you on top of Dean?"

And she'd meant that figuratively, not literally, thought, from the way that Daphne was looking at her, it was clear that she wouldn't mind being on top of Dean.

"Please," Daphne waved a hand carelessly, "Seamus loves me, I'm sure if he didn't like me hanging around he would have said something years ago."

Well, she probably wasn't wrong.

"I don't think we're ready for that big step, though," Daphne added, tilting her head, a look of contemplation overtaking her features, "I don't think Seamus and Ginny are either, so we could be living together for a few years...unless Dean and I end up getting our own places."

The big step, Hope knew, was marriage, and she could understand her wanting to wait. Most got married right out of Hogwarts, but she could understand the appeal of giving it some time. But Hope and George had been together far longer than Dean and Daphne or Seamus and Ginny, or even her parents when they'd been in school, and Hope found it far more appealing to be able to call George her husband (not that she'd ever tell him that).

They settled into silence again that was only broken by a stooping witch with grey hair so curly that it could have easily been a bundle of wily snakes and Hope would have believed it.

"Daphne Greengrass, Hope Potter," the witch said with a tremulous voice, "your NEWT results."

She then thrust the sealed envelopes towards the girls before disappearing back behind the swinging door before either of them could utter a "Thank you."

Hope broke the seal on hers easily, reading its contents on bated breath:

Nastily Exhausting Wizarding Tests Results

Pass Grades

Outstanding (O)

Exceeds Expectations (E)

Acceptable (A)
Fail Grades

Poor (P)

Dreadful (D)

Troll (T)

Hope Lily Potter has achieved:

Ancient Runes O

Astronomy E

Charms A

Defence Against the Dark Arts O

History of Magic E

Potions A

Transfiguration E

"Aw, you did better than me in Transfiguration, Ancient Runes, and Defence," Daphne complained, before Hope looked over her results.

"And you did better than me in Potions, Charms, and History of Magic," she pointed out with a light laugh before gathering up her coat. "Come on, I think the boys are waiting for us at The Three Broomsticks to hear the news."

Daphne's stomach gave an ominous growl. "Ah, yes, food, such a foreign concept…but we both know just how jealous you are of my results, darling."

Hope rolled her eyes at her friend's antics as they made their way to the lift, glad to have the weight of impending exams off her shoulders at long last.
George didn't understand it. She'd tried on three vastly different outfits in the time span of five minutes and each one had been discarded, leaving Hope looking even more doubtful than when she'd started.

Her hair was twisted into a tight black knot on the top of her head, the color probably reflecting her current stress level.

"I thought the last one looked nice," George offered helpfully and Hope cast him a glance that clearly said she doubted the truth behind that.

"What you think looks nice and what Ragnok will consider nice are two very different things," Hope complained tossing another shirt onto the bed in her aggravation. "You thought what I wore yesterday was nice, and I'd never wear that in public."

George's lips twisted in amusement, remembering that pretty lace number that she'd come into bed wearing. "Well, you weren't wearing that for very long," he recalled slyly, but Hope ignored him.

"Goblins don't really care about beauty," Hope murmured to herself, "by their standards I'm rather ugly, so it'd probably be best to not go with anything flashy..."

"Hope, I don't know how to break it to you, but flashy has never been your style."

"Shush!" Hope pressed her hands against his mouth in order to silence the flow of his words, her eyes fixed on the closet, searching for something appropriate.

A second later she was tugging on a worn pair of jeans and a loose shirt the precise shade of blue that was George's eyes—her absolute favorite color—before sitting down on the edge of the bed to pull her boots up over her ankles and yanking her long red duster coat over her shoulders.

She struck a dramatic pose that was probably more for his benefit than hers. "What d'you think? Would you hire me to be a Curse-breaker?"

George considered her. There was definitely something distinctly rustic about her style, like she wouldn't be amiss in a pile of ruins. "I'd hire you, I'd probably put you to work right away."

And her eyes glittered hazel as she grinned at him before giving him a swift kiss and checking her watch. "I should probably get going; my appointment with Ragnok is in a half hour."

"Let me know how it goes!" George called after her as she rushed down the stairs only to race back up them once she realized she'd left her holster (complete with her wand and rune dagger) on the bedside table.

George couldn't help but chuckle at the flustered expression on her face as she rushed back down, disappearing out the door with an audible crack that made George quite sure that it wasn't likely for her return.

By Merlin, George loved that woman something fierce.

Hope was a bundle of nerves, but she tried not to let it show as she sat primly in front of Ragnok's desk as he looked over her paperwork, taking a purposefully long time, Hope knew, Ragnok had a
But Hope had passed her NEWTs and she had completed Gringotts specialized entrance exams just that morning, so she was good to go, but he was dragging his heels, just for the sake of stressing Hope out.

"Everything appears to be in order," he said once he could not avoid her any longer, "Gringotts would be lucky to gain a Curse-breaker with a skill in the Ancient Arts…but I wonder how you would feel about a liaison position?"

Hope's eyebrows furrowed. The liaison position in Gringotts was one that was quite infamous and Fleur and Bill had both spent a few weeks as the liaison before abruptly retiring from it. Bill called it the 'kill job' that the goblins liked to stick Curse-breakers into just to see how long they could last. It dealt with compromising between Curse-breaking agencies around the Wizarding world as well as within Gringotts between other Curse-breakers and Curse-breakers and Rune-Analysts.

It was a lot of hard work, Hope knew, but the pay was better than a starting Curse-breaker, mostly because of how much extra work was put into it. Bill claimed it was next to impossible to be the liaison and be a Curse-breaker.

"Well, I've never been in a liaison position," Hope acquiesced, getting the feeling that she was signing her life over by the feral-like grin the goblin threw in her direction.

"Good, I'll mark you down for it."

Hope floundered and she was sure it was rather clear on her face. "Er, I'm not entirely certain of all the things that being a liaison entails…"

"I'll get one of the Curse-breakers to explain it to you," Ragnok said without so much as a blink, "and you will be starting work the second week of January, yes?"

A dozen different questions were caught on the tip of her tongue but they were all abruptly silenced as she sighed. "Yes," she said, "I can start work in January."

"Excellent." Ragnok would have been smiling, but his bared teeth looked far too dangerous for the look to be taken as a smile. "Our current liaison will probably be finished with the job by then."

And Hope didn't really find that to be a comforting thought as she found herself shutting his office door behind her not five minutes later to find Fleur waiting outside it with a light smile.

"'Ow did eet go?" she asked eagerly as Hope fiddled with the edge of her red duster coat.

"I think he just hired me to be the next Department Liaison of Curse-breaking," Hope said bleakly and Fleur's smile fell into a grimace as she patted her arm unhelpfully.

"Bonne chance (Good luck)," Fleur said, laughing at the glare Hope gave her, "you're going to need it."

Hope could only press a hand against her forehead and mutter something unsavory under her breath.

December sixth was upon them sooner than thought possible, and Hope found herself in Athens with Agathe and Thalia (having danced out of reach from George with her dress in tow), pulling on the gown that had taken so much space up in her closet for so long.
She was right several months back when she'd told Angelina that the color was lighter than George's eyes, but it was only off by a few shades. The skirt was in three tiers and patterned with lace that swept just against the floor as she stood in her silver heels, and the bodice had a V-shaped boat neckline, patterned with lace that curled down her arms, her shoulders exposed. Her hair was as red as ever –Angelina had been rather specific about her not changing it for the wedding ("And since it's my wedding, you have to do what I say!")– but far curlier than its usual, swept just up slightly.

"You look lovely," Thalia assured her as Hope tugged on the edge of one of her curls.

"The problem is that the Daily Prophet is apparently holed up outside the chapel getting pictures of all the guests," Hope complained, brushing a curl out of her eyes. "Maybe I should change my face just for them…"

Thalia gave her a dry look. "And what would that solve?"

Hope huffed. She really didn't want to ruin Fred and Angelina's wedding. "How's Aggie coming along?" she asked instead, seeing as her sister was to be her plus one to the event.

"Complaining every other second," Thalia laughed. "She has never been one for dresses."

"I can understand that," Hope agreed, picking at the first tier of the skirt before Agathe made her appearance, her disdain clear on her pinched face.

"First of all," she said with vexation, "I hate dresses, second of all—" She lifted the hem of the skirt to show black heels. "I hate heels!"

Agathe, for all her aggravation, was breathtaking a dress of deep blue, hugging her curves in just the right ways, the material drawing up over one shoulder while leaving the other exposed, a thick patterns around her middle beyond which her skirt belled out, fluttering around her legs. The kinked curls in her hair looked as pretty on her as they had on Ginny for Bill and Fleur's wedding.

"You're lucky I like you, Potter," she sniffed, "I don't just put on a dress for anyone."

"What about for Ajax?" Hope smirked as Thalia rushed off to get a camera. "Would you wear one for him?"

"I think he'd like me much better without it on, if you get my drift." She gave Hope a saucy wink and Hope didn't bother to stifle her snort of amusement.

"Come on, we'd better go, we're going to be late," Hope added, checking the clock mounted on the wall.

"We're going to be early," Agathe disagreed, fluffing her hair, her lips pouted. "If only Ajax could see me now…he'd probably laugh himself to death."

"Is he still at the hospital?"

"He's pulling a double shift, but he says to give Angelina and Fred his congratulations, even though he doesn't really know them…"

Hope's lips curled in wry amusement. Ajax had barely spoken with Angelina, and that had been when they were considering options to help with her reopening wound issue, and he had never met Fred, but he'd met George (barely) and using his words "They're identical, so it's like I've already met him!" Hope didn't understand his logic, but she didn't comment on it either. "I'm sure they'll appreciate it either way," she assured her sister. "Ready to go?"
"Yes—"

"You two aren't going anywhere until I get a decent picture of the pair of you," Thalia barked, reappearing out of the shadows in a manner befitting of a descendant of Thanatos.

"Mum!" two voices complained.

"Give me this one thing, Agathe, Hope," Thalia retorted, faintly amused by their responses, "I don't have nearly enough pictures of the pair of you."

"Ugh," Agathe exaggerated the sound, but they both did as was requested of them, wrapping arms over shoulders and smiling as the flash caught their eyes.

The chilly wind battered them as they walked up the steps of the chapel. Hope could see an assortment of flower bouquets set outside, the flowers a mixture of red and yellow –Angelina and Fred were Gryffindors to the core, after all– but the thing that made her grimace had to be the photographers perched outside the entrance, clearly knowing they weren't allowed to photograph the wedding, so they were trying to get as many people as they could on their way in.

And this was why Hope really hated the press, especially when they swarmed towards her at the sight of her trademark red hair and the scar on her forehead clear as day from the fierce wind.

"Hope! Hope, give us a comment!"

"Tell us about your date; is the engagement called off?"

Hope kept an arm on Agathe who scowled at them, before striding past, her face set into a blank mask until they'd made it into the warmth of the chapel, hanging up their coats before allowing themselves a moment to survey the area.

Angelina had always liked the simple things, something that had no doubt come from being both an orphan in Angelina's case, and growing up with very little money in Fred's case, and the chapel reflected that. There were bouquets of flowers against the edge of the aisle seats, of course, but they were small and simple with daylilies and poppies. They weren't flowers Hope would have chosen, but this was Angelina's day and in the end it was only her and Fred's opinions that mattered.

Agathe tilted her head back to look up in awe above them where enchanted snow appeared to fall, vanishing before in could make contact with the guests' heads. "It's like a slice of a winter wonderland," Agathe remarked, impressed.

"You're late," came a second voice and Hope's lips curled as Hermione made her way forward, her curls in a sleek knot and her lilac skirt swirling around her legs as she moved.

"A witch is never late," Hope declared, "nor is she early, she arrives precisely when she means to!"

Hermione laughed at the altered phrase, surging forward to wrap her arms around Hope before leaning back to examine her.

"I'm fine," Hope said, noticing her looking her over and being quite familiar with Hermione's concern towards her. "Really, I've been healed for awhile now."

"Well, you are a bit prone to injuries…"

Hope sulked and Agathe snorted. "I'm not entirely sure I want to know."
"That's probably best," Hermione agreed before holding out a hand to Agathe. "Hi, I'm Hermione, I don't think we had the chance to be properly introduced."

"Aggie," Agathe said with a light smile, taking her hand, "Well, Agathe Blackwood to be particular, but I'm not really."

Hope and Agathe shared a laugh and Hermione smiled, but it was clear that she was a bit out of the loop.

"How's class going?" Hope asked her as they searched for their seats amidst the sea of gathering people, greeting friends they knew as they moved past.

"It's not as difficult as I thought it would be," Hermione admitted, "I think I was over-studying before school started up again."

"You were studying before class had even begun?" Agathe asked, faintly startled.

"That does tend to happen when you're as studious as Hermione is," Hope mentioned towards her, remarkably unperturbed by the knowledge, but then again, she had known Hermione for years now. "Trust me, she'll probably get straight O's on her NEWTs."

Hermione's cheeks turned a shade of pink that wouldn't have been noticeable as a color change from anyone who didn't know her as well.

"Now where is that best man?" Hope asked, looking around for any indication of her fiancé. "I hear he's something delicious."

Hermione sighed in exasperation and Agathe choked in her effort to stifle her amusement; it was likely that Hope and George were never going to stop that game of theirs.

Then Hope couldn't see a single thing as a pair of hands covered her eyes.

"Delicious best man?" came George's voice, his laughing mouth close to her ear, "watch what you say, Potter, I hear that fiancé of yours is a jealous bloke."

"He has his days," Hope responded, grinning widely as she tilted her head back, still with her eyes covered, allowing him to plant a kiss against her lips. "He's not as good of a kisser as you are."

George snorted as he removed his hands to wrap around Hope's where they rested on her hips. "You look stunning," he mentioned, pressing a light kiss to her cheek. "Hello, Hermione, Aggie."

"You two are complete saps," Agathe remarked, rolling her eyes.

"You should have seen them back in school," Hermione said, raising a hand to rub at the bridge of her nose, "completely shameless."

Agathe linked an arm with Hermione, an amused glint in her eye. "I think you and I should talk, Hermione, I need to hear these stories."

Hope ignored them, dropping her hands to cup George's where they rested on her hips, smoothing circles into his hands with her thumbs. "How's Fred?" she asked George.

"Pacing, having a small panic attack…I think he's more concerned with if Angie abandons him at the altar."

"Fat chance of that," Hope snorted, before glancing beyond him, "hey, you haven't seen your sister,
have you?"

Ginny, Hermione, and all those invited to the wedding that were still in school had been given a pass by McGonagall, who would be in attendance as well, but it was a Friday, and most classes were done by the time guests were expected to show up.

"Probably off with Seamus somewhere," George said, wrinkling his nose, his eyes shifting towards the dark corners of the chapel as if expecting to see his sister there with her boyfriend.

Remus and Tonks were close to the front, an aisle behind Hope and Agathe, with a squabbling Teddy squirming in Tonks' arms, Fleur and Bill were in the front row with Bill resting an arm around his wife's shoulders, his fingers tangling in the end of her blonde plait, Mrs. Weasley was dressed in the same amethyst-colored robes that she had worn to Bill and Fleur's wedding (maybe she liked the color or maybe she considered the robes to be preferred at a wedding), leaning on her husband's arm as she smiled, greeting other guests.

Hope saw the other members of the Resistance and the last remaining ones of the Order, but before she had a chance to greet them everyone was starting to make their way to their seats.

"Gotta run, love," George said, casting a wink towards Hope as he removed himself from her to return to the altar where Fred was standing with Lee (being the only groomsman apart from George), the nervous tension clear on him in the tightness of his jaw and the way his leg shook just slightly.

Fred's eyes found hers when they'd found their seats and Hope flashed him a double thumbs up, earning her a slight grin for her efforts. (George tried not to look amused at his side)

The softly spun tune that had greeted them when they entered the chapel swelled around them, fading into the background slightly as the main doors, which had been previously shut swung open.

Hope twisted in order to see and she couldn't help but be in awe.

She was absolutely breathtaking.

Her gown was modest and simplistic –though, Hope got the feeling that that was the intent– but clearly of good quality. The gown lacked any straps or sleeves of any kind, the bodice molded into a sweetheart neckline made with spiraling lace that descended from the top of the bodice past her hips to form a sharp angle, the white material flaring out underneath.

She cut an impressive figure and her face was positively glowing as she moved forward carefully, her dreadlocks swinging with every step, until she came to stand beside Fred, whose eyes hadn't left her from the moment she had stepped into view.

The pair seemed so caught up with each other that they hardly seemed to notice Alicia and Katie who had both followed Angelina in identical dresses of deep scarlet (a contrast to the lighter dresses that bridesmaids were known to don, but whoever said the former Gryffindor Chasers didn't look wonderful in red was kidding themselves).

The wizard standing at the altar with them cleared his throat to speak as Fred and Angelina joined hands and Hope wasn't entirely certain that she'd seen anyone smile so much. "Ladies and gentlemen," the wizard said, "we are gathered here today to celebrate the union of two faithful souls into one..."

Agathe gave a breathless sigh beside her and Hope could relate, her eyes soft as she listened to the heart-wrenching vows Fred and Angelina gave to one another, making promises to fulfill for as long as they both lived. And then she glanced towards George to find him already looking to her with a
Hope's feet were rather sore by ten o'clock that night and that was entirely the Resistance's fault. Once the instruments started playing upbeat tunes, Hope had been yanked onto the dance floor, and at this point, she wasn't even sure who had started it all, but she felt it had gotten rather out of control very fast...but that might have had something to do with the fireworks that had been released.

The likely culprit was Fred, but he wasn't admitting to it, even with a cheeky grin on his newly-married face as his mother attempted to voice her displeasure about the whole thing.

"You should probably ask me to dance before I collapse from exhaustion," Hope laughed as she held out a hand to George, who had been watching her dances with the Resistance with amusement (but it wasn't as though he hadn't danced with other members as well).

"And we wouldn't want that," George snorted as the music slowed and the fast-beat dancers dispersed to allow the slow-dancers their opportunity.

Hope had lost track of Agathe, but the last she'd seen of her was when she was howling with Ginny while Seamus tried to go a funny looking jig. Fred and Angelina, blissfully man and wife, weren't too far from them as Hope wrapped her arms around George's neck and swayed with him, and several of the older couples were moving towards the dance floor now that they didn't have to worry about keeping up with the beat. But Ron was still having trouble coaxing his girlfriend out for one last dance.

"When do you want to get married?" Hope asked him suddenly after a few peaceful moments had passed.

George didn't appear very surprised by the question, to his credit, and then, as though he had given it great thought, said: "August 31."

Hope's throat swelled shut as she remembered the first day she'd met him, the first day he had come into her life, back when he was that curious lanky boy and she was the short thin girl with a brace over one leg.

"Sounds like a date," Hope said, sealing it with a kiss.
"You know it's bad luck for the groom to see the bride on the wedding day."

"And when have you ever believed in back luck?" George arched an eyebrow.

"Lady Tyche is great and should be feared as much as Echidna," Hope intoned seriously, "though, if I was the mother of monsters I think I'd like to be more feared than Lady Luck."

George pressed a kiss to her cheek, wrapping an arm around her shoulder, rubbing circles into her skin in a soothing manner.

The sunlight was piercing through the trees and dappling the grass as Hope considered the set up in front of them. They had decided to have the wedding in the Forest of Morea, which was mostly Hope's idea, but she'd clasped her hands together and made her eyes big and a pout clear on her lips. Personally, she didn't think George had anything against the revenue, only that he wanted to see how far she was willing to beg to get it.

In the Forest of Morea there was a clearing overshadowed by a great tree that was split at the roots and then grew together to overshadow the clearing under its oak leaves. It was by far the biggest tree Hope had seen in all her life, and the altar-esque wall it was warped at the base was the thing that had first drawn her to it for use in the wedding.

Hanging wisteria flowers were wrapped around the branches over their heads, the chain of flowers dangling high above them and wrapped around the makeshift altar, but were still beautiful to gaze upon, and on the green grass that Hope found herself standing on were rows upon rows of carved wooden seats.

"There's going to be too many guests," she sighed, running a hand through her hair, tangling her fingers into the loose bun she'd pulled it into that morning. The wedding wasn't for at least four more hours, so she had some time to spare.

"Well, that's what you get for being so famous." George crooked an eyebrow and Hope gave another sigh.

Their guest list included: all the respective members of the Order of the Phoenix and the Resistance, the Minister of Magic himself (being a part of the first grouping), all of their professors from Hogwarts, their respective families (with George's being much larger than Hope's) though with no Auntie Muriel for which Hope was grateful, the last of the Triwizard Tournament champions, several old schoolmates…the list went on.

Neither of them had really been planning on a wedding party as large as the one they ended up with, but you would be surprised just how many people wanted to be a guest at Hope Potter's wedding.

"I regret my life choices," Hope decided, pinching the bridge of her nose as she did so before considering the wedding area and biting her frowning lip. "Maybe it's too much…"

George was no stranger to this viewpoint from his fiancée; she had been changing her mind every other hour since they had first had the area decorated.

"You asked for Parvati's help remember? Because she has a better head for design?" George reminded her. He hadn't had any skill in weddings, and neither had Hope, but hiring Parvati for the job—which she had taken to with an enthusiastic fervor– had ended up being the best idea they'd had.
thus far. And it couldn't be denied that Parvati would get some attention for being the wedding designer for Hope Potter's wedding.

"I know," Hope groaned, pressing her hands into her face, "but what if something goes wrong? You know something always goes wrong with us."

George opened his mouth and shut it just as abruptly. She wasn't wrong, things did tend to go wrong with them.

In March there had been an accident when Fred and George had been trying to create a new invention that had quite literally exploded in their faces and resulted in a week-long stay at St. Mungo's and then there'd been an accident when Hope was collaborating with Agathe on a project that involved ancient treasure lost at sea and Hope had nearly drowned. They were no stranger to bad luck.

"Nothing will go wrong," George said with a forced certainty, "unless you're getting cold feet?"

He arched an eyebrow and grinned as Hope huffed in annoyance. "You know I'm not…the Daily Prophet won't show up, will they?"

"Ron and Hermione made sure to leak a separate location just in case they try to show up," George explained patiently, seeing as they'd had the same conversation before.

He grasped her arms, bending to press his brow against hers. "All the plans have been set for weeks now, Hope, I think you're just worrying yourself for no reason at this point."

Hope expelled a sharp breath. "You're sure we haven't missed something?"

"Yes," George said with a light vein of amusement, "I'm sure…I'm also sure that Ron is going to look hilarious as your 'bridesman'."

Hope swatted his arm as he sniggered. "He will not, he's going to look as handsome as anyone else, and it's not like he's wearing a dress like Hermione."

Now that would be a humorous image. Ron had been vaguely startled when she'd asked him, since they were 'bridesmaids' for a reason, usually being made up of all females, but also flattered, because he had honestly expected to be just Hermione.

"Maybe you should let me see that dress of yours," George added, waggling his eyebrows for good measure and Hope leaned back to laugh.

"The point, Georgie, is that you're surprised when you see me in it," she retorted, resting her hands on his shoulders, "besides, it's having a few last minute alterations done."

"That's cutting it a bit close, don't you think?"

"Yes," Hope agreed, "but I do need room in my gown to breathe, so…" She gave a shrug. "But don't worry, Georgie, I'm looking forward to the look on your face when you see me at one today."

She shot him a saucy wink over her shoulder as she made her way out of the enclosure and it took George a few seconds to remember to breathe.

At twelve o'clock, Hope found herself in a tent set up just outside sight of the altar and the aisles of seats, some of which were already holding their guests. But Hope was a bundle of nerves, pacing...
and waiting impatiently until the tent flap opened and Agathe entered—wearing a soft green gown patterned like leaves—with a wide grin, her arms carrying a loose package as Ajax followed behind her.

"I've got it!" Agathe sang, her shoulders doing a little wiggle as she stepped forward and Hope couldn't help but be relieved, surging forward to grasp the packaging. "Just finished!"

"Oh, thank the gods," Hope muttered, pulling the zipper down to reveal the fabric within, pulling the gown free with care.

"I'll go guard the tent with Ron," Ajax volunteered before disappearing outside to allow Hope the privacy with Agathe, Hermione, and Thalia to change from her loose clothes into the pure white dress.

The minute she'd seen her mother's wedding dress she'd known she'd never want to wear anything like it. Hope's interests in dress styles had always drifted more towards Greek, and she still remembered how much she'd liked wearing that blue-green dress of hers to the Yule Ball in her fourth year.

But this dress was perfect. There were no others like it and it had been made from scratch with her wishes in mind.

Thalia knew entirely too many people, Hope had long since decided, but it just so happened that an old friend of hers had a daughter in the dress-making business and the girl in question, young Eris Kritikos, had been entirely too eager in coming up with designs for Hope, knowing full well what kind of business it would bring her if she was revealed to be the one who had designed Hope Potter's wedding gown.

The dress was so long that it swept along the grass, even with the heeled shoes that she was wearing for the occasion, with a stooping V-shaped neckline with a high silver pattern beneath the breast. The material hung loose around her, though still flattering, with some material being connected to her wrists by a similar silver pattern.

"You look perfect," Hermione told her, walking around her for any sight of tears of any kind that could be fixed or covered before she walked out of the tent. "George is going to lose it."

Hope laughed as Hermione pulled out the box that Hope hadn't touched hardly since she'd found it in Grimmauld Place more than one year ago. "Sirius would've been pleased to see you wearing this on your wedding day."

"He would've," Hope agreed, her fingers brushing against the silver coiled snake with an emerald lodged in its jaws. Then she permitted Hermione to clasp it behind her neck.

"How much time to we have?" Agathe asked.

"An hour yet," Thalia remarked, steering Hope towards a chair to force her into, "more than enough time, I think."

Hope wrinkled her nose as Agathe pulled out the make-up bag and Thalia began brushing her hair back. Her eyes jumped to Hermione. "Can you go make sure nothing's gone wrong? And check on George for me?"

"Sure," Hermione smiled. "I'll be back soon."
"She wanted me to check on you."

If Hope was nervous, then George was downright jittery, he kept running his palms down the front of his robes, shifting his weight from one foot to the next and he struggled to maintain a level voice. "Me? I'm fine."

Fred snorted, rolling his eyes towards Lee who sniggered for good measure.

"How's she?" George asked instead and Hermione gave him a shrewd look.

"Rather like you," she said, "but I think she's handling it better."

"That's likely," George and Fred said as one.

"Just hold out for an hour," Hermione said, "then you can see her."

Somehow that only seemed to increase his nerves.

Hope's heart was hammering in her chest when Thalia and Agathe left to take their seats, leaving her with Hermione and Ron.

"Deep breaths," Ron advised, reaching a hand out to her in case she needed steadying, but Hope clutched his hand like it was her lifeline.

"If I thought that getting married was this nerve-wracking, I would've told George no from the start," Hope muttered through her teeth.

"You would not," Hermione disagreed, rolling her eyes as Remus entered the tent, his hair looking less grey than usual, if that was possible, and when he saw Hope, he smiled.

Then he offered her his arm and kissed her cheek lightly. "Your father would be proud if he could see you now."

And Hope smiled and took the arm of the man escorting her down the aisle.

"Are you ready?"

"More than I'll ever be," Hope agreed and they stepped out into the sunlight.

The smooth melody grew soft and heads turned back in order to catch a glimpse of the bride as she approached and there were several "Ooh!"s of surprise, but it was only as they came closer that George found he had to swallow a few times to regain the use of his tongue.

Hope had opted to disregard wearing a veil, she had claimed there wasn't much of a point to them, anyways. Her hair was the deep red that he loved and piled in curls on her head secured in place by silver bands, light glanced off the emerald resting at the hollow of her throat, and the bouquet of blue irises was to be expected, but the dress itself took the wind completely out of him.

Her smile was wide and she was positively glowing as she was led down the aisle, Hermione and Ron walking after her and moving to her side of the altar which had been previously vacant.

Remus didn't say anything as Hope reached a hand to intertwine with George's as she reached his side, but he did cast him a knowing glance, as though he was saying "You're the clear choice."

But Hope's eyes never left George's as she settled herself to stand opposite him, and before the
officiating witch, handing her bouquet off to Hermione.

"Ladies and gentlemen," the witch said, "we are gathered here today to celebrate the union of two faithful souls into one. Through their time together, George and Hope have come to realize that their personal dreams, hopes, and goals are more attainable and more meaningful through the combined effort and mutual support provided in love, commitment, and family; and so they have decided to live together as husband and wife."

George saw Hope take in a silent deep breath and release it just as quietly and he thanked Merlin that she was just as nervous as he was.

"True marriage is more than joining the bonds of marriage of two persons; it is the union of two hearts," the officiating witch spoke, her voice rough from age and echoing around in the silence. "It lives on the love you give each other and never grows old, but thrives on the joy of each new day. Marriage is love. May you always be able to talk things over, to confide in each other, to laugh with each other, to enjoy life together, and to share moments of quiet and peace, when the day is done. May you be blessed with a lifetime of happiness and a home of warmth and understanding."

George could hear his mother sobbing in the first row and Thalia sniffling, but the only thing he could focus on was the young woman in front of him.

"You were born together, and together you shall be forevermore. You shall be together when the white wings of death scatter your days. But let there be spaces in your togetherness, and let the winds of the heavens dance between you. Love one another, but make not a bond of your love; let it rather be a moving sea between the shores of your soul. Fill each others' cups but drink not from one cup. Give one another of your bread but eat not from the same loaf. Sing and dance together and be joyous, but let each one of you be alone. Even as the strings of a lute are alone, though they quiver with the same music. Give your hearts, but not into each other's keeping. For only the hand of Life can contain your hearts. And stand together yet not too near together: for the pillars of the temple stand apart, and the oak tree and the cypress grow not in each other's shadow."

Their officiator might have said something more, but George quickly lost track of it staring into Hope's eyes.

"I understand the both of you have chosen to write your own vows? George, perhaps you'd like to speak first?"

The startled expression on his face appeared to amuse Hope faintly, but he turned away to reach a hand towards Fred who handed him a folded piece of parchment.

George cleared his throat.

"Hope Potter," he said, "you are the most aggravating human being I have ever come across."

Hope arched an eyebrow smirking.

"You're difficult and complicated and sometimes you never listen, but there isn't a thing about you I would change," he continued, his voice gaining strength. "We've both grown since that first day, August 31 of 1991, and I didn't realize how important you were going to be to me when I saw you then. We've chased each other through school and through war itself and even though we have experienced darkness and pain, we're still here, together, and I don't want it to be any other way."

Hope wiped at one eye, careful not to smudge the make-up that Agathe had so carefully crafted. "Dammit, Weasley, you're making me cry."
A titter of laughter flowed over the guests, particularly from the Resistance section.

"And your vows, Hope?" the officiating witch prompted.

"I didn't write them before hand," Hope admitted to him, "I've never been good at speeches."

George laughed and he wasn't the only one.

"You were the first person that tried to make me laugh and could never understand why you'd bother," Hope began, "because I was just that unfortunate Potter girl and here was a stranger offering me a kindness that I'd never known." She gave a thick swallow. "You showed me more than anyone else what love really was. I trusted you, expecting nothing in return, I loved you, expecting nothing in return. I would have been content being on my own until the day I died, but you showed me I didn't have to be alone."

Hope took another deep breath. "There was this old Greek myth I remember about the first humans created, how they had four arms, four legs, four eyes, two noses, and two mouths—"

"Terrifying," George said dryly, "is there a point?"

Hope glared and there was more laughter. "These humans terrified Zeus as he considered them a threat to his rule, so he split each human and left them to wander aimlessly in search of their other half…their soul mate. And I know that if you and I were one once, I would happily search the world for you just to be one once more."

George wanted to kiss her but he restrained himself.

"Now, the ring-bearer—"

Tonks lifted her son onto her hip, walking forward with a pillow stuck to his hand which held the two silver rings. Hope and George took their respective rings.

"Do you George Weasley, choose Hope Potter as your lifemate and one true love, promising to share in all that life offers and suffers, to be there for her in times of need, to soothe her in times of pain, and to support her in all endeavors, big and small?"

"I do," he said, and Hope slid the ring onto his finger.

"Do you Hope Potter, choose George Weasley as your lifemate and one true love, promising to share in all that life offers and suffers, to be there for him in times of need, to soothe him in times of pain, and to support him in all endeavors, big and small?"

"I do," Hope said and a silver ring joined her engagement ring of moonstone.

"Then I declare you bonded for life, you may now kiss the bride."

But George was already moving forward, spinning his arm around her waist and cradling her jaw in his hand as her hands caught in his robes, jerking him the rest of the way forward so their lips could meet.

There was an explosion of cheering but all Hope and George noticed were each other.

And then they parted and Hope's eyes gleamed. "Shall we, Husband?" She wrapped an arm around his own.

There was an excitement inside him hearing her call him 'husband' and he knew he'd never grow...
tired of it. "Always," he replied.
Epilogue

Chapter Notes

See the end of the chapter for notes

So many things had changed and it was still so odd for Hope to be standing at the platform waiting for the train to come in and for her children to exit it.

So many years had passed since any of the battles that Hope had taken a part in her youth, but they weren't even close to the end of her hardships. She could still remember the circumstances surrounding her second daughter's birth like they were yesterday, even though more than eleven years had passed, the complications that had kept her and George from having anymore children (though after four they thought that was good enough).

But the sun was shining and the day was new and Hope was happy with how her life was. She was still the Department Liaison of Curse-breaking even after more than a decade, which had come as more of a surprise to her coworkers than anything, given how feared that position was.

"They're late," proclaimed a petulant voice at her side and Hope shared a smile with her husband.

Hemera Blackwood II was named for her cousin, but that never seemed to bother her. She had her mother's fiery hair, her father's dark eyes, and with a complexion a few shades too light to compare to her father.

"Sometimes that happens, Mera," Hope said with a laugh, running a hand through the girl's hair, making her squawk in indignation, shooing her hand away. "Don't you want to see your cousins?"

Hemera ignored her, darting around to George, who was evidently her favorite of the day. "Uncle George," she appealed to him, tugging on his arm, "can we all play Quidditch together after?"

"If you can rally the troops," George laughed, knowing full well that she'd have no difficulty there and Hemera's eyes positively glowed.

The scarlet train pulled into the station slowly, steam overflowing and Hope couldn't help but smile at the sight of it, squeezing George's hand briefly where it interlocked hers and he gave one in return, pressing a light kiss high on her cheekbone. It had been nerve-wracking enough when they had first sent the twins off and Hope had been terrified, knowing all that she had gotten up to in school, but that time was over, this was a time of peace, and Hope had learned to part with her children little by little, comforted by the knowledge that they would return sooner or later.

The train came full stop and the doors opened and students flooded through. Hope was met with stares, even after so many years, but she had grown used to them, her eyes only focusing on the four children leaving the train with wide grins.

James and Sirius were the first out, their hands moving as they talked and Hope was certain she saw the pranking book she had given them for their previous birthday in James' hands.

But then they saw their parents and wide grins adorned their lips as they embraced their mother and father, recounting in detail of their most recent prank.

James and Sirius were their first borns and were the most difficult for Hope to carry, she'd ended up having them early in St. Mungo's by three weeks. They were identical and had inherited their mother's hair and their father's eyes, and though they, like all of Hope's children, had inherited her
Metamorphosing skill, they settled on a single look, much like Hope did. And like both of their parents, they had been sorted into Gryffindor immediately and became Beaters in their third year.

"How did McGonagall feel about it?" George asked eagerly and Hope rolled her eyes while Hemera laughed.

"Wasn't too pleased," James conceded.

"But Uncle Neville thought it was rad!" Sirius added.

Hope shook her head as her third child approached. Lily’s fiery coil of hair was mounted high on her head, her wand stuck through it and her radish earrings swinging with every movement. Lily had been named for her grandmother and her aunt, but it was the aunt that had affected her most profoundly; who else could get her to like things that could hardly be considered the height of fashion? There was a book tucked under her arm, fitting for her being sorted into Ravenclaw.

"Mum, you won't believe what I found!" Lily's eyes glowed as she pulled out the book, flipping it open to a random page and Hope took it, bemused, before chuckling as she read the angry scrawl in the margins.

"Well, I always had a bit of an annoyance towards anyone calling the Ancient Arts Dark," Hope admitted and her children laughed with her husband while the last of her children descended the train.

Morea was the most like Hope and the least like George. Her hair was always set in dark curls and her green eyes were impossibly bright, and it was Morea alone who had been sorted into Slytherin. And Hope had been proud that one of the last of Slytherin’s line had actually been sorted into his house.

"Exciting first year, Morea?" she inquired.

Morea scowled at Sirius who schooled his face to appear innocent. "Ri turned my broom pink. I hate pink."

Hope turned her eyes on her son and Sirius fidgeted. "That spell will be countered when we get home," she said, "or you won't be playing pick-up with Hemera."

"Aw, what! Dad—!" He appealed to his father.

George shook his head. "Listen to your mother, Ri."

Sirius pouted and complained loudly when Morea stamped on his foot in vexation while Hemera laughed. Her children weren't perfect, but they were children, they weren't expected to be.

Hope could see Teddy standing with his mother, his turquoise hair contrasting with his mother's bubblegum pink as they waited for Remus to disembark with Alena, leaving school as a fourth year Hufflepuff.

In the distance there were Rose and Hugo, Ron and Hermione's two children squabbling over something that Hope couldn't hear before Justin and Ella, Ginny and Seamus' children joining in, clearly amused by whatever argument they were having.

Roxanne was hugging Angelina as though there was no tomorrow and Charlie was gesticulating wildly to Fred who was positively roaring a moment later.
Victoire had caught Teddy off guard and the next thing his mother knew, her son was heartily snogging his just-graduated girlfriend in public while Dominique gagged and Louis directed his father towards the scene with disdain.

The cousins Scorpius Malfoy and Elias Greengrass were weaving through the crowd with difficulty and Elias had to grab the back of his younger cousin's robes to keep him from falling on his face.

It was chaotic and fresh and exciting, but mostly, it was the peace that Hope and all the others had fought for, it was a peace for generations.

All was well.

Chapter End Notes

This fic has been a part of my life for more than two years and I've grown so much in writing it and I am so very glad that I had all of you to share it with. You made Hope's story worth telling and you are the ones that inspired this great fic's completion.

For those of you who have been with Hope from the start, and even those of you who were just here for Hope's end, thank you for making this journey with me.

Hope's story is not done, there will still be snippets in A Girl Named Hope as well as the various Hope Potter AU ideas you have all given me. Serpent Tongue will be off hiatus and I look forward to writing Hope's darker and cleverer side.

You are all my inspiration, and I will never forget the advice and critiques and suggestions you have all given me.

Thank you

-Shini

End Notes

Cross-posted on Fanfiction.net, where the original is updated first, and might seem longer, but that's just because AO3 doesn't include ANs in the word count. Support on either site is appreciated.

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