The Last Stand

by TitansRule

Summary

Jennifer Black is taking matters into her own hands. If her godson has to face Voldemort, she's going to make damn sure he's not alone. As the war with Voldemort heats up, the Marauders - both new and old - must fight to save everything they hold dear.

Notes

If you haven't read Uncovering the Truth or Defying the Enemy, I strongly suggest you do, or you're going to be a little bit lost.
June 30th 1997

The Hogwarts Express traditionally made just two journeys a year, one to Kings Cross at the end of June and one to Hogsmeade at the beginning of September.

The previous Christmas had been different, since Umbridge had the floo system in the castle closed down, as it had been a few times during the first war, but now, as term ended once more, things were back on track.

Usually the train rides were accompanied with laughter and jokes, but not this time.

Not even after the tragic end of the Triwizard Tournament in 1996 had the train been this subdued.

The eight students who had fought at the Ministry had taken up residence in the last compartment in the train, activating the enchantments Jen had told them about over Christmas. This had turned out to be a good idea, since what seemed to be every Muggle-born in the lower four years had turned up in the hope of sitting near them, apparently for the security they felt around Harry. The older children seemed content with simply taking the nearby compartments, but the first and second years had taken the opportunity to sit in theirs, even if it meant sitting on the floor – the compartment may have been expanded, but even magic has its limits.

A few had been understandably nervous when they saw Draco, but the arm he kept firmly around Ginny’s waist swiftly dispelled any worries.

Draco and Ginny had not spoken about their bond, at least not that Hermione had heard. They weren’t dating, not yet, but physical contact was increasingly common between them. Currently, Ginny’s head was resting on his shoulder, her eyes closed, but her body was poised to act if something should happen.

Neville and Ron were playing a chess game by the window and Susan and Luna were curled up on the bench next to Ron, half-watching the game, half-chatting to each other.

Unlike Luna, Susan had quite a few friends in her house, but she had found that Hannah, Ernie and Justin didn’t understand what she was going through in the wake of the Department of Mysteries, not like the other seven could, and she and Luna had become very close.

Harry was seated in one of the corners near the door – opposite Draco, who occupied the other corner – and Hermione had situated herself on his lap to make more room for the first years – at least, that was her excuse.

The last Hermione had heard, Harry was still going back to the Dursleys for the first day at least, but Harry didn’t seem too concerned by this, and she had the feeling Jen had changed her mind about not tipping her hand.

She still didn’t know what Jen had planned and hadn’t bothered asking Harry or Draco what she had talked about over the mirror that evening in the Room of Requirement.

Right now, she was more concerned about the children sharing their compartment and how quiet they all were. “It’s unnerving.” She murmured.

“I’m not sure which is worse.” Harry said quietly, not needing to ask what she meant. “The fact that
these kids need to worry about the war or the fact that they don’t feel safe traveling on their own.”

“You can blame Pansy for that.” Draco said from the opposite bench without opening his eyes. “The girl’s psycho. I think she’s planning on giving Aunt Bella a run for her money.”

Hermione flinched. “That’s all we need.”

Ron made a strange whining noise and Neville clucked triumphantly. “Check!”

“Neville, why?!” Ron whined. “Why would you do this to me, why?!”

The first years giggled among themselves, which was the reason for Ron’s overreaction in the first place … mostly – he did have a five year winning streak to defend.

At that moment, however, the connecting door into the carriage flew open, bringing with it the sounds of spell-fire, followed by a scream of pain and terror.

Everything seemed to happen at once. The chessboard overturned, the pieces scattering across the floor, as Neville and Ron jumped into action. Susan and Luna darted around Crookshanks, who was chasing the chess figures, to the first years, who had formed a huddle, placing themselves in front of them, wands in hand. At the same time, Draco and Ginny raced out of the compartment, wands drawn, and Harry sprang to his feet, causing Hermione to slide to the ground with a startled squeak.

“Hey!”

Harry paused just long enough to pull her back to her feet and kiss her cheek in apology before sprinting out into the corridor behind Ron and Neville.

Hermione hesitated, listening intently. It sounded as though the fracas outside was caused by an ongoing problem, rather than an attack on the Muggle-born students, but she slipped out of the compartment anyway, her eyes scanning the rest of the carriage. The other compartment doors were tightly shut, despite the presence of Pansy, Theodore Nott, Millicent Bulstrode, Crabbe, Goyle and several sixth and seventh year Slytherins that Hermione knew by sight but not by name.

A whimpered sob near her feet caught her attention and Hermione looked down to see a figure huddled against the wall of the carriage. Erecting a Shield Charm around them, she knelt beside the terrified girl, recognising her instantly as Slytherin “Ice Queen” Daphne Greengrass.

The usually poised and put-together fifth year was trembling so violently that Hermione feared she may have been having some kind of seizure. Her robes were torn, her make-up smeared, a small amount of blood trickling down her cheek and mixing with her tears.

Hermione touched her shoulder and the girl flinched violently, so she pulled back. “Daphne?” She called softly. “Daphne, can you look at me please?”

Terrified blue eyes flitted towards her, settling on her face.

“Do you know who I am?” Hermione asked, keeping her voice gentle.

Daphne nodded jerkily.

“I’d like to help you into our compartment and away from the idiots with wands.” Hermione said. “Is that alright?”

Only once Daphne nodded again did Hermione try once more to touch her. This time, Daphne
allowed her to take her arm and help her to her feet.

Susan let out a sharp gasp at their entrance, stepping forwards automatically before catching herself. “What happened?”

“Death Eaters in training.” Hermione said grimly, sitting Daphne down and wrapping her in her cloak. “Do you have any chocolate?”

“I have a few chocolate frogs left over from lunch.” Susan said, pulling them from her pocket and offering them to Daphne. “Here, eat these. It’ll make you feel better.”

A few minutes later, the rest of their party returned, looking incredibly pleased with themselves.

“That was quick.” Susan commented, rhythmically stroking Daphne’s back. Whether there was any rhyme or reason to her actions, Hermione didn’t know, but it did seem to be helping; Daphne was relaxing ever so slowly.

“The rest of the DA showed up to help.” Neville explained. “They followed them here, apparently. Most of them got hit in the crossfire.”

“They took the Slytherins back to the next carriage.” Harry continued, smirking. “Shoved them in one of the empty compartments. Goyle looks like some kind of slug.”

“His mother’ll be happy.” Ron said gleefully. “He’s loads better looking now.”

Daphne let out a reluctant giggle and Draco knelt in front of her, deliberately positioning himself lower than her in a non-threatening pose. “Are you alright?”

“I don’t think I’ll ever get used to a you that’s this human.” Daphne remarked quietly.

“Join the club.” Ron muttered.

Ginny gave her brother a scolding look and touched Daphne’s hand gently. “That didn’t answer the question. Are you alright?”

“Physically, I’m alright.” Daphne said slowly. “It’s just …”

“It’s scary.” Harry finished. “People you thought you could depend on turning on you.”

Daphne snorted. “I never depended on them, Potter. We’re Slytherins. We don’t depend on anybody.”

“We can learn how to.” Draco said wisely. “As long as they’re the right people. I was going to try to contact you during the summer – rumour has it your family’s come down on our side of the fence.”

Daphne smiled wryly. “I have. They haven’t. Part of the reason behind that little display.”

Draco caught Ginny’s eye and she turned to Hermione. “Can we?”

Hermione blinked. “Can we what?”

“Well, she’s in it as deep as we are now, right?” Ginny pointed out. “And she’s got nowhere to go. We can’t just throw her in the deep end and expect her to tread water until the war’s over.”

“Interesting analogy.” Harry noted. “But she’s got a point.”
Hermione nodded in agreement. “Okay. Let me just set up a privacy bubble so the kids can’t hear us and we’ll explain everything.”

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As the train pulled in to Platform 9¾, the students began gathering their things together, ready to meet their families, but Harry caught Hermione’s arm before she could open the compartment door. “Hey, I want to talk to Draco and Daphne before we leave – go on without us?”

Hermione gave him a questioning look, but agreed, giving him a quick kiss. “I’ll see you in a few minutes.” She, Ron and Ginny gathered the Muggle-borns together and escorted them off the train, seeing them through the barrier before stepping through themselves.

Jen was waiting with Mrs Weasley and, while Molly busied herself fussing over her youngest children, Jen swept Hermione into a tight hug, murmuring apologies into her hair.

Hermione relaxed for what felt like the first time since the Department of Mysteries, her forehead dropping to Jen’s shoulder. “I’m alright.”

Jen pulled back to grip her arms. “Hermione, I am so sorry. We should never have assumed we had the mirror, we should have double-checked. And I shouldn’t have believed Albus when he said that you were too swamped to be contacted.”

“I’m alright.” Hermione repeated. “We both are. Harry’s just having a word with Draco and Daphne – that’s Daphne Greengrass; she’s come down on our side of the fence and her parents have come down on the other.”

Jen grimaced. “Ouch. Poor girl. I’ll think of something.” She raised a hand and waved to Neville and Susan, who were loitering nearby, beckoning them over.

“Your aunt and your grandmother asked if I’d mind collecting you from the station.” She explained when they were within earshot. “We’re just waiting for Harry.”

“Thank you.” Susan said with a smile. “How is everyone?”

“Everyone is just fine.” Jen said, including all three students in her answer. “They’re all at home, waiting for you.”

Hermione breathed a sigh of relief. “Thank goodness.” She turned to the Weasleys, just as Ron was released from his mother’s grip. “Hello Mrs Weasley.”

“Hello Hermione.” Mrs Weasley greeted politely. “How are you?”

“I’m … better, thank you.” Hermione answered, stumbling slightly over the response.

Ginny frowned. Hermione had nearly died in the Department of Mysteries, it was unlike her mother to be so formal all of a sudden. “Mum,” she said slowly, “you’re not upset Hermione and Harry are dating, are you?”

“Oh course not, dear.” Her mother said.

“Because Harry’s like my brother.” Ginny continued. “That was never going to …”

She broke off, her blood freezing in her veins, as the quiet presence at the back of her head vanished. Bonded they may have been, but she and Draco had been careful to give each other space in their
shared mind. Nevertheless, his sudden absence struck fear into her heart and she turned back towards the barrier. “Something’s wrong.”

“Ginny?” Hermione asked, but Ginny ignored her, running back through the barrier to Platform 9¾. She scrambled back on to the train and burst into the compartment, but it was empty. Nothing but sweet wrappers remained.

“Ginny!” Her mother scolded, but Hermione swore before she could continue.

“Where are they?!” Hermione demanded.

“I don’t know!” Ginny said frantically. “He’s not there, Hermione – he’s disappeared and they’re not here either and …”

“Ginny, calm down.” Susan said softly. “Let’s search the train and then figure out what to do.”

Twenty minutes later, they stepped back on to the platform, forced to admit that the train was empty. By now, Molly was even more hysterical than Ginny was, and all set to floo straight to Hogwarts, but Jen stopped her.

“We’ll go to the Burrow.”

“But Albus …” Molly began.

“We will go to the Burrow.” Jen said firmly. “We’re not going to be of any help when you’re this worried, Molly. We’ll floo there, come on.”

Ron went through first, followed by Susan and Neville. As soon as Molly had disappeared into the flames, Hermione, still gripping Ginny’s hand tightly, turned to Jen and said, “I didn’t see the Dursleys outside.”

Jen gave her the tiniest wink. “Off you go.”

Hermione smiled, taking Ginny through the fireplace with her.

Molly had collapsed at the kitchen table and Ron was patting her shoulder, a look of frozen terror on his face. Susan had found the kettle and was busying herself making a pot of tea, gnawing anxiously on her bottom lip. Neville was staring out of the kitchen window pensively, his hands in his pockets.

“Where’s the sugar, Ginny?” Susan asked quietly.

Ginny fetched it, wiping her eyes on her sleeve. “Do you think they’re alright?”

“Jen’s not worried.” Hermione said quietly. “And if anyone should be, it’s her.”

“Why can’t I hear him?” Ginny asked.

“I don’t know.” Hermione said, tucking the younger girl under her chin.

Jen took two of the cups from Susan and pushed one of them into Molly’s hands. “Here, Molly, drink this. Take some deep breaths for me. That’s it.”

“The poor boy …” Molly lamented, taking a shaky gulp of tea. “Oh, how did they get him again?!”

“Molly, calm down.” Jen said firmly. “Everything is going to be alright.” She stood and made her way over to Hermione and Ginny. “Ginny, am I right in thinking that there’s a soul bond between
“Yes.” Ginny said, shooting a covert look at her mother, who didn’t seem to have heard. “Can you sense it?”

Jen smiled at her. “No, but you said that he’d disappeared, not they, and you just asked Hermione why you couldn’t hear him. Suggests a soul bond, and it’s definitely not with Harry. Can you get him a message?”

“I can try.” Ginny said. “The link’s blocked.”

“Tell them it’s all clear and we’ll be with them in the next thirty minutes.”

Hermione sighed loudly, catching the attention of the others in the kitchen. “Jen, where are they?”

“Potter Manor.” Jen answered innocently. “Where else would they be?”
Bonds

June 30th 1997

Meanwhile …

If there was anything that could be said about the regulars in *The Hanged Man*, it was that they liked their gossip.

The same could probably be said of any local pub in any small village where the slightest change to routine can fuel weeks of excitement.

However, *The Hanged Man* wasn’t just any local pub; it was local pub in Little Hangleton, which happened to be where Voldemort’s father hailed from, so that was the pub Addie was aiming for that afternoon.

Finding the place had not been easy, until Sirius remembered Harry mentioning a man being killed in his original dream about the house and Dumbledore mentioning that the Ministry seemed unconcerned about the murder of a Muggle named Frank Bryce.

From there, Jen had been able to track down the news report of a mysterious death in Little Hangleton in 1995, which was much easier than finding the original reports of the Riddle family.

Unsure how much, if any, Death Eater activity was in the village, Addie had placed a strong Glamour Charm on herself and travelled alone, much to Sirius’s displeasure, but she was not backing down. Her brown hair was scraped back into a messy bun, her brown eyes blinking owlishly from behind thick-framed glasses, and she looked just like a Muggle historian – at least, she hoped she did, since that was the effect she was going for.

Her original wand was still Merlin only knew where, but her replacement was tucked into a wand holster under her shirt. It didn’t respond quite the same way, but it was perfectly acceptable. She doubted any wand would ever be the same as her first, and she had said as much to Mr Ollivander.

His answering smile had been almost sad. “*Well, Miss McKinnon, the wand chooses the wizard you know*”, he had said, which she had taken to be agreement.

She took her time wandering around the village, stopping to admire the hanging baskets that lined the ‘high street’, taking photographs with a Muggle camera of some of the older houses, all the while observing the manor house on the hill.

It was just as creepy as she had imagined it, and she didn’t attempt to approach it, turning instead to the small pub on the corner.

The interior was dark and smoky and she had to blink a few times to allow her eyes to adjust to the sudden change of light.

The noise level dropped as she entered, people twisting around in their seats and abandoning drinks to focus on the stranger who had wandered into the midst.

The clientele seemed to be made up of the entire population of the village – she could only assume they had nowhere else to go. One side of the pub seemed to be entirely older people, nursing local ales. The other side was primarily teenagers and young adults, playing pool in between cokes and cocktails. A couple of boys to her left seemed incredibly interested in her entrance and she could feel
their eyes on her as she crossed the floor.

Their stares sent uncomfortable prickles up and down her spine, but she ignored them, taking a seat at the bar and smiling at the barmaid who almost ran over to her. “Lemonade please.”

“Certainly, love.” The woman said, reaching under the bar for a glass. “Anything else?”

“No thank you.” Addie said, slipping her camera back into her bag. “It’s sweltering out there.”

“Makes a change from the rain.” The barmaid responded, setting her drink on the bar. “£3.20.”

That sounded a lot to Addie, but she had no idea what the exchange rate between galleons and pounds was, and that wasn’t the point of the exercise anyway, so she counted out the coins and handed them over, silently thanking Lily for teaching them how to use Muggle money.

“Travelled far to get here?” The woman asked casually.

Addie smiled – nosy, yes; subtle, no. “Not really. I’m staying in Greater Hangleton for the week – holiday, you know. Never been able to leave work behind. I’m a historian.” She said, anticipating the next question. “Small villages like this fascinate me.” She took a sip of lemonade. At least it was very good. “Out of interest, is there a story behind the old manor house on the hill? It looks deserted.”

Her eyes lit up. “Ah, now, there’s a story! See what happened was … No, tell you what – you want this story first hand, so to speak. ‘Ere, Dorothy! This lady wants to know about the Riddles!”

Addie looked over her shoulder to see a wizened old lady seated in one of the booths with a glass of water. Her face lit up as well, and she beckoned Addie over with a gnarled hand.

Thanking the barmaid, Addie made her way over and slid on to the bench opposite Dorothy, who squinted at her.

“My names Madeline.” Addie said with a smile. “I’m a historian.”

“Ah, then you’ll want to ’ear this story.” Dorothy croaked. “When I was a lass, that ’ouse was owned by the Riddle family – father, mother and son. Weren’t very well liked. The father was the squire around ’ere, but you know as well as I do that don’t mean squat anymore. Didn’t back then, but you wouldn’t think it, the way they carried on. Been a bit of a to-do when I was a babe – the son, Tom, ran off with the daughter of a tramp!”

Addie made an appropriately shocked face. “But he came back?”

Dorothy snorted. “Claimed to have been bewitched. Little ’ussy probably told him she was pregnant. Or maybe he did get ’er pregnant and just ran away when he couldn’t ’andle it.”

“When was that?” Addie asked curiously.

“Ah, now, let’s see …” Dorothy said slowly. “I don’t remember that, but it was only sixteen years later when … I musta been about six at a guess.”

Addie tilted her head curiously. “Sixteen years later … What happened sixteen years later?”

Dorothy leaned towards her, bringing with her a faint whiff of stale cat litter, and Addie tried not to grimace. “I were sittin’ ’ere, in this very pub, when their maid came runnin’ screamin’ down the road, into the pub. All three of ’em – dead.”
Addie gasped with feigned horror. “Good gracious! What happened?”

“Well *that’s* the strange thing!” Dorothy said smugly. “No one knows, do they? Police couldn’t work out ’ow they died. They arrested ol’ Frank Bryce – ’e were the gardener – but they ’ad to let ’im go – no evidence.”

“Do you think he did it?” Addie asked.

“I did.” Dorothy said. “For a long while. But ’e died as well, not so long ago. Found ’im in the garden. Just the same as the Riddles – looked like ’e’d been scared to death.”

*Killing Curse*, Addie’s mind supplied. “Well, that’s …”

“Exactly.” Dorothy leaned even closer. “There’s somethin’ funny about that ’ouse. You mark my words.”

Addie took a drink, thinking about the story. It wasn’t really the Riddles she was interested in, but she didn’t want to seem too eager. In the worst case scenario, she had to cast a Compulsion Charm or a Memory Charm, but that was the last resort. “What about the tramp’s daughter? What happened to her?”

Dorothy shrugged. “No idea. Disappeared, never came back. Father died, brother went mad, and then ’e died an’ all.”

“What was her name?” Addie asked, hoping she sounded absently curious as opposed to truly interested.

Dorothy’s face screwed up in concentration. “Let’s see … Ma said they were all ‘m’s, and really strange … Merope!” She crowed. “Merope Gaunt – Gaunt by name, and gaunt by nature, me ma used to say – looked like she was starving.”

The Gaunts, from what Addie could remember, were originally an Ancient and Noble pureblood family whose inbreeding and obsession with blood purity had left them ostracised by even the most obsessed of purebloods, despite their ancestor being one Salazar Slytherin.

Even Sirius’s mother would not have been swayed into an arrangement – where the Blacks had managed to escape most of the downfalls of ‘line-breeding’, the Gaunts had managed to catch all of them – their magical power had dwindled, their intelligence with it, each generation became uglier and uglier, and they were all quite mad.

Okay, so none of the Blacks had escaped *that* particular downfall – even Sirius, Jen and Andie, arguably the sanest of the Blacks, had a streak of insanity within them. They just managed to hide it better than the others.

All of this would certainly explain why Voldemort was such a psychopath, and verified his claims of being Slytherin’s heir.

“If you want to take a look,” Dorothy said thoughtfully, “their old shack is on the road out of town. You can’t miss it – there’s a snake nailed to the door.”

Addie did not leave immediately. She was in no rush and she didn’t want to draw unnecessary attention, so she stayed and nursed her lemonade, asking Dorothy about some of the other houses and the history of the village.

Dorothy was quite happy to tell Addie all of her childhood stories and only when she began visibly
tiring did Addie finish her drink, thank her for her time, and leave.

There was only one road in and out of Little Hangleton, and Addie had walked along it on her way into the village, but had seen no shack.

This time however, she walked more slowly, her eyes scanning the hedgerows either side of the country lane, and finally, she found it, a tiny shack set back from the road.

The path was overgrown with nettles and brambles, which explained why Addie had missed it the first time, and she didn’t attempt to fight through them, staying on the lane and observing it from a distance.

Dorothy was right about the snake, but it was no longer nailed to the door. Its body had decomposed, its bones lying on the floor, in front of the door, a dire warning to all who dared enter.

The snake, though, was the last thing Addie was concerned about – magic shimmered around the shack in wards and enchantments. She recognised the signature of the magic from the island and it definitely wasn’t there for nostalgia purposes.

One thing was certain though – she wasn’t stupid enough to attempt a closer look without back-up.

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As soon as the words left Jen’s mouth, relief flooded through Ginny like a tidal wave. “You set it up!”

Jen squeezed her shoulder. “I didn’t trust Dumbledore not to have someone at the station to force Harry back to the Dursleys, so I told him to call Dobby on to the train and have him take Harry and Draco back to Potter Manor. And Daphne too, I guess.”

Ginny sighed heavily and closed her eyes, reaching for the place where Draco had been earlier. **Draco? Jen says it’s all clear and we’ll be with you in the next 30 minutes.**

There was a brief moment of silence, then the link reopened and his presence rushed back into her mind. **Okay, before you yell at me, Jen insisted we didn’t tell anyone to make sure that no one found out until it was too late.**

**Do you have any idea how worried I’ve been??** Ginny demanded. **Why did you close the link?**

I didn’t mean to, Draco insisted. **But I’m sorry.**

**Do it again, and I’ll hex you into the next century.**

The response was quick and relieved. **Done.**

“Jennifer?” Molly asked. “What’s going on? And don’t tell me Harry’s at Potter Manor, because I’ve guessed that.”

“Ginny?” Jen prompted quietly.

Ginny sighed, sitting down opposite her mother. “Mum, about two weeks ago, when Hermione and Draco woke up, I … Well, something happened.”

Molly reached across the table to take her hands, looking concerned. “What is it, Ginny?”
Ginny took a deep breath. “A soul bond formed between me and Draco.”

Molly stared at her and Ginny braced herself for an explosion, but Jen spoke first.

“Neville, Susan, your guardians have given their permission for you to spend the summer at Potter Manor with us.” She said. “But it’s not going to be a holiday, I’m afraid.”

Hermione grinned. “Are you going to train us, Jen?”

Jen nodded, and that was enough to distract Molly – at least for the moment – from her daughter’s soul bond. “I don’t think …”

“Sirius and I are Harry’s legal guardians.” Jen said flatly. “Sirius is also Hermione’s, thanks to Gringotts. Amelia and Augusta have given their permission. Now, admittedly, I cannot train Ron and Ginny without your permission, but I’m not stupid enough to believe that Harry and Hermione won’t do it for me.”

“But they’re children!” Molly protested.

“We’re underage.” Ginny said. “We’re not children.”

Molly scowled at her. “Soul bond or not, my girl …”

“This has nothing to do with the soul bond.” Ginny said fiercely. “Voldemort tried to use me to come back, remember? I know you like pretending that my first year never happened, but it did. I remember Tom Riddle, I remember the after-effects of the possession, I remember seeing Harry on the floor of the Chamber, I remember everything!”

_Ginny_, Draco whispered. _It's alright, Ginny._

Ginny took a shaky breath, grasping the extra restraint he offered her. “Ron and I nearly died last month, Mum. We could have done. We are already involved, whether you like it or not, because Harry isn’t getting out of this. And we aren’t leaving him.”

“She’s right, Mum.” Ron said, his hand on his mother’s shoulder. “Ground us if you like. Keep us here. We’re still going to fight.”

“You shouldn’t have to!” Molly cried.

“Molly, I agree with you.” Jen said firmly, shutting down Molly’s argument. “I love Harry like he’s my own son. I love all these kids. I hope beyond hope that this war ends and we sit in this kitchen and you can say ‘I told you so’.” She softened her voice, reaching out beseechingly to the older woman. “But, Molly, if that happens, the kids are alive to see it. If the opposite happens, if they do have to fight for their lives, and I’m the one who can say it … they won’t be.”

“Voldemort has tried to kill Harry five times already.” Hermione pointed out.

“Six, if you include the cursed broom.” Neville said.

Hermione frowned. “Can we include the cursed broom? That was Quirrell, not Voldemort.”

“But Quirrell was possessed by V-V-V-Voldemort.” Ron pointed out.

“True.” Hermione said thoughtfully. “That’s true.”

Jen shook her head in disbelief and turned back to Molly. “You see, Molly, Harry should not have had to defend himself all of those times, but where would he be if he hadn’t?”
The first thing Addie saw when the entrance hall of Ravenscroft Manor formed around her was Sirius pacing the floor. He swiftly changed course to meet her halfway.

“Did you find her?”

Addie nodded, allowing him to hug her. She was more comfortable with physical contact and affection now, eased, she suspected, by Sirius keeping his promise to dole out hugs when she needed them. “Her name was Merope Gaunt, daughter of a local tramp.”

“Gaunt. So he is Slytherin’s heir.” Sirius concluded.

“Great minds think alike.” Addie said with a smile. “She caused a great scandal when she ran off with the squire’s son.”

“I bet she did.” Sirius said. “Any sign of a Horcrux?”

“Well, there’s something there.” Addie said slowly. “I just don’t know if it’s a Horcrux. The Gaunts’ old home is covered with magic, really sadistic magic at that. I wasn’t going near it by myself.” She looked around. “Has Remus already gone to Potter Manor?”

Sirius nodded. “Jen let him know that Harry and Draco were there about ten minutes ago.” He offered her his arm. “Shall we?”

Together, they made their way to the reception room and Sirius offered Addie the floo powder. Unlike Ravenscroft, which was connected to several fires, Potter Manor was connected to Ravenscroft Manor only, a fact that Jen had made absolutely sure of.

She stepped through the fire into the warm reception room of Potter Manor, which was almost entirely different to the one she had just left – the Potters, although proud purebloods, had rarely stood on ceremony, even in formal company.

Remus was waiting for them, with three teenagers, but Addie barely had time to acknowledge them, before Sirius appeared from the flames and one of the teens hurtled himself across the room into his arms.

Sirius hugged his godson back with equal emotion, murmuring reassurance into his messy hair. It was a scene that brought a smile to Addie’s face, albeit one tinged with sadness.

A few days after her return, Andromeda had come to visit and, at Jen’s request, given Addie a medical examination. As Addie had suspected and accepted, she had not escaped entirely unscathed, and she considered herself lucky that the only damage was internal and confined to her reproductive system.

Addie had never really been maternal, not that she hadn’t considered children in the past, so it wasn’t something that she was dwelling on, especially since she had been expecting something (in her opinion) much, much worse.

That didn’t mean that the fact didn’t sting a little, especially when Sirius spoke about Harry and Hermione, and she saw just what a wonderful father he was.

She was easily distracted, though, especially when Sirius released Harry and they both turned to look at her.
“Merlin, you look like your father.” She laughed almost immediately. “Sorry, Harry, I bet you get that a lot.”

“Yeah, I do.” Harry admitted. “But I don’t mind.”

Sirius laughed. “Harry, this is Addison McKinnon. She would have been your godmother.”

“Call me Addie, Harry.” She said, wrinkling her nose. “I can’t think of the last person who called me Addison. It’s nice to finally meet you. Between Lily, James, Jen and Sirius, I feel like I’ve known you forever.”

Harry blushed slightly, but looked pleased. “Are Mum and Dad okay?”

“They were the last time I saw them.” Addie assured them. “I’m doing what I can to help Jen and Remus find the island.”

“Thanks.” Harry said quietly. “Are you okay? After … everything?”

Addie smiled at him, touched by his concern. “I’m getting there, Harry, thank you.” Then, because she could see him searching for another topic of conversation, she asked, “Who are your friends?”

Harry turned towards them automatically. “Oh, this is Draco Malfoy and Daphne Greengrass.”

“Draco,” Sirius greeted, moving to shake his hand. “I hear it’s you I’ve got to thank for my continued existence.”

Draco shrugged a little self-consciously. “I just reacted.”

“Good reflexes.” Addie commented, observing him. Sirius had explained about Draco, but a Malfoy with a friendly face was still a shock.

Speaking of shock, Daphne’s face was pale and she was trembling ever so slightly.

“Are you alright, Daphne?” Addie asked gently.

“She was attacked on the train.” Harry said with a scowl. “Wannabe Death Eaters.”

Addie grimaced and wrapped an arm around the young girl’s shoulders. “Come on. Let’s go and get a cup of tea. Padfoot can show the boys to their rooms.”

Sirius rolled his eyes and gestured for Harry and Draco to follow him, flicking his wand to levitate their trunks after them. He led them up the one of the two marble staircases in the entrance hall that framed the entrance to the ballroom and then up another flight of stairs.

“The first floor is almost entirely a library.” He explained as they reached the second floor. “So this is where the bedrooms start.”

Harry looked horrified. “We’ll need to put Tracking Charms on Hermione, or we’re going to lose her.”

Draco tried to choke back a laugh, but only succeeded in giving himself a coughing fit. Harry slapped him on the back, now grinning broadly, as Sirius stopped outside one of the doors. “Draco, this one’s yours.”

The room had probably once been red and gold like much of the rest of the house but someone, much to Draco’s visible relief, had redecorated in muted green with silver accents.
“Thanks.”

“No problem.” Sirius said. “You can thank Jen for the paint job. Although we should really be thanking Harry for letting us stay here – it’s your house after all.”

“Like I’d say no.” Harry said, rolling his eyes. “Is the next one along …?”

“No.” Sirius said, anticipating the question. “Yours is on the next floor.”

Harry frowned slightly, but Draco didn’t seem surprised. They followed Sirius up another flight of stairs and he pushed open the door to a room that caused Harry’s heart to almost stop.

“Sirius!” He protested. “It’s huge!”

“It’s your room.” Sirius said with a shrug.

“Yeah, but …”

“Pot-Harry.” Draco said, interrupting him. “They’re not doing this to make a point. This is your room. There’s a specific order of rooms in ancestral homes. Your parents, once they became Lord and Lady Potter would have moved into the Master Suite. There’s probably a Mistress’s Suite as well, but I doubt your parents ever used it. This room belongs to the Heir Apparent. It would have been your father’s room, growing up, right?”

“That’s right.” Sirius confirmed. “I used it as well, when I came to stay, even though they had the room. James insisted.”

“This was my dad’s room?” Harry asked, his eyes lighting up.

Sirius’s smile softened. “Yeah, Pronglet, it was. Come on, I’ll show you around.”

***

Perhaps unsurprisingly, it was very difficult, if not impossible, to apparate directly into the grounds of Potter Manor, unless you had Potter blood.

As such, Jen and Molly apparated the students to just outside of the wards and Jen ushered them across, almost walking straight into Ginny when she stopped dead.

“I know.” Jen said, anticipating her reaction. “It’s a beautiful house.”

“Stunning.” Hermione agreed faintly.

Jen led them up to the front doors and unlocked them with a tap of her wand, leading them into the magnificent entrance hall. “Hello the house!”

“Sirius is showing Harry and Draco to their rooms.” Remus said by way of greeting. “Addie’s giving Daphne a shoulder to cry on.”

“And hello to you too.” Jen said, kissing him. “She’s good at that.”

Hermione’s gaze remained fixed on the staircases, her hand squeezing Ginny’s tightly, as Draco and Harry appeared, perfectly unharmed, chatting to Sirius on their way back to the ground floor.

Sirius caught sight of them halfway down and excused himself from their discussion to jog the rest of the way, and Hermione took her cue to fly across the room into his waiting arms.
“It’s alright, Kitten.” He whispered. “I’m alright. I’m so sorry I scared you.”

Harry acknowledged his friends and Molly with a wave and jogged straight to Jen, who embraced him tightly. “I am so, so sorry, Harry. I should never have left you alone like that, especially not under those circumstances.”

“It’s okay, Jen.” Harry said, his voice muffled against her shoulder. “You explained why, I understand.”

“Doesn’t make it right.” Jen said, pressing a kiss to his head and releasing him so Hermione could scold him for scaring her.

Harry listened patiently for several minutes, until she began to repeat herself, whereupon he took her in his arms and kissed her softly.

Hermione gave him a stern look. “You can’t do that every time I’m mad at you.”

“I can try.” Harry said with a cheeky grin.

“Merlin.” Jen muttered under her breath, recalling a similar conversation between James and Lily.

Sirius sidled over to her. “You owe me ten galleons.”
Jen pulled a face at her brother, but didn’t begrudge him the money. He had won the bet, after all.

On her other side, Molly gave a little indignant squawk, drawing her attention to Ginny who appeared to have been mentally berating Draco and finished up by hugging him tightly, a move that seemed to shock him as much as it did Molly.

“I’m sorry.” He whispered, hugging her back. “I won’t do it again.”

“Molly, don’t.” Jen said tiredly. “There’s nothing you can do.”

“But …”

“A soul bond only forms between two people who are perfectly matched.” Jen said. “It doesn’t always form, the circumstances have to be exactly right, and they’re incredibly rare even then. But it would not form if he would ever hurt her. That should be enough.”

“But …” Molly repeated. “Harry ….”

“No.” Jen said flatly. “Quite aside from Ginny’s soul bond with Draco and Harry’s relationship with Hermione, he sees Ginny as a little sister. He calls her ‘sis’, for Merlin’s sake. Take my advice on this, Molly, and let it go.”

“People haven’t always.” Molly insisted. “I grew up hearing rumours of soul bonds, people still kept other betrothals …”

“And they died young.” Remus finished. “Take it from someone who’s experienced a completely blocked bond, Molly, even if very briefly. Breaking a bond is fatal to its participants. I do not recommend it.”

Jen shuddered, remembering those three days before they realised the consequences of shutting the link completely. **Try to get her to see reason, would you?** She moved forwards to meet Draco as he released Ginny, greeting him with a second unexpected embrace.

“Thank you.” She whispered.
“Thank you.” He responded. “I don’t know what I’d have done if I’d had to go home. Daphne …”

“The more the merrier.” Jen said, releasing him from her arms and turning to survey the young woman who had just appeared with Addie – quite literally; the kitchen at Potter Manor was only accessible from the front of the house by way of a secret passage in the walls.

She was still quite pale but looked a lot better than when Remus first saw her, so whatever Addie had said to her in the kitchen must have done a world of good.

“Hello, Daphne, I’m Jen, Harry’s godmother.”

“Thank you so much for this, Lady Black.” Daphne said quietly, shaking her hand.

While Jen told Daphne not to stand on ceremony, Sirius slung an arm around Addie’s shoulders and guided her towards the new arrivals. “Come on, meet the rest of the rabble.”

“Rabble?” Susan asked, with mock affront. “How dare you, sir!!”

Sirius sniggered. “Addie, this is Susan Bones, Alice’s niece, and Neville Longbottom …”

“Frank and Alice’s son.” Addie finished, shaking their hands. “You look so much like your mother, Neville.”

“Did you know them well?” Neville asked.

Addie nodded with a sad smile. “There were ten of us in our year, so the dorm was split in two. For the first five years, Alice and I shared a dorm with my sister, Leona, and …” she glanced at Molly “… two other girls. Those three were glued at the hip most of the time, so Alice and I, when we weren’t with Jen and the others, we tended to keep each other sane. I am so, so sorry about what happened.”

Neville nodded, his gaze dropping to the floor, and Sirius rescued him by directing Addie’s attention to the Weasleys. “Molly’s youngest, Ron and Ginny.”

“Are we sure Lily didn’t have another one and forget about it?” Addie asked dryly.

“You’re not the first to ask.” Ginny said with a grin. “But I am definitely 100% Weasley.”

“Unfortunately.” Ron muttered with a smirk, ducking the smack his sister aimed at his head. “And this,” Sirius said, pride filling his voice, “is Hermione.”

Addie smiled broadly, clasping the hand the girl reached out to her. “Hermione, it’s wonderful to finally meet you. Sirius has told me so much about you.”

Hermione’s face lit up with a smile. “Good things, I hope.”

“Very good.” Addie lowered her voice. “He thinks you can walk on water, just so you know.”

“Oh, I can.” Hermione said airily.

“Only on Tuesdays though.” Harry added. “And she does tend to sink even then.”

Addie laughed, her heart lifting. These two were so very important to Sirius and for them to accept her so readily and openly was a relief.

Yes, they were still treading carefully around the borders of their past relationships, focusing on
recovery and re-acquaintance as she had insisted upon, but they both knew – although they said nothing to each other – that it was a matter of time.

Jen caught her eye and waved her over and she excused herself to join her best friend out of earshot of the others. “Well?” She asked in a low voice. “What did you find?”

“One apparently abandoned manor house.” Addie answered. “One heavily warded shack. And one pub full of very eager gossips.”

Jen smirked. “Heavily warded, huh?”

“Heavily warded and belonged to the Gaunts.” Addie confirmed with a grin. “The daughter of whom ran off with the squire’s son, Tom Riddle.”

“I love gossips.” Jen said cheerfully. “Did you go inside?”

“No, the magic was pretty nasty.” Addie said. “Wouldn’t want to do it by myself.”

“Fair enough.” Jen said. “We’ll go tomorrow. We’ll get Molly to …” She trailed off, eyeing the woman dubiously. She had stopped arguing with Remus about the soul bond (or Remus about the soul bond; Remus wasn’t exactly arguing back), but still did not look happy as she watched Ginny and Draco talking with the others. “On second thoughts, the less involved she is, the better. I’ll floo Mandy and Arabella tonight, get them to come and watch the kids.”

“Can we call them kids?” Addie asked sceptically. “I don’t think Sirius has told me everything, but given what he has told me, you can hardly classify them as children.”

“Probably not.” Jen agreed. “But it’s quicker than calling them ‘underage young people’.” She checked her watch. “And given that the next two days could well be a bit overwhelming, I need to borrow a couple of them now. Hermione?”

Hermione looked over questioningly. “Yes?”

Jen smiled. “We’re going shopping.”

Hermione grinned back and grabbed Ginny and Susan’s hands. “ ‘Scuse us, boys.”

Jen laid a hand on Daphne’s shoulder. “You’d better come as well, unless you have some dress robes for the wedding?”

Daphne shook her head, a light pink blush staining her cheeks. “You don’t have to …”

“I know I don’t have to.” Jen said firmly. “But I’m going to. Molly, I’ll bring Ginny home when we’re done.”

“How did you talk Mum into it?” Ginny asked once they were outside. “I mean, I have no arguments if you want to buy me a dress, but Mum tends to get a bit funny about it. I think that’s where Ron gets it from.”

“Yes, I was expecting an argument.” Jen agreed. “So I took precautionary measures.” She winked. “You’ll just have to be another bridesmaid.”

Ginny’s face lit up. “Thanks, Jen.”

“Why are we doing this tonight?” Hermione asked curiously.

“Well, there’s some things we need to do over the next few days, and I don’t know how they’re
going to play out.” Jen explained. “Which reminds me, Mandy and Arabella should be coming over
tomorrow morning – Addie, Sirius, Remus and I need to disappear for a few hours.”

“Why?” Susan asked.

Jen’s smile turned slightly feral. “We’re going hunting.”
Le gasp! Could this actually be a new chapter? Six months after I actually started writing the thing? No, eleven months after I started the thing. Good Merlin, this is bad. Seriously not making any promises, guys. If you don't follow my Veritas tumblr, I have a new site - titansrule24.weebly.com - none of my stories will be published there, but you can find general updates on what I'm working on at the moment, rather than wondering what the hell I'm doing with my life.

July 1st

The following morning, once Mandy and Arabella had arrived at Potter Manor, Addie, Jen, Remus and Sirius set off for Little Hangleton.

Like Addie the day before, they travelled on foot from her larger neighbour, clad in Muggle clothes and utilising Glamour Charms so as not to draw attention to themselves.

As they approached the shack, Addie turned to Sirius. “Alright, out with it.”

Sirius gave Remus a pleading glance, but Remus was pretending to be very interested in a nearby butterfly, so he sighed and smiled innocently. “What do you mean?”

“You’re planning something.” Addie said flatly. “What are you planning?”

Sirius fidgeted a little under her gaze and relented. “Well, we know there’s something in the shack. But there might be something in the manor as well.”

“So you think we should check there as well?” Addie asked.

“No, I think we,” Sirius nodded at himself and Remus, “should check the manor, while you ladies handle the shack.”

Jen crossed her arms over her chest and glared at her brother. “This wouldn’t have anything to do with the fact that there might be Death Eaters up there, would it?”

“Of course not.” Sirius insisted.

“Because we can take care of ourselves.” Jen continued, switching her glare to her fiancé.

“Don’t look at me.” Remus said, the words resonating in her head at the same time. “This is all his idea.”

“Thanks Moony.” Sirius muttered.

“But you have to admit,” Remus continued, ignoring him, “it would save time if we split up.”

“They do have a point.” Addie said slowly.

Jen’s arms dropped to her sides and she gave her best friend a quizzical look. “Alright.” She agreed.
“We’ll meet back here.”

Addie allowed herself a smile when Sirius relaxed and moved forwards to give him a hug. “Be careful.” She whispered.

Sirius brushed a kiss against her cheek as she pulled away. “You too.” He clapped Remus on the shoulder. “Come on, Moony, we’ve got work to do.”

Jen kissed Remus and the two women watched their companions head towards the town. Once they were out of earshot – and keeping her mind shielded – Jen turned to Addie.

“Why aren’t you mad at them?”

Addie shrugged. “You know as well as I do that this was all Sirius – and can you blame him for wanting to protect us, given our history?”

Jen winced. “No.” She admitted. “I can’t. But that wouldn’t normally stop you from being mad.”

Addie smirked at her. “Jen, can we or can we not work much faster without those two under our feet?”

“Well, yes, but …”

“I checked the manor house yesterday after I found this place.” Addie continued. “There’s nothing there. So what’s the harm in letting them go exploring while we take care of business?”

Jen laughed. “I missed you, Addie. Now, about this shack …”

The first order of business, of course, was actually getting through the brambles to the shack itself, which was easier said than done, but a great number of Cutting Curses finally did the trick.

Only then did Jen examine the wards and, like Addie, she did not like what she found. “Oh, that’s nasty.”

“Isn’t it?” Addie agreed. “You can see why I didn’t want to do this by myself.”

“It looks like …” Jen began, frowning. “It looks like there’s a trigger on the front door. What do you think?”

Addie narrowed her eyes, allowing the wards to come into focus. “I think you’re right. I’d guess it would attack the origin of any spell or intruder.” She blinked rapidly, the wards fading out of view again. “So how are we getting in there?”

“Let me think for a moment.” Jen said, pacing up and down.

Addie waited patiently, leaning against one of the trees, watching her pace the length of the clearing three times, before spinning to face her.

“Mirrors.” Jen announced.

“Mirrors?” Addie repeated incredulously, pushing herself away from the tree. “All that, and you came up with mirrors?”

“No, it’s brilliant.” Jen insisted. “We’ll conjure a mirror and reflect a Bombardment Hex at the door. Then we’ll Vanish the mirror and the wards will attack the place the curse came from.”
"That … is brilliant." Addie conceded. "And nothing I would have ever thought of."

"Of course not." Jen said. "You're a pureblood."

"So are you." Addie pointed out.

"Yes, but I lived as a Muggle for a long time." Jen said. "This is a Muggle solution. Most wizards would overlook it. Including, I'm hoping, Voldemort."

The plan worked just as Jen had hoped, and the curse triggered by the breaking of the door ricocheted harmlessly away from the two women — as long as they counted the disintegration of a tree as harmless.

Cautiously, they made their way into the cottage, constantly scanning for traps and triggers with every step.

The interior was eerily silent, the heavy layers of dust and cobwebs dampening any sound from outside — and that had been quiet to begin with, since they were more or less in the middle of nowhere.

"This must have been one of the first." Addie said softly. "No one’s been here for a very long time."

"I think the first was the diary." Jen said. "But I wouldn’t be surprised if this was the second."

"I still want to know what diary you’re talking about." Addie commented, her wand hovering over a cabinet in what had once been a kitchen.

"Sirius didn’t tell you?" Jen asked.

"Well, if he had …" Addie paused, narrowing her eyes at one of the cabinet doors. "If he had, I wouldn’t still want to know, would I? I think I found it."

Jen joined her, flicking her wand at the place Addie indicated. "I think so."

The two women took up position either side of the offending cupboard and Jen opened the door. A jet of purple light splashed against the opposite wall and Jen pulled a face. "Lovely."

"What would that have done?" Addie asked.

"Reversed our internal organs, I believe." Jen said with false cheeriness. "Let’s see what we’ve got here."

Neither was under any illusion that Voldemort would have made it possible to magically remove the Horcrux — whatever it was — but they tried it anyway, just in case.

When it didn’t work, Jen reached into her bag and extracted a Muggle litter-picker, carefully poked it through the cupboard door and felt around with it.

It wasn’t easy — not only finding the Horcrux, but actually picking it up — not least because whatever it was was very small, but finally Jen managed to hook on of the metal pincers through something and pull out …

"A ring?" Addie asked dubiously.

"A signet ring." Jen corrected, examining it closely. It radiated the same evil aura as the locket and it was old — so old that the family crest on the black stone had all but vanished, faded into obscurity over the centuries. "It probably belonged to his grandfather."
“Or his uncle.” Addie said thoughtfully. “Which one was framed for the Riddles’ murder again?”

“The uncle I think.” Jen said, her eyes fixed on the ring. “Think the father was dead by then.”

There was a strange tone in Jen’s voice and Addie reached out to take the litter-picker. “Jen? Selena, let’s get this packed away safely.”

“Do you know what this is?” Jen asked.

“A Horcrux.” Addie said bluntly. “And it’s messing with your head, Jen, so let’s get it away.”

“I’m fine.” Jen said, her brow creasing, still refusing to relax her grip. “Addie, you don’t . . .”

A red beam of light shot from Addie’s left hand and hit Jen in the chest. She froze mid-sentence and crumpled to the ground, unconscious.

Addie pulled a charmed protective bag from their larger satchel and placed the Horcrux inside it, bagging it twice more before she was satisfied. Then she took a seat beside Jen, tucking her knees up against her chest.

It would have been smarter to have a set of mirrors really, she thought as she waited, because Remus would have felt Jen fall unconscious, so the boys must have been frantic with worry.

Addie had just begun to consider how odd it was that she still referred to them as ‘boys’ in her head when they were all in their late 30s, when there was a commotion outside. She raised her wand, but it was Sirius and Remus who burst in, and she tucked it away again. “Relax, we’re fine.”

“What happened?” Sirius demanded, kneeling to check on his sister.

“It had some kind of Compulsion Charm on it.” Addie explained. “I’m immune to them, because I’m a natural, but she’s not. I don’t know if she’d have fought it or not, but since I didn’t know what it was telling her to do, I figured I’d Stun her as a precaution. How was the manor?”

“You knew it was empty, didn’t you?” Sirius asked.

Addie smiled innocently at him. “If you want to be the big, strong protectors, who am I to ruin your fun?”

“Give it up, Padfoot.” Remus advised, stroking Jen’s hair. “You’re not winning this one.”

A few seconds later, Jen stirred, her eyes blinking open, and she sat up with a groan. “Well, that’s embarrassing.”

“You’re not infallible, Jen.” Addie said gently, before adding with a smirk, “You’re not me.”

Jen made a wordless gesture that caused Sirius to snigger. “It’s still embarrassing.”

“What was it, Jen?” Remus asked, keeping the conversation public for the benefit of their companions. “The Horcrux, I mean.”

“It’s a signet ring.” Jen said tiredly. “But the coat of arms, from what I could see, was the Peverells.”

“It’s plausible.” Sirius said. “From what I remember, Slytherin and Gryffindor were distant cousins. And the Potters are descended from the Peverells way, way, way back. But what does that . . .”

“Rumour has it they were the three brothers in the story.” Jen said flatly.
“The three brothers.” Addie repeated. “*The* three brothers? Travelling along a road at twilight –those three brothers?”

“We were always told it was midnight.” Jen said, rubbing her forehead. “But yes. Look at James’s Cloak. They lose potency within three years, but it’s served Harry well, did the same for James, and for his father before him.”

“So it’s a *really* good Cloak.” Addie said, getting to her feet. “Besides, even if that stone *is* the Resurrection Stone … what good ever comes from raising the dead?”

“I know that.” Jen whispered, her head falling onto Remus’s shoulder. “That’s where the Compulsion Charm comes in. I couldn’t stop thinking about Reggie and …”

“In the story,” Addie said gently, “the second brother goes mad, because the woman he loves is not truly with him – she’s trapped in both worlds. You don’t want that for him.”

“No.” Jen agreed, letting Remus help her to her feet. “I don’t. Now, I think we’ve stayed here quite long enough. Who wants to go and explore the Chamber of Secrets?”

Remus sighed. “Darling, you have such an odd sense of adventure.”

***

When they returned to Potter Manor, they found Mandy and Arabella out on the Quidditch Pitch. Rather predictably, Mandy was in the air with the fliers, while Arabella sat on the grass below with Hermione, Neville and a young girl none of them recognised.

Hermione jumped to her feet as they approached, gesturing to her. “This is Luna Lovegood. She was with us at the Ministry. She knows everything we do – can she come as well?”

Jen gave the girl a kind smile. “Does your father know where you are, Luna?”

Luna nodded, a somewhat dreamy smile on her face. “Oh yes. I don’t think he knows exactly where we’re going, but he’s just happy I actually have friends.”

“Then of course you can come with us.” Jen said firmly. “I’m Jen, Harry’s godmother. This is my brother, Sirius; this is Addie, and you know Professor Lupin.”

“I’m not your teacher anymore.” Remus added. “Just call me Remus.”

Luna nodded, her gaze fixed on Sirius. “You know some people think you’re Stubby Boardman.”

“I have heard the news.” Sirius said with a grin.

Mandy had already spotted them and led the students in a steep dive, coming to land neatly in front of them. “All okay?”

“Fine.” Jen said shortly. “Hello, Ron, Ginny. Ginny, are you sure you’re alright to come with us?”

Ginny nodded, her face pale but determined. “I need to do this.”

“How are we going to do this?” Mandy asked, putting the brooms away. “We can’t apparate them all.”

“I’ll set up a Portkey to the Shack.” Jen said, rifling through her pockets for something she could use. “We’ll go through the Willow. How did you get Molly to agree?”
“Dad agreed.” Ron explained. “He thinks we need training as well, to make sure we’re safe. Mum doesn’t know about the Chamber – but what she doesn’t know can’t hurt her.”

“Or me.” Jen muttered, finally retrieving a quill. “Okay, everyone, off we go!”

***

“I didn’t think,” Addie said seriously, “that it was possible for this place to look any worse.”

The Shrieking Shack had never been a particularly nice destination when they were students, but it somehow looked even worse now – the wood beginning to rot, cobwebs strung from every available surface, a thick coating of dust on anything that stayed still long enough to collect it …

No wonder the villagers still called it haunted years after the screaming stopped – she could only imagine what it looked like from the outside.

Jen gave the Shack a cursory glance as she pulled open the trapdoor, covering her face to shield against the cloud of dust that rose with the movement. “Neither did I. I should have known better.”

“Wait a moment.” Hermione said softly, narrowing her eyes. “Give me a moment to make sure we’re covered. Draco, I could use a … Thank you.” She added belatedly, feeling him reach out to Hogwarts as well.

It took them a few moments – it was harder to hide their presence when they didn’t have a castle full of students to work with – but finally, Hermione nodded. “That should do it.”

“I’ve got the Map anyway.” Harry said, pulling it from his pocket and activating it. “There’s no one near the windows.”

“Okay then.” Jen said decisively. “Off we go.”

There was a brief moment of panic about halfway to Myrtle’s bathroom when Filch appeared on the Map just round the corner, but a second later, Peeves caused something to fall with a crash and he disappeared down a secret passage just as quickly.

“Was that luck or was that you two?” Mandy asked softly.

Hermione smiled innocently. “I don’t know what you’re talking about.”

“Of course not.” Mandy said, smirking.

Harry led them all down the last corridor and into Myrtle’s bathroom. Myrtle herself wasn’t there, strangely, but no one was complaining.

Harry leant over the sink and stared at the tap for a few minutes. Hermione had a sudden thought that, if anyone were to walk in, they would be confronted by a very strange sight – six adults and eight teenagers, all staring at a ninth teenager trying to become one with the plumbing.

As she swallowed her giggles, Harry’s mouth opened and a strange hissing noise escaped it, causing the sink to slowly melt into the floor, leaving behind the gaping mouth of a dark tunnel.

The very sight of it sent shivers down Hermione’s spine and she resisted the urge to back away, swallowing hard. “So now we jump?”

“No.” Ginny answered shakily. “You have to say ‘stairs’.”
“Stairs?” Harry repeated blankly.

Arabella groaned. “Harry, tell me you didn’t just jump head-first into a dark tunnel last time.”

“Well, we made Lockhart go first.” Ron protested.

Mandy’s mouth twitched. “Oh, well, that’s alright then.”

Harry grinned sheepishly and hissed something else, causing stone steps to emerge from the walls, leading down in a tight spiral to whatever lay below them. “Ladies first.”

“Oh, thanks.” Hermione said, rolling her eyes. Nevertheless, she accepted his hand and stepped into the tunnel, her unease comforted by the knowledge that the castle would have warned her if there was anything to fear. Sure enough, she reached the bottom without any trouble and leaned against one of the walls to wait for the others. She considered sitting down, but decided, upon eyeing the debris, that standing was the safer option.

“Harry?” She asked, when she heard his footsteps. “What happened to the basilisk?”

“Er, nothing, I don’t think.” Harry said, emerging from the gloom.

“Oh, great.” Hermione sighed. “That’s going to reek!”

It took about ten minutes for everyone to gather at the bottom of the stairs, by which point Ginny was just short of hyperventilating, clinging to Draco like a lifeline.

“You don’t need to come, Ginny.” Jen reminded her kindly. “No one would think any less of you.”

“I need to.” Ginny said, her voice wavering. “I need to face it. Not for any of you, but for me.”

Jen patted her shoulder. “I get it.” She said, because she did. “We go at your pace, okay? Harry, anything we need to be aware of?”

“Well, you might want a Bubble-Head Charm.” Harry advised. “There’s a dead snake in the next chamber and it’s been there for three years.”

“Oh.” Jen said with a grimace. “Okay, everybody, charms until we can get that sorted out.”

Hermione, having had time to think on the matter, wasn’t worried. She had suddenly remembered something she’d been told, back at the beginning of the year by Rowena, and she had a feeling that the snake was not as issue.

Harry led them through the tunnel, through the narrow gap in the rocks that Ron had needed to clear after Lockhart’s spell backfired, all the way to a circular metal panel engraved with snakes.

“Stand back.” Harry warned, before hissing again.

The metal snakes wriggled, then slithered around the circumference of the door and locked into place, allowing the door to swing open.

Inside the bubble, Harry’s mouth dropped open.

With a rush of excitement, Hermione slipped past him and climbed through the hole to see the four founders standing in front of her, far more solid than they had been when she had first seen them.

With a smile, Rowena opened her arms and Hermione needed no extra prompting to run into them,
embracing her great-grandmother tightly.

“Hermione, we’ve been waiting for you.” Rowena chided gently, removing the charm with a wave of her hand and allowing Hermione to take a breath of decay-free air.

“Sorry, Grandmother.” Hermione said. “I take it everyone else can see you down here?”

“That they can.” Helga agreed, embracing her as well.

Hermione shook hands with the two men before turning to her dumbstruck companions, who had removed their charms. “I told you I wasn’t crazy.”

“We never said you were.” Remus said faintly.

“Don’t worry about introductions.” Helga said cheerfully. “They obviously know who we are, and we’ve watched each of them come through Hogwarts.”

“I need to sit down.” Jen murmured. “There’s not a lot of things that’ll shock me, but this is one of them.”

Draco, still stroking Ginny’s hair absently, looked at Ron. “You’re taking this well.”


Hermione glanced over and saw that Ginny’s eyes, unlike everyone else’s, were not fixed on the founders, but something in the corner. Turning in that direction, her gaze fell on the corpse of a fifty-foot snake, still in fairly good condition, and she screamed.

Sirius was the next to notice it, and turned a colour white that could not have been entirely healthy. “Bloody hell, Harry; you killed that when you were a second year?”

“Yeah.” Harry said casually.

“And just what were you doing fighting a basilisk, young man?” Addie asked.

Harry shrugged. “Extra credit?”

“He was saving me.” Ginny whispered, still pale, but not clinging to Draco quite as tightly. Seeing the body seemed to have relaxed her, reminding her that the monster was dead, even if Riddle wasn’t.

Addie turned to Sirius. “Did you know about this?”

Sirius grimaced. “Unfortunately.”

She raised an eyebrow. “Because I’m fairly certain, when you were telling me all about them, you never mentioned it.”

“Well, I didn’t want to throw everything at you at once.” Sirius explained. “They had a couple of eventful years at Hogwarts, and I didn’t want to drop it on your head.”

Addie pulled a face that he knew meant that she knew he was right. “Fair enough.”

Godric cleared his throat. “Well, as interesting as all this is, I think everyone needs to take a seat.
There are things you need to know.”
Ginny sank into one of the chairs that appeared, still gripping Draco’s hand tightly. “Are they good things or bad things?”

“Neither.” Salazar answered vaguely as the others sat down as well.

“First of all, you are right not to trust Albus Dumbledore.” Rowena told them grimly. “His aura grows darker by the day.”

Ginny inhaled sharply, but Hermione merely shook her head sadly. “Fawkes implied as much at the beginning of the year. He only stays to protect Hogwarts – Dumbledore’s convinced that what he’s doing is right, so he won’t even consider that he might be wrong.”

“Precisely.” Rowena agreed softly. “We don’t know the full extent, but we want him out of this school and away from our children as soon as possible.”

“You and me both.” Jen said with a sigh. “But we’ll have to wait before we take him down. Removing him now is just going to cause unrest and that will only help the Death Eaters. Any advice on that front?”

“Funny you should ask.” Salazar said, smirking. “First of all, Harry, I believe if you ask the mouth of that statue to open, you will find a private library with journals believed to have been lost, as well as a few other items of interest. And I think it best for your health if you let Hermione take a look at them first.”

Hermione blushed.

“Secondly,” Hegla continued, “I suggest you work on creating another entrance to this Chamber, one with an English password. You never know when you might need an ace up your sleeve.”

“Thirdly, you might want to harvest that basilisk while you’re down here.” Godric suggested. “I believe the fangs may come in handy.”

“You know about them?” Jen interrupted, her eyes cutting to her bag which contained not only the Gaunt signet ring, but the locket as well.

“Not until you just came in.” Godric said. “We can sense the magic and we’d appreciate it if you destroyed them as soon as possible.”

“What?” Ginny asked curiously.

“I’ll tell you later.” Jen said with a grimace.

Rowena cleared her throat. “Lastly, it would be to your advantage to visit Gringotts at some point, especially you, Hermione. I had a rather good rapport with the goblins.”

Hermione nodded. “I’ll go tomorrow morning.”

“Okay.” Jen said. “Harry, open the statue; you lot scope that out.”

Harry nodded and rose from his chair, addressing the statue in a hiss. The mouth of the great figure opened and, with a grinding, crunching sound, its left hand descended to the floor like a great elevator.
“There’s another snake up there.” Harry said suddenly, putting out a hand to stop anyone from moving.

“It’s not a basilisk.” Salazar assured him. “Just a regular snake.”

“Oh, that’s alright then.” Harry said, pocketing his wand and stepping on to the hand. “Coming, guys?”

Hermione eyed it warily for a second, before following his lead. “Well, I did say once that I’d follow you anywhere.”

The others agreed too, and the hand lifted them up to the open mouth. They all clambered in and followed Harry along a narrow tunnel, which slowly got darker and darker.

Then, all of a sudden, it became lighter and lighter, and they emerged into another cavern, this one furnished like a library.

Draco glanced over his shoulder. “Aren’t they coming to help us?”

“No, that would make it too easy.” Hermione said, running a finger along the dust-covered bookshelves. “Do you think Riddle ever came in here?”

“I don’t know.” Harry said. “The basilisk came out of that tunnel, but it doesn’t look like it was in here. I wonder if he read those books.”

“No, he didn’t.” Hermione said with an intense frown, apparently listening to a voice that only she could hear. “He felt their age overruled that potency.”

“You what?” Ron asked.

“They were too old to be of any used.” Susan elaborated, speaking for the first time since they’d entered the Chamber. “Are they safe to touch?”

“Yes.” Hermione answered decidedly. “They wouldn’t have sent us in here otherwise. Where’s this snake, Harry?”

“I don’t know …” Harry trailed off. “Oh, there she is.”

“She?” Ginny repeated, hesitantly releasing her grip on Draco. “Where is she?”

“Under the desk.” Harry said, moving slowly towards it, his voice slipping back into the hisses and sputters of Parseltongue.

Ginny clapped her hands over her mouth to prevent a scream. The snake was much bigger than had expected, curled up in a mountain of scales. Her tongue flickered out, scenting the air, and she slowly uncoiled herself, slithering up Harry’s outstretched arm to settle on his shoulders.

“Isn’t she beautiful?” Harry commented, and the snake hissed in a pleased sort of way.

“That’s one way of putting it.” Ron muttered.

Ginny reached out a hand, stopping just before she reached the snake. “Can I?”

In answer, the snake batted her head against her hand, almost the way a cat would, and Ginny complied, gently stroking the scales. Now the shock had worn off, she could see Harry’s point.
The snake was a shimmering green colour, which seemed to turn rainbow when the light hit her in a certain way.

“What’s her name?” Luna asked, also petting the snake’s head.

“She doesn’t have one.” Harry said. “What do you think we should call her?”

“Esmerelda.” Luna answered with hesitation. “It comes from ‘Emerald’.”

Harry hissed something to the snake and nodded. “She likes that name.”

“Er, would this be a good time to admit that I’m terrified of snakes?” Draco asked shakily.

Ron’s head snapped round so fast his neck cracked and he winced. “But you’re a Slytherin!”

“That doesn’t mean we like snakes.” Draco said, rolling his eyes. “You can’t tell me all Gryffindors like lions.”

“Or all Hufflepuffs like badgers.” Susan continued.

“Or all Ravenclaws like eagles.” Luna finished.

“Besides,” Hermione added, “you’re scared of spiders, you’ve got no room to talk.”

“She’s not that bad.” Neville said, changing the subject as Ron’s ears turned red. “She’s quite pretty actually.”

The snake hissed something and Harry laughed. “She says thank you; you’re not that bad yourself.”

Now it was Neville’s turn to blush and Hermione giggled. “Well, as interesting as that is, Draco, can you come and help me look for things that might help us? We can’t take all these books, as much as I’d like to.”

“Well, Lord Salazar said journals, didn’t he?” Draco asked, joining her. “So it makes sense that we’re looking for something hand-written and untitled.”

“Can we come back?” Daphne asked, flicking through one of the books. “I know they’re not what we’re looking for, but some of this stuff has probably been lost for centuries.”

Harry snorted. “I’m not going to try to keep Hermione away.”

“Hey!” Neville breathed suddenly. “Look at these!”

Hermione hurried over to him to find him staring at four, thick, leather-bound books. Just as Draco had predicted, they had no titles, but when she drew one from the shelf and opened it, she was met with her grandmother’s handwriting. “Wow …” She turned the pages as though they were made of very thin glass. “These aren’t just journals, these are spell-books. Handwritten by each of the founders. Some of these spells I haven’t even heard of.” She handed the book in her hand to Draco and retrieved the others as well. “Let’s take these back down. We’ve got all year to search through the rest; I think these are the important ones.”

Ron gasped. “I never thought I’d hear Hermione Granger call a book unimportant.”

“Granger-Black.” Susan, Neville and Ginny corrected.

“And I didn’t say they were unimportant.” Hermione added. “I said they weren’t as important as
these ones. Now move it.”

“Yes, ma’am!” Ron saluted her, spun on his heel and led the way back through the tunnel and back on to the lift that took them back to the ground level of the chamber.

By this time, the basilisk had disappeared and there was a large storage cupboard that hadn’t been there previously.

“Is that where all the pieces are?” Ginny asked.

“All but the fangs.” Addie confirmed, holding up a bag which was smoking slightly. “The rest of it, Harry, is all yours.”


“You killed it.” Jen reminded. “You get to claim the spoils. You are alright with us taking the fangs, right?”

“Yeah of course.” Harry said absently, eyeing the cupboard. “What do I do with it?”

“Whatever you like.” Jen said with a shrug. “Selling it would be the most obvious course of action – very valuable potions ingredients. Find everything?”

“Four founders journals.” Hermione said.

“Harry,” Mandy said warily, staring at the snake draped over Harry’s shoulder. “What is that?”

“This is Esmerelda.” Harry said. “She likes me. Can we keep her?”

Jen inched forwards and tentatively stroked the snake’s head. “Is she venomous?”

Harry hissed something and shook his head. “She is, but she promises not to bite anyone unless I ask her to.”

Jen glanced at the other adults, who shrugged at her. “Alright,” she said, a little reluctantly. “But make sure you know where she is at all times, alright?”

“Alright.” Harry agreed, his face lighting up in a smile.

“Jen,” Draco said slowly. “You can’t use basilisk fangs in potions, can you?”

“No,” Mandy answered for her. “Unless you’re brewing poisons.”

“Then what do you want with the fangs?” Draco asked curiously.

Sirius flinched. “I think it might be a good idea if we go home and talk there.”

***

An hour later, everyone was gathered in the informal sitting room at Ravenscroft Manor, clutching mugs of hot chocolate.

The silence following Jen’s explanation was almost deafening in its totality while the students tried to digest the concept of such Dark magic.

“Try not to think about it too much.” Jen advised finally. “It’ll drive you mad.”
“Too late.” Ginny muttered, nestled into Draco’s side.

Hermione heaved a sigh and leaned across Harry to fetch a piece of parchment and a quill from the side table next to him. “Alright, let me get this straight. From what Regulus learned, we know he was planning on splitting his soul into seven pieces, right?”

“Right.” Addie confirmed.

“So his body is one.” Hermione said, jotting it down. “The diary was two. You found the ring and the locket, that’s three and four. We think Helga’s cup is a fifth one. It’s a reasonable guess to say that he used something of Grandmother’s for the sixth. So we just need to figure out the seventh.”

“And where they are.” Sirius pointed out.

Hermione nodded, beginning another list. “Right, so he hid one with Lucius, got Bellatrix to hide another in Gringotts. He hid one in his mother’s home and one in a cave.” She frowned. “What’s with the cave?”

“That’s the one that confuses you?” Neville asked.

“Well, Riddle’s a half-blood.” Hermione said fairly. “He wouldn’t have had a Gringotts vault or a fancy manor and title of his own. Those things were important to him. And his mother’s home may not have been important, but it was significant. What’s the significance of the cave?”

“I can’t work that out.” Addie agreed. “The closest I could figure out is near Brighton on the Sussex coast. Remus said a school trip or something.”

Hermione tapped the quill against her chin thoughtfully. “Well, his orphanage was in London, right? Brighton would be a fairly close seaside town, a trip isn’t out of the question.” She sighed. “I suppose it doesn’t really matter—we’ve got that one. We need to figure out where the others were.”

“Hogwarts?” Harry suggested. “He seemed pretty against going home when I saw his memory in second year.”

Hermione frowned. “I don’t think so. Something that Dark … I would have felt it, wouldn’t I? So would the founders, wouldn’t they?”

“Maybe not.” Jen said. “They didn’t notice these two until I walked into the Chamber with them. And, honestly, I’ve been thinking about it – I don’t think there is a sixth Horcrux. I think he was aiming to use Harry’s death to make the last one, and failed – it would explain the amount of Dark magic around Godric’s Hollow.”

“It would.” Addie agreed. “But I don’t think we should discount the snake. You said Harry’s been seeing through the snake’s eyes as well – that’s more than a familiar bond. Maybe when he got his body back, he decided to make up for the lost diary.”

Sirius grimaced. “If you’re right, Ads, we’ve got a problem – he never lets that snake out of his sight.”

“That’ll have to be the last one we destroy then.” Jen said. “Right, anyone else have any bad news to share? Get it out of the way early?”

Hermione nudged Harry, who sighed. “Dumbledore told me the full prophecy.”

What little levity that had been in the room vanished completely.
“How?” Neville asked. “It smashed, didn’t it?”

“Yeah, but Trelawney made it to Dumbledore, remember?” Harry said gloomily. “So he knows the whole thing.”

“How?” Jen prompted gently. “You don’t have to tell us, cub.”

“Yeah, I do.” Harry said, taking a deep breath. “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 him as his equal, but he will have power the Dark Lord knows not … And either must die at the hand of the other, for neither can live while the other survives.”

For a few moments, there was silence, then Susan said, “Is it just me … or has that already happened?”

“What do you mean?” Jen asked, a little shakily.

“Think about it.” Susan said. “The prophecy could have meant Harry or Neville, Voldemort marked Harry as his equal by choosing to target him. He had whatever protection Lily and/or James gave him, which is the power he knows not, and Voldemort technically died.”

“It doesn’t matter.” Addie said softly. “I mean, that makes sense, but as long as Voldemort believes there’s a prophecy and that Harry has the power to kill him, he’ll keep coming.”

“Dumbledore thinks the ‘power he knows not’ is love.” Harry said.

There was a general reaction of disbelief, but Jen looked thoughtful. “Well …” she said slowly. “He may not be entirely wrong on that count.”

“What’s he going to do?” Sirius asked. “Hug Voldemort to death?”

Harry laughed. “Like father, like daughter.”

Jen shook her head with a snigger. “No. But Harry has all of us, which is something Voldemort doesn’t have. We’ll stick by Harry no matter what, most of the Death Eaters have proved that they won’t. And if sticking by him means teaching him everything he could probably need … Well, someone’s got to do it.”

***

That evening, under the cover of twilight, two women met up outside the Leaky Cauldron, as soon as they could leave their families’ graduation celebrations. They entered Diagon Alley almost silently, one illuminating the directions they had been given with her wand.

“Alicia?” Angelina asked quietly.

“Yeah?” Alicia’s response was quiet and almost habitual; her attention was fixed on the parchment in her hand, so she didn’t need to look up at what the Alley had become.

Since the Ministry’s announcement of Voldemort’s return, the usually bright and vibrant street had become quiet and almost unwelcoming, the usual displays covered by Ministry warnings and posters of known Death Eaters.

The one nearest the entrance held a picture of Sirius Black, who lounged against the frame looking bored, occasionally rolling his eyes at Bellatrix Lestrange, who laughed manically in the poster next
“What was that idea you said George had come up with?” Angelina asked, her voice shaking.

“U-No-Poo.” Alicia answered, finally looking up. As she did, she stopped dead in her tracks. Amongst the closed-down shops and giant posters of wanted Death Eaters, Weasleys’ Wizard Wheezes stood out bright and orange and cheerful – and sporting a large sign, exactly as George had worded it. “Oh, they didn’t.”

“They did.” Angeli said faintly.

“Well, that settles it.” Alicia stated matter-of-factly. “They need us. They’ll get themselves killed at this rate.”

“I think they’re closed.” Angelina said, shielding her eyes against the evening sun and peering through the window. “There is someone in there, though.”

“You don’t think …” Alicia whispered, not wanting to vocalise her fears. With the shop closed, the twins should have been upstairs in their flat, not in the shop itself.

“I don’t know.” Angelina drew her wand and tapped it against the door-knob, making it swing open. “Finite Incantatem.”

The whisper sent a spell at the door-frame; experience had taught both girls never to take entering a room occupied by either of the twins lightly, and entering one that belonged to both with anything short of ‘Mad-Eye Moody’-worthy paranoia was just criminal.

Another spell assured the young women that, aside from themselves, there were only two other people in the whole building, alive or dead, which meant that the movement must have been …

“Oi, Weasley! You here?”

“Angie!” Fred cried jubilantly. He hurried over and kissed her, lifting her off her feet. “How’d you get in without setting off the alarms?”

“I know you.” Angelina answered. “Hey, Romeo!” She called into the shop. “Juliet’s here!”

Fred placed his hands on her shoulders and turned her to see Alicia already wrapped in George’s arms.

“Oh, that’s alright then.” Angelina said with a smile. “Aren’t you closed?”

“Yeah.” Fred said. He smacked his brother upside the head – which did nothing to break them apart – and led his girlfriend to the curtain at the back of the shop. “Back here is where all the real work’s going on.”

There was an odd noise from behind them – a bit like a plunger being removed from a sink.

“What’s that then?” Alicia asked.

“You two finally resurfaced then.” Fred commented idly. “I give you …” he drew the curtain back with a flourish.

“Weasleys’ Wizard Warfare!” They chorused.
Angelina blinked in the sudden light. The back room was far less colourful than the shop floor, but behind the extra stock were shelves upon shelves of seemingly innocuous items.

“All of these products,” Fred continued, “are part of a DADA line.”

“They’re not pranks.” George added. “But a series of creations designed to help our side take down the Death Munchers.”

“Your imaginations,” Angelina said, taking in the vast array of products, “never cease to amaze me.”

“Well, we can’t take all the credit for these.” George admitted.

“We had some help from some old friends.” Fred added with a wink.

Alicia sighed with no small amount of frustration. “That is the second time you’ve suggested you know who the Marauders are – do you know or not?”

“We do.” George said, his humour fading into something far more serious. “And they’re working on a more proactive approach to the war.”

The two girls barely exchanged a glance before responding in unison: “Count us in!”

***

That night, Ginny found herself lying awake, unable to sleep.

Now this, in itself, wasn’t that much of a surprise; she had returned home after finding out that the diary that possessed her was much more than just an enchanted journal.

What had surprised her was that this news had actually made her feel better about what had happened. There was no way she could have stopped Voldemort himself; the blame now lay with Lucius Malfoy, and with him alone.

And so it was that it was Draco keeping her awake, not her own mind. The link between them was flooded with a toxic swirl of fear and pain. It had jolted her from sleep about an hour previously, and the need to get to him was growing stronger with every second.

She could tell that it was a nightmare, but she could not distinguish what exactly the nightmare was about.

Finally, she gave sleep up as a bad job, slipped on her slightly threadbare robe and hurried down the hall to her parents’ room.

Her parents’ door was rarely closed, but she knocked anyway, waking Molly instantly.

“Ginny? Whatever’s the matter, dear?”

Knocking had been habit, and Ginny cursed it now. Quietly waking her father would have been far easier. “It’s Draco, Mum. He’s having a nightmare. I need to get to him.”

“Absolutely not!” Molly said sharply.

Ginny grimaced, feeling something tugging at her. “I might not have a choice, Mum; the bond’s pulling me.”

Molly seemed to swell with indignation. “Then we will just find some way to …”
“Stop.”

Arthur’s quiet voice prevented his wife from climbing out of bed, but it did not stop her from directing her ire at him.

“Arthur, you cannot possibly …”

“Jennifer has tried to explain soul bonds to you, Molly.” Arthur interrupted. “She has told you that they cannot be forced. She has told you that breaking it would eventually kill both of them. She has told you that it would not have formed if Ginny was in any danger from him whatsoever. I trust Jennifer, therefore I am willing to give Draco the benefit of the doubt. Ginny, what’s going on?”

“Draco’s having a nightmare and the bond’s pulling me to him.” Ginny said through gritted teeth, fighting the magic that was trying to pull her to his side.


“Thank you!” Ginny said hastily, finally letting the bond in.

With a sensation that was a cross between flooing and a portkey, Ginny disappeared from in front of her startled parents and reappeared in Potter Manor, on the other side of the wards, in front of an even more startled Hermione.

“Ginny, how did you … Never mind.” Hermione said, interrupting herself. “He’s hurting, Gin; it woke me up.”

“I know.” Ginny whispered. “Leave it to me, Mione; go back to bed. We’ll figure out how I got here tomorrow.”

Hermione nodded and swept out of the room with a quiet ‘goodnight’, leaving Ginny alone in the dark.

She perched on the edge of the bed and laid a hand on Draco’s forehead, making sure he wasn’t feverish.

For someone in the throes of a nightmare, he appeared to be sleeping peacefully, the only sign of his internal distress the sweat beading on his face.

“Draco?” Ginny called, taking her hand in his and opening the link as far as she could without plunging into the dream herself. “Draco, wake up!”

With a gasp and a start, Draco’s eyes shot open. “Ginny?”

“Yeah, it’s me.” Ginny assured him softly. “You alright?”

In answer, he pulled her into his arms and held her tightly, burying his face in her hair, shaking with emotion.

Momentarily taken aback by the strength of his reaction, and not quite sure how to handle it, Ginny settled for rubbing his back and making comforting noises, all the while trying to extract the blankets from between them so she could lie down beside him.

It was a feat that reminded her of having to change out of her bathing suit underneath her towel when she and her brothers used to go swimming in the pond, but she finally managed it, resting her head on the pillow beside him, allowing him to curl up into her arms.
She was starting to worry now – Draco was never one to share his emotions like this, even after the bond had formed between them. “It’s alright.” She whispered. “I’m here. What happened?”

“That bloody diary happened.” Draco muttered. “If I ever find out that my father knew what it was …”

“I doubt he did.” Ginny said with certainty. “He’d have kept it safer if he’d known.” She ran a hand through his hair, feeling him shudder as she did. “Tell me what you saw.”

Draco released her, rolling away from her to lay on his back staring at the ceiling. “It’s nothing.”

“It’s not nothing.” Ginny said. “You practically dragged me here.” She took his hand again, squeezing softly. “You can tell me.”

“We were down in the Chamber.” Draco said softly. “The diary had you again, but it was my father this time, not Voldemort.”

It was the first time Draco had actually used the name, but Ginny didn’t say anything.

“He told me that he’d kill you unless I took the Mark.” Draco continued, his grip tightening on her hand. “And then he came out of you and into his own body, and you collapsed, but you kept telling me not to listen to him. And then he threw the Killing Curse at you.” He closed his eyes, but not before she could see the tears in them, reflected in what little moonlight streamed through the gap in the curtains. “Is that what it felt like when I blocked the link? Like part of you had gone missing and ice was creeping into your heart because it felt like some of you had died?”

“Yes.” Ginny whispered. “Yes, that’s exactly what it felt like. Minus the dying part.”

“I never expected this.” Draco murmured, pulling her close again. “Never.”

Ginny settled against him, his body still tense from the remnants of his nightmare. “Expected what?”

“I never expected to feel like this.” He elaborated, his lips brushing her forehead. “I never expected to need you like this. I never expected … expected to love you like this.”

For a split-second, Ginny thought about refuting this. But it made sense.

There was no other emotion that could describe what she was feeling.

No other emotion could simply exist the way this did.

And, as he tilted her face up and their lips met, she finally realised why it was called a soul-bond.

He was her soul-mate.
Inheritance

The next morning, when Hermione stumbled downstairs, she was still half asleep and, as a result, it was only the hand that caught her under the arm that kept her from literally stumbling down stairs.

Blinking tiredly, she looked up to see Harry’s grinning face, clearly in a far better mood than he had any right to be at this sort of time in the morning.

“Say it with me,” he said cheekily. “Ban-is-ter.”

Hermione rolled her eyes. “I feel I should inform you, Harry, that I am bloody exhausted.”

“What happened?” Harry asked, his humour evaporating.

“Nightmare.” Hermione answered. “Draco’s, that is. It woke me up, I couldn’t wake him up. Ginny ended up sitting with him.”

“Ginny?” Harry repeated. “She’s not here.”

“Well, she is now.” Hermione said with a shrug, pushing open the dining room door. “Appeared out of thin air.”

“Who did?” Addie asked, helping herself to porridge. “Morning.”

“Good morning.” Hermione greeted. “Ginny appeared last night. Like she apparated, but without the noise.”

Addie looked thoughtful. “Well, I’ve never heard of anything like that, but I only caught the beginning of Jen and Remus’s bond. Ask them when they get here. Cup of coffee?”

“Oh, yes please.” Hermione said, accepting it gratefully. “I’ve got to wake up before I go to Gringotts.”

“Just be careful.” Addie warned. “Goblins can be tricky.”

Hermione hummed in vague agreement, raising a hand in greeting as Remus, Jen and Sirius joined them, the latter dropping a kiss on her head as he passed.

“Morning.” Jen said with a yawn, falling into the chair beside Addie.

“Morning all.” Ginny greeted, appearing in the doorway with Draco.

Her appearance seemed to wake Jen a bit more and she smiled. “Do I want to know?”

“No.” Ginny answered. “But I do. Draco had a nightmare last night and pulled me here. Did that ever happen with you two?”

Jen nodded. “Yes, it’s part of the link. Sorry, I should have warned you. Are you feeling alright this morning, Draco?”

“Yeah, I’m fine.” Draco assured her.

“Ginny?” Jen asked. “Any ill-effects?”
Ginny frowned. “No, should there be?”

“Not usually.” Remus answered. “But you were pulled through some pretty intense wards.”

“Well, I seem fine.” Ginny said with a shrug. “What’s the plan for today?”

“Well, I was going to find out if there was any way for Harry and Draco to visit Gringotts without walking though Diagon Alley.” Jen said. “But I think I should probably start on convincing your mum to let you and Ron stay with us.”

“Dad.” Ginny advised. “Go with Dad.”

“I can talk to the goblins about that.” Hermione offered. “I’m already going in to claim my inheritance, I can ask.”

Jen didn’t look convinced, but Addie nodded. “That’s probably a good idea, Selena. Lady Rowena said that she had a ‘rapport’ with the goblins, right? Hermione may be best placed to ask.”

Jen sighed. “Alright. While you’re at it, mention the Horcruxes – don’t mention the Lestrange vault unless it’s going well, alright?”

Hermione decided not to mention that that went without saying.

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Once again, Hermione found herself standing outside Gringotts Wizarding Bank, slightly concerned that she was about to provoke one of the blood-thirstiest races in the wizarding world.

Then again, retrieving Sirius’s wand from his vault (was that really only two years ago?) had been easier than she had expected, so maybe this would be the same.

And lingering too long in the open space of Diagon Alley was no longer as safe as it used to be.

Squaring her shoulders, she strode into the bank, telling herself over and over again that she had every right to be there, and over to one of the tellers.

She waited for a few seconds, then, when she was not acknowledged, cleared her throat. “Good morning. I’d like to speak with my account manager.” Then, realising belatedly that she might not have an account: “Or open an account.”

“Name?” The goblin grunted.

“Hermione Granger-Black.” Hermione responded.

The goblin looked up at this, peering a little suspiciously at her.

“I was blood-adopted though Gringotts when I was a baby.” Hermione elaborated.

“Very well.” The goblin said, not looking any more convinced. He pushed a small wooden box towards her. “Place your thumb in the indentation on the top.”

Hermione did as she was told, unsurprised by the small prick on her skin. After all, in the years before Jen had claimed Ladyship by proxy, there were probably a lot of witches and wizards who claimed to have Black blood, just to get their hands on the family fortune.

A small piece of parchment appeared on the desk, and the goblin picked it up.
He read it several times, his eyes widening with each pass, and then he seized the arm of the goblin beside him, whispering something in his ear. The next goblin did the same to the one next to him, and Hermione watched the unknown news travel around the room until every non-human eye was on her.

Drawing more attention to herself was the last thing she wanted to do, but she had come this far. “Is there something wrong?”

The goblin hurried out from behind the counter and gave her a very low bow. “My Lady.” He snapped his fingers, and several more goblins hurried over and escorted her out of the lobby and down another corridor.

With every step, Hermione felt her heart rate increase. What kind of rapport had her great-grandmother been talking about?

The door at the end of the office opened and she was ushered into a richly decorated office, where another goblin got to his feet and bowed to her. “Lady Ravenclaw, it is an honour.”

“Thank you.” Hermione said with a curtsey. “May I enquire as to whom I am speaking?”

“Of course, of course.” The goblin gestured to a chair and she took a seat. “My name is Ragnok, I am the leader of the goblin nation.”

For a split second, Hermione’s blood froze in her veins. *This is either really, really good. Or really, really bad.* “Forgive me, sir, but I was under the impression that you only met with bank customers … well … that you never meet with bank customers.”

Ragnok gave her a fierce look that she only knew from Sirius as a goblin smile. “You are correct, Lady Ravenclaw, but you would not have come into your inheritance were you not worthy of the exalted position inherited from your grandmother, the Lady Rowena.”

It felt a little as though the room was spinning around her. This must have shown on her face, because Ragnok waved his hand with another goblin smile, and a glass half-full of amber liquid appeared on his desk. “Firewhisky, my Lady?”

Under normal circumstances, Hermione would have politely declined, but today, she picked up the glass and took a sip, the fiery taste burning through her shock. “Thank you. Now please excuse my ignorance, sir, but my mother turned her back on the magical world and I know very little about Lady Rowena. I knew I was descended from her, but I had not heard of any … position relating to the goblins.”

“Unfortunately, Lady Ravenclaw, goblins are not renowned for epic tales apart from those of battle.” Ragnok said with a slight bow. “As such, I know only what my father told me. He knew what his father told him, and so on. From what I gather, at the time Hogwarts was founded, goblins were little more than slaves of wizards. It was Lady Rowena who helped us to establish the great nation we are proud of today.”

“But I thought the goblin nation fought for their own independence.” Hermione said carefully.

“Oh, we did.” Ragnok said, with a fierce grin. “But that was only possible with an army. An army was only possible with a nation. Lady Rowena was a kind of … exalted adviser, and a great friend of the Goblin Nation. Originally she intended to pass that position on to her daughters, but after her eldest daughter, the Lady Helena, ran away, she decided to place a spell on her lineage. Only when an heir worthy of our trust and loyalty was born would we be alerted. Because Lady Rowena only
had daughters, the Ravenclaw name disappeared and we eventually lost track of her descendants. Until yourself. You are the direct descendant of Lady Maura Ravenclaw, her younger daughter.”

Hermione gazed into her glass, her reflection distorted in the amber liquid, then set it down on the desk. “Is there any chance of a cup of tea?”

“Certainly, my Lady!” Ragnok responded with a cheerful wave of his hand, and a cup and saucer appeared in the air in front of her.

Hermione took it gratefully, feeling the comforting warmth slide down her throat and calm her far more than the alcohol had. “So … what happens now?”

“Well, I must admit that I have never been in this situation myself.” Ragnok said, a little apologetically. “What I propose is … an exchange. Certainly, I am happy to consider you a Friend of the Goblin Nation, and I would ask that, once you are at an age at which you are capable of doing so, you aid us in dealing with the Ministry. In exchange, anything you request, within reason, will be granted.”

“That doesn’t seem like a fair exchange.” Hermione commented, frowning. “I mean, I would have fought for you anyway, it’s the right thing to do, and you shouldn’t be treated as second-class citizens just because you’re not human. So it feels like I’m getting special treatment in exchange for being a decent person.”

Ragnok inclined his head towards her. “A decent person who has more decency than most of the decent people that walk into this bank, Lady Ravenclaw. Your grandmother has chosen well.”

Hermione turned a little red. “Please, sir, call me Hermione. I’m not used to being called ‘Lady’ yet.”

“Certainly, Hermione.” Ragnok said, clasping his hands on the desk. “Now, I am certain you did not come to Gringotts today to discuss your family history.”

“Yes, there are a few things actually.” Hermione admitted. “I did come to claim the Ravenclaw line, although you’re right – I wasn’t expecting this. I have some friends, though – Harry Potter and Draco Malfoy. They both need to visit Gringotts, but they’re also both in danger if they walk down Diagon Alley.”

“I see.” Ragnok was silent for a few minutes, looking thoughtful, and Hermione drank her tea. “Is there anything else?” He asked finally. “Before I answer that?”

“Yes,” Hermione said slowly, setting her cup down. “Lord Voldemort has created Horcruxes.”

Ragnok’s eyes widened and an expression that could only be revulsion crossed his face. “He’s done what?”

“Very. Lady Black has managed to find two of them. And Harry destroyed one in second year – a diary, it possessed a first year student into opening the Chamber of Secrets.”

Ragnok pressed a button on his desk, activating an intercom. “Griphook, I want you to get me a list of all Tom Riddle’s financial transactions and investments.” Releasing the button, he looked at Hermione. “Lady Ravenclaw, on behalf of the Goblin Nation, I offer my apology for staying neutral in this war for so long. While we cannot touch the vaults of his main investors based on this
evidence, we can at least freeze his assets.”

“I shouldn’t think he has many.” Hermione said, smiling widely. “But that’s more than I could have hoped for, thank you. The reason I mentioned them, however, is that we know the diary was destroyed and we have a locket belonging to Salazar Slytherin and a ring belonging to Marvolo Gaunt. Regulus Black believed that he had two others, and we think that he may have made his snake into one when he returned. The other two items, however, are a mystery.” She took a deep breath. “I was wondering if it would be possible to search known Death Eaters’ vaults for either of them. If we destroy the item inside the vault, then it’s not stealing, is it?”

The grin that graced Ragnok’s face could only be described as feral. “An excellent idea, Hermione, and a request I am happy to grant. I will accompany you. As to your other request …” he pulled a box from the lower drawer of his desk and presented it to her, opening it to reveal a beautiful pendant. “This belonged to Lady Rowena, and she used it to portkey directly into and out of this office. You are the only one who can wear and use it, but you can transport as many people as you like with you.”

Reverently, Hermione lifted the pendant from the box, holding it up to the light. The Ravenclaw coat of arms shone, with the eagle almost seeming to move. Underneath, engraved words proclaimed that *wit beyond measure is man’s greatest treasure.*

Still, Hermione didn’t move to put the pendant around her neck. “Am I safe in assuming that this hasn’t left its box since my great-grandmother’s passing?”

Ragnok looked puzzled. “Yes, you are.”

“We know he turned Slytherin’s locket and we have strong reason to believe that he used a cup belonging to Helga Hufflepuff.” Hermione explained. “It’s not unreasonable to assume he used something of my grandmother’s.”

“I see.” Ragnok said. “The only other artefact owned by Rowena Ravenclaw, other than that pendant, was her diadem, which was rumoured to impart great wisdom. The Lady Helena took it with her when she ran away and it hasn’t been seen since. However, I can assure you that it is absolutely impossible for that pendant to have been infected by a Horcrux.”

“Thank you.” Hermione said, her mind racing. They’d need to find out where Helena went when she ran away. Maybe that would give them a hint as to where the diadem was. “What’s the activation code for the portkey?”

“A circle has no beginning.” Ragnok answered. “It’s longer than most activation phrases, but Lady Rowena felt it was apt for some reason.”

“Thank you.” Hermione repeated, slipping the pendant over her head, feeling it rest beneath her robes, just where her scar began. She stood and bowed to the goblin leader. “I’ll be back in a few minutes.” She said, thinking of Potter Manor. “A circle has no beginning.”

The transportation was nothing like Hermione had ever experienced. She wasn’t spun around madly like a floo journey. She wasn’t squeezed through a tiny space like apparition. There was no almighty tug behind her navel like an ordinary portkey.

The closest sensation she could think of was the journey between the enchanted rock and the entrance hall at Ravenscroft Manor.

All this took her the journey time to realise, which was about a second, but it took her even less time
to realise she had wands aimed at her face.

Her first instinct was to panic.

Then she took the time to observe the faces behind the wands and realised that the portkey had taken her, not to the ward boundary, but straight into the living room, where the others had gathered. “Relax, it’s me.”

Several wands lowered, but the others never even wavered.

“Why won’t you show me the scar Dolohov gave you?” Harry asked.

Hermione rolled her eyes. “Because it’s located in a rather compromising place.”

“Okay then.” Harry said, lowering his wand.

The others followed suit, Jen giving Harry a proud smile. “Good boy.”

“Hermione, how did you get through the wards?” Addie asked. “Come to think of it, how did you get here in general?”

Hermione pulled the pendant out from under her robes, but quickly realised that no one could see it. Carefully, she lifted it over her head and handed it to Jen for her to examine.

Jen sat down, shaking her head. “I’ve never seen anything like this. Goblin-made, human-embellished, as much magical protection as both could throw at it. Did you find this in the Ravenclaw vault?”

“Didn’t even need to visit it.” Hermione admitted. “Apparently, when Grandmother said that she had a ‘rapport’ with the goblins, what she meant was she was a Friend of the Goblin Nation and I would inherit that.” She shrugged. “It’s a long story, I’ll explain later. Does anyone other than Harry and Draco need to visit Gringotts?”

“I do.” Addie answered, slipping on a cloak. “I need to discuss McKinnon accounts at some point, may as well be now.”

“Jen, could you come with me please?” Harry asked. “Just in case?”

“Yes, of course, pumpkin.” Jen said, handing the pendant back to Hermione.

Hermione slipped the pendant back on again, before holding her hands out. “Hold on.”

Harry took her right hand and Draco her left, while Jen and Addie settled a hand on each of her shoulders.

“Ginny.” Draco said quietly.

Their eyes locked and they seemed to hold a private conversation for a few minutes – and, Hermione reminded herself, they probably were – before Ginny took hold of Hermione’s elbow and nodded.

“A circle has no beginning.” Hermione murmured under her breath and, with the same strange sensation as last time, they found themselves standing in Ragnok’s office.
The journey took the newcomers by surprise, as did their destination. Hermione, under no such handicap, greeted Ragnok with a cheerful smile and another curtsey, and was introducing her companions before they’d even had a chance to draw breath.

“Director Ragnok, may I introduce Lady Jennifer Black, Miss Addison McKinnon, Mr Draco Malfoy, Mr Harry Potter and Miss Ginevra Weasley.”

Ginny didn’t know much about the way Gringotts was run – she had always been far more interested in Bill’s tales of tombs and adventure than intra-bank politics – but she still knew who Ragnok was; her curtsey was almost automatic as her mind spun.

Ragnok inclined his head in greeting and beckoned Hermione closer. “Lady Ravenclaw, may I assume that they are all here for banking formalities?”

Hermione nodded. “Harry and Draco need to access their vaults and Addie needs to discuss her accounts. Jen is Harry’s legal guardian and he asked her to come with him, and Ginny is Draco’s …” She hesitated. “He asked her to come.”

“I see.” Ragnok said, glancing at the door as it opened to reveal Griphook. “Enter.”

Griphook hurried to the desk and bowed. “The information you requested, sir.”

“Thank you.” Ragnok took the offered parchment and scanned it. “Hmm. Griphook, escort Lady McKinnon, Mr Potter, and Mr Malfoy, and their companions to separate advisors.”

“Certainly.” Griphook said with another bow, then led the other five out of the room.

Draco took Ginny’s hand almost automatically as they separated from the other three and were shown into another office.

The goblin at the desk stood and bowed to them. “Mr Malfoy, I am Hortnuk, the Malfoy accounts manager; how may I help you today.”

Draco bowed as well. “Hortnuk, it is a pleasure; may our meeting prove profitable for both our families. This is Ginny Weasley; I wish for her to be present for at least the first part of our meeting.”

Ginny thought she saw surprise in the goblin’s expression, but it vanished as soon as it appeared.

*Stop looking so tense.* Draco told her, pulling out a chair for her. *No one’s going to eat you.* Aloud, he said, “With my father incapacitated, I would like to enquire about taking control of the Malfoy assets.”

Ginny started. *Thanks for the warning!*

*I like to keep people on their toes.*

“Well,” Hortnuk said thoughtfully, “Lord Malfoy is in Azkaban for the time being and you are sixteen, there is no reason you can’t take control of the family by proxy. Given the current circumstances, however, Gringotts and the goblin nation are aligning themselves against Tom Riddle, otherwise known as Lord Voldemort. There are some rules we cannot break, but since proxy-ships are generally assigned in the case of Lords too young for the responsibilities, we are
enforcing new requirements for cases such as these.”

“Of course.” Draco said. “If I may draw my wand to make an oath?” The goblin indicated that it was alright, so he drew his wand from his waist. “I, Draco Lucius Malfoy, do swear on my magic and on my life that I do not support Tom Marvolo Riddle, otherwise known as Lord Voldemort, in any way, shape, or form, nor will I ever. So I speak, so mote be it.”

“I think you covered everything.” Ginny said dryly.

Hortnuk was now grinning widely. “In that case, sir, it is perfectly acceptable for you to take the mantle of Lord Malfoy by proxy until you father leaves Azkaban.”

Draco nodded. *Now how do I stop him regaining control when he gets out?*

*Can you cast him from the family?* Ginny suggested. *Disown him in some way?*

Draco turned to her. “That, Gin, is a very good idea. Hortnuk, is it possible to disown my father, Lucius Malfoy?”

“Well, it is highly unusual.” Hortnuk admitted, looking taken aback. “In this case, the family magic would need to allow you to do so and that can be a little finicky – it would definitely need grounds to do so.”

Draco frowned. “Well, supporting the Dark Lord isn’t going to cut it – family magic doesn’t distinguish between good and bad alliances. It would need to be something …” His face brightened. “Treason. He hardly stopped the other Death Eaters trying to kill me at the Ministry.”

“And you’re his only child.” Ginny added. “Which puts the family line in immediate danger.”

Draco seemed to glow – literally, Ginny realised a second later – and when the glow vanished, there was a signet ring sitting on his right hand.

“The family magic has declared that an acceptable reason, my Lord.” Hortnuk announced. “Your father will be informed of his new status when he is released from Azkaban. Now, if you would, add a small drop of blood to this parchment and your listings will be automatically updated.”

Draco did as he was told, pricking his finger lightly with the offered pin. The blood absorbed into the parchment and Hortnuk read through it. “There are monthly instalments being taken from your vault by Tom Marvolo Riddle, am I right in saying …?”

“Stop him.” Draco stated firmly. “All of them. Anyone who can access the vault aside from …” He froze. *My mother. Ginny, what about my mother?*

Ginny flinched. She hadn’t even considered Narcissa. “We need to speak with Lady Black at the earliest convenience. She’s with Harry Potter.”

*What’s that going to do?* Draco asked, as Hortnuk pressed the button again.

*She’s your mother’s Head of House by proxy. She can dissolve the marriage between your parents and make your mother a Black again.*

*Gin, I don’t know what I’d do without you.*

Ginny turned a light shade of pink and then realised that Hortnuk was inexplicably following her instructions and making arrangements for Jen to join them. “Er, this is probably all confidential
information; do you need me to leave?”

Hortnuk glanced up. “Not at all, Lady Malfoy; you are at perfect liberty to stay.”

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“Lady McKinnon?” Hermione repeated, sitting down. “I wasn’t sure if she’d inherited the title, being supposedly dead and all.”

“She is the oldest daughter and there was no other family.” Ragnok explained. “The family vaults and titles have remained dormant, therefore she automatically inherits.”

“There weren’t any male relatives?” Hermione asked.

“Not close enough to be traced.” Ragnok confirmed, shuffling the papers he’d just been given. “I am afraid this doesn’t help us. All of Riddle’s assets are tied up with his supporters.” He gave her a cunning smile. “You understand, of course, that I cannot show you this parchment.”

“Of course.” Hermione said.

Ragnok set it down on his desk. “If, however, you were to see it while I was otherwise distracted, that would be an entirely different matter. Now, did I finish that report yesterday?” He gazed out of his window, apparently deep in thought.

Hermione grinned and pulled the parchment towards her, memorising the list of names. Most of the names there were not a surprise, nor was the fact that the Malfoy and Lestrange family were tied at the top spot.

“We’re almost certain there’s a Horcrux in the Lestrange vault.” Hermione said, returning the parchment to its previous resting place. “We know that Riddle trusted Malfoy with one, but that’s already been destroyed. I doubt Riddle trusted him with two.”

“True.” Ragnok agreed, turning back to her. “It is also unlikely that he wanted more than one in any one place. Still it cannot hurt to check – I do not want those things in my bank any longer. Follow me.”

“You know,” Hermione remarked, following him to one of the bookcases, “I was expecting this to be harder. Madam Bones was concerned we’d have to really fight for it.”

“The Ministry suffers from an unfortunate handicap.” Ragnok said. “They never consider the most obvious solution.”

“What is the most obvious solution?” Hermione asked.

“Asking for help.” Ragnok said simply. “They never bother.” He chose one of his many books and ran a long finger down its spine. The bookcase shuddered and split down the middle, revealing a secret tunnel.

“Is this a direct passageway to the vaults?” Hermione asked.

“Only the top security vaults.” Ragnok corrected, leading her through the opening.

It had definitely been built with goblins in mind rather than humans, as Hermione had to stoop and she wasn’t very tall, especially compared to Ron, who seemed to tower above her. Even Draco and Harry were a good head above her now.
They emerged into a wider, taller tunnel, facing great iron-cast doors with various crests on them. Ragnok led her to the one that held the Lestrange crest and tapped out a sequence on the key-hole with his finger, whereupon the door swung open silently.

Hermione thought she had already been inside the Black Family vault, but it only hit her after the door opened that it must have been one of the personal vaults, probably one that Sirius had inherited given the protections, because this was about ten times as big, with several piles of gold, but mainly artefacts and portraits.

Ragnok’s hand on her arm stopped her from entering. “My apologies, Lady Ravenclaw, but it is impossible to enter family vaults without the direct permission of the head of the family.”


“That is to say,” Ragnok continued, “it is impossible for humans to enter family vaults without the direct permission of the head of the family.”

Hermione smiled. “You’re enjoying this, aren’t you?”

“It does make a change from paperwork.” Ragnok conceded. “Do you know what Madam Lestrange had?”

“I don’t think so.” Hermione admitted, her eyes scanning the shelves from her vantage point in the doorway. “We’re looking for something of Ravenclaw or Hufflepuff. We think the last one is his snake and I’m fairly sure that’s not in here. There!” She pointed at the very top shelf, where a little golden cup sat glinting in the dim light.

“Everything in this vault has been charmed with Germino and Flagrante Curses.” Ragnok said. “So we need a way to destroy it without touching it.”

Hermione reached into her cloak and pulled out a small bag, extracting from within it a single basilisk fang. “This should do it.”

“Yes,” Ragnok agreed. “I would imagine it would.”

Hermione handed the fang to Ragnok with a bow and he took it gravely. Then, with a wiggle of his fingers, he floated up to the shelf where the cup sat. Without any hesitation, he plunged the fang into the cup and Hermione flinched, a dreadful scream echoing through the vault.

Serenely, Ragnok floated back to her and handed the fang back. “Well,” he said, “I think it’s safe to say that was one of them.”

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Jen and Harry were led to another room, where the Potter account manager was waiting, a goblin she knew well and greeted with a smile and a curtsey. “Barchoke, how wonderful to see you again.”

Barchoke gave her a low bow. “Lady Black, as always, the pleasure is my own.”

“Barchoke used to visit your grandfather at home.” Jen explained to Harry. “Sirius and I were often there at the time.”

“And Master Harry as well,” Barchoke said, bowing to him as well. “I had begun to think you had no interest in the family accounts.”
“He wasn’t informed about them.” Jen said crisply, ushering Harry into a seat after his rather awkward bow. “Someone who shall remain nameless decided he didn’t need to know.”

Barchoke scowled. “That someone may need to be reminded that inheritance is something that Gringotts and the Ministry of Magic actually agree on.”

“That someone will receive a strong reminder in due course.” Jen said. “In the meantime, could you kindly give Harry a rundown of the accounts please?”

“Certainly Lady Black.” Barchoke said, a piece of parchment appearing in his hands. He duplicated it and handed one to Harry to examine.

The analysis was much as Jen had expected, given that no one had touched the accounts. Harry’s trust fund was updated yearly, as per the custom, and the various investments seemed to be growing strong, with the exception of Gambol and Japes, who were slowly slipping.

“If I were you,” Jen said, “I’d pull that investment and channel it into Weasleys’ Wizard Wheezes.”

Harry frowned. “Is it a good idea to base investments on personal friendships?”

Jen gave him an approving smile. “Normally, no, you’re right. However, I’m not basing that on personal friendships. I’m basing that on the fact that G&J are on the verge of going out of business and WWW are on-track to becoming a very successful business.”

“I concur.” Barchoke said. “It would be highly profitable to jump in now.”

Harry nodded. “Alright, I’ll do that then.”

Barchoke snapped his fingers and the parchment updated. “There are no other outgoings, which is to be expected, given Lord and Lady Potters’ predicament.”

Harry’s head snapped up. “Wait, you know?”

“Harry.” Jen chided gently. “Manners. I assume that’s the Will?”

“It is.” Barchoke confirmed.

Harry frowned. “What Will?”

“Most Noble Families – and the Potters were definitely that – make their Will with Gringotts.” Jen explained. “But it is sealed with a rather remarkable charm. It’s tied to their life-force. As long as your parents live, the Will cannot be read.”

“But then how does no one know?” Harry asked.

“Have a think, Harry.” Jen said. “Why do you think?”

Harry was silent for a second, then his shoulders slumped. “Because no one would listen to the goblins.”

Barchoke nodded, looking angry. “Professor Dumbledore did come for the Will but we informed him the charm was not broken. Imagine my surprise when I hear nothing about their survival and instead hear that the Wizengamot heard their Will read! I even – and I do not do this lightly, young man – I even went to the Ministry myself, but I could get no one to even speak to me, let alone listen.”
Harry scowled. “You’d think that, given they all trust you with their money, they’d be a little nicer.”

Barchoke gave him an approving smile. “Some do. Your Lady Mother, for example, was always exceptionally friendly.”

“I think a lot of Muggle-borns are.” Jen said. “They didn’t grow up with the same prejudices. Now how does the family stand now, Barchoke?”

“Well,” Barchoke said, “with Lord James still alive, Master Harry can take the responsibilities of Lord Potter by proxy, but regrettably, he cannot enter the family vault without Lord James’s permission until he is 17.”

Jen nodded. “That’s pretty standard.” She explained to Harry. “The family vault is where all the heirlooms are and generally young purebloods with no responsibility can be a little …”

“Irresponsible?” Harry suggested.

Jen laughed. “Well, quite.”

There was a quiet knock at the door and Barchoke called for the visitor to enter.

A very young goblin slipped through the door and gave a very shaky bow. “Begging your pardon, my Lord and Lady, Manager Barchoke sir, but Lord Malfoy is requesting Lady Black’s presence.”

“Lord Malfoy?” Harry repeated in surprise.

Jen raised an eyebrow. “Draco must have taken control of the family by proxy as well. Harry, did you have any other questions?”

Harry thought for a second. “Just one.”

Jen nodded and smiled kindly at the young goblin. “What’s your name?”

The goblin gave another shaky bow. “I am Gornuk, my Lady.”

“Gornuk, kindly inform Lord Malfoy that I will be with him in a few minutes, if you please.”

Gornuk nodded hurriedly and, with one last bow, hurried from the room.

“Harry?” Jen prompted.

“Harry?” Jen prompted.

“How would I go about selling basilisk parts?” Harry asked.

“Well, now,” Barchoke said thoughtfully, “I presume that is not a hypothetical question.”

“No.” Harry said, a little sheepishly. “I have a large basilisk that I don’t need.”

Jen coughed to cover her laugh. “It has all been harvested.”

Barchoke nodded. “Well, then. What I suggest, Mr Potter – or will you be taking the Lorship by proxy?”

Harry looked faintly alarmed and Jen patted his hand. “You don’t have to until you’re seventeen,” she said kindly. “As your legal guardian, I can handle any of the duties until then.”

Harry nodded, looking relieved. “Yes, please.”
“Well then, Mr Potter,” Barchoke repeated, “what I suggest is that you mail the parts here to
Gringotts, addressing it to myself. We will then sell the parts on your behalf. Would you like the
proceeds to go into your trust vault, a personal vault or the family vault?”

Harry frowned. “I’m not sure. Can I think about it and let you know?”

“Certainly,” Barchoke said. “Include it with the carcass and we shall endeavour to fulfil your
request.”

“Thank you,” Harry said fervently.

“Thank you, Barchoke,” Jen repeated, rising from her chair. “Now I should see what Draco wants.”
She led Harry from the room to where Gornuk was waiting outside. With another bow, he trotted off
ahead of them.

“You’ll need to wait outside, Harry,” Jen cautioned as they arrived.

“Yeah, of course,” Harry said, coming to a stop outside the door. “Do you think everything’s okay?”

“I don’t know,” Jen admitted. “But we’ll soon find out.” She rapped sharply on the door and let
herself in.

Draco’s account manager had apparently stepped out to give them some privacy.

Ginny was perched on Draco’s lap, her face buried in his neck. When Jen shut the door behind her,
she raised her head just long enough for Jen to see the red rimming her eyes.

“What’s wrong?” Jen asked urgently, crossing the floor to lay a hand on the girl’s back.

“It turns out,” Draco said, with false calm, “that in goblin culture, a soul bond is considered a legally
binding marriage. As far as Gringotts is concerned, Ginny is now Lady Malfoy and she’s a little bit
overwhelmed.”

“Just Ginny?” Jen asked automatically.

Draco gave a small shrug. “Well, I was already a Malfoy, it’s not quite as bad.”

“Why didn’t you tell us?” Ginny asked in a small voice.

“I didn’t know,” Jen said, frowning. “I knew it used to be considered a legally binding marriage by
the Wizengamot, but one too many pureblood heirs bonded with Muggle-borns, and the blood-snobs
protested it. Did their children no good, of course. Most of them only just lived long enough to
produce the next heir before the bond killed them. I didn’t know Gringotts still abided by it.”

“How?” Draco asked. “Didn’t your bond form in your seventh year?”

“Well, yes, but …” Jen closed her eyes, the answer suddenly falling into place. “The Blacks are an
Ancient and Noble Family. The goblins are very particular about status and hierarchy. I daresay that
Narcissa would still have been Miss Black, even after she married, until Lucius became the head of
the family. So they wouldn’t have called me Mrs Lupin, because Miss Black has the higher status,
you see?”

“This is all well and good,” Ginny said a little shrilly. “But you and Remus are getting married
tomorrow. Draco and I have been thrown in the deep end here!”

***
Ginny’s mind was racing faster than Harry’s Firebolt in a Gryffindor-Slytherin Quidditch Match.

Married? How could she be married? She didn’t even turn fifteen until August, for Merlin’s sake, how could she be …

**Ginny? Are you still with us?**

Ginny started, Draco’s voice in her head effectively bringing her back to earth with a bump. **Yeah. Sorry.**

Draco gave her a smile that was close to a smirk, and turned back to Jen. “I’ve taken control of the Malfoy vaults and blocked my father.”

Jen blinked, then broke into a smile. “Well done! How did you manage that?”

“He let the others try to kill me, family magic agreed,” Draco said. “What about my mother?”

Jen hesitated, pursing her lips in thought. “Well … I would remove her access as well. I’ve set up an account for her to use, it’s nowhere big enough for them to keep funding Voldemort, just enough for her to live on. If she has access, there’s not telling with Lucius will do to get hold of it.”


The goblin reappeared from the adjoining room with a bow. “Yes, my Lord?”

“From now on, the only people who can access the Malfoy accounts are myself and …” Draco glanced down at Ginny “… Lady Malfoy.”

**Draco, you don’t have to …**

**Now, now, Ginevra,** Draco interrupted, **it’s only right.**

Ginny glared at him, but before she could protest, the meeting was ending and they were leaving the office.

**Not here,** Draco told her, tucking her hand into the crook of his arm. **We’ll talk later.**

Harry stood up when they appeared, smoothing his robes down. “Everything sorted?” He asked Draco.

Draco nodded. “He’s out, I’m in.”

Ginny narrowed her eyes. **Care to explain why Harry knew what you were planning and you didn’t bother telling me?**

**He asked,** Draco answered simply.

Jen led them back along the corridor to Ragnok’s office, tapping once on the door and letting them in.

Addie had already returned and was talking to Hermione. Her eyes were a little red-rimmed, but Jen pretended not to notice.

“What happened?” Hermione asked immediately, looking straight at Ginny.
“Later,” Ginny muttered.

Hermione frowned, but stood up. “Thank you so much for your help, Ragnok.”

“The pleasure was all mine, Hermione,” Ragnok said with a bow. “I should be thanking you for your assistance in removing that disgusting scourge from my bank.”

Jen breathed a small sigh of relief. It sounded as though Hermione’s mission had been successful.

“There is one last thing I need to as you,” Hermione said, a little reluctantly.

“No need, Hermione,” Ragnok said with a goblin grin. “That pendant has one more trick. Tap it twice with your wand and it will allow you to send a message here to Gringotts. You have my word that you can count on our assistance should trouble arise.”

Hermione gave a low curtsey. “Thank you.”

Jen curtseyed as well, murmuring her own thanks, her knees a little wobbly. To have the Goblin Nation onside was a stroke of fortune she would have never dared hope for.

Hermione held out her hands and her five companions all made sure they were all holding on to some part of her. She muttered something under her breath and they were catapulted back to Potter Manor.
As soon as they arrived back at Potter Manor, Ginny disappeared in the direction of the Quidditch Pitch.

Although she didn’t say anything, Draco flinched as though she had shouted (and maybe she had) and vanished in the direction of the stairs.

“What happened?” Hermione asked again.

Jen sighed. “It’s not my place to say, Hermione – they found something out, that’s all.”

**According to Gringotts, we’re already married.**

*Excuse me?* Remus asked, actually turning to look at her, something they rarely did when they were talking like this.

*You heard me. They abide by the Old Laws, which – duh – of course they do, why didn’t I think of that?*

“I’m going to check on Ginny,” Jen said aloud. “And then I’m going to talk to Arthur about letting them stay here.”

It didn’t take long to find Ginny. Jen had assumed that she’d need to get her own broom and chase the girl down, but she found her sitting on the pitch, rhythmically pulling up handfuls of grass.

“I’m okay,” she said as Jen approached.

“First of all, no you’re not,” Jen said. “Second of all, if you don’t want to talk about it, it’s fine. I’m going to talk to your parents about letting you and Ron stay here – do you …?”

“No,” Ginny said immediately, looking up at her with wide eyes. “Please don’t tell them.”

Jen chuckled. “I wasn’t going to tell them, Ginny. I was going to ask if you wanted to come with me.”

Ginny shook her head. “Thanks, but Mum probably won’t let me come back if I do. When you get back, could you tell Hermione and Harry for me please?”

“Of course.” Jen squeezed the girl’s shoulder and made her way to the edge of the wards, where she could disapparate to The Burrow.

***

As conversations went, it was a difficult one. Molly cried and protested, Jen attempted to remain as
calm as possible, and finally Arthur weighed in.

“Ron and Ginny won’t stay out of it,” he said firmly. “If Jen can help them stay alive, then I will be forever grateful.”

Molly rounded on her husband, giving Jen a momentary reprieve. “And what about this … this … soul bond that Ginny …”

“Keeping them apart is not going to make it go away,” Arthur said, a steely note entering his voice.

“Yes, but to have them in the same house …” Molly began.

“I hope you are not suggesting,” Jen interrupted, allowing the pureblood iciness she was raised with to bleed into her voice, “that I am incapable of preventing two teenagers from sneaking around behind my back.”

Molly faltered, the wind taken out of her sails.

“This soul bond would have formed eventually,” Jen continued, “but it is to Ginny and Draco’s disadvantage that it has formed so early. They haven’t had a chance to figure out their relationship before the bond and now this has fallen in their laps. The only thing they can be sure of right now is that the other person will never hurt them, which is an assurance most of us can only dream of.”

“I agree,” Arthur said, giving Molly a warning look. “Jennifer, as Head of the Weasley Family, I hereby grant you permission to act as Ronald and Ginevra’s guardian this summer.”

Jen inclined her head. “Thank you, Arthur.” She reached out to pat Molly’s arm. “Like I said, Molly, I sincerely hope that when this is all over, we can sit here and you can say ‘I told you so’.”

***

When Jen arrived back at Potter Manor, it was to be confronted by two teenagers.

“What happened?!” Hermione asked for a third time. “Ginny said she asked you to tell us.”

Jen took a deep breath. “A long time ago, a soul bond was considered a legally binding marriage in the wizarding world. That law was changed several hundred years ago, when it interfered with one too many betrothals …”

“Of course it did,” Hermione muttered.

Jen smiled fondly at her niece. “Obviously. However, we discovered today that Gringotts still consider them a legally binding marriage. Ginny is, as far as the goblins are concerned, Lady Malfoy.”

Hermione’s jaw dropped and she jumped to her feet. “Maybe I should go and talk to her; she must be freaking out.”

“Actually,” Jen said, “it’s Draco I’m worried about.”

***

Hermione hesitated, letting her empathy expand. The Quidditch pitch was relatively quiet, but she could feel a haze of fear and anxiety from the east wing. She nodded, bending to kiss Harry, before hurrying towards the source, finding Daphne hovering outside Draco’s bedroom door.
The Slytherin girl looked relieved at her arrival. “I saw him get back; he looked strange, but he won’t answer.”

“Long story,” Hermione muttered, trying the door. Perhaps unsurprisingly, it was locked. “Draco? It’s me, can you let me in please?”

There was a brief pause, in which she wondered why she had expected a response. On good terms with her he may be, but if Draco wasn’t going to confide in Daphne, he wasn’t about to confide in …

The lock clicked.

“I wasn’t expecting that to work,” Hermione admitted.

“Good luck,” Daphne said.

Hermione smiled weakly and let herself in, closing the door gently, pausing for a moment to give her eyes time to adjust to the dim light.

Draco was sat on the edge of his bed, his head in his hands, looking – for once – how he felt: utterly despondent.

Hermione sat down next to him, but didn’t say anything, knowing that he’d talk if he wanted to.

After a few minutes, he took a shaky breath. “I can’t feel her. Where is she?”

“Quidditch Pitch,” Hermione said softly. “She asked Jen to tell me and Harry what happened. I guess she needs some time to think.”

“About what?” Draco asked, almost helplessly. “We can’t change it.”

Hermione smiled slightly. “Well, from what I’ve gathered, you and Ginny only share thoughts you want each other to hear, right?”

Draco nodded.

“Well, normally, meeting ‘the one’ entails a good couple of months at least of ‘how is he feeling’, ‘am I acting too forward’, ‘does he really like me’ and so on,” Hermione continued. “Ginny’s trying to get her head around the fact that you’re ‘the one’ and she shouldn’t need to deal with all those questions, but she is, because she won’t use the link to find out what she’s feeling. Also, even though we all knew the soul bond was – you know – it, this is a little more … now.”

“Yeah,” Draco agreed softly. “I thought I’d be freaking out about it, but I’m freaking out more about the fact that she’s closed the link. I can feel her, but I can’t hear her and … and I don’t like it.”

Hermione frowned. “You want me to go and get her?”

Draco sighed. “No. Best let her work it out by herself. She needs …” He stopped, lifting his head to stare at the closed door. “She’s on her way.”

Hermione stood up, squeezing his shoulder as she did. “Alright. And sort this out today, please. We need you both focused.”

Draco pulled a face. “Yes, mum.”

***
Once Ginny’s thoughts settled, guilt began to pool in the pit of her stomach. After her reaction at the beginning of the summer, and their conversation the night before, blocking the link was not only wrong, it was borderline cruel.

She reached the landing just as Hermione left Draco’s room and the other girl gave her a stern look. “Fix it.”

Ginny just nodded, gathering her Gryffindor courage before knocking on the door.

It opened silently, and she stepped inside.

He was still sitting on the edge of the bed, and when he looked at her, it looked like he had already given up.

Gently, she nudged the link open again, flinching at the wave of pain and anxiety that washed over her.

Ginny opened her mouth to explain, then closed it again. After a few more attempts to find the right words, she gave up, took a deep breath, and forced the link open entirely, letting every single one of her thoughts, fears, memories and emotions flood into him.

His expression didn’t change, but the light in his eyes changed from pain, to shock, to … something else.

Then, before Ginny could as much as blink, his arms were around her and his mouth was pressed against hers in a searing kiss that sent shivers down her spine, making every inch of her skin spark with magic.

At the same time, he opened his side of the link.

Ginny found herself spinning through memories of Hogwarts, Slytherin, Lucius Malfoy, Death Eaters, Voldemort … then his emotions joined them; the love he felt for his mother, the fear and disdain for his father, the hatred for Death Eaters, the concern for some of his house-mates … and then she landed upon herself, right in the centre, surrounded by a myriad of emotions, feelings that she was harbouring for him as well, and possibly had been for weeks, maybe even months, but kept hidden.

Keeping the link as open as that would drive them both mad eventually, and they returned it to its usual state, but the connection didn’t disappear; his presence in her mind remained stronger than ever, and their embrace shifted from one of desperate need for contact to a soft, loving kiss that made her heart beat five times faster.

After what seemed like forever, he broke away, keeping her in his arms, pulling back only far enough to meet her eyes. “What were you worried about again?”

Ginny blushed, the curse of fair skin. “Okay, I was overthinking. Are you sure you’re alright with this? I mean, according to Gringotts, it’s you and me until death do us part and all that.”

Draco’s gaze didn’t waver, his azure eyes locked with her chocolate ones. “And providing we survive this war, I fully intend to make it that way in the wizarding world as well.

Ginny started. She knew that he loved her, but … “Really?”

Draco smirked at her – not his ‘Slytherin’ smirk, but one that she had noticed was reserved solely for her, and did things to her insides that she hadn’t entirely come to terms with yet. “Why, of course,
Miss Weasley, what were you expecting?”

Ginny chose not to answer, focussing instead on something else. “And here I thought I was Mrs Malfoy now, dear.”

Draco chuckled. “Lady Malfoy, darling, there’s a slight difference.” He became serious again very quickly. “And you’re alright with this as well? You and me? Forever?”

Ginny nodded. “Forever.”
Unions

Chapter Notes

I've actually had to split this chapter in half because it was getting too long. So the wedding will be in the next chapter.

July 3rd dawned bright and sunny – not that the weather mattered a great deal.

Jen and Remus would be getting married in the ballroom at Ravenscroft Manor and then staying there for a week or so in lieu of a honeymoon, while Addie and Sirius returned to Potter Manor with the students to start training.

“How do I look?” Jen asked, fussing with her hair.

Addie rolled her eyes. “Jen, for the thousandth time, you look beautiful. Now would you relax and stop doing that?” She pulled Jen’s hands away from her hair and carefully pinned the wayward strand back into place.

Jen had chosen to wear her hair down, but scooped back away from her face. It trailed in curls over her shoulders, which had been left bare by her dress robes, styled to look like a Muggle wedding dress.

In contrast, Addie had twisted her hair up into an elaborate topknot and she had chosen a purely Muggle dress in blue satin.

There was a soft tap on the door, and Hermione’s voice floated through the wood. “It’s us, the boys are downstairs.”

Addie opened the door for them and Hermione and Ginny entered, stopping short almost immediately.


Jen smiled, but it didn’t quite reach her eyes. Reading her expression, as she had so many times at Hogwarts, Addie reached out and took her hand. “What is it?”

“Lily should be here,” Jen whispered, conjuring a tissue and dabbing her eyes. “It’s her wedding day all over again. I wasn’t supposed to be her maid-of-honour, you were. Like I’m not supposed to be Harry’s godmother, you are.”

“And I’m not supposed to be your maid-of-hour, she is,” Addie finished. “But here we are.” There were tears appearing in her eyes now as well. “I know it’s hard Jen, but …”

“Oh, for heaven’s sake!” Lily’s voice said. “We had enough of this on my wedding day!”

Both women turned to see that Hermione’s eyes were now emerald green.

“Jen?” Addie asked.
Jen gave a watery smile. “It’s Lily. She can’t do it often or for long, but Hermione can let her in like this from time to time. She did it last Christmas.”

‘Lily’ was smiling at them. “You look lovely, Selena.”

Addie cleared her throat loudly.

‘Lily’ rolled her eyes in a painfully familiar fashion. “And so do you, Shadow. You are not doing this today, ladies. I am not dead, I’m just not here. And yes, that’s horrible, but we’ll get there. Now go and knock them both dead.” She blew them a kiss, a shiver passed through Hermione’s body, and her eyes faded back to brown.

Jen swept her into a hug. “Thank you, Hermione.”

“No need to thank me,” Hermione told her, sniffling slightly herself. “If you really want to thank me, talk to Ginny about telling her parents about Gringotts; she’s giving me a headache.”

Jen chuckled, turning to the younger girl. “Nervous?”

Ginny fiddled with the skirt of her dress. “Mum’s going to kill me.”

“She can’t kill you for something you have no control over,” Addie said fairly.

“You don’t know my mother,” Ginny said.

Jen patted her on the shoulder. “The longer you put it off, the harder it will get Ginny, trust me. Just do it quickly and get it over with – just like ripping off a plaster.”

“Easy for you to say,” Ginny muttered under her breath.

Addie chuckled and turned her attention to Hermione, who was standing in front of the mirror, twisting her hair on top of her head experimentally, then giving up.

“Having trouble?”

Hermione met her eyes in the mirror. “I don’t have fifty gallons of Sleakeezy to spare.”

Addie chuckled. “Maybe you should have checked Potter Manor. Harry’s great-grandfather invented the stuff.”

“Did he really?” Hermione asked. “It makes sense, I suppose. Potter Hair is ridiculous.”

“It is,” Addie agreed, carefully untangling the knots that had formed in Hermione’s hair, just from her twisting it. “You got your mother’s hair, I see.”

Hermione grimaced. “For my sins.”

“I’m surprised actually,” Addie commented. “I would have expected the blood adoption to bring the Black out in you a little more.”

“It did,” Hermione said. “I’m wearing a Glamour Charm.”

“It’s more or less self-sustaining by now,” Jen added, helping Ginny with her make-up. “It fell in the Department of Mysteries, but I put it back on for her.”

“I’ve thought about dropping it completely,” Hermione admitted, “but I can’t do that at school. And I’m not sure I’m ready.”
Addie hummed in agreement. “Well, I can partially remove it today for you, to see if it makes this any easier.”

Hermione sighed in relief. “Yes please.”

“Alright, hold still,” Addie said, resting a hand atop her head. “Let’s see what we can do.”

***

While the girls were getting ready, Harry and Draco were lounging downstairs in the ballroom, watching Remus pace and Sirius trying to calm him down, but doing more harm than good.

Amelia, who would be presiding, and Augusta were sending streams of flowers and lights around the room, creating a soft, romantic atmosphere. Susan, already resplendent in pale-green, was helping them, but Neville had spent the night with the Weasleys and would be arriving with them.

At first, the two young men didn’t speak, engulfed in a heavy – yet not awkward – silence, occasionally ducking the occasional wayward sweet pea.

After a good ten minutes, Draco cleared his throat. “So did you ask about the Gryffindor line at Gringotts?”

Harry sighed. “No, but I didn’t need to. Hermione learned more than enough from Ragnok. Rowena wasn’t the only founder who wanted her Heir to prove themselves first. You’d think pulling the sword would have done that.”

“Maybe it means something else,” Draco said. “Gryffindor was all about chivalry as well as bravery. I mean, you did all that to rescue your best friend’s sister. Would it have been as easy if it was, say, me down there?”

Harry pulled a face. “Well, I like to think I wouldn’t have left anyone down there, but I suppose you’ve got a point.”

“Alice!” Augusta suddenly exclaimed. “What are you doing out of bed?”

Both started and looked around. A thin, pale woman stood in the doorway, taking in the happenings with a vacant expression.

“That’s Neville’s mum,” Harry whispered. “What’s she doing here?”

“Madam Longbottom had them both discharged from St Mungo’s at the beginning of summer and moved them here,” Draco answered quietly. “I overheard Jen mentioning it.”

The two older witches had now abandoned their decorating in favour of trying to convince Alice to go back to bed.

Before he had really thought it through, Harry stood up, brushing his dress robes down, and headed over to them. “Do you want me to take her?”

Amelia gave him a tired smile. “Yes please, Harry. I know Jen said she’d like Alice there if she could cope, but she won’t, not really.”

Harry nodded, taking a step towards his friend’s mother. “Alice? Why don’t we go back? You must be tired.”

Alice turned to look at him. For a split-second, he thought he saw something flash in her eyes, but it
disappeared too fast for him to be sure.

She took his arm without fuss, and Harry gently steered her out of the room and towards the East wing, where Augusta and Amelia were living. Trying to keep her moving, he chatted away, telling her all about Hogwarts and Neville, until they finally reached a large white room that held two hospital-like beds, one of which held Neville’s father, awake but gazing at the ceiling.

As Harry released her, Alice walked slowly to the empty bed and turned to look at him expectantly. He hesitated, but followed her, helping her under the covers and tucking her in.

Before he could move away, she caught his arm, her grip surprisingly strong for such a frail woman. Her pale eyes locked on his face. “James …”

Harry froze. “No, Alice, I’m Harry. James’s son.”

“James,” Alice repeated, her voice firmer.

Her hand was trembling and he could see her getting upset. “Yes.” He covered her hand with his and squeezed gently. “Yes, I’m James.”

A ghost of a smile graced her face as her grip loosened and her eyes closed.

Harry waited for her breathing to even out, before carefully pulling his arm free and leaving the room, wondering if that was some sort of break-through in her condition.

Halfway back to the ballroom, he came across Hermione and stopped dead in his tracks, all other thoughts flying out of his mind. “Mione, you look … Wow.”

Hermione smiled shyly at him. “Yes?”

“You look amazing,” Harry told her honestly. “Did you … Did you do something with your hair?”

To his relief, Hermione’s smile didn’t waver. If anything, it got bigger. “Actually, no. Addie helped me remove part of the Glamour Charm so my hair was a bit more manageable.”

“How did she know it would do that?” Harry asked.

“Apparently, Black blood outs,” Hermione said dryly. “You really think I look okay?”

Harry sighed. “Hermione, you are beautiful. It doesn’t matter how many times you ask me, my answer is not going to change.”

“I’ll second that,” Draco said from behind him.

Hermione started. “Really?”

“Of course.” Draco turned to Harry, shaking his head. “You really need to do something about her self-esteem, Potter.”

“I don’t see why she has such a problem,” Harry agreed. “She’s stunning.” Out of the corner of his eye, he could see Hermione’s complexion turning bright pink.

Draco also caught it and smirked. “Well, that’s my goal for today reached.” Before she could protest, he bowed formally to her, took her hand and kissed it. “Lady Ravenclaw, allow me to extend my compliments – you will be one of the most beautiful girls in the room today.”
“One of the most?” Harry repeated, wondering how red they could make her. “Surely the most?”

“Well, I would agree with you,” Draco said, “but I do have to include Ginny in my reasoning.”

“Oh, of course,” Harry said, nodding sagely. “And obviously no one can outshine the bride.”

“Obviously,” Draco agreed. “Well, I’d love to stand and chat all day, but Ginny’s a little nervous, what with her parents coming, and her internal monologue has reached a pitch that only dogs can hear, so please excuse me.”

“I’m beginning to agree with Ron,” Harry commented, as soon as he was out of earshot. “He’s actually acting normal.”

Hermione laughed. “Calm down!”

***

As he walked away, Draco knew that Potter – *Harry* – would make some comment, but didn’t bother to wait and hear it. He was more focussed on trying to soothe his soul-mate, even though he knew she was trying to shield her worry from him.

He knew he was acting very ‘un-Draco Malfoy’, but then again, it was very ‘un-Harry Potter’ for the Gryffindor to just turn his back on the four years of enmity between them.

Recently, however, much of Draco’s behaviour had been an act of self-preservation – the general opinion of the Slytherins was not incorrect; many were pureblood supremacist, if not outright supporters of Voldemort, and Draco was a Slytherin for a reason. If he had been prepared to announce that maybe he didn’t agree with that line of thinking, he would have been a Gryffindor.

His father had certainly done his best to raise a future Death Eater, but his mother, on the rare occasions she was permitted to spend time with her son in private, had done the exact opposite, telling him stories of a Muggle-born Gryffindor, who had been Narcissa’s only true friend and, Draco only realised later, become Lady Lily Potter, the Countess of Richmond.

Ultimately, unfortunately, his father’s teachings had broken through, and he had arrived at Hogwarts believing that the world should be served up to him on a platter.

That attitude had not lasted long.

He had been beaten to the top of his year by a Gryffindor and a Muggle-born at that. What was worse, no matter how he tried to justify it to his father, the fact of the matter was that she was just … better than him.

Humiliated, Draco had spent the next year desperately trying to undermine the so-called ‘Golden Trio’, but nothing bothered them: they were a team, a unit … friends.

He would see them down by the lake, laughing, joking, willing to do anything for each other … and then he would look at his own ‘friends’ – nothing more than political links to appease his father.

He found himself watching them, wishing he was a part of something like that.

Third year, he stopped trying to antagonise them so much – who knew that they were as loyal as Hufflepuffs when it came to Hagrid? (With hindsight, he had to admit that he should have done.) On a bad day, he could still feel the sting where Hermione had punched him; just the fact that she made contact earned her his grudging respect.
And that was all that led him to trust her in his fourth year.

Draco was, if nothing, the perfect Slytherin. But Hermione Granger had him beaten at every turn.

Sometimes he wondered how the Hat sorted her at all.

Analysing his thoughts, he chuckled to himself when he realised that an outsider would mistake his opinion of the young woman for a romantic interest.

But the affection he held for her – because there was affection, he wasn’t going to bother denying that – was strictly platonic. She was a friend – a sister, even.

Reaching Jen’s bedroom drew him out of his thoughts, and he tapped smartly on the door. It opened just enough for Addie to peer out.

“Good morning,” Draco greeted. “May I borrow Ginny?”

Addie smiled at him. “Good morning, Draco. Yes, of course.” She beckoned over her shoulder and Ginny took her place, shutting the door behind her.

“What’s wrong?”

“Really, Ginny, does something have to be wrong?” Draco asked, offering her his arm. “You look stunning.”

“Oh, thank you,” Ginny said, glancing down at her dress as they set off downstairs. “I was a bit worried about this dress actually; blue isn’t really my colour …”

“Gin, you’re not worried about the dress,” Draco said, cutting in smoothly. “If you are, you shouldn’t be. I can feel you in my head. What’s really bothering you?”

Ginny smiled wryly. “Like you don’t already know.”

They emerged into the entrance hall and came to a halt, the only sound the distant murmur of Augusta’s voice as she gave instructions.

Ginny sighed heavily. “I’m worried, Draco. Mum still isn’t happy about this, and she only knows about the bond – she doesn’t know you have feelings for me, she certainly doesn’t know that I have feelings for you, she doesn’t know about Gringotts and she doesn’t know that we’re …” she trailed off, looking around as though hoping the correct descriptive would fall from the ceiling. “… that we’re whatever the hell we are.”

“What about your father?” Draco asked quietly.

“Oh, he’ll be alright,” Ginny said dismissively. “At least, I hope he will. But Mum likes to be in control of every situation, and she’s not in control of this, she could easily forbid me from coming here, I’m still underage, and with the bond we have …”

Draco could see her getting upset now and, taking her hands, he pulled her into his arms and held her tightly. “I’m not losing you, Gin; you’re jumping to conclusions.”

There was a soft pop, and he glanced up to see her family appear behind her. Their invitation acted as a portkey, so they didn’t need to worry about finding the transportation stone.

Neville was with them, but he just gave them a smirk and a wave, and vanished into the ballroom to find his grandmother.
Ron looked oddly smug, a sharp contrast to the anger and confusion on the rest of her brothers’ faces. Molly looked about ready to explode.

It didn’t matter though; what did matter was the fact that Ginny was still upset. “Ginny, your family’s here.”

*I don’t want to deal with it. Can’t I just stay here?*

Draco sighed and extended a hand to her father, pretending he couldn’t read the mistrust on his face. “Mr Weasley, good to see you again. I’d just like to apologise for everything my father has said and done over the years. And thank you for giving him a black eye a few years ago.”

Fred and George’s glares dropped and they sniggered at the memory.

Slowly, Arthur shook Draco’s hand. “I must admit, Draco, that when Ron told me you were on our side, I was a little sceptical. Apparently, names can be deceiving.”

“You sticking up for me?” Draco asked Ron. “Whatever next?”

Ron shrugged. “Seemed like the right thing to do, considering. What’s with Ginny?”

Draco glanced down at the top of her head. “What, this? Ginny’s a little worried about telling you something. Good morning, Mrs Weasley.”

Molly ignored his greeting. “What things? What’s wrong with her?”

Draco steeled himself, hoping that Ginny being between them would stop him from getting killed. “I assume you all know about the soul-bond.”

“You share a soul-bond?” Bill asked, relaxing almost immediately.

“Bill?” Arthur prompted. “What do you know?”

“Well, soul-bonds are very rare,” Bill said. “They rarely form before the couple have begun dating – I assume this is what happened here?”

Draco nodded. “Absolutely. I was unconscious in the infirmary.” He briefly laid out what happened, including his exhaustion and Pansy’s sudden entrance.

Bill was nodding as well now. “That sounds about right. The thing is, Dad, soul-bonds don’t form unless Magic knows the two would never harm one another. Ginny’s about as safe as she can be.”

“How do you know so much about it?” Charlie asked, looking much happier himself.

“Gringotts lives by the Old Laws,” Bill explained, “so they …. Ah.”

“Yes,” Draco agreed dryly. “Imagine our surprise when I took control of the family and disowned my father, and they started calling her Lady Malfoy.”

“What?!” Ron choked out.

Draco nodded. “Gringotts considers the soul-bond a legally binding marriage still, even if the wizarding world doesn’t.” He turned to Arthur. “Mr Weasley, I just want to reassure you that we are both very aware of the fact that we have been thrown in the deep end, so to speak, and neither of us have any plans to change that until after we have both graduated.”
Arthur raised an eyebrow. “Is that you way of saying you intend to marry my daughter?”

Draco didn’t flinch. “Not without asking your permission.”

“And if, for whatever reason, I decided not to give it?” Arthur asked evenly.

Ginny shifted in his arms, and Draco loosened his grip to let her turn to face her family. “No offence intended, sir, but I love your daughter so I’d marry her anyway.”

“And I love Draco,” Ginny added, “so I’d tell him to ignore you.”

“Well, Ginny is scarier than Dad is,” Charlie said gravely, “so that’s probably wise.”

Arthur nodded, finally allowing himself a smile. “Just wait until you’ve both graduated.”

Ginny rolled her eyes. “Yes Dad.”

“Arthur …!” Molly began, but her husband held up a hand.

“Molly, we can discuss this at home. This is Jen’s wedding day and neither the time nor the place for this discussion.”

“But …”

Bill and Charlie promptly flanked their mother and steered her out of the entrance hall and into the ballroom, Arthur following close behind.

Ron let out a shaky breath. “Well, this is …” He shook his head and focused on Draco, narrowing his eyes. “Look after her.”

Apparently not trusting himself to say anything more, he followed his parents and older brothers, leaving Ginny and Draco alone with the twins.

If Draco was honest, it was these two, out of anyone, that he was worried about; his hands tightened unconsciously on hers and she sent a wave of reassurance back through the link.

“Have you closed the shop for today then?” Ginny asked.

“No, we left Angie …”

“… and Alicia in charge.”

Ginny raised an eyebrow. “I thought they were going into professional Quidditch.”

“They only got reserve positions.”

“So they came to work with us.”

“Now, Malfoy …”

“We should probably call him Draco if he’s actually dating her.”

“Draco then – you should probably know …”

“… Ron spoke for all of us.”

“So hurt her …”
“… and we’ll hurt you.”

In the time it took Draco to put the separate strands into one sentence, the twins had disappeared into the ballroom themselves, and Ginny was shaking her head.

“I’m so sorry.”

“Don’t be,” Draco said, pulling her into the living room so they could talk privately. “That went well.”

Ginny hugged him impulsively. “Yes, it did. Mum’s going to throw a fit, but when Dad puts his foot down, it stays down. Thank you – that could have been so much worse.”

“I meant every word of it,” Draco told her quietly. “You know I did. And did you realise that’s the first time you’ve said that you love me out loud?”

_That’s the first time anyone’s said that they loved me out loud._

Ginny sucked in a breath, and it only took a glance for him to realise that he’d projected his last thought to her. “I …”

She reached up on tiptoes and kissed him lightly. “I love you. And I don’t have a problem saying it out loud.”

Draco gave her a genuine smile, realising as he did that she was a year younger than him, so waiting until they had _both_ graduated meant waiting three years, not two.

As she returned his smile, he wondered whether he’d get through those three years with his sanity relatively intact.
Weddings

It was a beautiful ceremony for all its simplicity. Jen and Remus both seemed to glow with happiness and, when the two were finally pronounced man and wife, there were few dry eyes in the room – Hermione swore she even saw Sirius brushing away a tear.

Then, as the new Mr and Mrs Lupin made their way back down the aisle, everyone rose to their feet, firing off red and gold sparks in a salute. With another wave of Amelia’s wand, the chairs flew to surround the small tables along the sides of the ballroom, creating a dance floor.

Hermione directed her wand at a Muggle CD player in the corner, starting up the playlist of Muggle and magical music she and Ginny had put together – for obvious reasons, neither Jen nor Remus had felt comfortable hiring a band.

“They look happy,” Harry murmured in her ear, as people swarmed the happy couple with well-wishes.

“Of course they look happy,” Hermione said quietly. “They just got married.”

Harry sighed, wrapping his arms around her waist. “I want to look that happy one day.”

“You will,” Hermione said confidently. “We will.” She glanced over her shoulder to see Harry giving her a dazzling smile, before he kissed her.

“I love you, Mione.”

“Love you too.” Hermione grabbed his hand and pulled him into the dispersing crowd. “Come on.”

When they reached Jen and Remus, they were talking to Fred and George.

“You could have brought the girls along,” Jen was saying. “I’d have liked to meet them.”

“At least someone would,” Fred grumbled. “When we brought them home for dinner, Mum asked them flat-out if they knew we had no aspirations.”

“Besides,” George added, when Jen’s frown deepened, “we’ll bring them over after the honeymoon.”

“Yeah, they’ve had some amazing ideas,” Fred agreed, brightening up. “We didn’t want to bring up the war today.”

Hermione giggled. “You just did.”

As the twins stuck their tongues out at her in unison, Jen swept her and Harry into a hug. “I’m so glad you two were here for this.”


Remus hugged her as well, still beaming. “Thank you, Hermione.”

Spotting Mandy and Arabella nearby, Hermione excused herself to jog over to speak to them, having missed them before the ceremony.

Sirius, Remus and Jen had resigned from the Order, saying that they wanted to stay available for
Harry and the others, but Mandy and Arabella had stayed, mainly on Jen’s request.

Jen was not going to pretend there was no possibility she could be wrong, so she had asked them to stay close, just in case.

“Are you okay?” Hermione asked, once hugs and greetings had been exchanged. “You look exhausted.”

“Dumbledore doesn’t buy the reason Jen gave them for their resignation,” Arabella said in a low voice. “That’s half the reason Minerva isn’t here; she’s sent her best wishes, but it would just cause too many problems.”

Hermione frowned. “He doesn’t think they’ve gone dark, does he?”

Mandy shook her head. “No, I think he’s just worried they’re out of his control. It’s taking all of our Occlumency to keep him at bay.”

“Hence looking exhausted,” Arabella said. “With any luck, he’ll drop it soon enough.”

“Oh, he’s got to,” Mandy said wearily. “He might be a manipulative git, but he wants Voldemort gone too.”

“That’s enough,” Arabella said firmly. “I’m not going to think about the war any more today. It’s too depressing and this isn’t a day to be depressed.”

“No,” Mandy agreed, hugging Harry as he came over. “Hey, pumpkin.”

“Hey,” Harry said, “where’ve you two been?”

“Oh, all over the place,” Arabella sighed. “But that’s pretty dull talk, honey, trust me. How’s school been?”

While Harry and Hermione complained about their OWLs, Jen and Remus had been approached by Bill and Charlie.

“Boys, I promise you that Draco’s on our side,” Jen assured them. “Bill, you work for Gringotts; don’t pretend you’re not just being overprotective. Now,” she smirked, “that’s quite enough about your sister’s love-life; what about yours? Bill, I thought you were seeing that Beauxbatons girl? Fleur, I think her name is?”

Bill’s ears turned red, a trait he shared with his father and younger brother. “Yeah, she had to work today. Actually, I’m … I’m thinking of asking her to marry me.”

Jen beamed, mentally reminding her husband of the bet they had going. “Good for you! What’s holding you back?”

Bill didn’t answer, but he couldn’t stop himself glancing over his shoulder, to where his mother was talking to Augusta Longbottom.

“Bill,” Jen said quietly, following his gaze, “Molly will never consider anyone good enough for her children, unless she’s picked them herself. I’m not surprised she doesn’t like Fleur – from what Harry’s told me, they’re total opposites – but you are a grown man. If you really love her, go for it. Make it a long engagement and Molly will come around.”

“Listen to her,” Remus advised. “She’s a smart one.” He stepped back quickly to avoid an elbow to
the stomach. “What about you, Charlie? How’s Romania?”

Charlie grinned and held up his left hand. With a wave of his wand, a wedding ring appeared on his third finger.

Three jaws dropped and Bill punched him on the arm. “You git! You got married and didn’t tell me?!”

Charlie hastily hushed him, replacing the Concealment Charm. “Mum and Dad don’t know yet. Any advice, Jen?”

Jen was still gaping at him, and Remus gave him a smile. “She’s got nothing.”


“Her name’s Katherine,” Charlie answered, a giddy smile on his face, “and she’s another dragon handler. We’ve been dating for a while, but I didn’t want Mum to get all broody on me, so I didn’t tell anyone. Well, the twins knew, but they know when to keep a secret.”

“I know Katherine,” Bill said with a frown. “She’s brilliant. When did you two …?” He glanced back at his mother again. “You know.”

“May,” Charlie said heavily, his smile fading. “I went back and I was going to propose to her, but … there’d been an attack while I was gone and she was cursed really badly and the Healers couldn’t do anything and …”

Jen made a soft sympathetic noise, squeezing his arm.

“We thought that was it,” Charlie said softly. “And she said she wanted to die as my wife so we married quickly and …”

“Please tell me this story has a happy ending,” Jen interrupted.

It broke the tension and Charlie chuckled. “Thankfully, she made a full and miraculous recovery.”

Jen gave him a stern look. “So why isn’t she here?”

“I didn’t want to steal your thunder by breaking the news to Mum today,” Charlie admitted.

Jen smiled at him. “Well, thank you for not upstaging me. You will bring her to visit soon, won’t you? I’d like to meet her.”

“Yeah, of course,” Charlie agreed readily. “She’s really looking forward to visiting the UK.”

“You’ve warned her we’re not at our best right now, right?” Remus asked.

“Oh, she knows,” Charlie said with a sigh.

“Speaking of not at our best,” Bill said, “I’m sorry Percy’s not here.”

“Oh, don’t be,” Jen said with a smile. “It’s not like he ignored the invitation. In fact, he sent me a perfectly lovely letter, thanking us for thinking of him and wishing us all the best.” As Molly began walking towards them, she patted Remus on the arm. “It looks like Kingsley actually brought his date. We should say hello.”

Neither of the Weasley boys got where they were by being stupid and they gave her almost identical grins. “We’ll handle her.”
The celebrations continued long into the night, until, one by one, everyone made their excuses, congratulated Jen and Remus once more, and departed until only the residents remained.

Even Ron and Ginny had gone back to The Burrow – although Ginny had warned that she wouldn’t stay long if her mother blew up (and it was a miracle she hadn’t already).

“Well, I guess this is goodbye,” Sirius said. “I don’t want to see either of you for at least a week.”

“Yes,” Addie agreed. “We’ll take care of this lot and hold the fort for you.”

Jen smirked at them. “That’s what concerns me.”

Amelia and Augusta would be remaining in Ravenscroft Manor, in the wings that Jen had set aside from them, along with Frank and Alice, and Jen and Remus were remaining for a week for an approximation of a honeymoon.

Everyone else was moving to Potter Manor for the summer, although Jen had made transport a lot easier.

Technically neither Potter Manor nor Ravenscroft Manor was on the floo grid, so setting up a connection was not easy, especially making it completely private. In the end, Jen had relied on a magical loophole – as they were all living in both places, she could magically count it as one residence.

Once the war was over, they would untangle themselves and figure out who lived where and on what paperwork, but for now, the arrangement was working out fine.

“Madam Longbottom,” Harry said suddenly, as Sirius began ushering the others through the fireplace, “Madam Bones, could I speak with you please?”

The two women exchanged a glance and led him away from the group, quietly reminding him to use their first names while they were at it.

Once they were out of earshot, Harry took a deep breath. “I walked Alice back to her room earlier and she … well, she sort of recognised me.”

“What do you mean, sort of?” Amelia asked.

“Well, she thought I was Dad,” Harry said. “She called me James.” He was starting to feel a little silly; now he was saying it, it didn’t feel as incredible. “Sorry, it’s probably nothing, but I thought I should tell you.”

To his surprise, Amelia smiled at him, a little teary-eyed. “No, Harry, this is good. Alice recognising James in you means she’s recognising things again, which is much more than we had before.”

Harry returned her smile. “That’s good.”

“Harry,” Jen called. “You’re up, sweetheart.”

Harry bid the two women goodbye and hurried over to hug his godmother. “Enjoy your honeymoon; don’t do anything I wouldn’t do.”

Remus ruffled his hair. “That’s a long list, cub, but we’ll do our best.”
With a sprinkle of floo powder, Harry stepped into the flames. “Potter Manor!”

Jen watched with a smile as he disappeared in a whirl of green.

***

Harry stumbled out of the fireplace at the other end and just avoided falling on his face due to Sirius snagging him under the arm.

“Good instincts,” Susan remarked.

“Nah, he’s a Potter,” Sirius said with a grin. “It’s in the genes.”

“Oh, leave the poor boy alone,” Addie chided, checking the clock. “Time for bed, I think.”

No one was arguing, as it was now technically the morning after the wedding.

Amid yawns, Harry, Hermione, Draco, Daphne, Neville and Susan said goodnight and meandered upstairs to bed.

Addie slipped her shoes off, burying her toes in the soft carpet with a sigh. “What’s that look for?”

Sirius was watching her with a fond smile. “Memories. You did that after the Yule Ball in seventh year.”

“Well, I danced the night away that night as well,” Addie said. She hesitated for a second, then added, “Of course, I seem to remember us retiring a little earlier that night.”

“We did,” Sirius agreed quietly.

The space between them changed, tinging it with anticipation.

He didn’t move, waiting for her to make the next move.

Bringing up the Yule Ball could not have been a casual remark, not when the night had ended so intimately that it seemed to stretch across the years to touch them now.

Addie took a deep breath. Her reasons for taking things slow were sound and she had been right. However, she no longer felt the knot of panic at the thought of taking things further and she was confident that the love she had for him was not just the ghost of what they once had, but a promise of what could be as well. “Sirius … we need to talk. Not tonight, but … at some point. Properly talk, I mean. About – About us.”

Sirius held out a hand to her and she took it, allowing him to tug her into his arms. She rested her chin on his shoulder, feeling him rock them gently in an approximation of the last dance of the night.

“Why don’t you and I have dinner tomorrow night?” Sirius asked quietly. “Just the two of us?”

Addie smiled into his collar. “That sounds lovely.”

***

In Ravenscroft Manor, Jen and Remus bid Amelia and Augusta goodnight and made their way upstairs.

Their bedroom door swung closed behind them and Jen stretched languidly, pulling the pin from her
hair to let it tumble free over her shoulders.

“I don’t know if I’ve told you,” Remus murmured, wrapping his arms around her waist, “but you are so beautiful.”

“Only several times a day, darling,” Jen said with a smile, leaning back against her husband.

Remus chuckled, kissing her neck. “So we have the next week all to ourselves. What are we going to do?”

Jen laughed and spun in his arms to kiss him properly. “Oh, I can think of a few things …”
I may or may not have mentioned that I suffer from anxiety. Recently it has been sky-high, which has resulted in it being exceptionally hard to write.

My brain seems to have settled on CSI: NY again and the rewrite of Kindred Spirits, which - okay, is nice, because it's been a while since my inspiration was there, especially since the show was cancelled.

However, it does mean that inspiration for everything else has dried up. And I could force myself to write, but when my anxiety acts up, that ends up causing panic attacks. You do not want me writing on panic attacks, trust me.

I have not given up on any of my other stories or series. I just need to give myself a time-out for a bit.
Trials

Chapter Notes

First of all, this is all new material; never seen before. Hopefully I do it justice.

Second of all, thank you for all your kind words following my last author's note. I feel I should give some more background as to the reason behind the frequent long gaps between chapters, as the general opinion seems to be that all fanfic authors have hours of free time in which to write:
I am 26 years old and I work 9-5 at a finance company. At present I have five works in progress that demand immediate attention and a number of others that are currently on hiatus until I have time to write them. I also have an original work that I hope to finish and publish. If I get writers' block in my free time, I'm probably not writing that day. Couple this with the aforementioned anxiety, and you can begin to see the issue.

Due to this lack of time, I have made the decision to discontinue the Price of Peace series. This will not affect The Last Stand, or Aftermath, or any future stories in anyway. I may even, at some point in the distant future, return and do a similar story, but Price of Peace, in its current form, will not be continuing.

I will leave Price of Peace 4 and 5 up here, in their current form, but I will not be updating them.

On a lighter note, on to the chapter, which contains a great deal of headcanon regarding the Wizengamot, all of which has probably been debunked by JKR by now but I don't care.

July 4th 1997

The morning after the wedding was supposed to be relaxing and was supposed to begin with a nice lie-in.

Unfortunately for Jen and Remus, this plan was foiled almost immediately, by a soft tapping at the window.

Jen groaned into the pillow. “If that’s Sirius, I’m going to kill him.”

“Even Sirius wouldn’t stoop this low,” Remus said, kissing her cheek as he rolled out of bed. She heard rather than saw him walk to the window to let the owl in. “It’s for you.”

Jen groaned again and rolled over, her eyes opening for the first time that morning. “Sirius?”

“Ministry,” Remus corrected.

Jen frowned and sat up, taking the offered letter. It was sealed with the official Wizengamot seal and was addressed to Lady Guinevere Black, Baroness Blackmoor.

“Assholes,” Jen muttered, breaking the seal.
“They don’t know we’re married,” Remus pointed out, a twinge of sadness in his tone. “They can’t.”

“It’s not that,” Jen said, sending a wave of love towards her new husband. “They called me Guinevere. Assholes.”

Lady Blackmoor

Your presence is hereby requested by the Wizengamot Chamber for an emergency meeting to discuss the return of He-Who-Must-Not-Be-Named. The Chamber will convene at 10am promptly.

The letter was not signed, but that was normal for Wizengamot summons, she remembered from James’s.

“Are you going?” Remus said, reading over her shoulder.

“No,” Jen said. “It’s our honeymoon.” She caught his eye and a wave of emotion and sighed. “We’re going to be irritatingly reasonable about this, aren’t you?”

“We do need the connections,” Remus pointed out. “Not to mention that I would feel better if one of us was there.”

Jen pulled a face. Technically, as the Head of a Noble House, Addie should get a summons as well – that is, if she had officially claimed her seat, which Jen was not certain she had.

In any case, Addie was certainly not in any fit state to deal with that kind of situation right now, not without Sirius by her side at any rate.

“I hate it when you’re right,” Jen muttered, getting out of bed and checking the time. It was 8 o’clock now. “I’d better get ready and get there early, so I can mingle.” She pulled a face on the last word.

“All part of the job, love,” Remus said with a smile.

Jen’s retort was not verbal but he heard it loud and clear.

***

Clad in her red Wizengamot robes, Jen stepped out of the fireplace at the Ministry and strode over to the golden lifts. As a member of the Wizengamot, she was no longer officially a ‘visitor’ to the Ministry, even if she didn’t work there anymore, so she no longer needed to present her wand for inspection.

People mulled around her as she waited, one or two greeting her with a smile. Someone jostled into her and a voice murmured: “You lost, Mrs Lupin?”

Jen glanced sideways at Mandy, who grinned at her unrepentantly.

“Shouldn’t you be at home in bed or something?” She continued, before Jen could say anything.

Jen coughed back a laugh. “No. Wizengamot meeting at 10am. Someone’s got to do it.”

“Fair enough,” Mandy said with a smile. “Be prepared though; this lift is probably going up before it goes down.”

Jen shrugged. “It’s fine; I’m early.”

“The Chamber’s not due to assemble again until August, isn’t it?” Mandy asked.
“Emergency meeting,” Jen answered. “Presumably about the Department of Mysteries.”

“Ah,” Mandy said with a nod. “Say no more.”

The golden grills slid open and the two women stepped into the lift together.

Sure enough, the lift started to rise, stopping first at Level 7 for the Department of Magical Games and Sports.

Mandy stepped out with a wave and Jen shifted to one side to let a few more people on.

On Level 6, Percy Weasley stepped on, from the Department of Magical Transportation, and the lift doors had closed before he realised who he was standing next to. When he did realise, he turned bright red, mumbling a hello and a congratulations.

Jen smiled to herself. His letter had certainly been far more poised and put-together. “Good morning, Percy. How are you today?”

“Very well thank you, Lady Black,” Percy managed to say, his blush receding a little. He was clutching the reports in his hands like a lifeline. “Are you here for the meeting?”

“I am,” Jen said. “Will you be acting as scribe?”

“Well … Minister Fudge hasn’t asked it of me,” Percy said.

“Well, you are still Junior Assistant to the Minister of Magic, are you not?” Jen asked.

Percy seemed to straighten a little. “Yes, ma’am, I am.”

“Then you seem the most obvious candidate,” Jen said, shuffling over again to allow a few more people on.

Percy’s ears went pink again, which Jen kindly didn’t mention.

Once the doors had closed on Level Two, she said, “You recall the conversation we had in the Leaky Cauldron last September?”

Percy sighed. “Yes, I do.”

Jen gave him a comforting smile. “It holds true, you know. They’d be happy to see you.”

Percy didn’t answer immediately. When the doors opened on Level 1, he said, “I’ll think about it,” and disappeared down the corridor.

Jen shook her head with a sigh and pressed the ‘9’ button again. Not that it really mattered – the lift would call at all floors in order, whether the button had been pressed or not.

Finally – after seven more stops, the doors finally opened on Level 9. Jen stepped out alone and strode along the corridor, her footsteps echoing off the bare stone walls.

She took a sharp left before the Department of Mysteries, down the steps towards the courtrooms.

The very last door led to the Wizengamot antechamber; the Wizengamot Chamber beyond was almost identical to the other courtrooms except for the family crests that adorned the walls.

However, today, that door was closed; it was the door to Courtroom Ten that was wide open and it
was from there that voices bubbled out.

“Morning Jen,” A voice called behind her.

Jen turned to smile at Augusta and Amelia. “Great minds think alike. Sorry; I should have waited for you.”

Like Jen, Amelia and Augusta were proxy members of the Wizengamot; unlike Jen, they were acting in proxy on behalf of heirs too young to take their own oaths.

Augusta waved her off. “Nonsense dear, we just got here … Courtroom?”

“Just what I was thinking,” Jen said with a frown. “I take it this is not just a general gathering about Ministry security?”

“Unfortunately not,” Amelia said with a sigh. “It’s trials.”

“Dammit,” Jen muttered. “If I’d known that, I’d have stayed home.”

Amelia chuckled. “Most people would; that’s why they don’t tell us. I only know because I have to preside.”

“Oh, you’re presiding this time?” Jen asked with mock-innocence. “I thought that was the Minister’s job now.”

“Cornelius has been oddly quiet since the … incident,” Amelia said. “Not that I’m complaining.”

“No one would complain about that, dear,” Augusta said as they stepped in to the courtroom.

The next half an hour or so was taken up by a flurry of activity, while the three women – Jen, in particular – greeted old friends and renewed old alliances.

Jen – obviously – hadn’t been in the Wizengamot before the war. Her father (may he rot in Hell) had been Lord Black then, then Regulus, and then Sirius – although that was after her disappearance, and she was certain he never took up any of his duties – rightly or wrongly.

Maybe if he had, it would have been harder for Crouch to skip a trial.

However, she had attended enough Ministry parties and gatherings thrown by friends – including the Potters – that she already knew a good number of the members before she went to her first proper meeting the previous winter.

Not that she was renewing any of her parents’ old alliances.

Eventually Dumbledore arrived, and the members drifted apart to take their seats. Unlike the rest of the chamber, Jen took the stairs to the left of the tiered podiums where Amelia (as Head of the DMLE), Fudge (as Minister) and Dumbledore (as Chief Wizard) would sit in ascending order. Just above Dumbledore’s podium, there was another row of seats. Once, they had run the full length of the chamber; now there were only six, three to the left of the podiums and three to the right.

Jen sat down in the seat on the far left.

In the Wizengamot chamber, practically identical to this one, the Black Family crest would be on the wall behind her.

The other seats – the only remaining Ancient and Noble bloodlines – remained dormant until an heir
was found or of age: Ravenclaw and Slytherin beside her (and wasn’t that going to cause a stir when Hermione took her seat) and Potter, Hufflepuff and Gryffindor directly opposite.

Fudge finally appeared, with Percy just behind him carrying a quill and a stack of parchment. He glanced up, caught her eye, and busied himself with the scribe’s desk. Fudge took his seat with uncharacteristic silence and Dumbledore banged his gavel.

“I hereby call to order this emergency gathering of the Wizengamot Council. Madam Bones, you have the floor.”

Amelia rose to her feet, amid the quiet murmur that ran through the room, the few members that didn’t already know finally realising the reason for the meeting.

“My Lords and Ladies,” Amelia began, “it gives me great pleasure to announce that, following the attack on the Department of Mysteries, Rodolphus Lestrange, Rabastan Lestrange, Antonin Dolohov, Augustus Rookwood, Philip Mulciber and Andrew Travers have been re-apprehended and are back in Azkaban.”

The Council applauded – some with more enthusiasm than others.

Unfortunately, the members more likely to be on the ‘less enthusiastic’ side of things were on Jen’s side of the Chamber, and she therefore could not see their faces.

Thankfully, Augusta could, and Jen trusted her to make a note of them.

“Thank you,” Amelia said, causing the clapping to die down. “There were, however, others apprehended, in Death Eater garb, with Dark and Unforgivable curses showing on their wands. We gather here today to hear testimony and pass judgement.”

A sheet of parchment appeared on the desk in front of Jen’s chair, listing the names and the charges. Lucius Malfoy, Walden McNair, Vincent Crabbe Sr, Calista Jugson, Hubert Avery, Theodore Nott Sr, Isabelle Edwards … all charged with treason to the Ministry, membership of a terrorist organisation (Death Eaters), uses of Unforgivable Curses, breaking and entering …

Jen sighed. It was going to be a long day.

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While Jen settled in to the first of seven Death Eater trials, Mandy settled in at her desk to review the paperwork for the next Quidditch World Cup.

The European Cup final would be taking place within a few weeks in France, but as England, Scotland, Wales and Ireland had all been knocked out during the first few rounds, Mandy didn’t really need to bother with it. There was not even any cause for Magical Britain to send a representative.

Mandy sighed. Once upon a time, an open seat at any Quidditch game she wished would have been a dream come true.

Not right now, though.

Maybe the war would be over by the time the next World Cup came around and she could talk Sirius and Jen in to letting her take Harry to Germany to see the final – whether the home teams made it or not.
In the meantime, the World Cup hadn’t even started yet, and she still had a lot to do, even if England wasn’t hosting it this time.

A knock at her office door caught her attention and she waved her visitor in absently. “Just one moment.”

“Of course.”

Normally, Mandy would have finished the paragraph she was reading but Amos Diggory showing up in her office was reason enough to take a break.

“Amos,” she greeted, just cordially enough to pass for acceptable. “What can I do for you? Please, close the door.”

Amos pushed the office door closed and took the seat on the other side of her desk. “I apologise for the interruption, but I need to speak to someone about this, and – well – you were the first person I thought of.”

Mandy set the paperwork aside. “Okay, you’ve got my attention.”

Amos took a deep breath. “I’m worried about Cedric. He’s … acting strangely.”

“Strangely?” Mandy prompted.

“He’s quiet, withdrawn …” Amos shook his head. “He’s not acting like himself.”

“Well, he’s been through quite a lot,” Mandy said. “I know Addie said the Death Eaters never came to them, but … Well, sometimes the waiting and the not knowing is the worst part.”

Amos gave a small nod. “How … How is she?”

Mandy gave him a sharp look, but his query appeared to be genuine. “She’s coping.” She answered briskly, then changed the subject. “Has Cedric spoken to anyone about what happened?”

“I assume he spoke with Addie while they were out there,” Amos said. “Other than that, no.”

Mandy thought for a second. “I suppose …” she said slowly. “I suppose Addie and Harry would be the best people for him to talk to … I can send someone to pick him up and take him over to where they’re staying. No offence, but I doubt you and Addie being in the same airspace is a good idea.”

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Unlike Mandy, Arabella did not have a lot to do. Creature Comforts, the pet shop she had worked in since she graduated and owned since the former owner passed away and left it to her, was open, but it was a quiet day, and so she was working in the back office.

Her two Saturday employees were out on the shop floor, and Arabella had enough confidence in them to let them to run the place. So, instead, she was reviewing the June profits, absently petting the tortoiseshell cat that had hopped up on to her lap.

“Arabella?”

Arabella glanced up, a frown creasing her forehead at the sight of Mandy’s head floating in the flames of the fireplace. “Mandy. Everything okay?”

“Mostly,” Mandy answered. “Amos Diggory just stopped by my office.”
Arabella pulled a face, but said nothing; she and Mandy both knew each other’s opinion of Amos well enough.

“He’s worried about Cedric – the kid hasn’t talked to anyone apparently, since he got back. Do you mind …?”

“Going to get him and take him to Harry and the others?” Arabella finished.

“If it’s not too much trouble,” Mandy said apologetically.

“Not at all.” Arabella flicked her wand, sending the papers flying neatly back into order and into the charmed folder that only she could open. “I’m killing time here anyway.”

Mandy sighed in relief. “Thanks hun – I’m a bit swamped here. I’d ask Jen, but she’s got an emergency Council – and the last thing we need is for Amos to take him over.”

“Absolutely,” Arabella agreed, shifting the cat off her lap in favour of grabbing her cloak. “Let me just let the girls know I’m going and I’ll head on over.”

“Thanks Arabella; I owe you one,” Mandy said, just before she vanished.

Arabella stepped out into the front of the shop. Charlotte was over by the rabbits, feeding them, and Elizabeth was behind the counter.

“Liz, I’m heading out; I’ve got something to take care of.”

“Not a problem,” Elizabeth said with a smile. “Do you know how long you’ll be?”

“Hopefully not too long,” Arabella answered. “But if something does happen, go to Weasley’s Wizard Wheezes – the twins will be able to contact me.”

Elizabeth – who had been at Hogwarts a few years ahead of the twins – shuddered dramatically. “I think we’ll just deal with it ourselves.”

Arabella laughed and made her way through the front of the shop to let herself out into Diagon Alley.

The Alley was busier than it had been when she and Mandy had returned from Europe, but it still had the same unnerving quiet that it had held when she had first started working there.

Arabella hurried through the Alley to the apparition spot and turned sharply, arriving just outside the Diggorys’ home down in Ottery St Catchpole.

It was only then that Mandy’s words caught up with her – Jen was at the Ministry? For an emergency Council? What happened to the honeymoon?

Deciding then and there that she was not going to mention this when she got to Potter Manor – Sirius would worry and Addie would just feel guilty that she hadn’t sworn in yet so couldn’t go in Jen’s stead – Arabella knocked sharply on the door.

Tabitha Diggory answered with a tired expression that became a smile almost immediately. “Arabella, how wonderful to see you! Please, come in.”

“Thank you,” Arabella said, stepping inside. “I’m sorry for dropping in on you like this …”

“Oh, not at all,” Tabitha said immediately. “Would you like a cup of tea?”
“Oh, no thank you,” Arabella said, trying not to sound hasty. She had never even had a full
conversation with Tabitha before the Triwizard Tournament, and that was to tell her that her son was
dead.

Or not, as it turned out.

“Actually, Mandy asked me to drop by – Amos said Cedric’s not doing too well?”

Tabitha’s smile faded. “No, he’s not. I’m getting worried.”

“Mandy and I thought it might be a good idea for me to take him over to Potter Manor so he can talk
to Harry,” Arabella explained.

“Oh, would you?” Tabitha said. “Thank you so much. He’s barely left his bedroom – he won’t even
go flying!”

“Well, that’s the first sign something’s wrong,” Arabella joked – except she wasn’t joking, not really.

Tabitha disappeared up the stairs and Arabella waited for her to return, with Cedric in tow.

When she did, Arabella felt her heart break in her chest, and desperately tried not to let it show on
her face.

The Cedric she had taught had been a quiet, well-mannered, chivalrous young man – he would have
done well in Gryffindor, were it not for the fact that he rarely sought any recognition from himself.

Arabella remembered Amos wailing about it being ‘his fault’ after the third task, and wondered if
maybe Cedric had entered for his father, rather than for himself.

Now, though, he was different. Still quiet, still perfectly polite in the way he greeted her, but the light
in his eyes had dimmed and the good humour that had made him such a good prefect and so popular
among the younger years had all but vanished from the way he held himself and the look on his face.

“Good morning Professor.”

Arabella smiled at him. “Please, Cedric, just call me Arabella – I’m not teaching now. I was going to
go and visit Harry – I thought you might like to come.”

Relief flashed in Cedric’s eyes for a split-second, before he nodded.

Tabitha Diggory gave her son a hug and a kiss, and he followed Arabella out of the house, taking
her arm without prompting.

Arabella didn’t question it – Hogwarts taught apparition in sixth year, and students who came of age
in the first half of the year had the opportunity to take their test in the spring, unlike their cohorts who
would need to wait until the summer, but she had a feeling that the Tournament had delayed Cedric
from learning – let alone getting his licence.

They apparated to the outskirts of Potter Manor, and only then did Cedric relax a little.

“Thank you for this,” he said quietly. “Mum means well, but …”

“She doesn’t get it,” Arabella finished.

Cedric nodded. “Neither does Dad.”

Arabella didn’t grace that with a response. Amos had been approached by the Order during the first
war, but he had declined, confident that his pure blood would protect him and his family – if no one else.

It was a foolish belief (even if it had held true) – after all, the McKinnons had always been a well-known neutral family, refusing to take sides in any conflict, until Addie and Leona’s parents joined the Order – and no one had known that, even after they were murdered, except the members themselves.

Still, on saying that, Arthur and Molly hadn’t joined the Order the first time either, since they had little ones, so maybe that had been the root of Amos’s dissent; maybe her own feelings for the man were coming in to play.

Whatever the reason, Amos had never seen combat, so he certainly would not understand what his son had gone through, however hard he tried.

“Did Fred and George explain Sirius’s innocence?” Arabella asked.

“They did,” Cedric said. “I still can’t believe he never got a trial – what was Crouch thinking?”

“He was thinking Sirius was from a well-known Dark family and he wanted the popularity points,” Arabella answered dryly. “Then broke his son out of Azkaban and held him under the Imperius for the next thirteen years, the hypocrite.”

“I heard a rumour about that,” Cedric said with a frown. “Mum and Dad won’t actually tell me anything, so …”

“It’s probably going to be better coming from Harry,” Arabella said. “I’m not fobbing you off, I promise. Just … he was there.”

“I know,” Cedric said. “How’s Addie?”

“Much better, last time I saw her,” Arabella said. “That was yesterday, at the wedding.”

“Wedding?” Cedric repeated.

“Jen – Lady Black – got married yesterday,” Arabella explained. “They had to keep it quiet though because she married Professor Lupin and your father hasn’t got the laws overturned yet.”

Cedric’s face lit up in the first genuine smile she’d seen all day. “Brilliant! I liked Professor Lupin – it sucked that he had to leave!”

Arabella smiled. “Yes, it did. I think he’s used to it now though.”

“Well, he shouldn’t be,” Cedric said.

At that moment, as they approached the house, the front door opened and Addie stepped out.

For a second, she just stared at them. Then she was running towards them. “What happened? Are you okay?”

It was probably a question Cedric had been asked a hundred times since his homecoming, but this was also probably the first time he answered it honestly. “No, not really.”

His voice cracked on the last word.

Addie skidded to a halt in front of him, opening her arms, and he just about fell into them. Both women pretended his shoulders weren’t shaking, and greeted each other like nothing had happened.
“The others are all down at the Quidditch pitch,” Addie said. “I felt the wards ping as you arrived so I came back up. You want to meet us down there?”

“Yeah, of course,” Arabella said.

A second later, a brown tabby darted off in the direction of the Quidditch pitch.

Addie smiled to herself. The grounds of Potter Manor were so big that the Marauders had often used their Animagus forms to traverse it (when David Potter wasn’t looking, of course), simply because they could cover more ground like that.

She, herself, didn’t move, waiting for the young man in her arms to stop shaking, whereupon she pressed a kiss to his forehead and released him. “Not doing too well, huh?”

“It’s …” Cedric faltered. “It’s difficult.”

“I know,” Addie said, slipping an arm through his as they ambled in the direction of the pitch. “Believe me, I do.”

Aside from Cedric’s initial explanation of the Tournament and his knowledge of what happened in the graveyard, they hadn’t talked about their ordeals during their imprisonment.

Cedric had filled her in on the fates of her school friends – the ones he knew of – and she had tried to teach him wandless magic and told him stories of her times at Hogwarts.

But neither of them had talked about what really mattered.

Addie had been unwilling to unpick everything she had buried deep inside her; reluctant to break down there, while it wasn’t safe.

Cedric, presumably, had followed her lead.

Now, however, they were safe, so he asked, “That’s right – your body was found, wasn’t it?” She had reminded him of that when he first arrived, as part of her reassurances that he wasn’t dead, that there was another curse.

Addie smiled humourlessly. “Let’s not be so polite about it. They put it in an Inferi army.”

Cedric shuddered. “I did hear that, yes. What happened? And why?”

“Bellatrix Lestrange happened,” Addie said darkly. “Although … she might have still been Bellatrix Black then … No, I’m sure she married straight out of school. Anyway, when she found out Sirius and Jen had joined the aurors, she was furious. I mean, she hated them anyway for refusing to join Voldemort, but actively joining the fight against him was the icing on the cake.”

“So she faked your death?” Cedric asked with a frown. “Why?”

“She made sure mine went straight to Sirius,” Addie whispered. “James said … James said it nearly killed him. The shock, I guess, and …”

“And he couldn’t bring himself to hurt you,” Cedric finished, squeezing her arm. “I can understand that. I mean, why fake it? Why not just kill you? I mean, I’m glad she didn’t, but …”

“I wondered that,” Addie said. “But she knew. I mean, why kill us? She thought Regulus was torturing us and … Merlin knows what else. Bellatrix is a very intelligent woman. Sadistic, yes, but very intelligent. Killing me then would end it. Leaving me alive meant I carried on suffering – and
believe me, she wanted me to suffer.”

“Do you think …” Cedric hesitated. “Do you think that was why your family was targeted as well?”

“No,” Addie said with certainty. “Sirius certainly blamed himself, I know, but the world does not revolve around his family hating him. If it was just me who’d been attacked, I’d consider it, but my entire family died. An entire neutral pureblood family, wiped out in a matter of hours. She would never have got up the support without Voldemort, and he wouldn’t have done that for a teenage fling.”


“I know,” Addie said with a smile. “But we had only been together six months at that point.”

“Huh,” Cedric said. “I figured it was longer.”

“Well, I’d known him a lot longer,” Addie conceded. “But we weren’t really talking about me; we were talking about you. Despite everything else I went through, there is nothing more terrifying than hearing something that sounds like the Killing Curse, and seeing that light rush towards you.”

“I thought I was going to die,” Cedric whispered.

“I know,” Addie said. “And that does something to you. And burying it is not going to help.”

“You buried it,” Cedric muttered, a little petulantly.

“Not when it happened,” Addie said gently. “I talked to my sister. I even talked to Regulus, who was actually surprisingly helpful for someone raised Slytherin whose only advice growing up was ‘walk it off.’”

“I was seventeen,” Cedric said. “Harry was fourteen. And all I could do was leave him there.”

Addie released his arm to wrap hers around his shoulder. “You know, Jen says that Harry’s been blaming himself, and did so right up to the moment he found out you were okay.”

“But he’s a kid,” Cedric protested. “No one knows what happened when he was a baby – it doesn’t make him superhuman!”

“You seem to be one of the few that realises that,” Addie muttered.

As they reached the entrance to the Quidditch pitch, Harry emerged with two brooms – his own Firebolt, and a second that Addie thought might be a Nimbus 2001 – it was hard to tell with the handle pointed away from her.

Cedric stopped dead in his tracks; Harry shifted both brooms to one side and held out a hand. “Welcome back.”

Cedric ignored his outstretched hand and embraced him like a little brother.

Addie rescued the brooms, stepping away to give them a bit of privacy. Whatever was said between the two boys – young men, really – was too quiet for her to hear, and when they broke apart, both of them were a little red-eyed.

Despite this, Harry was smiling. “We’re about to play a pick-up game. Want to play?”

A small smile appeared on Cedric’s face. “Love to. You might actually beat me this time.”
Harry laughed. “No ‘might’ about it, mate.” He took the brooms back from Addie and handed the Nimbus to Cedric. “Come on then.”

Addie followed them in, watching them both take off and join the others in the air.

Neville was sitting with Sirius and Arabella, but Hermione – surprisingly – had joined the others in the air.

“I didn’t know Hermione played,” Addie said.

“She doesn’t,” Neville answered, leaning back on his hands to watch them. “She’s scared of heights.”

“Then how come she’s up there?” Addie asked.

“Numbers,” Sirius answered. “She was going to sit it out, but when Cedric arrived, that made the teams uneven and it wasn’t fair to ask one of the others to sit out.”

“Yes, but is it fair to ask Hermione to fly if she’s scared of heights?” Addie asked.

“No,” Neville answered. “No one asked her; she volunteered. The ground has a Cushioning Charm and she wouldn’t hit it anyway. Harry would catch her first.”

Sirius caught her eye. “Hermione’s only scared of heights when Harry’s not there. I don’t think she even realises she does it.

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That evening, Addie was tying her hair up before dinner, when Winky appeared beside her with a soft pop and a curtsey.

“Miss Addison, I is having a note for you!”

Addie took the parchment with a smile and unfolded it, finding Sirius’s handwriting inside.

Addie

Would you please join me in the West wing for dinner?

Padfoot

PS, Yes – I’ve sorted the ‘kids’ out.

Addie laughed aloud.

Yes, that was the first thought that came in to her head, right down to the quotation marks.

“Kindly tell Sirius that I will be there in a few moments?”

Winky curtsied again. “Of course, Miss Addison.” She disappeared and Addie finished pinning her hair back, checking her reflection with a critical eye.

She had regained most of the weight she had lost over the last eighteen years and she looked far more alive than she had upon her return. It wasn’t as good as she would like, but progress was progress.
The ‘kids’ as Sirius put it would be eating down in the dining room, giving them a chance for privacy (which in a house the size of Potter Manor was actually harder than you’d think).

The West wing of the house actually started on the second floor, since the library took up the entire first floor by itself.

There were several bedrooms, including Sirius’s, but the only door that was open led to a room that officially had no real purpose, and had likely been used for a hundred different things throughout the generations.

When they were younger, it was this room that James had used as a kind of den when his friends visited, preferring it to the actual ‘Heirs’ Suite’ (which was intended for that purpose).

This evening, however, it bore a single round table, laid for dinner, and a small sofa where Sirius was waiting.

“Did you check on the kids?” He asked by way of greeting, a smile on his face.

“No, I trust you,” Addie responded. She paused. “Should I?”

Sirius rolled his eyes. “I asked for that, didn’t I?”

“Walked straight into it,” Addie said cheerfully, taking the seat beside him. “Do you have any objections if we have that talk now rather than after we eat?”

“No, of course not,” Sirius’s hand brushed against hers and she wove her fingers through his, squeezing lightly. “Ladies first?”

“If you don’t mind,” Addie said, trying to order her thoughts. Taking a deep breath, she let it out slowly, lifting her eyes to meet his. “I’m not completely okay. I don’t think you are either. But I also think that we could both wait forever and we wouldn’t be okay.”

“I think you’re right,” Sirius said quietly. “Azkaban … I’m not nearly as bad as I was a year ago. Or even six months ago. Having Ravenscroft … and coming here … Before it felt like I’d traded one prison for another; now I actually feel free.”

“You are certainly a lot better than I’d feared,” Addie said. “How did you do it?”

“I was innocent,” Sirius said. “It’s not a happy thought, so they couldn’t take it away. But it gave me something to focus on.” He fell silent for a few moments, his eyes searching her face for … something, she wasn’t sure what.

He did this sometimes, just look at her, and she never asked, because she figured it was similar to her need to touch him, even if just a hand on his arm to remind herself that he was here and alive.

“I lost your face, in Azkaban,” he whispered hoarsely. “But not your voice. That memory of finding you … of watching you disappear in front of me … that was the worst memory I had …”

“But you found Harry, didn’t you?” Addie asked shakily.

“But their bodies weren’t there,” Sirius said. “And Harry and Hermione were okay. And, yes, finding that empty house was awful … realising that my brother was …”

“Fine,” Addie murmured, inching closer. “He’s fine.”

Sirius took a shaky breath. “I know. I know he is. But that was never going to be as awful as
“watching you disappear in front of my eyes knowing that there was nothing I could do.”

“You were there,” Addie said. “That was enough.” She nestled into his arms and he held her tightly, tighter than he had since her return, even though she knew that holding back cost his restraint dearly.

“You told me that you would always love me,” Sirius said into her hair. “Dementors draw out bad memories, but they can’t edit them. So they could never take you away completely, because they could never take that away from me.”

“What about …?” Addie hesitated, not really wanting to ask but concerned all the same that he was burying things that would come back to haunt him later. “My body appeared.”

“It did,” Sirius said in a low voice. “That nearly killed me.”

Addie shuddered. “I know. James said.”

Sirius shook his head. “Not the … Not at the time. Although, he was probably right about that. I mean afterwards. Living without you was already torture and then …” He sighed. “It probably wasn’t the Gryffindor way, but I went to Jen and I asked her to help me. She cast a modified Memory Charm – I know what happened and everything that followed, but I don’t remember it happening.” He smiled sadly. “I know; I’m a coward.”

“No, you’re not,” Addie said quietly. “There’s nothing cowardly about asking for help, Sirius. I think when Bellatrix faked my death, she thought that the biggest torture for me would be knowing that no one would be looking for me, but … it wasn’t. The worst part was knowing what it would do to you and I … I was so scared you’d do something stupid.”

“I nearly did,” Sirius admitted quietly. “So many times. Until Hermione was born.”

A smile crossed Addie’s face unbidden. “Good.”

Sirius cleared his throat. “Anyway – yes, Azkaban was awful, but I know that I am a lot better than I could be. You said that neither of us was going to be okay again – I think you’re wrong about that.”

Addie raised an eyebrow. “Oh?”

“What is okay?” Sirius asked rhetorically. “Neither of us are going to be the way we were in seventh year, no. But that doesn’t mean we’re not going to be okay.”

Addie smiled. “Maybe you’re right.” She fell quiet for a second, savouring the warmth of being held in his arms, something that would have been so second-nature once but that she would never take for granted again. “I guess what I was worried about was … and it’s not the case for me; I loved you then and I love you now … but …. We’re not the people we were when we fell in love with each other. I figured if anything had changed, it was better to figure that out first, rather than try to pick up where we left things off and make things …”

“Difficult,” Sirius finished.

Addie nodded, looking away. Even though every signal she had received should reassure her, she couldn’t help the fear that Sirius was about to break her heart.

A kiss landed on her hairline and she smiled. “I’m doing it again, aren’t I?”

“Yes, you are.” Sirius touched her face and gently drew her attention back to him. “We may have changed, Shadow, but nothing else has. I still love you just as much as I did eighteen years ago, if not more. You were right, when you said that picking up where we left off was a bad idea. But what
do you say to starting something new?”

“Well, that depends,” Addie said.

“Oh? And what are your terms, my lady?” Sirius asked with a grin, clearly recognising the glint in her eye.

Addie tilted her face up towards him. “I don’t think we need to start over on everything, do you?”

Sirius chuckled, drawing her closer. “Excellent idea, Miss McKinnon.” He kissed her, for only the second time since her return.

The last time, merely hours after their reunion, had been overshadowed by her inner turmoil, an irrational fear that coursed through her veins like adrenaline.

Now, however, the only adrenaline rushing through her was the familiar love, affection and want that pushed her to move closer, shivering as his hands ran over her back and sliding in to her hair.

Very reluctantly, she broke their embrace. “Not that I’m complaining,” she said, a little breathlessly, “but you did promise me dinner.”

Sirius gave her a roguish grin. “Are you sure there’s no way I can convince you that you’re hungry for something else?”

Addie’s stomach growled in response, and they both laughed.

“I’ll take that as a no,” he said, helping her to her feet. “Come on then, I suppose I’d better feed you.”

Addie rolled her eyes, not bothering to hide her smile. “I take it back – you haven’t changed a bit.”

Dinner appeared on the table as they approached, either by house elf or by the removal of a Preservation Charm.

“If you say so, darling,” Sirius said, pulling out a chair for her. “I’m sure I used to be able to talk you out of dinner every now and then.”

“I’m fairly sure back then, I wasn’t playing Quidditch with a load of teenagers twenty years younger than me,” Addie said. She gave him a coy smile as he sat down. “I’m sure I can be persuaded about dessert though.”
“Hermione … Hermione … Hermione …”

Hermione grumbled and rolled over, but it was hard to ignore the soft prodding to her side. “Harry, what is it?”

“Come on, get up,” Harry said. “We’re going for a run.”

“Good for you,” Hermione mumbled. “I’ll just stay here.”

“No, we’re going for a run,” Harry said, pulling the blanket off her. “All of us. Builds up your stamina.”

“I hated PE at school,” Hermione groaned, finally opening her eyes. “Do I have to?”

“I bet most Death Eaters don’t go running,” Harry said.

“Good point,” Hermione said, closing her eyes again. “Is it too late to switch sides?”

Cold hands slipped under her shirt on to her stomach, and she squealed, jerking fully awake. “Harry!”

Harry grinned at her and sprinted out of the room. “Catch me!”

Grumbling to herself, Hermione pulled on a tracksuit over her pyjamas, and dashed after him.

Thankfully, not only was Hermione not the only person grumbling, she was also not the most unfit person running.

As the only Muggle-raised, Harry and Hermione were used to physical exercise as part of school. Ron and Ginny both had a certain level of physical fitness due to Quidditch training – which, for Gryffindor, included physical exercise.

But to Hermione’s surprise, she could outrun the others, even Draco, who she would have assumed was in fairly good shape.

Maybe Harry had a point.

After breakfast, Addie began teaching them wandless magic, until they began to visibly tire, at which point she convinced them to start their summer homework, starting with History of Magic.

Just like the previous summer, Sirius turned out to be a huge help.

He had just finished talking Ron through one of the points on his essay, when he glanced up to see Addie smiling at him. “What?”

“What? I mean. You’d be much better than Binns.”

Sirius laughed. “Come on, Addie; I’m a Marauder! Can you really see me teaching?”
“I’m seeing it right now,” Addie said, still grinning.

Sirius rolled his eyes. “Tell you what, Shadow; I will become a teacher, when you are headmistress of Hogwarts.”

“That’s never gonna happen,” Addie laughed.

Sirius smirked. “Exactly.”

Addie shook her head, checking her watch. “Right, lunchtime. Through to the dining room, please.”

As they filed in, to be met with a plateful of sandwiches courtesy of the house elves, Addie put a hand on Hermione’s shoulder. “You alright, sweetheart? You’ve been very quiet today.”

Hermione shrugged quietly. “It’s nothing.”

“It doesn’t sound like nothing,” Harry said with a frown.

Hermione sighed. “It’s my cousin’s birthday today. Her mum is my father’s sister. They never got along, but Mirabelle and I were really close before Hogwarts. It didn’t bother me too much last summer, but she’s eighteen this year, so she comes of age in the Muggle world.”

“I could take you,” Addie offered. “Where do they live?”

Hermione smiled wryly. “South of France.”

“Oh,” Addie said. “Nothing we can do without an international Portkey. I can’t make another trip like that any time soon.”

“I’d rather you didn’t make another trip like that ever,” Sirius said. “It nearly killed you the first time. You could always try phoning her, Kitten. Lily had a phone put in so she could talk to her parents and sister. Not that Petunia ever picked up. I don’t know if it will still work, but you’re welcome to give it a go.”

Hermione’s face lit up and she hurried out of the room.

“Go on,” Addie said to the others, most of whom looked bewildered. “Go and see. You know,” she added to Sirius, as they all followed Hermione out of the room, “it might be a good idea to make some trips to the Muggle world this summer. Help the purebloods survive out there.”

“Like Lily did for us,” Sirius agreed. “Good idea. We’ll talk to Jen after the honeymoon.”

Thankfully, the telephone did work, and Hermione was able to speak to Mirabelle, who was thrilled to hear from her.

Lunch, therefore, was filled with a discussion about what a telephone was and how exactly it worked.

By the time Amelia turned up, the students were debating whether or not a similar device could be created in the wizarding world.

“Should I be worried?” She asked Sirius.

“I don’t think they’re quite at law-breaking levels yet,” Sirius said. “No work today?”

“I’m delegating,” Amelia said. “And volunteered to come and give you some news.” She raised her
voice to cut through the debate. “How about some duelling practice?”

Harry’s face lit up. “Brilliant! Do we need to do that outside?”

“Actually no,” Sirius said. “The Potters had a duelling chamber.”

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While the students paired off and practiced, Amelia, Sirius and Addie sat against one of the walls to watch and offer advice.

“Out of interest,” Harry said, after a few rounds. “Can the Killing Curse be blocked?”

Sirius smiled. “You know it can’t, Harry.”

“Jen did it,” Harry said with a shrug.

“When was this?” Amelia asked sharply.

“At the Ministry,” Harry answered. “In the atrium, Voldemort threw a Killing Curse at me and Jen stepped in front of it and it …”

“Ricocheted,” Ginny finished. “There was a flash of white light and the spell deflected. I’ve never seen anything like it.”

“Sirius?” Amelia asked quietly. “What does Jen know that we don’t?”

Sirius sighed. “Probably nothing. Honestly, I’ve never seen Jen do that before. But I will say this: if Jen knew a spell that could block the Killing Curse, she would have told us. I think it’s probably a matter of power.”

“So if you’re powerful enough, you might be able to deflect the Killing Curse?” Amelia asked.

“That’s my theory,” Sirius said. “I would recommend no one tests it.”

“Good advice,” Addie said, watching them start up again. “So what’s the news, Amelia?”

“We had the trials for the Death Eaters captured at the Ministry yesterday,” Amelia said.

“All of them?” Sirius asked.

“No, the ones who had escaped were just put back into Azkaban,” Amelia said. “The new ones were all found guilty and sentenced.”

“Good,” Addie muttered.

“Was Jen there?” Sirius asked.

“Yes, she was,” Amelia answered. “She said that she wanted one of you to be there, but she didn’t want Addie to feel like she had to take her seat yet.”

Addie grimaced. “I would have done it. She’s supposed to be on her honeymoon.”

“But would you have been ready?” Amelia asked knowingly.

“No,” Addie admitted.
“What about Isabelle Edwards?” Sirius asked. “Jen said they found her with the silver hand Voldemort gave Pettigrew for resurrecting him.”

“Well, she admitted under Veritaserum to the ritual that restored Voldemort,” Amelia said with a sigh. “We nearly had a diplomatic incident on our hands, but she has dual citizenship, and the French Ministry sent a representative to witness the trial. They’ve washed their hands of her.”

“Hang on,” Addie said. “If Harry saw Peter, how was it Isabelle? Did she fight the Veritaserum?”

“Why would she do that though?” Sirius asked. “I mean, who lies that they did do something like that?”

“Maybe so Voldemort could keep Peter as a spy?” Addie suggested.

Sirius shook his head. “Maybe, but that still doesn’t really make sense. I mean, even if everyone knows Peter’s alive, he’s still got Wormtail. One rat looks as much like any other.”

“True,” Addie said frowning. “So if Isabelle was telling the truth, that means she was using Polyjuice, so … what’s happened with Peter?”

“I have no idea,” Amelia admitted. “You two probably don’t know this, because I don’t think you ever witnessed a trial, but the questions are either given by the Chief Wizard, or the head of DMLE, so in this case, me or Dumbledore. The thing is, the spells on the chair that the defendants sit in mean that they can only hear one of us at any one time.”

“That makes sense,” Addie said. “Otherwise everyone would be shouting at them.”

“Right,” Amelia agreed. “But only Dumbledore has the ability to switch the spell. So Isabelle couldn’t hear me. And Dumbledore never asked.”

“Excuse me?” Addie asked. “Why not?”

“Apparently, it ‘wasn’t important’,” Amelia said, rolling her eyes.

“I beg to differ,” Sirius muttered.

Addie took a calming breath. “At least tell me the Ministry are taking other measures?”

Amelia laughed humourlessly. “Oh, I wish. Jen tried to get Albert Runcorn questioned, since he had control of the Hogwarts wards when Death Eaters managed to get Harry portkeyed out, but no one really knows enough about the Hogwarts wards to confirm that.”

“Dumbledore would,” Addie said. “Let me guess – it wasn’t important.”

Amelia shook her head. “The Ministry are dragging their feet over any dramatic changes and we can’t get a majority in the Wizengamot. Jen tried to get a proposal through that Ministry personnel have to take an oath of loyalty, but it just got batted back and forth today.”

“How on earth do you argue against that?” Sirius asked in bewilderment.

“They said that it’s an insult against the Ministry workers,” Amelia said. “So it’s had to be tabled for now.”

“No one should be insulted by that,” Addie said. “Please tell me you’re doing something.”

“Of course,” Amelia said. “I’m working my way through the departments and checking people that
way. Unfortunately, it’s not admissible in court, so I can’t arrest them, but I can get them fired so at least we won’t get another Rookwood.”

Addie’s entire body stiffened. “Another what?”

Sirius cursed under his breath. “Amelia, can you keep an eye on them for us?”

“Sirius?” Addie asked, as he pulled her to her feet.

“Come on,” Sirius said, tugging her out of the room.

As soon as they had some semblance of privacy, Addie tugged her hand out of his. “Sirius, was she talking about Augustus Rookwood? He was a Death Eater?!”

“Ads, I’m so sorry,” Sirius said quietly. “I know I should have said something before now.”

“I’m not … I’m not upset about that,” Addie said. “But … He was a Death Eater?”

Sirius sighed. “Yes, he was a Death Eater. His was the name that bought Karkaroff’s freedom. And he got a trial, so he was definitely guilty.”

“I’ve known him my entire life,” Addie whispered. “He was one of Mum’s best friends. She’d … She’d invited him round for dinner the night they died.” She sucked in a shaky breath, tears beginning to track their way down her cheeks. “Is that how he knew? Is that how …?”

A sob choked her, swallowing the rest of her words before she could finish. She slumped into his arms, her body shaking as she cried.

Sirius could only hold her. Ever since he had learned of Rookwood’s betrayal, he had wondered if he had something to do with Voldemort learning about the McKinnons joining the Order, just because Marlene McKinnon had been an Unspeakable as well.

Now it seemed that he had not only had something to do with, but actively participated in the attack.

“It’s okay,” he whispered into her hair. “It’ll be okay.”

But they both knew it wouldn’t be.
It had been a long, tiring, emotional, satisfying summer.

All nine students – because Luna’s father had given permission for her to stay – had been training hard.

Every morning, Harry continued to wake them up at six, take them out to the grounds behind the house, and lead them on a run, the length of which varied from day to day.

That first day set the precedence for the whole summer.

After breakfast, Addie would teach them wandless magic, then, as lunchtime drew nearer, Sirius would sit with them in the library and help them catch up on the magical history Professor Binns tended to ignore.

In the afternoon, Amelia would visit and help Harry put them through their paces with Defence Against the Dark Arts training.

After the honeymoon, Jen and Remus joined them and helped them add Healing, Charms and Transfiguration to their training.

In the evenings, Augusta and Jen would talk them through the various pureblood customs and traditions, which – surprisingly – benefited everyone, because only Daphne had been taught all of them – Draco had only ever been taught the Dark, Ron and Ginny the necessary, and Susan and Neville the Light. And Harry, Hermione and Luna had no experience whatsoever.

Two days after the honeymoon, Jen finally removed the block on Harry’s magic. The resulting backlash left Harry unconscious for two hours, which nearly gave her a heart attack.

Now several weeks later, he had finally managed to readjust for the new power, and was performing spells properly again.

Occasionally, one of the Marauders would announce at dinner that they should take the next day off, and Harry and Hermione had great fun taking the others into Muggle London and to theme parks – which they did for Harry’s sixteenth birthdays – and even to a pop concert (which was a huge eye-opener for the purebloods).

Once a week, Mandy and Arabella came for dinner, and would fill them in on the comings and goings of the Order.

By now, Bill and Charlie Weasley had both resigned, citing concerns about their jobs.

Completely disenfranchised, Fred and George had never joined.

July 21st dawned bright and sunny, but Jen and Addie were in no position to enjoy the sunshine.

The official Wizengamot session was upon them, and they were both in the depths of the Ministry of Magic.

Addie had taken her oath and been sworn in, and had taken her seat, the McKinnon family crest lit
up on the wall behind her.

Most of the meeting was exceptionally boring.

Addie had watched one or two when she was younger, from the gallery, as the Heir Apparent. Her father had assured her that once she was grown up, it would all make sense.

It didn’t.

The only part of any real importance was when Jen, once again, brought up her suggestion that the Ministry workers should all take an oath of loyalty.

“Is that really necessary?” Elliott Hawthorne asked. “Everyone in this building works hard every day to make our world run smoothly. Are we really going to insult them by asking them to state the obvious?”

It was a decent argument.

Or would have been if Addie didn’t know his politics from when he was at school with her – albeit a year below her.

If he didn’t have the Dark Mark, she would be very surprised.

“With all due respect, Lord Hawthorne,” Addie said, rising to her feet, “I believe in these times no one should be insulted by reasonable security measures. My mother was an Unspeakable, and she was killed. Her co-worker, Augustus Rookwood . . .” she faltered, sucking in a shaky breath. “Her friend supported Lord Voldemort to the extent,” she raised her voice above the horrified murmurs, “that I truly believe he was partly responsible for her death. Yes, there are many good people in this Ministry. It only takes one. It takes one person, one parasite, to poison everyone around them.”

“Then let me ask you this, Lady McKinnon,” Lord Hawthorne said, in a voice that could only just be considered polite, “how would you feel? If, after everything you had been through, someone asked you to take an oath to prove that you weren’t one of them?”

There were a few shouts of outrage across Addie’s side of the chamber.

Lord Ashford even leapt to his face to shout, “How dare you, sir?”

Addie, however, didn’t flinch. “When?”

The noise stopped immediately, and even Hawthorne looked puzzled. “Excuse me?”

“When would you like me to take the oath, sir?” Addie asked with a smile. “It would be a reasonable request; I escaped under exceptional circumstances. But I have nothing to hide. I am perfectly happy to take an oath. Are you?”

“No one needs to take any oaths,” Dumbledore interrupted.

The proposal was officially tabled, and the court moved on.

Once the meeting was over, Jen met Dumbledore at the bottom of the steps to confront him.

“Sir, why did you do that?”

“Do what, Jennifer?” Dumbledore’s eyes focused on Addie as she approached them. “Addison, it is wonderful to see you again.”
“Thank you, sir,” Addie said, a little frostily. “It’s a pity that none of your spies ever mentioned that island.”

“Indeed,” Dumbledore said gravely. “Alas, not all of Lord Voldemort’s followers are privy to all of his secrets.”

“Albus!” Jen said sharply. “Why did you stop Addie from taking that oath? You know Hawthorne’s alliances as well as I do. If Addie had taken that oath, he would have had to.” She lowered her voice – there were some things you just didn’t shout about. “We cannot have people like that making the laws in this country. That’s the whole reason Voldemort had supporters to come back to.”

“Jennifer, there is no point antagonising people or casting judgement,” Dumbledore said. “It will do us no good.”

Jen’s jaw dropped. “I … I have no words to respond to that.”

Dumbledore seemed to take that as the end of the discussion and bid them goodbye, sweeping out of the chamber.

“He’s deluded,” Addie whispered. “He’s …”

Jen patted her on the shoulder. “I know.”

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**August 31st 1997**

Unsurprisingly, no one was happy with Dumbledore in the slightest.

Unfortunately, the search for Horcruxes was at a dead end, so they had all reluctantly agreed that the headmaster would have to be consulted.

On the last evening of the summer holidays, the Marauders and their ‘students’ were slumped in the living room at Potter Manor, exhausted after a day’s training.

Luna, the sole Ravenclaw in the group, had abandoned her dreamy appearance for one of quiet reflection. She had collapsed on the sofa next to Ron and slumped sideways, so her head was resting on his shoulder, and the redhead wasn’t complaining.

Daphne, who had finally accepted that her fellow students genuinely wanted to help her and had no mind for Slytherin politics (at least not within their group), had relaxed a lot more and her ‘Ice Queen’ exterior had melted. She had also shown a gift for healing spells and was currently waving her wand over a nasty wound on Neville’s arm. Susan was sitting on his other side, her hand propped up only by her hand under her chin.

Draco was sat at one end of the sofas, with Ginny curled up on his lap, half-asleep. He was alert, however, talking in undertones with Harry, who was braced against the arm of the other end of the sofa.

Sirius, Remus and Addie were, likewise, unwilling to relax. The reason for this was the notable absence of Hermione and Jen, who had journeyed Grimmauld Place, in order to floo to Dumbledore’s office and tell him of their discovery of the Horcruxes and their destruction.

Even Remus was worried, because Jen had temporarily closed the link, just to be on the safe side.
“I don’t like this,” Draco said, for the hundredth time.

“You think I do?” Harry retorted.

At that moment, the door flew open and Hermione talked in, with Jen following along behind her.

“Hermione, as frustrating as he is, it’s going to be fine.”

“I’m sure it will; that’s not why I’m mad.” Hermione practically fell into Harry’s lap. “Moony, can you fix this?”

“Fix what?” Remus asked, kissing his wife.

In that second, a dazed loo passed over Jen’s face, followed by one of anger. “Why that … that … that …”

“Manipulative bastard?” Hermione finished scathingly.

“Yes!” Jen bit out. “Yes, that’s exactly what he is!”

“Let me guess,” Addie said. “He tried obliviating you, but Hermione’s a natural and Jen’s got a soul bond.” She frowned. “But he knows about the soul bond. And what happened last time. Doesn’t he?”

“Well, maybe last time, he figured it only happened because Remus knew about the memory charm,” Sirius suggested. “He doesn’t know Hermione’s a natural. If she wasn’t, and he thinks none of us know why they went to talk to him, then no one would ever know they’d been charmed.”

“Well, he definitely thinks we didn’t tell anyone,” Hermione said. “As far as he’s aware, I found the locket at Grimmauld Place and asked Jen about it. At least this way, he’ll think he plans are safe, whatever they are.”

“Did he at least know where the others were?” Harry asked. “Or did he just wipe your memories?”

“No, he humoured us at first,” Hermione said. “I think we’re on the right track with the snake and the diadem, but we’ll have to deal with the snake last.”

“And we still don’t know where the diadem is?” Draco asked.

“Not yet,” Hermione said. “I can ask Grandmother when I get back to school, but I really don’t think she’ll know. Ragnok said that the diadem hasn’t been seen since Lady Helena ran away.”

“So what was the cover story?” Addie asked. “I mean, if you didn’t go to talk to him about the Horcrux, why does he think that you think you went?”

“Oh, I went to apply for the Defence Against the Dark Arts position,” Jen answered, “since they don’t have one yet.”

“Still?” Addie asked. “I know Arabella said he didn’t have one a few weeks ago, but … term starts tomorrow; they still don’t have anyone?”

“Shouldn’t think anyone wants the job,” Draco said. “I mean, look at the last five. Remus resigned, but Quirrel’s dead, Lockhart’s in the long-term ward at St Mungo’s, Moody was locked in a truck for nine months, and Umbridge is … Well, should be in Azkaban, but is actually on the run.”

Harry snorted. “I can’t see Umbridge running.”
“Harry!” Jen chided, with a giggle.

Harry grinned. “So you’re our new Defence teacher?”

“Actually, no,” Jen said. “He thinks I went to apply – although why I’d take Hermione is beyond me – but I didn’t get the job regardless. He did ask me to offer the job to someone else though.”

“He can’t honestly think the parents will go for that,” Remus said. “They know what I am now.”

“Oh, I didn’t say it was you, honey,” Jen said with a smirk. “Addie, you up for it?”

“Me?” Addie asked, gaping. “You heard what I said when I said term starts tomorrow, right?”

“He’s desperate,” Jen said. “And apparently, you’re much less of a threat.”

“Well, obviously,” Addie said, rolling her eyes. “I’m much less Slytherin.”

Jen mock-gasped and threw a cushion at her. “I am a Gryffindor, thank you very much.”

“Snake in lion’s clothing, Jen,” Draco said. “We like you like that.”

“Addie, you need to do this,” Jen said, serious now. “This is our chance to put someone in Hogwarts to keep an eye on things, so the kids don’t have to.”

“I know that,” Addie said reluctantly. “But I am not a teacher, Jen; how am I supposed to know what I’m doing? They’ve already been given the text books, haven’t they?”

“It’ll be okay,” Hermione said. “I flicked through ours earlier …” she smacked Ron over the head as he made a muttered remark “… and the fifth and sixth year textbooks practically plan the lessons for you. Maybe the others are the same.”

“I hope so,” Addie muttered.

“Well, I’m going to restart the DA,” Harry announced. “If that’s alright with you, Professor.”

“Professor.” Addie shook her head. “I never even graduated for Merlin’s sake. You do whatever you need to do, Harry.”

“Just please,” Jen added, “change the name.”

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“Do you have to go?”

Addie stopped rummaging through her wardrobe, smiling as a pair of arms slipped around her waist. “I do. You know I do.”

“It’s not fair,” Sirius mumbled into her neck. “I only just got you back.”

Addie turned in his embrace, winding her arms around his neck. “I know. But I’ll only be at Hogwarts, Sirius. I’ll be perfectly safe.”

“I don’t trust him,” Sirius growled.

Addie smiled, placing a light kiss on his lips. “Natural Legilimens, remember? His mind games and Memory Charms won’t work on me. They won’t work on that daughter of yours either.”
Sirius tried to keep the frown on his face, but he couldn’t help the smile that lit up his face, the same smile that appeared every time she called Hermione his daughter. “I don’t want you to go.”

Addie laughed. “Honestly, Padfoot, you’re acting like a five-year-old. Although why that still surprises me, I don’t know.” She cupped his face in her hands. “I love you. And that’s not going to change whether I’m here or at the school. And Jen’s right. At least if I’m there, I can keep an eye on things.”

Sirius heaved a sigh. “I know. I’ve got a bad feeling about this. That’s all.”

Addie forced herself not to flinch, remembering the last time he’d said that to her over eighteen years ago, as she and her sister prepared to leave Hogwarts for the Easter break to visit their parents.

It had been the last time she’d seen him.

“I’ll have my own fireplace,” Addie reminded him. “And the mirror.” She patted her pocket, where a newly-charmed mirror had been stored earlier. Reluctantly slipping out of his arms, she retrieved the last set of robes from her wardrobe, setting them in her trunk and checking the rest of the contents. “Right, I think I’ve got everything.”

“Not quite,” Sirius said, pulling her to him again.

Addie laughed again. “Padfoot, we’ve been through this. I can’t show up at Hogwarts with a dog.”

“No, that’s not what I meant.” Sirius manoeuvred her in front of the mirror and produced a necklace, bearing a small pendant in the shape of the Marauder sign.

“Sirius, it’s …”

“Important,” Sirius finished, fastening it for her. “It’s charmed to protect you against all minor hexes.”

Addie touched the pendant gently. “Because I can’t do that myself?”

“Of course you can.” Sirius pressed a kiss to her neck. “Humour me. It’s also a portkey. Just think the words ‘heart’s desire’ and you’ll be home. Jen charmed it,” he added with a grin. “She felt it was apt.”

Addie pulled away from him. “Well, thank you. It’s beautiful.” She bent over the lock her trunk, and the necklace heated up against her skin. “Is there a reason it’s warming up?”

“It’s charmed,” Sirius said. “It’ll heat up whenever I think of you.”

“So it’s always going to be warm?” Addie asked with a smile, wrapping her arms around him again. “I think this might be the nicest gift you’ve ever given me.”

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1st September 1997

Arriving at Platform 9¾ was an interesting experience this year.

Every other year, Hermione had arrived through King’s Cross, but this year, they used the floo connection – from The Burrow, since Jen wanted to keep the Ravenscroft line secure.

Maybe it was the rumours surrounding the events at the Ministry, maybe it was the stories in the
Prophet about how Harry was ‘The Chosen One’, or maybe it was the physical changes they had all gone through over the summer, partly thanks to their training, but the platform seemed to quieten as the group brushed down their robes and made their way towards the train, shrunken trunks in their pockets.

Susan and Luna led the way, deep in conversation, two shades of blonde hair in striking contrast with each other.

Daphne, Neville and Ron followed them, chatting about the likelihood of Snape cursing Addie before Christmas.

While the all knew Snape was on their side, they also all knew that Addie’s sense of humour was the same as Sirius’s, and she wasn’t going to make things easy on him, especially given some of the stories she had heard over the summer.

The two boys positioned themselves either side of Daphne, a silent warning for anyone seeking retribution over what had happened in June; both young men had increased in height and muscle and towered over her.

Walking arm-in-arm behind them, in a comfortable silence, but with no less presence, Draco and Ginny caught most of the attention; they were, quite possible, the most unusual couple to grace Hogwarts in the school’s history.

Harry and Hermione brought up the rear, robes billowing behind them as they walked in a way that would make Snape jealous. Any damage caused by the Dursleys’ neglect had been well and truly undone, thanks to proper nourishment and a few potions, and he was now almost as tall as Ron.

This was the Harry Potter who slew a basilisk and stared down Lord Voldemort.

When they reached the train, they separated; Harry kissed Hermione’s cheek, and he, Susan, Luna and Neville disappeared on to the train.

After a few minutes of quiet discussion, Ron and Ginny, prefect badges glinting, set off along the platform to start rounding up the younger students. Daphne, who had replaced Pansy as prefect (and wasn’t she looking forward to that conversation), joined them.

Without another word, Draco and Hermione turned and headed towards the barrier, where a group of people had gathered, huddled together.

As they approached, Hermione gave them all a smile. “First years?”

No one answered, but there was a flurry of nods from some of the kids.

“Muggle-born?”

These nods were slightly more tentative, and Hermione could only wonder what they had encountered upon their first trip to Diagon Alley to make them this nervous.

Several of the parents, indeed, looked like they’d rather not let their children go at all.

“It’s alright,” Hermione said. “My name’s Hermione; this is Draco. We’re two of the prefects at Hogwarts.”

“No one mentioned a war when they told us about all this,” One of the fathers stated tersely.
Hermione winced. “No, I don’t suppose they did. But I wouldn’t worry, sir. Hogwarts is one of the safest magical place in the country. And even if the war does somehow get in, we’ll have enough forewarning to get your children to safety before it does.”

“And our children won’t be involved?” Another parent asked.

“We’re not in the habit of making eleven-year-olds fight in wars, ma’am,” Hermione said. “We won’t let them get involved.”

While they’d been talking, Draco had been stacking the trunks into four piles. Daphne and Ron were now approaching them.

“Are you two alright taking a pile each?”

In response, the two pulled their wands and, with a swish and a flick, two of the piles rose into the air to be guided to the train.

Hermione smiled at Draco as he levitated a pile himself. “I wish I’d had someone to do this my first year.”

“Me too,” Draco agreed.

Neither of them mentioned the fact that they both had had someone who could have done so, but didn’t; Draco’s father because he wanted his son to do it himself, Hermione’s mother because she hadn’t wanted to blow her cover.

“Right. If you’d like the follow Draco?” Hermione lifted the last pile of trunks and watched as the children hugged their parents and trotted obediently after him. She smiled at the cluster of adults, none of whom looked the least bit reassured. “They’ll be fine. I knew nothing about magic when I started, and I just got the highest marks in my year in my Ordinary Wizarding Levels. We’ll keep an eye on them. Make sure they write.”

This earned her at least some smiles, and even a few weak chuckles, and she caught up with the end of the line, following them until they had all filed into the expanded compartment.

Draco, Harry and Neville were stowing the trunks away while Luna talked to the first years, telling them about the boats that would take them to the castle.

Hermione set down the last stack of trunks and she and Draco slipped off to join the prefect meeting.

To Hermione’s surprise, the Head Boy and Girl this year were Katie Bell and Cedric Diggory. She greeted Katie with a hug, before turning to her partner. “Cedric, I wasn’t expecting you here. Well, I was expecting you to return for seventh year, but I wasn’t expecting you here.”

Cedric grinned at her. “Neither was I. I think it’s publicity personally. I don’t think Dumbledore had anything to do with it.”

Hermione nodded in agreement, scanning his emotions carefully. “Come sit with us afterwards?”

“Sure.” Cedric said, sounding confused, but she just smiled at him and took her seat next to Daphne. At least Dumbledore can do something right.

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By the time the prefects, accompanied by Cedric, made it back to the expanded compartment, the
Muggle-borns had been joined by almost all of the other first years.

“Harry’s father and his friends bewitched the compartment when they were at Hogwarts,” Susan explained to Cedric, who was staring around in amazement.

Hermione closed the door behind them and put up the last of the protective spells, sitting down just in time to hear one of the first years ask about the sorting process. “Can’t tell you that,” she said with a smile. “It’s tradition that you don’t know until you get there.”

“Cedric.” Harry stood up and shook his hand, clapping him on the shoulder. “Congrats on getting Head Boy.”

“Thanks, Harry.” Cedric sat down with them. “I hear Addie’s this year’s DADA teacher. Or is that the Hogwarts rumour mill running amok again?”

“No, that one’s true,” Hermione said. “Amazingly.”

“I see,” Cedric said. “That’ll be interesting. How’d you do in your OWLs?”

“All Outstanding,” Hermione said with a grin.

“Well, that doesn’t surprise me,” Cedric said, smiling back at her. “Harry?”


“Well, no one can blame you for that,” Cedric said. “What about the rest of you?”

“Well, we all got Outstanding in Defence,” Ron said. “I got Exceeds Expectations in everything else, but failed Div. and History.”

“Same as Harry,” Susan said, “except I was smart enough to not to Divination.”


“Likewise,” Daphne added.

“Is it a coincidence that you all did so well in DADA?” Cedric asked. “From what I heard your teacher last year was …”

“Crap,” Ron finished bluntly. “She was.”

“Well, once she was arrested, Professor Jones was fine,” Hermione said. “But she had to teach by the Ministry’s wishes and they were crap. We weren’t even supposed to practice the spells until the exams.”

“The Minister thought Dumbledore was forming an army to take him out,” Harry said, his lips twitching. “I won’t lie and say I’m not tempted.”

“So last year’s class was that bad, and you all got Outstanding?” Cedric asked. “How’d that happen?”
“Well, Daphne and I were lucky,” Draco admitted. “The others I think you can accredit to Harry.”

“He created the Defence Association,” Hermione explained.

“After they talked me into it,” Harry put in.

Hermione rolled her eyes. “Either way, you taught us everything we needed.”

Cedric looked from one face to another. “Sometime tells me there was more than exams behind that particular idea.”

“There was,” Harry agreed. “Hermione, love, could you do the honours?”

“Of course.” Hermione drew her wand and set up another layer of privacy and silencing spells around them, letting the first years chat among themselves.

“What we’re about to tell you,” Harry said quietly, “must be kept quiet and not repeated to anyone who doesn’t already know.”

“Of course,” Cedric said immediately. “What’s this about?”

Harry smiled weakly. “For once, the Daily Prophet’s got it dead right.”
And So It Begins

For a few seconds, Cedric stared at them in something skin to shock. Then …

“I should have known,” he said, shaking his head. “Why else would he come after you so often?”

Hermione rolled her eyes and gave Harry an affectionate smile. “He does seem to be a magnet for trouble, doesn’t he? Thing is, it doesn’t quite stop there …”

It took the better part of the morning to explain about the Marauders, the prophecy, and their first five years at Hogwarts, along with the reasons they didn’t trust Dumbledore.

When they had finished, Cedric let out a low whistle. “Unbelievable. I want in.”

“I thought you would,” Susan said.

Cedric looked at Harry. “So your parents …”

“Yeah,” Harry said. “Still can’t quite believe it myself. Jen’s still trying to find the place though.”

Cedric frowned. “If their spirits are travelling to and from the place, could they not map it?”

“It’s not really that simple,” Hermione explained. “They can only travel so far from their bodies. After that, they need to … tether themselves, I suppose would be the best description, to a person. So they get to the middle of the ocean, and then they need to use that tether to pull themselves directly to me, or Harry, or Sirius. From us, they then have another maximum radius, but the two don’t cross over.”

“I suppose that would be too easy, wouldn’t it?” Cedric asked.

“Speaking of easy,” Susan said, trying not to smile, “I assume Cho knows you’re back?”

“She knows I’m alive,” Cedric said, pulling a face. “I don’t know she knows I’m back at school. I thought she was a prefect?”

“She was,” Luna said, buried in *The Quibbler*. “Professor Flitwick thought she had a Wrackspurt infection.”

“Cho did absolutely nothing to stop her friends bulling Luna,” Ron translated.

Cedric’s face darkened. “I didn’t know about that. I haven’t had a moment’s peace all summer. Mum’s barely let anyone visit, so I’ve had owls several times a day. I never realised she was that clingy.”

“Don’t think ‘clingy’ is the word you’re looking for, mate,” Harry said. “She was hanging on to me by September.”

Cedric shook his head. “Unbelievable. It’s not your fault,” he added hastily, seeing the guilt that crossed Harry’s face. “So how can I help with … you know?”

“Well, I think what we need to do,” Hermione said, “is make sure that we’re prepared for the worst-case scenario, which I would say is Voldemort attacks the school and we get no back-up?”

“We’ll get back-up,” Harry said. “Jen and the others would come.”
“What if they can’t?” Hermione asked. “What if we have no way to contact them?”

“We would need the DA to be an actual army,” Luna answered immediately. “Trained in combat, people who know what they’re getting in to, battle-ready strategies, and people to man the infirmary.” She looked over the top of *The Quibbler* at Cedric, her eyes slightly out of focus. “You have a host of nargles following you, did you know?”

Cedric looked to Susan for help.

Susan shrugged and mouthed, “Go with it.”

“Is that good?” Cedric asked Luna.

“Oh, yes,” Luna answered absently. “Just don’t worry if you start being drawn to people you hadn’t considered.”

Hermione hid a smile. After learning about the thestrals, and how they could only be seen under certain circumstances, she had wondered how many of Luna’s ‘imaginary’ creatures were the same. Many things the girl came out with did make sense if you looked at them from a different perspective, and they had all promised themselves that they wouldn’t do what so many others did and dismiss her out of hand.

“We’ll need to find a way of getting the younger years out of the castle as well,” Daphne said. “And anyone else that doesn’t want to fight. We can’t rely on the floo – what if he finds a way to block it?”

“Good point,” Hermione said, frowning.

“Jen will probably have some ideas,” Ginny said.

“She definitely will,” Hermione said. “Maybe we should all have a think about it.”

Everyone agreed, and she removed the shield charms with a wave of her wand, jumping back into the conversation the first years were having.

When the trolley came round, Harry bought a large selection of sweets, allowing the new Muggle-borns to sample wizarding candy for the first time.

For her part, Hermione delved into her bag and retrieved a selection of Muggle sweets, which was a huge hit among the magically-raised.

Seeing how successful the wizarding etiquette lessons and the Muggle day trips had been among their own group, they had decided to try to bridge the gap between the two cultures as best they could with the younger students.

Once lunch had passed, they took it in turns to take the first years in groups to the next compartment, which was empty thanks to a small charm on the door, to allow them to change into the robes – and help them, in the Muggle-borns cases.

By the time the train pulled into Hogsmeade station, all the students were ready and they had just one more thing to do.

The older girls all opened their bags again and pulled out wand holsters, which they helped the younger students to attach to their arms.

As soon as everyone was armed, Harry and Hermione led the way off the train and on to the
platform, where Hagrid’s familiar voice could be heard shouting, “Firs’ years! Firs’ years over here!”

The new Muggle-borns stopped dead and even the other first years hesitated.

Hermione chuckled, wrapping an arm around the shoulder of a young girl who had attached herself to her side. “It’s alright. Hagrid’s a good friend of ours.”

A few of the braver first years trotted forwards, but the others stayed where they were.

Hermione understood. It normally took a good half an hour for all the first years to assemble.

Hagrid was definitely a good example of ‘not judging a book by its cover’.

In these times, however, no one could afford hanging around the station any longer than they needed to; despite the war, and despite the fact that the Hogwarts Express arrived at Hogsmeade Station every year at the same time, there seemed to be no security measures in place.

Most of the others were already at the coaches, making sure that the younger students were all loaded up.

Hermione decided she would need to take matters into her own hands. Squeezing the shoulder of the girl beside her, she lowered her head to talk to her. “What’s your name?”

“Catherine Barter,” she whispered.

Hermione smiled at her. “Come with me, Catherine.” Releasing her shoulder in exchange for taking her hand, she led the young girl over to where Hagrid was standing. “Hello, Hagrid.”

“Hermione!” Hagrid greeting, bending down to give her a hung that was, mercifully restrained. “How are you?”

Hermione automatically touched the top of her scar. “Better, Hagrid; thank you.” She nudged Catherine forward. “This is Catherine Barter; she’s a first year. Catherine, this is Rubeus Hagrid, Keeper of Keys and Grounds at Hogwarts.”

Hagrid’s eyes crinkled in a beaming smile and he held out his huge hand. “It’s very nice to meet you, Catherine. I’ve always said a friend o’ Harry and Hermione’s is a friend o’ mine.”

Looking a little startled, Catherine looked up at Hermione, who nodded with a smile. Her face lit up as she shook Hagrid’s hand, her own hand almost disappearing within it.

At that, the rest of the first years surged forwards and Hermione took a step back. “Hagrid will take you up to the castle. We’ll see you in the Great Hall for the Sorting.”

She met Harry and the others at the last carriage, where Ginny was staring at the space in front of them. “Is that a thestrals?”

“Yes,” Draco said. “No one died at the Ministry, did they?”

“No,” Harry said. “But I could see them after Cedric, and I didn’t see them at the end of fourth year. I think that thinking you’ve seen death and mourned over it is enough. We did think Padfoot was dead for a good month.”

“Longer than that,” Ginny muttered, accepting Draco’s help into the last carriage.

Hermione put a tentative hand out, feeling it rest on a leathery neck. “I don’t know if you were one
of them,” she whispered. “But thank you for your help last June.”

Something nudged her gently and she started, stepping back into Harry’s arms.

“I think that was a ‘you’re welcome,’” Harry murmured in her ear.

Hermione chuckled weakly. “I guess so.” She twisted her head round to look at him. “Ready for this?”

Harry looked at her for a moment, love shining in his eyes. “Hermione, with you by my side, I’m ready for anything.”

***

The new students had been sorted, the Sorting Hat removed, and the students of Hogwarts were waiting patiently for Dumbledore to address them.

Daphne and Draco were sitting at the Slytherin table, at the end nearest the teachers, unashamedly using the younger years as a barricade between them and their classmates.

Luna was at the Ravenclaw table, being ignored by her classmates as per usual, and in a slight daze – also as per usual, but her friends had come to realise that this expression just meant that she was thinking deeply about something.

Susan and Cedric were sitting together, a little closer than they needed to be.

As soon as they’d entered the Great Hall, Cho had made a beeline for them, and Cedric had quickly wrapped an arm around Susan’s shoulder and pulled her closer, seeming to whisper something private in her ear.

Only Susan knew the truth: “I can’t deal with her right now; please play along.”

Susan had given him a small nod and complied, leaning into him as they walked to their House table, trying to ignore the dirty look his ex-girlfriend gave her.

The five Gryffindors were all grouped together, all of them pointedly looking in any direction other than at Dumbledore.

Hermione was quietly making arrangements with the castle and Ginny was talking to Draco in her head.

Harry, Ron and Neville were scanning the Great Hall, taking in everything and everyone, eyes and minds finely tuned from a summer spent training with the Marauders (who let’s face it, made you as paranoid as the Weasley twins).

They took note of everyone who might possibly pose a problem, for once not just focusing on the table furthest away from them.

Occasionally, their eyes met, and they’d all look at the same person, before agreeing.

It goes without saying that they all kept their shields up, barricading their minds and thoughts from the expected mind-sweep Dumbledore performed before his speech.

As always, Dumbledore explained the general rules to the first years (and reminded everyone else), before explaining that everything and anything sold at Weasleys’ Wizard Wheezes was now on the ‘Banned Item’s list – Hermione had a feeling that had more to do with the owners than the actual
Getting the first years safely into their dorms wasn’t easy for Draco or Daphne, but they weren’t in Slytherin for no reason.

They easily put on their icy fronts, responding to the students who wanted help, ignoring those who repeated snide comments about blood traitors.

Then, as curfew approached, they strode out of the Common Room together, heads held high.

They passed several ghosts and countless paintings, and came within a few feet of Filch and Mrs. Norris, but none paid a second’s attention to the two prefects; Draco and Hermione had done their jobs, and no one would notice them, bar the castle herself.

When they reached the Room of Requirements, it didn’t take more than a few seconds for the door to appear, and they were met with a simple, yet comfortable, common room, with two doors leading to bedrooms and ensuite bathroom.

Draco let out a low whistle. “There’s something to be said for pissing off your entire house.”
“’I’ll say,” Daphne agreed, running a hand along the back of the sofa, not flinching with Dobby and Winky appeared with their trunks.

“Thanks,” Draco said quietly.

“Thank you,” Daphne echoed.

All of the purebloods had their eyes opened over the summer, but none more so than the two Slytherins.

The trips to the Muggle world had helped Draco in particular understand the way Harry and Hermione saw house elves.

But it had also forced them to see the opportunities the magical world was denying itself.

In some areas, it had to be admitted, magic was superior; there was no way they could compare flooing or portkey or even the Knight Bus with Muggle transportation, but they had come to appreciate how every Muggle-born or raised student must feel entering the magical world for the first time.

Dobby and Winky disappeared with another pop and Daphne turned to Draco. “Why did you
suddenly look annoyed with Dumbledore introduced Addie as the DADA teacher?"

“Well, it suddenly hit me that he has no idea who he’s dealing with,” Draco answered. “He hired Addie at the last minute. But as far as he’s concerned, she’s been trapped without magic for eighteen years and never even graduated Hogwarts.”

Daphne cursed under her breath. The fact that Addie had spent her time learning and perfecting wandless magic was a secret only a few were privy to.

“So basically, he’s as bad as the Ministry when it comes to teaching us to defend ourselves, but he’s managed to pull the wool over everyone’s eyes again, because Addie escaped after so long and no one’s cottoned on to the fact that her escape was more luck than anything else. This cannot be good.”

“No,” Draco said, a smirk spreading across his face. “No, this is good. Addie’s a lot more powerful and a lot more controlled than he thinks.”

Daphne nodded thoughtfully. “So what Dumbledore thinks is hindering us is actually helping.” She snorted. “Because obviously, no one would ever hide something from him. Apparently there is an upside to him being an arrogant shit.”

“I don’t think that quite becomes you, Miss Greengrass,” Draco drawled in an accurate impression of himself in third year.

Their eyes met and they both began to laugh.

Daphne calmed down first, bit she was still smiling broadly when she floated her trunk into her room. “Goodnight, Draco.”

“Goodnight, Daphne.”

***

Addie heaved a sigh, surveying her new domain. She had to admit, of all the classrooms at Hogwarts, this one was her favourite, with the spiral staircase behind the desk that led up to the office and, behind that, the private living quarters.

She just never thought it would be her classroom and her office and her living quarters.

She hadn’t had long at all to prepare for this job, although Hermione was right about the text books. Whatever topic she chose practically had the lesson written for her.

*Hmm … I could make a few changes here and there … Maybe give them an idea of what they’re dealing with …*

With a flick of her wand, a picture of the Dark Mark appeared on the back wall, next to another picture of a Death Eater mask.

*They should at least be able to recognise trouble … Now … lessons …*

She took a seat at her new desk and pulled a piece of parchment towards her, loading a quill to begin jotting them down.

She could have asked her quill to do it by itself, but for some reason, she’d never quite mastered a wandless levitation charm, and using her wand seemed to be more draining.

*Seventh year’s easy enough; that’s just duelling and revision. Sixth year … curses. Offensive curses*
that can be used safely, and ones that they should recognise but not use … Fifth year is counter
curses, I think …

Wordlessly, she conjured a list of spells needed for the DADA OWL exam.

Yes, counter curses. I am right. Better pull a Moody and move Unforgivables further down the list …
Or is that pulling a Crouch? Jinxes and hexes in fourth year … magical creatures for third … and
then I can concentrate on defensive charms for first and second. Starting with the shield charm.

Addie tapped her quill against the desk thoughtfully. And the first lesson should probably be a
history lesson – for all of them.

Addie’s schedule was a little fuller than most of the teachers. Unlike the rest of the classes, Defence
Against the Dark Arts was taught in single house groups.

The only exception was first years, who were paired up to make room for the extra introductory
lessons they would need – early theory, proper wand care and general subject introductions were all
covered in the first few weeks.

It wasn’t quite the Wizarding Studies that Addie privately felt the Muggle-born students could benefit
from, but it helped even things out a little – even if Snape refused to participate.

Setting her quill down, Addie rose from her chair and made her way down the classroom.

Thankfully, sense had prevailed this year, and Gryffindor had been paid with Hufflepuff, and
Slytherin with Ravenclaw.

It was two fairly neutral pairings, which was especially necessary when the subject matter was so
divisive.

She stopped halfway down the classroom, behind a very familiar chair. Closing her eyes, she could
almost hear the Marauders’ laughter, Lily and Jen’s stifled giggles, their teacher’s desperate attempts
to regain control of the class.

Despite being in a castle full of people, she suddenly felt very alone. The necklace that rested
beneath her robes warmed comfortingly, and she smiled.

A throat cleared softly in the doorway, making her jump a little. She looked over sharply, then
relaxed immediately. “Oh. Good evening, Professor McGonagall.”

“All you need to do is call me Minerva; we are colleagues now,” her old teacher said, stepping into the
classroom. “It is so good to see you again.”

Addie had only just arrived before the students did, so she and Minerva had yet to have a proper
conversation. “I’m sorry I haven’t been by before; I was finding my feet again …”

“You certainly don’t need to apologise for that,” Minerva said firmly giving her a very unexpected
embrace. “I mean, what you must have gone through … But you don’t want to talk about that.”

“No, I don’t.” Addie agreed fervently.

Minerva sighed, waving her wand at the door, locking and silencing the room. “Addison, there are
very few times I disagree with the headmaster, but I’m afraid this is one of them.”

Addie smiled. “Let me guess. You’re concerned, because I’ve been trapped on an island without a
wand for eighteen years, so what could I possibly teach these children?”
Minerva faltered. “Well … yes, actually.”

“I taught myself wandless magic out there,” Addie explained. “Although, to the best of my knowledge, Albus doesn’t know that.”

“But then …”

“Why did he hire me?” Addie asked with a sigh. She waved a hand, setting up more privacy charms around them. “I have no idea. But there is something else you need to know, Minerva, but I need a witch’s oath you won’t repeat this, especially to the headmaster.”

The display of magic by her former pupil shocked Minerva into doing just that.

“I wasn’t alone out there,” Addie said.

Minerva sucked in a breath. “Leona?”

Addie nodded. “And James and Lily.”

Hand on heart, Minerva sank into the nearest chair. “Potter?”

“Exactly.” Addie leaned against one of the desks. “They arrived as the Death Eaters vanished, obviously. By the time Cedric reached me, I was in another part of the island … The wards had shot back up to full force again, so I bided my time, hoping they’d forgotten about us … Apparating myself and Cedric out … wandless magic or not, it really was as big a miracle as everyone’s saying it was.”

“Where is this island?” Minerva asked.

Addie sighed. “I don’t know. I wish I did. Jen and Remus are half-buried in books and maps and scrolls trying to find something.”

“What about …?” Minerva began.

“Snape’s taken an Unbreakable Vow,” Addie said.

“And Albus?” Minerva asked. “Why don’t you trust him?”

Addie sighed. “Minerva, we have a number of reasons. My main one is that Regulus Black told Albus we were out there, and to the best of my knowledge, he never bothered to look. My second one is that Albus cast the Fidelius Charm to make Peter their Secret Keeper and yet Sirius still ended up in Azkaban.”

Minerva’s face had paled quite considerably, and Addie took pity on her. “I would talk to Jen. She’s got a whole list of reasons and probably more evidence than I do.”

Minerva nodded slowly. “I believe I will.” She rose from her chair, taking Addie’s hand in both of hers. “I must admit that you, Lily and Jennifer were three of my favourite students. And it pains me to see what the three of you have gone through. I’ll keep this to myself. Goodnight, Addison.”

“Goodnight, Minerva.” Addie watched her former head of house leave the classroom and turned to the window.

Focusing her gaze, she could just see the wards shimmering at the edge of the boundary. At some point she would need to take a closer look, so that Jen could adapt Portkeys so they didn’t need to be outside the wards to work.
With a heavy sigh, she made her way up the stairs to her office, crossing the room to the portrait on the wall. “Marauders forever.”

The wizard in the painting winked at her and gave a bow, and the frame swung forwards, allowing Addie access to her new bedchamber.

As she entered, she felt her necklace warm again, and smiled. Maybe this year wouldn’t be so bad after all.
Desperate Times

2nd September 1997

When Hermione reached the Common Room the next morning, she was surprised to find the first years already waiting for her.

Actually, it wasn’t the fact that they were waiting for her that surprised her.

It was how Dean and Seamus – who usually just ignored the younger years and headed straight down to breakfast – were explaining to them in great detail the difference between football and Quidditch.

Hermione stopped at the bottom of the stairs, taking in the scene in front of her with a smile.

“That’s new,” Lavender murmured from behind her.

Definitely,” Parvati agreed, eyeing the two boys as if she’d only just seen them for the first time.

“Mind if we take them off your hands?” Lavender asked.

Hermione shrugged, inwardly breathing a sigh of relief as she recognised the gleam in Lavender’s eyes – a gleam that, last term, seemed to have been aimed at Ron more than anyone else.

It was unlikely Ron would say know if Lavender did make a move and, as much as Hermione liked her roommate, she didn’t particularly want her involved in what they were doing at the moment.

“I’m not the one they’re talking to.”

She watched in amusement as the two girls moved forwards as one to address the first years. They got a flurry of nods, took the boys’ arms and steered them out of the portrait hole.

“Good morning,” Hermione greeted, approaching the first years.

Little Catherine Barter looked up at her, almost bouncing with excitement. “Do we really get to play sports on brooms?”

Hermione chuckled. “Slow down. You have to learn how to fly first, which should be later this week. And you can’t try out for the teams until second year …”

“Unless you manage to impress McGonagall so much that you get chosen as the youngest seeker in a century,” Ron finished from behind her.

Hermione rolled her eyes. “That’s not going to happen.”

“That’s what they said about Harry,” Ginny said, appearing from the girls’ dorms, looking as refreshed as though she’d been up for hours. “Can you help Draco out?” She asked in an undertone.

“The first year snakes can’t see them at the moment.”

“My ears are burning,” Harry commented, as he and Neville joined them. “What did I do?”

Hermione laughed. “Don’t worry, love.” She took his offered hand and turned to the first years. “Alright, follow us and we’ll take you down to the Great Hall for breakfast.”
This journey always took a bit longer than the night before, because the first years were no longer half-asleep, so could pay attention to everything around them.

“Hermione?” One of the boys asked eventually. “Is there a map?”

Neville laughed. “I wish! You can’t even rely on the portraits or the suits of armour, because they move.”

“It gets better,” Hermione said. “Give it a week, and you’ll be fine.” She pushed the doors to the Great Hall open and stepped back to let Ron lead the first years through.

Harry and Neville followed, but the two girls waited, seeing Draco and Daphne emerge from the dungeons with the Slytherin first years in tow.

“Draco thinks we should meet up after class to talk,” Ginny murmured; Hermione caught his eye, nodding in agreement.

As the first years passed them, Hermione scanned their emotions; below the obvious first day nerves, there was the same fears of the war and the unknown as the rest of the student body, with the exception of a handful who apparently felt they had nothing to fear.

Whether that was because they agreed with Voldemort, or their parents were Death Eaters, Hermione didn’t know, and she wouldn’t, without reading their minds.

Besides, it wasn’t the first years Hermione was worried about – it was the sixth and seventh years instead.

Following their discussion on the train, Hermione had been racking her brains on how to get the younger years out of the castle should the worst happen, but now she had another problem – she had been assuming that she could send everyone home, but clearly she couldn’t.

Those who, like Draco, wanted to escape the pressures of their families, but couldn’t, would need another alternative.

She was still thinking deeply by the time she sat down at the Gryffindor table, piling a heap of scrambled eggs on to her plate automatically.

“What classes do we have today?” One of the first years asked.

“Professor McGonagall is bringing your schedules around now,” Hermione answered, not really paying attention.

It didn’t take long for their head of house to reach them, but it was Harry she addressed first. “Mr Potter, it took a while for decisions to be made within the other houses, so it wasn’t included with your letter, but I would like you to be the Quidditch captain for Gryffindor this year.”

“Wow.” Harry looked stunned, even as Ron clapped him on the back. “Thank you, Professor, but … I think it would make more sense for it to be Katie. She’s been on the team longer than I have.”

“Miss Bell has already declined the position, Mr Potter,” Professor McGonagall said. “You have the next longest tenure.”

“Well, there are only three of us left,” Harry admitted. “But Ron’s been following the game a lot longer than I have, and he understands the plays – I only know the Seeker’s role. I wouldn’t know the first thing about the Chasers’ plays, or the Beaters’, or the Keeper’s.”
Now it was McGonagall’s turn to look surprised, but she recovered quickly. “Well … that’s a very mature view on things, Mr Potter.” She handed the badge to Ron. “Congratulations, Mr Weasley.”

Ron broke into a smile. “Thanks, Professor. But,” he said, fixing the badge to his robes, “I don’t know I can manage prefect and Quidditch Captain. Besides, I reckon Harry would always have been a better prefect anyway. Is it alright if Harry takes that?”

Professor McGonagall gave him a rare smile. “Perfectly fine, Mr Weasley.”

“I think you just impressed her,” Ginny said, after she’d moved on. “Don’t think she knew you could be that mature.”

Ron shrugged. “I didn’t know I could be that mature.”

***

Addie leaned against her desk as her first class filed in – Slytherin and Ravenclaw first years. She needed to make a firm first impression as well as a good one.

She waited patiently for everyone to settle down and stop talking, before waving her wand at the door to close it. “Good morning. My name is Professor McKinnon and I am going to be your Defence Against the Dark Arts teacher for at least the next year. Before we start, I’m afraid I need to go over some ground rules and get the boring bits out of the way. First of all, as soon as you walk through that door, you are a student.”

That drew a few nervous giggles, and Addie gave them all an indulgent smile. “Yes, I know that sounds strange. That is, you are just a student. As far as I am concerned, you leave blood-lines and houses behind at the door. If I hear anyone making any sort of disparaging comment towards another student, for any reason, including those two, I will take points. Am I understood?”

There was a flurry of nods throughout the classroom, although Addie wasn’t too concerned. Slytherins and Ravenclaws always seemed to get along better than the other houses.

“Secondly, I have to admit, I loved a class prank as much as the next person.”

This time the laughter was a bit louder, as the students began to relax with their new teacher.

“But this class is not just about preparing you for later life,” Addie said. “It may well save your life one day. I don’t care what you do in other classes – don’t tell the others I said that – but in this one, there will be no tolerance for people messing around in my class.

“And thirdly – and this is the last one, I promise – the door to my office is always open. If you need to talk to anyone, for whatever reason, please come and find me.”

She didn’t get any response, but she wasn’t really expecting one, so she hopped up on to her desk. “Okay then, my job is to teach you how to defend yourselves, but first of all I’m going to tell you all why you need to be able to defend yourselves, so I’m going to give you a history lesson first. I know this is Professor Binns’ job, but I need you to pay attention, so I’m going to do it.” She paused. “And that will make sense once you’ve had your first History of Magic lesson.”

A few people laughed, probably purebloods, who had heard story.

“Now I know you probably think you already know what’s going on out there,” Addie said, “but the story is a little more complicated, so I’ll ask you to indulge me. First of all, who can tell me who Voldemort’s …” she paused to allow the shiver of squeals to run around the room “… parents are?”
There was silence and nobody moved.

Addie smiled at them. “Come on. There’s no such thing as a stupid answer.”

A tentative hand rose from the third row and Addie nodded to the young Ravenclaw. “Yes, Miss …?”

“Margaret Mahagony, Professor,” the girl filled in. “I don’t know who his parents were, but he claims to be the Heir of Slytherin, and I believe the last known heirs were the Gaunt family, so one of them must have been a Gaunt.”

“Five points to Ravenclaw,” Addie said. “Remember, even if you don’t know the answer, you almost certainly know how to find out. As it happens, you are correct. His mother was Merope Gaunt, the youngest child of Marvolo Gaunt. As for his father …” she allowed herself mischievous smile. “Let’s make it a bit easier. Was he a wizard or a Muggle?”

“Wizard, obviously,” one of the Slytherins drawled.

Addie glanced at him, recognising his features from a ‘reformed’ Death Eater. “If you could raise your hand please, Mr Ardon. What makes you say that?”

He frowned. “How’d you know my last name, Professor?”

“Well, I do have a class listing, Mr Ardon,” Addie said, “and I was at school with your Aunt Alexia. She was a few years ahead of me. So tell me your thought process – you say wizard. Why?”

“Well …” Jacob Ardon hesitated. “You-Know-Who hates Muggles. It would make no sense for him to be related to one.”

“Really?” Addie asked. “If I may use a personal example, Mr Ardon, your aunt absolutely despised her grandmother, and made it very clear to anyone who asked and quite a few people who didn’t. And her grandmother was a Muggle, if I remember correctly.”


So did Alexia, but Addie wasn’t going to get into that argument right now.

“Yes, well,” Addie drew her wand and conjured the words ‘Tom Marvolo Riddle’ in thin air, made out of silver ribbon, which shimmered before reforming into the words ‘I am Lord Voldemort’. “This is a story about a young woman who fell in love …”

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While Addie began a story she would repeat many times over, Jen and Remus were approaching a Muggle house, about to do exactly the same thing.

“Why the hell aren’t the Ministry doing this?” Jen muttered. “They haven’t even stopped us; we could be anyone.”

Remus kissed his wife’s cheek. “They won’t be watching Muggle-borns’ families. They’ve got ‘more important’ things to do. That’s why we’re doing it.”

“They didn’t care even when they were at full numbers,” Jen grumbled.

Thankfully, the student lists at Hogwarts had the addresses included, so Addie had compiled a list from her class registers of all the students who lived in the Muggle world, so were likely to be either
Muggle-born or, at the very least, half-bloods who might not have warding around their homes.

“It’d be nice if we got some help though,” Jen added, waving a hand at the house in front of them. “No magic whatsoever.”

“Off to a good start then,” Remus said, knocking on the door.

After a few minutes, the door opened to a woman about their age, who looked curiously at them. “Yes?”

“Mrs Barter?” Remus asked, double-checking the list in his hand. “My wife and I need to talk to you and your husband about your daughter.”

“She’s not in any trouble,” Jen added hastily. “But we do need to speak with you. It’s really quite urgent.”

Mrs Barter hesitated for a second, then stepped back. “Come in.”

Jen thanked her with a smile, and they stepped inside the neat Muggle home.

Mr Barter was sitting in the living room reading the paper – thankfully, they both had the day off work.

When the two walked in behind his wife, he put his paper down. “Meredith?”

“They’re here to talk about Catherine,” she told him quietly. “Please have a seat. If she’s not in trouble …”

“Well, I bet the people who told you she’s a witch never mentioned the war, did they?” Jen asked cheerfully, as she and Remus sat down on the sofa.

“No, but they did at the station and I’d be grateful for an explanation,” Mr Barter said sharply.

“Jen,” Remus said, “we should at least start from the beginning. I’m Remus Lupin; this is my wife, Jennifer.”

“He’s right,” Jen said. “Let me try to explain.”

And she did.

Obviously, trying to explain to the Barters that they had sent their daughter into a world terrorised by a group of murderers who considered their daughter fairer game than grouse in the shooting season went down like a lead balloon.

“Is she safe?” Mrs Barter asked, once the explanation had faded into a loaded silence.

“At Hogwarts?” Remus asked. “Definitely. I’m not saying Voldemort won’t do that …”

“Merlin forbid,” Jen murmured.

Remus nodded in agreement. “But we’ve got someone there. I know Hermione’s coming up with a plan, and Harry would never let anything happen to them.”

“But I thought they were just students?” Mr Barter said with a frown. “Surely you’re not getting children to fight your battles for you.”
“We’re not,” Jen said. “Unfortunately, since May there’s been a rumour going round that Harry’s the ‘Chosen One’ and the Ministry’s decided that’s enough for them to sit on their arses and do nothing.”

“That’s quite comforting really,” Mrs Barter said. “It’s good to know that some things are the same in the magical world and the Muggle world. Politicians are still useless.”

Jen snorted. “Hear, hear. The point is, just because they’re twiddling their thumbs and doing nothing, we are not.” She opened her bag and pulled out two small metal objects and two bracelets.

The metal items were Dark Mark Detectors – a new invention of the Weasley twins that detected the combination of the Protean Charm and the Dark Mark tattoo. Once they had given one to Mandy and Arabella to test on Snape at an Order meeting, they had given an endless supply to Jen (who was paying for them; the twins just hadn’t realised it yet).

“These will light up if any of his followers come near you,” Remus explained. “And the bracelets are portkeys.”

“They’re a kind of magical transportation,” Jen explained. “If you lose consciousness, or say the words ‘safe haven’, it will transport you somewhere safe.”

“And how long will it take for these people to find us there?” Mr Barter asked.

“They won’t,” Jen answered. “The place in question is Potter Manor; even if they find it, they won’t be able to get in to it. The wards are too strong.”

“Wards?” Mrs Barter questioned.

“Magical shields,” Remus elaborated. “In an ideal world, we’d put wards around your home as well, but that would actually draw more attention to your home and put you in more danger.”

“I’m modifying the wards of one of my family homes,” Jen added, “so we can get the children there if Voldemort does attack the school.”

Mrs Barter was still staring at the Dark Mark Detectors. “Do you really think it’s likely that this Voldemort will come after us?”

Jen sighed. “At this time, I don’t know. When we were at school, during his first rise to power, it wasn’t uncommon for Death Eaters to attack the parents of Muggle-born students. So far, the attacks have been on members of the Ministry of Magic.”

“But if these people take over your Ministry,” Mr Barter said, “couldn’t they start coming after people like us legally?”

Remus smiled humourlessly. “Yes. We’re not going to let that happen.”

“Never,” Jen agreed. “And even discounting the teachers, I know at least nine students who would die before they let anything happen to your daughter or to anyone else’s.”

Mr Barter met her eyes for the first time. “I hope they don’t need to.”

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“Should I be worried?” Ginny asked casually.

“About what?” Draco responded, not looking up from his homework.

“You living with another woman,” Ginny answered flatly.
Now Draco looked up, the beginnings of a protest on the tip of his tongue, but the grin on her face alerted him to the fact that she was messing with him. “Funny.”

“You’re quiet,” Ginny said. “Bad day?”

“Snape’s not very happy with me at the moment,” Draco said with a sigh.

“Are you sure about leaving the Quidditch team?” Ginny asked. “You’re not happy about it.”

“Of course I’m not happy about it,” Draco said. “I don’t have much of a choice. They’re more likely to aim the Bludgers at me than the other team.”

“I’m not surprised Snape’s upset,” Ginny said. “You were the best bet for Captain. And the best player on the team.”

A tiny smile touched Draco’s face. “Next year, maybe, if things have fixed themselves.” He glanced at the door. “The others are on their way.”

“Is Hogwarts telling you that?” Ginny asked. “What does it sound like?”

Draco frowned. “It’s difficult to explain, really … Give me a minute.”

Ginny stayed silent, knowing he would tell her at some point. Sure enough, his presence in her mind opened up, inviting her in, and suddenly, a soft whisper came into focus, above the quiet of the Room of Requirement, like a thousand voices all whispering different secrets all at once. Is that Hogwarts?

That’s it … It’s amazing, isn’t it?

“He helped you hear her, didn’t he?”

Hermione’s voice caused the two to jump, and they looked up to see her closing the door, with the rest of the group, and Cedric, beside her.

“Her?” Cedric asked.

“Remember I told you on the train that I’m the Heir of Ravenclaw?” Hermione asked. “And Draco’s the chosen Heir of Slytherin. We can both hear Hogwarts – she is definitely female, or at least the magic is. Probably Grandmother’s.”

Hermione was right, Ginny realised – it was predominantly a female voice.

Hermione, Ron and Harry were all stripping off heavy cloaks, which made no sense, since Ginny knew they had no reason to leave the castle that day.

“Where have you three been then?” Draco asked for her.

“We went to visit Hagrid,” Harry answered. “Wanted to tell him in person that we aren’t taking Care of Magical Creatures.”

“How’d he take it?” Neville asked.

“Oh, he’s fine,” Ron said dismissively. “I’m more worried about Grawp.”

“He isn’t pulling up trees anymore,” Hermione said. “Take that as a plus.”
“Do I want to know who Grawp is?” Cedric asked.

“It’s better if you don’t mate,” Harry said. “Then you’ve got plausible deniability, because we don’t.”

“Oh no,” Cedric sighed. “In which case, I don’t want to know.”

“I do,” Draco said, sounding interested. “Why don’t we already know?”

“Like Harry said,” Ginny said. “Plus, those of us who do know wish we didn’t.”

**Hagrid’s half-brother’s living in the forest. He’s small for a giant though.**

Draco turned to look at her. “Are you kidding me?”

Ginny smirked. “Now you don’t have plausible deniability either.”

“You’re right,” Draco said, rubbing his forehead. “I wish I didn’t know that.”

“Alright,” Daphne said, raising her voice a little. “We’re all here. The first day’s over – thank Merlin. So has anyone thought any more about what we talked about on the train?”

“Well, I’ve been thinking that we need a headquarters,” Hermione said. “Somewhere we can study the books properly.”

“I thought you said there was nothing in them,” Ron said.

“No, I said there was nothing that would help Harry kill Voldemort,” Hermione said. “There’s other stuff in there; we just haven’t looked at them that closely.”

“Well, can’t we use this room?” Harry asked.

Hermione pulled a face. “Well, we can still use it as the training room for the DA, but other students do use this room, Harry. I’d feel better if we had a solid place. I figured if we get a copy of the Marauders Map on the wall in there, make sure one of us is in there at all times – or Dobby; I’m sure he wouldn’t mind – then if Voldemort turns up, we’ll have an advantage.”

“We’ll have that anyway, won’t we?” Susan asked. “Won’t the castle warn you?”

“Well, yes,” Hermione admitted. “But I’d rather have it backed up in flesh and blood if we have to evacuate quickly. You know how some people react to some nutter grabbing their head and yelling that Voldemort’s back.”

“Oi!” Harry protested. “I resent that.”

Hermione gave him a deceptively sweet smile. “Love you, darling. My point is, one of us – or a house elf – appearing or sending a Patronus or something – people are more likely to listen to evacuation orders.”

“So where were you thinking?” Ginny asked curiously.

Hermione took a deep breath. “Well, I think we should take Lady Helga’s suggestion and use the Chamber of Secrets.”
For a few seconds, there was a silence as everyone looked at Ginny, who thought for a second, then shrugged. “Strangely, it doesn’t bother me anymore.”

“Dumbledore certainly wouldn’t consider it,” Draco added.

“True,” Cedric conceded. “I’m inclined to agree, just to see it.”

“You can see it anyway,” Harry said. “I’m happy to give tours.”

Cedric grinned. “Well, maybe we should vote on it.”

“Exactly what I was thinking,” Susan agreed.

“Must be a Hufflepuff thing,” Daphne said. “All in favour?”

Ten hands went up, although Ron and Neville’s did so a little hesitantly.

“It’s creepy down there,” Ron said, by way of explanation.

Neville’s reason was a little more practical. “Harry’s the only one who can get in.”

“Hmm …” Hermione stood up and began pacing, having admittedly not considered that little snag. “I wonder …” She stopped, just after her second circle of the room, thinking back to the previous Christmas in Dumbledore’s office. That time, Rowena had just appeared, but she couldn’t see any reason why … “Grandmother?”

Draco jumped to his feet with a bow, as the ghostly figure of her great-great-great grandmother appeared in front of them. “Lady Ravenclaw.”

Hermione could see from the bewildered expressions on everyone else’s faces that they were the only two who could see her. “Still invisible? I thought you said you’d become like ghosts.”

Rowena sighed. “Maybe in time, dear, but not yet. What’s wrong?”

“I know Lady Helga said we should, but how can we create another entrance to the Chamber of Secrets?” Hermione asked.

Rowena chuckled. “Hermione, you know where you are, don’t you?”

“The Room of Requirements,” Hermione answered. “But … Oh. I can ask the room for another entrance, can’t I?”

Rowena nodded, still laughing. “Always remember to deploy logic first, dear. Sometimes the answer really is that simple.”

Hermione nodded as she faded away again, her face flushed red. She glared at Draco, who was sniggering at her. “Oh, shut up. You didn’t think of it either. Apparently, the only time they’re visible to everyone else is in the Chamber.” Or in the weird room that no one else can find, she added mentally. “Harry, could you …”
“Done,” Harry said with a smile, gesturing to a portrait in the corner of the room.

It was just like the one he and Hermione had given the Marauders for Christmas: a full moon in a forest clearing, just without the animals.

“Nice,” Hermione said. “Is the password the same?”

“Same as what?” Cedric asked.

“Marauders’ Map,” Susan answered.

Cedric grinned. “Do you have it on you?” He asked Harry eagerly. “I’d love to see it.”

Harry pulled a piece of parchment from his pocket and tapped his wand against it, as Hermione touched hers to the frame of the portrait.

“I solemnly swear that I am up to no good.”

Cred’it’s muttered exclamation as the Map began to form was drowned out by Hermione’s gasp as the full moon in the painting grew to form a hole in the wall.

“Does anyone have the journals?” Hermione asked.

“I do,” Ginny answered. “They’re in my bag, charmed to look like text books. I don’t know how we’re going to work through them though.”

“Maybe we should split up,” Daphne suggested. “You two take the Ravenclaw and Gryffindor ones, and Sue and I will take the Slytherin and Hufflepuff ones.”

“That sounds like a good idea,” Luna agreed, making all three girls jump (they had thought she was still talking to Ron on the other side of the room). “I can research Ravenclaw’s diadem and find out where that could be. Daddy’s trying to recreate it; I could ask him.”

Hermione and Daphne exchanged a look. While they all appreciated Luna’s open-mindedness, they also knew that she, at least, left the magical creature hunting for more appropriate times; her father had no such restraints.

“Luna, why don’t we start with irrefutable fact first,” Hermione suggested gently, “and then start … speculating?”

Luna smiled at her. “Fair enough. Daddy’s looking for the Crumple-Horned Snorcack at the moment anyway; he won’t be home.”

“All right then.” Hermione glanced over at where the boys were all huddled around the Map, sniggering at something. “Gentlemen? Are you coming?”

“Right behind you, ‘Mione,” Ron said, still chuckling.

Daphne sighed. “What’s so funny?”

“Theo’s stuck in a broom closet with Millicent Bulstrode,” Draco said.

Daphne’s mouth twitched. “He might be in there willingly.”

Draco’s grin widened. “That’s even better.”
“I’m sure Millicent is very nice,” Hermione said, a little dubiously. “Headlock-tendencies aside.” She climbed through the hole into a dark tunnel. “*Lumos.*”

“Not exactly a holiday destination, is it?” Susan muttered, waving her wand and conjuring lanterns for the walls.

Hermione carefully lit each one with the bluebell flames she’d mastered in first year. “Come on, then” she said. “That way.”

The ten moved along the passageway, creating lanterns as they went.

“Do you think this passageway will stay here, even when the entrance disappears with the room?” Ginny asked, slipping a hand into Draco’s.

He started, as he always did when she was spontaneously affectionate (or rather, more likely, when someone showed him spontaneous affection), but relaxed a split-second later, squeezing her fingers lightly.

“I don’t know,” Hermione admitted. “I think so.”

“I hope so,” Susan said. “Then we won’t have to do this every time.”

“Watch out,” Harry said sharply. “Dead end.”

They all pulled up short, staring at the solid stone in front of them.

“That can’t be right,” Draco said, frowning.

Harry tapped his wand against the wall, but nothing happened. “Maybe I made a mistake in the Room of Requirement.”

“Or maybe,” Hermione said, tapping her own wand against the wall, “you don’t know the right password. As blood heir of Rowena Ravenclaw, I request you reveal your secret.”

The ground shuddered and one of the stones on the floor rattled.

“Ah.” Hermione stepped on it and it sank into the ground slightly. A few seconds later, the floor began to slowly descend, like a huge elevator.

“It makes sense, really.” Susan said. “We were on the seventh floor and the Chamber’s all the way beneath the castle.”

“Why did that password work?” Cedric asked curiously.

Hermione shrugged. “It’s my castle, technically.”

“I thought Hogwarts was originally Gryffindor Castle,” Cedric said as they stopped, and the wall opened up in front of them.

“No, dear,” Rowena said. “Ravenclaw Castle. Close your mouth, Mr Diggory; you’re catching flies.”

“Cedric, this is Rowena Ravenclaw, my great-great-great grandmother,” Hermione said, smiling at Cedric, who had stopped dead, gaping in shock. “It’s not *that* weird.”

“It’s *very* weird,” Cedric said faintly, shaking the hand Rowena offered. “Lady Ravenclaw.”

“Call me Rowena, dear,” Rowena said. “The others should be along soon to help; it’d be nice to get
this place cleaned up a bit.”

“Good idea,” Susan said, drawing her wand. “C’mon, Daph, Luna.”

Neville joined them as well, as they began casing cleaning charms at the floor and the walls.

“Where’s my friend?” Salazar asked as he and Godric emerged from the shadows. “Esmerelda, I think you called her.”

“I had to leave her at home,” Harry said. “Snakes aren’t allowed in school.” He grinned. “Jen’s reaction was priceless though.”

“Well, there’s really no need to be concerned,” Hermione said logically, transfiguring one of the stones on the floor into a desk. “Esmerelda loves you; she can catch her own food, so they don’t need to feed her; she’s happier in the garden than in a cage; and she doesn’t bite.” She spread the Marauders Map out on the desk and surveyed it with a frown.

“Do you know how to do this?” Ginny asked curiously.

Hermione grimaced. “I know the theory.”

“So do I,” Draco agreed.

Hermione glanced at him. “Do you mind?”

“Not at all.”

The two waved their wands over the Map, chanting under their breath, and a ghostly copy of the Map rose from it and expanded, before attaching itself to the wall and becoming solid.

“Nice,” Harry commented.

“Thank you,” Hermione said absently. “We can work out a rota for when we’re not in class. I think it might be a good idea to get Addie to teach us that Patronus Charm.”

“We know the Patronus Charm,” Harry said, flicking his wand and causing Prongs to appear.

The ethereal stag looked around, fading into nothing when it didn’t find any danger.

“Show off,” Hermione said fondly. “I meant the variation of the charm the Order uses to communicate. I’m surprised they didn’t teach us over the summer.”

“They probably didn’t think about it,” Harry said. “We’ve got the mirrors after all, and they’re much quicker.”

“Yeah, but a Patronus would shut everyone up,” Ron said, “especially if we’re in the middle of dinner or something.”

“And we probably will be,” Draco said darkly. “If he attacks the school, he’ll want the optimum panic – which will be if everyone’s in the Great Hall when he bursts in.”

“Well, we’ll just have to burst his bubble, won’t we?” Hermione said.

“Can we get help from anywhere else?” Susan asked. “Probably not the Ministry, obviously.”

“The goblins will help,” Hermione said. “I’ve had that assurance.”
“The centaurs?” Susan asked.

Harry snorted. “Not likely. They’ve become more and more pissed off with humans since Firenze helped me in first year.”

“Yeah, I think we can count them out,” Hermione said. “The house-elves might help …”

“We can’t order them to die for us though,” Ron protested. “That’s not fair.”

Hermione stared at him for a second. “That’s … You … We …”

Luna appeared at her side, leaned in and planted a kiss on Ron’s mouth.

“Um, Luna?” Hermione asked, bewildered.

Luna pulled away, leaving Ron gaping at her. “Well, you couldn’t kiss him, Hermione. Harry wouldn’t be very happy.”

“I … wasn’t thinking about it,” Hermione said, turning to Harry.

Harry just shrugged. “She is right though.”

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September 7th 1997

A few days later, Addie was sitting in her office, checking over her lesson plans for the following day. Her necklace was warm against her chest and she smiled, wondering if Sirius’s mind was in the same place hers was. She would have to make a mirror call when she was done.

She tended to stay out of her private quarters until curfew it, in case any of her students needed her; her speech to all of her classes about her door always being open had not been an empty promise.

So far, there had been no reason for it, and she wasn’t surprised.

It would have taken her months to feel like she could talk to one of her teachers about anything personal, even Professor McGonagall.

Personally Addie felt that Hogwarts would benefit from having Heads of Houses that were not teachers so they were less intimidating, but Hogwarts had run this way for a thousand years; it was hardly likely to change now.

She had a feeling, though, that the first child to come to her would be one of the Muggle-borns, since they were more likely to have problems their parents couldn’t help with.

She was proved right, when a soft tap on the door signalled the arrival of Catherine Barter, who hovered in the doorway as though she was afraid the room would eat her.

“Good evening, Catherine,” Addie greeted with a smile. “You can come in, you know.” She only ever used last names in the classroom; it seemed to make her more approachable.

With a shy smile and a hint of a blush, Catherine trotted inside and took the seat on the other side of Addie’s desk. “Thank you Professor.”

Addie put aside her lesson plans and offered the girl a box of chocolate frogs. “How can I help?”
“Mum and Dad wrote this morning,” Catherine whispered, holding out a sheet of Muggle paper in a shaking hand.

Addie took his hesitantly and read it through, sending up a silent prayer that Mr and Mrs Barter weren’t ‘doing a Petunia’ as Lily had called it.

_Darling Catherine_

_We’re so glad you’re settling in at Hogwarts – we were a little worried about sending you to learn magic, so it’s good to hear that you’re happy._

_We had an interesting visit from Mr and Mrs Lupin the day you left. They explained to us all about the war and we’re a little worried. While we believe that you are safest where you are and trust in the measures they’ve put in place to protect us, we are concerned for your safety if you come home._

_So we’d like you to stay at school over Christmas, though we’ll miss you a lot. Keep in touch, sweetheart._

_Lots of love,_

_Mum and Dad_

Addie glanced up from the letter, just in time to see Catherine’s eyes fill with tears. “Dear, what …?”

“They don’t want me anymore,” Catherine sobbed, beginning to cry.

In a second, Addie had rounded her desk and pulled up a chair beside her. “Catherine, that’s not what’s happening.” She sent a quick non-verbal spell at the classroom door to close and lock it, and drew the girl into a hug. “Sweetheart, your parents are worried about you; they know you’re safest here and they want to make sure you’re safe. Why do you think they don’t want you?”

“M-My auntie says I’m a freak,” Catherine managed to tell her, through heaving sobs.

Once again, Addie found herself flashing back to her own time at Hogwarts, this time to first year, comforting a young redhead in front of the fire because her sister had sent her yet another awful letter.

“You know,” Addie said quietly, “when I was at Hogwarts, I was best friends with a girl named Lily. Her parents loved her very much, but her older sister, for some reason, hated her and would tell her things like that. And I’m going to tell you what I used to tell Lily: if she has a problem with your magic, it’s her loss, not yours.”

“What happened to her?” Catherine asked, her tears beginning to subside.

“Lily Evans was one of the brightest students in our year, and one of the most powerful witches of our generation,” Addie said with a smile. “She was Head Girl, married a wonderful man, and had a son who has done her and his father proud.” She conjured a tissue and gently wiped the girl’s tears away. “Your mum and dad love you – that’s all that matters. And, honestly – Christmas at Hogwarts is one of the most amazing things you will ever experience.”

Catherine smiled shakily. “I guess it would be interesting to have a magic Christmas.”
“That’s the spirit,” Addie said cheerfully. “With any luck, the whole thing will be over by the summer, and you’ll be safe.”

As the young Lion’s smile became wider and more genuine, Addie couldn’t help but worry that she was making promises she couldn’t keep.

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September 18th 1997

Several weeks in to the term, Harry, Hermione and their friends were almost swimming in homework, but Friday evening still found them waiting in the Room of Requirement.

“Are you sure you set the coins to the right date?” Draco asked, examining the books.

Hermione rolled her eyes, but she was spared from answering when the door opened and a whole army of people flooded in.

She and Harry exchanged a startled glance; there definitely had not been this many members before the summer.

When the door had closed behind the last stragglers – and the room had expanded to fit everyone in – Harry climbed onto a table and blew his whistle loudly, effectively getting everyone to shut up.

“Wow,” Harry said into the silence. “First of all, thanks for coming. Secondly, this is going to run a bit differently this year, because Professor McKinnon has the job down . . .”

“She’s been trapped with Death Eaters for fifteen years,” a voice said from the back of the room.

Harry sighed. “Eighteen years, actually,” he corrected quietly. “Professor McKinnon was a good friend of my parents. I have complete faith in her ability to teach and she taught me a few new tricks over the holidays, so trust me on that.” He cleared his throat. “Now this is not a story-telling class. If you’re here to hear about the graveyard or the fight at the Ministry, or whatever rumours you may have heard about other things I may or may not have done, then I suggest you leave now. No one’s going to think any less of you. I certainly won’t.”

No one was really that surprised when half the students filtered out, but it still left about sixty behind.

Hermione did a quick tally: all the seven years from Ravenclaw, Hufflepuff and Gryffindor, as well as all the sixth years from the latter two houses – and a few Ravens – and a handful of fifth years from all houses – Snakes included.

Harry nodded. “Okay, now we’re working on the basis that there might be an attack on the school. Hopefully, we’ll end up wasting our time, but I’m not taking chances. If you are not prepared to die for this cause, then please let yourselves out. Again, no one’s going to think any less of you.”

This time, no one moved.

“Brilliant.” Harry glanced at his girlfriend. “Hermione, could you?”

Hermione waved her wand at the door. “The charm I just cast is a Secrecy Charm,” she explained. “Nothing we don’t want repeated outside this room can be.”

“Where did you learn that?” One of the Ravenclaws asked eagerly.
Hermione just smiled. “Not important.” The answer was in Rowena’s journal, but she wasn’t about to reveal that.

It had another charm woven into it that meant Dumbledore couldn’t find out what was said during his daily mind rapes.

“It looks like Hermione’s going to have to produce some more of those coins, so we’ll give those out at the next meeting. We’re also give you each an emergency Portkey, which will automatically take you somewhere safe if you get knocked out. Obviously, we’ll ask you to keep them somewhere safe while you’re training, just in case there are any accidents.”

One of the Ravenclaw fifth years put her hand up.

“Yes?”

“Portkeys don’t work inside Hogwarts though,” she said a little nervously.

Harry gave her a kind smile. “You haven’t met my godmother.”

Once Addie had been able to take a proper look at the wards, and passed the details along through the mirror, it had been fairly easy for Jen to bypass them using the portkey spell. Amending a portkey so it was triggered by the wearer’s heart rate, blood pressure and breathing was a little more complicated, but not impossible.

“Now Harry lied a minute ago,” Draco said, “because this session is a story-telling one.”

“Why?” Zacharias Smith asked.

“Because there are things you need to know,” Ginny said, rolling her eyes. “That’s why.”

“Addie … er, Professor McKinnon,” Harry amended, sheepishly, “is perfectly capable of teaching Defence Against the Dark Arts, but I do not trust the Headmaster and you need to know,” he continued, raising his voice above the outraged muttering, “why that is.”

“You’re about to tell us everything, aren’t you?” Katie Bell asked quietly. “That’s why there’s a charm over the door.”

“Yes,” Harry answered simply, chairs popping up all over the room. “I am.”
September 19th 1997

“I’ve never seen a room at Hogwarts so quiet,” Neville commented the next morning, his eyes fixed on the sky.

“It was quite creepy,” Hermione agreed, twirling her wand absently. “Then again, we had just given them about twenty reasons not to trust Dumbledore.”

“Do you think it will make a difference?” Neville asked.

Hermione sighed. “I don’t know. I mean, people believed us, which is the main thing – but, let’s face it, no one interacts with Dumbledore anyway. He gives a speech at the beginning and the end of the terms and that’s it.” She winced as one of the prospective beaters missed the Bludger completely and fell of his broom. She waved her wand and the boy’s fall slowed, so he landed safely on the field. “We won’t really know until then, I don’t think.”

Ron flew down to land beside him and pulled him to his feet.

“This is going to be a long try-out,” Neville murmured.

“It already has been,” Hermione sighed. “We’ve had – what – a group of first years who looked surprised they could get off the ground; a group of girls who giggled so hard when the boys looked at them that they fell over; ten Hufflepuffs; two Ravenclaws; and we’ve only got the Chasers.”

The three Chasers in question – Katie Bell, Ginny Weasley, and a new girl called Demelza Robins – were sitting in the stands with Neville, Hermione, and the giggling girls from earlier – none of whom looked too unhappy that they hadn’t made the team and all of whom seemed perfectly content to watch Harry fly.

“It could be …” Neville began, but broke off with a sharp intake of breath that was echoed through the stands, along with a couple of screams, as another Beater managed to hit the Bludger so hard that it knocked Harry off his broom.

Hermione was out of her seat before anyone else could move, even as spell slowed Harry’s descent as well.

Racing out on to the pitch, she dropped down to her knees beside him. “Harry, are you alright?”

Harry blinked up at her a few times. “I think so.” He rubbed his head, grimacing.

“How many fingers am I holding up?” Hermione asked.

“Three,” Harry answered, glancing at her hand. “I’m fine.”

Jimmy Peakes – the third year who’d hit the Bludger – landed next to them. “Bloody hell … Sorry, Harry, I didn’t realise …”

Harry held up a hand to stop him, getting to his feet. “Drop the apologies; you’re on the team.”

“Oi, I thought I was captain!” Ron said good-humouredly as he touched down as well. “Nah, I’m with Harry, mate; that was a brilliant shot.”

“Just make sure you aim at the other team,” Harry joked.

“Look at it this way,” Ron said, seeing that Peakes still didn’t look convinced. “You just hit a Bludger at *Harry Potter*. The Slytherins aren’t going to be a problem. Now get back in the air; I want to see how you work with the others.”

Harry lingered on the ground as the other two took off again. “I’m sorry this is the way you’re spending your birthday, Hermione. I wasn’t expecting this to take so long.”

Hermione waved it off. “It’s fine. I don’t mind watching try-outs.”

Harry smiled at her. “Room of Requirement after dinner? Just the two of us?”

Hermione blushed, but nodded. “I’d like that.” She watched him pick up his Firebolt and brush it off. “Are you sure you’re alright?”

“I’m fine, Hermione;” Harry said. He mounted his broom, leaned over to kiss her, and took off again.

A strange noise came from the stands – it sounded like all the girls who’d turned up to watch Harry had tried to groan and coo at the same time.

Hermione ignored them; she knew Harry’s actions were for her and her along. And that meant more than he would ever realise.

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**October 5th 1997**

As September turned to October and the weather began to turn, Addie began to notice some worrying trends.

Students had begun to travel the castle in groups – in fact, the only time she ever saw anyone by themselves, they were purebloods.

It reminded her of her own school days – and not in a good way – when none of them would let Lily go anywhere alone; not because she was incapable, but because she would likely be outnumbered.

However, Addie could only take guesses at why this was – educated guesses, of course, but guesses nonetheless – until one October evening.

The evening meal had finished, so the school was in the comfortable place between dinner and curfew, when no one had any classes, and everyone had a lot of time to get into trouble.

Addie had been caught up in some paperwork, to the extent that she had missed dinner. When the growling of her stomach reminded her of this, rather than call a house-elf, she decided to wander down to the kitchens to get something to eat.

It was a decision that proved to be a good one.

Halfway between her office and the kitchens, Addie was alerted by the sound of a child crying, and the unmistakable sound of spells being fired.
Drawing her wand, Addie hurried towards the noise, finding, in an empty classroom, a young second-year huddled against the wall and three seventh years taking it in turns to fire curses at him.

“Expelliarmus!”

Three wands flew into the air and she caught them all easily, not lowering her wand.

“Prof-”

“I don’t want to hear it!” Addie said sharply.

A little whimper from the floor caught her attention, and she softened her tone, although didn’t take her eyes off his attackers. “You’re going to have to come with us, Jack, because I don’t want to send you off to the infirmary on your own.” She jerked her head towards the door. “Let’s go, boys.”

The three seventh years filed out ahead of her and Addie helped the young Hufflepuff to his feet, keeping him at her side.

She marched the three boys to Dumbledore’s office at wand-point, dropping their victim at the infirmary on the way.

Poppy had been absolutely horrified at the state of him, and demanded that Addie return afterwards to update her on the outcome.

Whether Dumbledore sensed Addie coming, or her magic unconsciously reached out, or Hogwarts just decided to help out, she didn’t know, but the gargoyle leapt aside immediately.

“Good evening, gentlemen, Professor McKinnon,” Dumbledore greeted when they entered. “Would you care for a …?”

“I just came across these three torturing a second-year,” Addie said, interrupting him. “I feel this is beyond my remit.”

The twinkle in Dumbledore’s eyes dimmed a little. “Is this true?”

The three seventh years nodded, doing an excellent job of pretending to be contrite.

“I shall inform Professor Snape that you have detention with him on Friday evening,” Dumbledore said, giving them a stern look over his glasses. “I am very disappointed.”

“Yes professor,” they muttered.

Addie’s mouth fell open as the boys filed out. She could already hear the sniggering on the stairs. “That’s it?”

“What do you mean, Addison?” Dumbledore asked, holding out a bowl. “Sherbert lemon?”

“No, I do not want a bloody sherbert lemon!” Addie snapped. “I want you to do something about the Death Eaters that just walked out of your office.”

“Now, Addison, let’s not get ahead of ourselves,” Dumbledore began.

“I’m not getting ahead of myself,” Addie said. “They were torturing a second year. Those were not spells we teach. They were Dark spells and, even if you excuse that maybe they didn’t know how bad they were, it doesn’t excuse the fact that they did it over and over again! That is Death Eater activity, Dark Mark or not.”

“This is out of my hands, Addison,” Dumbledore said. “The Department of Magical Law
Enforcement will not take action without proof and it is your word against theirs.”

“And since when does the DMLE not permit Pensieve memories as evidence?” Addie asked icily. “Even if that were the case, you could have given them more than one detention.”

“Andison, we must show them the path to redemption,” Dumbledore said. “If we ostracize them it will simply drive them further down the path of darkness; they are only children after all.”

“First of all, they are not children,” Addie said icily. “They are adults. Even if they were children, they have evil in their hearts. This is not going to stop.”

“Albus,” one of the portraits said suddenly. “Minerva is on her way up.”

Even with the split-second warning, Addie still jumped when the door flew open.

“Albus, there are two Muggle-born first years in the hospital wing – they’ve been attacked with Dark magic,” Minerva said, notably upset. “They’re too scared to tell me anything; something has to be done.”

“I wouldn’t bother if I were you, Minerva,” Addie said, glaring at Dumbledore. “I just caught three seventh years in the act and Albus won’t give them more than a detention.”

“They deserve a chance at redemption,” Dumbledore repeated.

“If they regretted it, yes they would,” Addie argued. “Even if they did regret it, their chance at redemption should not be at the cost of the safety of the students around them!”

“Addison, aren’t you being a little unfair?” Dumbledore asked. “After all, you and your friends were a little rambunctious at school.”

“Excuse me?” Minerva asked.

“Rambunctious?” Addie repeated. “We never hospitalised anyone, Albus! We never hurt anyone, not even the Marauders’ targeted pranks hurt anyone – they were purely designed to humiliate, and they knew exactly what they were doing. The only targeted pranks were at people we had caught torturing Muggle-borns because the staff wouldn’t do anything about it.”

“We couldn’t,” Minerva said reluctantly. “It was all hearsay.”

“I appreciate that, Minerva,” Addie said. “I had hoped a Professor catching someone in the act would hold more weight. I had hoped that the safety of the student body outweighed our need to indulge Death Eaters in their little games but clearly I was wrong.”

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October 29th 1997

Weeks passed and, before anyone knew what was happening, Halloween was approaching. Decorations were popping up all over the school and the older students were eagerly anticipating the upcoming Hogsmeade trip.

The celebrations were somewhat overshadowed, however, by the attacks on Muggle-born students. Thankfully, there had been no more since Addie’s confrontation with the Headmaster – the DA had taken to escorting Muggle-borns to and from classes, thereby thwarting any attacks that may have been planned.

The DA had also become a lot more sensitive to the fact that Halloween was not just the day Voldemort disappeared, but the day that Harry’s parents were killed – as far as they knew.

Although they tried not to treat him any differently, they also all made a conscious decision to not
make too much of a big deal about the holiday in his earshot.

This year, thankfully, Halloween fell on a Monday, which meant that Harry would be able to enjoy the Hogsmeade trip without thinking about it.

By now, Hermione paid no attention to the post owls’ entrance every morning. She didn’t even look up as the Daily Prophet landed in front of her, automatically dropping a couple of knuts in the pouch on the owl’s leg.

“I don’t know why you still pay for that crap,” Ron commented as she unrolled the paper. “I know the Ministry’s on our side now, or so they say, but they’re still not telling us anything.”

“I know,” Hermione said, running a cursory eye over the front page. “It’s the only five minutes in the day when I can pretend I have a normal life.”

Harry snorted into his porridge. “Normal? Hermione, you gave up all hopes of a normal life when you met me. And you’ve got a letter.”

That caught Hermione’s attention, and she suddenly realised a haughty-looking eagle owl was standing on the table next to her breakfast, one leg outstretched, perfectly balanced.

“Sorry,” Hermione said, removing the letter and offering the owl some bacon to make up for ignoring him.

He accepted with a dignified hoot and took off while she opened the letter. It had been wax-sealed, but not stamped with any kind of crest, and the handwriting inside was strangely familiar.

Miss Granger

I apologise for the late notice of this letter, but I debated for many weeks over whether or not I should write it – however, I must speak with you as soon as possible.

Would you please meet me at 12, at the Hog’s Head pub, today (29 Oct)?

I would prefer you come alone, although I understand that this is somewhat unwise in the current climate and that you may prefer not to do so. In this case, I request that your escort be someone you trust implicitly.

Sincerely

NBM

The initials sparked a memory – a folded piece of parchment shoved into her hand in a crowd – and she passed it across to Ginny, who read it with a slightly distant look in her eyes.

Hermione recognised the signs and looked over her shoulder at the Slytherin table, where Draco had stiffened. He looked up to meet her eyes, and nodded once.

“Is he coming?” Hermione asked, turning back to Ginny.

“No,” Ginny said, handing the note back. “Are you going alone?”
“No,” Harry answered for her.

“You don’t even know what we’re talking about,” Hermione said, nudging him with her shoulder.

“I don’t want anyone going anywhere alone today,” Harry said darkly, as he took the offered letter.

Hermione sighed, although couldn’t begrudge his paranoia, and silently asked Hogwarts if she sensed any danger in Hogsmeade. “Castle says it’s safe, Harry. Besides, I’d feel better if you stayed in the more crowded areas of the village.”

“Then take Cedric and Susan with you,” Harry suggested. “They can sit and have a drink, while you talk to her.”

Hermione had to admit that this was a good idea, and caught up with the two Hufflepuffs as they were about to leave for Hogsmeade.

Cedric was relieved, as it meant he didn’t have to spend the day avoiding Cho, who wouldn’t go anywhere near the Hog’s Head unless she had to, and wouldn’t think Cedric would either.

Apparently, Susan had been going to ‘help’ with this – although privately Hermione wondered if she had just interrupted a first date.

When they arrived at the pub, the bartender gave all three of them a long look, before jerking his head towards the staircase. “Room 8,” he grunted.

“Thank you.”

Casting a glance back at her classmates, who were ordering butterbeer, Hermione climbed the stairs with some trepidation.

Room 8 was the very last room at the end of a long corridor, the perfect place for an ambush, and she drew her wand before knocking.

“Come in.”

Hermione pushed the door open, her wand out, to see only Narcissa Malfoy present in the room, seated on a low couch by a coffee table laden with food.

“Madam Malfoy,” Hermione greeted courteously, letting the door close behind her.

“Miss Granger.” Narcissa’s eyes lingered on her wand. “I mean you no harm.”

“Given the circumstances and the times we’re living in,” Hermione said carefully, “and I mean no disrespect, I would feel better if you would take a witch’s oath to that effect.”

Narcissa smiled, drawing her wand. “Of course.”

As the magic flashed around them and her companion didn’t flinch, Hermione relaxed, stowing her wand away. “Can I assume half of that food is for me?”

Narcissa smiled at her, gesturing to the empty seat opposite her. “Of course, Miss Granger.”

“Hermione, please,” she said, taking a seat. “Miss Granger makes me feel like I’m in class.”

“Only if you call me Narcissa,” Draco’s mother said, pouring a cup of tea.
“Very well,” Hermione said, taking the cup. “Shall we discuss your concerns first?”

Narcissa’s mask slipped, fear entering her eyes. “Draco. Is he alright?”

“He’s fine,” Hermione said. “And he will remain that way; Jen didn’t spend all summer training him for no reason.”

“So she did have him,” Narcissa murmured. “Thank goodness. Is she alright?”

“She’s doing fine,” Hermione took a sip of her tea, gazing at her curiously. “I assume you know Occlumency?”

“Naturally,” Narcissa said. “And you can trust me.”

“I know,” Hermione said. “She got married.”

Surprise flashed in Narcissa’s eyes for only a split-second before it disappeared. “Remus Lupin, I presume.” A smile quirked on her face. “Has someone told Aunt Walburga’s portrait?”

“I have no idea,” Hermione said. “I’m sure we’ll hear about it when they do.”

Narcissa gave a rather un-ladylike snort. “Since I am aware that Jen would be unable to invite me to her wedding, but I am sure she would invite me to a funeral, I assume Sirius fares well?”

“Right again,” Hermione said. “Your son, actually. Hit him with a Malfoy family spell before he could fall through the veil. Left him magically exhausted, but he recovered fairly quickly.”

“Good,” Narcissa said. “You do realise, of course, it is only a matter of time before the Dark Lord frees Lucius and his fellows from Azkaban.”

“Of course we do,” Hermione said. “I’m amazed he hasn’t already. Unless you know something we don’t?”

Narcissa shook her head. “I am not Marked, Hermione. I know nothing unless Lucius himself tells me. And the Dark Lord is not – for obvious reasons – using the Manor as bolthole.” She set her cup aside and selected a sandwich, perfectly manicured fingers hovering over them in indecision for a brief moment. “As for why he has not already, he is likely biding his time so they suffer at least a little for their failure at the Ministry.”

“That sounds about right,” Hermione muttered.

“When Lucius does get out …” Narcissa began, but trailed off.

Hermione understood her concerns. “When was the last time you tried to access the Malfoy accounts?”

Narcissa frowned, seemingly taken aback by the question. “Not for a while. Why?”

“Draco took control of the family at the beginning of the summer,” Hermione explained. “The family magic allowed him to disown Lucius due to attempted line theft – he did nothing to stop the others trying to kill Draco at the Ministry.” She smiled. “There was a reason I was not addressing you as Lady Malfoy.”

“Forgive me,” Narcissa said. “I just assumed you were unaware. Clearly my cousin did give you some proper education.”
“Madam Longbottom, actually,” Hermione said. “It helped all of us really. Especially Harry. He had no idea about anything. But I digress. Jen has set up an account for you, but you can no longer access the Malfoy accounts. Draco didn’t want Lucius to do anything to hurt you.”

“It’s a bit late for that,” Narcissa murmured.

Hermione frowned. “Jen could dissolve the marriage, couldn’t she?”

“Jen won’t unless I ask that of her,” Narcissa said with a sigh. “And it will cause more problems than it solves right now. The main reason I wanted to speak to you today, Hermione, is … is there any way you can convince Draco to use his Slytherin self-preservation and keep out of this?”

“No,” Hermione answered honestly. “No, I won’t try to convince him, for a start. He knew the risks better than I did when he made the decision to actively take our side and it would do him a disservice by questioning that decision. And, no, it wouldn’t work even if I did. I’m sorry.”

Narcissa sighed. “I didn’t think so.”

“He’s an excellent dueller,” Hermione offered. “Really incredible.”

Narcissa smiled proudly, but this did not seem to settle her.

The two women finished their lunch and rose to their feet, Hermione slipping on her cloak as she did so. “Thank you for lunch.”

“My pleasure.” Narcissa held out her hand. “Thank you for meeting with me.”

“No at all,” Hermione said, shaking her hand. “I just hope that all of this gets resolved quickly.”

Narcissa sighed. “You may be pushing it there, my dear. Please tell Draco …” she hesitated, as if trying to encompass everything she wanted to say to her son into one simple message. “Tell him I’m proud of him.”

“Of course,” Hermione assured her. “Be safe.” She bobbed a little curtsey and let herself out of the room, making her way downstairs.

Susan caught her eye and she nodded, heading over to the bar. “Butterbeer please.”

The bartender retrieved a bottle from under the counter. “Tell me you don’t believe everything my idiot brother spouts.”

Hermione started, taking a closer look at him. His hair was grey instead of white, his beard much shorter, but there was no mistaking those eyes. “You’re …” She cut herself off before she could identify him, reaching out with her empathy. Satisfied, she said, “No, I don’t. I don’t trust him as far as I can throw him.”

Abeforth Dumbledore gave her a crooked smile. “That’s alright then. Because he’s a manipulative …”

“I know,” Hermione assured him. “I do.” She hesitated for a second, rooting through her purse under the pretence of counting out sickles. “We’re worried about the safety of the school, it there’s an attack. If we have to get the younger years out of the school – it’s just not practical to give everyone a portkey …”

“Say no more,” Abeforth told her. “If you can find a passageway, send them through here. I happen to know that godmother of Potter’s has somehow hidden herself from my brother. Get her to contact
me; we’ll get a floo connection set up.”

Hermione nodded, feeling a warm glow of relief. “Thank you.”

“There’s a fireplace in the room you were just in,” he continued. “That’ll do. And I can set up an apparition point in there.”

Hermione nodded, handing him the payment, before thanking him and joining Cedric and Susan at their table for a discussion about the upcoming Quidditch match.

***

While the Hogwarts students headed off for Hogsmeade, Addie had followed them, but as soon as she was outside the gates, she murmured the activation code for the Portkey.

She found herself landing on the sofa at Ravenscroft Manor, practically on Sirius’s lap. “Hello.”

Under his sister’s laughter, Sirius shook his head with a grin. “Well, that’s one hell of a landing.” He kissed her. “How’s school?”

Addie rolled her eyes, shifting so she was sitting beside him not on top of him. “Dumbledore’s driving me mad.”

“I’m not surprised,” Jen said, still giggling. “Hand it over and I’ll fix it so you don’t have to leave the grounds first.”

Addie handed her the necklace. “How’s your job going?”

“Very well,” Remus said. “We’ve spoken to all the families in Muggle areas that we could identify, so they’re all covered.”

“And so far,” Jen continued, handing the necklace back. “There haven’t been any problems.”

“No attacks yet?” Addie asked, surprised, lifting her hair to one side so Sirius could fasten the necklace for her. “I would’ve thought he’d consider those easy victories.”

“Well, there have been attacks,” Jen admitted. “But I’ve been getting warning letters – remember I told you about the Azkaban breakout last year? Amelia’s been able to send aurors to capture the Death Eaters before they can do anything.”

“How strange,” Addie murmured. “Snape?”

“Definitely not Snape’s handwriting,” Jen said. “On saying that, I don’t recognise the handwriting at all, and all the letters are addressed to Selena.”

“Which makes sense,” Remus said. “Whoever it is wouldn’t want to use your real name in case someone saw him or her sending a letter.”

“It does,” Jen conceded. “But not many people know my Marauder name. The charms took care of that.”

In an effort to keep their identity as the Marauders safe, Remus had found a nifty little charm that had allowed them all to use their nicknames at school all they liked without anyone ever paying attention to them or linking them to back to the mysterious pranksters.

“And we weren’t like you four,” Addie said. “We didn’t use our nicknames every five minutes.” She hesitated. “Look, I’m just going to say it – have we considered it could be Peter?”
Sirius let out a bark of humourless laughter. “Come on, Ads; he sold James and Lily out to save his own skin – is he really going to risk his neck to save some strangers?”

“Well, he’s the only one who would call Jen ‘Selena’,” Addie said. “Snape certainly wouldn’t. Not to mention: nothing about Voldemort’s resurrection made sense. Harry’s dreams saw Peter, right, so either Isabelle or someone else was using Polyjuice the entire time, or they switched right before the ritual. And if they switched right before the ritual, why Isabelle? She and Peter didn’t know each other.”

“There’s something else, now you mention it,” Remus said with a frown. “Trelawney made a prediction, end of Harry’s third year. She said that Voldemort would rise again and his servant would help him do it. Wormtail escaped that night – we all assumed it was him.”

“What were the exact words of the prophecy?” Addie asked.

“I’ve got it written down somewhere,” Jen said, waving her wand. “I dreamed it too.” A second later, a piece of parchment came flying down the stairs and into her outstretched hand. “It will happen tonight. 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 servant’s aid, greater and more terrible than ever he was. Tonight before midnight the servant will set out to rejoin his master...”

“Seems pretty damning to me,” Sirius said.

Addie frowned. “I don’t know …”

“Addie, Peter was the Secret Keeper,” Sirius said. “He was a Death Eater.”

“I’m not arguing with that, Padfoot,” Addie said, squeezing his hand gently. “But we established that Peter did not resurrect Voldemort, and I don’t think that prophecy said he would. It said that the Dark Lord would rise again with his servant’s aid – that could mean anything, not necessarily participating in the ritual.”

“She’s right,” Remus said. “But it must refer to Peter.”

“Actually, I don’t think it does,” Addie said. “I hate to play devil’s advocate, but … This was June, right?”

“That’s right,” Jen confirmed. “Why?”

“Twelve years,” Addie said simply. “By that point, it was closer to thirteen years since Peter had been living as a rat. Were there any other Death Eaters on the grounds?”

“No,” Sirius answered, but Jen was staring at the parchment.

“Yes,” she whispered. “Buckbeack was going to be executed. Macnair was there. Remus, how long had he been working for the Ministry?”

“He was caught sometime after Halloween,” Remus said, taking her hand. Before she and Sirius had run away, she had been betrothed to Walden Macnair; even after the betrothal had broken, she had had to go out of her way to avoid him, until James and Sirius had taken things in hand. “Claimed Imperius, obviously, and ended up working for the Ministry, so I would say about …”

“Twelve years,” Addie finished. “Would a Death Eater pretending to be reformed and having to abide by the Ministry’s rules, however corrupt, consider themselves ‘chained’?”
“Maybe,” Jen said slowly, “but there’s still …”

But no one found out what else there was, because at that moment an owl swooped through the window and dropped a note on Jen’s lap, before swooping right back out again.

It was addressed to Selena once again, and inside were just two words.

)(_Azkaban. Hurry._)

Jen swore, leaping to her feet, and sending off an immediate Patronus to Amelia. “He’s going after Azkaban; I’ll meet you there.”

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Addie did not want to leave before Jen returned, so she stayed in the reception room, watching Sirius and Remus, trying to play chess and failing, as neither of them was concentrating.

Not another word had been said about Peter.

After a while, Augusta came down to join them. When she heard why Jen had left, she took a seat and waited with them.

Finally, the floo alarm went off and Jen stepped through, looking ten years older.

“We were too late,” she said flatly. “The prisoners have escaped, the Dementors have joined Voldemort and ten aurors lost their souls.”

Sirius looked up sharply. “Anyone we know?”

“Proudfoot and Stubbins,” Jen said tiredly, sitting beside Remus and resting her head on his shoulder. “I didn’t recognise the other names.”

_Sorry for shutting you out, love._

_It’s fine._ Remus brushed a kiss against her forehead. _I’d rather you not get distracted._

Sirius was frowning. “All the prisoners?”

“Few minor security ones were still there ironically,” Jen said tiredly. “I guess they weren’t worth his time.”

Addie glanced at the clock and sighed, but before she could speak, an alarm began blaring through the room.

Sirius frowned. “Is that the ward alarms for Potter Manor?”

“Someone just portkeyed in,” Jen said, getting to her feet again.

“Jen, do you want me to go?” Addie asked.

“No, they’ll know me,” Jen said. “I hope.” She stepped into the fireplace again and flooed to Potter Manor.

The only Portkeys that could enter through the wards were the ones that she herself had charmed, and she was very prudent with their distribution, but she drew her wand just the same.
The visitors – if she could call them that – were found in the living room, the woman sobbing hysterically over the man lying on the floor, bleeding from a wound in his stomach, and twitching in a way that told her that a Cruciatus Curse had been administered.

Jen cursed, recognising the couple as Catherine Barter’s parents. Whether her spy was Peter or not, they had finally slipped up.
October 29th 1997

“Crap,” Jen muttered, healing the wound instantly. “Winky!”

The house-elf appeared in an instant. “Yes, Mistress Jennifer?”

“Could you fetch me a Calming Draught and anti-Cruciatus potion please, and then inform Miss Amelia that there’s been a Death Eater attack on a Muggle-born’s parents, but I don’t think there are any casualties.”

“Certainly, Mistress Jennifer.” Winky vanished, returned with the potions, and disappeared once again.

Jen hooked the anti-Cruciatus onto her belt; it would probably be easier to get it down his throat once his wife had calmed down. “Mrs Barter?”

“Nathan,” Mrs Barter whimpered, shaking her husband desperately. “Nathan, please …”

“Mrs Barter,” Jen repeated, more firmly. “Meredith, I need you to look at me.”

The use of her first name seemed to cut through her panic, and the woman looked up, anguish in her eyes. “Mrs Lupin …?”

“That’s right,” Jen said quietly. “He’s just unconscious.”

“He was screaming …” Meredith whispered.

Jen shivered involuntarily. “I know.” She uncapped the vial in her hand and held it out. “Here – it’s a Calming Draught. It’ll make you feel better.”

Meredith gulped down the potion and the colour slowly seeped back into her cheeks. “You’re right.”

Jen gave her a small smile. “No need to sound so surprised.” She waved her wand over the unconscious man between them. “Enervate.”

Nathan Barter’s eyes slowly opened and he groaned in pain.

“Mr Barter?” Jen called quietly. “My name’s Jennifer Lupin; do you remember me?”

He gave a slight nod, his eyes a little unfocused.

“Allright, that’s a good start.” Jen pulled the vial from her belt. “This is a potion that will help with the side-effects of the curse.”

Thankfully, he was lucid enough to follow her instructions and the potion worked quickly. Jen was able to help him to his feet and sit him down on one of the sofas.

“Was there any one else in the house?” Jen asked.

“No one,” Meredith answered, sounding much better now her husband was conscious again. “It was just us and then …”

“Did you get a good look at them?” Jen asked. “I mean, I’m going to guess that they were wearing
black and wearing white masks, so no help there, but was there anything unusual that stuck out?”

Meredith was quiet for a few moments, but there seemed to be no sign of distress, so Jen let her think.

“There was one,” she said finally, after a few minutes. “She was quite short and very fat, and … she had the most peculiar voice. Like a little girl.”

Jen raised an eyebrow. “Did it sound like she was talking to very young children?”

“Yes,” Meredith answered. “Do you know her?”

“Dolores Umbridge,” Jen said, shaking her head. “That … doesn’t surprise me, to be honest.”

“We can’t go home again,” Meredith said softly. “Can we?”

“If your home is still in one piece, I’ll be surprised,” Jen said with a sigh. “I would also suggest that you find a way to take leave from work and stay here until it’s over. I’m sorry.”

“Sorry?” Nathan repeated weakly. “You saved our lives – if you hadn’t visited us, they’d have murdered us in our own home!”

Meredith gripped his hand tightly. “That spell … The one they used on Nathan – Catherine won’t learn that one, will she?”

“I should hope not,” Jen said with a scowl. “She’ll learn of it, eventually. The Cruciatus Curse is one of the three Unforgivable Curses. Use of one of those against another human being is an automatic life sentence.”

“It hurt like hell,” Nathan muttered.

“I know,” Jen said. “I’ve been under it a time or two. Are you still in pain?”

“No,” Nathan answered. “I’m tired, but it doesn’t hurt anymore.”

Jen sighed in relief. “Good. You weren’t under it for too long then. The fatigue is expected, but a good night’s rest and you’ll be right as rain in the morning.”

“Are they all like that?” Meredith asked. “The people who attacked us?”

“Unfortunately,” Jen admitted. “And we’ve had another major blow today: a lot of his more powerful supporters were in prison and there’s been a breakout. On top of that, we lost ten good fighters on our side.”

“We want to help,” Meredith said firmly, her husband nodding in agreement.

Jen sighed again, this time in resignation. “I wish you could – we certainly need all the help we can get – but …”

“Maybe they can.”

Meredith screamed, Nathan jumped, and Jen rolled her eyes. “They can’t if you give them a heart attack, Padfoot.”

Addie swatted him over the head. “Honestly, you’re as bad as the children.” She stepped into the room, drawing the Muggles’ attention away from the ‘wanted mass-murderer’. “Good evening, Mr and Mrs Barter; I’m Professor McKinnon, Catherine’s Defence Against the Dark Arts teacher.”
The name clearly rang a bell, because Meredith’s face lit up in a smile, clearly over the sudden shock. “It’s wonderful to meet you, Professor; Catherine thinks the world of you.”

Addie smiled, blushing a little. “Well, I’m flattered she thinks so highly of me. I apologise for the shock, I would imagine that Jen wanted to explain under slightly more relaxed circumstances. You probably remember Sirius from the news a few years ago; essentially, he was framed and never given a trial.”

“Is that usual for the Wizarding World?” Nathan asked, horrified.

“It’s not supposed to be,” Jen said, not wanting to get into politics right now. “All the same, it happened.”

“And we are going to fix it,” Remus added from behind him. “As soon as the Ministry get their heads out of their …”

“Thank you!” Jen interrupted. “That’s quite enough. You remember my husband?”

“Of course,” Meredith said, giving him a shaky smile.

“Now, what do you mean; maybe they can help?” Jen asked Sirius. “They can’t do magic.”

“No,” Sirius agreed. “But you don’t need magic to research or prepare potions ingredients. It’s not much, but it would be a help.”

“Man’s got a point,” Remus said.

Jen thought of a moment. “We do need to stock up on pain-relievers … and it’s so expensive to buy them … I could use some help …”

Remus frowned. “You said you were fine when I asked.”

Sirius sniggered. “That’s because you’ve always been terrible at potions.”

Remus scowled at him. “Have not.”

“Have too.”

“Have not.”

“Have too.”

“Mutt.”

“Wolf.”

“Mangy mutt.”

“I am not mangy!”

Addie rolled her eyes. “Just ignore them.” She advised the Muggles quietly. “They’ll forget what they’re fighting about sooner or later.”

“Do they … get along?” Meredith asked tentatively.

Jen almost laughed, but then realised that their playful bickering could be mistaken for something else entirely. You would need to be blind to miss that Sirius and Jen were related, after all, and even
people at school had assumed that Jen dating Remus would cause him and Sirius to hate each other immediately.

Not that Sirius hadn’t had his overprotective moments.

“They’re best friends,” Addie explained. “This is … normal.”

“As normal as they get, anyway,” Jen added. “Out of interest, why did the Dark Mark Detectors not go off?”

“They probably did,” Meredith admitted. “We were in the back garden, and they were in the hallway.”

“Need to talk to the twins about making them a bit more portable,” Addie said, flicking her wand.

One of the cushions flew off the sofa and hit first Sirius, then Remus on the head. “Boys, knock it off!”

“Sorry Shadow,” they chanted.

“Where are we?” Nathan asked, looking around now the potion had taken full effect.

“Potter Manor,” Jen answered, “the ancestral home of the Earl and Countess of Richmond.”

Nathan’s expression was almost enough to make Jen burst out laughing, were it not for the fact that she wanted him to realise she was telling the truth.

“I thought there was only a Duke of Richmond,” Meredith said, frowning.

“In the Muggle world, certainly,” Jen said. “James’s ancestor was granted the title long before the Norman conquest. And, yes, before you ask, the current monarchy do still recognise it and, yes, they know about magic. As does the prime minister.”

“And how did you end up access to it?” Meredith asked curiously.

“Well, I’m not the Countess of Richmond, if that’s what you mean,” Jen said with a laugh. “I am currently Baroness Blackmoor by proxy until we get Sirius’s name cleared. I think we’re the only remaining titles still recognised by the Muggle monarchy – am I right, Padfoot?”

Sirius thought for a second. “I think so. The only remaining Ancient and Noble families are the four founding families, but since three of the bloodlines got lost and Slytherin’s practically bred themselves into obscurity, I think they ‘died out’ in the Muggle world.”

“The newer pureblood families, once they amass a certain amount of age and wealth, are granted a seat on the Wizengamot,” Addie continued. “Kind of like your House of Lords. However, that title is not recognised in the Muggle world. But to answer your original question, Mrs Barter, since Jen seems to have forgotten it, the current Earl and Countess of Richmond are James and Lily Potter, the parents of Harry Potter, who is our godson.” She glanced at the clock and jumped to her feet. “I’ll have to love and leave you, Jen; I’ve got to get back to the school. Try and stop the Ministry sending the letter to Catherine, alright?”

“Why?” Sirius asked, kissing his girlfriend goodbye.

Addie smiled. “I’ve got Gryffindor and Hufflepuff first years before lunch on Monday; I can tell her in person then.”
Daphne and Draco hadn’t gone to Hogsmeade, and Ginny had stayed with them in the Room of Requirements, working on some homework and trying to distract Draco from what his mother might be up to.

Almost as soon as the first students started arriving back from Hogsmeade, the other seven joined them, Ron looking very excited.

“Zonko’s has closed,” he announced as soon as the door shut behind them.

“You’re joking,” Daphne said.

“I’m not,” Ron said grinning. “Guess who are buying the premises.”

Draco raised an eyebrow. “Already? Diagon Alley must be going well.”

“They’ve got a lot of investors,” Ron said, jerking a head at Harry.

“Hey, I do what Gringotts advises me to do,” Harry said. “Not because they’re family.”

“How did it go at the Hog’s Head?” Ginny asked.

Everyone, including the two Hufflepuffs turned to Hermione, who shrugged.

“It went fine.”

“What did she want?” Ginny asked, when it looked like Draco wouldn’t.

“Oh, the obvious,” Hermione said. “To know if Draco was alright. To know what would happen when Lucius gets out of Azkaban – Voldemort’s planning a break-out. To know if Draco would fall back on Slytherin self-preservation and sit this one out.”

Draco rolled his eyes. “Not going to happen.”

“I know,” Hermione said with a smile. “She says she’s proud of you.”

Draco nodded impassively, but Ginny took his hand and squeezed it softly, betraying his thoughts.

“And what about the barman?” Cedric asked. “You talked to him for quite a while.”

“Harry, where’s the mirror?” Hermione asked in response. “I’d rather not repeat myself.”

Harry rooted in his pockets for a second and handed it over. “Here.”

“Thanks.” Hermione said. “Selena.”

The mirror shimmered for a second, and Jen’s face appeared, looking rather drawn. “Hermione. Did something happen in Hogsmeade?”

“Not exactly,” Hermione said, frowning. “Are you okay?”

“You first,” Jen said.

“Well, Narcissa sent me a message asking me to meet her at the Hogs Head,” Hermione said.

Sirius’s face popped up next to Jen’s. “Hermione …”
“Yes, Dad, I was careful,” Hermione said automatically. “She thinks there’s going to be a break-out from Azkaban. I thought you ought to know.”

Jen sighed. “Well, thank you for the warning, sweetheart, but it’s a little late. I’m sure you’ll read all about it in the paper tomorrow. What else happened?”

“I’d rather hear about Azkaban,” Hermione said, eyes wide. “There’s been a break-out?”

At this, the other nine students huddled around her.

“Are you somewhere private?” Jen asked.

“Room of Requirement,” Hermione answered.

“Alright then,” Jen said. “Yes, there’s been a break-out. Although whether you can call it a break-out when the only prisoners left are the petty crooks, and ten of the auror guards are soulless, I don’t know – no one you know,” she added hastily. “Couple Sirius and I worked with back in the day,” “Jen, I’m so sorry,” Susan said. “Is there anything we can do?”

“Keep your eyes and ears open,” Jen said, “and stay safe. What else happened in Hogsmeade?”

Hermione wasn’t convinced Jen was telling them everything, but Jen very rarely withheld information, and never without a good reason, so she let it go. “Well, I met the barman of the Hog’s Head.”

“Oh good,” Sirius said, grinning. “Abe always hated Albus, never could figure out why.”

“Well, he says if you contact him, he can help with a way to get the younger years out of the castle if we need to evacuate,” Hermione said. “We’d just need to get the kids to the Hog’s Head.”

“How?” Sirius asked. “You can’t send them all through Honeydukes – someone would notice.”

“No, but we can ask the Room of Requirement for a passageway, I’d imagine,” Hermione said. “It gave us another passage to the Chamber of Secrets. Who’s watching the Map at the moment?”

“Dobby,” Daphne answered. “We all wanted to be here when you got back.”

“Well, if you can open up a passageway, brilliant,” Jen said. “I’ll talk to Abe tomorrow – I don’t want to give them all a portkey if I can help it.”


“Talk to Addie on Tuesday,” Jen said. “She needs to talk to everyone else involved first; best you don’t know until then.”

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October 31st 1997

The news of the Death Eater’s escape had sent a shiver of fear running through the school and the corridors suddenly became much quieter. Although there were some students who dealt with the fear by pulling pranks and cracking jokes, any laughter was quickly stifled, as though it would act like a
beacon for Dark wizards.

Even those students who followed those teachings kept their heads down.

Addie wasn’t too worried about the sudden change in the students. Aside from the fact that everyone was suddenly working a lot harder in her lessons, she’d seen all this happen before. She knew that it wouldn’t be long before the students realised that Voldemort wasn’t about to come bursting through the front doors just yet.

Catching hold of her thoughts before they could wander any further, she glanced at the clock, realising as she did that she was just about to make the first years late for lunch – and none of them had said a word.

“Okay, everyone; wands and quills away. For homework, I want five alternatives to the Shield Charm, magical or otherwise. I don’t care how it’s done – essay, list, practical demonstration if you’re feeling really brave; whatever you feel comfortable with. Class dismissed. Catherine, could you stay behind for a few minutes please?”

While she gathered her papers together, Addie watched out of the corner of her eye as Catherine said goodbye to her friends and walked slowly towards her desk. “Come on, you’re not in trouble.”

The young Lion followed her teacher up the stairs to the office and took the seat in front of the desk. “What’s wrong, Professor?”

Addie gave her a smile and moved her chair round to the front of the desk as well. “Catherine, do you remember what I taught you about Death Eaters?”

Catherine nodded. “They’re Voldemort’s followers.”

Addie couldn’t help the way her smile widened. Whether it was because of her own influence, or the admiration the young girl had for Harry and Hermione, she didn’t know, but Catherine had never had a problem with using Riddle’s name. “Exactly. On Saturday, evening, they attacked your house. Your parents are fine,” she added hastily, when the girl turned horribly pale. “Harry’s godmother, Jennifer, had given them an emergency Portkey, which took them to a safe-house.”

Catherine’s voice shook a little. “Do they hate me now?”

“No, they don’t hate you,” Addie said. “In fact, they’re going to help Jen prepare all the healing potions we’re going to need.”

“And they’re both okay?” Catherine repeated, sounding calmer.

Addie nodded. “You should’ve had a letter yesterday telling you all this, but I didn’t want to you find out through a letter.”

Catherine nodded, her eyes downcast. “I suppose that means I can’t go home at all, can I?”

“And actually, it means the opposite,” Addie said gently. “Your parents are now completely safe, behind very strong wards, which means it will be safe for you to spend Christmas with us.”

“Us?” Catherine repeated, the light returning to her eyes.

Addie smiled at her. “Yes, us. Jen happens to be one of my best friends, so I’ll be there over Christmas as well. Now …” she stood up and moved her chair back behind her desk with a flick of her wand. “I think it’s time we went to lunch. This doesn’t mean you can get out of homework.”
“No, Professor,” Catherine said, beaming. “Thank you, Professor.”

Addie chuckled fondly, as she followed the young girl out of her office, making sure to keep her in sight. She wasn’t supposed to have favourites, as a teacher, but Catherine was fast becoming one of hers.

***

December 12th 1997

Just as Addie was becoming fond of Catherine, Sirius, Jen and Remus had found themselves ‘adopting’ Nathan and Meredith Barter into the family.

Nathan – a surgeon – spent a lot of time with Remus, who patiently explained different aspects of the wizarding world, and Sirius, who was happy to show him his bike; Nathan was particularly interested in how it had been ‘altered’ to allow it to fly.

He had taken leave from work, concerned that the Death Eaters would take their escape personally, and potentially endanger the hospital. Since he now had extra time on his hands, he was helping with the search for the island James and Lily were trapped on.

Meredith – a former nurse and pharmacy tech turned housewife – spent most of her time with Jen, who talked her through the art of potion-brewing. Without magic, Meredith couldn’t actually do any of the brewing but she did have a degree in chemistry – which was a similar process – so proved very helpful with ingredient preparation.

“Jen?” She asked one day, as Christmas drew nearer. “When we were taken to Diagon Alley to get Catherine’s school things, there wasn’t anything that looked familiar. But this house has a lot of Muggle technology it, albeit about twenty years old. How is that possible?”

“Well, Muggle technology is a bit difficult,” Jen answered. “First of all, magic doesn’t like electricity which means we need to charm things to work, which we’re not supposed to do in case it falls into the hands of actual Muggles.”

“Would we notice the difference though?” Meredith asked.

“Well, no,” Jen admitted. “But some would charm them to do things that they wouldn’t normally, so it’s safer just to ban all of it.”

“But Sirius’s bike flies,” Meredith said.

“There are ways around it,” Jen said. “Sirius’s bike is covered in runes that act in the same way as Muggle-Repelling Charms. You two can see it because he lets you. Other Muggles just wouldn’t notice it, and they wouldn’t ever go near it. Now the items in this house are slightly different. Lily Potter is Muggle-born, which of course is why there are Muggle items here. As for the rest of the wizarding world …” she sighed. “Even those who don’t believe that Muggles are beneath us believe they couldn’t possibly have come up with anything useful. When the Statute of Secrecy was invoked, we were miles ahead of them. Then we dug our heels in and remained oblivious. Most pureblood wizards wouldn’t have a clue what to do when confronted with a light switch. Or Muggle money, for that matter.”

“But …” Meredith frowned. “You said there are only a handful of villages that are solely magical, so witches and wizards must spend time in the Muggle world sometimes. How doesn’t that raise suspicions if they can’t blend in?”
“Personally, I agree with you,” Jen said. “They do teach Muggle Studies at Hogwarts, but it’s an elective and it’s at least a century out of date. Changing it at the moment, however, just isn’t possible. It’s on my to-do list for when we win. In the meantime, the majority of purebloods don’t need to enter the Muggle world at all. You’ve seen our transportation – their homes are extensively warded, they shop in magical villages and they work in magical buildings – or not at all, if they can afford to.”

“Afford to?” Meredith repeated.

“Many of the pureblood families have enough money not to work,” Jen explained. “James and Lily, for example, both worked, but they certainly didn’t need to. They could have just managed the Potter accounts, and their great-great-grandchildren could still not work their whole lives and have money left over.”

Meredith frowned. “Are there purebloods that do that, then?”

“Oh yes,” Jen said. “Usually the men. The women … Merlin only knows what they do.”

“Look after the house?” Meredith suggested. “Magical housewives must have it much easier.”

“Sometimes,” Jen conceded. “You can’t transfigure or conjure food, so cooking isn’t any faster, but most of the richer families have house-elves for things like that, anyway.” She stopped rummaging through the store cupboard. “Dobby?”

Dobby appeared with a crack. “Yes Miss Jennifer?”

“Do we have any newt’s eyes?”

“No, Miss Jennifer,” Dobby answered. “You is running out last week.”

“Bother,” Jen sighed, rooting in her pocket. She handed him two galleons. “Can you go to the apothecary and get me two pounds please?”

“Certainly Miss Jennifer.” Dobby took the money and disappeared again.

“That,” Jen said calmly, “is a house elf. If you wait until Christmas, I’m sure Hermione would be more than happy to explain exactly what they are and why they don’t want payment. Well, Dobby does, but Winky absolutely refuses. Dobby is just rather strange. Lovely. But strange nonetheless.”

“But if they don’t get paid,” Meredith said, “why is it only the richer families that have them?”

“Because you still have to buy one normally,” Jen answered. “Most of the elves who don’t have a family are on their own because they’re disobedient. Honestly, most of them end up at Hogwarts.”

“So if the house-elves do all the housework, so what do the housewives do?” Meredith asked.

Jen shrugged. “Sit around and look pretty, I guess. Remus and I didn’t have one when we left Hogwarts. I’ve got more than enough on my hands now. Lily stopped working when she fell pregnant, but then she looked after the Potter accounts, since James was working, and anyway she insisted on doing the cooking.”

“I suppose the house-elves are the reason I can’t find the kitchen in this place?” Meredith asked, smiling.

“That would be why,” Jen said, casting a Stasis Charm on the potion. “Can’t do any more with that
at the moment. Come on, I’ll show you.”

She led Meredith out of the potions lab – or rather, the room she had commandeered as a potions lab – and led her down the stairs and into the ballroom.

The ballroom itself was impressive – even more so than the one at Ravenscroft, since Potter Manor was the ancestral home – with high, cathedral-style ceilings that didn’t appear to be possible, given the fact that there was a library directly above them.

Jen headed straight to the back of the room, running a finger down an almost invisible seam on the wall.

A section of the wall slid away to reveal a dark passageway and Jen gestured for Meredith to follow her.

“It’s alright,” she said cheerfully. “Nothing’s going to bite.”

Even though she had learned to enjoy cooking while she was a Muggle, Jen had yet to enter the kitchen at Potter Manor, and nostalgia hit her harder than she expected.

She half-expected to round the corner to find Lily playfully bickering with the house-elves about the Mistress of the House cooking.

Instead, she just found Winky in the middle of dinner preparations.

“Mistress Jennifer!” Winky squeaked in surprise. “Is Winky doing something wrong? Winky will …”

“No!” Jen said hastily. “No, Winky, you haven’t done anything wrong. Mrs Barter was wondering about household spells and I thought I’d show her the kitchen.”

Meredith was staring around her in shock. “It’s huge! It’s as big as the ballroom!”

“Well, the Potters held a lot of functions,” Jen explained. “After all, they would need to be able to feed as many people as could fit in the ballroom. That was Lily’s corner, over there.” She pointed to a corner of the kitchen where the appliances were a little more Muggle – at least in appearance. “She used to bake all the time. She did it more when they moved to the cottage – I was never there when the cottage didn’t smell of cookies or bread or …”

Meredith put a gentle hand on her arm. “You miss her.”

Jen nodded. “I know she’s okay, but … I hope she’s okay.”

Hermione hadn’t seen Lily since September – at least, not that Jen was aware – so they were working from old information.

They could only hope that it was still true.

To try and distract her from her morbid thoughts, Jen showed Meredith a couple of simple household charms, but she had a feeling that there was something else she was wondering about.

“So what would a witch do,” Meredith said slowly, “if she thought she might be pregnant?”

Jen smiled. “Do you?”

Meredith nodded nervously. “I mean, it’s stupid – Catherine’s not an only child by choice, and it’s
“It’s not stupid,” Jen said, before the other woman could get too wound up. “You’re around a lot of very old magic; it wouldn’t be out of the question for it to give you a helping hand so to speak. There is actually a simple spell, and it would work on Muggles. I wave my wand over your stomach and a grey mist appears. Then you blow on it and it changes colour – pink for positive, blue for negative.”

“Not pink for a girl, blue for a boy?” Meredith asked, looking a little apprehensive through her smile.

“No, this spell is far older than current gender segregation,” Jen said with a grin. “Tell you what, why don’t I test me first?”

Meredith nodded, looking more than a little relieved, and Jen waved her wand over her own stomach.

The grey mist appeared, hovering in the air in front of her, and Jen blew on it softly.

The mist shimmered for a moment, then turned a bright, brilliant pink.
I have now finished writing The Last Stand (!) so there should be a fairly regular stream of updates from here on out - I am aiming for every Sunday. If we get to Monday, London time, and I haven't posted - please feel free to remind me.

For a few minutes, Jen just stared at the pink mist. When it did nothing but hang there, she swiped her wand through it and repeated the test.

Once again, the mist turned pink.

“Are you alright?” Meredith asked.

“I don’t know,” Jen said faintly. “I mean … we’ve been …”

“Careful?” Meredith finished. “Is magical contraception more effective than Muggle contraception?”

“Well, I assumed it was,” Jen said. “Obviously not. I mean … we’re in a war, and it’s hardly the best time, and …” she could feel the smile spreading across her face. “And I’m going to have a baby.”

“There it is!” Meredith said with a laugh. “Alright then?”

Jen nodded, grinning. “Very alright. Okay, you ready?”

Meredith nodded, her humour disappearing beneath nerves, and Jen repeated the spell.

Once again, the mist turned pink, and Meredith started crying.

A box of tissues and some chairs appeared, and Jen sat her down, wrapping an arm around her. “Are you alright?”

“I’m alright,” Meredith said, taking one of the tissues. “I never wanted Catherine to be an only child and I’m not getting any younger and I really thought it would never happen!”

Eventually, the shock wore off, and Meredith excused herself to go and tell her husband, which prompted Jen to do the same.

*Remus, love, where are you?*

*I’m in the library. What’s wrong?*

Jen smiled. As soon as the pink mist had appeared, she had carefully shielded her thoughts, which she rarely did, so his concern was unsurprising. *Nothing. Stay there; I’ll come to you.*

She would have to get Sirius to carry on with the potions, until she was sure there was no risk to the baby. Contrary to popular belief, her brother was quite a skilled potions maker.

He was nowhere near as good as Mandy (or Snape, loathed though she was to admit it), but he had
enough talent to handle pain relievers.

She found Remus in one of the small study rooms in the middle of the library, rather predictably half-buried in books, and she stood in the doorway, watching him for a few minutes.

Their research was split between searching for the location of Rowena’s diadem and searching for James and Lily. Originally, their plan had been to delve into the life of Tom Marvolo Riddle, but Dumbledore had done them the huge favour of treating Hermione and Jen to his life story before Obliviating them.

Besides, since they only had two Horcruxes left and they knew what they were, his life story was unlikely to help.

Remus waved his wand at a world map on the wall. It flashed once, but nothing else happened.

“Dammit,” Remus muttered. “Jen, you know I don’t like people watching over my shoulder.”

“Technically speaking, I’m too far away for that,” Jen said with a smirk, finally entering the room. “Take a break, sweetheart. We need to talk.”

“Those words never bode well,” Remus said, putting his quill down. “What’s wrong?”

“Nothing,” Jen said with a smile, taking a seat on the small loveseat in the corner. “Come on. Any luck finding Lily and James?”

“None,” Remus sighed, coming over to join her. “It’s like this place doesn’t exist.”

“We’ll get there,” Jen said, kissing him softly. “We have to.”

“I know,” Remus said, taking her hand. “What did you want to talk about?”

Jen took a deep breath. “I’m pregnant.”

He stared at her for a few seconds. “How?”

Jen rolled her eyes. “Come on; you don’t really need me to answer that.” Aside from the initial surprise, he wasn’t letting anything through the bond, and it was starting to worry her. “You are happy, aren’t you?”

“Of course,” Remus said, attempting a smile “It’s just that …”

“I know we weren’t planning on it,” Jen said, shifting to allow him to get up and start pacing. “I know the timing is really terrible and we’re in the middle of a war and we said that James and Lily were mad when we found out they were having Harry and that makes us complete hypocrites …”

“That’s not what I’m worried about,” Remus interrupted. “I mean, yes, it does make us hypocrites, but I’m a werewolf, Jen …”

“I hadn’t noticed,” Jen said dryly. “Remus, there’s really no need to worry about that. We’ve never slipped up on a full moon.”

“Harry’s third year,” Remus said.

Jen rolled her eyes. “I said we haven’t, not you haven’t.”

“And that’s not what I meant either,” Remus continued. “What if the baby’s a werewolf?”
“They won’t be,” Jen said quietly. “They will probably be a carrier, yes, but lycanthropy only passes through birth if both parents are carriers.”

“You could be a carrier,” Remus whispered. “There’s no reason why you couldn’t.”

“Aside from the fact that the only way to become a carrier is to be a child of a werewolf,” Jen pointed out dryly. “Now take a look at my family and tell me the odds of that happening and me still being in a line that hadn’t been disowned and disavowed.”

Remus chuckled, visibly relaxing. “Yeah, I suppose you’re right. How far along are you?”

“I don’t know,” Jen admitted, standing up. “The only reason I even tested myself was to demonstrate the spell to Meredith – I could be a couple of days, or it could be months and I’ve had an easy time of it.” She ran a hand over her stomach, frowning. “Actually … I think it’s more likely to be the latter. I hadn’t really noticed, but … I think I’m starting to show. I thought I was just putting on weight, but it feels too firm for that.” She took his hand and pulled it to her stomach, showing him the tiny bump just above her pelvis.

“Have you made an appointment with St Mungo’s?” Remus asked.

“No yet,” Jen said. “And I’m not sure that’s a good idea. Amelia’s still wading through paperwork; technically, this baby’s illegal.”

“What about a Muggle hospital?” Remus suggested. “You can use Jessica’s name and address; Dobby’s picking the mail up anyway.”

“Could do,” Jen said. “But then there’s Meredith to consider. I was showing her the spell for a reason; she’s pregnant too. The Death Eaters could have gone two ways – “who cares if a couple of Muggles got away” or “they got away and they must pay for it”. It might not even be safe for her to go to a Muggle hospital.”

“Well, there is a third option,” Remus said. “Would Andie agree to home visits?”

“Always,” Jen said. “That’s almost definitely the safest option.”

Remus nodded, a wide smile breaking out onto his face, and he pulled her closer and kissed her, one hand still caressing her stomach. **We’re having a baby, Jen. I love you so much.***

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**December 18th 1997**

Finally, the Christmas holidays arrived. The ground was covered in a blanket of snow, Peeves had started singing Christmas carols with alternative lyrics (half taught by the Marauders, half by the Weasley twins), and the Great Hall was adorned with holly and Christmas trees and (real) fairy lights.

Unfortunately for Harry, he ended the term by being summoned to Dumbledore’s office.

Not really wanting to open hostilities (yet), he went alone, letting just enough through his Occlumency shields to make Dumbledore think they didn’t exist.

“Harry, my boy!” He greeted. “Sit down. Sherbet lemon?”

Harry smiled politely. “No, thank you, Professor.”
Dumbledore peered at him over the bowl of sweets. “Harry, you didn’t put your name down on the list to stay over Christmas.”

Harry managed to look politely puzzled. “No, Professor. I’m going home for Christmas. To Jen and Remus, I mean. I’ve never had a proper Christmas with a family before.”

Dumbledore smiled sadly at him. “I understand that Harry, but I must insist you stay at Hogwarts over Christmas. I have no doubt Remus and Jennifer mean well, but your safety is of the utmost importance.”

“No, sir, I mean. I understand.” Harry pushed a pleading note into his voice. “There must be some extra wards you could put up, aren’t there?”

If he hadn’t been looking for it, he’d have missed the way Dumbledore seemed to swell up a little, the same way Percy had every time his job had been mentioned during fourth year, and Harry knew that the subtle compliment had worked.

“Maybe the Hat was right about Slytherin.”

“T’ll have a look at that, my boy,” Dumbledore said. “But I’m sure we can find some way for them to visit.”

Harry pulled a face. “Terribly. Professor, do I …?”

“Yes, Harry,” Dumbledore said firmly. “It’s very important that you learn to close your mind.”

Harry sighed, slumping in his chair. “Alright, sir.”

“Now, off your trot,” Dumbledore said, “and remember what I said.”

“I will, sir,” Harry said. “I promise I won’t floo home for Christmas.” He let himself out of the office and made his way towards the Defence Against the Dark Arts classroom, where Addie had just about given up trying to keep the second years’ minds on work.

The best part was, he mused, leaning against the door-frame, he hadn’t lied.

The Occlumency part of the ‘lessons’ was going terribly – because it wasn’t happening. He spent the time in Snape’s office doing homework and getting Snape’s input on the castle’s defence plan.

“One more time!” Addie called over the noise. “Shield Charms on three!”

“Come on, Professor!” One of the students groaned. “We’re going home tomorrow; we’re not going to need them any time soon.”

Harry smirked, pushing away from the doorframe, and raised his wand. “Rictusempra.”

The boy in question fell to the ground, laughing hysterically, and the other students all fell silent.

Addie narrowed her eyes. “Mr Potter, I’ll thank you to refrain from jinxing students in my class.”

“Sorry, Professor,” Harry said, not missing the amusement in her eyes. “You know, if he’d had a Shield Charm up, I’d be the one laughing. Finite Incantatem.” He offered a hand to the no-longer-laughing student on the floor, who took it with an awestruck expression.
“You’re Harry Potter,” he whispered as he was pulled to his feet.

“I know,” Harry said, ignoring the whispers that erupted around them.

“But I couldn’t have stopped you!” The Hufflepuff burst out. “You’re a hero!”

Harry rolled his eyes. “I’ve just been in the right place at the right time.”

“Or the wrong place at the wrong time,” Addie said.

Harry grinned at her for a second, before turning back to the kid in front of him. “What’s your name?”

“John,” he said excitedly. “John Burrows.”

“Alright, John,” Harry said. “Let’s see if you can show the rest of the class what a real Shield Charm looks like.”

“Harry, don’t scare him,” Addie cautioned.

“Who’s scaring him?” Harry asked. “Either he ends up laughing hysterically, or I do.”

Addie sighed. “Alright, then. On your own head, be it.”

“I’m just another student, John,” Harry said quietly, seeing his hesitation. “If you don’t think you can stop me, you can’t stop anyone. Ready?”

John looked pale, but nodded, drawing his wand. “Ready.”

Harry lifted his wand. “Rictusempra.”

“Protego!”

The shield that erupted between them caused Harry’s jinx to rebound and hit him square in the chest, knocking him off his feet.

While Harry began laughing, Addie broke into a smile. “Well done, Mr Burrows. Twenty points to Hufflepuff.” With a wave of her wand, she removed the jinx on Harry.

Still chuckling he got to his feet. “That was fantastic. I can normally dodge the backlash, but I couldn’t do anything about that one.” He held out a hand and shook John’s firmly. “Good job, kid.”

“On that note,” Addie said, over the mutterings of the class, “you’re all dismissed. Have a lovely Christmas.”

The class trooped out amidst congratulations and Christmas wishes. Once they had gone, Addie closed the door with another wave of her wand, leaning against her desk. “You’re a good teacher, Harry. How’s the DA going?”

Harry pulled a face. “We need to change the name. I’m not happy leading a group called ‘Dumbledore’s Army.’”

“I meant the actual club itself,” Addie said. “But now you mention it, how’s that going?”

“Well, people are still reeling from everything I’ve told them,” Harry said. “So we’re taking it one step at a time.”
Addie began clearing her desk. “Was there a reason you interrupted my class?”

“Yeah,” Harry said. “Dumbledore doesn’t want me to go home. I promised I wouldn’t floo home – and Draco and Daphne can’t exactly be seen flooing to the Burrow …”

“My office,” Addie said. “Tomorrow morning.”

Harry grinned at her. “Thanks, Addie. I love loopholes.”

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**December 19th 1997**

The next morning, Hermione hung back with the Muggle-borns who were returning home, waiting for everyone else to floo from the fireplace in McGonagall’s office.

Hermione never saw the point of Muggle-borns flooing home for Christmas, when they would just end up on the platform anyway, but it was ‘tradition’.

The only time the floo was not used was if the floo network at Hogwarts had been cut off for some reason.

Finally, she was the only one left who knew what she was doing. She left Catherine at the back of the line and offered the floo powder to the first student. “Take a pinch and throw it into the flames. Once they turn green, step into them and say ‘Platform Nine-and-Three-Quarters’ nice and clearly.”

He nodded, looking determined, and followed her instructions, the fire whisking him away.

Once he’d made the trip successfully, the line moved quickly and soon Catherine and Hermione were the only two left.

“Now, Catherine, you need to do the same thing, but say ‘The Burrow’,” Hermione said quietly. “Got it?”

Catherine nodded, throwing the powder into the flames. “The Burrow!”

“Have you ever thought of teaching, Miss Granger?” McGonagall asked.

Hermione chuckled. “I don’t think that’s a good idea, Professor. I catch on to things too quickly; I can’t always explain every step of understanding something. The only reason I can help with this is because I’ve been there. Have a nice Christmas, Professor.”

“You as well, Hermione.”

Hermione threw a pinch of powder into the fire and stepped in after it. “The Burrow!”

Emerald green swirled around her and she stepped forwards, stumbling into the Weasleys’ kitchen.

A hand snagged her under the arm before she could hit the floor. “Careful, Mya!”

“Could’ve been a Seeker with those reflexes,” Hermione joked, brushing the soot from her clothes.

“Are we expecting anyone else?” Fred asked.

“No,” Hermione answered. “Neville, Susan and Luna all flooed to their homes. Amelia and Augusta will take them on from there, and Luna’s spending Christmas with her dad. This is Catherine Barter,
Gryffindor first year. Catherine, this is Fred and George Weasley, former Gryffindors and pranksters extraordinaire.” She narrowed her eyes at them “Be nice to her.”

“Mya, we’re …”

“… always nice.”

“Hello, Catherine; I’m Fred …”

“… and I’m George.”

Hermione rolled her eyes. “It’s the other way round.”

Fred gaped at her. “How’d you know?”

Hermione smirked. “Like I’d tell you!”

“Are you the people who own Weasleys’ Wizard Wheezes in Diagon Alley?” Catherine asked shyly.

“We are indeed!” George said cheerfully. “Are you ready?”

“Fred and George are going to apparate us to where we need to go,” Hermione said. “Take George’s arm and hold on tight.”

“Does it hurt?” Catherine asked, doing as she was told.

“Not at all,” George said. “You might be a tad uncomfortable, but it’ll be over in a pinch. One, two, three …”

With a loud crack, the disappeared.

Fred bowed to Hermione. “M’lady?”

Hermione took his arm with a smile. “Thank you.”

Fred twisted away from her and she tightened her grip, feeling the horrible, squeezing sensation of apparition.

“I hate doing that,” she muttered, when it stopped.

Fred chuckled. “Yeah, it’s not the nicest way to travel, is it? It gets better when you do it yourself.”

“If you say so,” Hermione said as they crossed the wards.

They caught up with George and Catherine, who had stopped dead, gaping at Potter Manor.

“It’s beautiful!”

“Yeah, it is,” Hermione said fondly. “Come on.” She led the way up the pathway to the house and tapped the door handle with her wand, pushing it open. “We’re home!”

On either side of the entrance hall were two large, sweeping staircases, which led up to a balcony that doubled as a corridor, linking one side of the house to the other. The banisters were adorned with green wreaths, decorated with baubles and fairy lights, and, right in the middle of the hall, stood a huge Christmas tree.
“Wow …” Catherine whispered. “Are those fairy lights?”

“Sort of,” Hermione said. “They’re the same as the ones at Hogwarts – they’re real fairies.”

Catherine’s mouth dropped open and she gaped at the tree for a few minutes.

“That’s exactly how we reacted,” an unfamiliar female voice said from the family room doorway.

Catherine turned towards it, her face lighting up. “Mum!” She ran into her mother’s open arms and hugged her tightly.

Meredith clung to her daughter for a few minutes, but did not release her, even as she extended a hand to the three behind her. “How do you do; I’m Meredith Barter.”

“Hello, Mrs Barter,” Hermione said, shaking her hand. “I’m Hermione Granger. And this is Fred and George Weasley.”

“Ah yes,” Meredith said with a smile. “I’ve heard a lot about you two.”

“Relax,” Hermione said in an undertone. “Only about fifty percent of the rumours are true. Trick is, figuring out which fifty.”

Meredith laughed. “Well, I’ve only heard good, so I’m not too worried.” She shuffled her daughter to one side, allowing Hermione to slip past her into the family room.

Sirius stood up in time to catch her, hugging her tightly. “Welcome home, Kitten. Good term?”

Hermione nodded. “It was very educational.”

“In more way than one, I’m guessing,” Jen said, standing up to hug her as well.

“Of course.” Hermione gave her aunt an extra squeeze, letting her shields down just a little.

Yes, she was definitely hugging two people – and not just because of the soul bond.

Still, it was not her place to say anything, and she was instantly distracted by the two women sitting on the sofa. “Angie! Alicia!”

The former Chasers greeted Hermione happily.

“Boys get you here alright then?” Angelina asked. “They brought us over so we could talk to Jen about some new products.”

“Where’s Harry?” Alicia asked.

Jen frowned “Where is Harry?”

“Bloody hell,” Sirius muttered. “Did you change the portkey, Jen?”

“No,” Jen said. “Only to let her through the Hogwarts wards.”

“But I landed in Ravenscroft last time,” Addie said, kissing Sirius hello. “Where exactly does the
Portkey take me?"

"I told you," Jen said with a smirk. "It takes you home. I was expecting Draco and Daphne, but Harry?"

"Dumbledore didn’t want me home for Christmas," Harry explained. "I promised him I wouldn’t floo." He smirked. "I never said anything about a Portkey."

Jen shook her head. "You sneaky little Slytherin," she said, without heat. "I’m impressed."

"You’re a bad influence, Jen," Sirius said, grinning.

Jen pulled a face at him and tugged Harry into a hug. "How are you, sweetheart?"

"Tired," Harry muttered. "And mad at Dumbledore."

"Well, we’re all that." Jen released him, holding him at arms’ length and looking him over. "Still, at least you look better than every other time you’ve come home."

"That’s because no one’s tried to kill me yet," Harry said, before catching sight of the two women standing with his girlfriend. "Well, look what the twins dragged in!"

Angelina and Alicia both embraced him, kissing a cheek each. "You’ve replaced us then."

"Ron replaced you," Harry said. "Ginny Weasley and Demelza Robbins. They don’t work quite as well with Katie as you used to, but we won our first game, so we’ll make do."

Jen shook her head, stepping over to greet Addie.

Once she’d been hugged and Jen was speaking to Daphne, Addie glanced over at Hermione, who nodded.

"Thanks for the advice, Jen," Alicia called across the room. "We’ve got to get back to the shop."

"Of course," Jen said, waving them off. "See you later. Now, Catherine. Welcome to Potter Manor; I’m Jen, Harry’s godmother."

As Jen and the Barter led Catherine out of the room so they could show the young girl where she’d be staying, Addie caught sight of Sirius nodding towards the door.

Leaving the kids to chat amongst themselves, she followed him back out the front door and round the side of the house, into the part of the garden James’s mother, Emily, had so carefully cultivated. After her death, the house-elves had continued to maintain it.

It had taken a while, but Dobby and Winky had managed to restore it to its former glory. Sirius led her through the raised flowerbeds to a cobbled path that led to a fountain that spilled over into a small fishpond.

A charm on the area made sure the water never froze and small golden fish ventured to the surface every now and then, before darting back into warmer depths.

It was snowing, which was unusual for Hampshire, even in December, but Addie was fairly sure that the wards had been altered to make sure that the Potter family always had a white Christmas, just as she was fairly sure that the Quidditch pitch would be completely snow-free.

"It’s beautiful out here," Addie said.
“Aunt Emily loved her garden,” Sirius said, leading her over to the bench beside the pond. “But I didn’t bring you out here to look at the scenery.”

Addie chuckled. “No, I didn’t think you did. Is there a reason you wanted me in the cold?”

It wasn’t that cold out there – probably due to the wards again – but Sirius wrapped an arm around her shoulders anyway. “Do I need an excuse to want to see you? I don’t like being away from you, you know that.”

Addie bit her lip, then finally asked the question that had been bothering her for over eighteen years. “Is that why you came to visit me during the Easter break in seventh year?”

Sirius smiled. “Funny you should mention that. I was just thinking I should probably tell you.”

Addie waited, her heart beating a little faster. Ever since Sirius had appeared in the doorway of her bedroom, trying desperately to keep her from fading away in front of his eyes – literally – she had wondered if she had imagined him.

Once Lily had confirmed that he had been there, she had wondered why.

“Well?” She said, after a few minutes. “What was it?”

Sirius took a deep breath. “I wanted to talk to your father.”

Addie frowned. Certainly her father had liked Sirius well enough, but she couldn’t think of a single thing they would need to talk about. “My father?”

“I had a question,” Sirius said, looking at her intently. “A very important question I had to ask him.”

“A …” Addie froze, as the meaning of his words suddenly registered. “Oh, Sirius … You mean you were …”

“Yes. Yes, I was.”

It hadn’t crossed her mind.

Crazy, perhaps.

After all, Sirius had never made a secret of how he felt about her.

“When?” She asked curiously.

“Does it matter?” Sirius asked. “Graduation.”

Addie rolled her eyes. “In front of everyone, no doubt.”

“Hey, Lily agreed it was a good plan,” Sirius protested. “She was going to shoehorn it into her Head Girl speech and everything.” He fell silent for a few minutes. “What do you think he would have said?”

Addie frowned. “My father?”

Now it was Sirius’s turn to roll his eyes. “No, Merlin. Of course your father.”

“He would have said yes, Sirius,” Addie said. “He liked you.”

Sirius nodded. “Good to know.”
Addie waited, her heart still beating somewhere in her throat. “Don’t you want to know whether I
would have said yes?”

Sirius shrugged. “Not really.”

“Oh,” Addie managed to say, her throat closing up. “Well, if that’s all …”
He let her shrug off the arm around her shoulders, but caught her arm gently. “I’m not really
interested in whether you would have said yes. I’m more interested in whether you still will.”

Addie froze, sinking back on to the bench. “Oh my God.”

Sirius smiled at her, pulling a small box from his pocket. “Addie, I have been in love with you since
before I knew what that word meant. You make every day shine just by smiling. The moment you
first let me hold you … I never wanted to let you go. I never want to let you go. You are my light …
my strength … I thought losing you was the hardest thing I would ever experience, until I had to live
without you.” He released her arm to cup her face, wiping away the tears she hadn’t realised were
falling. “Addison Marlene McKinnon, will you marry me?”
December 20th 1997

Harry’s favourite part of Potter Manor was the Quidditch pitch in the grounds behind the house. It was a replica of the one at Hogwarts and was charmed so that, no matter the weather, it was warm enough to fly.

That part was added by James’s parents, when they realised that nothing – not even pneumonia – would stop their son from flying.

So Jen knew exactly where to look the next morning when Meredith informed her that all the ‘kids’ seemed to have disappeared.

“We’ve never been back here,” Nathan commented, as they reached the gate.

“Did Sirius tell you about Quidditch?” Jen asked in response.


“This is where they play it,” Jen said, letting them in.

As they stepped onto the field, shedding jackets and cloaks in the sudden warmth, Harry suddenly plummeted towards them, pulling out of the dive just in time for his feet to skim the grass.

“Sonorus. HARRY POTTER, IF YOU EVER DO SOMETHING LIKE THAT WITHOUT PROFESSIONAL TRAINING, I WILL LITERALLY GROUND YOU UNTIL YOU ARE SEVENTEEN.” Jen removed the charm and calmly placed her wand back in her pocket. “Sorry about that; Harry seems intent on giving me a heart attack every time he gets on a broom.

Harry landed in front of them, looking sheepish. “Sorry, Jen.”

“Where’s Catherine?” Nathan asked.

“Down with Hermione.” Harry pointed to the other end of the pitch, where a small figure on a broom was flying slow circles. “Strictly speaking, it takes Muggle-borns longer to get used to flying, and Mione hates heights anyway. I found a Cleansweep in the shed, Jen, is that okay?”

Jen nodded. “Good beginner broom. She’s better off on that than the school brooms.”

“What’s wrong with the school brooms?” Meredith asked. “And what’s a Cleansweep?”

“The school brooms are very old,” Jen said. “Hell, I think they used them with us when we went to Hogwarts. The enchantments on them are fading and they’re very unreliable, but they’re expensive to replace. Brooms are like cars in the wizarding world; there’s lots of different companies and models: the Cleansweep, the Comet, the Nimbus and the Firebolt.”

“The Firebolt and the Nimbus are more professional,” Harry added, flicking a speck of dust from the handle. “Whereas the Cleansweep and the Comet are steadier brooms. There are others, but those are the main four on the market today.”

Meredith watched Catherine circling Hermione. “Is it safe?”
“She’s not high up,” Harry assured her. “And if I know Hermione, she’s put a Cushioning Charm on the ground. Even if Catherine does fall, she’ll bounce.”

“I meant in general,” Meredith said.

Harry shrugged. “Depends who’s flying. There are no seatbelts, so you can fall off, but it’s a matter of experience. Like the dive I just did – if Catherine tried that now, she’d crash or fall off, which is why she’s not going to. The only reason Jen hates me doing it is because I cut it so close.”

Meredith still looked worried.

“Harry,” Jen said suddenly, “why don’t you give Mrs Barter a ride?”

“If she likes,” Harry said, holding the broom out.

“Is it safe for the baby?” Meredith asked.

“Absolutely,” Jen said. “Harry will go slow, won’t you?”

“Well, I wasn’t about to turn into a rollercoaster, Jen,” Harry said chuckling.

Apparently reassured, and looking a little excited, Meredith accepted Harry’s hand and mounted the broom.

“All flying brooms have charms on them,” Harry said. “Otherwise, no one would ever ride them. Ready?”

Meredith nodded, and he kicked off from the ground, making the ascent far slower than he normally would.

“You sure she’s safe up there?” Nathan asked.

Jen chuckled. “Harry’s only ever had one accident and that was under very extreme circumstances, none of which are about to be repeated.”

After a few laps around the pitch, Harry returned Meredith to the ground, promising to take her flying again later, before he and Draco managed to coax Daphne and Susan (who had arrived with Neville from Potter Manor that morning) into a pick-up game.

Neville was adamant that his feet were staying firmly on the ground, so he was sitting watching Catherine with Hermione.

It was at this time that Sirius and Addie joined them, hand in hand and both grinning like Cheshire Kneazles.

“Oh, Addie, I’m glad you’re up,” Jen said by way of greeting. “I know it’s a bit depressing, but would you and Hermione mind having a proper look at Frank and Alice?”

Addie sucked in a shaky breath. She’d only visited her former room-mate once in the summer; out of all the Gryffindor girls, she had been the closest to Alice at school (although she was sure that had changed after the attack) and it had been a very draining experience. “Any particular reason?”
“Hermione is almost certain they can be reached,” Jen explained, “but the mind healers have had no luck. You two might have a better chance of it.”

Addie nodded, tucking her hair behind her ear, the sunlight glinting off the engagement ring that now adorned her left hand. “Okay.”

“I’m in,” Hermione said, approaching them. “James told me,” she explained pointing to the empty space beside her.

“Of course,” Jen said. “I really wish you wouldn’t spoil my fun, Prongs.”

Hermione sniggered, but didn’t repeat his reply, something everyone was grateful for. “I haven’t told Neville – I don’t want to get his hopes up.”

“Good idea,” Jen said. “Good luck.”

“Thanks,” Addie muttered, as they headed back towards the house.

“Not looking forward to this?” Hermione asked.

“Not in the slightest,” Addie said. She glanced over at Hermione as they approached the door. “You were rather quiet last night. Are you okay with me and Sirius …?”

“Oh, of course!” Hermione said hastily. “I was just a bit tired last night, that’s all. And there were a lot of emotions in the room.”

“Does that hurt?” Addie asked curiously.

“Sometimes,” Hermione said. “Negative emotions do. They were all positive last night – they don’t hurt, but they are draining.”

“Will you be alright today?” Addie asked.

“I’ll be fine,” Hermione said. “I promise to tell you if I’m not.”

The two women fell silent, until they reached the Potter Manor’s reception room, where the floo fireplace was.

“Do I need to call you Mum now?” Hermione asked.

Addie smiled, a little wistfully. “You can call me whatever you like, Hermione. I just don’t want you to feel like things are going to change or have to change.”

Hermione didn’t miss the sadness that floated in the air between them. “Am I right about Jen?”

“If you’re thinking what I’m thinking,” Addie said, “then I believe so.”

“Are you alright?” Hermione asked.

Addie gave her a searching look and smiled. “Absolutely. I think I get to be godmother this time.”

Hermione wasn’t convinced, but then it had been a rather personal question.

When they reached the wing of Ravenscroft Manor set aside for the Longbottoms, Augusta and Amelia were chatting over a cup of tea.

“Good morning, Addie, Hermione,” Amelia greeted. “What can we do for you?”
“I was hoping to visit with Alice and Frank,” Addie said, her voice only shaking a little. “We want to see if we can get through to them.”

“It’s up to you,” Hermione added. “We won’t if you don’t want us to.”

“Well, what’s the worst that can happen?” Augusta asked. “Nothing, that’s what. It certainly can’t hurt.”

“I agree,” Amelia said. “Do you need us in there with you?”

“I don’t think so,” Addie said. “But stay close please.” She led Hermione into the bedroom that had become a hospital and shut and locked the door behind them. “Silencing Charm?”

“Might be a good idea,” Hermione said quietly.

Addie flicked her wand again and turned to the Longbottoms. “Both of them?”

Hermione expanded her empathy again, touching first on Alice, who was standing at the window, staring at the enchanted scenery, and then Frank, who was lying quietly on his bed, staring at the ceiling, as he had every other time she had seen him. “I’m certainly getting emotions from both of them. He’s not as relaxed as he looks. It’s almost like they’re both in the same state, but they’re handling it in different ways. Who do we try first?”

“Alice,” Addie said firmly. “I knew her better. When one wakes up without the other, they’ll be upset and worried. I can keep her calm.”

Hermione nodded and approached Alice slowly, putting a gentle hand on her shoulder. “Alice? Will you come and sit down please?”

Alice turned to look at her with unseeing eyes, but yielded to the gentle pressure with no protest, returning to her bed and lying down.

“That’s it,” Addie said soothingly. “It’s alright, sweetheart; this isn’t going to hurt. You first, Hermione.”

Hermione took a deep breath and plunged into Alice’s mind.

Unlike any other mind she had been in (only to check Occlumency shields), she landed in darkness, seconds before Addie appeared beside her. “Which way do we go?”

Addie glanced behind them. “Well, it’s just black that way.”

“It’s just black this way as well though,” Hermione said.

“No,” Addie said, reaching out. Her hand passed through the air, catching little tendrils of black smoke. “It’s Dark magic. This is why. The Healers get in this far and decide there’s nothing here.”

“Well, there isn’t,” Hermione said. “Is there?”

“This is incorporeal,” Addie said, “and it can’t hurt us here. The Healers might not have been able to get through, to be fair to them, but we can.” She took Hermione’s hand and they walked together, straight through the wall of Dark magic.

It was like walking through a wall of Dementors, but it let them pass through unharmed and they emerged into a dimly lit hallway.
For the first time, there were signs of life – soft piano music floated out of a room up ahead.

“Come on,” Addie said, tugging on her hand, and they quickened their pace, emerging in a brightly lit nursery, where a young woman was slumped beside a crib, clutching a child’s blanket and sobbing into it.

“Alice?” Addie called.

The woman froze, lifting her tear-stained face, an incredulous expression in her eyes. “Addie? But … but you’re dead … you can’t …” She rose to her feet, drawing her wand from her pocket. “Who are you?!?”

“You know who I am, Ally,” Addie said softly, holding her empty hands up. “But if you insist. My name is Addison Marlene McKinnon, daughter of Adam and Marlene McKinnon, sister of Leona McKinnon. I shared a dormitory with you at Hogwarts until Christmas of our sixth year, when I moved into the next room. Along with some of our classmates, I became an Animagus in my fourth year, taking the form of a large, golden dog, favouring a grim. You nicknamed me Shadow because of my ability to blend into the darkness despite my light colour, and insisted on saying ‘I told you so’ a lot when I started dating Sirius.”

Alice stared at her, her wand shaking in her hand. “Addie?”

“It’s me, Alice,” Addie said. “Why don’t we put the wand down before someone gets hurt?”

Alice lowered her wand, looking at Hermione. “And who are you?”

“Hermione Granger, Mrs Longbottom,” Hermione said. “I’m Annabelle’s sister.”


“You were attacked, Alice,” Addie said gently. “Do you remember?”

“I remember … Pain … A lot of pain …” Alice’s gaze returned to the crib and she crumbled once more. “My baby … I couldn’t save my baby …”

“Alice, Neville’s fine,” Addie said. “I promise.”

“But he’s not here!” Alice protested.

“That’s because we’re in your head, sweets,” Addie said, pulling Alice to her feet again. “You’ve been trapped in your head for over sixteen years. I imagine you don’t want to make it seventeen?”

“Has it … Has it been that long?” Alice whispered. “Neville …”

“He’s alright,” Hermione repeated. “Why don’t we go and see him?”

“How?” Alice asked. “There’s no way out.”

“We’ll help you,” Addie said. “I’m a Natural, remember? So’s Hermione. Trust me?” She began to walk backwards, gently tugging on Alice’s hands as she did. “Come on.”

Slowly, Alice allowed them to lead her out of the room and in to the corridor, only to stop dead when she saw the wall of Dark magic in front of them. “They did that?”

“They did,” Addie said. “We’re going to have to take it down.”
Alice began shaking her head. “I don’t know how.”

“Patronus Charm,” Hermione said, the answer popping into her head. “Pure Light magic.”

It took Alice a few tries, but a silvery tiger was soon crouched beside them. It took one look at the Dark magic and gave a silent roar, leaping at the wall and beginning to tear it apart.

Addie and Hermione helped urge it along, untangling some of the tendrils that floated towards them.

Finally, their path was clear, but still led into darkness.

“Come on,” Addie said again. “Keep walking. I’m going to disappear in a few minutes, honey; stay with Hermione and follow my voice.”

As the hallway got darker and darker around them, Addie caught Hermione’s eye and nodded, before vanishing entirely.

Hermione caught Alice’s arm before she could run back. “It’s alright, Mrs Longbottom. Just listen.”

“Alice? Alice, sweetheart, can you hear me?”

“Can you hear her?” Hermione asked.

Alice nodded, staring into the inky black in front of them. “She’s in there.”

“Just keep walking towards her voice,” Hermione said. “I can’t go any further with you. Keep going. Neville needs his mum.”

At the mention of her son, Alice stiffened and nodded, striding into the darkness with a determination Hermione hadn’t expected.

When she was barely visible, Hermione closed her eyes and pulled out of Alice’s head, returning to the bedroom at Ravenscroft.

Addie was leaning over the bed, calling her name softly. “Alice?”

“My turn,” Hermione said quietly.

Addie nodded, turning into the large golden dog that so favoured Padfoot and sitting at her feet.

Hermione took her place, taking Alice’s hand. “Mrs Longbottom? Can you open your eyes for me?”

She held her breath as Alice opened her eyes, but this time, there was no vacancy in her gaze.

“What happened?” She asked quietly. “Where am I? Who are you?”

“You’re safe,” Hermione said. “I need to ask you a few questions before I explain. Do you know what your name is?”

Alice frowned, but answered regardless. “Alice Elizabeth Longbottom. Unless you want my maiden name, in which case Alice Elizabeth Bones.”

“And your date of birth?” Hermione asked.

“December 9th 1960.”

“Your occupation?”
Hermione took a deep breath. “What is the last thing you remember?”

“Death Eaters,” Alice answered without hesitation, before her face turned a horrible grey. “Oh, shit – Neville? Where’s my son?”

“Mrs Longbottom, I need you to calm down,” Hermione said firmly. “Neville is fine. You and Frank were tortured. The date is December 20th 1997, my name is Hermione Granger and you are in a safe-house called Ravenscroft Manor.”

“Frank?” Alice whispered, struggling to sit up.

“He’s in the bed next to you,” Hermione said. “We woke you up first.”

“We?” Alice repeated.

Shadow barked, and Alice stared at her.

“Shadow?”

Shadow rose up on to her back legs, turning back into Addie as she did. “Hey sweetheart.” She bent to hug Alice, who clung to her tightly.

“Addie, we thought you were dead!”

“I got better,” Addie said. “We’ll tell you all about it later. First of all though, we need to wake your husband.”

They helped Alice out of bed; as soon as she had steadied herself on her feet, she hurried to her husband’s side. “Frank? Frank?”

“He won’t answer, Alice,” Addie said sadly.

“We’re going to help him now,” Hermione said. “In the meantime, let’s go and see Amelia.”

“Amelia’s here?” Alice said.

“She is,” Hermione said, taking her arm. “Come on, Mrs Longbottom.”

“None of that, dear,” Alice said. “You used to call me Aunt Alice when you were little.”

“Alright, Aunt Alice,” Hermione said. “Then humour me. Amelia can take you to see Neville.”

When they stepped out of the room, Amelia and Augusta hadn’t moved, but the atmosphere had changed; it was tense, charged, both desperately hoping for the best, both desperately trying not to hope too much, after so many disappointments.

Amelia rose to her feet at once. “Alice?”

In response, Alice burst into tears, running into her older sister’s arms. This alone was enough to make Amelia start crying as well.

“Frank?” Augusta asked.

“Addie thought Alice would be easier so we tried her first,” Hermione explained quietly. “She’s worried, obviously. Amelia, can you …?”
“I’ll take her to Potter Manor,” Amelia said thickly. “We’ll go and see Neville.”

“Please,” Alice sobbed. “I need to see my baby.”

“Come on, sweetheart,” Amelia said, guiding Alice out of the door. “Right, quick rundown of the things you need to know. Sirius was not the Secret Keeper; they changed to Pettigrew, who faked his death when he blew the street up.”

This brought about a fresh wave of tears, with Alice’s emotions so near the surface. “We should have known.”

“Ally, what could you have done?” Amelia said fairly. “You were pushing for a trial; that was all you could do. What happened after your attack is on everyone else, not you. Sirius broke out of Azkaban about three and a half years ago, but he’s technically not cleared yet, hence the hiding at Potter Manor. You know about Addie, obviously, but Jen’s back too; she was under a Memory Charm.”

“Oh, thank Merlin,” Alice said. “And what happened to Harry? Frank wasn’t in the Wizengamot the day the Will was read.”

“I’m not surprised,” Amelia said. “He probably would have known it was faked.”

“Faked?!” Alice repeated.

“He ended up with Lily’s sister,” Amelia said, “who somehow managed to produce a decent human being, despite treating him worse than a house-elf by all accounts, although he does have an impressive hero complex.”

Despite her anger, Alice managed to laugh. “Just like Jamie.”

“Just like Jamie,” Amelia agreed with a chuckle.

David and Emily Potter had been Alice and their brother Edgar’s godparents, and their parents had been James’s godparents, which meant that the three Bones siblings were the only people who had ever got away with calling James Potter ‘Jamie’ – Jen and Sirius tried, but they usually only got a hex for their troubles.

Even as they reached the fireplace, Amelia didn’t release her sister, stepping in to the flames beside her. “Potter Manor.”

A few seconds later, they were brushing themselves down. By now, Alice’s tears had dried and she was eager to see everyone.

“How did the Memory Charm happen?”

Amelia hesitated. “There’s a whole long story there, Ally, and it’s going to be easier if we all sit down with you and Frank later and explain it in order.”

Alice nodded. “That’s fair enough, I guess.” She squeezed her sister’s arm as they made their way through the house. “So what’s he like? Did he grow up with you and Susan?”

“No,” Amelia said. “He grew up with Augusta. He looks like you, with Frank’s eyes. Can’t brew a potion to save his life, but he’s amazing at Herbology. Gryffindor, of course – with you two as parents, I was hardly surprised, but I think he was. He’s grown into red and gold very well though.”

“What about Susan?” Alice asked. “How is she?”
“Hufflepuff,” Amelia said proudly. “She’s doing wonderfully. Better at Charms than Herbology. She’s here as well, actually.” As they reached the gate of the pitch, she cleared her throat. “There is one more thing. Draco Malfoy and Daphne Greengrass are spending Christmas here as well.”

“A Greengrass I’m not surprised by,” Alice said. “But a Malfoy?”

“He’s a good boy,” Amelia assured her. “Both Slytherins, but Neville seems rather fond of Daphne – although I don’t think he’s cottoned on to the fact that she might feel the same way …”

Alice didn’t seem in the least perturbed by the fact that her son’s potential love interest wore green and silver. “Is she nice? Will she look after him? Do you think they’ll get married?”

“Slow down, Alice,” Amelia laughed. “As far as I know, they haven’t started dating yet!”

They emerged on to the pitch and Amelia glanced over to the stands where Sirius, Remus and Jen were, giving them a thumb’s up.

Alice didn’t notice, her attention fixed on the teenage boy at the other end of the pitch.

He was sitting on the grass, leaning back on his hands, half-chatting to a blonde-haired girl at his side, half-watching a young girl on a broom flying slowly around them.

As Alice watched, the girl caught sight of them and came to a rather wobbly landing beside Neville, pointing in Alice’s direction.

The Quidditch pitch seemed to disappear, along with everyone around her, as her son stood up, brushing grass from his robes as he walked towards them.

“Mum?” He asked when he was within earshot. “What are you doing here?”

His question was aimed at Amelia, rather than Alice, because, she suddenly realised, he was not expecting any kind of response from her, and the thought brought tears to her eyes.

“Mum?” Neville repeated, taking her hand. “Are you okay?” He turned to Amelia without waiting for an answer. “Maybe I should …”

“I’m fine, sweetheart,” Alice said softly. “It’s just you’re all grown up.”

Neville stared at her. “Mum? Do you know who I am?”

“I do,” Alice said, touching his face. “You’re Neville Frank Longbottom and you’re my son.”

“How?” Neville asked shakily.

“We have excellent friends,” Alice said, embracing her son.

Neville buried his face in his mother’s shoulder, trembling in her arms.

In the air, the flyers noticed the extra person on the pitch and swooped down to land beside them.

“Mum?” Neville said shakily, releasing her. “There’s … There’s a lot of people you need to meet.”

“I’ll say,” Alice said, her eyes landing on Susan. “Susie, is that you?”

“Hi Aunt Alice,” Susan greeted, kissing her cheek. “I’m so glad you’re better.”
“And this is Harry,” Neville said, “Harry Potter.”

Harry grinned at her, offering her a hand. “Mrs Longbottom.”

Alice gave him a hug. “I was Aunt Alice to you as well, you know. Actually, that goes for all of you,” she added, glancing at the others, including Catherine, who had followed Neville over. “Just call me Aunt Alice, or Alice if you prefer.”

“This is Draco Malfoy, Daphne Greengrass and Catherine Barter,” Neville said. “And you know these three, I’m guessing.”

Alice turned and immediately threw her arms around Jen, who hugged her tightly. “Oh, Jen, I’m so glad you’re okay! Amelia said you’d explain everything later?”

“We will,” Jen said. “It’s a long story.”

Before Alice had a chance to greet Sirius and Remus as well, a shout went up from behind them.

“Alice!”

At the familiar voice, Alice spun around and threw herself into Frank’s arms with another stifled sob.

Neville sprinted forwards too, clinging to his father; Augusta watched, tears of joy streaming down her cheeks.

Hermione and Addie were behind him, beaming and, after a few minutes, Neville disentangled himself to hug both of them, before returning to his parents.

Sirius wrapped an arm around Addie’s shoulders as she returned to his side. “You just gave him the best Christmas present in the world.”

“Yeah,” Addie said quietly. “We did.”
December 25th 1997

“Hermione, Sirius is about to do it again.”

Lily’s words work Hermione immediately and she jumped out of bed, casting a quick spell on her blankets that made them rise up, making them look like she was still asleep beneath them. Then she slid into a gap between the wardrobe and the wall, waiting.

Just as he had the previous year (at the same time, if her memory was correct), Sirius burst through the door. “WAAAAAKE UP!”

“Aguamenti!” A jet of water shot from her wand and hit Sirius square in the face.

Most adults would get annoyed by this, but Sirius just laughed and conjured a towel. “That’s my girl! Between you, Harry, Fred and George, the Marauder legend will live on.”

Hermione just laughed and gave him a hug. “Happy Christmas! Although you can actually blame Lily for that one.”

“Why am I not surprised?” Sirius asked, kissing her forehead. “At least she’s okay.”

Hermione hadn’t seen James or Lily since she had crossed the Hogwarts wards in September, so she shared his relief. “You’d better let me wake Harry up though. He’s developed a habit of cursing first and asking later.”

“That’s not a bad thing,” Sirius called over his shoulder as he disappeared down the hall.

“Yeah, well, it is in this case,” Hermione muttered. She dressed quickly, leaving her hair in its braid, and slipped upstairs into Harry’s room.

For a second, Hermione paused, wondering how best to go about this. She never had to wake Harry at school; he seemed to have an in-built alarm clock that woke him at seven o’clock on the dot every morning without fail.

The few times the boys had to wake him, they had emerged with white faces and the occasional hive; jumping on the bed this year would be more likely to get her stunned – if she was lucky.

“Harry?” She called softly, perching on the edge of his mattress. “It’s time to get up.”

As he started to stir, Hermione carefully took his right hand so he couldn’t reach for his wand. “It’s Christmas Day. Time to get up.”

In a split second, Harry was holding her wrist, rather than the other way round. “Mione?”

Hermione smiled at him. “Hi Harry. Merry Christmas. You can let go now.”

Harry thought about it for a second. “Nah.” He tugged on her wrist and she went willingly, lying down beside him and nestling into his side. “I didn’t hurt you, did I?”

“No,” Hermione assured him. “But you can grovel all you like.”

Harry gave a non-committal hum and Hermione sighed, feeling him relax against her again. “You’re
not going back to sleep, are you?”

“It’s early,” Harry said, closing his eyes, “and I’m comfy.”

“So am I,” Hermione said, “but do you really want to be here when Sirius comes to get us?”

Harry was quiet for a few moments. “Alright, you’ve talked me out of it.”

“Probably a good idea.” Hermione rolled out of bed and stretched. “I’ve seen your mum this morning, by the way.”

Harry breathed a sigh of relief. “Thanks, Hermione.” He kissed her cheek. “Now get out of here so I can change.”

Hermione waited outside, leaning against the wall and tapping her foot impatiently, until Harry finally emerged, stretching leisurely.

“Oh, sorry, Hermione,” he said, with mock surprise. “Were you waiting for me?”

Hermione raised an eyebrow. “Just for that, you don’t get your present.”

Harry gasped. “Not that! Anything but that! Is there anything I can do to make up for this?!”

Hermione rolled her eyes. “Drama queen,” she muttered, tugging his head down so she could kiss him. “If you stop, I’ll call it even.”

“Deal,” Harry said with a grin.

“Come on,” Hermione said, tugging on his arm. “Let’s go. The longer we stand here, the more likely it is that Padfoot drags us downstairs.”

As it turned out, they weren’t the last people downstairs, but then there weren’t many people expected that morning.

The Longbottoms and the Bones were spending the morning at Ravenscroft and the Barters were spending it in the guest suite; they would all, however, be there for Christmas dinner.

Jen and Addie were already in the family room, both looking tired, but happy.

“Morning,” Addie greeted with a smile. “Merry Christmas.”

“Sorry it’s so early,” Jen added with a sigh. “But you know how my brother is.”

“We do.” Harry fell into the chair beside Addie. “Are you sure you want to marry him?”

Addie chuckled. “I know how to handle him, Harry; don’t worry.”

Sirius arrived now, followed by Draco or Daphne, who looked suspiciously damp.

“Why aren’t you wet?” Draco asked Hermione, sounding grumpy.

“Lily warned me,” Hermione said. “And I woke Harry up.”

“Probably the safest for everyone,” Daphne said, taking her own predicament with more grace than her housemate. “Aren’t we one short?”

“Right here,” Remus answered from behind her. “Breakfast should be ready in about thirty minutes.”
“Okay then,” Jen said. “Merry Christmas everyone!” With a wave of her wand, gifts flew out from under the tree, landing on the laps of their recipients.

For a few moments, the room was filled with the wonderful noise of Christmas morning.

A tapping at the window interrupted their merriment, and Harry crossed to the window to let the owl in.

It flew straight to Hermione, bearing a letter with a Gringotts seal.

“It’s the wrong time of the month for a bank statement, isn’t it?” Jen asked with a frown.

“I think so,” Hermione said, slitting the letter open with her wand.


copy

Lady Ravenclaw

Following the heinous attack upon your person in February 1994, during your second academic year at Hogwarts School of Witchcraft and Wizardry. The proceeds created by the basilisk responsible for the attack have been split between its victims. As of December 17th 1997, your vault has been credited for twenty thousand galleons and ten sickles.

Sincerely

Barchoke

Account Manager

Gringotts

Hermione gaped at the parchment for a few seconds. “Oh, Harry?” She asked sweetly. “Why are there twenty thousand extra galleons in my vault?”

“You forgot the ten sickles,” Harry said.

“What did you do?” Hermione asked.

“I sold the basilisk remains,” Harry said with a shrug. “The goblins looked over the stuff I sent them, sold it, and split the profits between everyone affected by the Chamber being opened.”

“So me, Ginny, Colin, Justin and Penelope?” Hermione asked.

“And Filch,” Harry added. “I don’t like the man, but he really suffered when Mrs Norris was petrified.”

Hermione smiled. “You’re a good man, Harry. And your parents are very proud of you. Did you sell all of it?”

“No,” Harry said. “I held back some parts and send half to Mandy and half to Snape for Christmas.”

“That was very generous, Harry,” Addie said. “At least you didn’t inherit your father’s penchant for pranking him.”

“Says who?” Harry asked. “It’ll take Snape ages to decide whether to open it, and another few hours to figure out how he should deal with it when I get back.”

***
Severus Snape did not particularly enjoy Christmas – he never had, even as a child.

But the Hogwarts house-elves were always in jubilant moods, which meant the food was even more superb than usual. This, in turn, meant his solitary breakfast in his quarters was much more enjoyable, as he opened gifts with a wave of his wand.

The only people he exchanged gifts with were Dumbledore and McGonagall.

Dumbledore – rather predictably – had sent him some woollen socks and a packet of sherbet lemons.

The socks he levitated to a drawer, the sherbet lemons he destroyed with a sneer. How Dumbledore expected a Potions Master to miss the loyalty potions they were laced with, he didn’t know.

McGonagall had sent him a new book on the properties of different potions. It was one he’d had his eye on for a while and was very grateful for.

This year, however, there was an extra present and he examined it carefully from every angle, before unwrapping it to reveal a small black box, with a note that read:

*Professor Snape,*

*With best wishes for Christmas and the year ahead,*

*Harry J. S. Potter*

Why would Harry Potter be sending him anything?

Against his better judgement, he opened the box and his mouth fell open at the neatly labelled and packaged basilisk parts.

He had heard the rumour about Potter killing a basilisk in the Chamber of Secrets, but Dumbledore had told him there was no truth in the story.

Yet here was the proof – enough scales, tendons and venom for hundreds – if not thousands – of potions.

It was a happy Christmas indeed.

***

Christmas in the Clearwater house was just as quiet.

Like her ex-boyfriend, Penelope had intended on entering the Ministry after she graduated, but, unlike Percy, she had quickly become disillusioned with the bigotry and the falseness of the establishment, especially when less qualified candidates were chosen over her time and time again simply because they were purebloods.

When the Ministry categorically denied Voldemort’s return, she decided that the Ministry was not where she wanted to work at all – certainly not in its current format.

Penelope wasn’t stupid – she remembered all too clearly what had happened in her sixth year, even if Percy didn’t. They had argued over whether Harry Potter was lying and she had ended the relationship – however much it broke her heart to do so, she knew she couldn’t have a future with a man who turned his back on his family in favour of his career.

Even now Voldemort’s return was public knowledge, she knew he hadn’t swallowed his pride and
returned home.

After their break-up, she had taken it upon herself to write to Molly Weasley, apologising on his behalf and informing her that the relationship was over.

Her reply had brought a fresh wave of tears, as had the Weasley sweater that had arrived that Christmas.

This year was no different and her parents watched gratefully as Penelope pulled the sweater on, offering them a home-made mince pie as she did.

Now she’d given up on the Ministry, Penelope dreamed of becoming a reporter. She refused point-blank to work for the Ministry-led *Prophet*, so was currently working as a secretary for a law-form.

Money and breeding opened doors in the wizarding world and, unfortunately, she had neither.

Then the owl arrived and Penelope was left dumbstruck by the news. Twenty thousand galleons? For her?

Realising that Harry Potter – for it must have been him – had just come to her rescue a second time, she immediately set about writing him a letter of gratitude.

***

Similar scenes were played out at the Finch-Fletchleys’ and the Creeveys’, although the latter involved a flood of tears from Colin’s mother.

At the Burrow, things were different, mainly because Ginny had a moment’s warning.

“Ginny, dear, you’ve got a letter,” Molly called, entering the living room with a tray of hot chocolate and an owl on her shoulder.

**Did you just get a letter?** Draco’s voice asked.

**Yes. Why?**

**Make sure you’re sitting down.**

Ginny took the letter, perching on the sofa. It was addressed to *Lady Ginevra Malfoy*, which explained the unhappy expression on her mother’s face – the fact that she hadn’t had a coronary was a miracle in itself.

**Maybe she’s coming to terms with it.**

“Boys, would you stop leaving these wands around!” Molly cried, brandishing a rubber chicken.

**Or she’s distracted.**

Ginny opened the letter and her jaw dropped. “What the …?!”

“What’s up, Ginny?” Ron asked.

Ginny cleared her throat. “Following the heinous attack upon your person in February 1994, during your first academic year at Hogwarts School of Witchcraft and Wizardry. The proceeds created by the basilisk responsible for the attack have been split between its victims. As of December 17th 1997, your vault has been credited for twenty thousand galleons and ten sickles.”
“WHAT?!”

As her family erupted into chatter, Ginny rubbed her eyes. *Am I dreaming?*

*No. Hermione’s in shock as well.*

*I bet she is. Any way we can talk him out of it?*

*Why bother?* Draco gave a mental shrug. *Either you accept it or the money goes into Harry’s vault.*

Ginny sighed. *Fine.*

“Ginny, dear, we have to give it back,” Molly was saying.

“No,” Ginny said. “All that’ll happen is that the money goes back into Harry’s vault. And it’s not just me. Hermione got a letter too – which means so did Penelope, Justin and Colin. You know what Harry’s like – he won’t profit from this; that’s why he won’t keep a knut. Besides, it’s in my private vault, not the family one.”

“She’s right, Molly,” Arthur said quietly.

Molly sighed. “Well, I suppose if you put it that way …”

*Is it safe, or should we start barricading the door?*

*Shut up, you.*

***

As lunch approached, the Barters came downstairs and the Longbottoms and the Bones came through the floo. While everyone greeted each other, Hermione sat down next to Jen, who was picking up the discarded wrapping paper. “Are you going to tell us?”

Jen glanced at her. “You know?”

Hermione grinned, nodding. “Uh huh. Unless I’m seriously misreading.”

“You’re not,” Jen said, standing up and vanishing the paper. “Remus? It’s time.”

“Time for what?” Sirius asked blankly.

Jen smiled, taking Remus’s hand as he came to stand beside her. “We have an announcement to make.”

Alice’s hand flew to her mouth, stifling the gasp that slipped out. “You’re …?”

Jen nodded. “We’re having a baby.”

Harry bounced to his feet, giving his godmother a hug. “Congratulations!”

“Blimey, you kept that quiet!” Sirius said, following suit. “How long have you known?”

“A few weeks,” Remus admitted. “We wanted to make sure everything was okay before we told everyone.”

“And is it?” Alice asked.
“Everything’s fine,” Jen answered, rubbing her stomach. “I got Andie to check me over. I’m four months along, so I’m due in May. I can’t believe I didn’t notice.”

“Well, you’ve been a bit distracted,” Draco said.

Amidst all of the congratulations, Hermione suddenly felt a spike of emotion that didn’t quite fit, a sharp shooting pain that brought tears to her eyes.

A quick sweep of the room told her who.

“Padfoot?” Hermione said quietly, patting him on the shoulder. “You need to go and check on Addie.”

Sirius frowned, looking around the room. “Where is she?”

“I don’t know,” Hermione said. “But you need to find her.”

Sirius gave her a smile. “I’ll find her, Kitten; don’t worry.”

It proved harder than he expected; Addie wasn’t anywhere he expected her to be.

Finally, he resorted to checking the house room by room. And he found her, perhaps unsurprisingly, in Harry’s old nursery, which had yet to be dismantled.

She was sitting in the window seat, where Lily used to sit with Harry, gazing out at the grounds.

“Addie? Are you okay?”

She sighed. “I’m being silly.”

“Right,” Sirius said, approaching her slowly. “It’s Christmas Day, and you’re hiding in an abandoned nursery because you’re … being silly.”

Addie managed a small smile. “Alright, fair point.”

Sirius sat down next to her. “Talk to me.”

“It is silly,” Addie said. “I knew Jen was pregnant as soon as I got home. I was happy for her. I am happy for her.”

“But?” Sirius prompted.

Addie heaved another sigh, still talking to the window rather than to him. “When Andie told me I couldn’t have children … it was like … okay, I’m alive and I’m still sane. It felt like a small price to pay for my life and my sanity and my dignity and … I’d never really been that maternal, you know? I mean, I thought about it and I’m sure if the war hadn’t happened, you and I would have had children, but … it was never … I wasn’t …” She shook her head. “I don’t know how to word it.”

“It wasn’t the be all and end all,” Sirius said.

“Yes,” Addie said, finally looking at him. “Exactly. Maddie, may she rest in peace, she was going to be a mother. That was going to be her life. It wasn’t going to be mine.” She dropped her gaze to her knees. “I thought I was okay, but I’m not. I … I want a baby, Sirius, and they took that away from me. And it’s not okay and it shouldn’t be okay.”

“Ads …” Sirius held out his arms and she slid along the window seat into them. “I’m sorry,
sweetheart. I wish I could make this better.”

“I know,” Addie said. “I didn’t say all that to make you feel bad, Sirius; I said it because you asked. It’s not your fault.”

“Just because it’s not my fault doesn’t mean I don’t wish I could fix it,” Sirius said quietly. “If I could give you a child, Addie …”

“But you have,” Addie said, lifting her head. “You have given me a child, Sirius. And she’s not mine by blood, but that doesn’t matter.”

As if on cue, there was a soft knock at the door and Hermione stuck her head in. “Are you both alright?”

“We’re fine, Kitten,” Sirius said with a smile.

“Should I go?” Hermione asked.

“No,” Addie said, waving her over. “We were just talking.”

Hermione came and sat on Addie’s other side. “Are you okay?”

“I’ll be fine,” Addie said, managing a smile.

“You know,” Hermione said quietly, “I might not need another mother the way I needed a second dad, but I’m happy to make room for one.”

Addie’s smile widened and held out an arm, inviting Hermione into the embrace. “Then I take it you won’t mind if I tell you I already think of you like a daughter.”

Hermione shook her head, as Sirius wrapped an arm around her as well. “I don’t mind at all.”

Addie pressed a kiss to Hermione’s forehead. Yes, she would be okay – in time.
Penelope’s letter arrived during lunch the next day, causing conversations to cease round the table.

Only the Hogwarts students were there, since Sirius and Addie were visiting Frank and Alice to discuss the logistics of keeping them hidden, and Jen and Remus were discussing pregnancy and parenting tips with Molly and Arthur at The Burrow.

“Who do you think that’s from?” Ginny asked.

“Who knows?” Harry raised an eyebrow as it landed in front of him. “Is that for me?”

The owl hooted, holding his leg out.

Harry removed the letter and opened it, handing the owl a piece of cold turkey.

“Harry, we’ve got owl treats for a reason,” Hermione said, rolling her eyes.

“And I can’t be bothered to get up,” Harry said, scanning the parchment. “It’s from Penelope.”

“No, quite the opposite,” Harry said, handing it to Hermione so she could read it. “She says she’s very grateful, because she gave up on getting a job at the Ministry the summer before last when they refused to admit Voldemort’s return.”

Ginny nodded. “Yeah, she wrote to Mum after Percy walked out. The poor girl was distraught about ending things, but she still wrote to apologise for his behaviour!”

“Well, apparently, Muggle-born and not working for the Ministry adds up to unemployment,” Harry said.

Draco snorted. “The Ministry’s got nothing to do with it.”

“Why doesn’t that surprise me?” Hermione muttered. “And people wonder how people like Voldemort get such a hold.”

“What does she want to do?” Daphne asked.

“Reporter,” Hermione answered, still perusing the letter. “Although she refuses to work for the …” she broke off with a chuckle. “Well, the Prophet, but that’s not what she calls them.”

Luna smiled dreamily. “I’ll talk to Daddy. He’s looking for another reporter.”

“That’s kind of you, Luna,” Hermione said.

“He’ll still interview her,” Luna said. “But then she wouldn’t take the job otherwise, would she?”

“No,” Hermione said. “I shouldn’t think she would.”

At that moment, another distraction arrived, in the form of a very distressed house-elf.

“Kady!” Hermione cried, sliding off her chair. “Kady, what happened are you alright?”
The house elf tried several times to speak, but only managed a few shuddering gasps.

Knowing that offering her water would only create more hysterics, Hermione could only try to calm her down. “Kady, it’s alright. Whatever’s wrong, we can make it better.”

“Lady Ravenclaw miss is not claiming the castle,” Kady wailed, “so Headmaster is still Kady’s master, but Kady is not wanting to spy on Lady Ravenclaw miss!”

“Why that …”

“Harry!” Hermione interrupted sharply. “It’s alright, Kady; we can work something out. Take a deep breath for me please.”

The gasp of air, however forced, did seem to at least help Kady calm down a little.

“Kady, why don’t we give you the information I don’t mind Dumbledore knowing,” Hermione suggested. “That way you can follow your orders and you won’t be spying on me.”

Kady’s eyes had slowly dried and she was now beaming up at Hermione. “Oh, thank you, Lady Ravenclaw, miss.”

“You’re very welcome, Kady,” Hermione said. “Any chance you can call me Hermione?”

Kady gave Hermione a surprisingly stern look. “Lady Ravenclaw miss is not being used to house elves.”

“That’s a no then,” Draco said with a smirk, after she had disappeared.

Hermione shrugged. “It was worth a shot. Who wants to help me come up with things Kady can tell Dumbledore?”

***

January 3rd 1998

All too soon, it was the beginning of the Spring Term.

Neville and Susan took Catherine to The Burrow, to floo back to Hogwarts.

Addie gathered Harry, Hermione, Draco and Daphne together, kissed Sirius goodbye, and portkeyed back to Hogwarts.

Expecting a welcoming committee, she did not use her own portkey, but a one-off that took them to just outside the castle gates.

Sure enough, when they reached the Entrance Hall, Dumbledore was waiting for them, looking extremely disappointed. “Harry, I thought we agreed that you wouldn’t go home for the holidays.”

“No, Headmaster, you agreed I wouldn’t go home,” Harry said. “I promised I wouldn’t floo home.”

“And since I took him by portkey, there was no problem,” Addie said. “I need not remind you, Headmaster, that Jen is Harry’s legal guardian and keeping him here against her consent is classed as kidnapping under wizarding law.”

Dumbledore sighed. “Of course not, Addison. I was just concerned about Harry’s welfare, that’s all.”
“Well, as you can see, he’s absolutely fine,” Addie said briskly. “Alright, kids, off to your Common Rooms please.”

“Yes, Professor,” the four of them chorused.

“Good evening, Headmaster,” Addie said, heading towards her office.

It was a few moments before she ‘noticed’ that he was accompanying her. “Was there something else you wanted, sir?”

“I was just wondering if you would pass on my congratulations to Remus and Jennifer,” Dumbledore said.

Addie frowned. “How on earth did you know, sir?”

“Ah, Hogwarts holds a great many secrets,” Dumbledore answered vaguely. “I do not claim to understand all of them.”

“Of course not, sir,” Addie said, injecting just enough awe into her voice to be believable.

Jen’s pregnancy – at her agreement – was one of the things they had agreed Kady could tell the headmaster.

Her own engagement was not.

After all, Dumbledore could nothing to manipulate Mother Nature, whereas she herself was in a somewhat vulnerable position.

“Oh, for your information, sir, I will be leaving Hogwarts over the next Hogsmeade weekend to take care of some family business,” she said.

“May I ask what kind of business?” Dumbledore asked.

“My parents left quite a few things in the lurch,” Addie said. “Lady McKinnon has some affairs to attend to.”

“Of course, Lady McKinnon.” Dumbledore inclined his head in gracious permission, before taking his leave.

*The benevolent god ruling over his mindless subjects.*

Addie shook her head and continued on her way to her private quarters. Marrying on Valentine’s weekend was a little cheesy for her liking, but there was no way she was going to play Dumbledore’s game to get the students out of the castle, so it was going to have to be on the same day as a Hogsmeade visit.

It was going to be difficult, planning a wedding from the castle, but it would be oh so worth it.

***

January 8th 1998

The first DA meeting of the New Year began with a surprise.

Already, the group and formed a different structure from the year before. Although the first half of the meeting was taken up by Defence Against the Dark Arts, the students split into groups for the
second, preparing for the worse, if something should happen.

Luna and Daphne – as the most proficient in healing charms – had taken the least able fighters to teach them those to staff the infirmary Jen was arranging.

Hermione and Susan took another group and taught them protective charms to hold off any attackers and give them time to prepare.

Ginny and Cedric took all the Quidditch players and ran aerial strategies, getting direction from Ron and Neville, who poured over the Marauders Map and maps of Hogsmeade, coming up with defence plans.

Draco and Harry … Well, no one – not even Hermione and Ginny – knew what they were doing, but they were planning something.

At Addie’s suggestion, Harry planned on warning them that Voldemort’s snake needed to be destroyed, even if they weren’t going to mention the Horcruxes.

However, when they arrived at the Room of Requirement, the rest of the DA was already there.

“Wow, you’re eager,” Harry said with a chuckle. “I thought Professor McKinnon’s lesson was pretty good this week. Not that they aren’t always.

Ernie MacMillan – the obvious spokesman – stepped forwards, clearing his throat pompously. “Well, you see, Harry, we’ve all been thinking about what you said in September about Dumbledore, and we concur that something will have to be done about him.”

“Okay.” Harry exchanged a confused glance with the nine that had entered with him. “I thought you’d already done that.”

“Well …” Ernie drew himself up in preparation for what promised to be a long speech, but Katie Bell cut him off.

“We can’t fight as Dumbledore’s Army, Harry. We just can’t.”

There was a murmur of agreement through the room.

“What a minute,” Hermione said. “You mean I spent ages coming up with a speech to convince you all that we needed a new name and you beat me to it?”

“I told you that you were overreacting,” Neville said. “I vote we revert to the Defence Association. Then we can still call it the DA.”

“I think we need a battle-cry though,” Justin said. “I mean, if we’d ever had to take on Umbridge, yelling “Dumbledore’s Army” would’ve been hilarious, and it’d probably piss Mouldy-Shorts off, but I’m not going to lower myself.”

Hermione couldn’t help smirking. Harry’s suggestion – that they come up with a more insulting nick-name if they couldn’t bring themselves to actually say ‘Voldemort’ – had borne some interesting results.

“So we need something to yell,” harry said thoughtfully. “Any ideas?”

“Marauders Forever,” Daphne suggested.

“I like it,” Dean agreed.
“And this way it takes some of the focus on you, mate,” Seamus pointed out, grinning at him. “You’re always saying how it was your mum that took the Dark Bastard down the first time, so why don’t we give her the credit for once? Give them all the credit.”

Seeing that Harry was a little choked up, Hermione took charge. “Any other ideas?”

No one answered.

“Very well.” Hermione cleared her throat. “All in favour?”

The response was unanimous. “MARAUDERS FOREVER!”
Absence Makes the Heart Grow Fonder (Sometimes)

February 13th 1998

With a new battle-cry, the Defence Association worked harder than ever before; the speed, strength and power emerging from some of those attending was impressive, to say the least.

The meetings did become more sporadic for a while, since the sixth years began to take apparition classes to prepare for their tests – at the beginning of April for those students already seventeen, and during the summer holidays for everyone else.

The Death Eaters had been worryingly quiet since their break-out from Azkaban, leaving everyone wondering if they hadn’t just given up.

The Order and the Marauders knew differently however – Voldemort was lulling people into a false sense of security while he placed his people in the perfect positions to strike at the heart of the Ministry.

Already, Amelia had counteracted twelve Imperius Curses just in her department, and was getting increasingly frustrated by the constant assurances that the Ministry was ‘dealing with’ the threat.

The problem was, Amelia said, Fudge was too scared to make any ground-breaking changes.

Unfortunately, that was exactly what they needed.

But today, the Marauders were taking a break from the war, as the ten students took the thestral-drawn carriages down to Hogsmeade for the Valentine’s Day trip.

The five couples – Neville and Daphne, and Cedric and Susan weren’t officially dating (yet), but were accompanying each other as friends so as to lose any unwanted guests – strolled through the village until they reached the Hog’s Head.

Abeforth glanced up as they entered and nodded to them, handing them the key to room 8. “Tell ‘em congratulations from me,” he muttered as they passed.

Hermione nodded to show she’d heard, but said nothing as they headed upstairs. Daphne unlocked the door and let them in, before locking the door behind them as a precaution.

One by one, they threw floo powder into the flames and flowed to the flat above Weasleys’ Wizard Wheezes, before flooing again to Ravenscroft Manor, and then making yet another journey to Potter Manor.

By the time they got there, Harry was rubbing his shins, having predictably fallen each and every time. “Remind me again why we didn’t just floo straight here?”

“Because Jen doesn’t want to set up a direct connection,” Hermione answered. “You don’t have to fall every time.”

“Potter Portkey genes,” Remus chuckled from the doorway. “They’re as much of a curse as the hair.”

“Tell me about it,” Hermione muttered, eyeing Harry’s hair.
“No time to worry about that now,” Susan said, ushering the girls towards the door. “Sorry, Remus, but we don’t have very long.”

Remus smiled. “Of course, ladies. Oh, Hermione, Harry, Sirius wants to talk to you.”

With difficulty, Hermione removed herself from the group of girls and grabbed Harry’s hand. “Where is he?”

“His room,” Remus answered.

“Why do you think he wants to talk to us?” Harry asked, as Hermione dragged him up the stairs.

“I’ve got no idea,” Hermione answered, her voice dripping with sarcasm. “He’s getting married today – why would he want to talk to his godson and adopted daughter?”

“Put it like that and it sounds like a stupid question,” Harry said, rolling his eyes.

Hermione laughed. “Think, Harry. That’s what you have a brain for.” She stopped outside Sirius’s room, knocked once, and pushed the door open.

Sirius was already in his dress robes and was pacing up and down, his face white. “Remind me to apologise to Prongs when he gets back,” he said as Harry pushed the door shut. “I laughed myself silly when he was this nervous marrying Lily.”

Hermione glanced at where James Potter was slumped against the wall, wiping away tears. “Don’t worry, Padfoot; he’s repaying the favour.”

“Thanks, mate,” Sirius muttered where he thought James was and missing by several feet.

“Relax, Sirius,” Harry said. “Addie’s been walking on air for the last three weeks. What did you want to talk to us about?”

“Well, I know it’s a bit late,” Sirius said, “but I wanted to make sure that you two were okay with this.”

Harry and Hermione looked at him.

“You want to know if we’re okay with you finally marrying the woman you love?” Harry asked. “No, of course not, Padfoot – you know how unreasonable we both are.”

“Neither of you are unreasonable,” Sirius said.

“He was being sarcastic, Sirius,” Hermione said, elbowing her boyfriend in the side. “Of course we’re okay with it.”

“I’m a little too nervous to appreciate sarcasm today, Pronglet,” Sirius said.

Harry chuckled. “Sorry. I’ll try to say everything in words of one syllable.”

“Watch it,” Sirius said mildly.

Hermione checked her watch. “Merlin’s beard! I need to change!”

Harry laughed as she dashed from the room, but stopped abruptly when she returned and dragged him out after her.
“Is there a reason why you’re not waiting for me to pop first?” Jen asked good-naturedly, examining her reflection in the mirror. Her dress had been carefully altered to allow for her growing baby bump.

Alice Longbottom, dressed in an almost identical red dress, patted her on the shoulder. “I was much bigger with Neville, dear. And Lily was massive towards the end.”

“Besides,” Addie said quietly, “we don’t know what the future holds. That’s been proven once already. I don’t want to wait any longer than we have to.”

Her white silk gown swirled around her ankles as she moved to sit in front of a vanity, allowing Meredith to fix a veil into her hair, which had been pinned back to allow it to fall in curls down her back.

Dress shopping had been difficult, so Jen had gone for her, into Muggle London, with the mirror, under the pretense of shopping for herself on a Saturday afternoon.

Showing Addie her own reflection had allowed the bride to choose her dress, and then Jen had visited Hogwarts, under the pretense of speaking to Dumbledore, to alter the dress for her.

“Fair enough,” Jen said with a grimace, turning away from the mirror. “But I feel like a whale.”

“A very beautiful whale,” Alice said with a smile.

Jen rolled her eyes. “Thanks.”

The door opened and the Hogwarts girls slipped in.

“Jen, you’ve gotten so big!” Susan exclaimed.

“Oh – we’re kicking, if you want to have a feel.”

While Susan, Luna and Daphne flocked to Jen, Ginny gave Addie a hug, being careful not to crease her dress. “Addie, you look amazing. Are you nervous?”

“No,” Addie said, with no hint of hesitation. “How could I be?”

In no time at all, Sirius and Addie were standing in front of Amelia, her wand over their joined hands.

“Do you, Sirius Orion Black, take Addison Marlene McKinnon to be your lawfully and magically bonded wife as long as you both shall live?”

“I do.”

“And do you, Addison Marlene McKinnon, take Sirius Orion Black to be your lawfully and magically bonded husband as long as you both shall live?”

“I do.” Addie caught Sirius’s eye and he gave her a small smile, mouthing five words at her.

_I was hoping you did._

Addie bit back a laugh, remembering the first time she told him she loved him, and his identical
response.

“Now this is normally the part where I complete the ceremony,” Amelia said, “but there is one last vow that the bride has requested I include.”

Addie smiled at his bewildered expression and released one of his hands to reach out to one of her bridesmaids.

Looking startled, Hermione stepped forward to take her hand.

“So, Addison Marlene McKinnon, take Hermione Jane Granger-Black as your lawful and magical step-daughter, to love, guide and cherish, as long as you both shall live?”

“I do.” Addie wiped the tear from Hermione’s cheek and kissed her forehead.

“And you,” Amelia added, looking at Jen, “can remove the ward that stopped the Ministry from registering this.”

Jen nodded with a smile, waving her wand. Normally, when a couple married magically, the Department of Magical Records received an automatic notification.

These could be blocked, if you had enough power and the right knowledge.

Luckily for the new Lord and Lady Black, Jen had enough power and Amelia had the right knowledge.

Just like the previous summer, the chairs flew to the sides of the Potter Manor ballroom and the guests swarmed to congratulate them, waylaid this time by the bride’s embrace of her new stepdaughter.

Unlike the Lupins’ wedding, however, the party was cut short for some of the guests.

After about an hour, Hermione checked the time and drained her butterbeer. “We need to go.”

She was met with an outburst of protests from her fellow students and rolled her eyes. “Come on, we need to get back to the coaches before anyone realises we’re not in Hogsmeade.”

“She’s right,” Addie admitted, hugging them all. “Thank you all so much for coming.”

“We would never have missed it and you know it,” Harry said, kissing her cheek.

“We’ll see you at the end of term,” Sirius said, hugging Hermione, “and hopefully not a moment sooner.”

Addie smacked him lightly in the stomach. “Don’t jinx it please.”

“We’ll see you at Hogwarts then?” Draco asked.
Addie nodded. “I’ll be back on Monday morning.”

The students changed back into their school-robes, said goodbye to the new couple once more, and began the long process of flooing home.

One thing was certain – Harry’s shins wouldn’t escape the journey unharmed.

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**February 15th 1998**

On Monday, at lunchtime, Addie almost floated into the staffroom. Despite now officially being Lady Black, she was still Professor McKinnon to the students – after all, it would be hard to explain how she was married to a supposedly dead escaped convict.

“Good morning, Addison,” Minerva greeted.

“Morning Minerva,” Addie responded, filling a plate with food.

The teachers were due to have an impromptu staff meeting, so Dumbledore had arranged for the house-elves to send food there rather than to the Great Hall.

“Is there a reason why you’re so happy?” Minerva queried.

Addie smiled as the other teachers came in. “There might be.”

“Is this going to take long, Albus?” Madam Hooch asked impatiently. “Someone managed to completely reorganise the broom-shed and charm the first-year brooms to play ‘God Save the Queen’.”

Addie choked back a laugh. If she didn’t know better, she would have said that was the work of the Marauders, but there was no way …

*Better ask Harry about that next time I see him. It’s not really like him to prank, but that’s far too James to dismiss the idea out of hand.*

It shouldn’t take too long, Rolanda.” Dumbledore waved his wand at the door, locking and silencing the room.

His actions caused the light-hearted atmosphere to freeze almost instantly; this was no ordinary staff meeting.

“Lord Voldemort has created Horcruxes.”

Addie did not have to fake her confusion. After everything Albus had done to hide the existence of the things, he was now telling the Hogwarts staff of all people?

Minerva had collapsed into a chair, a hand on her heart. “Albus, are you sure?”

“It might just be me,” Septima Vector said, “but what is a Horcrux?”

“Bluntly put, Septima, it is a piece of Voldemort’s soul,” Dumbledore said. “As long as he has this anchoring him to life, he can never truly die. We are working on destroying this as soon as possible. In fact, I have a location of one hidden in America.”

*America? That makes no sense. He agreed with Jen and Hermione that Riddle would hide them in*
Addie had to admit, if Voldemort wasn’t so egotistical as to want to keep his Horcruxes in places that meant something to him, America would be a good place to hide one, since no one would think of it.

“It is my intention to take the Order of the Phoenix to search for and destroy this object as soon as possible,” Dumbledore said.

“What is this object?” Pomona Sprout asked.

“It is my belief that it is a small golden cup that once belonged to Helga Hufflepuff.

Addie’s blood froze in her veins and she fought to keep her emotions from showing on her face. So Dumbledore’s not only leaving – he’s leaving to destroy something that we’ve already destroyed. But he knows that! Jen told him last summer, but he obliterated her … Oh, what’s the old goat up to now?!

“We will need as much help as we can get,” Dumbledore continued. “So saying, Addison, Aurora, Charity and Sybil, I will ask you to remain here to keep the school running, while the rest of us join the Order of the Phoenix in our quest.”

Addie felt her jaw dropped, but it was Aurora Sinistra who protested. “Albus, I agree that these … these things need to go, but you can’t just leave the school with the four of us! What about the students? Classes?”

“From this point in the school year,” Minerva said slowly, “the seventh year curriculum is simple revision. They could hold classes – practical applications. That would help them revise for their own exams.”

“And we could always hold a session once a week for OWL students,” Charity Burbage pointed out. “None of us is so bad that we couldn’t cover the other subjects.”

Addie couldn’t help glancing over at Sybil Trelawney, who was gazing around vacantly. I wouldn’t be so sure about that. “Yes, Albus, what about Voldemort? We all know he’s after Harry – what if he takes this opportunity to …”

“Voldemort will want to beat Harry as an adult,” Dumbledore interrupted. “My sources tell me that he is frustrated with being beaten by a child, and feels that he needs to prove that Harry is no threat by waiting until he is of-age and fully-trained.

It sounded plausible – just the sort of thing a megalomaniac like Voldemort would do – but Addie couldn’t help worrying.

As Dumbledore began addressing the teachers leaving school, she looked over at Snape, pushing a thought into his head.

You’re the source? Do you believe that?

To his credit, Snape didn’t flinch at the sudden intrusion, but glanced over to make eye contact with her. Yes. And no. I think with Albus away, the Dark Lord will not choose his own ego of taking advantage. Try convincing Albus of that though.

“Very well!” Dumbledore clapped his hands together with a smile. “Now that’s settled, I think we should get everything set up. We leave on Saturday.”
As everyone got up to leave, Trelawney rose from her chair as well, pointing at Dumbledore with a trembling finger. “A grave mistake lies in your future, Headmaster! Danger lurks where you least intend it!”

“Thank you, Sybil, I’ll be sure to look out for it,” Dumbledore said kindly, guiding her out of the room.

Minerva snorted. “If she’s a Seer, I’m a Slytherin,” she muttered to Addie as she passed.

Addie attempted a smirk, but she couldn’t. She couldn’t the feeling that, for once, Trelawney was absolutely right.
Preparations

Late February 1998

The news of the teachers’ departure spread panic through the school for many different reasons.

The fifth year students were almost in hysterics about the idea of preparing for their OWLs without any teachers.

The seventh year students had to face preparing for the NEWTs and tutoring the younger years, and the three remaining competent teachers (i.e. not Trelawney) spent many hours that first week helping them work out ‘teaching schedules’ that would double as their own revision notes.

“It’s ridiculous,” Aurora fumed, pacing around Addie’s office. “This is a bloody school, not the auror corps. Do you believe any of that crap about You-Know-Who not attacking Harry Potter yet?”

Addie snorted. “Not in the slightest. Just leave everything to me, Aurora. If he does turn up, we’ll be ready … Well, as ready as we can be.”

“But we’ll be alone!”

“No, we won’t,” Addie told her firmly. “There are people who did not go with them. It will be fine.”

Aurora sighed. “I hope you’re right.”

***

In the Room of Requirement, the New Marauders – as they had come to be known – were having a meeting, putting the finishing touches on their escape plan.

After much deliberation, they had made the decision to use the same portrait to guard the tunnel through to the Hog’s Head, but with a different password.

“How about ‘desperate times call for desperate measures’?” Ginny suggested.

“Too long,” Susan said. “I like ‘Marauders Forever’.”

“‘Safety’,” Draco said. “Then they won’t realise what it is. We can just use it in a sentence. Speaking of, what are we going to do about the students with the Mark? Do we make them leave?”

“We can’t make them leave,” Hermione said. “I’m going to send a couple of house-elves with the students, with orders to knock out anyone who’s causing trouble, especially with the Mark. They won’t concern themselves with elves; they never do. Are we agreed on ‘Safety’ then?”

Everyone nodded and Hermione tapped the frame with her wand. The tunnel led to another portrait in room 8 of the Hog’s Head, a portrait of a young girl.

None of them knew who the girl was – questioning Abeforth led only to a sad expression on the old man’s face and they relented immediately.

***

At Ravenscroft Manor, they were also preparing for war, but their preparations were much more obvious.
Amelia, Augusta, Alice and Frank had moved across to Potter Manor, leaving the Black property empty, but not for long.

The first floor had been cleared of stud walls entirely, leaving one huge open-plan room, which was filled with hospital beds. The walls were filled with vials of healing potions and bandages and other medical supplies, and Jen was in the process of conjuring curtains to separate the cots.

Andromeda had been given a two-way mirror and was standing ready; she would man the infirmary along with Luna, Daphne and the students they had been training. Alice was a trained auror, but she and Frank had agreed that they didn’t want to put Neville in the position of losing them both – and she was better at healing spells – so she would also help in the infirmary.

Downstairs, Sirius was busy in the ballroom. Using a list of students Addie had given them, he had conjured enough sleeping bags for everyone in the lower four years, plus extras, just in case.

Slowly by surely, the room turned into a giant common room, with small tables with chess and gobstone sets, shelves of books transported from the Potter Manor library (no one wanted to take a chance on the books in the Ravenscroft library – it was still a Black property after all), and several wizarding wireless sets and charmed CD players.

After just a moment’s hesitation, Sirius waved his wand once more and the colours on the wall changed to gold, red, blue, bronze, black, yellow, green and silver.

“Not bad,” Remus commented from behind him. “But …” He flicked his own wand, and the colours settled into slightly more harmonious decorations.

“Show off,” Sirius muttered, turning his back on the ballroom. “Where have you been?”

“Out in The Shack,” Remus explained.

The Shack was a large broom-shed in the hidden grounds of Ravenscroft Manor. Since there was no way into those grounds without using the transport stone in the kitchen, and that was under its own Fidelius, there was no way for Voldemort to find it, which made it perfect for what they wanted it for.

Remus had spent the last few days enlarging the interior until it was big enough to fit over 300 small cells, each separated by Silencing and Shield Charms.

Since Dobby and Winky would be busy, Jen had hired two new house-elves to man the prison and make sure that any Death Eaters that arrived were disarmed and separated.

“Done?” Jen asked from the stairs.

Both men turned to face her, identical frowns on their faces.

“Jen, I wish you’d leave these things to us,” Remus said, more out of obligation than anything else.

Jen rolled her eyes. “Once again, gentlemen, I am pregnant, not paralysed. I am not made of glass and I am perfectly capable of performing simple spells.”

“They are not simple spells,” Sirius protested.

Remus chuckled. “You forget, Padfoot, that you’re talking to the most powerful witch of our generation. They are simple to her.”
Jen smiled, a hint of a blush gracing her cheeks. “Why, thank you, love. Is the prison ready for me to charm the Portkeys?”

“Ready and waiting,” Remus said. “Just …”

“Be careful and don’t overdo it,” Jen finished with a sigh. “I know.”

***

Harry’s whistle cut through the Room of Requirement and the Defence Association fell silent.

“Alright, listen up. I know many of you share our concerns that Riddle will take the opportunity to attack while Dumbledore’s gone. There’s nothing we can do about that. What we can do is make damn sure we win.”

Hermione opened a box and lifted out a small round disk. “These were sent by Harry’s godmother this morning. They’re Portkeys, but they’re not for you. You take out a Death Eater in battle, simple slap one on him or her, press the button in the middle, and they’ll get taken to a specially designed prison far away from here until the Ministry gets their act together. You will get several each; if you can make sure a Death Eater won’t get up again, please do.”

“Where are our healers?” Daphne asked, watching several hands rise across the room. “I know you’re not as confident in duelling, which means that we’ll need you to come with Luna and I to accompany the younger years and stick around in the hospital for when people start appearing. Everyone still have their Portkeys?”

There was a flurry of nods.

“Good,” Harry said grimly. “Marauders together.”

“Marauders forever!” The DA responded.

As they filed out, Harry turned to the others. “We’re not ready.”

“We’re as ready as we’ll ever be,” Susan pointed out. “There’s not much else we can do. Do we know which way Voldemort’s likely to come from?”

“Well, he’s got three options,” Draco said. “Through Hogsmeade from the west, the moors from the east or the forest from the south.”

“You don’t think he’ll apparate directly in front of the gates then?” Ginny asked.

“He can’t,” Hermione said. “I’ve extended the anti-apparition wards as far as I can without claiming the ownership.”

“Even if you hadn’t, I doubt he’d take the chance of being surprised,” Draco added. “He’ll want to be able to see what they’re up against. I think the moors are more likely. He does still have to break through part of the forest, but it’s just dense trees; there’s nothing in there, really, not like he’d have to deal with if he came through the Forbidden Forest. And Hogsmeade would attract too much attention. Are you going to claim the castle?”

“I will,” Hermione said. “I don’t want him to have time to work around that.”

“What about fliers?” Cedric asked. “Would they fly in?”

“Wards won’t let them,” Hermione said. “It’s plausible that they will have fliers, but so will we …
Although will we use those given the Dementors?’

“They can all cast a Patronus,” Ron said, looking grim, “and they all know the risks, but I don’t know if we’ll run with them.”

“Are we completely on our own?” Daphne asked.

“Well, the remaining teachers, obviously,” Harry said. “I’m quite glad Hagrid’s with the Order, at least we know he’s safe.”

“Why is he with the Order?” Draco asked. “I can’t imagine he’d be much help.”

It was not said with any malice, and Harry just shrugged. “Apparently Dumbledore ‘thinks’ a creature might be guarding the Horcrux.”

“We can get hold of most of my brothers,” Ron said. “Except Percy, the git. And Angie and Alicia have lines to Oliver, so he might bring some people.”

“And the Marauders,” Hermione added. “And Frank, Augusta and possibly Amelia.”

“We should at least try to contact the Ministry,” Susan said. “Whether we think they’ll listen or not.”

“What about the Order?” Daphne asked. “Is there a way we can contact them?”

Hermione smirked. “Fawkes?”

The phoenix appeared in a burst of flame and swooped around the room, before settling on Hermione’s shoulder.

“Of course,” Susan breathed, stroking the bird’s feathers gently. “He’s tied to the school, not the Dumbledore.”

“You’ll take a message to Dumbledore for us, won’t you?” Hermione asked.

Fawkes trilled and bobbed his head.

“You know, I’m still having trouble believing it,” Cedric commented. “I’m with you all the way when it comes to Dumbledore being a manipulative git, but I can’t believe he’d abandon the school thinking that Voldemort would attack.”

“I don’t think he does,” Hermione said. “I think he genuinely believes that Voldemort won’t make the final push until Harry’s of age, but I think he thinks there will be an attack – not a large one, just one we can afford to concede. He wants us – or rather, Harry – to realise that he needs Dumbledore around to win the war. Right?”

Fawkes trilled affirmatively again, but with a look on his face that could only have been described as a pout.

“He’s not listening to you, is he?” Harry murmured. “Still wants to get his ‘weapon’ back under control?”

Fawkes trilled a third time and hopped from Hermione’s shoulder to Harry’s, rubbing his face against his cheek, singing a few notes apologetically.

“I know,” Harry sighed. “It’s not your fault, Fawkes. As long as the school’s safe. We’ll fix it.”
April 19th 1998

The next two months passed quietly and without incident.

Every evening, Addie, Charity and Aurora held extra classes for OWL and NEWT students who needed the support, but, amazingly, the tutoring/revision plan actually seemed to be working.

“We shouldn’t be surprised,” Addie commented at dinner, one Tuesday evening. “Dumbledore’s not stupid enough to leave them high-and-dry – there’d be too much trouble with the Ministry.”

“True,” Aurora conceded. “How’s Jennifer, by the way? She must be June soon.”

Addie nodded. “Five weeks.”

“Do they know what they’re having?” Charity asked.

“Not yet,” Addie answered. “They’ve decided to wait and …” She trailed off, as the noise in the Great Hall abruptly fell away.

A graceful Patronus in the shape of a panther (or maybe a leopard, Addie couldn’t quite tell given that it was pure silver) had just sprung through the doors.

Daphne’s voice erupted from its mouth. “This is not a drill. Repeat: this is not a drill. Riddle’s just appeared at the south side of the Forest with at least 100 Death Eaters.”
The Come and Go Room

April 19th 1998

For a second, there was silence, and then panic broke out among the students.

Before the teachers could move, a loud bang echoed through the Hall and everyone fell silent again, seeing Harry on his feet.

When he spoke, his voice was calm and quiet. “Alright, everyone, let’s make sure this goes our way. Hermione?”

Hermione nodded, getting to her feet. She moved to the centre of the Great Hall, everyone’s eyes fixed on her, and raised her hands. “I, Hermione Jane Granger-Black, the rightful heir of Lady Rowena Ravenclaw, do hereby reclaim Ravenclaw Castle, currently known as Hogwarts School of Witchcraft and Wizardry.”

As her words sank in, she glowed a brilliant white light, forcing everyone to shield their eyes from its glare. When it faded, she was holding a longbow studded with sapphires.

“Kady?” Hermione called.

The house-elf appeared in front of her, bowing low. “How can Kady be of service, Lady Ravenclaw, Mistress.”

Hermione smiled, handing her the bow. “Kindly find a safe place for this and then alert the rest of the house-elves that Hogwarts is under attack.”

Kady’s eyes widened. “Yes, my Lady.”

As she disappeared, Hermione drew her wand. “Everyone who knows protective enchantments, start casting. Piertotum locamotor!”

For a second, nothing happened.

Then there was a loud thud from the Entrance Hall. The doors opened and the suits of armour marched in, forming an army along with statues that seemed to have been created from the very stone of the castle.

“Hogwarts is threatened,” Hermione said. “Man the boundaries; protect us. Do your duty to our school.”

As the army marched out, the three teachers had joined the students in firing protective spells towards the enchanted ceiling, creating a bubble-like shield around the castle.

“You realise, of course, that we can’t keep out You-Know-Who indefinitely,” Aurora whispered.

“Maybe not,” Addie said. “But we can at least delay him. And his name is Voldemort, Aurora; you may as well use it. He’s going to try to kill you either way.”

“Okay,” Harry called over the incantations. “If you are in first, second, third or fourth year, kindly stand and follow Draco and Hermione out of the Great Hall. Healers, with them. All other DA members, please make your way to the front of the Great Hall, along with anyone else who wants to
fight. Anyone who doesn’t, follow the younger years out and make your way to the seventh floor.”

His tone left no room for argument.

Hermione and Draco led the way out of the Great Hall to the Room of Requirement. As they reached it, she tapped her pendant twice with her wand.

The door to the room appeared without prompting and she pushed it open. “We’re going to get you to safety.”

On the last word, the full moon in the portrait widened into a tunnel.

***

Daphne hadn’t waited for Hermione to reach her. She ran straight through the passageway to the now-permanently-reserved room in the Hog’s Head, sending a quick Patronus downstairs to Abe, before flooing to the flat about Weasleys’ Wizard Wheezes.

“Fred! George!”

One of the twins stuck his head round the door, wand in hand. “Who’s the Gryffindor Seeker?”

Daphne rolled her eyes. “A wide-mouthed tree frog. It’s time. Get the others.” She stepped back into the fireplace with another pinch of floo powder. “Ravenscroft Manor!”

***

Hermione stood to one side, turning to face the crowd of students. “This tunnel will lead to a room with a fireplace. Floo to Ravenscroft Manor.”

“Go quickly now,” Draco urged, ushering the first students through. “Jen will have had time to set up the link.”

Hermione’s pendant flashed and she gave a grim smile, sending a Patronus towards the door. “There’s a contingent at the edge of the Forest.”

“Excellent,” Draco said darkly. “That should slow them down.”

Ginny sprinted in, wand in hand. “It’s worse than we thought. We just checked the Map. Either Daphne underestimated, or more have arrived – there are at least two hundred, plus what looks like a fleet of Dementors, judging by the fog coming from the Forest.”

Draco cursed under his breath. “And how many are there on our side?”

“Once you include the students who stayed but aren’t in the DA, and take away the healing students,” Ginny said, “about seventy.”

“We need help,” Hermione said faintly.

“I wrote a letter to the Order,” Ginny said, pressing it into Hermione’s hand. “Better get it to them.”

Hermione nodded. “Fawkes!”

The phoenix appeared in a flash of flames, singing a melodic tune that seemed to calm the nerves of everyone who heard it.
Hermione handed him the note. “Would you take this to Dumbledore please?”

As he disappeared with another trill, there were a few screams inside the tunnel and Sirius emerged, wand in hand, Remus and Frank close behind him.

“Great Hall,” Hermione said, before either could say anything. “Ministry?”

“Jen’s sending a message to Amelia,” Sirius said, “but we’ve got no way of knowing how much help we’re going to get.”

“Bet they don’t come,” Fred said, appearing with Angelina as the three men sprinted out of the door. “Keep going, midgets!”

“Fred …” His girlfriend heaved a sigh, apparently giving up. “At least we didn’t come alone.”

Behind them, Bill, Charlie and George were squeezing past the line of evacuating children, along with Alicia, Oliver Wood, Fleur Delacour, and a woman with dark hair that Hermione didn’t recognise.

At that moment, Fawkes reappeared with Mandy and Arabella.

“You’re back!” Hermione said. “Do I want to know where the others are?”

Mandy looked furious. “They’re not coming. Dumbledore’s insisting that Voldemort won’t attack until Harry’s of age.”

“Of course!” Ginny said, rolling her eyes. “This is all our imagination!”

“He says it’s just a distraction and they won’t get past the wards anyway,” Arabella said.

“I wouldn’t be so sure,” Hermione said.

“We’re going,” Mandy said. “Just get the kids out. Great Hall?”

“As far as I know,” Hermione said, as they hurried out of the room.

“Ginny, get out of here,” Bill said. “It’s not safe.”

Ginny scowled at him. “I’m better trained than some of the seventh years.”

Augusta popped out of the tunnel, much to Hermione’s surprise. “Neville?”

“Great Hall,” Hermione answered automatically. “Getting ready to fight.”

“Well, of course he is,” Augusta said proudly. “And I must go and join him.” She trotted out of the room with a speed that belied her age.

“I don’t care if you’re trained,” Bill was saying. “Mum and Dad would kill me – this isn’t your fight!”

“The hell it isn’t!” Ginny snapped. “He tried to use my soul to come back, in case you’d forgotten!”

Bill’s next argument was interrupted by a scuffle in the tunnel, and another red-haired figure emerged.

“I came as soon as I could! Madam Bones is trying to round up Ministry workers, but no one’s
listening; I couldn’t just sit back and do nothing. Am I too …?”

Percy broke off, having clearly not been expecting to see nearly his whole family standing in front of him.

There was a very awkward silence, as Draco continued to usher students through the tunnel and the Weasleys stared at each other.

In a wildly transparent attempt to break the tension, Fleur – now Bill’s fiancée – turned to Hermione. “Hermione, this is Katherine – Charlie’s wife.”

“Oh, hi!” Hermione shook hands with the young woman she hadn’t recognised. “Welcome to Hogwarts. Sorry about the …”

“I was a fool!” Percy shouted suddenly, making them jump. “I was an idiot! I was a …”

“… Pompous, power-hungry, family-disowning, Ministry-loving moron,” Fred finished, glaring at Percy, clearly not in a forgiving mood.

Percy swallowed hard. “Yes, I was.”

Fred seemed to consider this for a second, before holding his hand out. “Well, you can’t say fairer than that. Good to have you back, Perce.”

“As touching as this is,” Hermione said, “we’re under attack and we’re outnumbered, so get going!”

As they left the room, a shudder ran through the castle, shaking the floor beneath them.

“What was that?” Ginny asked.

“That was the Death Eaters breaking through the enchantments,” Hermione whispered. “This is it.”

“But what about the diadem?” Ginny asked fearfully. “We still don’t know where it is.”

Hermione closed her eyes and willed herself to calm down. She had already shut off her empathy, but she suddenly realised that there was a strange itch running up and down her spine – claiming the castle had done more than she expected and … there was a Dark object inside the castle.

Even stranger, it seemed to be right on top of them.

“It’s here,” she said suddenly.

“In the castle?” Draco asked.

“In this room,” Hermione said. “Or, rather, in a variation of this room, which makes sense. Riddle would be arrogant enough to believe he was the only one to ever find it.”

Draco sucked in a breath. “I’ve got an idea. You figure that out; I need to find someone.” He shoved a piece of parchment into the hand of one of the healing students, who had hung back to guard the rear. “These are the likely trouble-makers; keep an eye on them.”

As he dashed out of the room, Hermione ushered the last of the younger students into the tunnel. “Ginny, you go and …”

At that moment, the last person Hermione had expected emerged from the tunnel.
“Jen, what the hell are you doing here?!” Ginny demanded. “You’re eight months pregnant.”

Jen was pale faced, strong Glamour Charms and protective spells around her midsection making her pregnancy impossible to see. “Where’s Remus?”


Her warning was for nothing, however, as Jen hurried out of the door.

“Oh, for …” Hermione cut herself off. “Ginny, come on!”

They stepped out of the Room of Requirement, just as Draco returned. “I’ve got it,” he said. “I know what happened.”

“Oh, ginny, go and help the others,” Hermione said. “We’ll join you as soon as she can.”

As Ginny hurried away down the corridor, Hermione began pacing up and down. *I need to find the place where the Horcrux is hidden.*

The door reappeared and she dragged Draco inside, only for both of them to stop dead.

“Whoa …” Draco whispered.

They were standing in a huge room, the size of a large cathedral, which great high windows sending shafts of light down upon piles and piles of objects hidden by generations of Hogwarts inhabitants; teetering piles of broken and damaged furniture, thousands upon thousands of books, mountains of forbidden items.

Hermione shook herself and turned to Draco. “Alright, let’s start searching. Where did you go, anyway?”

“Rowena Ravenclaw’s lost diadem is lost,” Draco said. “No one in living memory has seen it.”


“Then why did we never think to ask someone who’s dead?” Draco asked.

Hermione grimaced. “I don’t know. You asked one of the ghosts?”

“Yeah, turns out the Grey Lady is Helena Ravenclaw,” Draco said. “She stole the diadem while her mother was still alive and ran away. When her mother was on her death-bed, she begged one of Helena’s suitors to find her and bring her home. The Baron tracked her to Albania. When she heard him coming, she hid the diadem in a tree. They argued; he stabbed her. When he realised what he’d done, he stabbed himself, and was forced to bear his chains for all eternity.”

“Chains?” Hermione repeated, gingerly opening a chest. “You mean the Bloody Baron? That’s why he’s covered in blood?”

“That’s it,” Draco said. “Turns out, Helena told this story to one other person.”

“Let me guess,” Hermione said. “Tom Riddle. When he was Head Boy?”

“Exactly,” Draco said. “Dumbledore said he came back to Hogwarts to ask for the DADA job.”

“You think he wanted it?” Hermione asked. “Or did he just want an excuse to come back and hide the diadem?”
“Who knows?” Draco said. “Does it really matter?”

“I suppose not,” Hermione said. “I guess that explains his connection to Albania.”

“Hey,” Draco said sharply. “Is this it?”

Hermione closed the trunk she was rooting through and jogged towards his voice. She found him staring at a bust of a very old and ugly warlock, which had a sparkling tiara perched on top of it.

As Hermione lifted it down, the door opened and closed again.

“Were you followed?” Hermione whispered.

“I don’t think so,” Draco murmured. “I’ll go and make sure.” He drew his wand and disappeared around the corner.

Hermione carefully examined the diadem. It held a magnificent sapphire, silver strands shaped around it like the body and wings of an eagle.

It was altogether too beautiful to destroy.

Drawing her wand, Hermione aimed it at the diadem. “Aufero malum res.”

Black smoke poured from the diadem and Hermione quickly set up a shield that forced the spoke into the bust.

That was something she didn’t mind destroying.

Before she could retrieve the basilisk fang from her bag, however, there was a soft footfall behind her.

A spike of emotion in the air caused to hit the ground, just in time for a chilling jet of green light to fly over her head, colliding with a cabinet.

“Nott,” Hermione snarled, getting to her feet. “Why am I not surprised?”

“The Dark Lord will be victorious, Mudblood,” Nott sneered. “I don’t know how you fooled the castle …”

“I didn’t,” Hermione interrupted. “My mother was a pureblood. Some of us are secure enough in our abilities that we don’t have to hide behind our blood status.”

“Then you’re as bad as Potter,” Nott said. “An upstart half-blood.”

Hermione smirked. “I have the same blood status as your precious Dark Lord, you know. Pureblood mother, Muggle father. At least my mother was a proper witch, rather than a near Squib.”

Fury clouded Nott’s features, but a Stunning Spell hit him from behind before he could fire another curse.

Hermione relaxed. “Thanks.”

“No problem,” Draco said, bending to put a Portkey on Nott. “Crabbe and Goyle were lurking near the door. They were easily stopped though.”

“I transferred the Horcrux into the bust,” Hermione said. “Pity Nott’s Killing Curse didn’t hit that
instead of the cabinet.”

“That would have been rather ironic,” Draco agreed.

Hermione retrieved the bag of basilisk fangs and held one out to Draco. “Do you want to do the honours?”

Draco took the fang, but as he lifted it, the bust suddenly blinked.

“Draco Malfoy … you need not betray your blood like this … I am the Heir of Slytherin … join me and I will give you the world …”

“My world relies on you being gone,” Draco said. “And you got disowned; I am the Heir of Slytherin, you son of a bitch.”

He plunged the fang into the white marble. It yielded easily beneath the venom; as it shattered, an awful scream echoed through the room.

Hermione clapped her hands over her ears. “The cup didn’t scream.”

“Maybe the less there are, the greater the effect of the destruction,” Draco said, gazing at the destroyed bust speculatively.

Hermione carefully wrapped the diadem and set it on a shelf, taking a moment to memorise the location so she could retrieve it later. “Just one to go then.” She glanced at Draco, who still looked deep in thought. “What are you thinking?”

“I’m thinking …” Draco said quietly. “Voldemort was planning on making a Horcrux with Harry’s death that Halloween, right?”

“Yes, but he didn’t,” Hermione said. “That’s why he turned the snake into one when he got back, presumably. That, and the diary had been destroyed.”

“But he must have completed the ritual before he reached Godric’s Hollow,” Draco said. “He wouldn’t have had time after Harry was killed, so all he had to do was commit murder and transport the soul portion into the vessel. Thing is, no one’s ever said that the ‘evil act’ needed to split your soul has to be murder.”

Hermione sucked in a breath, “You’re not saying …?”

“Look at Harry’s scar,” Draco said. “The way it hurts when Voldemort’s feeling strong emotions, the way he can see through Voldemort’s and Nagini’s eyes, the Dark Magic you and Jen both found during Occlumency lessons. I mean … is it possible Harry’s an accidental Horcrux?”
The Battle of Hogwarts

April 19th 1998

No matter how Hermione tried, she could not refute Draco’s theory. “Crap, this isn’t good.”

“Can’t you do what you did with the diadem?” Draco asked.

“I can, but if Harry finds out before we can warn him …” Hermione groaned. “You know Dumbledore’s left Harry some kind of message telling him he needs to die or something.”

“Well, Dumbledore wouldn’t know about the spell you just used, would he?” Draco asked fairly. “I assume it was one of the spells from Salazar’s journal?”

“It was,” Hermione said, “but he told us that there were several ways of destroying a Horcrux without destroying the vessel. We couldn’t use them, because we don’t have the power, but Jen or Dumbledore could manage it.”

“Well, we won’t find him by standing here,” Draco said. “Come on.”

Drawing their wands, they left the Room of Hidden Objects to re-join the fight.

It was clear immediately that the situation in the castle at deteriorated immensely; the walls and ceilings were shaking and dust filled the air.

Lighted wands were approaching the doors and it was a matter of time before Hogwarts was breached completely.

Down on the third floor, they found Ron and Ginny, standing at the broken window, sending jinxes and curses out at the approaching army.

“We’ve dealt with the diadem,” Hermione said, sucking in a breath as Grawp appeared out of the Forest, lumbering towards the Death Eaters with a roar.

“Let’s hope he stops on some of them,” Ron said, as the screams grew louder.

“As long as it’s none of our lot,” Ginny said, firing a well-aimed hex and knocking at least two Death Eaters off their feet.

“Good girl,” Jen said as she joined them. “They look like they’re breaching the North Battlements; they’ve brought giants of their own.”

“We’ve had to abandon the plans,” Ron said. “We never anticipated anything on this scale. The flight teams are a no-go anyway, because of the Dementors.”
“Jen, you need to get out of here,” Draco said.

“Not until I find Remus,” Jen said firmly. She might have said more, but a curse hit the side of the castle and they all ducked as the window frame shattered.

“What’s the new plan?” Hermione shouted over the noise.

“Fight!” Ron shouted back. “Jen, go home!”

“I can’t,” Jen answered.

“Jen …” Hermione began.

“No, I can’t,” Jen repeated. “I’m in labour; there’s no time, and I can’t Portkey – it’s too dangerous.”

Hermione cursed. “Come on!” She dragged Jen into one of the alcoves abandoned by a suit of armour, setting up a protective bubble of enchantments.

“That’s all we need,” Ginny said, frowning. “Will she be okay?”

“I want to know what she’s even doing here,” Draco said. “Remus can handle himself; she’s not usually this …”

He was cut off as yells and shouts and the unmistakable sounds of duelling filled the already dust-filled air.

Ginny’s heart sank.

The Death Eaters had penetrated Hogwarts.

“You two stay here!” Ron yelled, sprinting away.

_We need to find Harry_, Draco said privately. _Hermione and I think he might be a Horcrux._

Ginny cursed out loud, but any other panic would have to wait, for at that moment, Fred and Percy backed into view, both duelling masked and hooded men. _Where the hell did they come from?!

_Might be seventh years if they got up here so fast_, Draco suggested, as they ran forwards to help.

Jets of light flew in every direction as they forced the Death Eaters back; as one of the men turned, his hood slipped and they recognised him as Albert Runcorn, former High Inquisitor and Headmaster of Hogwarts and current Senior Undersecretary to the Minister of Magic, Percy’s immediate boss, proving Draco at least half-wrong.

Percy didn’t show any sign of surprise. “By the way, Runcorn, did I mention I’m resigning?” He cried, sending a hex at him.

“You’re joking, Perce!” Fred shouted gleefully, as the Death Eater he was duelling collapsed under the weight of three Stunning Spells. “You’re actually joking! I don’t think I’ve heard you joke since you were …”

The air exploded.

They had been grouped together – Ginny, Draco, Fred, Percy and the two Death Eaters, one Stunned, the other coughing violently – and, in that moment, when danger had seemed, if only temporarily, at bay, the world was ripped apart.
Ginny felt herself flying through the air and all she could do was hold on as tightly as possible to her one and only weapon. Draco’s hand grasped her wrist and pulled her to him in mid-air, covering them both with a Shield Charm; she could hear screams and yells, without a hope of knowing who they belonged to.

And then, just as suddenly, it all stopped, the world reduced to pain and darkness.

Ginny found herself and Draco half-buried in the wreckage of a corridor that had been subjected to a horrific attack; cold air told her that the side of the castle had been blown away and there was something warm trickling down her cheek.

“Are you alright?” Draco asked shakily, helping her to her feet.

“Yeah, I think it’s just a small cut,” Ginny said, wiping the blood from her face. “Where’s Hermione and Jen?”

As she asked, both women came into view, emerging from the dust that hung in the air like fog.

“Are you both okay?” Draco asked. “Where’s the baby?”

“We’ve given her as much protection as we can,” Jen answered, her face white. “She’s going to have to stay there.” She healed the cut on Ginny’s head. “Are you both alright?”

“We’re fine,” Draco answered for both of them.

A shout went up behind them, and they stumbled together over the stone and wood, towards the horrible cry that seemed to echo through the corridor, expressing an agony that no curse could home to match.

“NO!” Someone was shouting. “Fred – no!”

And Percy was shaking their brother, who was lying, eyes closed, in the middle of the rubble, the ghost of a laugh still echoed on his face.

“NO!” Ginny fell to her knees, collapsing onto her brother’s chest, feeling Draco rest a sympathetic hand on her shoulder, hearing him offer tentative words of apology to Percy,

Then, amazingly, she realised the flesh beneath her was moving. “He’s alive!”

“What?” Percy choked out.

Ginny brushed the dirt from her fallen brother’s face, trailing her fingers down to his neck, to the pulse point and, sure enough, a faint beating was evident below her fingers. “He’s alive, He’s got a pulse; he’s breathing.”

Jen cast a quick diagnosis spell. “He’ll be fine. Excuse me.” She sprinted into the darkness of the school, to be replaced by Ron, who had fought his way back.

At the sight of his brother, he fell to his knees, face pale and grime-covered.

“He’s alive,” Ginny whispered. “He’s just unconscious.”

But then a body fell pass the hole blown into the side of the school, vanishing on the way – it was one of theirs, but they were alive, at least for now –and curses flew in at them from the darkness.

“Get down!” Draco shouted. He and Ron had already grabbed Ginny and Hermione and pulled them to the floor, but Percy stayed where he was, shielding Fred from further damage.
“We’ve got to move!” Hermione said sharply, but Percy shook his head. “Percy, there’s nothing we can do. Even if we could get him to the hospital wing, there’s no one there – why didn’t his Portkey activate?”

“He gave it to an injured student,” Percy said hoarsely. “They didn’t have one.”

Draco rolled his eyes. “Oh, get out of the way!”

Ron, Hermione and Ginny finally managed to wrench Percy away and Draco sent a jet of green light at Fred that caused him to vanish. “Where is he?!” Percy demanded.

“Ravenscroft Manor,” Draco said. “It’s a Malfoy transportation spell. Why must you insist on complicating things that are really quite simple?”

“Simple?” Ginny repeated. “Last time you used that spell, you were unconscious for two weeks.”

“I’m not half-unconscious this time,” Draco reassured her. “And I’ve been practicing.”

Hermione screamed and, as everyone spun around, they didn’t need to ask why: a monstrous spider the size of a small car was trying to climb through the huge hole in the wall.

“REDUCTO!” The spells collided, and the monster was blown backwards, its legs jerking, vanishing into the darkness.

Ron ran to the hole to watch its descent. “It brought friends! The Death Eaters must have infiltrated through Aragog’s nest!”

Hermione ran to his side and they fired Stunning Spells down at the leader, knocking it into its followers so they all fell into the darkness.

More curses came soaring over Hermione’s head, so close she felt them lift her hair as they passed. “We need to move! Now!”

Draco had pushed Ginny ahead of him, and he, Ron Hermione and Percy ran after her into the next corridor, which was swarming with people, whether friends or foes, it was difficult to tell.

“ROOKWOOD!” Percy yelled, sprinting after another Death Eater, but Draco pulled the rest of them behind a tapestry on to a hidden staircase.

“What are we going to do now?” Ginny asked in a hushed voice as they huddled a few steps down.

“I don’t know,” Hermione admitted. “Where’s Harry?”

“I saw him briefly,” Ron said. “He went to Dumbledore’s office to see if he left anything that could help us.”

Hermione gave a little moan.

“We need to get to him,” Draco said firmly.

“Why?” Ron asked.

“Harry might be one of them,” Hermione said. “We need to find him, before he figures that out as
well, and does something stupid!"

Before Ron could respond, the tapestry was ripped away to reveal to Death Eaters.

Before they could even raise their wands, Hermione reacted. “Glisseo!”

The stairs beneath their feet flattened into a chute and all four hurtled down it, unable to control their speed but fast enough to avoid the curses that flew harmlessly over their heads.

They shot through the concealing tapestry at the bottom and spun around. While it was only Quidditch reflexes that kept the others on their feet, Hermione had been ready and pointed her wand at the tapestry. “Duro!”

There were two loud crunches as the tapestry turned to stone and the Death Eaters pursuing them crumpled against it.

They ran down the next staircase to the first floor and found themselves in another corridor full of chaos. The portraits were crammed with figures, screaming advice and encouragement, while Death Eaters, masked and unmasked, duelled students.

Every now and then, one of the students would pull a Dark Mark distractor from their pocket and throw it into the fray; like the Detectors, they sought out the Dark Mark and, unlike the Detectors, attached themselves to the Death Eaters’ arms, distracting them and allowing the students to get a few shots in.

Fred and George must have brought supplies with them and got them dispersed before the Death Eaters got in.

They dropped to the floor as a green light flew over their heads and struck the wall behind them, sending pieces of stone flying everywhere.

Ginny screamed as one piece hit a student in the back of the head, but his Portkey activated before he hit the floor.

The foursome raised their wands at once, ready to strike, but the duellers were weaving and darting around so much that there was a strong risk of striking their own side if they cast curses.

As they waited for an opportunity to act, Peeves zoomed over them, dropping Snargaluff pods on the Death Eaters’ heads, which were suddenly engulfed in wriggling, green tubers like fat worms.

“Brilliant, Peeves!” Hermione cried.

Peeves gave her a salute. “Don’t mention it, your Ladyship.”

Dean made the most of the Death Eaters’ momentary distraction, knocking one of them out with a Stunning Spell, while Parvati hit the other one with a Body-Bind Curse. The two students darted forwards and clapped Portkeys to the two men, transporting them away.

“Let’s go!” Ron yelled, and the four of them pelted, heads down, through the midst of the fighters, slipping in pools of Snargaluff juice, towards the top of the marble staircase into the Entrance Hall.

There were more duellers all over the stairs and in the Hall, Death Eaters everywhere they looked: Yaxley, close to the front door, in combat with Addie; a masked Death Eater duelling Sirius right next to them. Neville emerged from nowhere with a few other DA members, all brandishing armfuls of Venomous Tentacular, which looped itself happily around the nearest Death Eater and began
“Split up!” Hermione shouted, as she and Ginny veered off to the left. “We could use the Map really.”

“Harry has it,” Ginny said. “We should have made more copies.”

They turned down one of the side corridors, only to come face to face with Fenrir Greyback.

The two young women backed up hastily, brandishing their wands.

“Well, well … all alone, ladies. Can’t be safe on a night like this.”

“We’ve got wands and you don’t,” Ginny said, far more bravely than she felt. “There’s two of us and one of you. I think we have the advantage.”

Greyback grinned, showing yellow, pointed teeth. “Guess again, sweetheart.”

“Leave them alone,” Remus warned from behind them.

“Ah, Remus,” Greyback greeted, as though they were old friends bumping into each other in Diagon Alley. “No missus today? What a shame. I hear congratulations are in order.”

Remus narrowed his eyes. “Stay away from my family.” He firmly pushed Hermione and Ginny behind him. “That includes them. They’re right; you’re outnumbered.”

“Taken your potion tonight?” Greyback asked gleefully. “I know I have.”

Three pairs of eyes turned automatically to the window, where the full moon was emerging.

It was suddenly very obvious why Jen had come to the castle that night and why she refused to leave.

Remus froze. “Girls, run! Now!”

Neither needed to be told twice.

Turning on their heels, they sprinted back the way they’d come, reaching the staircase at the same time as Ron and Draco.

“We can’t find Harry,” Ron told them, ducking a Slicing Hex that hit a Death Eater behind them.

“It’s a full moon; we need to find Jen,” Hermione said, putting up a Shield Charm.

To her horror, before anyone could do anything, Sirius and Addie fell in quick succession, the latter with a painful scream. The Portkeys they were wearing activated almost before they hit the ground and they vanished.

Ron grabbed Hermione’s arm before she could move. “Don’t do anything rash.” He pointed his wand at Jen, who was duelling another Death Eater. “Help me out here!”

Three other wands aimed, four voices chanted: “Accio Jen!”

Summoned out of the path of a Killing Curse, Jen flew towards them, managing to land on her feet. A howl down the corridor told her more than Hermione or Ginny could, and she sprinted off, transforming mid-stride.

As soon as she and Moony made contact, their bond would force his human mind back into control,
which would get rid of half the danger at least, and hopefully they could then deal with the other half; Greyback with control was somehow even more terrifying than the idea of Greyback without it.

“Ready?” Draco asked grimly.

Ron nodded. “Let’s do this.”

The quartet sprinted down the marble staircase; glass shattered to their left and the Slytherin hourglass that recorded house points spilled his emeralds everywhere, so that people slipped and staggered as they ran.

Two bodies fell from the balcony overhead as they reached the ground and a grey blur sped down the stairs to sink its teeth into one of the fallen.

“NO!” Hermione shrieked; with a deafening bang from her wand, Greyback was thrown backwards from the feebly stirring body of Lavender Brown.

As her Portkey activated, her attacker hit the banisters and struggled to return to his feet. Then, with a bright white flash and a crack, a crystal ball fell on the top of his head and he crumpled to the ground and lay still.

“I have more!” Professor Trelawney cried from the top of the stairs. “I have more for those who want them! Here!”

With a movement like a tennis serve, she heaved another enormous crystal ball out of her bag, waved her wand through the air and caused the ball to fly across the hall, flying through the window.

At the same time, the heavy wooden front door burst open and more of the gigantic spiders forced their way into the Entrance Hall.

Screams of terrors filled the air; the fighters scattered, Death Eaters and students alike, and red and green jets of light flew into the midst of the oncoming monsters, which shuddered and reared, more terrifying than ever.

However, with a great effort, they began to retreat under an onslaught of spells, as both sides joined forces momentarily.

Ginny and Draco ran forwards to help drive them back, fighting their way to the front of the crowd, but progress was impeded just outside the door by a monumental foot, which swung down out of the darkness and made the ground on which they stood shudder.

They looked up.

A giant stood before them, twenty feet high, its head hidden in shadow, nothing visible but its huge shins, illuminated by the castle light.

With one brutal, fluid motion, it smashed a giant fist through an upper window and glass rained down on the, forcing Draco to expel a shield to cover them.

“Merlin!” Hermione screamed, as she and Ron caught up with them.

“DON’T!” Draco yelled, seizing her wand arm. “Stun it and it’ll crush half the castle!”

“HAGGER?”

Grawp came lurching towards them; only now did Hermione truly appreciate that Grawp was indeed
an undersized giant.

The gargantuan monster that was currently trying to crush people on the upper floors looked around and let out a roar. The stone steps trembled as he stomped towards his smaller kin, and Grawp’s lopsided mouth fell open, and they launched themselves at each other with the savagery of lions.

“Come on!” Ron yelled. “We need to find Harry!”

But Ginny was still, staring out at the grounds in horror, and it wasn’t long before the others realised why. The air had frozen; their breath caught and solidified in her chest.

Shapes moved out in the darkness, swirling figures of concentrated blackness, moving in a great wave towards the castle, their faces hooded and their breath rattling …

Ron, Hermione and Draco closed in beside her, their shared warmth doing little to cut through the sudden chill.

“Where’s Harry when you need him?” Ron muttered. “Expecto Patronum!”

A silver terrier leapt out of his wand, running at the Dementors, followed by two winged horses, Hermione’s Grim, and a dozen others from inside the castle, scattering the Dementors and driving them away.

Suddenly, the shouts from inside the castle changed. Draco glanced over his shoulder and immediately pulled the other three off the steps and into the shadow of the building.

The Death Eaters were flooding back into the Forest, none of them taking any notice of the students, even the ones firing curses after them.

No one was naïve enough to believe this was a surrender, which was proven a few minutes later, when a high, cold voice filled the air, sending a shiver of dread through everyone who heard it.

“You have fought valiantly. Yet you have sustained heavy losses. If you continue to resist me, you will all die, one by one. You have thirty minutes. Dispose of your dead with dignity. Treat your injured. I speak now, Harry Potter, directly to you. You have permitted your friends to die for you rather than face me yourself. I shall wait for half an hour in the Forbidden Forest. If, at the end of that time, you have not come to me, then battle recommences. This time, I shall enter the battle myself and I shall find you and I shall punish every last man, woman and child who has tried to conceal you from me. Half an hour.”

Silence fell over the grounds, broken only by the sounds floating out from the castle.

“Harry!” Hermione called. “If you can hear me, don’t you dare! There’s another way!”

“Do you think he’ll do it?” Ginny asked.

“I don’t know,” Ron sighed. “No. No, he wouldn’t. He wouldn’t be that stupid.”

***

Harry had not waited for Voldemort to make his offer. He was already walking through the Forbidden Forest, his Invisibility Cloak folded up under his robes.

As each step took him closer to death, he seemed to get lighter.

No wonder Dumbledore had treated him like a weapon – he was never expected to survive.
Part of him wished he could have said goodbye, but it was easier this way. They would only try and talk him out of it, and this needed to happen tonight.

There was a plan, and Draco would stick to it, with any luck.

Once Harry was dead, they could kill the snake and Voldemort would be mortal.

With the prophecy fulfilled, anyone could finish the Dark Lord off.

“Master …”

That was Bellatrix, up ahead.

“Be quiet, Bella. Never let it be said that I am not a man of my word. Potter will come.”

Bellatrix knew better than to question her master, but her silence spoke volumes.

A twig cracked under Harry’s feet, but he didn’t care.
He was not looking to hide his approach.

Sure enough, when he entered the clearing, all eyes were on him.


Harry held his wandless hands at his side and said nothing.

“And no Dumbledore.” Voldemort laughed humourlessly. “Does he have that much faith in his hero or does he truly believe that I would not take advantage of his absence.”

Again, Harry didn’t answer.

“I’m disappointed in you, Potter,” Voldemort said. “I expected you to put up more of a fight. Still, the prophecy ends tonight. Avada kedavra!”

The green light sped towards him and Harry closed his eyes, thinking of his friends, his family, his parents … the baby god-sibling he would never meet … and Hermione, the way her smile lit up her eyes and her laugh lifted his soul.

Her face was the last thing Harry saw before he died.
Severed Ties

April 19th 1998

White.

Harry blinked, trying to bring something into focus, but all he could see was white.

Slowly, he got to his feet.

Wherever he was, he was alone, in a great expanse of space. His wand was missing from his wrist holster, as was the Invisibility Cloak – but then, he supposed he didn’t need them if he was dead.

He began walking, unsure what else to do, in this great big world of nothing.

As he walked, his surroundings began to come into being, although they remained the same blank canvas.

It looked rather like King’s Cross station, except he had never seen King’s Cross without the crowds of people or the trains, so he couldn’t be sure.

Up ahead was a bench and the first sign of life – a quiet whimpering sound.

Harry approached the bench cautiously and peered beneath it. Lying on the ground was the ugliest baby he had ever seen, red raw and whimpering with pain.

Harry hesitated. Surely he should try to help the child.

“You can’t help.”

Harry jumped, spinning around to see a young woman a few years older than him, who certainly hadn’t been there a few seconds ago. She had blonde hair pulled back in a pony-tail and sparkling brown eyes – the same brown eyes as his father. “You’re a Potter, aren’t you?”

The woman smiled at him. “That’s right, Harry. I’m your Aunt Bethany. I was two years younger than your dad, but I died when I was two years old.”

Harry frowned. “If you died when you were two, why do you look like you’re in your twenties?”

“Well, it’s easier for you to communicate with an adult than a toddler,” Bethany said.

“Besides, her soul has had more than enough time on the Other Side to grow up.”

Two older adults were approaching them – a blonde woman who resembled Jen and Sirius and a man who looked just like his father.

Aemilia Dorea Black-Potter swept her grandson into a tight hug. “Oh, Harry, you look so much like James. I’m so sorry I never got a chance to meet you or Lily.”

“You’d have loved Lily,” her husband said, beaming at Harry. He had died six months before James and Lily’s wedding. “And you, young man – you have been so brave, Harry.”

“So brave,” Emily repeated, releasing him. “Although you probably should have spoken to your friends, sweetheart. There was another way.”
Harry’s jaw dropped open. “But …”

“Albus has a lot to answer for,” David said darkly. “But there is one thing he didn’t count on.”

“What’s that?” Harry asked.

“When Tom Riddle used your blood to come back,” Emily said, “he cursed himself. It created a two-way tie.”

“Does that mean that removing the Horcrux any other way wouldn’t have worked?” Harry asked.

“No,” Emily answered. “Not exactly. As long as the Horcrux and the blood connection were there at the same time, any Killing Curse would have this affect. If the Horcrux was removed first and either of you was hit with a Killing Curse, it would kill you both.”

Harry nodded. “So what do I do now?”

“Well, it’s up to you, Harry,” Bethany said. “You can choose to go back, or you can come with us.”

“I have to go back,” Harry said. “You know that.”

“We do,” David said, clapping him on the shoulder. “We are so proud of you, Harry.”

“We are,” Emily agreed, giving him another hug. “You’ll give our love to James, won’t you?”

“I will,” Harry said into her shoulder. “I promise.”

“Tell him I owe him a couple of Howlers,” Emily added. “Gave me a bloody heart attack every month when he was at school.”

“Lighten up, Emmy,” David said, embracing both of them. “Jamie’s his father’s son.”

“More’s the pity,” Emily joked, as they released their grandson. “Good luck Harry.”

Harry blinked, his grandparents shimmering in front of him. When he opened his eyes again, they were gone, leaving him along with Bethany.

“Same goes for me, Harry,” Bethany said, kissing him on the forehead, where his scar was. “Tell James that I love him. And tell Lily thank you, for putting up with the prat.”

Harry laughed. “I will, Aunt Bethany.”

Bethany Potter took a step back. “Time to wake up, Harry.”

“Wait,” Harry said. “Is this real? Or is it all happening inside my head?”

The light around him got steadily brighter and Bethany began to fade from view. “Of course it’s happening inside your head, Harry. Why should that mean it isn’t real?”

The light became so blinding that Harry had to close his eyes.

When the light vanished, he kept his eyes closed. He was no longer in King’s Cross – if that was indeed where he had been.

He was lying on the ground, the scent and sounds of the Forbidden Forest all around him, his Invisibility Cloak pillowed beneath his chest. His arm was bent at an awkward angle, but he didn’t
dare move.

There were no sounds of jubilation from the Death Eaters.

“My Lord …” Bellatrix whispered. “My Lord, are you …?”

“Enough,” Voldemort said sharply, cutting through the whispers.

“Potter?” Bellatrix asked. “Is he dead?”

Footsteps approached him, and Harry forced himself to lie still, keeping his body as still as possible trying to keep his breathing shallow.

Softly scented long hair brushed against his cheek as someone bent over him – a woman. Gentle hands turned him over and checked his pulse.

Harry braced himself for the shout, but it never came.

“Are you alright?” Narcissa whispered to him. “Is Draco alive?”

Harry gave two small nods and she withdrew, straightening up. “He’s dead.”

***

Unaware of the events in the Forbidden Forest, Hermione, Ron, Ginny and Draco ran back into the Entrance Hall, which was now unnaturally silent.

The flagstones were stained with blood, emeralds scattered across the ground, and part of the banisters of the marble staircase had been blown away.

As one, they approached the Great Hall, where survivors stood comforting one another, healing the injuries that had not caused the Portkeys to activate.

Through the door to the antechamber, they could see eight sheet-covered bodies.

Without a word, Ron and Draco turned back to scour the rest of the castle for Harry.

Hermione cast another glance at the antechamber, but allowed Ginny to lead her straight to where the Weasleys had gathered with their friends.

Eight fatalities was not a bad number considering the odds that had stacked against them – but that was not counting anyone who may have passed away in the infirmary.

Katie was clinging to Oliver, who had a nasty cut above his right eye. Katherine was putting her creature healing training to good use, helping Jen with injuries.

Ginny pulled Hermione straight over to Bill, who was treating a cut on George’s head. Upon closer inspection, it became clear that his ear had been blown clear off.

“Ginny,” Bill said, sighing in relief. “Thank Merlin you’re okay! Where are the others?”

“Where’s Fred?!” George demanded. “Something’s wrong.”

“The corridor exploded,” Ginny answered, trying not to remember how pale Fred had been. “He was unconscious; Draco sent him to Ravenscroft.”
“How are you feeling, George?” Hermione asked softly.

“Saint-like,” George answered, his voice croaky with relief.

Alicia, clutching his hand, looked terrified. “What? Was his brain affected?”

George cracked a grin at his girlfriend. “Well, I’m holy now, aren’t I? Get it? Holey?”

Ginny laughed. “Pathetic,” she informed him. “All the ear-related humour at your feet and you come up with holey.”

**Ginny! We need to move!**

As Alicia began to scold George for scaring her, Ginny grabbed Hermione’s hand again. “We’ve got to go.”

“Ginny!” Hermione yelped. “What’s wrong?!”

“Draco,” Ginny said grimly. “They found something.”

**We’re on our way.**

They ran into Ron and Draco just past the top of the marble staircase.

The two young men looked livid.

“Dumbledore’s Pensieve was out on his desk,” Ron growled. “It contained a memory of a conversation between Dumbledore and Snape.”

“About how Harry’s a Horcrux?” Hermione guessed warily.

Draco nodded. “And about how the only way to defeat Voldemort is for Harry to walk out there and let Riddle kill him.”

Ginny cursed violently, turning back towards the front doors. “Come on; we’ve got to find him!”

“Dumbledore must have Obliviated Snape afterwards,” Hermione said as they hurried to the staircase. “He would have told Addie otherwise.”

“Wouldn’t Snape’s Occlumency have blocked that?” Ginny asked.

“Not one of Dumbledore’s,” Hermione answered. “I can only block them because I’m a Natural.”

Halfway down the staircase, Voldemort’s voice washed over them once more, freezing them in place.

“People of Hogwarts. The battle is won. My Death Eaters outnumber you. And the Boy-Who-Lived lives no longer.”

Hermione felt the blood drain from her face and she stumbled, her legs losing the ability to hold her upright.

Ron caught her arm as Draco grabbed Ginny’s, and they raced down the rest of the stairs, as people flooded out of the Entrance Hall towards the grounds.

“NO!” Jen’s scream seemed to echo through the castle and across the grounds, and it was even
worse than the cold chill of Voldemort’s voice, because Jennifer Lupin was always in control, even when she seemed not to be, but now the anguish in her voice could not be faked, and no one had any doubt that her world had been ripped apart.

The slipped and slid through the emeralds scattered across the Entrance Hall and joined the crowd, finally emerging into the cool summer’s night.

There, illuminated by the light from the castle, Voldemort stood waiting, flanked by his Death Eaters, Nagini lying patiently near her master.

At his feet lay the still, dead body of Harry James Sirius Potter.
Chapter Notes

Once again, if you recognise anything, it's because the book did it better than I can.

See the end of the chapter for more notes.

April 20th 1998

Hermione screamed – a long, drawn-out cry that seemed to echo through the grounds. Dimly, she could hear Bellatrix laughing manically, but it had yet to register as her legs buckled beneath her. She felt Ron and Draco seize her arms again to keep her upright, but found that she didn’t care.

All around her, shouts and screams filled the air as the survivors took up the cause, screaming and yelling abuse at Voldemort and his Death Eaters.

“SILENCE!” Voldemort shouted – there was a bang and silence was forced upon them.

“Harry Potter is dead,” he announced triumphantly. “Don’t you see now? You’re hero was nothing, ever, than a boy who relied on others to sacrifice themselves for him.”

It was Rom who broke the Silencing Charm upon them. “He beat you!”

Once again, the defenders of Hogwarts were screaming and shouting, until a second, louder bang forced silence upon them once more.

“He was killed as he …” Voldemort broke off as there was a scuffle amongst the crowd.

Neville broke free of the invisible bonds holding them and charged at Voldemort, who disarmed him casually, throwing the wand away with a laugh; Neville hit the ground with a thud.

“And who is this?” He asked in a hiss. “Who has volunteered to demonstrate what happens to those who continue to fight when the battle is lost?”

Bellatrix gave a delighted laugh. “It is Neville Longbottom, my Lord; the son of the aurors, if I remember.”

Hermione blood boiled, her grief and anguish slowly morphing to anger, bubbling beneath her skin. Her gaze flickered across the crowd, catching sight of Frank, frozen in place by Voldemort’s charm like everyone else, horror painted on his face.

“Ah, yes,” Voldemort hissed, looking down at Neville, who was struggling to his feet in the no-man’s land between the Hogwarts and Death Eaters. “You show spirit and bravery and come of noble blood. You would make a very valuable Death Eater. We need your kind, Neville Longbottom.”

“I’ll join you when hell freezes over!” Neville shouted. “Marauders forever!”

There was an answering cheer from the crowd, whom the Silencing Charms seemed unable to hold.
Hermione clamped down on her empathy yet again, focussing her attention on her own anger, which was trying desperately to find an outlet.

There was help coming, if they could just hold on.

“Very well,” Voldemort said, and the silkiness of his voice sent a shiver of terror through the watching crowd. “If that is your choice, Longbottom, then we revert to the original plan. On your head, be it.”

Voldemort waved his wand and, seconds later, the Sorting Hat flew out on one of the castle’s shattered windows, through the half-light, and into Voldemort’s hand, dangling empty and ragged by its tip.

Hermione stiffened, hearing Hogwarts calling out in her head. Obeying without question, she lowered the remaining wards around the castle.

“There will be no more Sorting at Hogwarts School,” Voldemort announced. “There will be no more houses. The emblem, shield and colours of my noble ancestor, Salazar Slytherin, will suffice for everyone.” He pointed his wand at Neville, who grew rigid and still, then forced the Sorting Hat on to his head, so that it slipped over his eyes.

Hermione shifted in place, feeling those around her doing the same. The Death Eaters raised their wands, holding the fighters of Hogwarts at bay.

“Neville is now going to demonstrate what will happen to anyone foolish enough to continue to oppose me,” Voldemort said and, with a casual flick of his wand, the Sorting Hat burst into flames.

Screams split the air and Neville was aflame, rooted to the spot. Hermione drew her wand, as did many others, feeling that they must act.

And then everything seemed to happen at once.

They heard uproar from the distant boundary of the school as what sounded like hundreds of people came swarming over the walls and pelted towards the castle; back-up had finally arrived, a little too late for Harry, but there was time yet for the battle to be won.

At the same time, Grawp lumbered around the side of the castle and yelled, “HAGGER!”

His cry was answered by roars from Voldemort’s giants; they ran at Grawp like a pair of bull elephants, making the earth quake.

Then came hooves and the twangs of bows, and arrows were suddenly falling among Death Eaters, who broke ranks in surprise, as the centaurs unexpectedly joined the fight.

In one swift, fluid motion, Neville broke free of the Body-Bind Curse upon him; the flaming Hat fell off him and he drew from its depths something silver, with a glittering ruby handle.

None heard the swish of the blade over the noise of everything else, and yet it seemed to draw every eye. With a single stroke, Neville sliced off the great snake’s head, which spun high into the air, gleaming in the light of the flooding from the Entrance Hall, and the snake’s body thudded to the ground at his feet.

Voldemort roared with anger and Neville dove to one side to avoid his curse, grabbing his wand and rolling back to his feet.
“HARRY!” Jen screamed. “WHERE’S HARRY?!”

She was right – Harry’s body had vanished from its spot at Voldemort’s feet, but there was no time to think about where it might have gone.

Chaos reigned extreme.

The charging centaurs were scattering the Death Eaters, everyone was fleeing the giant’s feet, and nearer and nearer thundered the reinforcements that had come from who knew where.

The thestrals soared around the heads of Voldemort’s giants, scratching at their eyes while Grawp pummelled them.

The goblins send by Ragnok had recovered themselves and were joining the fight with swords and battle-axes.

And now the wizards, defenders of Hogwarts and Death Eaters alike, where being forced back into the castle.

Hermione found herself buffeted into the Entrance Hall, searching for Voldemort, who was across the room, still screaming instructions. The Horcruxes were gone; with Harry’s death, someone needed to take up the sword, so to speak, but it would be a toss-up whether she got there before Jen did.

Shield charms seemed to be erupting mysteriously everywhere and Voldemort’s would-be victims, Seamus and Hannah, darted past Draco and Ginny into the Great Hall.

Now more people were storming up the front steps and Hermione saw Alice Longbottom and Amelia Bones overtaking a portly man she didn’t know, who was still wearing emerald pyjamas and seemed to be at the head of what looked like the families and friends of every Hogwarts student who had remained to fight, along with the shopkeepers and homeowners of Hogsmeade. Several of them were wearing torn robes, where they seemed to have resigned from the Ministry by ripping the insignia from their uniforms.

The centaurs burst into the Hall with a great clatter of hooves, as the house-elves of Hogwarts swarmed into the Entrance Hall, screaming and waving carving knives and cleavers.

“Ignore your standing orders!” Hermione called to them over the noise. “You are allowed and encouraged to use magic against the Death Eaters!”

They were hacking and stabbing at the ankles and shins of Death Eaters, their tiny faces alight with malice, and everywhere Hermione looked, Death Eaters were folding under the sheer weight of numbers, overcome by spells, dragging arrows from wounds, stabbed in the leg by elves, or else simply trying to escape, but swallowed by the oncoming horde.

But it was not over yet; far from it.

Hermione sped between duellers, past struggling prisoners, and into the Great Hall, just in time to see Jen take a curse to the back and vanish as she fell. Hermione promptly threw a stunner at the Death Eater responsible and clapped a Portkey to his robes.

Voldemort was at the centre of the battle and he was striking and smiting at all within reach. Hermione could not get a clear shot, but fought her way nearer, and the Great Hall became more and more crowded, as everyone who could walk forced their way inside.
She saw Yaxley slammed to the floor by George and Lee Jordan, saw Travers fall with a scream at Sinistra’s hands, saw Macnair thrown across the room, hit the stone wall opposite, and slide unconscious to the ground.

She saw Ron and Neville bringing down Rookwood, Draco Stunning his father, and Percy and Bill flooring Albert Runcorn.

Voldemort was now duelling three people at once, and there was cold hatred in his face as they wove and ducked around him, unable to finish him.

Bellatrix was still fighting too, fifty yards away. Like her master, she duelled three at once: Alice, Ginny and Cedric, all battling their hardest, but Bellatrix was equal to all three, and Hermione’s attention was diverted when a Killing Curse shot so close to Alice that she missed death by an inch.

Memories of Alice’s mental trauma flashed through her mind and Hermione changed directions. “Not in my castle, you bitch!”

Bellatrix spun around, laughing at the sight of the new challenger.

“Out of the way!” Hermione called, and with a swish of her wand, began to duel.

The grief she felt for Harry, combined with the anger she’d felt about what had appeared to be Sirius’s murder, began to manifest itself as her wand slashed and twirled, and Bellatrix’s smile faltered and became a snarl.

Jets of light flew from both wands; the floor around the two witches’ feet became hot and cracked; both were fighting to kill.

As Hermione pushed more and more power into her spells, drawing energy from the very walls of her castle, her glamour faded, her face fading into the recognisable Black features.

“No!” Hermione shouted as a few people ran forwards to help. “She’s mine!”

Other duels slowly came to a stop, and hundreds of people now lined the walls, watching the two fights; Voldemort and his three opponents, and Bellatrix and Hermione.

“What will happen to the rest of your family when I’ve killed you?” Bellatrix taunted, capering around Hermione’s hexes. She seemed to have noticed the change in Hermione’s appearance, but it hadn’t lessened her wish to cause her serious harm – if anything, it made her more determined to kill her. “What will happen when you’ve gone the same way as Potter and my dear cousin?”

The final taunt about Harry – and Sirius, to a lesser extent – hit Hermione hard. “You will never touch my family again! Impedimenta!”

Bellatrix laughed, the same exhilarated laugh Sirius had given just before he was supposedly killed and the watchers knew what was going to happen before it did.

Hermione’s curse soared beneath Bellatrix’s outstretched arm and hit her squarely in the chest, directly over her heart, the increased power stopping it instantly.

Bellatrix’s gloating smile froze; for the tiniest amount of time, she knew what had happened, and then she fell.

The watching crowd roared and Voldemort screamed.
Hermione spun around to see his three opponents blasted backwards, flailing and writhing through the air, as Voldemort’s fury at the fall of his last, best lieutenant exploded with the force of a bomb.

Voldemort raised his wand and pointed it directly at Hermione, who had no way to dodge what was coming.

“PROTEGO!”

A Shield Charm expanded in the middle of the Great Hall and Hermione was left staring around desperately from the source when Harry materialised, to shouts and screams, very much alive, Invisibility Cloak in hand. He threw her the Cloak, motioning for her to get out of the way, and he and Voldemort began to duel.

Hermione felt Ron grab her and pull her back into the crowd.

Unlike the fight between Bellatrix and Hermione, which had been backed by screams and yells, the crowd had fallen silent to watch this duel, Hogwartsians and Death Eaters alike watching the fight in stunned silence. Every now and then, they would draw breath as one or muttering would punctuate the quiet.

The two wizards were missing each other by inches, and Hermione had no idea how Voldemort was anticipating Harry’s next move, because she had been his best friend for six years, and she couldn’t guess. Harry was displaying an amazing combination of wordless and wandless magic that she didn’t know he’d learned.

There was a sudden intake of breath as Harry hit Voldemort’s wand-arm with a Slicing Hex. Before Harry could follow up the attack, however, there were a number of loud cracks and Voldemort and his remaining, living Death Eaters disappeared, taking advantage of the lowered wards.

Before anyone could do anything, Draco sprinted forwards to join Harry in the centre of the Great Hall. With a wave of their hands, two bags flew in from the Entrance Hall, and they twisted sharply on the spot, disapparating with another double crack.

Hermione ran towards them, but was too late to stop them. “HARRY POTTER, WHEN I GET MY HANDS ON YOU, YOU ARE GOING TO WISH YOU WERE DEALING WITH DEATH EATERS!!”

Chapter End Notes

One chapter to go, and then we're done ... at which point I should probably start planning the next story, because I know where to start, but I'm a bit hazy on exactly where it's going ...
April 20\textsuperscript{th} 1998

In a dark forest, Draco and Harry staggered to their feet. Neither had attempted to apparate that far before, and it had taken a lot out of them.

They had been planning this excursion to months, but they had been forced into it early, having originally planned to ‘disappear’ after Harry’s seventeenth birthday. Tracking the magical trace of the Death Eaters’ apparition had been Harry’s idea, and Draco had been sure it wouldn’t work.

Harry had turned to Draco for back-up for several reasons.

Firstly, Draco knew and could counter some of the Darker spells that Harry didn’t, having learnt them from an early age.

Secondly, Draco had more magical power than anyone else in the group, aside from Harry and, maybe, Hermione.

Thirdly, Draco was better at immediate tactics, whereas Ron was better with long-term strategy.

And lastly, though Harry knew she was likely to kill him when he returned, he wanted Hermione to stay safe.

Besides, Hogwarts would need her.

“Thanks for the heart attack,” Draco said.

“No problem,” Harry said absently, looking around. “Where are we?”

“I told you it wouldn’t work,” Draco said, waving his wand. \textit{Tempus}.

Smoke shot from his wand and formed words in the air. \textit{April 20\textsuperscript{th} 1998, 2.30am, Albania.}

“Albania,” Harry read with a smirk. “Also known as suspected hiding place of one Tom Marvolo Riddle. I do believe you owe me two galleons.”

“Alright, alright.” Draco pulled a couple of coins from his robes and tossed them to Harry. “Now hang on.” He paced out a large circle around Harry and the two bags, muttering protective charms under his breath.

“Since we’re in Albania, I’m not restricted by the underage use of magic laws, am I?” Harry asked, pulling a tent out of one of the bags.

“No,” Draco answered. “Nice of Mr Weasley to led us his tent, although I doubt he knew what we wanted it for.” He grimaced. “Hang on, I’m being shouted at.”

Harry sniggered, putting the tent up with a wave of his wand. “I am \textit{so} glad I don’t have a bond with Mione right now.”

Draco closed his eyes. \textit{Ginny?}
DRACO LUCIUS MALFOY, I AM GOING TO MURDER YOU WHEN YOU GET BACK! DO YOU HAVE ANY IDEA HOW WORRIED I AM?

Ginny! Calm down; we know what we’re doing.

What exactly are you doing? Ginny asked in clipped tones, although no longer shouting in his head. And are you prepared for it?

We’ve been prepared for months, Draco assured her. This just pushed our plans forwards, that’s all. We’ve got a tent; we’ve got food; we’re alright.

And the plan? Ginny prompted.

Kill Voldemort before he kills us.

WHAT?!

Draco winced. Merlin, Gin, keep it down, would you? I think Harry heard that!

Sorry. Ginny didn’t sound sorry in the slightest. And what do you propose we mere mortals do in the meantime?

Clean up the Ministry? Draco suggested. Get rid of Fudge? Get rid of Dumbledore? Anything along those lines would be helpful. Actually, I wonder if this’ll work. He cleared his throat and intoned, both aloud and in his head: “I, Lord Draco Lucius Malfoy, Head of the Most Noble Malfoy family and chosen Heir to the Most Ancient and Noble Slytherin line, to hereby grant Ginevra Molly Weasley, granted Lady of the House status by Gringotts Wizarding Bank, permission to hold both the Malfoy and Slytherin Wizengamot seats by proxy.” Think that’ll work?

Should do, Ginny answered. I'll do my best.

I know. Draco sighed, knowing she wouldn’t like what he told her next. Ginny, I need to block the link.

I understand, Ginny assured him sadly. I don’t want you to get distracted. Draco … be careful.

I will. Draco sent a gentle wave of love through the link. I promise, Ginny. I’ll come back to you.

***

As Hermione’s shout faded away, pandemonium broke out in the Great Hall, but Hermione didn’t let it take hold. “QUIET!!”

Her voice echoed through the Hall, cutting through the panic, just as Jen apparated back in. “What did I miss?”

“Harry’s not dead, Voldemort left with the Death Eaters, and Draco and Harry went after them,” Hermione said sharply. “Anyone following you?”

When Jen shook her head, Hermione raised her hand. “Hogwarts, re-engage anti-apparition wards!”

Light flashed through the Great Hall – anyone else coming in was going to have to use the front door, like everyone else.
“Hermione, sit down before you fall down,” Jen said. “Hogwarts students, you have been amazing. Your actions tonight have been exemplary. I ask the uninjured house-elves to set up sleeping bags in the undamaged classrooms and get some food together. We can start clean-up tomorrow. Those of you who came to help us, thank you. If you have a child in first, second, third or fourth year, I can confirm that we managed to evacuate all of those year groups, so unless someone snuck back in when no one was looking, they should all be alright. Any help you can provide would be greatly appreciated. If your child is in fifth, sixth or seventh year, please head over to the right side of the Great Hall, and we will be with you as soon as possible. At the moment, we don’t have a full list of casualties, so please be patient with us.”

As people began to move, she turned to Hermione. “Are you alright?”

Hermione nodded, realising belatedly that there was a trickle of blood running down from a cut on her forehead. “I’m fine,” she said, wiping it away. “We lost eight people that I know of …”

“Eleven,” Susan corrected, approaching her. “Three more were killed in the last bout. They’ve been moved to the antechamber, but I haven’t looked.”

“I’ll do it,” Hermione said. “It’s my castle … I just need a bit of time.”

“Hermione, you’ve done enough,” Jen said gently. “Got some rest; I’ll handle it from here.”

“No,” Hermione said. “I need to … I have to …” Jen, I …” She sighed, leading Jen over to where Bellatrix lay dead on the floor.

Narcissa stood nearby, staring dry-eyed at her sister’s body. At her cousin’s approach, she looked up, swiftly walking over to embrace Jen.

Jen stroked her cousin’s hair, looking down at Bellatrix with an unreadable expression. “Who?”

“Me,” Hermione said softly. “I wasn’t even trying, Jen; it was a … It was an Impedimenta Jinx. It’s not supposed to …”

“It’s not your fault, Hermione. It was you or her.” Jen passed a now-crying Narcissa over, and Hermione let her cry into her robes.

Relieved of her duty, Jen knelt beside Bellatrix, picking up her wand. “You could have had everything,” she said softly. “You had everything, Bella. And you threw it away to worship a hypocrite.”

“I’m sorry,” Hermione whispered, feeling Narcissa shake her head into her robes.

“Don’t be, Hermione,” Jen said heavily. “Bellatrix Lestrange deserved to die. But I can’t help mourning for the woman that Bella Black could have been.” She reached out and gently closed her cousin’s eyes. “Sleep peacefully now, Bella. And I pray that you find some redemption in the next life.”

“My son …” Narcissa whispered, lifting her head. “Where’s my son?”

“I don’t know,” Hermione admitted. “I’m sure he has a plan.”

Ginny hurried up to them and Hermione was about to ask her to reassure Narcissa, when the redhead said something that made her blood run cold. “Did anyone see what happened to Greyback? Because no one remembers Portkeying him out and the moon hasn’t set yet.”
“Shit,” Hermione muttered. “The lack of screams is reassuring, but … go and check the third floor corridor.”

Ginny glanced over at Jen, who was now speaking to Amelia and had apparently not heard them. “Right, got it.”

As she hurried away, Hermione felt Hogwarts shiver around them. “Amelia,” she called. “The Minister of Magic’s on his way with the aurors.”

“It’s about bloody time,” Amelia muttered. “Let’s set up the welcoming committee then.”

***

In Ravenscroft Manor, Andromeda, Luna and Daphne were running the infirmary like a Muggle military operation. As soon as the injured were treated, they were either given a bed or told the return activation for the Portkey so they could return to the battle.

One of the fifth year Healers had been given a list of Hogwarts students and had checked off everyone downstairs in the ballroom, as well as kept a record of the people who had Portkeyed in and out.

It was Ron who had the common sense to send them a Patronus to tell them that the battle had been won, even if the war was still on-going, and Daphne made the decision not to send anyone else back to the castle.

As the general pandemonium died down, she caught sight of Luna gazing at a world map on the wall. “Luna?”

Barely blinking, Luna didn’t look away. “James and Lily won’t be happy about Harry running off like that.”

Daphne sighed. “I know. They deserve to see the end of the war, but how can they? Remus and Jen have searched everywhere.”

“Why don’t we try apparating to the people rather than the place?” Luna asked.

Daphne opened her mouth to argue, then paused. Strictly speaking, one needed coordinates to apparate anywhere, so it wasn’t possible to apparate to a person.

But had anyone tried it?

“The wards wouldn’t let us,” she said cautiously. “Would they?”

“The Death Eaters must apparate on somehow,” Luna said. “And Addie apparated out without a wand.”

It was certainly worth a go, she decided – the worst case scenario was that nothing happened. “Alright, come on then.”

Andromeda was with a patient, so she called over to one of the seventh year Ravenclaws. “Mirabelle, hold the floor!”

Daphne and Luna headed downstairs, popping into the ballroom on the way.

A few students were unconscious in the corner, guarded by a few of the house elves.
“The Battle of Hogwarts has been won,” Daphne announced. “We’ll send you back as soon as we can.”

They slipped out amidst the cheers jubilation, and took the transport stone out to the surrounding forest, where Daphne took Luna’s arm and walked her to the apparition spot.

“Okay, focus on the Potters as hard as you can.” Daphne closed her eyes, picturing the couple she’d seen in Jen’s Pensieve – James Potter with his messy black hair that stuck up in the same place Harry’s did, Lily with her startlingly green, almond-shaped eyes.

The image imprinted itself on her brain and she twisted sharply, feeling the beginnings of apparition, willing her magic to take her to them.

As soon as the dizzying sensation appeared, Daphne opened her eyes, erecting a Shield Charm in time to deflect the curses that flew towards them.

The element of surprise on their side, the two witches moved quickly, dispatching the five Death Eaters in front of them.

Once they were able to take a good look around, Daphne’s jaw dropped.

She’d seen this place once before, in a picture drawn by Hermione, while Lily was inhabiting her body.

“I don’t believe it,” she whispered. “It actually worked.”

***

“Right, according to these Order map,” Harry said, tracing one of the lines with a finger, “Voldie’s hide-out is approximately 38 miles north-east.”

Draco nodded thoughtfully. He’d been quiet ever since he’d entered the tent after his mental conversation with Ginny.

“You alright, mate?” Harry asked.

“It’s weird not having her in my head,” Draco said. “But yeah, I’m fine.” He shook himself out of his thoughts. “So we going with Disillusionment Charms?”

“Have to,” Harry said. “Mione’s still got my Cloak.”

“Probably for the best,” Draco said. “They’ll be expecting your Cloak. We’ll set out tonight then?”

“Early,” Harry agreed. “At dusk, I think. If we try to set up camp here,” he pointed at several spots on the map, “or thereabouts, we should reach it within the week.”

“Assuming he’s there,” Draco said darkly.

“Well, even if he’s not, there’ll be some Death Eaters,” Harry said, rolling up the map. “We should get some sleep though; we’ve been awake for coming up to twenty-four hours now.”

“I’ll take the first watch,” Draco said. “I’m not that tired.”

Even though dawn was now breaking, it was dark in the tent.

Draco sat in the entranceway, his wand alight, his eyes alert for any sign of movement within the
trees, which were just as dark, their leaves forming a dense canopy that shut out the light.

It was going to be a very long week.

***

Ginny sprinted up the stairs, brushing past students who were organising themselves into empty classrooms, and burst on to the third floor.

A chilling howl forced bile up into her throat and she hurtled towards the sound, trying desperately not to let any of her fear seep through the closed link to Draco – the last thing she wanted to do was distract him right now, not when it could be a matter of life or death as far as she knew.

The werewolf was picking its way over the blown-out corridor, its snout covered in blood, far too close to the alcove Jen had charmed for Ginny’s liking.

It let out another howl at her appearance and sprang towards her – her mind went blank – she raised her wand and shouted the only spell she could think of.

“REDUCTO!”

It was a crude method, but it worked. The red beam of light made contact, a loud bang filled the corridor, and Ginny ducked as flesh and blood splattered over her.

Screams erupted from the nearby students but Ginny paid them no heed. She had no idea if the protective enchantments would stop a werewolf, but she wasn’t taking any chances. Her wand was in her hand, dismantling the spells, even as she raced towards the alcove.

As a basinet – probably transfigured – came into view, Ginny slowed, unwilling to see the damage done, but needing to, because it was surely only a matter of time before Jen came running, and she didn’t need to see that first-hand.

Not entirely sure what she would find, Ginny peered over the edge of the basinet, to see a perfect little baby, lying motionless on her back. She couldn’t see any injuries, but that didn’t mean anything.

Sending up a prayer to anyone that was listening, Ginny reached into the basinet. As she lifted the baby out, her eyes blinked open, her face screwed up, and she began to cry.

Ginny breathed a sigh of relief, tucking the baby up close to her chest. “Oh, don’t cry, sweetheart. It’s alright. We’ll go and find Mama.”

The journey back to the Great Hall was prolonged by questions about the baby, but Ginny finally reached the Great Hall, only to walk into a very loud argument that drowned out the sound of the baby’s cries.

While Amelia tore into her aurors, Jen was facing Cornelius Fudge, shaking with rage. “HOW DARE YOU?! HOW DARE YOU SHIRK YOUR DUTIES LIKE THIS?! IT IS YOUR RESPONSIBILITY TO PROTECT THE WIZARDING WORLD, MINISTER, NOT PROTECT YOUR OWN SORRY HIDE!”

Hermione caught sight of her and waved her over. “Are you okay? And the baby?”

“I’m fine,” Ginny said, soothing the baby. “She seems fine. Greyback was very close though – we are never going to get those stains out. Are you okay?”
“Not really,” Hermione said, grimacing. “It’s getting harder to hold it back; I’m going to snap, Ginny; I swear – one more thing …”

Just then, the doors to the Great Hall were pushed open again and a very familiar face walked in.

“How’s it going?”

Running down the middle of the Great Hall, through the crowd of startled aurors, Hermione threw herself into Harry’s arms, sobbing into his robes.

His arms encircled her automatically, rubbing her back, and she let herself cry, vague threats escaping her, threatening retribution for scaring her so.

Another hand stroked her hair and a soft female voice asked if she was alright. The voice was familiar and, as Hermione calmed down, she slowly realised that the man holding her was just a little too tall, a little too broad-shouldered to be Harry.

Pulling back, she looked up into his face to see mischievous brown eyes smiling down at her.

“How’s it going?” James Potter whispered, realisation dawning on his face. “You’re all grown up.”

Chapter End Notes

NOW it's finished. Sorry about the confusion - I miscounted the chapters and marked it complete by mistake! I haven’t yet started writing the sequel, Aftermath - I’m still planning it actually - so keep an eye out on my profile; if you have an account, you can subscribe to the series, and you'll get an email notification when the next one gets posted.

Please drop by the archive and comment to let the author know if you enjoyed their work!