**Kurt Hummel and the Boy Who Lived**

**by** gleefulmusings

**Summary**

Kurt Hummel is the unknown twin of Harry Potter, the Boy Who Lived, and is about to matriculate at Hogwarts School of Witchcraft and Wizardry along with his two best friends. Highly skilled and intelligent, he is no one's pawn and will stop at nothing to protect his brother. He must help Harry defeat Voldemort before he can save the world from a far more insidious evil.

**Notes**

Take two! This version of the story has longer chapters, additional prose, and hopefully a tighter narrative. Enjoy!
To recap, Kurt is the missing twin of Harry Potter. Helping his brother vanquish Voldemort is a priority, but Kurt has a grand destiny all his own. Expect intelligent children who triumph frequently, but the adversity will only grow that much stronger.
The Return of the Prodigal

As the day of the death of the seventh month dawned, Kurt Hummel rolled over on his side and the light from the enormous bay window on the east wall of his bedroom bathed his face. He blinked once, harshly, and startled awake. He yawned and sat up in his large sleigh bed before gently laying back against the overstuffed king-sized pillows.

He absently reached under one and fingered his wand.

He surveyed his room, pleased with how he had appointed it. The walls were a deep mustard with a teak wainscoting and crown molding painted in the shade of Devon cream. The carpeting was plush and was an exact match for the molding. Aside from the bed, there was a large armoire lining the wall opposite the end of his bed, which housed his entertainment system. The abutting wall, running the length of the room, held his rather large mahogany desk, either side of which was flanked by enormous matching built-in bookshelves.

The woods were heavy, antiques dating back centuries, but durable and functional. The room was large enough that it wasn't dominated by the furniture, all of which had been placed for maximum efficiency and aesthetic flair.

He was going to miss this room, it had become the sanctuary of his often hectic life, but it was time to put away childish things.

"Happy Birthday, Kurt," he murmured.

He would be celebrating with the requisite party in roughly three weeks, along with the traditional coming-of-age ceremony that was an American carryover from British traditions, but today was the true day of his birth.

"Born as the seventh month dies," he hissed, his world crashing in on him.

His restless mind settled on thoughts of his brother and he wondered what his missing twin was doing at that moment. Harry would have received his Hogwarts letter by now.

"Happy Birthday, Harry."

He didn't understand how it was possible to miss so horribly someone he had never truly known. He had memories of Harry, ones that hadn't eroded with time, but they were so divorced from his experience only vague feelings of love and loss remained. He wondered if Harry had those feelings as well, if he also felt as though a huge part of himself was missing.

Could Harry miss someone he didn't remember?

By all accounts, mostly gleaned from that rag which passed itself off as the newspaper of wizarding Britain, Harry had no idea he even had a brother. Harry was the Boy Who Lived while Kurt was all but forgotten, which was just fine with him.

He didn't begrudge his brother the fame; he knew well given his father's career how fickle public opinion could be. In fact, he was sure that as soon as Harry reentered wizarding society, he would be immediately longing for obscurity.

And therein lied Kurt's true power: no one knew who he was, save very few, and Britain certainly wouldn't be prepared for what he would unleash upon them. That was the advantage of lying in the
Rage coursed through his veins, undiluted fury that he had been separated from his brother and given away like so much trash. Thankfully he had been adopted by Burt and Suzanne Hummel, who had been the perfect parents, at least for him. Even after Suzanne had died, Burt continued to be nothing less than a devoted father, fiercely protective of his only child.

But what of Harry? No substantive information on his placement had been unearthed, despite numerous and insistent, though subtle, attempts. Had Harry been as lucky as he? Was he loved and cared for as he deserved? The thought that he most likely was not made Kurt want to howl with frustration. He didn't know why or how, but he had always had a persistent niggling that Harry was not well.

Soon he would know, however, and then appropriate action would be taken. In roughly one month, he would be reunited with his brother and woe betide anyone who interfered.

Kurt, with the help of his advisers, had made numerous plans with short and long-term contingencies depending on his arrival at Hogwarts and what he would discover therein. He knew it would be difficult to get close to Harry and most likely dangerous to his own welfare, but he would not be deterred. He didn't care that Voldemort was still alive, existing somewhere as a parasitic wraith. He didn't care about Britain and their stupid Pureblood war and prejudices.

He was going to get his brother back and do everything in his power to ensure Harry's survival, no matter who he had to destroy in the process. After all, he wasn't a hero, either perceived or in action, and had no qualms about crushing Harry's enemies beneath his fashionable heel.

He nodded to himself and hopped out of bed, storming toward the bathroom. He had to complete his ablutions and get dressed before reviewing today's agenda.

In roughly four hours, Albus Dumbledore would be arriving to deliver his Hogwarts letter, expecting an easy sell. The man was in for a rude awakening. Kurt would be recalcitrant and unimpressed by the man's legend and the promise of a vaunted Hogwarts education. He would then proceed to make his demands, all of which he was sure Dumbledore would concede in order to secure his attendance.

Harry Potter was well and truly the Boy Who Lived, the child who had defeated Voldemort a decade previous; he had earned the title and respect which came with it.

Kurt Hummel, however, born Liam Potter, also fit the prophecy and was sure Dumbledore would want to keep him close at hand along with Neville Longbottom, just in case Harry didn't survive his perceived duty.

He smirked.

Matching wits with the most celebrated wizard of the last century? Not a problem.

He shut the bathroom door and turned on the shower, shrugging out of his pajamas.

"You have no idea what's coming, Albus, but trust me, my performances always deliver."
After showering and dressing, Kurt began making his way downstairs, descending the grand stairway as the heels on his loafers clacked out a pleasing rhythm that echoed down the surrounding halls.

Most of the staff was off for the weekend and he was glad for the quiet. Even though he had lived in this house the past two years, it still didn't seem like home. He could appreciate the grandeur of the architecture and decoration, the sense of history all but seeping from every baseboard, but it was also sterile and transitory in a very visceral way.

He headed for the dining room, hoping that his father was already there and that his stepmother and stepbrother were not. He had a lot of affection for Carole, who was a very nice person and exceedingly kind to him, but whenever he was in her presence, whenever he saw her looking so lovingly at his father, he was reminded of his mother and grieved all over again.

Finn was another issue entirely. It wasn't that Kurt hated his brother; rather, he fiercely loved him. It was simply that they were very different people who were both utterly inflexible about what they were willing to tolerate. Finn didn't understand why Kurt loved school and didn't enjoy sports. Kurt didn't like that Finn seemed unable to read books without pictures and believed belching was a public event.

Still, at the end of the day, they put each other before almost everyone else. If someone outside the family criticized Kurt, Finn's fists went flying. If someone teased or made fun of Finn, that person found themselves at the end of Kurt's wand, which was definitely an unwelcome place to be. They were brothers; they just didn't have much in common and therefore easily frustrated one another.

"Hi, Dad!"

Burt looked over the top of his newspaper and smiled. "Hey, kiddo. Sleep well?"

Kurt wrinkled his nose. "Mostly."

A concerned Burt frowned and put down his paper. "Did you have that nightmare again?"

Kurt shook his head. "No, for which I'm quite glad." He shrugged and then grinned. "I guess I'm just young and restless."

Burt quirked a brow and chuckled lowly. "Happy Birthday, baby boy."

Kurt flushed with pleasure. "Thanks, Daddy," he whispered.

Burt nodded but then gave his son a hard look. "There's no way I can talk you out of this, is there?"

"Absolutely not," Kurt said blithely, helping himself to the fruit platter.

Burt sighed and shook his head. He was nominally in charge of his family, but had learned the hard way that Kurt could be utterly intractable about certain things. He remembered when his son was three and refused to eat eggs, declaring them nothing but potential chicken. Kurt had no interest in eating potential chicken; if he wanted chicken, then he would have chicken, thank you very much.

Even something so innocuous and almost comical screamed how focused and determined Kurt could be when moved by a particular issue. Considering this particular issue was Kurt's twin brother, Burt knew he had very little room to maneuver. In the end, despite his young age, Kurt would do what he wanted, his father's lack of permission notwithstanding. It was infuriating, but Burt respected his son's ability and commitment to family.
Not for the first time, Burt seethed that Harry hadn't been given to him and Suzanne along with Kurt. Kurt had suffered greatly those first two years after his bond with Harry had been forcibly severed. Burt didn't think he would ever forgive Albus Dumbledore for doing that to his son, even if it had been, perhaps, unintentional.

Zeus only knew what had befallen Harry. Dumbledore had insisted to the international press that the Boy Who Lived was safe from Death Eater reprisals and a rabid public, tucked away with relatives who would love and care for the boy. Of course, both Kurt and Burt knew the only family outside of Kurt himself who still existed were the Dursleys, but, try as they might, they couldn't find the family.

Burt still didn't know how that was possible. Given his considerable influence and rather lengthy list of contacts, tracking down one non-magical family shouldn't have been so difficult. Whatever spell Dumbledore had used was surely incredibly powerful. It also rankled that Dumbledore had used an intermediary to place Kurt with them, unwilling to hand over the boy himself. That he hadn't considered the Hummels finding out everything possible about their child was simply poor planning and rather insulting.

Burt and Suzanne were never to have known that they had been given Liam Potter. All they had been told was that their new son was a political refugee who required immediate asylum and loving care. That hadn't been an issue, but obviously Dumbledore had never planned on the Hummels performing a Blood Adoption ceremony. That the old man hadn't considered that probability suggested to the Hummels he clearly wasn't operating on all cylinders.

Before the ritual could take place, the Hummels were required to cast the *Familia Originem* charm, the results of which had been shocking and very illuminating. As the quill hovered over the parchment and then began to fill in the *stemma*, Burt and Suzanne realized, for the first time, that their new son had been born Liam Charlus Potter, the first issue of Lord James Potter and Lady Lily Potter née Evans.

In a moment, everything had changed.

Kurt was not only the brother of the Boy Who Lived, but the Scion of the Ancient and Most Noble House of Potter ... which presented any number of problems.

After weeks of consultation with numerous lawyers, government officials, and even the Goblins, no clear answers could be had. Were the adoption to commence, there was no guarantee that Kurt would inherit the Headship and title upon his majority; the decision would be made solely by the *familia magica* when he went to claim the Potter ring.

Burt, though descended from ancient magical German royalty, didn't hold much stock in such nonsense, but Suzanne had been anguished over the entire affair. A French national and Pureblood aristocrat herself, she'd had a far better understanding of the intricacies of European wizarding politics, which were basically ignored and derided in the United States.

Blood adoptions were uncommon but not entirely rare, usually reserved for those Pureblood families which clearly had no designated Heir; in this case, however, Kurt was undoubtedly the Potter Scion. If they adopted him by blood and magic, he could lose the legacy into which he had been born and Suzanne had been very reluctant to deny him his due.

Burt had argued that, in terms of the prejudiced Pureblood agenda, their adoption of Kurt would only strengthen his stature. As Purebloods themselves, Kurt would be considered a Pureblood of international pedigree rather than a Half-Blood and would thus be difficult to attack politically. Europe, and Britain in particular, would be defying their own conventions were they to do so,
setting a precedent which could best be described as disadvantageous and even downright dangerous.

He hadn't cared if Kurt were denied the Headship. The Hummels had more than enough money and power to bequeath their son, who would eventually come to hold several titles in his own right. He was their son, first and foremost, and a Potter second. Voldemort had made sure of that. If the *familia magica* were dissatisfied with Kurt, the Headship would automatically go to Harry, who, as the last remaining Potter, could not be denied.

Burt had posited it might even be better were Harry to inherit as it would shore up his political clout. Few dissenters were willing to go against the Head of an Ancient and Most Noble House; to do so would be political suicide. Tacking on the Boy Who Lived title would make Harry almost politically untouchable.

Besides, it had been impossible to guess whether Kurt would even want the onus of responsibility the Headship entailed. He would be politically shielded as a Hummel and Delacroix and might end up turning everything over to Harry to ensure his brother's protection.

In the end Suzanne had agreed and the adoption proceeded accordingly. The results weren't very spectacular, as the ritual didn't alter the child's magical core. Kurt's natural aptitude for magic was unimpeded; in fact, it had only grown with the potential of now four powerful witches and wizards coursing through his bloodstream.

Outwardly the differences were few. Kurt's hazel eyes, the legacy of James Potter, had turned a compelling combination of Burt's blue and Suzanne's green, with some gray and golden threads thrown in for good measure. His messy auburn hair had smoothed and darkened into Suzanne's chestnut brown. Kurt had received Suzanne's delicate bone structure and pouty lips, both of which built on Lily Potter's refined features. The result was an absolutely beautiful child.

Once Kurt's identity had been known, there had never been a question of keeping it from him. James and Lily Potter were considered heroes throughout the entire wizarding world and neither Burt nor Suzanne would keep their son ignorant of the sacrifice his birth parents had made, nor would they deny him his brother.

In the United States, a child began their magical education upon their first bout of serious accidental magic. Accidental magic was wild, untrained, and could be quite dangerous if not properly reined in. The average age for education to commence was, as for non-magicals, about five, whereby wizarding children would enter a type of kindergarten, in which they would learn wand care, the fundamentals of magical theory, and a grounding in magical history.

Kurt had started magical training before he was three. That he had been blessed, or cursed, with an eidetic memory meant he had blown through the first years of the curriculum with ease in approximately eighteen months. Thankfully the elementary school also insisted their students learn comparable non-magical studies in conjunction with magical studies. Kurt had also excelled in those, but not quite at the same rate.

Eventually, however, Kurt had required a cadre of private tutors and was withdrawn from his school, which had been ill-equipped to keep up with him when trying to govern a class of twenty to thirty students.

Kurt was, at times, a very frustrating child. He was so brilliant but also incredibly introverted and thus set apart from his peers accordingly. He hadn't begun speaking until well after his second birthday and then spoke in complete sentences rather than the occasional word or phrase. By the time he was six, he was performing calculus, spoke three other languages, and could perform basic...
transfiguration.

Still, on the whole, he had been happy. Then Suzanne had passed away. Long believing she was sterile, both she and Burt were surprised yet thrilled when she conceived. In her six month, she began experiencing problems. The miscarriage caused severe hemorrhaging, which a strict regimen of potions and even non-magical intervention had been unable to arrest.

She had died shortly before Kurt's seventh birthday. After that, Kurt had become even more withdrawn from the world around him, disappearing into books and only grudgingly emerging when unable to resolve problems and questions himself.

It was after Suzanne's death, and only with great reluctance, that Burt informed his son about his birth family. Kurt had been alternately surprised, angry, and hurt - all of which was because he had already known and Burt had waited until after Suzanne's death to tell him. He had honestly believed his parents had no idea he was born a Potter.

Burt had been horrified to discover that Kurt's memory was truly eidetic: he remembered everything he had ever seen, heard, tasted, and smelled. It suddenly made sense why Kurt was so reserved: he had witnessed the death of Lily Potter and knew he had a brother somewhere out in the world who most likely had no idea who Kurt was.

Eventually Kurt and Burt reconciled with the former coming to understand that his adoptive parents had never planned on keeping his history from him, but had been merely waiting for the proper time to inform him. Kurt had accepted that easily enough, but had thrown himself into researching the Potter family exhaustively, as well as Voldemort. He had convinced Burt to try and discover everything he could about Harry, but Burt had been able to come up with very little.

It was then that Kurt's truly awesome grudge against Albus Dumbledore had been born.

After Suzanne's death, Kurt had refused even to consider a return to school. The administrators, very much wanting the reputation educating Kurt Hummel would provide, had struggled to develop an appropriate curriculum for a child so advanced but eventually capitulated that Kurt would fare better if he continued with his tutors.

In the end Burt had yielded to his son's desires, contracting several new experts in leading fields to educate Kurt in both magical and non-magical disciplines.

Kurt had loved it and, in many ways, the difficult and demanding private tuition had helped him enormously. He still grieved for his mother and for the loss of Harry, but rather than closing himself off from his father and the rest of the world, Kurt had channeled that energy into learning as much as he could about everything that intrigued him, convinced he would one day reunite with his brother and that Harry would need him.

And he had surpassed every goal his tutors, Burt, and Kurt himself had set for him. By the time he was ten, he was fluent in a total of twelve languages, nine non-magical and three magical. His performance in his magical studies was far above average of that of his peers, but he was particularly adept at Transfiguration and nothing less than a prodigy in Charms.

He had discovered that those were the best subjects of his birth parents, and thus felt closer to them. He had received preliminary tuition in Ancient Runes, given his facility with languages, and Arithmancy, excelling greatly.

He would enter Hogwarts with the education of at least a fourth-year and the ability of a Masters candidate. He hadn't even approached the power he would one day be able to channel through his...
core and thus suffered greatly when he pushed himself past his natural limits.

But he was strong, very strong, and very determined no one but him would shape his destiny.

Burt marveled at his son's power and wondered as to the potential that Harry possessed. He was frightened when Kurt postulated that Harry was, in fact, even more powerful than himself.

Truly, however, it was his fear for Harry which drove Kurt's pursuit. The closer it got to their eleventh birthday, the more frantic Kurt had become, knowing that Harry would be delivered from the cage in which he had been imprisoned and trotted through the British wizarding world as some carnival attraction.

Kurt knew that Dumbledore had plans for Harry; why else would he separate them? There was something about Harry that Dumbledore needed and the only possibility Kurt and his father could determine was that Voldemort wasn't truly dead. Most likely, whatever magic Harry had performed that fateful night had discorporated Voldemort, leaving an amorphous and powerless wraith.

Eventually Voldemort would return and Dumbledore would use Harry to finish him for good.

Kurt was of a quite different opinion on that issue.

Even though their bond had been severed, even though they hadn't seen each other in almost a decade, and even though there was no guarantee they would actually like each other, blood was blood, and Harry was his blood. Kurt wasn't about to let some senile Santa in hideous robes decide his brother's life.

Therefore, in addition to exhaustive studies into the Potter family and Voldemort, Burt, at Kurt's behest, had discovered as much as possible about Albus Dumbledore ... and there had been a lot to unearth.

Dumbledore wasn't that well-regarded outside of the United Kingdom and while he was paid a certain level of courtesy on the Continent due to his defeat of Grindelwald, he wasn't particularly respected. After all, every continent had at least one witch or wizard at the same level as Dumbledore; they just weren't showy about it. Luckily Burt had had the foresight to become acquainted with at least three of them and Kurt with their children.

That's how Quinn Fabray and Santana Lopez had entered the picture. Burt respected the former but was terrified of the latter. Santana was a fearsome presence, even at such a young age.

Then something had happened. Burt wasn't sure what it was, but knew it had occurred that summer they spent in Greece. It had affected all of the children, but especially Brittany Pierce. He couldn't say that it was a bad change, but it was a forbidding one. Suddenly the kids began running a race of which only they were aware and everyone else merely bystanders.

The triad had gone on to establish an international network of powerful children with politically active families. Kurt fed off the energy of the other two and they him. They were a force unto themselves and were already garnering a reputation for their intellect and ability.

Kurt smirked as he thought of Santana and Quinn, and the potential damage they could cause Dumbledore.

Burt startled out of his own reminiscences and looked over at his child, considering the rather evil look on Kurt's face and frowning.

"What are you plotting?"
"World domination," Kurt smoothly replied.

Burt grunted. "Better load up on some carbs."

Kurt giggled. "Where are Carole and Finn?"

Burt rolled his eyes. "Back to school shopping. You know how Carole is."

Kurt laughed outright. "I'm sure Finn must be so excited."

Burt snorted. "What time are the girls coming over?"

Kurt checked his watch. "About an hour. We're expecting Dumbledore by noon."

Burt sighed. "I really wish you would let me stay for this."

Kurt's eyes softened. "I really wish you could," he said, "but it's not a good idea. Dumbledore will think me far more pliable if it appears this decision is mine alone to make. I want to get a good sense of him, but if you're here, he'll be more apt to play to you than me. I need to know just how far I can push him and I want him to understand that I'm no one's puppet."

"I can't help but worry, baby," Burt said quietly.

"I know," Kurt whispered, "and I can't argue that I'm not somewhat scared, but this is the way it has to be. Besides, Santana and Quinn will be with me; you know we take of each other. Will and Nadia will be in the house, security patrolling, and the Elves on guard."

Burt sighed, knowing that, as much as he hated it, Kurt was right. Dumbledore would let his guard down somewhat when faced with nothing but three children, even though said children were far from defenseless.

"Don't take any of his shit," was Burt's final word on the matter.

Kurt smirked. "Oh, don't worry. I plan on shoveling a lot of my own and he's going to eat it with a smile."

After breakfast and several assurances to his father that he would be just fine, Kurt bustled around his bedroom, reviewing his notes and waiting for Santana and Quinn to arrive.

He knew that he should be feeling anxious and perhaps slightly terrified - after all, playing metaphorical chess with an acknowledged master would be a daunting challenge - but he was strangely calm and almost bored with the entire affair. This had been planned for years.

In the end, he truly had nothing to fear. He, unlike Harry, was not an orphan. He had a parent who would fight to the ends of the earth to keep him safe and Carole was no slouch, either. He had powerful friends and allies. He was not a British citizen and therefore not subject to any laws Dumbledore might pull out of one of his ridiculous hats. He could leave Hogwarts as quickly as penning a letter of his withdrawal would take.

And ... he could always say no. He wasn't required to attend Hogwarts, Dumbledore couldn't compel him in any way, and he could shift his plans accordingly to help Harry from the sidelines.
He nodded, relieved for reviewing his options. Still, his determination was staunch. He couldn't explain it but something told him that his presence at Hogwarts would be needed, that *Harry* would need him. That was really all that mattered.

"We should just kill him," Santana said.

Quinn rolled her eyes as she sipped at her lemon water, legs crossed at the ankle and looking over a few of the dossiers Kurt had compiled. "Thank you for that extremely worthless suggestion."

Santana glared at her. "Well, we should!" she insisted. "Dumbledore is a menace. It's obvious from his wardrobe that he's deeply disturbed."

"She has a point," Kurt acknowledged.

Santana preened.

Quinn ignored them. "I still think we should play this by ear. If we approach this too rigidly, he'll be able to take us by surprise and trap us, either by our own words or resulting actions. We may be powerful and intelligent, but we're still eleven. We don't want him thinking we know more than we do." She raised a brow. "Or should."

Santana grudgingly nodded. "Skipper's right. It will be a lot easier for us in the long run if he thinks we're just obnoxious, entitled brats."

Quinn blinked. "Wait, we're not?"

The other two cackled.

Finally, Kurt sighed. "I agree with both of you but, at the very least, I want him unsettled. That doesn't mean that I plan to reveal anything, but he should be made to feel concerned."

Quinn leaned forward. "Are you absolutely sure? The more suspicious he is, the closer attention he will pay us."

Kurt waved a hand. "He'll do that anyway. It's not as though he would ever dismiss me outright."

He shook his head. "No, he wants me there and will be keeping an eye on me, on us. I want him to know he will be watched too."

"Tink's on point here," Santana said. "We should put him notice immediately so that he knows we're not just some kids screwing around and susceptible to his Father Christmas bullshit." She tilted her head. "In fact, I'd be surprised if he wasn't anticipating some warning. Our families are powerful, both magically and politically. He might be hot shit in England, but here he's just cold diarrhea."

Quinn choked on her water and glared. "Don't underestimate him."

"I'm not," Santana shot back, "but he needs to be made aware not to underestimate us either. Sure, he's powerful; I'm not denying that. I'm just saying that he's bought into his own hype. He's completely oblivious to the fact that he's barely hanging on to his ICW position, which he treats as though it's nothing more than his due. His attendance record at conferences *sucks* and he's
supposed to be the leader. Outside of Europe, Hogwarts is viewed as either a deteriorating powerhouse or an overblown relic."

She shook her head. "Don't even get me started on his leadership of the Wizengamot. You've read the transcripts and opinions as closely as I have. For all his proclamations about the rights of non-magicals and the wizards and witches born to them, he's done very little to help them. He bleats like an old goat about the nation coming together and healing and blah blah blah, but he says it safely from his castle, where he sits on his golden throne and pile of galleons, stroking his Order of Merlin and secure in the knowledge that almost no one knows he's of mixed blood."

She bit her lip. "Frankly, if I wasn't Pureblood, you wouldn't be able to get me to set foot in that country. It won't be much longer before those of non-magical parents are moving to the Sudan just to get some rights."

"Agreed," Quinn said, voice crisp. She then sighed. "I'm sorry. I'm just worried."

"We all are, darling," Kurt said, "and I want to reiterate that you absolutely do not have to do this."

Her eyes flared with indignation. "Don't start with that nonsense, Hummel, or I'll have Berry here in two minutes to serenade you with Streisand's greatest hits."

Kurt curled a lip. "You would commit such blasphemy?"

"To keep you from being an idiot?" she asked sweetly, shrugging. "Of course. What kind of friend would I be if I didn't?"

He gave her major side-eye.

Santana had to admit, if only to herself, that Quinn's threat, while not terribly creative, was nonetheless extremely effective. No one needed that pygmy caterwauling about the way she was. Besides, people who needed people were not the luckiest people in the world; they were the stupidest.

Well, except for her needing Quinn and Kurt, and Brittany, but no one needed to know that.

She nodded to herself. Right!

"Fine," Kurt grunted, wiping his face with a hand. "We'll approach this delicately and with some measure of flexibility on our part. There's no point in showing our hand all at once."

"Threats and intimidation?" asked a hopeful Santana.

Kurt grinned. "Possibly."

"Violence?" she cheerfully shrieked.

"Only if absolutely necessary," Quinn demurred.

Santana scowled. "Damn."

Kurt startled slightly. "The wards have been activated." He looked down at his watch and raised a brow. "Right on time."

Their Occlumency shields snapped into place.

"Should we leave until you call for us?" Quinn asked.
"State your intentions."

A bewildered Albus Dumbledore stared at the tall and fearsome witch before him. This woman, in terms of sheer power and personality, could best be described as the product of an unholy union between Severus Snape and Minerva McGonagall. She was terrifying.

"I beg your pardon, madam," he said humbly. "I am here to speak with young Kurt Hummel."

"Name?"

Dumbledore was flummoxed. It was extremely rare for him to be unrecognized by a witch or wizard, even outside of the United Kingdom. His fame, once something he had purposefully sought, was sometimes a burden due to the expectations which came with it, but it was often useful. However, this woman either truly had no idea as to his identity, or couldn't have cared less. He honestly wasn't sure which perturbed him more.

"Albus Dumbledore."

General Sue Sylvester made a great show of running down the endless ream of paper attached to her clipboard, whistling a merry tune all the while. "You're not on the list."

She then turned her back on him, which suggested she was either ignorant as to his power or truly uncaring of it.

Dumbledore found this greatly disturbing. He stood there for several moments, merely blinking and debating his next course of action. He had done a cursory scan on the domicile and knew the wards were impenetrable; he doubted even Goblins could bring them down.

He was fascinated by the power which had created them. Why would an average American magical family require such extensive wards?

Further, he knew that, as a foreigner, despite his positions, he could be charged with any number of crimes were he to attempt to enter by force. He certainly didn't need that aggravation, especially as causing an international incident would be playing right into the clammy hands of Cornelius Fudge.

"Excuse me," he said.

Sue whirled around and cocked an eyebrow. "Still here?"

"Er, yes," he said slowly. "I really must speak with Master Hummel."

"Why?" she demanded. "Further, why didn't you make an appointment with his social secretary?"

Dumbledore's eyes widened. "Social secretary? A boy of eleven has a social secretary?"

Sue gave the old fart a hard stare, searching his eyes for something Dumbledore couldn't hope to
fathom. She found it, however, and smirked.

Oh, this was too delicious. The famed Dumbledore had absolutely no idea upon whose door he was trying to knock! She snorted and shook her head. Poor form, indeed. Well, far be it from her to explain the particulars, but she couldn't wait to see the fallout.

"First of all, he's ten. His birthday isn't for three weeks. Second, of course he has a social secretary," Sue bit back, her tone scathing. "Not just anyone can see him. They first have to make an appointment and then must be properly vetted after exhaustive background checks and confidentiality oaths. After that, they receive a preliminary clearance and are granted temporary credentials to seek an audience with him."

"An audience!" repeated an astounded Dumbledore. "To speak with a mere boy requires meeting such strident conditions?"

At the look on her face, he instantly regretted his words.

Sue's eyes turned arctic. "What did you just say?"

"I'm terribly sorry," he began, "I believe we're suffering from some miscommunication."

"Mere boy!" Sue roared. She poked a finger at Dumbledore's chest. Hard. "Listen up, you refugee from a thrift store carnival sideshow! I have been tasked personally with the security of one Kurt Hummel, codename Alabaster, and that is a duty I hold as a sacred privilege! Anything trying to get to him goes through me first, and if I don't like what I hear ..." she trailed off, cracking her knuckles and rolling her neck.

Sue was having an immensely pleasant experience but knew she had to move this along were Alabaster's plan - of which she only maddeningly knew the basics - to work. She stepped back and stood at attention.

"I suggest you state your intentions immediately if you do not wish to be forcibly removed from the premises," she said dispassionately.

"Might I ask your name?" Dumbledore asked.

"No names, no credentials. State your intentions."

Defeated, Albus brandished Kurt's letter of admission to Hogwarts. "I would like to invite Master Hummel to attend Hogwarts School of Witchcraft and Wizardry," he said softly.

Sue snatched the letter out of his hand, pulled her wand, and began casting a series of high-level spells.

Dumbledore noticed she was checking for illegal portkeys; hexes, curses, and jinxes; poisons; and possible other Dark activity. He was reluctantly impressed with her repertoire and thoroughness. There were some spells with which he was quite unfamiliar. He couldn't possibly imagine why a young boy required such security and realized he had vastly underestimated this situation, to his own detriment.

"Acceptable," Sue finally pronounced. "Now, after you show me your International Portkey authorization and Customs paperwork, I will take your oaths and contact Alabaster to see if he is amenable to meeting you."

He blinked. Oh, dear. He had created his own portkey, not bothering to go through the proper
channels for what he had assumed would be a meet-and-greet of no more than a few hours. After all, he was Albus Dumbledore.

His silence suggested as much to Sue, across whose face a cold smirk spread.

Dumbledore shuddered.

After having to defend himself most vociferously, including swearing a magical oath that he was not a terrorist and several other oaths falling under that umbrella, Sue reluctantly allowed Dumbledore to pass.

"Enigma!" she roared.

A lovely young redhead instantly appeared at her side, bowing her head. "General?" she prompted, ready for her orders.

"Escort the Sorcerer's Apprentice to the main house," she barked. "The Hair Bear will be waiting to collect and introduce him to Alabaster."

Emma Pillsbury saluted her commanding officer. "Sir!"

She then set off at a brisk pace, expecting Dumbledore to follow, which he did, though admittedly with some difficulty.

Once again, Albus was ruminating on the fact the he had badly bungled this operation. Never had he suspected that Kurt Hummel would be so difficult to access. He had been rather lax about maintaining surveillance on the boy, much as he had Harry Potter. He had merely assumed a decade previous that he had prepared matters as sufficiently as possible.

Obviously he had miscalculated. Harry was still safely tucked away at the Dursleys, but Kurt's adoptive family apparently wielded more power and influence than Dumbledore could have ever imagined. Had he been wrong to separate the twins all those years ago?

He shook his head.

After the brief battle which had taken the lives of James and Lily Potter, there had been no question it was Harry who defeated Voldemort. The young boy had been marked, as the prophecy insisted he would be, while young Liam - Kurt, he automatically corrected himself - had suffered no ill effects, or displayed any magical exhaustion or even a hint that magic had either touched or been released by him.

No, Harry was most definitely the child of the prophecy and thus had to be sequestered from the magical world for his own safety, as well as the safety of all magical citizens. Immediately following the discorporation of Voldemort, the magical world of Britain had descended into even further chaos.

Voldemort had been a monster, to be certain, a powerful psychopath who wanted nothing but to bend the world to his will, but he had also ruled his followers with an iron fist. In the wake of his death or, as his minions had insisted, his disappearance, they had scrambled to lay claim to his cause and army.
Lucius Malfoy had opted for the political route, claiming to be a victim of the *Imperius* curse, which had truly been so much nonsense. He had secured for himself a pardon and spent the past decade rebuilding his family name and insinuating himself into every aspect of the magical government, bringing along several of his fellow Death Eaters and recruiting for them high-level posts within the Ministry.

Bellatrix LeStrange, perhaps even more deranged than her Master, continued Voldemort's martial efforts to the best of her ability, executing as many Muggleborns and Half-Bloods as possible, solely on principle. She also had routed dozens of Purebloods who had been opposed to Voldemort, whom she viewed as blood-traitors. One such family was the Longbottoms, whom she had attacked two weeks later, looking for information about her Master.

Great Merlin, Albus silently moaned, walking through a sun-dappled copse of trees. How much farther was this house! He discreetly cast some cooling charms on his robes. The woman accompanying him apparently had no such troubles and hadn't even broken a sweat. Oh, how he envied the young.

That thought returned him to those previous. He had every confidence that Harry was the true Boy Who Lived, but it simply wouldn't do not to keep a close eye on the twin brother, and Neville Longbottom for that matter.

Voldemort wasn't truly dead, of that he was certain, and while Harry was destined to end him, it was just as possible that Harry himself might meet an untimely demise. Were the worst to happen, Kurt Hummel or young Neville might be the only hope wizarding Britain had to throw off the yoke of Voldemort once and for all.

Tremendous guilt coursed through his veins as he was reminded of his many failures.

He had failed to curb Tom Riddle's descent into madness, which had led to the perversion of a once promising youth and the deaths of so many wonderful families, people Albus had considered dear friends. Their loss weighed heavily on his conscience every single day.

He had obviously failed Sirius Black, though he didn't know precisely when that failure had occurred. What had happened to the rebellious, if generally kind and decent, young man who had stood up to his imposing family and sided with his brothers by choice? He shook his head ruefully. He had never seen Sirius's betrayal coming and often rued his lack of foresight in that particular matter. He regretted that Sirius was subjected daily to the torture of the Dementors, but another part of himself, one he was loath to examine too closely, felt satisfaction that the young man was where he belonged.

He had failed James and Lily Potter so badly it brought tears to his eyes every time he even thought their names. There was no reason they had to die; the Fidelius charm absolutely would have worked. He should have insisted upon another Secret Keeper. The Marauders were well known throughout wizarding Britain for their unusually close friendship. He should have borne the duty himself, or perhaps asked Minerva to shoulder it. Instead he had allowed the Potters to choose Sirius, who was far too young and too brash, and he betrayed them.

He shook his head and reminded himself to check in on Remus, the poor man.

He had failed Frank and Alice Longbottom. He still didn't understand how the Fidelius at Longbottom Hall had been breached that night, how the LeStranges and Barty Crouch, Jr. had been able to determine its location. He had never pressed Augusta on the matter. The woman had always been a fearsome witch who wasn't one to discuss family matters with outsiders, regardless of affiliation. The woman had grown bitter at the loss of her son and his wife, and Merlin could
only guess how her intransigence had affected Neville, who was far more important than anyone knew.

He could only hope that he hadn't failed in his duty to young Harry. He knew placing the child with the Dursleys was, at best, a crap shoot. Lily had been quite vocal about the shortcomings of her sister, but he was sure that Petunia would care, even if only grudgingly, for Lily's child, knowing Lily would have done the same for the Dursley lad. He had known when he had made the decision that Harry would have a difficult life with that family, but it had been paramount to keep him out of the wizarding world, to keep him safe. Harry had to be protected at all costs.

"It's just a bit further," said the young woman accompanying him, for which Albus was most glad.

And then there was Liam - Kurt, he once again forcefully corrected. He still was unsure if he had been right to separate the twins. In fact, he was quite positive that James and Lily were cursing him from their graves. Perhaps it had been a rash decision. Perhaps it had indeed been the wrong choice, but those months after Voldemort's fall had been as terrifying and draining as his attempted conquest.

Albus had known that Harry was the strongest of the twins and that unscrupulous people would have sought to manipulate Kurt, even harm him, to get their hands on his brother. He also doubted the Dursleys would have been willing to take two children. Perhaps he should have looked for other relatives, no matter how distant? Of course there were no guarantees the blood wards would have held, depending on the number of degrees from Lily's blood of these possible other relatives.

There was also the fact that Albus still didn't know what spell or charm Lily had used to protect Harry, and while it was logical to assume she had used it on her other son, there was no guarantee she had. Further, he believed the magic of the spell had been powered by Voldemort's attack. Based on the evidence at Godric's Hollow, Voldemort had targeted Harry first and was then vanquished. Kurt had been untouched.

He repressed a sigh. Part of being a leader was making difficult decisions and then pondering over them forever.

But Kurt was safe. That was what was important. He was secure.

As the wide path of pavement gave way to the foot of the drive, his mouth fell open at the residence before him.

The grandeur of this house was of the likes he had never before seen. Thoroughly modern, it was certainly on par with Malfoy Manor or Potter Castle. The dwelling appeared to go on forever in both directions. It was bright and cheerful, however, despite its size. Albus could honestly say he had never seen anything like it. Was this home typical for Americans? Had Kurt been adopted by an obscenely wealthy family?

He should have questioned Alastor more thoroughly as to where the man had placed the child. After they had Obliviated the knowledge of Kurt's existence from the few who had known, all Moody had said, from the safety of his Floo, was that the boy had been placed with extremely distant relatives of Alastor's own mother somewhere in the United States and couldn't be in safer hands.

Alastor had used his position to Obliviate Remus, followed by Sirius, before the latter had been thrown into Azakaban. Thank Merlin Peter had already been dead by then, taking the secret of the Potter twins to his grave. Outside of Moody, the Marauders, Frank and Alice Longbottom, a few Hogwarts faculty members, and Albus himself, no one else had known Lily had given birth to
Alastor then had himself Obliviated by a friend who was an Unspeakable and wouldn't ask too many questions. Constant vigilance indeed.

The only reason Albus even knew Liam Potter was now known as Kurt Hummel was because of the admissions letter, addressed to an unknown boy in America.

And soon he was to meet this boy.

Considering the security surrounding the child and the impressive compound sprawling before him, Albus could admit, even if only to himself, that he was almost as anxious as he was intrigued.

Dragging his weary carcass up the front steps, Albus was surprised when the heavy double doors were thrown open and he was greeted by a young man wearing a delightful garment that was half-jumper and half-vest. The kaleidoscope of colors present in this marvel were enthralling. Albus made a mental note to ask later after the man's tailor.

The hair was unfortunate, but the man's blinding smile was at least welcoming.

"Hello! You must be Mr. Dumbledore. My name is Will Schuester. I'm Mr. Hummel's personal assistant."

As Albus shook the man's proffered hand, bewildered that Kurt had not only a social secretary but a personal assistant, Will made cow eyes at the young woman next to him.

"Thank you, Emma," Will bleated.

Emma Pillsbury made the appropriate comments and quickly departed to return to her post.

"A pleasant young woman," Albus noted.

Will nodded enthusiastically. "Emma's very nice."

Albus smiled at Mr. Schuester's obvious infatuation. Ah, young love! It was grand. "May I ask the name of the formidable witch I met at the gate?"

Will shuddered. "Sue Sylvester. She is truly frightening and has the power to back up her threats."

"Is she an Auror?"

"I'm sorry, Mr. Dumbledore," Will said officiously, "but I'm not permitted to speak of Ms. Sylvester's qualifications. That information is classified." He cleared his throat and straightened his shoulders. "I understand you are here to speak with Mr. Hummel?"

Albus nodded. "Correct, young man. Is he available?"

Will tutted and ushered the man into the foyer. "You're very lucky. Mr. Hummel had a speaking engagement that was canceled due to security issues. It's rare he has a break in his schedule. He has agreed to meet with you, however."
Speaking engagement? Albus was completely baffled, but nodded pleasantly. "Outstanding!"

William Schuester led Albus Dumbledore into a well-appointed parlor, advised him that Mr. Hummel would be with him presently, and offered refreshment.

Dumbledore declined, took his seat, and waited, looking around the room with appreciation. The walls were a lovely sage and the mahogany floors gleamed to the extent that they reflected the furnishings, all of which were exquisite antiques. He looked longingly at the Queen Anne chair opposite him. The Turkish rugs scattered throughout the room looked freshly woven, though he knew they were quite old.

It was a grand room in a thoroughly bewitching home. He wondered how young Kurt had fared, being reared in such opulence. He could only hope the boy wasn't the American version of Draco Malfoy, a child whose reputation for being utterly spoiled preceded him.

Albus was startled out of his silent reverie by the gentle clearing of a throat.

"Good morning, Mr. Dumbledore," Kurt said politely. "I understand you wished to speak with me."

"Ah, Mr. Hummel!" the man exclaimed, rising to his feet.

His thoughts raced as he got his first look at this mysterious child.

He was at first confused by Kurt's appearance, for he looked nothing like James or Lily, before quickly realizing the boy must have been blood-adopted by his surrogate parents. This was somewhat troubling and it bothered him that he hadn't planned for this possibility.

He couldn't help but notice that Kurt Hummel was an absolutely beautiful boy. It certainly wasn't difficult to imagine why the Sylvester woman referred to him as Alabaster; his skin was milky and looked like fine china. His hair was dark and glossy, like mink. It was the eyes, however, that were his most arresting feature, for they were of a color to which Dumbledore could ascribe no name.

Despite this, he was able to see some traces of the Potters upon closer examination. Kurt had James's nose and Lily's almond-shaped eyes along with the stubborn tilt of her chin. The boy was also quite small, certainly undersized for his age, which also hallmarked his birth parents. Lily had been petite and though James had been larger than life, he had also been the shortest of his friends.

"I'm very pleased to meet you," Albus finally said, "and I thank you for accommodating my request for an audience. You may address me as Headmaster Dumbledore."

Kurt arched a brow. "Forgive me, Mr. Dumbledore, but you are not my headmaster. How may I help you?"

Dumbledore deflated a bit but kept a sunny smile on his face. He was slightly annoyed at the rebuff, but could not find fault with the lad's reasoning. The boy was also exceedingly polite. Still, Albus had the feeling that said politeness was somewhat forced, as though he were perturbed by this interruption.

"Quite true, quite true, my boy," Albus said.
He faltered when Kurt's eyes narrowed at the address. Too late Albus realized he was being entirely too familiar with the child.

"Again, thank you for seeing me and I apologize if my unannounced visit has caused any upset."

Albus didn't mean his words and it was obvious Kurt was aware of it. Interesting.

Kurt offered a thin, bland smile. "I am happy to accommodate a wizard of you station, sir," he said, indicating with a wave of his hand that Albus should resume his seat as he took the one opposite. He feigned patience with Dumbledore's woolgathering and waited for the man to make his first parry.

"I understand you had an unexpected pause in your schedule," Albus said cautiously.

Kurt nodded. "I had a speaking engagement that was unfortunately canceled at the last minute due to the escalated terror level."

Albus blinked. He was aware that relations between the United States and the Middle East were precarious at the moment, though he remained ignorant of most of the details, but couldn't possibly fathom what they had to do with the boy before him.

"Merely a precaution," Kurt continued. "One can never be too careful with security."

"Yes, of course," said a very confused Albus.

Kurt then realized Dumbledore had absolutely no idea to whom he was speaking. How very awkward.

He should probably remedy that immediately.

Truthfully, however, he wasn't too surprised. It was apparent from Dumbledore's dismal governance of the ICW that he paid little attention to politics outside of Europe. Still, it was somewhat off-putting that Dumbledore had done little to no research prior to this meeting. It unbalanced Kurt somewhat and he was resentful for it. Regardless, he would turn this to his advantage.

"I have to take a moment and express how impressed I was with your leadership of the conference last year in Prague," he lied.

Albus stared briefly. "You were there?" he blurted before a light blush stained his cheeks.

"Yes," Kurt replied, ignoring the gaffe for the sake of propriety. He paused and then decided to go in for the kill. "Mr. Dumbledore, please don't take offense, but are you unaware that I am the Global Youth Ambassador for the Magical United States?"

"I ... I beg your pardon?" Albus croaked, his skin taking on a waxy pallor.

Oh, dear.

How in the name of Merlin had he not known this? Granted, he had paid little attention to the GYAP beyond the initial discussion in the ICW. After all, it was designed to be its own body, functioning much like the Muggle United Nations, though on a smaller scale and with quite young representatives, all in the spirit of fostering international cooperation amongst the next generation of magicals. Most of Western Europe had thought it an interesting if basically worthless idea and had laughed it off. Certainly Albus himself hadn't paid it much notice.
Apparently this was a tragic oversight.

He hadn't known it had even entered the pilot stage, let alone advanced to such a degree that one of its members apparently held speaking engagements which were threatened by international terrorists!

He was horribly embarrassed and not a little upset that his plan to awe this boy had failed so spectacularly. Even though Kurt had acknowledged his position with the ICW, it was obvious that he was hardly impressed. After all, as a Global Youth Ambassador, and apparently one who was quite active in that role, Kurt probably enjoyed a fair bit of celebrity himself.

The more he dwelt on this, the angrier Albus became with himself. Amongst his many titles, the one in which he took the most pride was Headmaster of Hogwarts. The idea that he had so blatantly dismissed a promising program spearheaded by wizarding children spanning across the entire globe was appalling.

Further, he should have suspected something like this when Kurt had announced he had been present at the Prague conference, for he would have had no reason to be there otherwise. The Magical United States was one of the more progressive countries in the wizarding world, even more so than their Muggle counterparts. Blood status played no role in their politics and sentient magical creatures had been given protected status in their Constitution.

The MUS had even gone so far as to disavow the ICW at the turn of the last century for refusing to allow women to hold positions of power, a lamentable practice which unfortunately continued to this day. Instead, the MUS had forged alliances with several countries, including some in the ICW who, while disappointed by that body's prejudices, still retained membership.

Notable amongst them were Ireland, France, Italy, Scandinavia, a contingent of the Eastern Bloc, Japan, and even Canada and Australia, who did as much as possible to further themselves from their British cousins. Of these countries, few exercised or enjoyed the power of the MUS, and those European nations included had longstanding feuds with Britain.

Kurt frowned. "I apologize, Mr. Dumbledore. I was under the impression you were here to speak with me about the plans for the GYAP conference next year in Reykjavík. Was I mistaken, or is it that you wished to speak with my father?"

"Your father?" Albus repeated, new fear dawning in his eyes.

The frown deepened. "Yes, Burt Hummel." Kurt raised both eyebrows at the man's unnerved silence. "The Vice President of the Magical United States?"

Albus's mouth fell open in horror.

Kurt stared. "I see," he said slowly. It took everything within him not to cackle uproariously.

This was far better than he had anticipated!

For the first time in more years than he would care to consider, Albus was speechless. He didn't
particularly enjoy the experience at all.

In the space of a handful of moments, his hopes for shepherding Kurt Hummel into the stiff arms of British magical society were dashed. He was quite sure that Kurt probably held the same beliefs as many other nations: namely that magical Britain was backward, insular, and corrupt, which, frankly, it was.

Even were that not the case, how could he possibly hope to entice a boy who was not only an international political figure, but the son of the man who was the second in command of an entire nation, one that was almost forty times the size of the United Kingdom with a magical population more than a hundredfold in number?

Kurt Hummel already had a social secretary, a personal assistant, and a chief of security who would frighten gargoyles. He was articulate if reserved, obviously intelligent, handsome, and had probably mastered the art of rhetoric. At the tender age of ten, Kurt enjoyed more wealth and political power than most adult wizards and witches could even dream of possessing.

He was what that insufferable brat Draco Malfoy could only wish to become.

A proffered place at Hogwarts was hardly likely to impress.

Albus was ruing the entire day, if not the past ten years, when an even more disturbing thought entered his mind. What had become of Harry? Somehow he doubted the boy was enjoying life as much as his twin and given that Albus had never bothered to check up on the lad, assuming Petunia would well care for him, Merlin only knew what might have befallen Harry.

He paled as he remembered he was planning to send Hagrid to introduce Harry to the magical world. What utter folly! He had hoped the man would present to the doubtlessly impressionable lad the more positive side of magical Britain, and of Dumbledore himself, but now he realized that Hagrid was ill-equipped to handle the numerous questions Harry was sure to have!

No, this wouldn't do at all. Hagrid might have his complete trust, but both of them had failed to consider that while Harry had been born in the magical world, he had been raised as a Muggle. In fact, given his letter to Petunia, it was entirely possible the woman had told Harry nothing of what was to come. Indeed, that was the most likely scenario. Lily had always insisted her sister was nothing if not spiteful.

"I beg your pardon, Mr. Hummel," Albus said, voice faint, "but I've just realized I've neglected a rather pressing matter. Might I impose upon you to allow my familiar entrance to your home so that I might send a message?"

Kurt blinked. "Of course, Mr. Dumbledore, but couldn't you simply call the other party?"

"Call?"

"Forgive me," said the contrite boy. "I forgot that wizarding Britain still uses owls."

Dumbledore was confused. "And the United States does not?"

"No, sir," Kurt said blankly. "We use telephones or email."

Albus shook his head to clear it, having no idea what on earth email was supposed to be. Instead he closed his eyes and summoned his magic to the surface, sending out a telepathic message to Fawkes.
A moment later Fawkes appeared in the room in a ball of flame, flying in frantic circles and trilling happily.

"A phoenix," Kurt reverently whispered, his eyes agog at the spectacle.

Fawkes released another trill and alighted on the headrest of Kurt's chair, bending over and playfully pecking the boy on the top of his head, sending Kurt into gales of giggles.

Dumbledore smiled softly at the sight. He took comfort in the overly serious boy laughing as though he hadn't a care in the world.

Even after all these years, Fawkes still both intimidated and fascinated him. He would never presume to understand his friend, merely taking comfort in the fact that Fawkes had remained loyal to him for so very long. He quickly conjured a piece of parchment and then debated about what to write.

Who should he send to young Harry? Minerva was a wise choice; after all, she had been introducing the Muggleborn to the magical world for decades. Still, she was a very dour woman who was more intimidating than she realized. Severus was out of the question for a plethora of reasons.

His eyes brightened.

Filius!

Yes, Flitwick was the perfect candidate. The man was jovial and of a good humor, but he was also a remarkable duelist and could protect Harry should the need arise. Further, his diminutive size and cheerful disposition had made him a favorite among the students for as long as anyone could remember. There was also the bonus that Lily Potter had been his preferred student and a treasured friend. Albus was sure Filius would take the utmost care in guiding Harry through this confusing time.

Granted, he was also counting on Filius using his connection with the Potters to cajole Harry's attendance. He quickly penned his missive and sent it off with Fawkes, noting the sadness that punctuated Kurt's face when the majestic creature departed.

"You are a very fortunate man, sir," Kurt said, still staring at the space which Fawkes had occupied only seconds before.

Albus inclined his head. "I am, indeed, Mr. Hummel. Still, it is sometimes necessary for me to be reminded of this fact lest I become ungrateful for my many blessings. Therefore, I thank you."

Kurt nodded and then decided to forgo pretense altogether. "Mr. Dumbledore, why are you here?"

Albus blinked at the frank manner before smiling slightly. Although it was not his preferred method of communication, he did appreciate those who didn't suffer fools. In this moment, Kurt Hummel reminded him a lot of Minerva McGonagall. He was also relieved that Fawkes' appearance had distracted the boy from questioning why Albus hadn't known he was the son of the Vice President.

Kurt wasn't distracted, of course, but was perfectly willing for Dumbledore to assume otherwise. There was no need to show his hand all at once.

"Ah," Dumbledore said, though it sounded more like pontificating, as he nodded his head.
Kurt barely refrained from rolling his eyes.

"Are you aware, Mr. Hummel, that you were born in the United Kingdom?"

Kurt stared at him. Really? *This* was his grand opening?

"Of course I am," he replied, letting some annoyance creep into his voice. At Dumbledore's startled look, Kurt *did* roll his eyes. "I assume that what you really want to ask me is whether or not I know I'm adopted. The answer is yes, though I can't possibly imagine how it concerns you or why you believe this to be any of your business."

Albus had the grace to flush, acknowledging the child had a point. He had shown up at the boy's home unannounced and obviously ignorant of the boy himself and his family, and had then proceeded to dance around what was a family issue, perhaps even a family secret.

He truly didn't understand how he had managed to err this badly. If he didn't know better, he would believe himself to be under some spell or befuddlement curse, but that was ridiculous.

He shook his head, missing the slight sneer on Kurt's face.

Apparently Dumbledore was unaware that, though he was now a politician, Burt Hummel held a mastery in warding. There were just all sorts of interesting spells one could weave into a ward if one had the expertise, including a surface scan of the house's occupants, much along the lines of Occlumency. That information would be relayed to the one who held the wards.

Coincidentally, Burt had shifted temporary control of them to Kurt just that very morning. How fortuitous!

"I'm well aware of my own adoption, Mr. Dumbledore," Kurt said sharply, "as well as its circumstances. I repeat my question: how is this any of your concern?"

Dumbledore fidgeted, wondering why he found this child so unnerving. The more time he spent in this house, the more out of sorts he felt. Kurt Hummel was unnaturally prepossessed for one so young and it bothered him. He had yet to see any trace of whimsy or innocence in the boy, save the earlier grand entrance by Fawkes, and it reminded him of another boy he had once failed.

He was determined not to fail Kurt and Harry.

"You may not be aware, Mr. Hummel, that Hogwarts School of Witchcraft and Wizardry keeps records of all magical children born in the United Kingdom. As such, you were registered with the school at the moment of your birth." He beamed. "Congratulations! You have been admitted to Hogwarts School of Witchcraft and Wizardry!"

Kurt regarded him placidly. "Well, thank you, Mr. Dumbledore, but I have no interest in attending your school. Was there anything else?"

"I beg your pardon, young man?" Dumbledore asked, disbelief plain on his face.

Kurt slowly repeated his statement.

"You don't wish to go to Hogwarts?" Dumbledore rumbled, thunderstruck.

Kurt sighedsoftly and leaned back in his chair. "Mr. Dumbledore, how familiar are you with the educational system here in the Magical United States?"
"Regrettably, not very."

Kurt nodded as though he had expected as much, which Albus found slightly annoying. "I know that in the United Kingdom, magicals matriculate at age eleven, correct?" At Dumbledore's nod, he continued. "Here, we begin training after our first serious bout of accidental magic."

Dumbledore's eyes widened to the size of saucers.

"I began schooling shortly after my second birthday," Kurt added, much to Dumbledore's shock. He winced. "I apparated from my crib to my high chair in the kitchen, splinching myself in the process."

"You ... you apparated?" Dumbledore whispered.

Surely this was an exaggeration! Such a thing couldn't be possible, for, were it true, the child's power must have been incalculable! Had he gotten things so very wrong? Was Kurt truly the more powerful of the Potter twins?

But Harry had been the one to defeat Voldemort; he had been, and was still, absolutely sure of this. He had run exhaustive tests after the event and every single one had confirmed that Kurt had expended no magic during the encounter.

Of course, that simply could've meant that, as he had believed, Voldemort had attacked Harry first and Harry had defended himself. However, what if Harry had not been protecting his brother as originally thought? What if Harry had been reacting to his mother's murder? Or perhaps it had been the boy's own survival instinct kicking in?

Great Merlin! What would have happened had Voldemort instead gone for Kurt? There were many things which, admittedly, Dumbledore did not understand, one of which was the mystery of twins. Rare in the magical world, twins were an enigma which had been little researched. Identical twins were the norm, while fraternal sets, which the Potters were, were even more obscure.

Was Kurt as powerful as Dumbledore believed Harry to be? Was Kurt, perhaps, even more powerful? James and Lily Potter, while well matched spiritually, had not been of similar magical strength. Lily had far and away been the stronger of the two, though sadly she had died before much of that potential could be actualized.

When people referred to her as the brightest witch of her age - and even the most surly Purebloods could agree on that, hatred of her notwithstanding - what they really meant was that she had been the most powerful. That often happened within a generation. Dumbledore had been the strongest of his generation, Tom Riddle of his own, Lily Potter of hers, and, Albus strongly suspected, Harry, or possibly Kurt, was the strongest of theirs.

Outside of Lily, who had been Muggleborn, the three most powerful magic wielders in British magical history were of allegedly mixed blood.

"I'm above average in magical strength," Kurt gamely continued, "but what I lack in raw power, I make up for in sheer determination." He shrugged. "I wanted a cookie."

Dumbledore stared.

Kurt shrugged again, this time with diffidence. "I really liked cookies!" he said defensively. "I was two years old!"

Dumbledore shook his head to clear it, his mouth quivering beneath his beard. "So you've been
receiving a magical education for almost a decade."

Kurt nodded. "Thus I am far more advanced than the typical first year Hogwarts student. Were I to accept your invitation, I would not only be held back and bored out of my mind, but the other students would come to resent me." He shook his head. "I've played that game before and have no desire to do so again."

Dumbledore decided this required a different tack. "May I ask as to what your education has consisted of so far?"

Kurt nodded and smiled, obviously pleased to discuss such matters. Albus correctly interpreted this to mean that the boy loved learning.

"Most of my training has been in magical theory," Kurt explained, "though I do well enough with the practical. I've studied the usual subjects: Transfiguration; Charms; Potions; Magical Botany, which I believe you refer to as Herbology; and, finally, Cryptozoology and Martial Studies. I think the closest analogues in the British educational system are Care of Magical Creatures and Defense Against the Dark Arts.

"Additionally, for the past two years I have been studying the theory behind Arithmancy and Runic Magic as well as several other disciplines, though I have not focused on the practical portions."

He shook his head. "I'm sorry, Mr. Dumbledore, but I believe there is very little your school can offer me. I receive private instruction and am unused to competing against others for grades or the attentions of a teacher. Frankly, I have no wish to disrupt a system in which I excel. I also have a commitment to the GYAP for the next seven years, one which I fully intend, and am contractually bound, to honor."

As much as he wanted to argue those points, Dumbledore knew he would be unable to do so without sounding petty or eliciting suspicions he didn't really wish to combat. How the devil was he to convince the child to come to Hogwarts without revealing his true intentions?

"Finally," Kurt said, "I have two companions with whom I am very close. I have been receiving instruction with them for years and will not be separated from them."

Kurt suppressed maniacal laughter when he saw a gleam enter Dumbledore's eyes. He had successfully cast the net and now there was nothing left to do but watch as Dumbledore attempted to reel him in.

Dumbledore smiled magnanimously. "I am more than happy to extend invitations to your companions, Mr. Hummel. I find your dedication to your scholarly pursuits to be quite commendable." He paused. "Frankly, Hogwarts could do with students of your caliber."

Kurt wondered just how much that admission had cost the man.

"I suppose I could discuss it with them," he said slowly, ignoring Dumbledore's beam, "but I'm confused, sir. I was unaware that Hogwarts recruited from the international magical community. From my understanding, you cater specifically to the United Kingdom. I may have been born there, but I no longer hold citizenship and neither do my companions."

Dumbledore certainly hadn't been expecting that, which was apparent from the look on his face. He then brightened. "Surely you aware that members of the United Kingdom can hold dual citizenship?"

"I am," Kurt drawled, "but my British citizenship was renounced upon my adoption. My father is
American and my mother was French, so I am already a dual citizen."

Dumbledore's eyes dimmed at his use of the past tense. "Was?" he softly repeated. "Then your mother is no longer with us?"

Kurt became rigid, furious with himself for the unintentional slip. It was nothing he hadn't planned to reveal later but wanted to do so under circumstances of his own choosing. He was sure that Dumbledore would try to manipulate him with this information, though he didn't as yet know the manner.

"She died when I was six," he said coldly. "I will not discuss it."

Dumbledore wisely backed off, but he mourned for this boy who had lost three parents in his short life. It was most unjust.

"My father has since remarried," Kurt said. "Her name is Carole and she is a lovely woman. Additionally, I gained a stepbrother, Finn, with whom I am very close. The idea of being away from him for ten months out of the year is not a pleasant one."

Dumbledore silently cursed, once again furious that he had been so lax in keeping tabs on Kurt and Harry. He had never even conceived that siblings would be an issue, as it was rare for magical families to have more than one child. The Weasleys and Greengrasses were the exception rather than the rule.

Kurt knew he had to dangle a carrot in front of the old man, who was swiftly losing hope in his mission.

"However," he said slowly, "I must admit that the opportunity to receive tuition from some of your instructors is worthy of consideration."

Dumbledore sat up straight. "You are aware of our faculty?"

"Some of them," Kurt replied. "Part of my instruction includes reading and writing synopses of the current research presented in international periodicals. I have read several such articles written by Severus Snape, Minerva McGonagall, Pomona Sprout, and Filius Flitwick." He allowed a small smile. "I am most impressed."

Dumbledore took pride in that statement, though he regretfully noted that only four of his faculty had been included. Of course, Vector, Babbling, and Sinistra were relatively young and had yet to make their marks in their respective disciplines, though he was certain they would. Kettleburn was more interested in wrangling his animals than actually studying them; Muggle Studies was sneered at by most of Britain, so Quirrell's exclusion was of no surprise, but perhaps Charity Burbage would fare better; and Trelawney ... well.

Regardless, he was determined to put his best foot forward, now that Kurt was more engaged in the conversation.

"Are there particular disciplines you favor?" he asked jovially.

Kurt inclined his head. "I am most interested in Potions and Charms. I am skilled enough in Transfiguration, but am unable to appreciate it for the art it is. I am too much of a perfectionist and am easily frustrated. Transfiguration requires a great deal of patience and precision, which, though I possess for Potions, I do not for Transfiguration. I am aware, of course, of your reputation in the field, and I have found Professor McGonagall's research to be compulsory reading. The woman is absolutely brilliant."
Dumbledore beamed once more and couldn't wait to relay this to Minerva, who often felt her skill was unappreciated by the students. Kurt's interest in Charms and Potions was also intriguing, given they had been Lily's best subjects. Perhaps Kurt took after her then, while Harry would hallmark James. Of course, that could also be a problem, especially among certain members of the staff. He made a note to speak with Severus later.

"And your opinions of the others?"

Kurt bobbed his head. "Professor Sprout is a leader in her field and her advancements in that field are remarkable. Unfortunately she does not have the international standing she should because, while similar, Herbology and Magical Botany are not analogous."

He paused. "Professor Flitwick's reputation speaks for itself. He is surely one of the greatest Charms Masters in the last century and his dueling expertise is superior. I know that he has been courted by all four of the American schools several times over the years but has no interest in leaving Hogwarts."

Dumbledore was floored. This was certainly news to him! Dear Merlin, just how close had he come to losing one of his most valued instructors? This was most distressing.

"As for Professor Snape," Kurt said, becoming noticeably reticent, "his research is impeccable and I would have a great interest in learning from him." He paused. "However his reputation is also fairly well-known." He arched a brow. "You understand why this would give me pause."

Albus said nothing, though he silently agreed with the boy. Severus' attitude had frankly become more trouble than it was worth and had alienated the majority of the students and all of the faculty. Granted, the man was a genius and the foremost potions expert in the Isles, but he had no interest in teaching and it was apparent to everyone who encountered him. If Albus didn't so desperately require Severus' other skills, he most likely would have dismissed him long ago and set him up in private research.

He certainly couldn't allow the man to alienate the Potter twins. While he had some control over Harry's life, though not as much as many would presume, it was quite obvious that he would be unable to control Kurt, who could simply leave Hogwarts at his leisure.

"Are there other schools you are considering?" he asked the boy.

Kurt shrugged. "Not particularly. I've received acceptances to all of the American schools, as well as those in Canada and Australia. I've also been invited to attend Beauxbatons, of which my mother was an alumna, and Durmstrang, as well as schools in Japan, Greece, Brazil, and New Zealand. But, as I explained, I have no real desire to attend any school whatsoever. I've done well with my tutoring and see no reason to change the course I've set for myself."

"What of your companions?" Albus pressed. "Would they not be interested in the chance to attend one of Europe's premier magical institutions?"

Kurt chuckled. "If anything, they would be a harder sell."

Albus couldn't fathom how this would be possible, given that Kurt was far from convinced. He thought about taking the matter up with Burt Hummel, but had a suspicion it would be pointless. Kurt obviously knew his own mind and there was nothing to suggest that he was prey to his father's commands. Indeed, Albus wouldn't have been surprised if Kurt was allowed to do as he wished, given his independence and intelligence. Further, going behind the boy's back would only anger him unnecessarily.
"Might I arrange to speak with them?"

Kurt shrugged a shoulder. "Of course. They're here now. Is this a convenient time?"

Dumbledore gathered a breath and unleashed a blinding smile.

These children were unlike any Albus Dumbledore had ever encountered. He had no idea what to make of them and was fairly certain all three couldn't have cared less what he thought. This was both a compelling and frustrating experience.

He was unused to dealing with children this age who were this competent, this knowledgeable about magic, and this unimpressed with the reputations of both himself and Hogwarts. The blond girl had listened passively to his pitch but exhibited not one shred of interest; the other had outright laughed when he extended their invitations to matriculate at his school.

"Might I ask what so amuses you about my offer?" he said stiffly to Santana Lopez, who merely smirked.

"Where shall I start?" the girl drawled. She then gave him a dazzling smile. "Perhaps with your limited course offerings? The percentage of your staff not in possession of a mastery in their chosen fields? The low number of graduates who pursue further education?"

Dumbledore gaped like a fish.

"How about the fact that the bird scores for your school are so pathetic, particularly in Potions and History, that they are routinely mocked on an international level?"

"That is not true!" Albus insisted.

"It is," Quinn said quietly. "You use the OWL system, correct?" At Dumbledore's nod, she continued. "The collective scores for the Potions and History exams are so low, they're anemic. They're not even recognized outside of Britain."

She raised a brow. "You have to know that the majority of magicals born to non-magical parents leave Britain upon their graduation. A great deal of them emigrate here, where they discover they must procure remedial tuition in those subjects if they wish to find worthwhile employment. It's an expense few can afford, but they find a way. They know nothing is waiting for them back home."

"And that's another thing," Santana interjected, rather hatefully in Albus's opinion. "Britain's inane concept of blood status is anachronistic and pedantic. Even schools like Durmstrang acknowledge that magicals born to non-magicals can possess enormous power. They might not admit them, but they also do not dismiss them as inconsequential."

Dumbledore scowled at that direct hit.

"That is not to say that the Magical United States does not have its own problems," Quinn said diplomatically. "There is rampant racism, classism, homophobia, xenophobia, and religious strife. However, blood status is considered irrelevant and though the voices of these other pockets of dissent are loud, they hold little power. Further, the MUS has instituted laws to protect different classes from discrimination and abuse. Your country has not."
"All of us have dealt with this on some level," Santana spat. "Me, because of the color of my skin; Quinn, because she's Christian; and Kurt, because he's gay. At least here we have some measure of recourse. Why the hell would we pull up stakes and spend seven years in a country that actively protests the right of a majority of their citizens to exist?" She shook her head. "No thanks."

This was a revelation for Dumbledore, who'd honestly had no idea that his country was this poorly regarded in the international magical community and among children no less! Yes, he had known about the low test scores, but he had simply put them out of his mind, telling himself he'd address it at a later time, though that time had never come. As for the girls' arguments about prejudice in Britain, well, he could hardly refute them. They were a matter of public record, after all, and he was sure that Kurt's position as a youth ambassador had afforded him a fair bit of intelligence on the state of British wizarding politics.

It was time to approach this from a different angle, as he was getting nowhere with these children and losing ground fast.

"May I address your concerns one at a time?" he asked pleasantly.

"Of course," Quinn said smoothly.

Kurt nodded with polite disinterest.

Santana sneered. "Whatever."

Not exactly a ringing endorsement, but Albus was determined to persevere.

"Please explain your comments about course selection," he politely asked. "We offer the standard European curriculum, as well as a few other courses that those such as Beauxbatons do not."

Santana gave a grudging nod. "But you don't offer any truly advanced subjects," she argued. "Hogwarts starts every student off at the same level, which is inherently unfair because we both know that Purebloods are trained at home prior to their matriculation."

Albus nodded tightly, well aware of that fact.

"We understand that this is no way reflects upon you or your school," Quinn interjected. "You can hardly be expected to keep up with every student prior to their arrival at Hogwarts, nor would you be privy to what their parents or tutors have taught them. Still, it does place the students of non-magical parents at a distinct disadvantage."

A mollified Albus also conceded that point with another nod. Just as he was beginning to suspect that the girls were playing Good Auror-Bad Auror, Santana gave Quinn a furious scowl, which suggested they were not in cahoots with one another and perhaps argued frequently.

"Not the point," Santana hissed. "There are no courses offered in Enchanting, Rituals, Healing, Law, or Politics. There is nothing in the way of Offensive Spellcasting or Spellcrafting. There are no courses in art, language, literature, music, drama, or physical education. Alchemy is also not an option, which is pretty ridiculous, considering Dumbledore trained under one of the greatest alchemists of all time."

Albus raised his brows. Apparently the girl had either vetted him or knew a present or former student.

She glared at him, hands on her hips. "Kurt wants to be a Healer. Hogwarts offers nothing that would help him other than a basic education, a large amount of which he already has. I want to be
an attorney but your History program is a joke and not even applicable to me as I won't be practicing in the United Kingdom, and you don't offer courses in Politics or Law."

Dumbledore suppressed a sigh, feeling old and rather useless. He could refute none of her arguments. Most students who went on to mastery programs or apprenticeships did experience some difficulty, given that their Hogwarts education, though relatively excellent, was so generalized. Further, Britain did not offer much in the way of mastery programs and most apprenticeships were closed to Muggleborn students.

"And what of you, Miss Fabray?" he asked. "Have you yet decided which career you would like to pursue?"

"Finance," she replied. "I'm afraid that Arithmancy, the only mathematics program Hogwarts offers, won't be of much assistance to me and Gringotts doesn't allow humans to apprentice as financial advisers."

"I think what most concerns us, Mr. Dumbledore," Kurt softly interrupted, "is that, as previously explained, we're not typical first year students. You couldn't place us in beginning classes. It not only wouldn't be fair to us, but it would skew the results of the other students."

"That is a fair point," Albus said, nodding. He paused. "Would you consider sitting placement exams?"

Quinn was mystified. "Why should do that? Are our IMAGE scores insufficient?"

Dumbledore gawped, rather unattractively. "You have sat the for the IMAGEs?"

The International Magical Aptitude General Exams were considered notoriously difficult and it was rare for British witches and wizards to take them. In fact, he could count on two hands the number who had: himself, Tom Riddle, Minerva McGonagall, Amelia Bones, Alastor Moody, Severus Snape, Lily Evans, Narcissa Black Malfoy, and Bill Weasley. Albus had tried and failed to convince Remus Lupin to sit for them, even offering to pay the entrance fee, but Remus had declined. Filius had never bothered, but would have triumphed had he the interest.

The exams were administered by the ETC, the Education and Training Commission, a subdivision of the ICW. Considering the exams were voluntary, expensive, and that the Magical United States was not affiliated with the ICW, this finally cemented the idea that these children were ridiculously advanced and terribly serious about their academic endeavors. It was no longer a question of convincing them to attend Hogwarts, but what to do with them should they agree.

Albus honestly didn't know how to address the situation. He should probably discuss it with his colleagues.

Santana had had enough and decided to cut right to the chase. "Why do you want us there so badly? Specifically, what do you want with Kurt? Quinn and I are well aware that you're only courting us to guarantee Kurt's attendance. He's our best friend, so we know how special he is. What do you want with him?"

Albus blinked, taking note of the blush spreading across Kurt's cheeks. These children were entirely too smart and sophisticated for his and their own good. Well, there was nothing for it except to answer their question.

Without really answering it, of course.

He sighed gently. "As I'm sure you're aware, Kurt was born in the United Kingdom, shortly before
the fall of Voldemort."

Santana and Quinn nodded, the former rolling her eyes and making an impatient gesture for him to hurry along.

He cleared his throat. "I consider it not only my solemn duty but my great joy to see that the magical children of the United Kingdom receive a quality education."

Kurt narrowed his eyes. "Did you know my birth parents?"

Albus paused, unsure of how to answer the question, so he opted for prevarication. "It is entirely possible that I did, young man. Do you know their names?"

"No," Kurt lied.

"Alas," Dumbledore quietly replied. "I may have known them, Master Hummel," he said, pointedly not lying outright, "but regardless, it is my responsibility to them, to you, and to my country to see that you receive the finest education possible."

Santana glared at this pompous declaration; Kurt seemed unconvinced; but Quinn looked thoughtful.

Albus wondered if perhaps she was the one he should directly engage; the weak chink in their armor, so to speak.

"Maybe this is something we should consider," Quinn said slowly.

Santana appeared outraged.

"Please explain," Kurt said to Quinn.

Albus sat back in his immensely comfortable chair and smiled, hoping the young Fabray girl would make his case for him.

Santana, her back to Dumbledore, smirked at her friends, certain that Quinn was going to string the old man along and wring as many concessions out of him as possible.

She knew she herself would one day be an excellent attorney, but Quinn had an unparalleled ability to bullshit her way into getting whatever the hell she wanted. Santana didn't have that much patience but certainly admired Quinn for playing to her strengths.

Kurt's laughter echoed in her head.
Filius Flitwick was having a most peculiar day.

It had started out normally enough with him entering the Great Hall at noon to share the midday meal with his colleagues. As Head of Ravenclaw House, Filius, along with Heads of House Severus Snape, Minerva McGonagall, and Pomona Sprout, was required to reside in Hogwarts year-round in order to keep the wards charged and active.

Filius had found since the death of his wife and son that he didn't much mind staying in the castle. He still retained a small cottage in the Welsh countryside, visiting when his workload permitted, but it was more a case of him being unwilling to relinquish the past than escaping the present. The cottage was where he had been a husband and a father. As he was no longer either of those things, the house had become more of a museum than a refuge.

Severus had a cottage in Spinner's End and Minerva one in the Shetlands. They held sentimental value for their owners, but neither often returned.

Filius liked Hogwarts. He enjoyed discovering rooms he hadn't known existed, even after his tenure of more than forty years. Of course, he would never dare presume he was cognizant of all the castle's secrets; frankly, he hoped that day never came. He had lived a long and mostly happy life, and surprises were one of the few joys left to him.

Upon entering the Hall, he noted immediately that Albus was not present. This in itself was not terribly unusual, given the man's positions in the Wizengamot and ICW. Still, it was curious. Summers, after all, were usually lazy days, even for the faculty. Minerva and Severus had already tucked in and Hagrid was looking particularly bright-eyed.

The other teachers were off enjoying their own holidays, save Sybill Trelawney, who, as usual, was sequestered in her tower. Filius clucked his tongue and shook his head. Such a strange woman. He, much like Minerva, didn't hold with Divination. It really was so much nonsense in his opinion, and he frankly pitied those who took stock in such fanciful notions.

"Good afternoon, everyone," he said cheerfully.

Minerva indulged him with a rare smile, Severus grunted, and Hagrid boomed a happy salutation.

Filius liked Hagrid a great deal. The man was almost as cheerful as Filius himself and it was almost unheard of for Hagrid to have an unkind word about anyone. He supposed their accord might be based somewhat on the fact that they were both considered half-breeds by British magical society, Hagrid being a half-giant and Filius being a quarter Goblin.

Severus ... well, Filius considered him a genius, but not a colleague. Severus was a very poor teacher who actively despised his position and took out his frustration on the students. Filius, however, having been employed at Hogwarts for more than three generations and having taught Severus, well knew the limits of the man's power. He had long ago realized that nothing he said would move Albus on the matter of Severus Snape.

Therefore Filius had taken it upon himself to pull Severus aside ten years ago to warn him that should his cruel tongue and manner ever be unleashed upon a Ravenclaw student, Severus would be meeting the end of his wand. Severus Snape was many things, but a fool was not amongst them.

Filius was closest to Minerva and though he considered her an intellectual peer and a fearsome
witch, their relationship was not particularly deep. It was cordial and respectful, however, and they had both decided to let that be enough.

He repressed a sigh. He admired Minerva but thought her almost slavish devotion to Dumbledore highly ridiculous and beneath her. He respected Albus's ability but held no illusions as to the man's character. Albus Dumbledore was, at the end of the day, a benevolent despot. He also found Minerva's willingness to rise constantly to Severus's baiting a tad unseemly.

As he took his seat and perused the morning's offerings, he banished such thoughts from his mind, learning long ago that happiness was a choice, one which people were often not strong enough to make. He had survived the scorn heaped on him a child, three wars, and the deaths of his entire family, yet he still chose to be happy. He refused to allow the petty problems of others to dim that resolve.

"You appear to be especially excited today, Hagrid," he noted.

Hagrid beamed. "The Headmaster has asked me to deliver Harry Potter's letter and show him around Diagon Alley this afternoon!"

Severus snorted, which in turn caused Minerva to scowl and mutter epithets under her breath.

Filius correctly surmised that Albus must be playing one of his little games, sending Hagrid out in to the Muggle world to introduce such a prominent student to magical Britain. He had no idea what Dumbledore was planning, but he was sure it was probably stupid.

He said nothing as he quietly seethed, wondering what on earth Lily would think of all this.

Filius helped himself to several of the dishes and serenely ate his lunch as Minerva and Severus predictably launched a witless battle of scathing attacks upon James Potter, Sirius Black, Remus Lupin, and Peter Pettigrew. The name of Lily Evans went noticeably unmentioned, for which Filius was grateful; otherwise, he would have had to take steps.

His eyes became misty as he thought of his favorite student. He had never told her, but Filius had come to regard the girl as his own daughter. He had been devastated by her death and the story Dumbledore had told him about young Harry vanquishing the Dark Lord had never sat well with him. No, there was something else, something that Dumbledore either didn't know or refused to share. It was most likely the latter.

Filius resolved to keep an eye on Harry when the lad finally arrived at Hogwarts. The boy would probably be sorted into Gryffindor like his parents, and though Filius was aware that Minerva took seriously the charge of her students, she was also very stern and rigid. That certainly had its place, of course, particularly in a boarding school where children needed discipline, especially as many had never before been away from home for any length of time. Still, the younger students often needed comfort and understanding, which, for whatever reason, Minerva was either unwilling or unable to provide.

Further, he was sure that Severus would attempt to make the boy's life a living hell. Dumbledore would deal with it as he did most problems: by ignoring it. Minerva would huff and puff, but would not interfere at Dumbledore's insistence. The rest of the staff, bar a few, would follow her lead. Filius, however, was not about to sit by idly and allow Severus free rein over the child of his greatest enemy.

Albus had his allies and acolytes amongst the staff, but Filius had his compatriots as well. He would have to remember to take Poppy and Pomona aside and ask them to watch out for Harry -
discreetly, of course, lest they arouse the suspicion of Dumbledore. Filius himself wasn't particularly concerned about Dumbledore's feelings, so he would look after Harry as he saw fit.

If, however, Harry was sorted into Ravenclaw, then Albus was in for a very rude awakening.

As he laid his spoon next to his empty soup bowl, Filius was startled from his thoughts by the appearance of Fawkes, who flamed into the room and trilled happily.

Minerva blinked, Severus growled, and Hagrid applauded. Filius merely raised a brow.

Said brow arched even higher when Fawkes dived at him, circled about his head, and then landed in the soup bowl, a parchment clutched in his maw.

"For me?" Filius asked.

Fawkes dropped the missive, honked, and disappeared.

"Ridiculous creature," Severus grunted.

Hagrid, of course, was extremely affronted and began spewing facts about the majesty of phoenixes while bleating about what a great man Dumbledore was.

Severus rolled his eyes, Filius not far behind him. Minerva simply sipped her tea.

"And what does Albus wish of you?" she prompted.

Filius hummed and unfurled the letter, scanning it quickly and wondering what the hell the old man was playing at this time. He rolled it back up, stowed it in the inside pocket of his blazer, and furrowed his brow.

"Albus has asked me to take young Harry to Diagon Alley," he said slowly. He turned to Hagrid. "I'm sorry, Hagrid, but Albus is concerned that Harry will have more questions than for which you would have answers."

Hagrid sagged with disappointment, but at last nodded. Truly, he really hadn't understood why Dumbledore had asked him in the first place. He had known James and Lily, but not terribly well; certainly not as well as Dumbledore, Flitwick, and McGonagall.

He also thought the change in plans made sense. He well knew that his experiences in the wizarding world were not comparable to what Harry would encounter. Further, as Hagrid had never graduated from Hogwarts, he was not a particularly suitable representative for the school, especially not for a new student.

Minerva quickly threw up a privacy charm to cover her and Filius. Severus surreptitiously dispelled it while throwing an obfuscation jinx in Hagrid's direction.

"When you get there," Minerva gravely began, "please be careful to examine Mr. Potter's living conditions thoroughly." Her lips tightened so severely they all but disappeared. She shook her head in consternation. "I told Albus not to leave the boy there. I warned him about how horrid those Muggles were."

Filius barely refrained from rolling his eyes. So once again Minerva had been privy to a Dumbledore debacle she knew to be a poor decision. Once again she had argued against it but had allowed him to check her backbone. Now when the result was coming home to roost ten years later, she was filled with unrighteous indignation and feeling morally superior.
He merely nodded. "Of course." He paused. "Would you happen to know the relatives with whom Mr. Potter has been staying? Albus would never disclose that information to me and only provided me an address in his missive."

Minerva silently debated whether or not to tell him, which was ridiculous, considering Filius had address in hand, but at last relented. "Mr. Potter lives with Lily's sister, Petunia Dursley, and her family."

Well, this simply wouldn't do. Filius knew from his conversations with Lily that Petunia was a bitter, vengeful shrew of a woman who detested all things magical. He would be sure to go over that house with a wary eye. Of course, this raised the question as to the whereabouts of the will and why it had never been probated. He would have Harry make an inquiry with the Goblins.

Severus had nearly bent his fork in half, he had gripped it so tightly. Dumbledore had never told him that the Potter brat had been put with Petunia, merely that he was safe with some relatives in the Muggle world.

He should have immediately made the connection but never had. He certainly wondered about that now. He would have to scan his Occlumency shields later, and rather deeply, looking for modifications not of his own making.

This ... changed things. He didn't particularly like change and liked even less reconsidering firmly held opinions; however, it might be necessary. He knew Petunia's character very well and could imagine what she had done to a magical child placed directly under her thumb. He didn't like the implications but would posit no further until Filius made his report.

He trusted Filius, who shared his opinion on what an incomparable witch Lily Evans had been; further, Filius had never been blinded by the smarmy charm of the Marauders. If Filius found Potter's home situation to be benign, Severus would continue as planned to make the boy's life miserable.

If, however, things were as bad as he was beginning to suspect they might be, revisions would be in order. He might even be able to use Filius as a middleman, thus ensuring his own hands stayed clean and reducing Dumbledore's interference.

Regardless of his personal feelings, he had that miserable life debt to take into account as well as his promise to Lily. Neither of those had anything to do with Albus sodding Dumbledore, though Severus certainly wouldn't put it past the man to abuse them for his own ends.

"I'm rather surprised Albus didn't make the trip himself," Filius casually remarked.

Minerva rolled her eyes. "He's off trying to recruit a potential student," she replied, scoffing. "An American, if you can believe that."

Severus cocked a brow and removed the charm from Hagrid, who was beginning to get suspicious. "Since when do we accept international students?"

"The child was born in the United Kingdom," Minerva said, "but orphaned during the war. He was adopted by an American couple, though his name has been down on the roster since his birth. I believe Albus has some grand notion about ensuring the boy isn't denied his heritage."

Something about that statement set off an alarm with Filius's mind. He didn't have time to process it presently but would unpack it later.

Severus merely snorted, sure there was something more behind Albus's American venture but
knowing he wouldn't be told unless absolutely necessary. Dumbledore really was a most infuriating man and, not for the first time, Severus wondered if he would have been better off not surrendering himself to Dumbledore but instead simply fleeing the country.

"Well," Filius sighed, rising to his feet, "I suppose I should be off. There is a Head of House meeting tonight, correct?"

Minerva nodded. "I'm sure we can all guess as to the agenda."

Severus gave another disgusted snort.

"Still searching for that truffle, Severus?" Minerva drawled.

Filius burst out laughing and made his exit.

Privet Drive was quite possibly the most bland and pedestrian street in the entire free world.

Filius had never seen anything like it and, unlike most of his colleagues, he was no stranger to the Muggle world. One simple glamour charm and he fit in with the best of them. It was his forte, after all, and he had never understood those witches and wizards who made no effort when venturing out into the unknown but then complained loudly when said sojourns were a bust.

He really did despise laziness. Unfortunately magic had made very many people, some of whom were actually quite sensible, incredibly lazy. Everyone knew laziness led to idiocy.

Every house on the street looked exactly the same: the same design, the same allotment of yard, even the same colors. Filius was bored just from standing there. He couldn't even imagine what it must be like to live in one of the dwellings.

He probably would have killed himself.

He shook his head and looked again the letter, frowning in consternation.

"Reply by owl, indeed," he scoffed.

How, exactly, was Harry to have done that? Even if he did know of the magical world, it wasn't likely he had access to an owl and while Filius was sure Petunia remembered the delivery of Lily's letter, she had been a child then. She probably knew what owl post was, but couldn't access it, so to speak.

Really, what the hell was Dumbledore playing at?

As he slowly approached the house, Filius became even more entrenched in his thoughts. He felt the traces of very old magic. Not old just in terms of simple linear time, but spellwork that was ancient in its construction and purpose.

His eyes widened.

Blood magic.

It stunk of Albus, which was problematic for several reasons. The first was that blood magic itself
had been outlawed over two centuries ago, having been deemed as dark by a rather provincial ministry administration.

Fiddle-faddle, naturally. Blood magic was in no way dark as long as it was used for its intended purposes. It could be construed as dark, much in the same way a simple levitation charm could be dark were it used to toss someone from a cliff.

The second problem was, while there was no doubt that Albus was indeed a genius and an incredibly powerful wizard, at his core he was a dilettante. He had masteries in Potions and Transfiguration and had apprenticed with Flamel, yes, but all of his knowledge of magical esoterica was merely the result of dabbling. He knew a little bit about a great many things, but Albus's true gift was self-promotion.

If Albus Dumbledore was skilled in blood magic, and thereby rituals and invocations, all of which were subsets of advanced and specialized charms work, Filius would gladly eat the Sorting Hat. Fennel would be necessary.

So what Filius had so far determined was thus: Albus had performed illegal magic in or around Harry Potter's house and had probably bungled it in some very rudimentary and colossal fashion. This, of course, could only have led to even further asinine mistakes.

Still, Filius could admit, if only to himself, that he was desperately curious to see the results of Albus's handiwork.

Well, he supposed there was nothing for it but to walk up to the door and ring the bell. He braced himself for the encounter even as he recalled everything Lily had ever mentioned of her sister. He therefore knew to be polite, as Petunia reveled in social niceties, though she herself didn't feel it necessary for her to exhibit them; firm, as the woman was utterly intractable; and, if all else failed, he should prey on her fear of magic.

Contrary to what many might have believed, such action was not beneath him.

Reinforcing his glamour, he rang the bell.

"Boy!"

Filius startled at the unholy screech.

"Get the door!"

A few seconds later said door quietly opened and he was met by a pair of hauntingly beautiful and familiar green eyes which peeked out at him with curiosity. Filius, however, had never before associated such timidity and hopelessness with those eyes.

He actually felt his heart break. And then the rage set in.

Thirty minutes later, Filius had barely refrained from committing multiple homicide. The only reason he hadn't indulged was because he was afraid of further traumatizing young Harry. Instead, he compiled facts.
First, Harry Potter had had no idea that magic existed. In fact, he had been repeatedly told it did not. Whenever Harry had performed accidental magic in his ignorance, he had been severely punished.

Second, Harry Potter had no idea that his parents had been murdered by a psychopath with delusions of grandeur. Instead he had been informed that his parents had been hopeless alcoholics who had perished in an automobile accident of their own creation, that they hadn't loved or wanted him enough to remain alive to care for him.

Third, Harry Potter had spent his entire tenure at the Dursley house living in a cupboard under the stairs.

It wasn't even until he had made that discovery that Filius had examined the envelope which held Harry's letter. He felt inordinately stupid, inadequate, and ashamed.

He also couldn't wait to rub it in Minerva's face. As the one who oversaw the process of the addressing of the letters, he was sure that she would feel just as guilty as he and he was in the mood to spread the pain around.

Fourth, Harry Potter was terrified of his uncle. It was much noticeable in his words or attitude, but was apparent from the way Harry constantly sought to remove himself from Vernon Dursley's reach; how he would wince whenever Dursley raised his voice, which appeared to be a constant endeavor; and how he would pale while Dursley would simultaneously turn a violent magenta.

Harry exhibited some measure of indifference where his uncle was concerned, but Filius was sure much of it was feigned. Regardless, he appreciated and respected the boy's bravado and seeming refusal to be intimidated.

This made Filius consider things he would really rather not consider, but which he nevertheless was sure were true. There would be a reckoning for this, but not until Harry was safely out of his family's clutches.

So Filius offered his little spiel: magic was real, Harry was a wizard, his parents had been magical and had been killed in a magical war, and now Harry was to go to Hogwarts.

He watched with undisguised interest as Harry absorbed this information. He watched as Harry reconciled past events with what he now knew to be true. And he did know it, which was shocking in and of itself. Never once had Harry denied he was a wizard, that magic couldn't possibly exist, or the host of other protests Minerva had related that Muggleborn children had expressed over the years.

On some level, then, Harry had to have known that there was more, more to the world and to himself.

Oh, there was anger, of course, aimed primarily at the Dursleys, but Harry held his emotions tightly to him, which honestly concerned Filius. It wasn't natural for an eleven year old child to have such control, to shut down so completely and offer nothing to the world but a blank mask. This wasn't inherent behavior; it had been bred into him and Filius was quite sure who was responsible.

Therefore the most important thing was to get Harry out of this house, never to return. He had no illusions that Dumbledore would fight him; for whatever reason he wanted Harry here, but that meant little to Filius. It was obvious Dumbledore had neglected Harry, never once checking in with or up on the lad, which was completely inexcusable.
Thank Merlin Dumbledore was presently out of the country. That offered a window, small though it was, for Filius to take action.

And he would be taking action.

Visits to St. Mungo's and the Ministry were definitely in order, particularly a meeting with Amelia Bones to entertain questions of possible charges. That Harry had been placed with the Dursleys at all meant that Dumbledore had, as Filius suspected, purposefully violated the Potter will. Filius had heard no more about the document after he had signed his name, which was highly irregular. Obviously, it never had been probated. The question was why the other beneficiaries hadn't protested.

So where was it?

More importantly, why had he never asked about it? Why had he never even thought to ask about it? In fact, why could he no longer remember the contents of the will when he had been a witness?

And then he knew, and that person was going to pay.

He scowled and shook his head to clear it.

The Goblins should have a copy of the will on file. Harry would need money to purchase his school supplies and to see him through the year, so the first stop would have to be Gringotts. Filius planned on utilizing every contact he had within that bank and had no qualms about preying on the Goblins' dislike of Dumbledore.

He quickly cast a series of charms, so quickly that they went unnoticed by everyone but Harry, who was watching with keen interest. The cupboard under the stairs was sealed until it could be thoroughly examined. The Dursleys were made not to discuss it with anyone unless Filius himself was present. Another charm told him that the blood magic he had earlier sensed was a series of wards tied to Harry himself, powered by his own magic, which was absolutely appalling.

He knew of only one type of blood ward that would be anchored in such a way, as well as how to dispel it.

He turned to Harry and smiled. "Harry, do you consider this house to be your home?"

Harry gave him an incredulous look but shook his head. "This has never been, and will never be, my home. It's merely where I live."

Filius beamed as Petunia Dursley gasped and the wards irrevocably fell. He quickly cast anti-apparation and anti-portkey wards, as well as the standard fire and flood prevention wards around the perimeter. After all, he didn't want the Dursleys to die. He much preferred them to suffer and would see to it that they did.

"Come along, then, Harry. There's much to do."

Closing the front door behind him, his meager possessions packed into a suitcase which Professor Flitwick had hastily conjured for him, Harry looked at the man expectantly.

"Let us hurry to the next street over," Filius said. "Wisteria Walk, I believe it was called."

Harry nodded. "I wonder if I should say goodbye to Mrs. Figg."

Filius raised a brow and Harry hurriedly explained about the elderly woman who took care of him
when the Dursleys were particularly taxed by his presence, which had been often.

Arabella Figg, Filius realized, obviously placed as a Dumbledore spy. He was of two minds about this particular revelation: either Figg was delusional, which was certainly quite possible, or she had been reporting to Albus about Harry's treatment for almost ten years and he had done nothing about it. Either option was galling and he planned to look into it further.

"I think that can wait," he said. "You could always send her a letter."

Harry nodded slowly, suspicion now shining in his eyes. "Why do you look like this? It's not real, is it?"

Filius was impressed. Most witches and wizards he knew couldn't see through glamours and certainly not at the level with which his had been cast. In fact, he knew of only one other in Harry's age group. Of course, he wasn't sure whether Harry could see through the glamour, but the boy definitely knew one was being employed. Oh, Harry was truly his mother's son!

Lily. Dear Lily, whom he had failed very badly. Well, time to put an end to that immediately.

He nodded. "You are correct, Mr. Potter. I am wearing what is called a glamour; a spell, specifically a charm, which alters my appearance so that I am more easily able to fit in to the Muggle world."

What was most surprising was that Harry didn't question this, but merely nodded. He didn't ask why this should be necessary, nor did he press Filius to remove the glamour and present himself truthfully. He just accepted the explanation.

This was somewhat bewildering. Either Harry was far more intelligent and cunning than the average eleven year old, or he was extremely gullible and willing to believe whatever was fed to him. Filius could only pray it was the former.

As they walked, Filius quickly explained the three primary methods of magical transport: the Floo system, portkeys, and Apparation. He was amused when Harry denounced as mental the idea of jumping in and out of fireplaces, declared his interest in portkeys and how they operated, and likened Apparation to teleportation.

Filius made sure to impart to Harry that magical transport was dangerous if the witch or wizard was unaware with the concept; that a clear destination must always be at the front of the mind; and that Apparation, while extremely useful, was distinctly uncomfortable. He explained that portkeys could be made out of absolutely anything and therefore important not to touch things with which he was unfamiliar, promising to teach him the applicable detection charms before the start of school. Also, should someone ever throw something at him, Harry would do well to repress his instinct to catch it, instead ducking out of the way.

He watched as Harry nodded, seemingly filing this information away in his brain. He rather suspected that Harry would be the type of student who took few notes. He was aural, not visual. Harry listened keenly to the words spoken to him, and while he might have had questions, he didn't ask them. This concerned Filius, who believed Harry had been specifically taught not to ask questions. He'd have to do something about that.

"So we're going to Apparate?" Harry prompted.

Filius nodded. "Correct. We are going to Apparate into Diagon Alley, the primary wizarding settlement in London. Normally, Diagon Alley is accessed via a pub called the Leaky Cauldron,
but you and I are going to Apparate straight to Gringotts Bank."

"Why there, sir?"

Ah, a question! Filius beamed.

"We need to access your accounts, Mr. Potter," he said. "You will need magical currency to procure your school supplies and uniforms."

Harry's eyes widened. "Accounts? Uniforms?"

Filius hesitated before dismissing the idea of discussing finances. He really had no idea as to Harry's accounts, only that they should exist, so instead pondered the other question. He knew that many Muggleborn children, while not necessarily averse to uniforms, did not like the idea of robes.

"I get my own clothes?" Harry whispered, brow furrowed as though he couldn't possibly imagine such a situation.

Filius blinked. His own clothes?

He looked over the outfit Harry was currently wearing. He had allowed himself to believe they were simply clothes in which Harry performed chores. Now, however, he realized the boy was always made to dress like this; the clothes were obviously not his, but probably passed down from his rotund cousin.

He was infuriated with himself. Here he was, trying to do his best by Mr. Potter and instead had fallen into the trap in which so many others were sure to be prey. Those clothes were ridiculous and offensive, but he had ignored them instinctively because he had known, on some level, what they indicated about Harry's treatment.

He wondered how many other people, sensible people, had taken one look at Harry Potter and known on a fundamental level that the boy was being neglected if not outright abused. They had done nothing, however, because they hadn't wanted to get involved. They hadn't wanted to believe that people who could treat innocent children in such a manner actually existed in their world. Instead, they had banished the idea from their minds while dismissing Harry from their thoughts.

He took a deep, cleansing breath and resolved then and there to take his time with Harry, to look beyond the superficial and not allow his discomfort get the best of him. He owed Lily at least that much.

His lips thinned. Own clothes! The boy had never been given his own clothes! He might as well have been a house elf!

His. Own. Clothes.

He forced a smile. "Yes, Mr. Potter, your own clothes."

"But how will I pay for them, sir?" Harry asked softly, eyes turning down in embarrassment, his blush severe. "I haven't any money."

Filius gently patted him on the shoulder, repressing a wince when Harry automatically tried to duck out of the way.

"I knew your parents, Harry," he said quietly, "and I was especially close with your mother."
Harry's eyes widened slightly with interest, perhaps even guarded hope.

"They did indeed provide for you," he continued. "The Dursleys were most likely ignorant of this because, first, they wouldn't have been able to use wizarding currency and, second, they most likely would not have spent the money on you. It certainly looks like they didn't spend much."

Harry scoffed and then thought better of it, blushing. "They didn't spend anything on me, sir," he admitted. "I've never had my own clothes and my glasses are from a donation bin."

It took all of Filius's self-control not to march right back to Privet Drive and hex those people into oblivion. Instead, he nodded tightly.

"Then we will be adding a few stops on our trip," he said with feigned joviality. "You will need clothes, your books, and definitely a new pair of glasses." He tilted his head. "Can you even see with those things on your face, Harry?"

The boy's silence spoke for itself. His obvious embarrassment suggested he blamed himself for his lot, which was not Filius's intention at all, but it spoke to the boy's character. It was at the moment he decided that, regardless of what House in which Harry was placed, he would take the boy under his wing. He would not allow Harry Potter to be anyone's martyr.

"Before we enter the wizarding world, Harry, there are a few things you need to know."

Harry was still reeling from Professor Flitwick's concise but thorough explanation of Voldemort and his vanquishing when they appeared outside the bank, Filius dropping his glamour.

Frankly, Harry had never heard of anything so ridiculous in his life, didn't believe most of it, and said as much to Flitwick.

"It doesn't make sense, sir," he had insisted. "How could anyone think a toddler defeated a homicidal maniac? Obviously one of my parents, or both of them, performed a spell to protect me."

Filius thought about that and at last nodded. It made the most sense, after all, and he wouldn't have put it past Lily to have rediscovered and performed some obscure charm to protect her child. The woman had been absolutely brilliant and always fascinated with ancient magic, spells which had either been banned by the Ministry or had simply fallen out of use.

"Perhaps so, Mr. Potter," Filius had said.

"You said we were going to the bank, sir," Harry had then said. "Is there any particular manner in which I should conduct myself?"

Filius had been delighted by the question and nodded enthusiastically. "Very astute, Mr. Potter! Gringotts Bank is run by Goblins, a sentient species with a very long and proud history in the magical world."

He had paused. "They do not like humans. They tolerate us because they depend on us for their livelihood, but are otherwise unimpressed, and for good reason. We require wands to perform
magic while they are not so hindered. That is not to say they are any more or less powerful than us, only that their magic is different."

Harry had nodded and Filius knew the boy was listening closely and would heed his words.

"They are not intimidated by us and resent humans as a whole for enjoying status and privileges not afforded to them by the government."

He had repressed a chuckle at Harry's disdain. He imagined Harry shared much in common with the Goblin worldview.

"So," Filius then continued, "the most important thing to remember is that Goblin society revolves entirely around gold. I presume you've heard the axiom time is money?" At Harry's nod, he nodded in kind. "For the Goblins, this is a way of life. Wasting time is akin to wasting money, which, to them, is a truly odious thought.

"Be respectful," he had finally added, "but don't simper. Be firm always. Also, you must remember that while Goblins don't give a fig about humans, they care very much about money, of which you have a lot. The Potters are one of the oldest magical lines in Britain and, over the centuries, they accumulated a lot of wealth, all of which now falls to you. Therefore the Goblins will most likely be inclined to be more civil toward you than they would others, but by no means will they be cordial."

Harry had nodded again, grim determination set on his face.

Filius had been rather alarmed at Harry's lack of reaction to his newfound wealth. Of course, as Harry had been raised with extreme frugality, it was quite likely he understood the value of money more than other children his age. That, or he was truly uncaring.

Lily had been much the same. She had been raised in comfortable surroundings in the Muggle world, but when she had married James, she had experienced a sudden influx of tremendous wealth, though it hadn't changed her. She hadn't cared one whit for the Potter money.

Now Filius could all but see the wheels spinning in Harry's mind and wondered desperately as to what the lad was thinking. He wouldn't ask, of course, until Harry first asked a question.

This should prove interesting.

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Harry was naturally intimidated by the Goblins, but had been exposed to far worse. He was sure the Goblins were probably the bloodthirsty killers they appeared to be, but as long as behaved himself, he wasn't anticipating any problems. He had learned long ago to blend in to his surroundings and adjust himself to unfamiliar circumstances. Professor Flitwick had also given him a crash course in Goblin greetings and Harry had paid close attention.

Regardless, he stood closer to the professor then he had outside of the bank.

Finally it was their turn at the head of the line. Harry strode toward the counter carefully, but with conviction. He glanced at the nametag of the teller and then met the Goblin's eyes.
"Good afternoon, Teller Ironmaw," he said softly but clearly. "My name is Harry Potter. I would like to speak with the honorable Goblin who oversees my accounts, please."

Ironmaw peered speculatively at the boy before his eyes drifted up the scar marring his forehead. He noted that the child grimaced slightly at the action but held his tongue. How interesting. Potter either understood or had been made aware of his fame, but had no love for it. He was also cognizant of the boy's attempt not to draw attention to himself.

"Well met, Scion Potter," he said quietly. "Your vault key, please."

Harry looked helplessly at Filius, who silently withdrew the key from his pocket and laid it on the counter. Ironmaw was surprised he hadn't earlier noticed his cousin and nodded in greeting.

"Filius," he intoned. "I was unaware escorting students was one of your duties."

There was a slight sneer in his tone which Filius chose to ignore. He was recognized by the Goblins as one of them, but was still considered separate from the nation as a whole due to his mixed heritage. They respected his abilities but deplored he willingly consorted with wizards.

He repressed a sigh. The Goblins had never understood that his allegiance was to Hogwarts and her students, not Dumbledore or any other wizard or witch.

"Ironmaw," he said crisply. "As I'm sure you'll later be more thoroughly informed, Mr. Potter's case is unique. Until this afternoon, he had no idea that he was magical. He had been told that Lord and Lady Potter had perished by Muggle means and had not provided for him."

Filius had no compunction about manipulating the conversation in Harry's favor. Indeed, the fact that Harry had been kept ignorant of his accounts would be considered an affront to the Goblin Nation, lest be thought of as in any way contributing to such financial malfeasance.

Ironmaw's eyes widened before narrowing. He turned toward the Potter heir, who was mouthing *Lord and Lady* as though he had no idea of the positions his parents had held.

This was unacceptable. It was true enough that Goblins as a whole decried the wizards and witches of Britain, predominantly for their superior and supercilious attitudes toward anyone or anything considered *Other*. However, prior to the establishment of the Wizengamot, the Goblins had enjoyed mutually beneficial alliances with a few of the First Families, later renamed by the Ministry as Ancient and Most Noble.

The Potters were one such family and peculiar in their conviction for advocating the right of other magical species to be regarded as sentient. Generations of Potters had declared their allegiance to the Goblin Nation during various rebellions. Over the centuries, that alliance had degraded somewhat as the constraints of alleged civilized society narrowed. The Wizengamot now enjoyed more power than ever, and while the Potters had always voted their seat to the benefit of the Goblin Nation, they had been forced to do so within the little power afforded to them.

Regardless, the Potter name still enjoyed some measure of courtesy within the Nation. That its Scion had been purposefully kept ignorant of his holdings was an affront.

There was also the simple fact that while the Potter accounts were substantial, they had languished in obscurity for the past decade with no one to direct them. This meant a great loss of profit to both the family and Gringotts itself. Nothing was more noxious to a Goblin than the deliberate act of financial sabotage.

"I see," Ironmaw said slowly. "In that case, I determine it best you speak with Fistlock regarding
your accounts, Scion Potter." He nodded at a goblin overseeing the lines, who rushed toward him. "Griphook, please escort Scion Potter and Master Filius to Fistlock's office."

Griphook blinked and nodded, waving an arm. "This way," he said, with a wave of his arm to the two mentioned.

Filius nodded and made to follow, but stopped when Harry turned to Ironmaw.

"Thank you for time, sir. I appreciate your courtesy and attention."

Ironmaw merely nodded and averted his eyes, which then followed the child as he trailed after Griphook and Flitwick.

He shook his head slightly. If the scar and that ridiculous mop of hair hadn't convinced him the boy was a Potter, the simple common decency certainly had.

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Fistlock was in a quandary.

After ordering a nameless underling to fetch him the appropriate records and asking the young Potter some vague questions, he came to the realization that he was sitting on an explosive secret.

Harry Potter was not the Potter Scion as so many believed. He was a Potter, yes; a simple blood ritual had seen to that. Fistlock had been quietly impressed that Potter hadn't even flinched when the sample had been taken, but noted that Filius had been bewildered. A few muttered words in Ghukliak, the Goblin language which wizards had mistakenly and insultingly termed Gobbledygook, had cleared that up.

Fistlock had been appalled by Filius's insinuation, though his face remained untroubled. Goblins outnumbered wizards and witches by almost twenty-to-one, but they mated for life and often had only one offspring. It was not uncommon for numerous goblin couples to remain childless. Fistlock himself, while happily married, had never been blessed with a child, though he had adopted his fourth brother's son after an unfortunate accident.

The abuse of a child, no matter its origin, was a sacrilege.

He repressed a sigh and shook his head, refocusing on matters at hand.

As it was Harry Potter's twin brother who was the designated Scion, there were limits as to what information Fistlock could reveal. He wasn't permitted to read aloud or probate the Potter will, as now only the missing brother could initiate such action. Still, he would be investigating why the will hadn't been released upon the deaths of Lily and James Potter, especially as it named guardians for their children. It was also expressly stated that under no circumstances were the twins to be raised in a Muggle home, specifically the Dursley home.

It was apparent that neither Harry Potter nor Filius Flitwick was aware of the existence of Liam Potter, who, as of today, would be regarded as his Head of House. He made no mention of the elder Potter because he had no further information on the child and was not about to expose the bank to the threat of a lawsuit. If Liam Potter did not claim his heritage by the time he reached his
He observed that Filius was most unsatisfied with this information, which made sense, given that he had been a witness to the will, but as Flitwick made no mention of the missing twin, neither did Fistlock. He suspected memory charms. He would later address this with Ragnok.

Fistlock was quite grateful that the young Potter launched into a series of questions, distracting Filius from the interrogation the man obviously wanted to conduct.

"Professor," Harry began, "what is the tuition rate at Hogwarts per annum?"

Filius supplied the information.

"And what is that in pounds?" Harry then asked, shocked when given the answer. "That's three times more than Uncle Vernon and Aunt Petunia are paying for Dudley to attend Smeltings," he muttered under his breath, shaking his head.

Fistlock watched with approval as the boy began running numbers in his head.

"And I am required to pay for my own books and uniforms?" Harry pressed.

Filius nodded.

Harry frowned. "What about inflation? Does the tuition increase accordingly depending on the potency of the economy or how taxed the resources of the school come to be?"

Filius blinked. "No, Mr. Potter. When a student matriculates at Hogwarts, their tuition rate is locked and remains frozen for the rest of their career."

Harry arched a brow. "I presume this is available in writing?"

Fistlock snorted in amusement. "It is. It is detailed in the Hogwarts charter. When the school first opened, the economy, such as it was, was unstable and family fortunes could be lost or gained in the space of a fortnight. The Founders ensured that those families in such precarious situations could ensure the education of their children."

Harry nodded. "Where can I find a copy of this charter? Is it available in the bookstore we passed on the way in?"

Fistlock was having far too much fun. "Unfortunately not. Over the centuries, the need for the charter was reduced and it became much more difficult to obtain copies. They were never reprinted. Those in existence have been passed down over generations and are zealously guarded."

Harry thought that was ridiculous and said as much. He was paying for the privilege to attend this institution, but it didn't see fit to provide him with the materials by which it was governed?

Filius silently agreed with him.

"It is entirely possible a copy of the charter can be located in your vault," Fistlock interjected. "If it is not, Gringotts would be pleased to provide you with one."
"For a fee, I presume?" Harry asked.

"A nominal one, yes."

"And what qualifies as nominal?"

"Five galleons."

Harry nodded. "I would like to arrange a copy from you, then, sir. Even if there is one in my vault, you can never be too prepared."

Fistlock nodded and made a note.

"I would like a copy myself," Filius said quietly. He had been an educator at Hogwarts for seventy years and had never laid eyes on the charter. There wasn't even a copy in the library.

Fistlock nodded. "Of course."

Harry was stunned at the professor's request; it set off all kinds of alarms in his mind, though he hid it well. What kind of school had a charter which even teachers couldn't access?

Having already determined the ratio of pounds to galleons, Harry nodded thoughtfully and shifted the topic of conversation. "Is there any sort of rebate or incentive afforded to those students who prepay all seven years?"

Filius stared at him blankly before turning to look at Fistlock, who smirked.

"Indeed there is, Mr. Potter," he said, inclining his head. "If I might ask, why are you so concerned?"

"What is your rate of compound interest?" Harry shot back.

Fistlock laughed. "An excellent question! Many people fail to ask."

"Then they deserve a lower rate," Harry said simply, shrugging.

Fistlock appreciated this boy. He didn't like him, but respected his mind, at least where finances were concerned.

"To answer your question, Master Fistlock, as I see it, I have a certain amount of money to see me through the next seven years. No matter how fair your interest rate, I will be spending more than I have coming in, so I intend to wrangle for myself the best possible deal. I don't want to finish school and have nothing to show for my efforts. My parents loved me enough to see to my care. I will not dishonor their memory by wasting their legacy."

Fistlock's smirk became fierce.

"That incentive?" Harry prompted.

Filius gave up trying to play the middleman in this scenario. It was obvious Harry could handle himself just fine. Raised in comfortable surroundings, none of that money had trickled down to him, but he obviously must have paid attention to the financial affairs of his relatives. If they had taught him nothing else, they had taught him how to pinch a knut for all it was worth.

Harry and Fistlock then entered fiery negotiations. After explaining to the boy that the tuition rate was decreased by five percent for every year that was prepaid, Harry authorized the transfer of the
appropriate funds from his account to the Hogwarts coffers.

Harry then asked what types of accounts Gringotts offered clients, the protections each was afforded, and wanted to know if his current account was best suited to his needs. Fistlock assured him that a trust vault was absolutely safe from the ups and downs of the market and, though the interest rate was lower than that of the more high-risk options, it was more than satisfactory.

Harry asked about mobile banking options, such as personal checks and debit cards. Fistlock had no idea what a debit card was, but resolved to find out. He explained that Gringotts offered banking drafts which were accepted in every magical proprietary institution and functioned much like Muggle checks. Harry could also always reach his account manager by owl post.

Harry then asked about statements and was told they were delivered quarterly.

"Then why have I never received one?"

Fistlock's face lost any trace of amusement. After further probing and assurances that young Potter had indeed never received a statement of any kind - which shouldn't have been surprising given that he had been told only today he had a vault - Fistlock was livid. This was yet another avenue which could see the bank hauled into court.

Filius, meanwhile, had frowned and begun scanning Harry with his wand.

"Mr. Potter," he said softly, "you have a mail interdiction placed upon you, which means that any magical mail you should have received was directed elsewhere."

Fistlock scowled.

Harry was bewildered. "But where did it go? Why was this done and who did it?"

It was obvious to the other two that only Dumbledore could have done this, but neither knew how to break the news to Harry. The boy solved the dilemma for him by suggesting whoever had placed the wards on Privet Drive must have also performed the interdiction. Neither Filius nor Fistlock disabused him of that notion - after all, it was essentially correct - they just didn't supply a name. It was far too early to pit Harry against Dumbledore.

Filius removed the spell and Fistlock provided Harry with a sheaf of past statements, ensuring that all future ones would be delivered promptly. Harry accepted the words at face value, though Filius could see the shadow of doubt creeping into his eyes. Not toward Gringotts, but toward the wizarding world in general. As sad as it made him, he couldn't argue to himself that it wasn't necessary.

Across an ocean, the negotiations in which Albus Dumbledore found himself were far more intense.

He had vastly underestimated Quinn Fabray and was paying for his hubris.

Albus Dumbledore had come to the realization he had been set up. He had yet to determine if Quinn Fabray alone was responsible for his current unpalatable circumstances, or if Kurt Hummel and Santana Lopez had abetted her.
It was distressing that he couldn't reach an immediate answer. Earlier he had suspected that Miss Fabray and Miss Lopez were playing off each other to unseat him but hadn't been able to establish this with any certainty. Mr. Hummel, meanwhile, had been content to sit back and allow his cohorts to take the reins. Even now, Albus couldn't decide whether or not young Kurt was merely a disinterested passive observer or if he was a master puppeteer subtly pulling the strings of his friends.

These children were absolutely confounding! Highly intelligent and careful with their choice of words, Albus had no idea which of them was in charge or if they were instead acting upon roles long ago chosen. They appeared to communicate entire conversations with quick looks. Words were unnecessary; when they were required, they often finished each other's sentences.

Most bizarrely, all of their IMAGE scores were exactly the same, down to the half-percentage. This wasn't out of the realm of possibility, of course, given that they had been training together since early childhood, but it was still unusual.

Three children, operating so effectively and with such perfect synchronicity. It was almost as though they were one mind in three distinct bodies. He found this unsettling.

Quinn Fabray looked like an angel with her long blond hair and warm brown eyes. Her voice was sweet and gentle, but emerged from a smile Albus could only liken to a shark. He had spent the past hour attempting to negotiate their matriculation at Hogwarts and it had resulted in him ceding far more ground than he had gained.

The first order of business had been class standing. Again he had stressed his desire for the children to sit placement exams, despite their IMAGE scores. Quinn had merely scoffed, stating they were all quite aware those scores would see them admitted to anywhere between third and fifth years at any magical school in the world. Albus knew her words were true and didn't bother to offer a rebuttal.

Quinn had then demanded that, should they select Hogwarts, they be allowed to enter as fifth years. Albus had been outraged but simply stated that no matter their IMAGE scores, they were not advanced enough, socially or magically, to be put into classes with students four years their senior. He argued that doing so would only attract unwanted attention and resentment from the other students, which Kurt had stated he wished to avoid.

Quinn had reluctantly capitulated, Albus noticing that she did so seemingly to avoid causing any harm to her best friend, and then tried to bargain for fourth year. Albus had countered with third year admittance with the option of an increased class load, with all available classes open to them. This would be reviewed after one month to determine whether or not they could handle the strain.

Quinn had conceded after a shared pointed look with the other two and Albus had allowed himself to revel silently in his triumph. It wasn't until later that he realized Miss Fabray had given up nothing and couldn't have cared less about class standing; she merely wanted the option of extra tuition on record.

Indeed, there was a record, as Miss Lopez, the solicitor-in-training, had insisted that all tenets reached by mutual agreement were to be written down in clear and plain language. It would then be signed by all present, including the children's parents at a later date, and notarized, with copies to be disbursed to all parties and filed with the appropriate agencies.

Before he could figure out Quinn's machination, however, she had launched into a reopening of one of Miss Lopez's primary concerns: class choice. Quinn had argued that, regardless of what Dumbledore believed of his school and staff, the classes available were limited in scope to a
generalized education. There was nothing offered in the way of specialization and, if an accord couldn't be reached, well, Miss Fabray was so very sorry for having detained Mr. Dumbledore on a matter which had ultimately amounted to nothing.

It had been obvious to Albus that this was a deal-breaker for the children, who had already decided on their future careers and had received specialized instruction to those ends. He found Kurt's aspiration to become a Healer quite noble and, while he had no love for solicitors or financiers, he had no problem imagining Miss Lopez and Miss Fabray in those occupations.

There was also the very real truth that he no longer wanted their presence at Hogwarts simply as a means to control Harry Potter and combat Voldemort. For the past decade, he had been at constant war with the Board of Governors over the direction of the school and knew they were very close to stepping in and monitoring his decisions on a daily basis.

Despite his best efforts to sweep them under the rug, the earlier-referenced low scores in several disciplines had been noted. The Board of Governors had no real power over him but could make life extraordinarily difficult.

He could fight them, of course, and easily win, as the formation of the Board had occurred after the charter had been created; thus, he could disband them with little effort on his part and little recourse on theirs. The only reason he hadn't was so that the older families were appeased while the dark families could be observed. It was all very political on both sides, and though the Board had a history of making threats, they always fell short on acting upon them.

These three children were the pinnacle of what most believed a Hogwarts student should represent: all were Pureblood, which, unfortunately, would carry sway with the Board, regardless of their views on Muggleborns; all were advanced in their education; and Kurt Hummel was an international political figure, though not on the scale of his father or Dumbledore himself.

Albus had no qualms about offering them up to the Board as exemplars of wizarding youth, nor would he have a problem holding them up as models to the other students.

He was unsurprised when, upon asking Miss Fabray how she would suggest resolving this issue, she offered an immediate solution.

She, Santana, and Kurt would be allowed to procure, at their own expense, private tutors for the subjects they wished to pursue and would be granted school credit via independent study. After careful consideration, Albus couldn't imagine a possible downside and agreed, provided said tutors were first vetted by the school. Quinn foresaw no problems with this and Santana diligently noted said agreement on the paper which would eventually amount to a magical contract.

Satisfied, Albus allowed himself to daydream, only to be snapped out brusquely of his fantasy in which a begrudging Lucius Malfoy resigned from the Board of Governors, when Miss Fabray launched another attack.

"You realize, of course, that we wouldn't sit your OWL or NEWT exams."

His eyes bulged.

She raised a brow. "Did you seriously believe we would?" She shook her head. "Those tests are of no use to us. As Santana already explained, we will not be remaining in the United Kingdom after graduation." She paused. "Should we decide to attend, of course."

Albus frowned at yet another pointed reminder that the children, as of yet, had agreed to nothing.
He didn't like others having - and using - trump cards against him. He argued that he couldn't allow them to be excused from compulsory standardized tests and Quinn shot back with their plans to sit the ICW analogues.

Dumbledore frankly believed that would be easier said than done. No one in recent memory, including himself, had sat for and passed the Intermediate Official Tuition Assessment or the Graduate Record of Advancement and Development Examination; the IOTAs and GRADEs, respectively. He had never bothered, as he had no use for the exams, which also held true for his faculty, for whom the OWLs and NEWTs were sufficient.

Still, who was he to try and dissuade them from their plan of action? If they did indeed sit for the exams and passed them, it would be a huge boon to the school. Further, he wasn't one for insisting that something was impossible; down that road lay self-imposed limits extremely difficult to overcome.

Finally, Miss Fabray had a point: the OWLs and NEWTs were of no real value to them if they didn't plan on making the United Kingdom their home. If they chose to stay after their graduation, they could sit the NEWTs at their leisure. He was hoping that young Kurt would indeed consider remaining in the UK. As Head of House Potter, he would have a long list of duties and responsibilities that would be easiest to oversee if he resided in the country.

Dumbledore knew that after Kurt was revealed to be Liam Potter, the Ministry would certainly try to interfere in his life, not the least of which was because they would want all of those many, many taxable galleons staying right where they were. Of course, there was no reason or prohibitive law which would keep Kurt from emptying his accounts and trotting back to the Magical United States, but that certainly wasn't the concern of Albus Dumbledore.

"Have you considered the courses you wish to take?" he happily asked them.

The children looked at each other for a long moment and at last nodded.

"Were we to attend," Quinn began, stressing again their acceptance was only theoretical, "I would take Transfiguration, Potions, Charms, Arithmancy, and what you call Defense Against the Dark Arts."

Albus nodded, seemingly deep in thought. "What about Herbology, Astronomy, Divination, Muggle Studies, History, or Ancient Runes?"

She shrugged. "I study and prefer Magical Botany, which is a hybrid between Herbology and non-magical plant science. It's more akin to a lab course than a hands-on experience, which is what Hogwarts offers. As for Astronomy, we've already perfected our study of that discipline; we've been undertaking it for almost six years and, as you can see from our IMAGE scores, we're at a level comparable to your OWLs."

He nodded again.

"I have absolutely no talent for Divination," she continued, "and it is my firm conviction that one is either a seer or one is not. No matter how many methods you study, if you don't have the inclination, it will ultimately be of no use to you." She paused. "I mean no offense to you or your staff, Mr. Dumbledore, but I've looked over the textbook for what you call Muggle Studies. It's at least one hundred years out of date."

Albus was floored. He well knew they were behind the times, which wasn't surprising given that the Purebloods considered Muggle culture far beneath their notice, but he hadn't been aware it was
At his look, Quinn nodded. "Oh, yes! You see, in the Magical United States, magical culture has assimilated non-magical culture to the point where there is very little difference between the two. We maintain the Statute of Secrecy, of course, but non-magical advances in science, technology, fashion, and popular culture occur at an exponential rate. You will find the inclusion of non-magical culture in everything from our couture and hairstyles to healing and law and politics to the financial markets, and to music and art and drama throughout our society."

"Magic is a beautiful thing, Mr. Dumbledore," Kurt said quietly, "but it also has the potential to make one incredibly lazy. If you use magic for absolutely everything, even the simplest things, there is no incentive to expand beyond the boundaries of what you believe magic is capable. There is no invention of new ideas or even revolution of the old. Society simply becomes stagnant and monolithic, eventually killing itself."

It was an attitude which Dumbledore had long held to be true, but it was a rare and dangerous opinion to have in his part of the magical world. He was also well aware that these children probably knew far more about a great many things than he ever would in terms of Muggle society.

He nodded dumbly.

After his duel with Grindelwald, he had realized many of his mistakes and become a champion of Muggleborns, as well as developing a healthy respect for Muggles. That said, he had always felt, though he would never admit this and was reluctant to do so even within the privacy of own mind, that Muggles were somewhat savage. Yes, he advocated for their right to live their lives in peace and would argue that their technology, their own version of magic, could rival some of what could be done with a wand, but he still felt them inferior on the whole to witches and wizards.

It might just be necessary to revise that stance.

"I am interested in Ancient Runes," Quinn added, "but whether or not I would enroll depends upon which runes we're discussing."

"Anglo-Saxon," Albus absently replied.

She nodded as though she had expected nothing more. "Futhark, then, I would suspect. What about Elder Futhark? Pictish? The various runes of the Celtic tribes?"

He looked at her blankly. Truthfully, he'd never made much of a study of runes, at least not beyond what he absolutely needed to know to further his own pursuits and translate the obscure books he was so fond of collecting. His had been very much a self-directed path.

"I am unsure," he said slowly, "as to the breadth and depth of the course. It has been recently overhauled and updated by Professor Septima Vector, who has only been with us for a year. If you would like, I would happily ask her to get in touch with you so that you might discuss it further."

Quinn nodded primly. "I would like that very much, thank you." She cleared her throat. "Regarding your history program, Santana has commented at length about what we consider the deficiencies of the class. Further, it is my understanding that it covers only the magical history of the United Kingdom and, as already stated, it is not our intention to remain there after graduation. Therefore the class is of no use to us."

Again, Albus nodded, this time with more defeat. It was a bitter tonic to swallow, being chastised, even so politely, by very young children. They had quite effortlessly pointed out the flaws in the
school of which he was so very proud and it was extraordinarily painful for him.

"And you, Miss Lopez?"

Santana shot him a look that was at once venomous and filled with boredom. "Potions, Charms, Transfiguration, Divination, Defense Against the Dark Arts, and Arithmancy," she drawled.

Albus didn't bother to ask about the other courses, as Miss Fabray had offered such detailed criticisms. Further, he believed the less he engaged Santana Lopez directly, the happier he would be. There was something about her which recalled a young Bellatrix Black before she had gone insane.

Still, he was curious about her desire to take Divination. If she believed the same as Miss Fabray, then the obvious conclusion was that Miss Lopez had some seer talent. Interesting.

He nodded again. "Mr. Hummel?"

"Potions, Herbology, Defense Against the Dark Arts, Arthimancy, Ancient Runes, Charms, and Transfiguration," he said crisply. He then paused. "Mr. Dumbledore, would you please answer some questions about your Care of Magical Creatures course?"

"If I am able, I would certainly be happy to do so," Albus replied, smiling.

"As you know, my intention is to become a Healer," Kurt said. "Exactly how detailed is this class? For example, does it discuss the anatomy and physiology of the creatures it covers, or is it more geared to future caretakers?"

"An excellent question!" Dumbledore beamed. He then thought about his answer and sighed. "Unfortunately, I don't believe the class would offer the kind of experience for which you are looking, Mr. Hummel. Anatomy is covered, but on a more superficial scale. There are elements of psychology and sociology introduced in the course as they pertain to animal behavior, pack mentality, and species interaction. I find it fascinating, but sincerely doubt it would dovetail well with human Healing. It's far more suitable as an introduction to those who plan to become veterinarians."

Kurt nodded, looking distinctly disappointed. "In that case, I would not be interested in enrolling in that class. If we accept your invitation, we will ask some of our current tutors if they are willing to portkey to Hogwarts to continue our instruction. We will make the list available to you prior to our arrival, should we agree to come."

At this point, Dumbledore suspected they kept referencing their theoretical acceptance only to annoy him.

He was right.

"If I might ask," he began, "what other subjects would you continue to study?"

The three children again looked at each other.

Dumbledore was really starting to hate those looks.

"I would continue my study of Magical Botany," Kurt said, "in order to compare and contrast it with your Herbology program, which I might or might not drop depending on the opinion I reach. I would also begin to study the biological and chemical sciences. As of now, I have been given a brief and broad overview of them. I have plans for Enchanting and Rituals, specifically as they
"I would continue to study advanced mathematics," Quinn offered. "I am currently well-versed in algebra and am almost through my geometry block. Trigonometry and calculus will be next, followed by applied statistics and accounting."

"Law and history," Santana said coolly, "along with their political applications."

They didn't bother to explain that what one learned would automatically be shared with the other two. There was no reason to tell Dumbledore just how close they really were.

"We would also continue our language, music, and dance instruction," Quinn added.

"What languages do you speak?" Albus asked. "As you might know, I speak several and am always happy to meet other polyglots."

Kurt smiled. "After we each left school and began studying privately together, we adopted the Classical rubric for education. We typically receive instruction for ten to twelve hours a day, with several breaks, and spread across almost a dozen disciplines, though several overlap. We learned Ancient Greek, but we only read it; we do not speak it. We then learned Latin and the other Romance languages, save Romanian, which we can read, write, and speak fluently. Additionally, I speak German, Arabic, and Russian; Quinn speaks Polish, Danish, and Swedish; and Santana speaks Japanese, Basque, and Catalan."

"Outstanding!" Dumbledore exclaimed. "Are there others you are interested in learning?"

"Very much," Kurt said, nodding. "I enjoy languages more than the girls do, but they also have a facility for them. We have two friends, one Korean and the other Chinese, who have introduced us to Korean and Mandarin, though we are finding them difficult to learn."

"I understand that Professor McGonagall is fluent in Scottish Gaelic. Do you think she might be interested in teaching me? I would, of course, happily provide remuneration for her time and effort."

"I will certainly ask her," Dumbledore said. In fact, he would beg on bended knee to get Minerva to agree. He didn't think he would have to go that far, however. Minerva was intensely proud of her heritage and would be thrilled to pass on her knowledge to someone with a healthy intellect and a genuine desire to learn. She didn't need the money, but it would be a nice incentive to what would probably amount to her surrendering three hours of her time per week. Granted, the woman hadn't much time to spare, but she might find it in this particular case.

"And you also study music?" Albus prompted.

Santana nodded. "We all sing," she said with unabashed pride and an almost maniacal gleam in her eye, one which suggested to Albus how much music meant to the young girl. "Kurt has the best voice, though," she added.

"Absolutely untrue," Kurt said staunchly.

His tone left no doubt in Albus's mind that the boy believed his words. This was not false modesty.

"We also play instruments," Quinn said, trying to stave off what was probably a longstanding argument. In fact, Albus wondered if this was a role she often played, that of negotiator.

Albus sighed gently. "I must confess, I have always longed for that ability." He shook his head sadly. "Alas, despite my love of music, regardless how much it touches my soul, I have no talent for it. My singing voice is dreadful and though I tried to learn the piano, it rebelled against me. In
fact, I believe it highly resented my attempt."

He was surprised yet heartened when all three children, even Miss Lopez, offered him genuine smiles. He had been very impressed with their academic achievements, but sensed that music mattered far more to them.

"Kurt plays the piano. He's wonderful!" Quinn gushed.

Kurt blushed lightly and looked down at his hands, resting in his lap. "Quinn plays the violin and the flute. Santana plays guitar and drums." He bit his lip. "The piano appears to be my only affinity."

"We know that Hogwarts offers no musical instruction," Santana interrupted, not about to put up with Kurt's inferiority complex - he played the piano as though he had invented it, "but does the school at least have facilities we could use?"

Albus repressed a sigh as the young girl's combative nature once again reasserted itself. "It is true that we have no music department, but we do have several ballrooms and unused classrooms which could easily be adapted for your purposes. However, we have no instruments for you to utilize. Thus, I am sorry to say, you would have to provide your own."

"That wouldn't be a problem," Quinn said absently, looking past Albus as she considered his words.

Albus was cheered. The girl had been running roughshod over him for the past three hours, but perhaps he had been right in his initial opinion that Miss Fabray would be the key to securing the acceptance of the others. She was making him work for it, yes, but he also had to admire her ruthless determination.

He had, for so very long, become inured to the ramifications of his reputation. He had not taught in a classroom for several decades, as his other positions did not afford him the opportunity. Nevertheless, teaching had always been his first love. It was therefore highly upsetting that his students, while in awe of him, generally did not seek him out for advice or tutelage of any kind. Indeed, they always appeared humbled in his presence, which brought to mind the unfortunate comparison to Voldemort's Inner Circle.

Albus Dumbeldore, though arguably the most powerful wizard in Britain, had never wanted minions. Allies, yes, certainly, but never mindless drones who offered no opinions or challenges.

These children were a challenge and, though they had often directed the conversation and had bested him on many points, he was very much enjoying the interaction. They didn't defer to him. They had made it clear that if he wanted their respect, he would have to earn it.

It was very refreshing and not a little intimidating to have to rely on his wits, not his power or authority. Granted, he had waltzed into Kurt Hummel's home intending to capitalize on just that, only to be rebuffed for his arrogance. He had thoroughly underestimated them to his detriment and was thus deserving of some of their contempt, so it was up to him to offer recompense. It was thrilling and freeing and unfamiliar and worrisome all at the same time, and truly no hardship.

In fact, Albus adored it.

Engaging young minds was what had prompted him to become a teacher, after all, and if these children were willing, he hoped they might permit him to come down from his ivory tower on occasion to offer what wisdom he could.
He had always regretted not having his own children but, over the years, had come to view several students as his surrogate children, grandchildren and, now, great-grandchildren. He cherished them more than they would likely ever know. He had and would continue to mourn the ones lost to him.

These children, however, were no mere children, and Albus appreciated that; he relished it. He had never believed in demanding less of children simply because of their age. He had never been one to coddle but had no qualms about offering comfort. Children had fought wars and built nations, and he found no cause to treat them as anything less just because they were young. Indeed, it was a child, a mere toddler, who had ended the last magical war that had torn his nation apart. A war, he was sad to say, had been, until that point, believed to have been lost.

The children now before him - and it was becoming increasingly difficult to consider them as such, as though the very term children, when applied to them, seemed more an ungracious epithet - had treated him as nothing more and nothing less than another contemporary. He was quite impressed with just how unimpressed they were. He didn't necessarily like it, but it was certainly interesting.

"We've yet to discuss the matter of security," Santana barked.

Dumbledore nodded, understanding why this might be a concern. Or so he thought.

"I can assure you," he began, "that Hogwarts is the safest place in magical Britain, and Mr. Hummel will ... "

Kurt cut him off immediately. "It is not just a matter of my security, but that of Quinn and Santana, as well." At Dumbledore's look of surprise, he arched a brow. "Quinn's father, Russell Fabray, is a senator of the Magical United States; her mother is the niece of the Swedish Minister for Magic."

Dumbledore blinked. Well, he could understand their desire for protection for Miss Fabray, of course, but it wasn't as though she were the child of a foreign dignitary or an international diplomat in her own right, as Kurt was.

"Quinn has been kidnapped once, I've been kidnapped twice, and Santana has survived four assassination attempts," Kurt added.

Albus stared, desperately trying to convince himself that he hadn't just heard what he knew he had. *Dear Merlin!*

Kidnappings? Assassination plots?

Perpetrated against children of such a young age? He was appalled and not a little bit bewildered.

How could anyone deliberately and with malice aforethought target children? Was he truly so naive? Was he that much of a relic that he was unable even to fathom that such disgusting persons walked the earth?

Then he remembered Voldemort and his ruthless plan to exterminate three infants for the sake of a nebulous political agenda which had been childish in its scope.

"And Miss Lopez ... " he croaked, wondering what on earth about the girl had inspired such evil plots against her very life.

Santana gave Dumbledore a feral grin. "When Kurt told us you were here, I was so excited to meet you. You see, I've heard all about you from my great-great-great grandmother. I believe you know each other."
Albus was terribly confused.

Santana's grin became wider. "Her name is Esperanza Ramirez."

Dumbledore paled considerably. "Yes," he said faintly after a very long moment, "we've met on occasion."

That was an understatement.

Esperanza Ramirez, still alive and menacing at the preposterous age of over two hundred years old, was one of the most fearsome magical users he had ever encountered. He would never be convinced she was anything less than a Dark Lady. The title might never have been applied to her, most likely because no one was suicidal enough to do so, but her reputation had been cemented well over a century past.

She would give Voldemort nightmares.

In fact, Dumbledore had long ago heard a rumor that Voldemort had attempted to secure Esperanza's aid in the last war, only to be thrown by the woman from the top of the Ojos del Salado, the highest volcano in the world, for his efforts.

The woman was shrouded in mystery, as was most of the magic practiced by the indigenous tribes of the New World. They had easily survived the invasions of the Spanish and Portuguese, resting comfortably in their remarkable settlements high in the Andes, where they remained untroubled and unmolested for millennia. The tales of their powers, of their great feats of magic, totally incomprehensible to the modern world, had survived for thousands of years.

Ancient legends persisted that their people were indeed native to South America; they had never migrated across the Bering Strait from Asia, working their way down into the previously uninhabited Americas. It was alleged they predated Norte Chico and even Sumer. It had been suggested they were touched by the gods and that the Incan and Aztec empires were spawned from their exiled members, mostly Squibs, whose knowledge of magic made them seem as gods to the Muggles.

Little was known about them, but they were said to be a bloodthirsty warrior race with a matriarchal society that would have caused the Amazon tribes of Greece, Macedonia, and Anatolia to run screaming into the night. They didn't use wands, but an entirely different foci, though no one knew what precisely those were. They were an insular nation that spanned across the continent and had no tolerance for the interference of outsiders.

Esperanza Ramirez was their queen.

Dumbledore released a shaky breath. "That would mean you're ..."

Santana offered a deep curtsy. "Santana, Princess of Tahuantinsuyu, the Land of the Four Quarters." She looked up and smirked. "Still interested in offering me a place at your vaunted institution, Albus Dumbledore?"

Filius accompanied Harry to his vault, guided by Fistlock himself.
He was amused by the comical look on Harry's face when the door opened and the boy got his first look at what was probably more money than he had ever seen. Granted, it was just a trust vault and Filius still had many questions about the rest of Harry's estate. He had previously thought about broaching the matter with Fistlock, but knew it would be both imprudent and impudent, as well making things more difficult for Harry.

Harry began peppering Fistlock with numerous questions, specifically about the denominations of knuts and sickles, as well as the ratio of pure metal versus alloy and investment opportunities for beginners.

Again, Fistlock was reluctantly impressed. He was still of the belief that humans were basically worthless, but at least the young Potter had a head for business, which was certainly more than his father ever had. He'd only ever met Lily Potter once, but the woman had struck him as very sensible and practical. Obviously the boy took after his mother.

Harry looked around at the piles of money, debating how much he should remove for his school supplies. He began questioning both Filius and Fistlock about the average cost of books, robes, and other essentials, surprised to discover he was expected to use parchment and quills. Finally, he decided to take a small amount of spending money to see him through the school year and would use drafts to pay for the necessities.

Fistlock took them back to the surface, handed Harry and Filius their copies of the Hogwarts Charter, and nodded cordially when Harry demurely but sincerely thanked him for his assistance. Harry then looked to Filius as to what they should do next.

Flitwick decided robes were in order and escorted the boy from the bank to Madam Malkin's Robes for All Occasions. They waited their turn, Filius distracting Harry from Draco Malfoy, who was in the middle of being fitted for his own robes.

As Harry looked over the available materials, it was apparent he was judging their worth against the noted price. He wondered if he was to buy new robes every year, deciding that would be quite expensive. He had the money but had no intention of wasting it unnecessarily. After all, it wasn't as though he grew very often. He then stumbled across a chart which outlined charms at an additional cost: heating, cooling, and adjustment. He quickly added up the numbers in his head.

Based on his average growth and weight gain, he believed his initial set of robes could see him through his second year and possibly his third. The charms were worth their cost and he decided to avail himself of them. As he began thumbing through a binder of additional options just out of curiosity, he came across a display of family crests.

Remembering that Ironmaw had referred to his parents as Lord and Lady, he wondered if his family had its own crest. He put that very question to Filius, who realized that Harry absolutely required a more thorough introduction to the wizarding world.

"Indeed so, Mr. Potter," he said. "If you don't see your coat-of-arms in the catalogue, we should inquire with Madam Malkin herself. She would certainly know."

Harry nodded and looked over his shoulder, pleased to see the vain git ahead of him was being rung up by the clerk. Harry frowned at the other boy's condescending tone. What a ponce.

Filius smirked when he saw Harry giving the young Malfoy a look of disapproval.

"Professor," Harry began, "what laundry facilities are available at Hogwarts? I know how to do the wash, of course, but is soap and fabric softener provided, or do I need to supply my own?"
Filius blinked, his mouth hanging slightly open as he wondered what on earth fabric softener was supposed to be. He hesitated to broach the subject of House Elves, knowing that Muggleborn and Muggle-raised children tended to become very incensed about what they considered slavery. He made a mental note to get Harry a book about the matter while he explained that laundry was a service whose cost was included in the price for room and board.

Harry nodded and let Filius usher him onto the small platform before a series of mirrors. Madam Malkin predictably gushed over Harry, much to the boy's bewilderment and chagrin. It was apparent he was neither comfortable nor welcoming of his fame. Filius cleared his throat and shot the proprietor a severe look, which served to calm her down.

Harry decided on a set of five robes with the extra charms and his family crest, believing it would in some small way help him feel closer to his parents, as well as three sets of school uniforms, two pairs of shoes, the proper underclothes, and a sky-blue cloak trimmed with silver for the winter months.

Filius was pleased to note that blue was Harry's favorite color and, though the man knew it was ridiculous, he couldn't help but hope it suggested the boy was bound for Ravenclaw.

Harry asked Madam Malkin about nightclothes and activewear. Unfortunately, she had little selection to choose from in the latter, but offered either silks or satins in the former. Harry privately thought those materials were far too extravagant for someone his age. Sensing his indecision and desire not to hurt her feelings, she suggested a Muggle store for which she had a catalogue and knew a Squib who was an employee.

Harry happily took the catalogue and Madam Malkin told him the rest of his order would be ready in an hour. He thanked her for her assistance and allowed Filius to guide him across the Alley to Flourish and Blotts Bookstore.

Filius carefully watched Harry's reaction to the spectacle, trying to gauge what kind of student Harry might be. The boy gaped and stared wide-eyed at all of the available material.

A clerk and former Ravenclaw student, Derek Capwell, noticed his favorite professor and immediately headed toward him.

"Hello, Professor Flitwick!" Derek said cheerfully. "I didn't expect to see you here today."

Filius smiled and nodded his head. "Good afternoon, Mr. Capwell. I am escorting a new student on his first trip to Diagon Alley and we are here to purchase his textbooks."

Derek turned and smiled at the boy, before startling at a peculiar and distinctive scar which had been only marginally concealed. "Oh, my," he whispered.

Harry pursed his lips and stepped partially behind Flitwick, who scowled.

Derek flushed, mortified by his blatant fascination. He murmured that he would run and gather the requisite first year materials and then proceeded to do just that.

Filius turned and gave Harry what he hoped was a winning smile. "Well, Mr. Potter, while Mr. Capwell does that, would you like to look around?"

A subdued Harry nodded.

Filius swallowed a sigh, sad to see Harry withdrawing back into his shell.
"Do you enjoy studying, Harry?" he asked.

Harry nodded shyly. "Yes, but Uncle Vernon would get angry with me when I scored better than Dudley, so I was only allowed to do enough homework that I wouldn't fail my courses." He stared down at the floor. "I like learning. I know I'm not worth much, but I am smart, or at least smarter than people believe me to be."

He said those words with a touch of defiance in his voice and Filius was pleased to see some of the lad's earlier fire reassert itself.

Harry looked at Flitwick. "Professor, given what you've told me the wizarding world thinks of me, they probably also expect I know all about their customs and beliefs, but I don't! What will I say when they ask my opinions? I don't want them to think me stupid."

Before Filius could even open his mouth to reply, Harry barreled forward. Having determined he would not be punished for asking questions, he decided to ask some of his more burning ones.

"Is there some wizard religion? What are your holidays? Do you have a government? If so, what is it like? Is it modeled on Muggle traditions, like the House of Lords and the House of Commons, or is there a monarchy? An oligarchy?"

Filius blinked.

"Also, what is magic anyway? Why do some people have it and others don't? Is magic the same throughout the world or are there differing, er, traditions? You said I would have to get a wand, but does everyone use a wand? What are they made out of? Can you use any wand or is your wand special to you and your magic? Do people use something other than wands? Is there wandless magic?"

A smile slowly spread across Filius' face.

"Why are goblins in charge of the banking industry?" Harry demanded. "How did that happen and why? Is it like that everywhere? Is Gringotts an international conglomerate or are there other banks? Do they hold a monopoly in Britain? Also, just what are these classes I'm supposed to take? Should I read the books prior to starting Hogwarts? Am I going to be tested on anything? Are there placement exams?"

"You mentioned the school is divided into Houses. What are these Houses? What are they like? What makes each one unique? Which House do you think suits me? Do I get to choose which House I want? What if I don't like where I'm placed? What recourse is available to me? Where exactly is Hogwarts? How big is it? Is it by the sea? I've never been to the sea. What are the teachers like?"

Filius wanted to dance a jig of glee.

Questions! So many wonderful questions!

At last, Harry felt safe enough to ask them, or perhaps he could simply no longer suppress his curiosity. Filius was elated. He gently took Harry's elbow in hand and guided the boy to the Magical History section. Best to start at the beginning, after all.

"What classes did my parents like, Professor? In which ones did they excel? Will I eventually get to choose other classes? What happens if I struggle in a certain class? Is there tutoring or extra credit available? What about sport? What happens if ..."
Brave New Worlds

Albus Dumbledore found himself in a conundrum: what to do with Santana Lopez?

It was quite obvious the girl in question understood the nature of his problem and was reveling in it. No matter what he decided, she would have him over the proverbial barrel.

If he recanted his invitation to Hogwarts, Quinn Fabray and obviously Kurt Hummel would also refuse to attend. It was apparent their acceptance depended on hers. Albus didn't know what, precisely, tied these three children to each other, but it was certainly much more than originating from families who held an obscene amount of political power.

If, however, he resolved to admit her, her familial tie to Esperanza Ramirez would be discovered - there was absolutely no chance to suppress it - and he would be politically assassinated by the pro-Light contingent of his country, the very contingent of which he had been the undisputed head for over fifty years.

Even if Miss Lopez had not committed any crimes herself, and he was far from certain that was the case, those of her ancestor could not be denied. Esperanza had never been tried or convicted for her many questionable activities - indeed, nothing of substance had ever stuck to the woman - but her reputation was fixed and universally accepted. Nothing could be proven, of course, but the court of public opinion had made itself clear. Further, as Miss Lopez was not a British citizen, he would be unable to fall back on his tired refrain that all magical children, despite their families, were entitled to a Hogwarts education.

Still, there was the very real prospect that the pro-Dark families would welcome Miss Lopez to Hogwarts with open arms. In fact, it was most probable they would champion her on Dumbledore's behalf, inadvertently sheltering him from the majority of the political fallout. The fact that she was so closely allied with Mr. Hummel, and therefore the United States, as well as Miss Fabray, who had political ties with both the US and Sweden, might mitigate even more of the distaste the presence of Miss Lopez was sure to arouse.

Finally, the fact that Miss Lopez was royalty could not be discounted. Yes, the citizens of magical Britain would be upset by the reputation of her many-greats grandmother, but Miss Lopez, despite her attitude to the contrary, was still a child. That, coupled with the fact of her royal title, would go a long in swaying them towards acceptance.

No matter how sophisticated they might proclaim themselves to be, people, in general, were still dazzled by royalty and the aristocracy. Even though titles in their world were now more ceremonial than anything else, the Ancient and Most Noble Families of Britain still enjoyed a huge amount of political capital, not to mention money. Also, there was the matter that Kurt himself was heir to one of those families.

The bottom line was that Albus needed Kurt Hummel. Should Harry falter or be killed, he would have to be replaced with either his brother or Neville Longbottom. That was the mandate of the prophecy and Albus still held it to be true. Voldemort might have chosen to attack the Potters first and thus make part of the prophecy self-fulfilling insofar as he had marked Harry, but he had further chosen to attack Harry before Kurt. The power of the prophecy was thus tied to Harry, but should something happen to him, Kurt and Neville were the only other options.

Frankly, from what he had heard regarding the capabilities of Neville Longbottom, Albus figured that, after Harry, Kurt was the best option. In fact, Kurt might be an even better choice than his
brother, but destiny had manifested in a particular way and there was nothing to be done for it.

That said, was it possible that Kurt Hummel himself was the power Voldemort knew not?

Albus blinked owlishly and shook himself from his ruminations, his decision made. He would rather suffer temporary setbacks than wonder what might have been should he allow Kurt to slip through his fingers. He cleared his throat.

"Miss Lopez, I assure you," he said slowly, "that you will be welcome at Hogwarts."

He paused, waiting for her reaction, which was sadly not forthcoming. He was not that surprised. Now that he had been made aware of her true identity, her attempts at provoking him made sense. Too, he was now better able to understand her keen political acumen. What was not so clear, however, was how much of her training had spilled over to the other two children or how much theirs had influenced her.

It was very curious, their relationship. Albus knew he had, and most likely would never have, any real insight into just what it was that bound them together, but he was certain it was far more than what it appeared. He noticed that Miss Fabray had arched an eyebrow at his declaration, while Mr. Hummel was utterly bored by all of it.

Santana coolly observed him. "I'm so pleased," she said, her voice toneless. "That does not address, however, our security concerns."

"I would welcome your suggestions," Albus said.

He knew there was no other way around it. If he wanted the children to attend, and he did, he would have to capitulate on a great many things.

They had carefully shepherded him to this point, boxing him into a situation where he had only two choices, and he had to admire them for it. They didn't need him or Hogwarts, and he was now painfully aware of that fact. Still, none of their demands were outrageous; they had merely bargained for what any other school would have gladly offered them. Also, he well understood their need for security, which was more than Hogwarts on its own could provide.

Kurt leaned forward, eyes shining with some unknown emotion. "I have a few ideas."

Oh, Albus was quite certain that he did.

At last Liam Potter was engaged.

Harry found that he was quite willing to part with a considerable amount of gold in order to procure for himself the books Professor Flitwick felt were necessary. In point of fact, once the final total had been tallied, Harry was rather startled by just how low it was. He hadn't been paying attention to the cost, merely adding books which were either recommended or caught his interest to an ever-growing pile which was soon split off into three additional.

Derek Capwell, the clerk who, of his own volition, had assigned himself to Harry, looked ready to faint with happiness. Harry gathered he was paid on commission.

Aside from his textbooks, the majority of the tomes dealt with magical history in Britain, chronicling its progress since the time of King Arthur and Merlin. Much of what had preceded that era was lost to time, which Harry found frustrating. He well knew that human history had records going back several millennia, but wizarding history in Britain didn't appear to exist prior to
That made no sense to Harry, but he would lay it aside until he could delve into his studies.

There were two books on religion which were rather thin and, upon closer inspection, relatively worthless. Harry kept them only because they had intriguing bibliographies and was assured by Professor Flitwick that Hogwarts' renowned library possessed many of the books listed. Harry would be welcome to peruse them to his heart's content.

Magical Britain had no official religion nor did it maintain any specific stance on the subject. People were welcome to worship whatever or whomever they wanted, provided it neither harmed nor infringed upon the rights of anyone else. From what Harry could infer from his brief scanning of the material, the majority of those who practiced religion followed the strictures of the ancient Druids called the Old Ways. They were not really a religion, per se, but more of a philosophy.

Harry supposed that revering Nature and the pagan gods made about as much sense as any other form of worship, but he wasn't sure it was right for him. Regardless, he was very interested in reading up on the subject. Apparently, there were all sorts of forgotten laws still on the books pertaining to the Old Ways and he was keen on learning more.

The Dursleys hadn't been particularly religious. They attended Sunday services at whichever Protestant parish was fashionable at the time, but they weren't true believers. They certainly had no interest in the Golden Rule or adhering to the measures Christ had laid forward in the Bible. Harry had never been invited to go with them. He hadn't really been exposed to the Bible, but he had heard and read some of its teachings. He couldn't say that he agreed with all of them, but there were certain ones which made sense to him.

There were pockets of Christianity in the wizarding world, arising predominantly with the mainstreaming of Muggleborn children, some of whom were loath to abandon the religion they had practiced prior to entering Hogwarts. Harry was curious as to how they reconciled their faith with their new situation, that magic existed and that they themselves were witches and wizards. He may have not been overly familiar with the Bible, but he had heard the saying *thou shall not suffer a witch*.

There also existed other religious sects, again carried over into the world of magic by the Muggleborn, namely Judaism, Islam, and Hinduism. Again, as he had no real exposure to those religions, he had no opinion on them, either. Although Harry believed he had very good instincts about people, institutions were more woolly.

One lesson he had learned from the Dursleys was not to judge based on appearances. The Dursleys put forth the appearance that they were good people, but Harry knew better. The Dursleys had engineered the appearance that Harry was a criminal in the making and Harry had been unfairly judged for it, when it couldn't have been further from the truth.

The issue of religion was not an easy one and Harry's interest was more academic than not. Perhaps he would find a religion which would suit him, but he wouldn't be troubled if that didn't happen.

The other books covered a wide array of subjects including government and politics, law, and magical theory. These interested Harry far more. He wanted to understand why he and his mother had magic, but his aunt and cousin did not. He had only the faintest understanding of genetics, but presumed that magic was somehow biologically determined. The books he had on the theory of magic didn't put much stock in Muggle science, so they most likely would not be very helpful, but Harry still wanted to read them, to understand.
He had explained this to Professor Flitwick, who encouraged his explorations. Flitwick then, with noticeable reluctance, explained about blood status and how it often governed their world. It didn't make much sense to Harry, all of the permutations that existed. Why were people treated like milk? Whole, half-and-half, two percent, one percent, skim.

Magic was magic. One either had it or one did not.

He relayed his conclusion to Flitwick, who was delighted by his nonjudgmental attitude but warned Harry that he would never be considered anything other than a Half-Blood by the upper echelons of society.

Harry didn't understand. How could he be a Half-Blood? From what Flitwick had explained, Half-Bloods were half-magical and half-Muggle. Despite the absurdity, he could understand the theory. However, his mother had been a Muggleborn and his father a Pureblood. How could he himself be half of anything when both his parents had been magical?

Wasn't it more likely that the Muggleborn were actually new Purebloods introduced into the gene pool by Nature to ensure that magics didn't become extinct through inbreeding? If that were the case and, political machinations aside, Harry didn't understand how it could be anything else, his mother had been a first-generation Pureblood and thus Harry himself was Pureblood.

Flitwick stared at the boy, the argument turning around in his head. Unbeknownst to both of them, Harry's musings had gathered somewhat of an audience, many of whom were muttering over his hypothesis and debating its merits. Try as some of them might, they couldn't think of a reasonable argument to refute his claims. Luckily, there were no blood bigots amongst them, but the gossip would spread regardless.

Thankfully Harry had pulled the bill of his cap further down his face, thus obscuring the scar. Otherwise, the headline of tomorrow's *Daily Prophet* would have incited a firestorm. For young Derek Capwell, himself deemed a Half-Blood, Harry's suggestion was revelatory and he planned to investigate it further.

Flitwick had no clear answer, which was fine with Harry. He understood that while the simplest solution was usually the right one, that often didn't hold when applied to complex social issues.

There were also a few selections which served as guides to Muggleborns, basically the who's who and what's what of magical Britain. Harry would certainly need those, although he was developing a resentment that he didn't know them already. The Dursleys had kept all of this information from him, along with whoever had placed him in their care. He had his suspicions about that, but wouldn't voice them until he had more evidence. He knew better than to rush into things blindly. Such action often resulted in punishment.

Harry was agog as Flitwick shrunk all of the books down to a size which easily fit the palm of Harry's own hand. He definitely needed to learn that charm and had paid careful attention to the wand movement and incantation. Professor Flitwick had told him that books on wands could be found in the wand shop, which they would be visiting quite soon. Harry couldn't help but be slightly excited about what kind of wand he would receive.

Flitwick ushered him from the store, throwing a look at Capwell that told the boy to keep his mouth shut, and then guided Harry to the stationery shop next door. Harry bought himself a standard trunk, not bothering with the extravagant security options available, opting instead for the basic ones. He had nothing that required such drastic protection and presumed that if anything of his was stolen, he could simply report it to the faculty, who would undoubtedly take care of it.
He thought perhaps it was possible that he was being naive, but considering he had grown up with almost nothing to call his own, he wasn't too worried. He could only hope that someone would steal Dudley's old rags. Books could be replaced.

He then, on Flitwick's advice, purchased a rucksack of some quality. It was distressed leather and the color of caramel and Harry did ask for a few extra charms on it, including an expansion charm, a feather-light charm, and a tracking charm which would allow him to find the bag were it ever misplaced. The tracking charm would be activated with his wand and attuned to his own magical signature. He was given a pamphlet with detailed instructions on how to cast the spell once he had procured a wand.

He then grabbed several reams of parchment, including some scrolls, in addition to a number of quills, bottles of ink, and an inkwell. He thought parchment and quills were ridiculous, but knew better than to say so out loud. Apparently tradition was very important in the wizarding world and he refused to be someone who downplayed the little things which made others happy.

That said, he also grabbed a store catalog which had, on the last few pages, a large selection of biros and notepads, making a mental note to order some later after he determined whether or not they would be permitted. At the very least, he should be able to use them for notes.

Flitwick cautioned him that many Muggleborn students had difficulty adjusting to quills and ink, and Harry should therefore take some time to practice his writing prior to turning in assignments. He colored slightly, knowing that his penmanship was atrocious and the bane of several former teachers' existences. Part of the problem, of course, was that he could barely see what he was writing and often had to guess as to how his writing appeared. If he really was to get new glasses, perhaps he could improve his penmanship accordingly.

Again his purchases were shrunk down and stowed in a pocket before Flitwick led him from the store. Harry gamely followed the tiny professor, only to halt in his movements when he heard a frantic screech. Narrowing his eyes and searching for the source of the sound, his eyes fell on Eyelops Owl Emporium.

Instantly, Harry knew he had to go into that store.

Wondering what had caused his charge to cease his movements, Flitwick turned around with a curious glance, eyes softening when he saw Harry staring avidly at the pet store. He was quite sure the boy had never been allowed a pet of his own and, had he brought home a stray, Flitwick wouldn't have put it past those horrid Dursleys to have killed it just for the sake of hurting the boy.

"Students are allowed a pet, you know," he said quietly. "An owl, a toad, or a cat." He paused at Harry's lack of reaction. "Would you like to go inside?"

Harry nodded once and barreled across the street, barely managing to refrain from knocking into several adults out for a casual stroll. He had to get inside.

Flitwick shook his head merrily and gave chase.

Harry didn't know what awaited him in Eyelops, but he hoped it wasn't a cat. He didn't care for cats, probably having developed a disdain for them thank to the many felines that lived with Mrs. Figg. He didn't imagine toads were that exciting, either.

An owl it was, then. He just had to find the right one.

As soon as he entered the shop, he was bombarded with the hysterical screeching of the most
beautiful owl he had ever seen. Not that he had seen many owls, of course, or even knew anything about them, but he knew this gorgeous creature, almost pure white, would be leaving the shop with him.

The owl alighted on his shoulder, cocked its head, and glared at him as if to say *What took you so long? and Remove me from this place immediately!*

Harry beamed at the owl and reached up to stroke its feathers gently. The owl made an appreciative sound and fluttered its eyes.

"Hello," Harry said softly. "My name is Harry. Am I to be yours, then?"

The owl regarded him with a cool look which clearly communicated *Duh*, although Harry was sure the owl would have used a much more regal phrase.

The shopkeeper made several exclamations about the temerity of this owl and how it had refused all other prospective customers. Harry didn't pay any mind, much more consumed with giving his new owl as much attention as it desired, which was apparently quite a bit. Flitwick was left to pick up the slack as Harry walked around the store pointing at things which he felt his owl might like. Incredibly, the owl hooted either affirmatively or negatively at his choices.

"You prefer these treats?" Harry asked.

A semi-excited hoot.

"Do you need a perch?"

The owl cuffed him with its wing.

Harry sighed. "I suppose you need something grand, don't you? You must be a girl."

She bit his ear.

"There's no need for violence," Harry chided.

The owl actually *snorted* at him.

"So that's how it's going to be," he said mournfully.

She gave a happy chirp.

Flitwick stood stunned at what he was seeing. He doubted the shopkeeper noticed the very faint glow surrounding Harry and his owl, but Filius recognized it for what it was. He shook his head in mirth. Leave it to Harry Potter to find his familiar the very same day he found out he was a wizard. The owl had obviously been awaiting its master, though Filius supposed Harry wasn't quite a master. If anything, the owl had claimed ownership of him.

"You might want to think about a cage," he advised.

Harry turned toward him and scoffed. "A cage? For her? Certainly not." He stuck his nose up in the air and continued perusing the shelves. The owl threw a look over her wing at the tiny professor.

Filius would have sworn that owl was *laughing* at him.

Harry stopped before a shelf of books. He looked up at his new friend. "Which ones, do you think? I want to be able to care for you properly."
Filius and the shopkeeper stared. Their mouths then fell open when the owl indicated with a wing which books Harry should purchase.

Harry nodded and grabbed everything his friend suggested before then taking his purchases to the counter. This was instance in which he was unwilling to haggle. He laid down fifty galleons and told the clerk to keep the change. When the clerk opened his mouth to protest, the owl barked at him.

The clerk blinked and said nothing more, quietly slipping the money into the till.

Filius was vastly amused. "I think Ollivanders, next," he said. "It's time for you to get your wand."

Harry looked at the owl. "What do you think, Hedwig? Time for a wand?"

Hedwig nodded.

"Hedwig?" Filius asked. "Why did you choose that name for her?"

Harry began walking toward the door. "I didn't. She told me what her name was."

Flitwick's eyes bulged and he raced after the boy.

Filius noted with no small amazement that Harry's confidence had grown exponentially after having found Hedwig. The boy was no longer trailing after him but authoritatively heading toward Ollivanders Wand Shop with a steady stride.

Harry stood before the shop, craning his neck up to read the sign. "That old? Well, we should certainly find something in here, Hedwig."

Hedwig preened his hair in response.

The three of them - and Filius couldn't help but consider Hedwig a person in her own right; a most curious owl - entered the shop and waited for service.

Moments later an elderly man stepped out of the backroom and stared appraisingly at Harry, who met his gaze unflinchingly.

"I've been waiting for you, Mr. Potter," he said.

Hedwig hissed.

Harry looked up at her and nodded. "I need a wand, sir."

"Of course, of course," Ollivander said, inclining his head at Filius, who had always felt the wandmaker was somewhat creepy. "Which is your wand hand?"

Harry blinked. "I'm right-handed, if that's what you mean."

The next forty minutes were spent on countless and unnecessary measurements as Harry then proceeded to try almost every wand in the store.

"I wonder ... " Ollivander said mysteriously, before disappearing.

Hedwig snorted again.
"That's not very ladylike," Harry observed.

Hedwig responded by digging her talons into his shoulder.

"Point taken," he said weakly.

Ollivander then returned and made a great show about this certain wand before handing it over to Harry, who took it reflexively. The entire shop lit up with red and green sparks that bathed the surroundings in a festive Christmas glow.

Filius looked down at the floor in disappointment, wondering if the colors from Harry's new wand were suggestive of which House he might enter. Were that the case, he would have to accept the boy would either be a Gryffindor or Slytherin.

Ollivander prattled on about the history of the wand before saying something which drew Harry up short. He slowly turned his head and glared at the shopkeeper.

Filius felt the temperature of the shop plummet inexplicably.

Shared wand cores, was it? The wand which was to be his, which had supposedly chosen him, shared a core with that which had killed his parents? And Ollivander had the nerve to stand there and declare it all but a totem? He dared to pontificate that, like the owner of the other wand, Harry was destined for great things? He had the audacity to insinuate that Harry was in any way similar to Voldemort?

That simply wouldn't do.

"And how much is this wand, sir?" Harry softly asked.

Ollivander quoted the price.

Harry looked to Hedwig, who nodded. Carefully, Harry reached his free hand into his money pouch and withdrew the set amount, placing it on the counter.

He then snapped the wand, dropped the pieces to the floor, and watched with satisfaction as the phoenix feather inside floated free and immolated itself.

Filius stared at Harry with incredulity.

Ollivander stood with jaws agape before his mouth trembled with some unnamed emotion.

"I am nothing like Voldemort, sir," Harry said sharply. "Next."

"I'm afraid I cannot allow that," Dumbledore said with insincere regret.

"Then we appreciate your time and wish you good day," Kurt easily replied.

Dumbledore blinked, shocked at the blatant dismissal, though he had known it was a risk the moment he denied their requests.

Santana shook her head, exchanging glances with her two cohorts, who gave her subtle nods of encouragement. If Dumbledore was going to be difficult, it was best they nip it in the bud quickly. In the end, it wasn't necessary for them to attend Hogwarts to secure Harry. There were legal maneuvers they could employ which would be far easier and take up much less time.
Then there were the *illegal* ones, which would probably be a lot more fun.

"You're not getting this," Santana said flatly. "You need us far more than we do you. That's obvious by how much and how long you've been pushing this. Most likely you want to hold us up as role models to your students and Board of Governors. And please don't think we didn't notice your evasion about why you're so interested in Kurt. Your martyred reply about ensuring the children of Britain receive an education really was so much nonsense."

Dumbledore couldn't believe this child's gall, that she had so easily called him out in such a mundane way. Still, he held a grudging respect for her. He didn't want to feel it, but he also couldn't help it. Besides, she was right and she and everyone else present knew it. They had no need of him, not really, and though he had granted almost every request they had made, he and they knew any other magical school would concede the same and much more to ensure their attendance.

"Magical Britain makes much about their aristocracy," Quinn said, "but the bottom line is that we have political power they could only dream to hold and we're still children. Over time, our influence will only grow. The Treasury of the Magical United States has already expressed keen interest in me. Should I desire, after completing my education I could easily secure a position in the Ministry of Sweden with the goal of becoming the Exchequer."

She wasn't bragging, Dumbledore understood, but merely stating a fact. She also wasn't employing false modesty, a trait to which Albus himself often fell prey. She simply had no desire for pretense. It appeared her friends were of a similar mind.

"Esperanza has already declared her intention to abdicate to Santana when the time comes," Quinn continued, "so she will therefore be quite busy running an empire and ruling her people." She shrugged. "As for Kurt, he's made clear his ambition of becoming a Healer. What he hasn't explained is that his ultimate goal is the creation and implementation of a global health initiative dedicated to improving and sustaining the well-being of the international magical community."

She waved a hand. "Even if he turned away from that goal, his political career is already established. He is the most successful of the Youth Ambassadors and is in high demand as a motivational speaker regarding the role of children in our society. There are those already making noise about drafting him to run for House Representative when he turns twenty-five, followed by a turn as Senator, and then the presidency."

Albus swallowed heavily.

"Just so we're clear," Quinn said in a cold voice, "we may appear to be children, but we have given our futures long and serious thought." She raised a brow. "We have the magical power, the political and financial capital, and the sheer determination to accomplish our desires."

She crossed her legs and regarded Dumbledore with a cool look. "We don't know precisely just what your agenda is, but we know that you have one." She shrugged a shoulder. "And that's fine. We don't really care. It could be something as banal as desiring to buttress the sagging reputation of your school or it could be far more sinister."

She leaned forward. "But know this: if you think we're going to be mindless drones flapping about to cater to your whims, think again. We're young, but we're not stupid. We know who you are. We know your reputation. We know far more than you think."

She cocked her head and smiled. "The question you should be asking yourself is not whether you can convince us to let you use us, but to what extent are we willing to be used? As well as what
"And security is only the tip of the iceberg," Kurt smoothly interrupted. "Our demands are nonnegotiable, Mr. Dumbledore." His eyes narrowed. "I would strongly suggest that you never again try to invade my mind, because I can promise you that you will not enjoy the consequences."

Quinn and Santana immediately stood, their gazes fierce.

Kurt smirked. Dumbledore had fallen so easily into that trap. What a pigeon.

"Just so you know, my security unit has already been informed of your attempt; it's a consequence of the wards. Should I ask, you will not be permitted to leave the premises. Instead you will be remanded into custody to stand trial by the end of the day. Charges will include attempted psychological rape, intentional infliction of severe emotional distress, child endangerment and abuse, espionage, torture, and treason. Other charges will be added to suit the circumstances and my whims."

Dumbledore's breaths became very shallow.

"After you're convicted," Kurt blithely continued, "and let me assure you, you will be, my father will hold an international press conference to announce the outcome of your trial and the terms of your imprisonment. Extradition to Britain will be denied.

"I highly doubt the ICW will interfere, as many members of your own Wizengamot will be glad to see the back of you once and for all. Fudge will surrender you because he would be too terrified to do anything else. Any attempts to interfere will result in an international incident which the United Kingdom can ill afford.

"Esperanza will have you declared persona non grata for the entirety of South America, if she doesn't simply kill you outright, and Uncle Alrik will do the same for wizarding Scandinavia. My extended family in France and Germany will do their parts, as well. Please don't forget that I am also a French citizen; wizarding France is still monarchical and operates under a vastly different legal system than their non-magical counterpart. They are only barely not at war with your government.

"Finally, I will hold my own conference with a press corps I've hand-selected and have met throughout the course of my ambassadorial duties."

Kurt offered a pleasant smile. "This isn't your country, Mr. Dumbledore, and I will happily crucify you."

He and Dumbledore stared at one another for a very long time.

"I began studying Occlumency when I was four; I mastered it when I was eight. Quinn and Santana are at my level. It was necessary, given the classified information we possess for any number of governments. We were taught by Esperanza herself, and if we can keep her out without difficulty, I am confident we can do the same with you and anyone else with very little strain."

"I am so sorry," Dumbledore said, closing his eyes and sighing.

"I don't care. I won't pretend to understand your motivations, but whatever accord we may have reached has been severed. Laying aside criminal charges, I want you to give me one solid, concrete reason we should now agree to attend Hogwarts."

Dumbledore suppressed a groan. He had been hasty, had overstepped, and was now completely out
of his league. He had sat here only moments before, marveling at the accomplishments of these children, vowing not to underestimate them, and then had done exactly that. He wasn't surprised they had been taught Occlumency; as Kurt indicated, it only made sense given the political power of their families.

He wasn't even terribly surprised by their skill. Esperanza's ability was renowned. No one had ever managed to breach her barriers. If she had managed to impart that training to these children, and it was obvious she had, their minds were well-guarded.

The truth of the matter was that, though Occlumency was a demanding art, the sooner one was instructed, the easier it was to learn. If a child showed an ability, it was foolish to put off the training.

The minds of children were elastic and their memories not as complex. The earlier those memories were examined, catalogued, and filed, the easier it was to master the discipline. Dumbledore himself had accomplished this before he was sixteen, Tom Riddle even earlier.

"I say we cut our losses here and now," Santana spat as she paced. "He's offered us nothing we can't get anywhere else, and we can get a lot more. I never wanted to go to a school to begin with. Our tutoring has been more than sufficient."

Quinn shrugged. "Beauxbatons' offer was much more appealing."

Kurt continued to hold Dumbledore's gaze, temporarily ignoring his friends. Or so it appeared to Albus.

"I'll tell you what I think. I think you did know my birth parents, Mr. Dumbledore. I think you knew them well. There is no logical reason you should know I was adopted. Those records of my birth in England weren't just sealed; they were obliterated." He raised a brow. "I know. I looked. I think you were the one to do that."

Albus set his jaw to keep it from quivering as a tear forced an escape from his left eye.

Kurt suddenly realized that whatever he had previously thought of this man, he had failed to take one thing into account: at the end of the day, Albus Dumbledore was just a man and nothing more. Powerful, yes. Deceitful and secretive? Certainly.

But a man nonetheless.

Probably lonely. Absolutely monolithic. A man who had been shouldering a great burden from a grateful but overbearing people since his defeat of Grindelwald all those years previous

"I can only surmise that you regret your decision to send me away," Kurt continued, his voice more sedate, "wondering if it was, in fact, the right decision. I believe you probably thought of me over the years, hoping I was well, but hesitant to interfere and terrified you might have made a mistake."

His eyes softened. "How am I doing so far?"

"A little too well," admitted a sorrowful Albus.

"Kurt!" Santana growled.

The boy raised a hand and she was instantly quieted. He cocked his head and continued to study the man before him.

"By now, I'm sure you've guessed that you were expected here." He wasn't going to admit that they
had expected him that day, for he still wanted to see whether his true identity would be revealed by Dumbledore. "I suspected that I would hear from Hogwarts just prior to my birthday."

"Why the subterfuge?" Albus quietly asked.

Kurt gave an unapologetic shrug. "I wanted to see how truthful you would be without being prompted or coerced. Admittedly, I'm disappointed."

"My dear boy, you must understand..."

"Nothing," he interrupted. "I must understand nothing, because it's obvious that my adoption was illegal and engineered by you." He shook his head. "That is, however, ultimately irrelevant." He drew himself up. "I am Kurt Hummel and that is the only name to which I will answer. Further, I am not, have never been, and will never be your boy."

He nodded to himself. "I won't allow my family to be torn apart. I won't allow my father to face possible kidnapping charges. I won't have my mother's memory sullied ragged through the mud. I won't be responsible for tension in the marriage of my father and stepmother, nor will I allow Finn to be subjected to the spectacle this could become. Those things would happen were I to press the matter, so I won't."

"Kurt," Quinn softly said, "are you sure?"

The boy nodded. "Very. There is absolutely nothing this man can do to me or my family without exposing his own misdeeds, the least being kidnapping and the greatest might possibly be Line Theft. I think we all know he has no intention of doing that. He has no leverage."

He arched a brow. "I, on the other hand, have quite a bit."

Albus sighed. "What are your demands?"

Kurt shook his head. "It's no longer that simple. I will admit that I am curious about England because I was born there, but as I've already stated, I have no real affiliation with that country. I'm a dual citizen of the United States and France and will remain such. Your faculty is adequate, but not overly impressive; not compared with the tutors I've had and those I could procure.

"So let's get down to brass tacks. What do you have to offer me, Albus Dumbledore?"

Very little, was the old man's startled realization. "What is that you want, Mr. Hummel?"

Kurt clucked his tongue. "Everything to which we've already agreed, for a start, and that will be finalized in a magically binding contract which you will happily sign."

Albus nodded. He no qualms with this.

"The security measures you outlined are completely unacceptable; however, I am willing to negotiate on certain points. I agree with you that General Sylvester's presence at Hogwarts could be disruptive, so I will not insist on her presence."

He said nothing about her presence in the environs of Hogwarts, however.

"That said, I must insist that she be allowed to inspect your school from top to bottom before the twelfth of August. You will give her unfettered access. She will draft an exhaustive report which will detail all of the shortcomings and we both know she will find them."
"Copies of that report will be given to both you and myself. What you choose to do with yours and whether or not you inform your Board is no concern of mine. You will have two weeks to implement her improvements. If you do not, we will know and we will not attend. The cost of such improvements will, of course, be met by me."

It was actually an intriguing demand, Albus ruminated. He would be very interested to see how an outsider judged the wards of Hogwarts. If there were weaknesses, and indeed there probably were, he should be made aware of them. He wanted to be made aware of them. Despite how poorly he had comported himself during this meeting, the safety of his students was paramount. Even if Kurt and the girls declined to attend, such a report was nonetheless a good idea.

It would also go over well with the Board of Governors, who would never turn down a free upgrade.

He cautiously nodded his head.

"Excellent," Kurt nodded. "Next, in lieu of General Sylvester, I still require a small staff." He held up a hand in a bid of silence. "Nonnegotiable. You must understand, Mr. Dumbledore, that being a student does nothing to mitigate my other obligations, which are many. The structured environment of a formal education will impair my duties as Ambassador, especially in a temporal matter.

"I am willing to keep my speaking engagements to a minimum and hold them in Western Europe, but I will have to attend said duties. I fully expect to be excused from classes when the need arises without any protests or reprisals. Transportation expenses will be met by me."

"Whom would you bring?" Albus asked.

"William Schuester, my personal assistant whom you earlier met," Kurt said. "He knows my schedule, my commitments, and my duties almost as well as I do. He will be given a suite at Hogwarts. Since you are currently operating at approximately one-fourth of your capacity, I presume this will not be a problem."

Albus nodded absently. "He has your complete trust?"

"He does. William Schuester is also my uncle, my mother's half-brother."

Dumbledore's eyes widened.

"Additionally Nadia Goodacre, my cultural and press attachée, will be in attendance," Kurt continued. "Nadia is an Elf, whom British citizens would disparagingly and ignorantly refer to as a House Elf, though she is no such thing. She is bonded to me in friendship, not slavery. She is well-educated and well-paid for her services.

"She will also be afforded a suite, not a broom cupboard in the kitchens. I will, of course, be providing the school with stipends for room and board for my staff. I do not expect you to bear the costs of their care."

Albus knew there was no way around this and agreed. Further, the stipends would serve as proof against any outcries of special treatment. No one would complain if they were not held liable for the costs.

"Should anyone, either student or faculty member, inquire," Kurt said flatly, "they are to be advised that Will and Nadia are in my employ. They are not there to serve anyone else and answer only to me. They will not take orders. They will not be treated as lesser beings. Should Nadia experience any of the prejudices associated with her species in Britain, I will take steps and guarantee you will
I am well aware of the history of Hogwarts, Mr. Dumbledore, and I know that when the aristocracy was at its height, it was not unusual for the Scions of Ancient and Most Noble Houses to bring a retinue when they matriculated. This is no different. There is precedent. I am an international ambassador and the only son of the second most powerful man in the free magical world. I will merely be exploiting loopholes which have existed since the Founders. As no one but me will be incurring any costs, I fully expect you to defend my right to have my staff at my disposal.

He glared. "However, if you cannot assure me that my staff will not be harassed, then this discussion is over."

Albus exhaled. "Mr. Hummel, you have my promise that your staff will be welcomed at Hogwarts and treated accordingly with their positions."

Kurt narrowed his eyes. "Bit of wordplay, there. I've heard of your penchant for such games. Know that all of this is going into the contract in very plain language."

Albus flinched but couldn't deny the boy had cause to distrust him.

"Other security measures will be negotiated between our governments and yours," Kurt continued. "Rest assured that both Quinn and especially Santana, given who their families are, will require their own security. In case it was unclear, their presence is absolutely mandatory to assure my own.

"As stated, we are not citizens of the United Kingdom but nevertheless hold international political power. Each of us is either noble or royal and will be considered foreign diplomats. We will not be subject to the laws of your nation, but our respective ones. In essence, we will have diplomatic immunity. This will be negotiated amongst the nations we represent.

"There is absolutely no way in hell I will attend your school under the yoke of your laws," he said, "and neither will Quinn nor Santana. We've studied the decisions of the Wizengamot; we know how it operates and how corrupt it is. We are no one's scapegoats."

Albus cleared his throat, not wanting to signal how badly that stung, but nodded. "And internal school matters?"

"A fair question. Should a situation arise in school which requires discipline, we will submit to your authority, but only when punishments are upheld by the school charter, copies of which are in our possession and will be memorized the charter before the start of term. If the letter or spirit of the charter is violated, we will ignore the reprimand. Should matters escalate, we will withdraw from Hogwarts immediately and file any charges necessary or applicable."

Kurt stared at Dumbledore. "Is anything I've just said in any way unclear?"

"No," Albus said, "and, frankly, your demands are far from unreasonable."

"This is bullshit!" Santana snapped. "I'm not going to be sequestered in some ancient pile of rocks where the head dipshit in charge, who obviously has no compunction about illegal Legilimancy attacks on minors, has unrestricted access to my person." She shook her head furiously. "No way."

Albus suppressed a groan. He could not believe how horribly he had allowed negotiations to deteriorate simply because he had been impatient and petulant.

"I'm sorry, Kurt," Quinn said, "but I agree." She shook her head. "You have to know how
ridiculous this is. We shouldn't have to do this. We shouldn't have to draft contracts and use intimidation to secure ourselves a proper education and ensure our rights won't be ignored."

She sat back down in her chair. "I am very uncomfortable with this and most definitely not satisfied. This man obviously wants something from you and it's far more than whatever he feels he owes your biological parents. We still don't know what it is he wants and he hasn't offered to explain it. Neither Santana nor I were born in Britain, so we have no reason to go other than you. I know you will protect us, but that's not your job or responsibility."

Santana nodded. "There's also our parents to consider. When we present them with this contract, they're going to want to know why it was necessary. As it is, none of them wants us to go to boarding school, if simply because of the security issues at play. I've yet to be convinced why formal schooling is necessary or even important."

Kurt wanted to smirk. His girls were certainly selling this! They would push and push until Dumbledore would offer them whatever they wanted, but they all now knew the man would never admit to why he wanted Kurt's presence at the school. He wasn't even worried about pushing Dumbledore too far because there was no such thing in this circumstance.

He turned to Dumbledore and raised a brow. "If you have something to sway them, I would suggest it now. We long ago agreed to make majority decisions and they're two thirds of this triad. I turn the floor over to you."

Albus opened his mouth to offer plaintive promises, but was summarily interrupted.

"Unbreakable Vows, I think," Quinn purred, "in addition to the contract. Better safe than sorry."

In the end, the children agreed to attend Hogwarts, much to the delight and relief of Albus. Most of that delight, however, resulted from the relatively few small demands they made. He had been prepared to offer much more, sensed they knew as much, and was stunned and humbled when they asked for so little.

He was sure it was some machination on their part but couldn't prove it. He certainly wasn't going to resort to another Legilimency attempt. Being caught had been embarrassing enough, but making the attempt at all, especially on children, mortified him. He knew he was powerful, perhaps one of the most powerful wizards on the planet, but he rarely used his power in such a way. He didn't routinely scan his students and faculty, as much as Severus thought otherwise. He respected their privacy.

Indeed, if your own mind couldn't be your sanctuary, what would be?

Oh, he had thought about it, naturally, and more than once. He had thought about using it with Tom Riddle but had convinced himself that he was misjudging the boy, being too hard on him. When he had finally reached the realization that it was absolutely necessary, Tom had already become one of the most skilled Occlumens he had ever encountered.

Albus was still of the opinion that Tom had used some obscure ritual to achieve this. His shields were too uniform and refined to be organic. They were also too readily called upon. No matter the level of skill, Occlumency was an unnatural state of mind. Yes, the practice became easier over time the more you exercised the skill, but it wasn't constant.

His own shields were exceedingly good but those of Severus were admittedly better, perhaps owing to the fact that the man was so paranoid, even if rightly so.
Albus made a mental note to look through some of his older texts. He fervently wished he had access to the many ancient tomes to which Lily Potter had been privy, ones outside the Potter Library. He had always wondered where those books had come from, how she had obtained access to them, and what had become of the them, but despite subtle inquiries, he had never gleaned the answers.

The truth of the matter was that there was much about Lily Potter that remained shrouded in mystery. She had begun working on her Charms Mastery when James and Sirius had joined the Hit Wizard Squad and finished in a remarkably short period of time, but had never been enrolled in any post-graduate institution nor was an apprenticeship on record. He had always found this particularly odd, especially given her close relationship with Filius. Albus well knew Flitwick would have moved heaven and earth to mentor Lily.

He would never ask Filius, of course. He knew that Lily had been his favorite student, his only favorite student, and the man became extremely disgruntled when questioned about their relationship. Still, if anyone would know, it would be Filius.

Personally, Albus had always suspected Lily Potter had been an Unspeakable. That she had been one, in fact, prior to her leaving Hogwarts.

He knew there was absolutely no way to validate his supposition. Even Albus Dumbledore with his great network of spies, allies, and informants, had never been able to infiltrate the Department of Mysteries.

He frowned.

James had been pants at Occlumency; the talent simply hadn't run in the family, though Dorea Black, his grandmother, had been extremely skilled. Lily, however, had been a natural and Albus had never determined just how she had learned the discipline. Now he wondered if she had mastered that ability even prior to matriculating at Hogwarts; if she had shared that ability with anyone else.

Such as Severus, who had never revealed who had instructed him in the art.

Perhaps Lily's gift had been inherited by Kurt, who was far more like his birth mother than father. Albus wondered what that meant for Harry.

Lily, for all her temper and bluster, had always been pragmatic and reserved. She had never given away anything about herself that couldn't have been gleaned from other, less personal, sources. Why she had been this way would never be known. Was it her upbringing? Had it been caused by Petunia's rejection? Her parents' deaths had occurred after graduation, so Albus doubted that was the cause.

Kurt reminded him so much of Lily. The boy was polite, circumspect, shrewd, argued to win, and never gave up anything of import without getting something far greater in return. Albus also realized it was quite possible Kurt had inherited his mother's legendary temper.

He sighed. Lily Evans all over again? Merlin, he was getting too old for this.

He suspected Kurt Hummel was going to be a large problem, but the benefits outweighed the headaches, surely. Of course, Lily had never had a Quinn Fabray or Santana Lopez at her side. Kurt alone was formidable, but coupled with the other two, the potential of a ridiculously overpowered triad seemed certain.
The power he knew not?

Albus was unsure but wasn't taking any chances. If this meeting had taught him anything, it was that it was far better to have Kurt Hummel under his eye than not. The boy would never be under his heel, but Albus could live with that. He knew Kurt wouldn't be able to be bullied or swayed or easily led, and that was fine. Perhaps it was time he relaxed the reins and allowed other people to help him help Harry. And, really, who better than Harry's twin?

Still ...

As he crossed toward the Apparition Hub, he glanced back over his shoulder at the Vice Presidential mansion, now hidden behind that enormous copse of trees.

He had signed the makeshift contract, which would then have to be approved by their parents and ratified by the children's coteries of solicitors before passing muster with the appropriate governments. Once everything was agreed upon, they would take Vows. There would be an exceedingly large amount of red tape, but he didn't foresee any insurmountable problems.

Indeed, he believed the children, for whatever reason, wanted to attend Hogwarts just as much as he desired them to come. Quinn had suggested, rather obliquely, that their parents would abide their decision. He sincerely doubted that any parent worth their salt would allow their children to navigate their own educations in such an unsupervised manner.

This meant the parents must have already agreed to allow the children to attend Hogwarts. This meant that he, the school, and its staff had been thoroughly investigated, at least on paper, by some of the most powerful people and government agencies in the world.

While he and Hogwarts had not been found entirely lacking, the children's dissection of the flaws of both the school and the British magical education system had hit close to home. They also could not easily be dismissed.

A most intriguing meeting. Fascinating children. He was looking forward to their arrival.

First, however, he had to return to Hogwarts and brief his staff. Second, he needed to prepare himself and the school for General Sylvester's arrival. He doubted the security precautions offered by the wards would be suitable and was curious as to what recommendations the woman would make. Third, he had to clear the way with Minister Fudge and Amelia Bones, the Head of the Department of Magical Law Enforcement.

It wouldn't be easy, especially given Amelia's innate distrust of him, but it would be worth it.

To vanquish Voldemort once and for all was worth any cost.

He frowned in thought, quickly waved his wand in an intricate pattern, and activated his portkey.

"What do you think?" Quinn asked.

"It's a start," Kurt said after a long pause, "but there's a lot that needs to be accomplished before we leave for Scotland."

"Where do we begin?" Santana asked.

He frowned. "That's the problem. There's so much we need to do if we're going to stay ahead of him." He bit his lip. "Harry will have received his letter by now," he said softly.
Santana laid a hand on his arm. "Can you feel him?"

He closed his eyes and shook his head. "There's just the sense of something missing."

Quinn sat down and sighed. "I think I hate Dumbledore more for that than anything else. For him to sever your bond without any consideration as to what it would do to you or Harry ..."

"He might not have anticipated it," Kurt quietly interrupted, voice dull and toneless. "Harry and I aren't identical."

"His willful ignorance is galling and no excuse," Santana said sharply. "You're twins. Twins always have a bond whether identical or fraternal, and magical twins even more so. Dumbledore should have known."

Kurt wrapped his arms around himself. "I miss him so much," he whispered, closing his eyes once more as tears gathered at his lashes. "It hurts to remember him."

Quinn gave an exaggerated blink. "Kurt," she said gently so as not to spook him, "what do you mean when you say you remember Harry?" She cocked her head. "You were separated when the two of you were only fifteen months old." Her mouth fell open. "You remember him?"

Santana's eyes widened. "You never told us."

"I've never told anyone," he admitted, eyes still shut tightly, "but, yes, I remember Harry. I remember Lily." He set his jaw as his eyes flew open. "And I remember that night."

The girls, plainly horrified, were helpless but to stare at him.

"Voldemort will pay for that. Harry or not, Dumbledore or not, prophecy or not, Voldemort will pay for what he has done to me and mine."

His eyes began glowing as a wind stirred and whipped about his hair.

"On my magic, I so swear. I will spill his blood and see him dead once and for all, and woe unto anyone who tries to stop me."

Far away, Brittany Pierce began to cry.

Halfway round the world, so did Luna Lovegood.

"We don't have to do this now," Kurt said, sighing, "nor do you have to help me."

An exasperated Quinn rolled her eyes. "Yes we do and of course we will." She gave him a frustrated glare, having gone through this with him countless times over the years. "Kurt, I appreciate your attempts to warn us away, but the bottom line is that we're not going anywhere. Did you somehow forget that we just agreed to attend Hogwarts with you? Stop being a martyr and help us!"

He gaped at her and then turned to Santana, who merely raised a brow. She was content to let Quinn handle this. When Kurt would eventually become even more unreasonable, and she knew that he would, then she would step in.

"Only because of the bond," Kurt whispered, turning his eyes downcast.
And apparently that time was now. "Bullshit," Santana spat. "That's not true and you know it, Tink, and I fucking resent the implication. We were close before the bond. The bond wouldn't have been given to us and then solidified were that not the case." She put her hands on her hips. "Do I need to drop my shields so you can read how much I love you and how much you are pissing me off?"

Quinn smirked with satisfaction as Kurt shuddered.

Santana basked in her triumph. "We'll lay aside - temporarily - that you never told us you remembered that night. It's your business and we won't pry."

Quinn hesitated but at last nodded. "For now," she qualified. "Sooner or later you will have to tell us, Kurt, because if you remember that Halloween, it's very possible that Harry does as well."

He fidgeted. "I don't think he remembers me. If he did, I would feel it; there would be something to the bond, some glimmer of recognition."

"You don't know that," she said reasonably, tone both kind and pragmatic. "The truth is that twin bonds are not well understood beyond the fact they exist. Most twins are too private to allow that aspect of themselves to be studied."

Kurt shrugged and turned his head to the side, signaling he was finished with the discussion at hand.

Santana and Quinn exchanged a glance filled with sadness, anger, empathy, and irritation. Kurt was their best friend; in fact, they most likely would have never been friends themselves without his influence. As it was, they argued frequently; however, at the end of the day, anything that threatened one would die by the other's hand. That was a fact with comforted like none other. And when Kurt was threatened, they would lay waste to the planet in their pursuit of his tormenters.

In a world filled with uncertainties, prejudice, evil, sadness, and loneliness, Kurt, Santana, and Quinn would always have each other, whether they liked it or not. Such was the nature of their bond.

They liked their bond.

Quinn frowned. Do you think we'll also have a bond with Harry?

Santana blinked and didn't immediately reply. I'm not sure, she finally said. As Kurt said, they're not identical. They're biologically different human beings, not to mention the fact that their magic is unique. Perhaps they'll have magical consonance, but that still doesn't mean our bond would extend to Harry.

Quinn bit her lip. Do you think Kurt regrets our bond? What if it supersedes his bond with Harry? Because of course they're getting that back.

Santana smirked with approval. They will, and I don't think he does. Remember that Kurt has always known about Harry and the loss of their bond. He entered our bond willingly, so I don't think he regrets it at all. That said, we're not his twin brother. We could never take Harry's place and I think Kurt knows we would never try.

Quinn, obviously relieved, nodded and then decided it was best to snap Kurt out of his maudlin funk. "What do you believe Dumbledore suspects about us?"

It worked and Kurt paused to consider her question. "I'm not sure," he said slowly. "Although we threw a lot of information at him, we barely scratched the surface." He gnawed on his lip. "I don't
believe he knows we're aware that Harry is my brother. If he did, he would have pressed the subject."

The girls nodded.

"Honestly," he continued, shrugging, "I don't think he knows any more than what we told him, but as to what he suspects? I'm sure he found it unusual how in sync we are with one another. We communicated with looks and finished each other's sentences. I wouldn't say that's particularly extraordinary, but it is odd. I think he accepted it because we made it clear that we've been together as a unit for a number of years."

"Do you think he knows about the bond?" asked an uneasy Santana.

He scoffed. "If our parents don't know, I highly doubt Dumbledore is aware. The type of bond we share hasn't been seen in over two thousand years and was never witnessed on British soil. No matter how learned Dumbledore is, I don't believe he's particularly interested in history on a global scale." He shrugged once more. "As it is, our bond would be considered nothing more than a myth or fairy tale."

"All of this presupposes that Dumbledore won't perform his own investigation of us," Quinn warned. "There's a month between now and when the term begins. He can accomplish a number of things in that time."

Santana nodded. "A legitimate point, but so can we and I don't think it's one he'll press too hard. We were nothing but honest with him about our agenda. Sure, we held stuff back, but I think he expected that and he held back just as much, if not more. I don't think he was prepared for how much we knew, specifically about his country, not just Hogwarts, and it was apparent he had no clue about any of us."

"Which bothers me," Kurt said, frowning. "If he didn't check up on me, it stands to reason he never did with Harry either. In fact, I believe that when he called his phoenix to him, it had something to do with Harry."

Santana stared. "You saw the phoenix. You actually saw the phoenix?"

"I suppose you could say we met each other," he replied. "Fawkes, the name of the phoenix, alighted behind me and proceeded to peck at my head in a playful manner. Dumbledore was amused."

"So the phoenix likes you," Quinn said, contemplating his statement. "That could prove useful, as well as being a great alibi for the future."

He rolled his eyes. "I'm not evil; none of us is."

"It's not that simple," Santana said, "and you know it. We've used what would, in Britain, be considered dark magic."

"But not for ill intent or personal gain," Quinn interrupted. "Further, what Britain considers dark magic is truly laughable. If they could, they'd outlaw everything, disarm their people, and then kick back and collect taxes."

"There's no such thing as dark magic, Santana," Kurt added, "and you know that."

She sighed and closed her eyes. "That entire country is going to crucify me."
"I really don't believe they will," Quinn said, "at least not on the basis of your family's reputation. Britain respects power and money, San, and you've got that in spades. If anything will get their collective goat, it will be the fact that you, that all of us, are foreigners. British magical society is intensely insular and xenophobic."

Kurt nodded. "However, I believe that will be somewhat ameliorated." He raised a brow. "Do you really think the Fudge administration won't make the most of the fact that an ambassador, a Swedish countess, and a genuine princess chose Hogwarts at which to study?" He shook his head. "They'll be falling all over themselves and us."

Quinn turned toward him. "I noticed you didn't make mention of your titles or mine to Dumbledore."

"Of course not," he replied. "For one thing, our titles are mostly ceremonial; they won't do much except encourage people to consider the fact that we have political allies outside of the United States upon whom we can call if necessary."

She nodded. It was true, of course, and let Dumbledore and Britain be content with thinking just that.

"The other is that there's a distinct difference between nobility and royalty," he added. "Santana is a legitimate princess, not just of a country but an entire continent. She will become a seated sovereign and is from a family dynasty which has ruled consistently for more than a millennium."

"Do you really think it will even matter?" Santana asked. "Most of wizarding Britain is completely unaware that Queen Elizabeth is their monarch; that she, in fact, holds more power in their world than in the non-magical one?"

Kurt shrugged, unbothered. "That's what happens when you let a ghost teach history to the children of an entire nation for more than two centuries. Look at the damage Snape has inflicted on their number of Healers and Potion Masters all in the space of a decade."

She conceded the point with a nod.

"Let's not forget the most obvious thing. Quinn interjected. "The moment this begins to go south and we're faced with no real options, we withdraw from the school and simply take Harry with us in whatever manner the situation requires."

Kurt nodded as Santana's eyes gleamed with malevolence.

"That presupposes he'll want to be with me," Kurt said softly. "He might not. He'll want to know why it took me this long for come to him."

Quinn frowned. "Kurt, you're a child! You've spent years searching for him. We can prove that. Why wouldn't he accept you?"

"There's a difference between understanding and feeling," Kurt said. "I have no idea what's happened to him in the past ten years, but if he was, as I suspect, left with the Dursleys, then it won't be anything good."

"Are you sure he's with them?" Santana demanded. "For that matter, what on earth could block you and an entire government from finding one non-magical family?"

He turned to face her. "A blood ward."
Her eyes widened as Quinn gasped.

Santana's face shut down. "The kind of ward of which you're speaking is an affront to magic itself. There is nothing in Dumbledore's profile that would suggest he has any authority or practical experience in creating such a ward." Her gaze was searing. "Do you truly think him that stupid?"

"Not at all," Kurt said, "but I do think him terminally naive, particularly where Voldemort is concerned, which is far more dangerous."

She exhaled slowly. "Then that explains a number of things."

Quinn threw up her hands. "I have no idea what either one of you is talking about." Before they could utilize the bond, she held up a hand. "Verbally, please. There's a lot I'm trying to assimilate at the moment."

Kurt nodded. "You wouldn't necessarily know this Quinn, and it's something neither Santana nor I have ever tacitly discussed. I'm aware of this particular ward because warding is Dad's specialty, and Santana because blood magic is an integral part of her culture. We haven't left you out of anything, not intentionally."

Santana nodded.

Quinn blushed lightly. She hadn't mentioned it, but was slightly bothered they were privy to knowledge she was not. That wasn't how their bond worked. Although each of them could dampen the bond so that their thoughts could remain private if they should so choose, knowledge was something they never kept to themselves. When one learned something, the other two automatically assimilated the information.

"What we believe has happened is that Dumbledore enacted a blood ward of protection around Harry," Kurt explained, "ostensibly to keep him safe from any Death Eaters who skirted punishment after the fall of Voldemort. It means that Harry has been essentially removed from magical observation; that is, no one outside of Dumbledore and perhaps a few key Ministry personnel knows where to find him."

Quinn shook her head in confusion. "That doesn't explain why you haven't been able to find him using non-magical means."

He nodded. "Which Santana will do now."

"In order for this ward to function properly," Santana continued, "it must be generated by a willing sacrifice."

Quinn's thoughts raced until she arrived at the only answer she believed could make sense. "Lily."

"Most likely," Kurt said. "From the little intelligence Dad has been able to gather, which is almost none considering the events at Godric's Hollow were placed under the Official Secrets Act, Lily's body was found at the foot of Harry's crib, suggesting she was the final barrier Voldemort had to cross to get to us."

"You and Harry didn't share a crib," Quinn surmised. At the shake of his head, she continued to extrapolate. "Then Voldemort did attack Harry first."

He nodded.

"So Harry really is the Boy Who Lived," she said. "Dumbledore didn't make a mistake about that."
"No," he said, smirking, "but I imagine he's reconsidering it now."

Quinn smirked in kind. "Well, that should keep him occupied for quite a while." Her face cleared. "And the ward?"

"Here's where it gets tricky and truly disgusting," Santana said, pulling a face. "The ward can only be maintained by continual sacrifice."

Quinn blinked. "But Lily's dead."

"Exactly," Kurt whispered.

Her face twisted in horror. "You mean it's Harry? He has to be sacrificed?"

"Not quite," Santana said, throwing a cautious glance at Kurt. "It's that Harry has to make constant unwilling sacrifices."

"What the hell does that even mean?"

"The initial sacrifice was based on Lily's love for her children," said a sedate Santana. "In order for the ward to be set, Harry would have to be placed with someone of Lily's blood."

"Petunia," Quinn guessed.

Santana nodded. "Had James cast the spell, Harry could have gone to a paternal relative."

Now Quinn was hopelessly lost. "Wait a minute. Before we go any further, where does Kurt fit into all of this? Why did Dumbledore separate him from Harry?"

"He most likely believed, and perhaps not incorrectly, that I could have been used against Harry," Kurt said.

"I could see that if you and Harry were adults, but how would one toddler be used against another? Further, as you're the elder, you're Scion of House Potter, not Harry."

"That makes the point for me," Kurt said. "If I had fallen into the hands of Voldemort's minions, they would have killed me so that Harry would inherit. Then they would have used the Ministry's own laws to have Harry placed with one of them. He would have been under their control, as would the House of Potter and its fortune."

Quinn swallowed heavily and nodded. That made sense. Horrible, sick sense. Then another thought occurred to her. "You're not actually arguing that Dumbledore made the right decision, are you?"

"No," he said rather heatedly, "only that I can understand his reasoning. Dumbledore cares about me in the abstract, as he does everyone, but not as a person. I am a tool to him, as is Harry, and that's the main reason for the separation. It's obvious from his actions he believes Voldemort will return. When that happens, the most logical person to oppose him would be the one who defeated him."

"Although," Santana interjected, "critical thinking argues it was Lily who defeated Voldemort, not Harry. He was the instrument."

"Possible," Kurt replied, "but not definite. Harry could just be that powerful."

Quinn and Santana doubted that, but neither could they dismiss it. Accidental and wish magic, particularly in highly charged emotional situations, could be inordinately powerful and notoriously
difficult to control or counter. Not to mention that Kurt was more magically powerful than either one of them, though they themselves were incredibly strong. If Harry's power was equal to or greater than Kurt's own, who was to say what happened that night?

"We have to assume that whatever Lily's protection entails, it also extends to Kurt," Quinn said.

"But Voldemort chose Harry," he said, "not me."

Santana blanched. "You really do remember."

He gave a tired nod.

Quinn felt it best to get the discussion back on track. "So what are you saying? That the severing of your twin bond is a result of the blood ward? That their relationship was a sacrifice?"

Santana met her stare with grave eyes. "Yes."

Quinn shook her head in incredulity. "That's ... perverse. It's absolutely reprehensible."

"And it gets worse. The ward would compel Petunia to admit Harry into her home, but not to love or even care for him. If anything, the ward would have turned her against him completely. Yes, her blood, as one of the last members of Lily's family, would help anchor the ward and thus give Harry sanctuary, but she would come to resent his presence thoroughly."

"Are you saying Harry has been abused?" Quinn roughly demanded.

"At the very least, he has probably been neglected, but given the nature of this ward, of the power necessary to cast it, and the magical strength that flows through Lily's children, yes, I do believe Harry most likely has been abused."

"That doesn't make sense!" Quinn insisted. "Intellectually I can understand Kurt's argument that Dumbledore separated him from Harry in order to protect both of them, but there are too many inconsistencies. First, as suggested earlier, it's only logical to assume that whatever James, Lily, or both of them did to protect Harry also protects Kurt. Kurt says that Voldemort went immediately for Harry, but we don't know if that was planned."

She sent a sorrowful look to her friend. "It could have just as easily been you."

He nodded his agreement, which served to spur her further.

"Second, I can understand Dumbledore's impetus for the ward and, as long as we're excusing his ignorance, that he wouldn't necessarily know he had cast it improperly or the ramifications of the spell." She paused for a breath. "That doesn't explain, however, why he would separate them. If anything, Kurt's blood would also power the ward, thus doubling their protection."

Santana blinked, narrowed her eyes in thought, and turned to Kurt. "It's a valid point."

He swallowed heavily. "There's a prophecy."

Quinn closed her eyes.

Santana huffed. "Well, shit."

"So you don't know what the prophecy is, only that there is one?" Quinn asked.

Kurt nodded.
"Well, that's unhelpful."

"Who told you this?" Santana demanded.

He regarded her carefully.

She squeezed her eyes shut. "Brittany."

He nodded and, though she couldn't see it, she felt it. Her rage and regret began stewing to a boil.

"It's not our fault," he said. "We still don't know what happened."

"She shouldn't have been there," she hissed. "We shouldn't have taken her."

"We didn't," Quinn gently remonstrated. "She followed us. We couldn't have known, Santana."

Santana knew her friend was right, but that did little to quell her fear. She sighed. "I don't know why I didn't ... "

She had some minor seeing talent, but nothing in the way of what Brittany was and would later become. She was still devastated that Brittany wouldn't be accompanying them to Hogwarts, but understood she required more specialized training than Hogwarts or any other magical institution could provide.

Kurt offered a diffident shrug. "She's Brittany. She defies all logic and explanation."

Santana smiled. It was filled with sadness, but also agreement.

"So you believe this prophecy is what encouraged Dumbledore to action," Quinn said to Kurt, who nodded.

"It makes the most sense. The Potters were targets long before Harry and I were born, but never had Voldemort been so overt in his quest to bring them to heel. Disposing of minor annoyances - and, let's face it, compared to his abilities, James could be considered nothing less - was left to his lieutenants."

He paused. "Lily was more problematic. In fact, she's more problematic in general. There's a lot I haven't been able to find about her, things which should be public record in both the magical and non-magical worlds. If she really was as powerful as some have suggested, then, yes, maybe it makes sense Voldemort went to Godric's Hollow himself that night."

"Why?" Santana asked.

"Because he might have been the only person capable of killing Lily," Quinn guessed.

Kurt nodded. "He personally killed James and Lily before training his wand on Harry. Yes, as you pointed out, it could have just as easily been me, but he obviously viewed us as a threat which required elimination."

"Then Voldemort knows the prophecy," Santana said.

"I assume so, or at least part of it." He tilted his head. "Enough to take drastic measures and expose himself."

"And you think Dumbledore knows the prophecy, as well," Quinn said.
"Definitely. We all know that prophecies, while inexact and usually worthless, have certain parameters."

Santana stiffened. "You believe Dumbledore was there when the prophecy was uttered."

"Of course. He had to have been, else why was he the one who engineered all of this? He was the one who separated me from Harry. He was the one who put me with my parents and Harry with the Dursleys. He obviously has some scheme in mind, probably a convoluted and ultimately idiotic one, and has spent the past decade twiddling his thumbs and waiting for the Potter twins to come to Hogwarts."

Quinn pulled a face but nodded. Kurt's explanation made the most sense, but something else was troubling her. "What about the Dursleys?" she asked. "Why haven't you or Uncle Burt been able to find them?"

"I believe that has to do with the ward. From what Dad's taught me, a blood ward of this kind, based on sacrifice, is designed to protect the warded from their most dangerous enemy, which in this case would be Voldemort. That means Dumbledore has known for quite some time that Voldemort still exists in some form."

Santana scowled.

"The next part ties in with the nature of sacrifice. Lily gave up her life, her blood, to protect Harry and me, but since Dumbledore in his misguided wisdom separated us, the ward itself applies only to Harry, as it was built around him."

"The ward itself," Santana interrupted, slowly repeating his words. "You think there's a protection in place separate from the ward?"

"Sure," Kurt said. "Lily wouldn't have known Dumbledore would end up casting that ward. I think the reason he did is because he knows - or at least suspects - Lily did something to protect us. Without access to the spell she used, I can only posit what that might be. I think Dumbledore erected that ward to protect Lily's, uh, protection."

"You're sure it was Lily?"

He looked away. "James was found on the first floor, Lily on the second in the nursery." He paused. "This is just my own extrapolation, but I believe he was buying her time."

"And the Dursleys?" Quinn repeated.

He sighed. "My bond with Harry was severed; that was a sacrifice. It can be argued that it was a sacrifice demanded of both of us, but that's debatable because I never agreed to any such thing. Harry, however, is under the power of the ward and his permission isn't required for sacrifices to be made on his behalf. I have memories of Harry while he most likely has none of me. Who knows which of us is worse off for that?"

Quinn shook her head, furious at Dumbledore.

"As for the Dursleys, I've already explained that it's my belief that Harry has been required to make continual sacrifices to power the ward, and it's possible that any memories he had of me have been suppressed in yet another sacrifice."

"You mean he might remember you, but those memories are hidden from him because of the ward," she said.
Santana nodded. "The ward is powered by continual suffering. Harry's continued separation from Kurt qualifies. Conceivably, anyone of Harry's blood should be protected by the ward, but because Harry doesn't know of Kurt's existence, the ward would not necessarily recognize Kurt as blood."

"But it does Petunia and Dudley," Kurt picked up, "because Harry has been led to believe they're all the remaining family he has. Essentially he thinks they're his only option. As such, the ward is made stronger by his belief that he is alone in the world save them."

"And you think they've abused him," Quinn said darkly.

"From the pieces Dad has been able to put together, there was no love lost between Petunia and Lily. Petunia did not attend Lily's wedding, our birth, or the Potters' funeral. I sincerely doubt that taking in her orphaned nephew was high on her list of priorities."

"So she, as Santana said, would resent him," she surmised, "and would see him as a burden."

He nodded. "I haven't been allowed to access the Potter estate yet, though I will be able to do so as of today, but I was able to determine that there have been no withdrawals from either it or our trust funds. I doubt that Dumbledore is footing the bill for Harry's upkeep."

Santana gnawed on her lip. "So if the ward doesn't recognize you as blood, it would keep Harry and the Dursleys from being able to be found by you or anyone acting on your behalf."

"If neither my father nor your grandmother can find one small non-magical family in an island-bound nation, only the blood ward would possess the magic to hide them."

"Anyone I asked to find them would be considered an agent of mine and the ward would not reveal Harry's location."

Quinn growled. "Look, I understand how intricate and illogical magic can be, but there's something seriously wrong with this scenario. If what we're thinking is right, and it probably is, that means Harry has been raised as a non-magical. There have to be records of him in that world, some kind of paper trail. Medical records, school records, something."

"I'm sure there is," Kurt agreed, "but we can't find them." He offered a shrug. "And enter Dumbledore."

Quinn grew very red, withdrew her wand, cast a silencing spell on herself, and screamed her head off.

"You think Dumbledore knew your family would come looking?" Santana asked him.

"I think he considered the possibility and planned for it," Kurt said. "I'm sure that, after today, after realizing I was blood adopted into the Hummel family, he wonders how much I truly know about my birth family. There are various rituals one can use for a blood adoption, but most of them will reveal the child's biological relatives as a magical safeguard. He might not know that I know I was born a Potter, but I'm sure he suspects my father does."

Quinn released the spell and hissed. "So that will be his excuse. He didn't tell you about Harry because he wasn't sure you knew, and he wouldn't want to interfere in how Uncle Burt was planning on telling you."

He gave her a bland look. "He had no idea of the positions Dad holds in the international community, let alone who he is as a person. If all of this has taught me anything, it's that Dumbledore sees me as a carrot he can use to goad Harry into action. He will reveal nothing until the last possible moment or unless he feels someone else might reveal it first. Then he would rush
to tell all and appear the only honest and trustworthy adult in our lives."

He began pacing. "I don't think Dumbledore is a malicious man; I truly don't." He rolled his neck. "However, I do believe that he is so focused on the big picture that he has made himself offensively myopic."

"He can't see the trees for the forest," Santana said wryly.

"Exactly. This is all an elaborate chess game for him and he fancies himself its master. Despite his good intentions, the problem is that he doesn't recognize the pieces are actual people and so while he feels compassion when he deems them necessary sacrifices, he believes the collateral damage to be worth the risk. That's what makes him so dangerous."

Quinn eyed him. "You believe that, as Dumbledore knew of this prophecy, he also knew the Potters would be targets?"

"Everyone knows the Potters were killed in Godric's Hollow, but no one knows exactly where. Or why, for that matter. Why were they there? Why leave the safeguards of Potter Castle? The lack of definitive locations suggests a Fidelius Charm. That isn't in the standard Hogwarts curriculum, not to mention that it requires a tremendous amount of power to cast."

He paused. "By all accounts, Lily was one of the most powerful magical practitioners of her generation as well as a Charms prodigy. She could have cast the spell, but someone would have had to show her how. Flitwick, perhaps, but I'm betting on Dumbledore."

Quinn blinked. "A Fidelius? Wow." She frowned. "So that would mean Black was the Secret Keeper? That's why he's imprisoned and labeled as a betrayer."

Kurt grimaced and nodded. "That, and the large number of nonmagicals he's been alleged to have killed."

Santana raised a brow. "As in the Ancient and Most Noble House of Black? A member of the Major Arcanum?"

He nodded.

She gave a low whistle. "How did I gloss over that before?"

"It wasn't important," Quinn said. "It still isn't. He betrayed the Potters."

Kurt had some questions about that but held his silence and hid his doubts from their bond. He would discover everything that happened that night, but now wasn't the time. Regardless, he and Sirius Black were overdue for a chat.

"We need to get that ward down," Santana declared.

"I might be able to help with that," Sue Sylvester barked as she strode into the drawing room.

Augusta Longbottom was not pleased and let Amelia Bones know it. Unfortunately for her, Madam Bones had zero knuts to give.

This had not been a good day.

Fudge was even more bumbling than usual; Dolores Umbridge had dropped by her office in an attempt to be menacing, failed, and left an unwelcome, lingering scent of litter box in her wake;
Dumbledore had tried to Floo her first thing that morning, though she hadn't answered; and her niece Susan was Hogwarts-bound and far too excitable.

Now this.

If she hadn't had so much respect for Filius Flitwick, she would have turned him to stone and placed him as part of that ridiculous statue in the Ministry atrium.

Harry Potter, the Harry Potter, Scion of the Ancient and Most Noble House of Potter, the Vanquisher of Voldemort and all-around Boy Who Lived was sequestered in a silenced conference room being guarded by four Aurors and Flitwick as she tried to figure out her next move.

That move would have to be implemented fairly quickly lest Cornelius or the Frog stumble across the boy and make matters so much worse.

Their legend, their hero, had been abused by Muggles.

This was beyond a clusterfuck. Should knowledge of the Potter boy's treatment be leaked to the public, there would mass revolts and political chaos would ensue.

Amelia Bones wasn't prone to melodrama and well knew the fiasco this could cause. Dumbledore would be vilified, perhaps rightly, by the press. The former Minister Bagnold was dead and thus beyond the grasp of the public's fury, but their anger would certainly carry over to Fudge, who had known of the boy's placement. Worse, he had approved it, seeing no reason to rock the boat Dumbledore and Bagnold had set adrift.

This was one of Fudge's greatest inadequacies: he hesitated to action, content to rest on his laurels and allow others to make difficult choices. When those choices resulted in triumph, he reaped all the accolades; but should failure result, he shrugged off any blame, passing the proverbial galleon to the first available patsy.

In this case, that would be her. As Head of the Department of Magical Law Enforcement, she was nominally in charge of overseeing the Magical Child Welfare Division. The connection was tenuous at best, but because the MCWD sometimes required the assistance of the DMLE, Amelia was tangentially its head.

She knew Fudge believed she was his only likely opposition when it came time for reelection, and though she had no intention of running - at least not yet - she also knew Fudge wouldn't hesitate to sacrifice her to protect himself. She wasn't about to throw away almost twenty years of service and a sterling reputation because Fudge couldn't do his job.

She was disgusted by how Harry Potter was treated - outraged, in fact - but knew she would do him more good by retaining her position and seeing those responsible for his treatment paid for their mistakes.

And they would pay.

She glanced down at the medical report before her, remembering how Flitwick, one of her favorite instructors, had flung it at her, snarling, when she had responded to his summons at St. Mungo's Hospital. She had never before seen the man so infuriated and intimidating.

She gave a bland look at Augusta Longbottom and causally slid the report across the desk.

Augusta raised a brow and looked down at the offering, underwhelmed.
She had never cared for the Ministry, though she had once recognized its value, remembering the
days when it served the public rather than forcing the public to service it. She remembered
Ministers who had been the salt of the earth, proud and dignified witches and wizards who served
with honor but also knew when to exit the stage.

In the past half century, however, particularly the past twenty years, she had seen the Ministry for
Magic turn away from its mission and devolve into a den of iniquity which granted itself
overreaching powers, placing that power in the hands of the morally bankrupt and terminally
stupid.

The Ministry had become a collective for those with delusions of adequacy.

She maintained her positions in the Wizengamot and on the Hogwarts Board of Governors
primarily to inject a sense of dignity and decorum into their proceedings as she prepared Neville to
take over the reins once he was of age. As his Regent, such was her duty to the House of
Longbottom. It was a fantastic way of keeping her eye on the undesirables, such as Lucius Malfoy
and his ilk. She had a network of spies and informants which easily rivaled those of Dumbledore
and Voldemort.

Augusta Longbottom was a proud woman, a busy woman, who had no time for nonsense. She
frankly resented the summons which had brought her to the DMLE this day. She had a large
respect for Amelia Bones. The woman was competent, magically powerful, and ethical - a rare
combination in a Ministry employee.

She thought it rather unseemly that Amelia had placed herself front and center of the political game
instead of behind the scenes where a woman of her character could exercise real power, but she
appreciated the gravity and moral center Bones brought to her position.

That said, she was unhappy to have been ordered to appear like a wayward child.

"What is this?" she demanded, tapping a fingernail on the folder.

"Read it," Amelia said.

Augusta narrowed her eyes. "Summarize its contents."

"I wasn't aware you were a functional illiterate, Augusta."

Augusta hid a smirk of approval, stared at Amelia for a long time, before slowly opening the
folder. At the first page, her eyes widened. As she raced through the document, she felt all the
blood in her head rush and pool to her feet.

"Is this accurate?" she hissed.

"I wouldn't waste your time or mine if it wasn't," Amelia barked.

Suddenly Augusta gleaned Amelia's plan."Absolutely not!"

Amelia was not about to let this old crone dismiss the situation out of hand. "I don't believe you
understand what's happening here."

"I understand more than you could possibly imagine. There is no way I will have this child
remanded in to my custody. He needs serious care, certainly more than I can provide."

They argued for the next twenty minutes, Augusta being intransigent and Amelia being persistent.
Finally, Amelia played her ace.

"Alice is the boy's godmother."

Augusta paled even further, this time with rage, visibly affronted that Amelia had the audacity to question her devotion to family. Yes, her daughter-in-law was indeed Harry Potter's godmother and, yes, Augusta had been negligent in following up on Harry Potter's care, but she was not about to accept responsibility for a physically and emotionally damaged boy. She had enough on her plate dealing with Neville and his wealth of inadequacies. She had no room for more.

"Alice is unable to care for the boy," she growled, "as you well know, Madam Bones, and though she is my son's wife, I will not be held accountable for the responsibilities she is medically unable to exercise."

Amelia leaned back in her chair and regarded Augusta with cool eyes. "You're suggesting that because Potter is not of your blood, you bear no responsibility for his care."

"Correct." Augusta knew she sounded heartless, but she would not be bullied into doing something she knew was ill-advised.

She was not a maternal woman. Frank had been a late-life pregnancy, conceived long after she thought herself barren, and while she was overjoyed at his birth and proud of his many accomplishments, she knew she had not been a good mother. She had been abrasive and controlling, manipulative and emotionally unavailable. It wasn't that she didn't love her son with every fiber of her being, but that she had been too old and set in her ways when he had been born. Worse, she knew she was repeating her mistakes with Neville and had no idea how to stop herself.

It hadn't surprised her when Frank had married Alice, a woman who was the polar opposite of his mother. She had been taken aback by Alice at first, but had grown to love the woman fiercely, especially when they argued. Alice came across as meek and docile, but she had the heart of a lion, a true Gryffindor, and hadn't let Augusta get away with anything. Alice had been a check and balance Augusta had desperately needed.

She missed the woman as much as she missed her son and knew both would be appalled by how she had raised Neville, though she had done the best she could. She knew it wasn't good enough, that she had damaged him perhaps irreparably. She would not be found guilty of doing the same to Harry Potter.

Amelia gave her a measured look. "You might be Augusta, the Lady and Regent of the House of Longbottom, but you were born Callidora Black." She tilted her head. "I was very young when she was transformed into the woman who now sits before me, but I've heard tell of how Black children were raised."

Augusta set her jaw.

"Toujours pur, oui?" Amelia asked. "Forever pure is the family motto, but it never meant what Walburga and her brood allowed it to become. She perverted the motto to suit her Pureblood agenda, but we both know that it references pure of heart."

Augusta said nothing.

"Apparently you have no heart, so allow me to put this in terms you can understand. First, you may have no legal duty to the Potter boy, but you most definitely have a moral one. Alice wouldn't have hesitated to step in and care for the boy, and you, as her current Head of House, bear the onus of
her responsibilities."

She paused. "Don't forget that I knew Frank well. I was his supervisor when he and Alice joined the Corps. He would support me in this, would have supported Alice, and you know it."

Augusta curled a lip.

"Let us lay that aside for the moment, however. You bleat about how important family is to you, that you are protecting and ensuring Neville's legacy until he reaches his majority, but do not forget that Harry Potter is also of your blood."

Augusta stilled.

"His grandmother was your cousin Dorea Black. You were rather close, as I recall."

"Do not speak of her," Augusta warned.

It was then that Amelia realized Augusta shared her suspicions that Dorea Black Potter had been assassinated. "But more than that," she quickly added, "Sirius Black, also your kin, was named a Son of the House of Potter by Charlus and Dorea Black. He is also Harry Potter's godfather."

"Irrelevant," Augusta seethed, furious that her connection to that disgrace of a wizard had been spoken of, even in this private conversation.

Amelia hooded her eyes. "I did some discreet checking," she said with utmost nonchalance, "in the Book of Names."

Augusta's eyes widened to the size of dinner plates.

"Harry Potter was named by his godfather, Sirius Black, as Heir Apparent to the House of Black."

"Impossible!" Augusta bellowed, rising to her feet.

"Oh, it is quite possible and very true. You well know that Sirius was the Scion by birth, which was upheld by Arcturus even after the death of Regulus. Though Sirius is imprisoned, his status remains unchanged. Walburga tried to disown him but was unable, as she wasn't his Head of House. He cannot fulfill his duties, of course, but that takes nothing away from his title.

"Even if Sirius wished to revoke Harry as Heir, he couldn't. After his exposure to the Dementors he will never be able to father his own children nor will he be considered in his right mind under the law. He will remain in Azkaban for the rest of his natural life, but Harry Potter will, on his seventeenth birthday, become the Head of House Black and his claim in stronger than either that of Draco Malfoy or your grandson.

"Coincidentally, the day previous, Neville will become the Head of House Longbottom. On that auspicious occasion, you will revert to being a Black."

"I am a Longbottom!" Augusta screeched. "Now and forever!"

"In thought and feeling, perhaps," Amelia conceded, "but you are not a Longbottom by blood. Harry Potter, once he accepts his title, will become your Head of House."

Augusta promptly sat down. "You are blackmailing me."

"Not at all," Amelia smoothly said. "I'm merely reminding you of a few key facts. What you do with that information is, of course, entirely up to you." She hummed. "I would, however, be very
interested to see how young Harry and Neville get along at Hogwarts. Will they, for example, be as close as their fathers? Will they possibly renew the alliance that once existed between their Houses, and, if they do, what would that mean for you when they learn of this moment?"

Augusta's face became a perfect mask. "Well played."

"I'm not trying to play you, Augusta," Amelia said firmly. "I want you to understand the consequences of your decision, of how very important this is. Harry Potter has a biological connection to you and a magical one to your daughter-in-law and thus your grandson. Those connections will give the Wizengamot and Ministry very little pause in assigning him to your care."

Her face darkened. "Do not forget that you are not the only Black in existence. Think carefully about who else could make a claim for custody and of the ramifications that would result should one of them gain power over Harry Potter."

Augusta's breathing rapidly increased.

Narcissa, and thus Lucius Malfoy, could lay claim to the Potter Scion. That would be absolutely disastrous.

"Why not Andromeda?" she demanded. "She is younger and, thanks to her husband, understands Muggle ways."

"A fair, if slightly offensive, question and one which has a ready answer. That answer you will repeat to no one under any circumstances." Amelia dropped her chin and gave the woman an arctic glare. "Is that clear?"

Augusta suddenly understood why this woman was so feared. She nodded her acquiescence.

Amelia tented her fingers. "Harry Potter was raised by Muggles, yes, but much was omitted from his knowledge. Until today, he had no idea he was a wizard. He had no idea that magic was real and the magical world into which he was born even existed. He was told his parents were lazy drunkards who died in an automobile accident. He has no knowledge of magic, the wizarding world, his place within it, or the House of Potter."

Augusta once again leapt to her feet and began pacing. "Unacceptable!" she furiously whispered over and over. She then halted and turned on her heel, glaring down at Amelia. "Dumbledore."

"Yes," Amelia said gravely. "Now, tell me, Augusta, what would have happened had the LeStranges incapacitated you as they did Frank and Alice? What would have happened to Neville if his destiny had been placed in the hands of Albus Dumbledore, as that of Harry's was?"

Augusta gnashed her teeth. "I accept."

Several hours after Dumbledore's return to Hogwarts, the Head of House meeting was ready to begin. He had sequestered himself in his office for most of the time after putting off the persistent questions of Minerva and Severus. Filius and Pomona, though curious, had been content to wait until the meeting. The younger faculty members, most of whom traveled throughout the day and returned only at night, watched the scenes with various levels of amusement.

Finally, when he could put it off no further, he convened the meeting. The agenda was to discuss the upcoming term and to hear from Minerva reports about the new students she had visited, particularly those students who came from ... less supportive ... homes.
"Well, Albus?" Minerva immediately pounced. "Out with it. What is so very important about these children you visited? To my knowledge Hogwarts has never employed an active recruiting policy, especially not one spearheaded by the Headmaster himself." She raised a brow. "And Americans, to boot?"

Albus gently lowered himself into his seat at the head of the table and then indicated that the others present should sit, as well. He was surprised by Poppy's attendance; he hadn't asked her to come but was pleased. The woman was uncommonly insightful.

Poppy, however, was here at Filius' insistence and had no idea why. She was rather perturbed about the entire affair. Infirmaries didn't sterilize themselves, after all! Well, not until she could work out the arithmancy. One day, she vowed.

Albus gave Minerva a patient smile. "In a moment, dear friend." He turned to Filius. "I am most interested in hearing about your meeting with Harry Potter."

Filius actually growled.

Dumbledore's eyes widened as Snape and McGonagall's worst fears came to pass.

"It was most ... illuminating," Filius said roughly. He waved his wand and four parchments appeared over the heads of the others before falling into their laps. "Read."

Poppy narrowed her eyes, recognizing the seal of St. Mungo's, and began devouring the contents of the parchment. The others moved more slowly.

For ten long minutes, not a single word was spoken.

"These are Potter's records, yes?" Snape demanded in a clipped voice.

"They are," Filius spat, turning toward Albus. "This is what you allowed to happen to Lily's son!" he roared, an accidental burst of magic erupting from his person causing Dumbledore to grasp the arm chairs tightly to keep from sliding to the floor.

Albus was pasty white. The hand holding the scroll exhibited a noticeable tremor.

Minerva couldn't speak. She was far too appalled and felt quite guilty at what she had abetted.

All Severus heard was the words of Filius loudly echoing throughout his mind.

*Lily's son! Lily's son! Lily's son!*

"How did this happen?" he asked in a low voice. But he knew. It wasn't difficult to discern. The worst thing was that he was partly responsible. His last promise to Lily was to protect her only child and he had failed. He hadn't followed up, followed through, and the result was that Lily's son - for now that was who he considered the child to be, not just Potter spawn - had grown up in circumstances similar to those of himself. It was intolerable.

Albus shook his head. "I honestly have no idea."

Filius snorted. "It was your damnable blood ward, Albus! As soon as I arrived at the Dursley residence, its malevolence encroached upon me. What on earth gave you the idea that you had the knowledge even to attempt to cast such a ward? Do you have any idea what it did? Not just to Harry but to the Dursleys as well? Do you even care?"
Albus pursed his lips and glowered. "There is nothing wrong with that ward, Filius. I researched it quite thoroughly. Because of Lily's sacrifice ..."

"That was your first mistake," an irate Filius interrupted. "To construct such an abomination on something so flimsy as research is reprehensible, if not outright criminal. Rest assured that I have people looking into that, Albus."

Dumbledore removed his glasses. "Excuse me?"

"There is no excuse for you or what you did!" Filius shouted, hopping up onto his chair. "That ward had nothing to do with Lily's sacrifice for her child - a sacrifice, I should say, not unique to her. How many mothers, parents, and family members gave their lives for those of their children during Voldemort's bid for power? Far too many."

"A willing sacrifice ..." Dumbledore rumbled.

"Has nothing to do with that ward! First of all, you should never tie a blood ward to a living person. Ever. I find it very hard to believe that you didn't encounter this basic truth in all of your research."

Dumbledore had the grace to blush.

"Second, you cannot construct a blood ward based on a previous sacrifice," Filius continued. "Had Lily constructed the ward herself just prior to her death, it might have worked, but that's highly doubtful, which is why, I suspect, she chose not to do it."

Albus colored more deeply, stung by the implication that a twenty-year old girl had been more learned than him. Still, he nevertheless had the sinking feeling that Filius was correct on all counts, but knew better than to interrupt.

"So what powered the ward?" Minerva demanded. "If it wasn't Lily's sacrifice, what was it?"

Filius turned furious eyes upon her, pleased when she wilted before him. "Harry. Harry had to be sacrificed. Since he was only a toddler when he was dropped off on their curb like a rubbish bin, in order for the ward to function, constant sacrifices had to be made on his behalf." He gestured to the scrolls in their laps. "And here are the results."

"And speaking of such deposits," he then bellowed, glaring at both Dumbledore and McGonagall, "what on earth possessed you to leave a child on the doorstep of unknown relatives in the middle of a November night?"

"What!" Poppy exploded. "Had you both taken complete leave of your senses?"

"Harry was well protected, Poppy," said a soothing Albus. "He was asleep and his blanket was charmed to remain warm."

She stared at him, disbelieving of this level of naïveté. "Are you so very daft, Albus? Tell me, was Harry in a magical sleep?" She smirked at his ignorance. "Of course not. He was walking at that age, Dumbledore! Nothing would have stopped him had he woken up and walked away. Did you even stay long enough to see the Dursley woman bring him into the house?"

Dumbledore looked down at the floor while McGonagall stared out the window.

Snape just shook his head, disgusted by their idiocy, but felt it best to get this meeting back on track. "What would constitute these sacrifices?"
"I beg your pardon," Albus interjected, "but I disagree with your assessment, Filius."

The other man scoffed. "Oh, I'm quite sure that you do!"

Albus glared and continued. "The ward was absolutely generated by Lily sacrificing her life."

"Yes," Filius said, "you used that as the basis for the ward, but if you had been paying attention, you would have heard me explain that it was a bad idea. The type of ward you created required *continual* sacrifice. Since you tied the ward to Harry, he, a mere *child*, was the one to make said sacrifices! Is *any* part of this unclear, Albus?"

Dumbledore fell silent. He was very afraid that Filius was correct. The man, after all, was a Charms master of international repute. Warding was an offshoot of Charms, a subject in which Albus had excelled but never truly mastered. The ward he tied to Harry was, in retrospect, cobbled together on the spur of the moment.

Oh, dear.

Filius turned to Snape. "To answer your question, Severus, such sacrifices would include Harry's health, his self-esteem, his very sense of self and, quite possibly, a good portion of his magic."

"What!" Pomona shrieked. She had been too stunned to interject her many objections to Albus's behavior but no longer had that option. "Are you saying Harry's lost his magic?"

Filius shook his head. "No, thank Merlin. In fact, and I say this with absolute sincerity, Harry Potter is one of the most powerful wizards I have ever encountered."

"Are you certain?" asked a wary Snape. It made sense after a fashion. He'd had no use for James Potter and never would, but the man had been a talented wizard, particularly with regard to Transfiguration. Lily's record spoke for itself.

"Oh, yes! Minerva knows that I'm slightly empathic," Filius said, acknowledging Minerva's nod with one of his own. "Goblins can sense the magical strength of other magicals. This ability falls under the umbrella of what humans deem *empathy*, though the Goblins would certainly disagree. That said, Harry Potter is simply the most powerful child his age I have ever known."

He paused, and looked down at his hands. "I haven't felt magic like that since Lily," he said quietly. "His magical signature hallmarks hers very closely."

Severus tried and failed to swallow the sudden lump in his throat. Flitwick was making it incredibly difficult to despise the boy and he resented it.

"And the ward affected this?" Poppy whispered.

"No," Filius said. "If anything, Harry's magic affected the ward. As it was tied to him, it was also tied to his magic." He looked around. "All of us know that Harry had been exhibiting accidental magic shortly after birth."

He shrugged. "The child is powerful. The ward fed upon that power. Harry's magic was being constantly drained and then replenished. As both the ward and Harry grew more powerful, the abuse the Dursleys inflicted upon him increased in direct proportion. *Continual sacrifice.*"

He sighed. "As we all know, magic is very much like a muscle; the more you use it, the more it grows until it reaches its upper limit. Harry's magic was used constantly, albeit unconsciously. Harry has more power at his disposal than adult wizards five times his age and he is nowhere near
"Then why didn't his magic protect him?" Pomona wondered.

"Because the ward was constantly drawing on it." His tone was patient, but all of them could sense his edges were frayed. It wouldn't be much longer before he simply couldn't hold back his rancor. "Further, Harry, until I visited him, had no idea that he was a wizard. He had no idea magic was real. If he ever suspected it was, I do not know, but if he wondered aloud about the possibility, I'm sure his speculation was punished. Harry therefore associates magic with pain."

Dumbledore closed his eyes. What had he done?

"And what did he know of his parents?" hissed a trembling Severus.

"He was told his parents were lazy drunkards who were killed in an automobile accident for which they were responsible. He was told his parents didn't care enough about him to leave him at home while they drove intoxicated, thus the scar on his forehead. He was told his parents had never loved him and had most likely died in a bid to escape his hold upon them."

Minerva stifled a moan as Snape dropped his head, his greasy hair falling in front his face like a curtain.

"Petunia ... " Albus said faintly.

"Is a horrid woman and poor excuse for a human being," Filius finished, "which you well knew prior to placing Harry with that family. Severus knew it. I knew it. Minerva and Poppy knew it. You did, as well, Albus. Minerva tried to warn you that day but you brushed her off and ignored her, as you do anything you don't wish to hear."

He raised a brow. "As much as I respect Minerva, I have to admit that I'm very disappointed with how she handled this situation. Her instincts about people are highly developed. If she was that uneasy about the Dursleys, then she had cause. Either she was weak in allowing you to ignore her condemnations, or she had some ... help ... in not worrying about them too greatly."

The others gasped at his insinuation, even Snape, though he thought the implication was apt.

"Filius, how dare you!" Albus demanded.

Flitwick merely rolled his eyes. "Because after my little adventure with Harry, I spent a good two hours closely examining my Occlumency shields." He smirked. "Would you care to guess what I discovered?"

Albus said nothing, though his eyes widened to unfathomable proportions.

"I'm not easily Obliviated, Albus. As a master of the art yourself, you should know that there are ... methods ... an Occlumens can employ to ensure it never happens." He held up a hand. "Do not waste your time or mine with a defense. The remnants have your magical signature. I know it was you. The memories have been sealed off and, while I can't access them yet, it's only a matter of time before I do, so you best get your excuses in order."

He narrowed his eyes. "There will be a reckoning for this, Albus. You are a fool if you believed I would so easily have my will subverted."

"Why didn't you sense it before?" asked a nervous Snape, wondering if his memories had been similarly altered.
"Because I didn't know to look for them. When I performed my examination, I looked for weaknesses as well as signatures that were not my own. I found them. Coincidentally, these modifications were made shortly after the death of the Potters, which explains why I can no longer recall their will, though I distinctly remember being one of its witnesses."

He turned toward Albus. "I also remember that Harry was never to be placed with the Dursleys, which is most likely why you never told me just where it was you stashed him, though I asked you repeatedly for years. Lily and James had listed a number of options, though I cannot recall them."

Minerva stared at Albus with a look of abject betrayal.

"I suppose I should perform a similar exam of my own shields," Severus mused.

Poppy nodded, glaring at Dumbledore. "As will I."

"Where is Harry now?" Pomona asked. "Please don't tell me you sent him back to those awful people!"

"Of course not," said an offended Filius. "Even if I were so colossally stupid, it simply couldn't be done. For one thing, after our visit to St. Mungo's, I immediately took Harry to Amelia Bones." He turned to Albus and smiled. "You should expect to hear from her soon."

Snape cackled. Actually cackled.

"And for another," Filius continued, ignoring the rather humorous interruption, "the ward would not keep Harry safe because it no longer exists."

His gleeful look nauseated Albus.

"It was very simple," Filius all but cooed. "All I had to do was ask Harry if he believed the Dursleys' home was his." He snapped his fingers. "Gone! In less than a second. You will never be able to recast it, Albus, and should you try, I've placed wards about the property to alert me, ones which you will not easily dispel."

Albus brought a shaky hand over his eyes. "Was it truly so very bad, Filius?"

"For his entire life in that house, Harry's bedroom was the cupboard under the stairs."

As Pomona, Poppy, and Minerva began shrieking, Albus sighed, wiping his face and blinking back tears.

"Harry's eyesight has been saved, but it was a very near thing," Filius said with difficulty, "and he will always require rather strong spectacles. His malnutrition can be arrested, but most of its affects cannot be reversed. As it is, he will be on a strong potion regiment for at least the next year or whenever enters puberty, which, according to the Healers, will most likely be far later than his peers. Neither James nor Lily were very tall, but Harry will never even approach their demure statures. If you were to look at him without knowing him, you'd think he was no more than six or seven."

Poppy gnashed her teeth as Snape's fingers curled into fists, his nails drawing blood from his palms.

"The scars, the physical ones, will most likely be with him for the rest of his life. Hopefully, they will fade with time. The mental ones, however, probably never will."
He shook his head and glowered. "The idea, the very idea, that an eleven-year-old child had to be subjected to a rape examination is disgusting. It's an obscenity."

"Did that happen?" Severus demanded, sitting up straight. "Was the boy so heinously assaulted?"

"He was not," Flitwick said quietly, "and thank Merlin for that." He paused. "However, when questioned, Harry did reluctantly admit that, when Dursley punished him, the man was often aroused."

Dumbledore immediately vomited. It took him several long moments to regain his senses enough to vanish the mess.

"Where is Harry now?" he croaked.

"Out of your reach until September," said a nasty Filius. "He was placed with Augusta Longbottom."

"That woman?" Snape sneered.

Albus heaved a sigh.

"Be grateful, Albus," Filius snapped. "Whatever Augusta's shortcomings, she won't abuse the boy. As Lily's only relatives are the Dursleys, who, of course, are extremely unsuitable, Potter relatives had to be considered. Had Augusta not agreed to assume temporary custody, Harry most likely would have been given to Narcissa."

Minerva and Snape began shouting.

"Oh, do shut up! Minerva, that you dislike Narcissa so intensely does not interest me. I trust the woman; she would never harm a child. As for you, Severus, you dislike Narcissa as well, yet are on cordial terms with her murderous bastard of a husband? Don't be such a hypocrite. We both know Narcissa never took the Mark." He sneered. "Not because it wasn't demanded of her, but because she refused."

Snape and McGonagall fell silent.

"Thank you, Filius," said a heartfelt Albus.

"Your thanks are offensive," the little man growled. "None of this should have been necessary. You should have been monitoring that boy from the beginning. That you did not makes a good argument for child abuse and criminal neglect. You took it upon yourself to place him, Albus. You were never given that authority, yet you obviously had no compunction about sealing the will, putting Harry wherever the hell you damn well pleased, and thoroughly ignored your self-appointed duty to check on the boy.

"You're going to be asked some hard questions, Albus, and the least of your worries are the ones Amelia Bones will pose. Harry, while told nothing of how he came to be with the Dursleys, is not an idiot. He suspects your involvement and will most likely demand an explanation."

"It's the very least I can provide him," said a bitter Albus, "as it seems I've failed him on every other account." He hung his head in shame.

Filius gave him a hard stare for several long moments, before at last sighing in exasperation. "I don't believe you to be a malicious person, Albus, truly I don't, but neither are you entitled to make all of these decisions which you insist are yours by right. Magical Britain is not your fief. We are
"not your serfs."

Albus flushed.

"You had to know you would eventually need to answer for your choices, Albus," Filius chided, "and that time is coming sooner than you think. You not only have Amelia and Harry after you; the Goblins want answers as well. The boy is Potter of Potter. That he had absolutely no idea of his family history, of the position he was to inherit, is reprehensible. It also leaves the Goblins open to legal action."

"How?" asked a confused Poppy.

"This old fool placed a mail interdiction on the boy," he said, inclining his head toward Albus. "Again, I believe he had the best of intentions; truly, who knows what was sent to the child in those early days or subsequent years? Tampering with his post, however, is a serious offense and violates the treaty the Goblins have with the current Wizengamot, which is already on shaky ground."

"I confess I never considered this," said a quiet Dumbledore.

"You should have," said a blunt Filius. "Harry should have been helping to run his estate for years and a good solicitor would argue you be held liable for the financial losses he has incurred. Even leaving the interdiction aside, you illegally sealed the will, Albus. You made an end run around the executor, whoever that is, so it was never probated. Other beneficiaries - and I remember there were others, though not their names - were denied their bequests. This is yet another actionable offense."

Dumbledore shut his eyes.

"And don't think for a moment that Amelia Bones isn't considering criminal kidnapping charges. As horrible as it is, I almost hope you did tamper with Minerva's memory. It might be her only defense against a conspiracy charge."

McGonagall choked.

"And please don't forget the Dowager Longbottom. She reluctantly took custody, but she took it. I didn't have an opportunity to speak with her at great length, but rest assured she is furious. There is no one here unaware that Alice Longbottom is Harry's godmother. Even though she cannot serve, Augusta should have been immediately considered and not only because she is a Black by blood, as is Harry.

"The Longbottoms and Potters have enjoyed a long and fruitful alliance and, when she assumed the Regency, Augusta became responsible for overseeing and nurturing it in regard to Harry and Neville. She bears the brunt of the responsibility for abandoning the alliance, but I believe she could successfully argue that, had she approached you, you would not have granted her access to Harry.

"You have bungled this badly, Albus, and once it gets out - and it will, no matter how hard we try to suppress it - you must remember that Harry is the Potter Scion. He is the de facto Head of an Ancient and Most Noble House. The Major Arcanum will not allow this to pass unpunished, especially considering you assumed and have voted the Potter seats in the Wizengamot - which you had no legal right to do. If Harry presses the issue, every vote, every decision you have made since will be opened to public scrutiny."
Just as quickly as he had blushed, Albus paled. Despite the fact that he knew young Kurt Hummel would be the one to inherit the Potter title, for all intents and purposes, Flitwick was correct. Harry would become the poster child for Dumbledore's enemies, who would seek to use the child to destroy him.

Snape nodded. "In such a matter, what is considered light and dark will become irrelevant. One of the fundamental tenants of our society is that magical children are to be protected at all costs."

Minerva snorted. "And does that include Muggleborns?"

"No," Snape said shortly, "but it should."

She stared at him.

"British witches and wizards," he continued, "regardless of their feelings for Potter, Dumbledore, or the Dark Lord will unite in this cause, even if it is because it is politically expedient to do so. Besides, just slapping Dumbledore on the wrist would set a precedent the Arcana in its entirety would never abide. Keeping Potter ignorant and voting his seats will infuriate all the factions and could be viewed as tantamount to Line Theft."

"This has to be contained," said a decisive Pomona.

"Surely you're joking!" Poppy blustered.

Pomona shook her head. "Not at all. Whatever Albus has done or not done, this misstep, as Filius pointed out, opens a window to question every decision he has ever made as both Headmaster and Chief Warlock. Let's face it: even with the glut of new students we'll be receiving this year, we depend a great deal on the Ancient and Noble families for funding."

Her eyes darted toward Snape, who nodded. "Light, Dark, or neutral will not matter here. Regardless that Lily was Muggleborn, regardless that Harry is a Half-Blood, he is the sole surviving member of an ancient line, one that predates the Ministry, the Founders, the Wizengamot, and even Merlin and Arthur."

She raised a brow. "Do you really believe they will allow this conduct to pass freely? Even Albus' most ardent supporters cannot allow this to be swept under the rug. It will be argued that the Ministry and Wizengamot are interfering in the governance of the Families. That will never be allowed to stand."

"For the Chief Warlock to have committed multiple felonies against an orphaned Last Scion will see the Wizengamot disbanded. Kidnapping, collusion, financial malfeasance, will tampering, memory charms? Good Merlin! All of the Families will pull their children from Hogwarts lest their Scions and Heirs be trapped under Albus' heel. The minor Purebloods and the Half-Bloods will follow. Without that revenue, the school will close."

She turned toward Poppy. "Can you even imagine what would happen should everyone in Azkaban learn of this and demand an appeal or even a blanket pardon? They would most likely be granted one because the government will cover themselves before anyone else. Imagine the chaos that would ensue if people like Lucius Malfoy, in the name of correcting miscarriages of justice, led the charge to free his former associates."

Poppy and everyone else paled, lost in silence for several long minutes a they pondered what might be around the corner.

Minerva delicately cleared her throat. "What he is like?" she asked softly. "Harry, I mean."
Filius furrowed his brow in thought. "Quiet," he said at last. "Withdrawn. Suspicious of adults and their motives, and certainly distrusting." He paused. "One thing that greatly concerns me is that I never got a sense, not once, of what he was truly thinking while these events came to pass. He's at most an independent observer, silently cataloguing everything he witnesses, though he has no real interest in participating in matters himself."

Albus winced. By trying to keep Harry safe from the Death Eaters who had blended in seamlessly with their society, he had inadvertently introduced the boy to an environment similar to the one that had produced Voldemort.

"Is that it?" Pomona asked Flitwick.

"No. The boy is highly intelligent, but has learned to hide it. He admitted he was punished when his grades fared better than his cousin, so he learned to manipulate his scores accordingly."

"Impressive," Snape allowed.

"At first I was concerned because Harry appeared to take everything at face value. My explanations about his parents, magic, Hogwarts: he questioned none of these. It was only after we entered the bookstore and he began perusing those subjects which interested him did he begin to question - and he did so almost fanatically. I assume Harry was taught never to question and thus learned to do so only within the safety of his own mind. He therefore will seek to discover answers himself before looking to others to provide them."

Filius exhaled. "He has an unusual thirst for history, but whether this is a genuine interest or one he feels compelled to study so that he can better understand this new world is unknown to me."

He paused, debating about what to say next. There were some things he didn't wish to open to the forum, such as Harry's trust vault and the rest of the Potter estate as well as just how precocious the lad truly was. Let them be surprised on that score.

There was a lot more going on here than what had so far been revealed and Filius knew the only way to get to the bottom of all of it was not to play his entire hand so early in the game. Let Albus be wary but also somewhat certain in his ability to make his problems go away. After all, pride was one of the absolute worst vices, one to which Dumbledore often fell prey.

Instead he launched into recounts of how Harry had handled the Goblins; his insistence that the idea of blood status was thoroughly ridiculous and illogical; and his new familiar, the owl Hedwig.

"To develop a familiar bond so soon ... " Pomona whispered.

"Developing suggests there was a lead given. As soon as Harry entered that shop, the owl was upon him as though she knew he were coming. We heard her frantic screeching from across and down the Alley. The boy walked into that shop under a power which I suspect was not all his."

He shook his head. "I've never experienced anything like it. I could actually see the bond forming. Harry and Hedwig immediately enjoyed some rudimentary method of communication, some form of telepathy which I'm sure will soon advance. They knew what the other was thinking and were already relaying messages through looks. Harry spoke to her as though he were completing her sentences. Hedwig told Harry her name."

He then described what had happened in the wand shop.

"Voldemort's brother wand!" Minerva exploded.
Pomona rolled her eyes. "Oh, really, Minerva, do stop carrying on. Obviously the wand did not agree with him, so he disposed of it while simultaneously ensuring none of the Dark Lord's supporters could get their greedy paws on it. No doubt some of them were present in the Alley, suspecting Harry would eventually put in an appearance. After all, the entire wizarding world knows today is his birthday. The boy has remarkable foresight."

Snape nodded reluctantly. At the very least, the child was not an idiot, which put him legions ahead of his soon-to-be classmates and the majority of current students.

Filius frowned in thought. "Yes, though it does raise the question as to why Ollivander was so insistent about giving Harry that wand, babbling about expecting great things from him." He shook his head. "Nothing that man does is so innocent and he's never met a contrivance he didn't enjoy."

Albus remained silent.

"Surely you're not suggesting Ollivander is a Death Eater," Poppy remarked.

He waved her away. "Oh, not at all. The meeting just reinforced my belief that the man knows far more about what goes on in our world than we will ever realize; not only behind the curtain we present to the Muggles, but behind the one we use to distract ourselves."

The others, even Albus, nodded. Ollivander had set them all on edge and more than once.

Filius shrugged. "At any rate, Harry ..."

"Why do you address him by his first name?" asked a curious Snape. There was no malice in his tone. Indeed, it was unusual for a professor to address a student as such.

A bitter chuckle prefaced the answer. "Well, I could argue I do so in order for the boy to become accustomed to it, seeing as how he didn't know his own name until he started school. The Dursleys only ever referred to him as freak or boy."

Severus and the others, including Dumbledore, collectively growled.

Filius sighed. "The truth of the matter is that he asked me to call him by his name. While he didn't explain the request, I believe it's because he doesn't understand what it means to be a Potter, what will be expected of him. Madam Malkin addressed him as my Lord and later as Your Grace. Harry balked."

His eyes darted to each of them in turn. "While we're on this subject, there is something I wish to discuss: namely the blatant disrespect some members of this faculty use when addressing students. Per the charter, we are to address them as Miss or Mister, not merely by their last name. This is a school, not the military. Our students pay for the privilege to attend this institution, not to be disrespected."

Severus and Minerva scowled.

"Nor should we be addressing them by their first name unless we are given leave, and certainly not in front of mixed company."

Albus looked away.

"In class, Harry is to be addressed as Lord Potter, just as Neville Longbottom and Susan Bones are to be referred to as Lord and Lady respectively, as they are the last of their lines." He frowned. "Those such as Draco Malfoy and Hannah Abbott, who are Scions but governed by an active Lord,
may be referred to as *Mister* or *Miss*, or simply as *Scion*.

He pursed his lips at the resultant grumbling. "Get used to it!" he snapped. "This is clearly stated in our own bylaws and you best be sure that people like Lucius Malfoy are aware of it. Do not give him any license to come to this school and demand redress. It will only result in a public spectacle and he'll have Rita Skeeter on the heels of his fanciful boots to decry how we at Hogwarts refuse to honor our history."

Albus at last nodded. "You speak wisely, Filius."

That settled the matter, though Severus and Minerva remained unhappy.

"To continue," Filius said. "Harry has no idea as to the legacy into which he was born. When told of why he was famous, he immediately decried the explanation as absolute rubbish, insisting that one of or both his parents, most likely his mother, was responsible for the vanquish of Voldemort."

Snape was pleased by this. Well, as much as he could be by anything a Potter proffered.

"You said the boy was intelligent?" he asked dubiously.

He knew that Filius wouldn't have said so if it wasn't true, and if anyone had the ability to judge, it was Flitwick; he was Head of Ravenclaw for a reason. Still, Snape was coming to realize that most of his illusions and delusions had been shattered and it would be essential to develop a new strategy for dealing with Lily's son.

Flitwick nodded. "Yes, but sadly not in the way for which my House is known. While I do believe he has a sincere interest in learning, he doesn't strive for knowledge for its own sake. He's much more interested in its applications. He taught himself to read, he obviously paid enough attention to the ramblings of his relatives to understand basic finance, and he possesses a rather unerring sense about people. The boy has excellent instincts."

"And you say he enjoys history," Pomona recalled.

"He wants to learn," Filius said. "He knows there are expectations for him and wants to know what they are. I don't believe for a second he's interested in fulfilling them, but he wants to understand. I don't imagine Harry Potter is easily led and should someone try to force him into a role he does not wish to fill, he will rebel. Said rebellion would be quite interesting to witness. My galleon is on Harry."

Albus got a sinking feeling in his stomach.

"Other than history, the only other subject in which he showed interest was, surprisingly, Potions."

"Oh, really?" Snape drawled.

"Yes. He said it was the only subject which makes logical sense and he related it, quite remarkably, with Muggle chemistry. He compared ingredients to elements, remarking that certain things had to be added at the appropriate times and in the appropriate measurements in order to achieve the desired result. He understands that in order for the potion to be effective, rules must be obeyed."

This pleased Severus, though he showed no outward approval. "Does he look like Lily?"

"Not at first glance," Filius said. "If you were to look at him from far away, he looks exactly like James, save Lily's eyes. However, the closer you get, the more he reminds you of her. His eyes have the same shape, his nose is hers, and the stubborn tilt of the chin is all Lily."
Severus was intrigued. Even a distant living reminder of Lily was more than he had now.

Filius sighed sadly. "Those beautiful eyes. I had been so looking forward to seeing them again, filled with wonder and intelligence and happiness." He shook his head. "The intelligence is there, but it's buried beneath fear and anger and resentment, beneath pain and suffering."

He gnashed his teeth.

Severus pressed his lips into a very thin line.

"He also has her personality. That scene with Ollivander is a perfect example. James would have screamed and beat his breast and carried on about that wand, but Harry merely paid for it, broke it, and stared into Ollivander's eyes as he demanded the next one. It was quite a sight to behold."

Albus wanted to vomit again. Kurt would be difficult enough, but if both twins had Lily's temperament, the world might not survive it.

"I feel I should mention that Harry has no real interest in attending Hogwarts," Filius said, ignoring the choked gasps of the others. "He agreed only because it would remove him from the Dursley home for the majority of the year. Even after realizing he would never again be returned there, his reaction to his new school was lukewarm at best. He understands that he needs to learn to control his magic, but is not looking forward to coming to an institution where everyone knows his name but does not know him."

He colored. "Nor is he excited by the idea that some of his new professors knew his location and couldn't be bothered to check on his welfare." He shook his head. "The boy has no friends and, left to his own devices, I don't see him making any. He's been a lone wolf his entire life. Introducing him into a new pack does not mean he will accept them, nor they him."

"Suggestions?" Pomona asked, looking around the room.

"A mentor," Poppy said, snapping her fingers. "Someone who will help Harry adjust but has no stake in how he does so. No affiliation with You-Know-Who, Albus, or the Ministry." She turned to Flitwick. "I imagine he would see straight through it?"

Filius nodded. "The boy is remarkably discerning."

"It has to go beyond that," Minerva mused. "The mentor must not have any ridiculous adherence or aversion to any particular House. No claptrap that all Slytherins are evil and all Gryffindors paragons of virtue."

Snape snorted.

She ignored him. "The mentor should be a good student and well-regarded by others, but not so dependent upon peer approval that they will crumble if Harry doesn't act as expected."

"A tall order indeed," Poppy said.

A slow smirk spread across Pomona's face. "Perhaps not. In fact, I believe I have the ideal candidate."

"Oh?" Filius asked.

She nodded. "Cedric Diggory."
After a moment of thought, the others nodded. Even Snape, who was poised to disagree on principle, thought it a good idea. Frankly, Diggory was one of the few students he could stand.

"What about Amos?" Minerva questioned. "The man is pompous, arrogant, and always looking to further his ambitions at the Ministry. Why wouldn't he use Harry?"

"And how do we explain to Harry why he's the only First Year to have such a mentor?" Albus softly asked.

Filius shrugged. "Lily was good friends with Diana Diggory before each married. They weren't as close as Lily and Alice, but they were close. I say we approach her with the idea. I'm sure she'll be appalled with how Harry's been raised. As fair-minded as Cedric is, I don't imagine he would disagree. We don't even have to make the mentorship formal, just ask Cedric to look out for Harry."

He smirked. "And no matter what Amos might choose to believe, Diana controls that house."

Albus nodded. It was a good plan.

Poppy cleared her throat. "I believe it would be a good idea if we set aside the subject of Harry Potter for the moment. I think we all need to ruminate on what we have learned and reexamine things after a good night's sleep."

The others wearily nodded.

"But what of these other children?" Snape asked, turning toward Albus. "Why have they been extended an offer of admittance?"

"These children," Albus slowly began, obviously gathering his thoughts, "are unlike any I have ever met." His eyes stared at each of his colleagues in turn. "Fascinating children with a fierce intelligence I have only ever seen in only a handful of past students."

Flitwick appeared excited, always happy to foster students with a keen mind and a thirst for knowledge. "What are their backgrounds?"

Albus exhaled. "I had originally intended only to ask one of them to attend Hogwarts, but he was quite clear that would only happen if his two best friends were also issued invitations."

Snape sneered. "More nepotism, just like the pathetically so-called Marauders."

Pomona rolled her eyes.

Flitwick and, surprisingly, McGonagall agreed with Severus, however.

"He raises a good point, Albus," Minerva said, shocking Snape to his very core. "While I was very fond of James and Remus, you cannot deny that, throughout their years here, they committed a ridiculous number of infractions, some of which were quite definitely illegal, that would have seen any other student expelled."

She raised a brow. "You hamstrung me then. That won't happen this time. I'm now the Deputy Headmistress, not merely a teacher, and if I ever witness such behavior again, I will ignore the fact that you are my immediate supervisor and address my concerns directly with the Board as well as Amelia Bones."

Filius nodded. "Minerva speaks for me as well, Albus. I won't be strong-armed again."
Albus was absolutely stunned by their statements.

"Do you really mean that, Minerva?" Severus whispered.

She nodded brusquely, though her eyes were compassionate. "I do. I know of the bullying you suffered, Severus, and it was shameful. Neither Filius nor myself were permitted to interfere, no matter how passionately we argued to do so."

She paused and tented her fingers. "However, we all know that while you might have been victimized by the Marauders, you were never their victim. Yes, you are sneaky and your counterattacks were well plotted and concealed, but rest assured we were aware of them. Neither Filius nor I stopped you because we both felt you were entitled to some vengeance."

Snape colored.

"Further," she continued, tone sharp, "we have also borne witness to your abominable methods of teaching. Pomona, Filius, and I have discussed this and, should such antics continue, we will fight to have you removed from your position. If we fail, Albus will be required to find three new Heads of House. James and Peter are dead, Severus. Sirius is imprisoned for the rest of his life. Remus has been all but exiled to the Continent. They are no threat to you."

He colored more darkly.

"You are a brilliant man, Severus. You are easily the most gifted Potions Master I have seen enter these halls during my tenure." She gave him a reproachful look. "I would hope you could relinquish some of your hatred for your past treatment and help guide the next generation of potions students. They are the future of this nation and they need you."

Snape remained flushed, but sat up just a bit straighter. Her words ... had merit.

Perhaps it was time to reconsider how he approached his indentured servitude. Surely not all of the children were dunderheads. William Weasley had been quite a skilled student, as was his brother Percy and, surprisingly, Nymphadora Tonks. Charles Weasley and Edward Nott had been competent. The Weasley twins were geniuses, though he would never admit it, and the Diggory boy was easily the best of the younger students rivaled only perhaps - and very distantly - by the Chang girl and Oliver Wood.

It must have been in the Black blood. Sirius was absolutely reprehensible, but he had been talented at potions. The Weasleys were related to the family. Tonks was a Black, recognized or not. Diggory also had some Black blood in him, courtesy of his mother. Snape had to admit that he was quite interested in how Harry Potter would fare with both the Black legacy and Lily's innate ability.

Minerva turned to a somber Dumbledore. "Questions, Albus? Concerns?"

"No," he said softly. "You are quite wise, Minerva, and, in this circumstance, you are also quite right. I mishandled James Potter and his friends to all of our detriments." He removed his glasses and wiped his eyes. "Perhaps if I had curtailed some of their bravado, they wouldn't have been so overconfident and might still be with us."

They stared at him. It was incredibly rare for Albus not only to make a misstep, but to admit it.

"And these new children, Albus?" asked a gentle Pomona.

His eyes brightened. "Fascinating children! Already so advanced! Just shy of eleven, and I had no choice but to admit them as Third Years!"
The table exploded with chatter, the fire that burned brightly in good teachers ignited.

"What have they studied?" asked an eager Flitwick.

"How advanced are they?" demanded a skeptical Snape, though there was an almost maniacal gleam in his eye.

"Oh, dear," Pomona said. "Are you sure promoting them so quickly is a good idea?"

Minerva sat back and merely waited for Albus to make his case.

Albus cleared his throat and began. "The initial recruit is a young boy, turning eleven next month, named Kurt Hummel."

"Kurt Hummel!" Filius thundered, jumping to his feet. "Are you joking? *Kurt Hummel* is going to attend Hogwarts?"

Dumbledore's eyes widened. "You know of him, Filius?"

He decided that, at this point, his best option was to shut up and let Filius make his case for him.

Filius nodded frantically. "Kurt Hummel is the son of Burt Hummel, the Vice President of the Magical United States!"

Again, chatter exploded and Filius waited until it died down.

"He's quite literally a genius," he continued, "with an intelligence quotient well into the one-sixties. For those of you unaware, the children of the Magical United States begin formal education after their first serious bout of accidental magic. Young Mr. Hummel began studying at three years of age."


"Younger, actually," Albus quietly interrupted. "He apparated and splinched himself. It was therefore necessary for him to begin training as soon as possible."

More staring.

"Apparated?" Snape faintly repeated.

Albus nodded. "At two years old. As it was explained to me, cookies were the goal, so I cannot fault him."

A stunned Flitwick continued after a long pause. "Mr. Hummel is a primary founder of the Global Youth Ambassador Program and represents his home country. He is contracted to do so for another seven years." He turned to Albus. "How will he continue if he is to be here?"

"Concessions were made."

Minerva smirked, betting he was the one to have made them.

Flitwick turned wistful. "I was most disappointed when Great Britain decided not to participate in the program. I know that potential ambassadors were approached and vetted. A few were selected for interviews. The forerunner was Susan Bones, who was Ambassador Hummel's chosen candidate."
"Really?" asked a surprised Albus.

Flitwick nodded. "I myself wrote the recommendation and Amelia told me that the Ambassador lobbied hard for Miss Bones and was sure she would be selected. He sent her a very kind letter after the Ministry for Magic declined to join. He told her that he expected great things from her."

His mind flashed back to Harry Potter's meeting with Ollivander. He made a mental note to send Harry an owl after the meeting had concluded. Perhaps setting up an initial meeting between Harry and Susan might be a very good idea.

"Then I very much look forward to having Miss Bones in my class," Minerva said. "If she's anything like her aunt, the Ambassador was correct in his assessment."

"Albus, this business about promoting this boy and his friends to the third year concerns me greatly," Pomona said. "Intellectual ability aside, I fear for their social development. We have all seen intelligent students ostracized and avoided out of jealousy and competition."

"I understand what you are saying, Pomona," he replied, "but I really don't believe that will be an issue with these children. They stated quite frankly that they have no real interest in making friends or attracting acolytes. They are uncommonly close. In fact, if I did not know better, I would swear they were telepathic."

"You're not serious," Snape said. Telepathy was an almost unheard of talent. There was no witch or wizard within the past five centuries to have been blessed with it.

Albus avoided the pun Severus had so unwittingly created. "Oh, quite so! They often finished each other's words. Not just phrases, but entire sentences and trains of thought. One would begin speaking, another would explain their reasoning, and the third would conclude the argument. Three parts working as a whole with maximum efficiency."

"It's very much as though they are one mind in three distinct bodies. And these weren't established roles; they would change positions with every topic. It was uncanny. I have no doubt all three will be put into the same House. If they are not, they might very well leave."

"Who are the other two children?" Flitwick asked.

Albus debated how best to relate his impressions of the children to his colleagues before realizing that actual words would not suffice. "I invite you all to enter my Pensieve and witness my memory of our meeting. I think you would find it more interesting, and more believable, if you were to see it yourselves."

Minerva gave an exaggerated blink. It wasn't like Albus to open his Pensieve, especially for something so mundane. Which only meant this was anything but mundane.

She was the first to queue up.
As one, the children turned to stare at Sue Sylvester.

It actually required effort on her part not to shudder. These children could, on occasion, be terrifying. There existed amongst the three of them some kind of unnatural energy, some unholy menace she could never adequately explain. She knew something had happened to them in Greece two years past, but she didn't know the circumstance.

The effects, however, had been immediate. They had become closer than ever, a closeness which couldn't be dismissed as schoolmates or even friends. It was no longer just them finishing each other's sentences, for words were no longer necessary. It wasn't hard to discern that when one learned something, the other two became ... programmed ... with that information.

There had also been a sudden deepening of their magic and understanding of it. Alabaster had always been the most advanced of the three; his grasp of his power and how to wield it had been instinctual for as long as she had known him. All magical children had some experience with accidental magic, but Alabaster had been able to harness his and make it purposeful. Once he had begun proper training, his wand had hindered rather than helped him.

He was unaware of just how close her eye remained on him - or she thought he was; she was never sure where he was concerned - and she had witnessed him doing wandless magic with ease. Nothing too difficult, of course, and certainly not complex spells, but that he could do wandless magic at all was frankly abnormal. Many of the world's most powerful witches and wizards were incapable of it.

Lopez and Fabray could cast many spells silently, but not wandlessly. She knew Fabray in particular was endlessly frustrated she was unable to perform wandless magic. Lopez never seemed too concerned, but she had never been a fierce competitor when uninterested in the subject. Besides, Lopez had trained with a different focus, so her relationship with her wand wasn't as personal or sentimental as that of other witches and wizards.

Still, whatever had happened in Greece had allowed the children as a whole to access their magic on another level entirely. They simply shouldn't be able, at their age, to perform the spellwork of which she knew them capable. Even their rigorous academic and training regimens could not explain their abilities. She was almost certain they also now enjoyed sympathetic magic; they could combine their magic on a metaphysical level and act in concert with little difficulty.

She didn't know what it meant but doubted it was good. There was reason for everything and a price for power. Some entity had plans for these children and she sincerely hoped they would triumph over whatever the hell it was.

"Help with what?" Santana flatly demanded. She had no idea how much Sylvester overheard and she wasn't about to cede any ground.

"Don't be dense, Lopez," Sue barked. She wasn't scared of this little girl's mouth, despite her pedigree.

Santana was the enemy you would always see coming. No, it was Kurt who was dangerous; Quinn even more so. Kurt had the power, but Quinn had the ruthlessness. Her conscience was far more ... elastic.
"Alabaster has had me monitoring for signs of Harry Potter for five years," Sue continued, "and today they finally appeared."

"Where is he?" asked a breathless Kurt.

Sue narrowed her eyes.

That singular action confirmed to the other three that she had no idea who Harry was to Kurt. The question was, should she be told?

"Yes," he answered to their unasked question. "I trust Sue with my life; with your lives; and with the lives of my family, including Harry."

Sue raised a brow. "You're related to the Boy Who Lived?" She frowned. There was nothing in her intelligence which had suggested such a connection. Despite how deeply it must have been buried, she should have been able to overturn something.

Kurt barely refrained from laughter. Sue was absolutely as tough as she believed herself to be, but she was also very easy to read.


She stared into his eyes.

"I was born Liam Charlus Potter. Harry Potter is my twin brother."

Sue said nothing, did nothing, betrayed absolutely nothing via her countenance, though her mind was furiously creating and discarding applicable scenarios. In the end, there was only one answer that made sense.

"Dumbledore."

Kurt nodded and she swore under her breath.

"Alabaster, I don't want you at his school, under his thumb, where he'll be able to influence you. Possibly even without your knowledge." She held up a hand to stave off the protests. "No slight against you and your abilities, or those of Fabray and Lopez. I know how strong you are, how talented, how advanced. But that doesn't mean jack shit when you find yourselves caught in the web of a master like Dumbledore.

"And make no mistake: that is what he is. He may do a piss-poor job of governing his country, but he's one of the most powerful wizards in the world. He defeated Grindelwald. He held off Voldemort. He's neither stupid nor weak. You're naive if you believe you can defeat him."

"We have no interest in defeating him," Quinn said with a lazy drawl. "He's not our enemy, General Sylvester, but he is an impediment. We don't have to defeat him; we merely have to keep him occupied. We can do that, in part, thanks to him, due to the events he himself set in motion. He's convinced himself he's the only chess player in the game, when the truth of the matter is that he has unwittingly made several moves that benefit his opponent."

Santana nodded. "We'll need him when Voldemort returns."

Sue curled a lip. "Returns."

"He's not dead," Kurt said. "He's presumed to be in hiding. I think it's more likely he was
discorporated after his vanquish at my brother's hand."

It suddenly dawned on her that Kurt really was the brother, the twin, of the Boy Who Lived. Kurt had been there in that house when Voldemort attacked. He might have seen his biological mother murdered right before his eyes. He might have seen Harry Potter vanquish the Dark Lord Voldemort.

The Dark Lord who was very much not dead, who was most likely in search of a way to return and would most likely want revenge against Harry Potter, at whose side Kurt would unquestionably stand.

*Fuck.*

She blew out a breath. "So he's alive." She shrugged. "Then what's the angle? Offhand, I can only think of three possibilities: a simulacrum, a phylactery, or a horcrux."

Quinn shook her head. "Not a simulacrum. Were that the case, he would have attempted a return to power a while ago, most likely not too long after his defeat when the British wizarding world was in utter chaos."

"A phylactery is possible," Santana continued, "but not probable. It's not dark enough to suit Voldemort's purposes, nor is it capable of being sustained after so long a period of dormancy."

"It's a horcrux," Kurt said with certainty. "Most likely several."

"Several," Sue faintly repeated. To have one was heinous enough, but several? Even the idea was perverse. If Voldemort wasn't insane before he began his reign of terror, he certainly would've been by the time he made his second horcrux.

"Do you have any idea what they are or where they're located?" she asked evenly.

Kurt soured. "Unfortunately no. However, that is on our list of things to address. Surely there must be some kind of magical detection or revelation spell." He pondered that idea for a moment. "It would only be useful, though, if we knew the vicinity in which the horcrux was located." He sighed and shook his head. "We have time."

"What else is on this list?" she demanded.

He smirked. "Well, that depends."

"On what?"

"On how amenable you would be to going toe-to-toe with our new esteemed headmaster."

Her smile was feral.

A few hours later they enjoyed supper before Sue departed for the United Kingdom. She would make her first report within the next two days, though she wasn't scheduled to arrive at Hogwarts for another two weeks. Kurt had assigned her a few other missions before she made her presence known to Dumbledore.

"Now what?" Santana asked.

"Eventually we're going to have to alert our parents to our plans," Quinn said. She turned to Kurt and raised a brow. "I assume Uncle Burt is already aware?"
He bobbed his head. "He is. Finn and Carole, however, are not." He winced. "Finn will not be happy."

Santana scoffed. She couldn't have cared less about that dullard.

Quinn was more sympathetic. "I know you and he are very close," she said softly, "and I'm sure the separation will be hard on you both." She paused. "Does he know about Harry?"

Kurt exhaled. "No, and that's a problem. On the one hand, if I told him, I'd have to deal with his jealousy which, as you both know, can be overwhelming."

The girls nodded.

"On the other, were I to make him aware of the existence of Harry, of what had been done both to Harry and myself, Finn would go out of his way to help me. He would do anything I asked."

Again, they nodded, Santana more grudgingly. Even she could admit that Finn was absolutely devoted to his brother. He also had very strong ideas about right and wrong and, though his paradigm often wasn't applicable to himself, even the suggestion someone had intentionally hurt his brother would drive Finn to homicidal rage. It would be amusing for her to witness, but ultimately unhelpful. More's the pity.

"Finn is above average in magical strength," Quinn acknowledged. The fact that this was true was surprising, but nevertheless quite real.

Kurt shook his head. "Finn is foolish and often unwilling to consider the consequences of his actions. I know that, when the time comes, I can call on him and he will answer. He will come unquestioningly to my side and though he will resent my lies of omission, they won't stop him from helping me."

He bit his lip and looked away, ashamed.

"Kurt," Santana said softly, "this is about more than Finn's hurt feelings. As much as you love each other, he's also a weapon that can be used against you. Honestly, I'm surprised Dumbledore didn't offer him a place at Hogwarts for just that very purpose."

He nodded absently. It was a good point, one which Dumbledore might reconsider at a later time.

"Still, it wouldn't hurt to have him close at hand," said a thoughtful Quinn.

"What are you thinking?" Kurt asked.

"That Finn would do well at Beauxbatons," she said. "The ratio of girls to boys is nearly three to one. Finn too often becomes aggressive and domineering when in the company of other boys. He also desperately needs to curb his burgeoning misogyny, especially as the media is taking more and more notice of him."

"They are?" asked a dubious Santana.

Kurt scowled. "Your opinions on my brother aside, darling, Finn has the potential of becoming a media sensation. He's already handsome and will someday soon be considered gorgeous. He's the stepson of Burt Hummel and the stepbrother of Kurt Hummel. Carole will most likely make a triumphant run for Congress within the next four years if Dad's bid is unsuccessful. If he wins, she'll probably be given a Cabinet appointment. This will bring Finn even more attention."
He nodded to himself, appreciating Quinn's suggestion the more he thought about it. "Getting him away from that scrutiny would be a good thing; Finn has never done well under a microscope. Separating him from Noah, even better." He sighed. "I love Noah, but he and Finn bring out the worst in each other."

Santana smirked. "And getting him away from Berry would be a bonus."

Kurt nodded. "Exactly," he said, quite seriously. "She only sees him as a trophy and I care too much about him to let that happen." He tilted his head. "Beauxbatons is not only an excellent alternative for all the reasons Quinn stated, but also because I have contacts there who will keep an eye on him."

He shrugged. "Besides, Madame Maxime won't allow any nonsense and she'll drill into Finn's head how to comport himself properly, especially amongst ladies. She'll browbeat him into learning patience and the art of deliberation. She'll also keep the more persistent members of the media at bay."

Santana's smirk grew larger. "There's also the fact that she doesn't like Dumbledore."

He grinned. "Yes, there is that."

"Do you think he'll go?"

Quinn scoffed. "To be as close as possible to Kurt? Hell yes." She smiled. "I'll also ask Fleur to keep an eye on him."

Kurt laughed. "If Finn can learn how to control himself in the presence of a Veela, he'll be able to write his own ticket."

Santana finished off her water and looked at her friends. "What now?"

"I suggest we pore over the results of our independent research," said a prim Quinn. She raised a brow. "I presume we've all completed our assignments?"

Kurt nodded as Santana rolled her eyes, both agreeing to her plan.

"First topic?" Santana demanded.

"The Arcana," he immediately replied. "Specifically those with whom we will come into contact while at Hogwarts."

Santana nodded and prepared to assume her unofficial role as the triad's scribe.

"As we all know," he began, "the Ministry and Wizengamot aside, British wizarding society is truly run by the upper echelons of that society, a collection of families known as the Arcana."

Quinn nodded. "The Arcana is divided into two separate and unequal components: the Major and Minor Arcanum. The Major Arcanum is comprised largely of the most celebrated British magical families, those with the most wealth, connections, history, and accomplishments. This is primarily where Houses that are both Ancient and Most Noble can be found."

"They are also predisposed to allegedly light magic," Santana interjected, "though there is a smattering of neutral and so-called dark families." She rolled her eyes. "I can't believe an entire society has been so stagnated because of their self-inflated ignorance about the very nature of magic."
"That's not our problem," Kurt interrupted, "and it could very well be to our benefit not to address that particular situation until it suits us."

Santana glared, but nodded. She knew patience was a virtue, but it wasn't one of hers, so she was glad Kurt and Quinn were capable of keeping her need to antagonize in check.

"Almost all of the Major Arcana has or will have a Scion or some other representative at Hogwarts during our time there," Quinn continued. "Shall we compare notes?"

Her compatriots nodded.

She exhaled and shuffled her papers, pleased Santana was poised to put to pen this meeting. The girl had an uncanny ability to absorb information, ferret out tangential connections, and sum it up admirably and in plain language. The world would come to fear her when she became a lawyer - if it didn't already, which was indeed possible.

"We know Kurt is the Scion of the Ancient and Most Noble House of Potter," she said.

"But what does that mean?" Santana demanded. She held up a hand. "I understand the literal definition, of course, but what does it mean in terms of social standing? British magical society is so insular, it's all but impossible to determine the purpose of these Houses."

"Thanks to Voldemort, they're mostly irrelevant now," Kurt agreed, "outside the Wizengamot and social stature. He swayed many to his cause and exterminated those who stood against him. Entire lines were ended either through service to him or by defying him."

He cleared his throat. "Before Britain was united under its monarchical banner, there was Brittania, comprised of Britons and then Anglo-Saxons, and which included, only by shared geography, Scotland and Wales as well as Ireland and various smaller, independent islands. It was very much like ancient Greece: a collection of city-states comprised of independent kings, governments, and laws. There were commonalities, but mostly these societies functioned as separate entities."

Quinn crossed her legs as Santana leaned back in her chair, smirking. They loved it when Kurt slipped into Professor Mode.

Intelligence was sexy. Kurt was sexy, even at this young age.

The girls knew he would be a remarkable and gifted healer, but felt his true calling was teaching. He had an uncanny ability to connect the past to the present in unique ways, to correlate facts and ideas in surprising and interesting fashions, using them to predict future trends. It was almost like his own method of divination. He had no particular talent for the Sight, but he possessed some sense, some ability which allowed him to draw parallels and connections which no one else ever had, which no one else could even posit.

"Much of this changed after Merlin and King Arthur," he continued. "By conquest, intimidation, or other assorted schemes, all of these entities came to be placed under the collective banner, or yoke, of Britain."

He paused. "However, much like their non-magical counterparts, British witches and wizards still cling tenaciously to their more ... pagan ... identities."

Quinn nodded. "That makes sense. Almost all of this planet's wars, be they magical or not, have been tribal, not national."

"Indeed. In sum, witches and wizards of Scottish and Welsh descent consider themselves to be Scottish or Welsh only. To them, the idea of Britain is merely a political construct; it is something they must endure in order to continue their survival. The Irish have always been fiercely
independent and have fought relentlessly to maintain that independence. They have also kept closely-guarded their tribal magic, while those of Scotland and Wales have mostly either been purloined or amalgamated into the British system."

"The Irish have their own magical system?" asked an interested Santana.

"Oh, yes!" Kurt exclaimed. "It is rare for it to be witnessed off its shores and almost never in the company of those who are not Irish."

She cocked her head. "Is it based on Celtic Magic? Is it spoken in Gaelic?"

"Predominantly Celtic, yes. There is some Pictish influence, but that is primarily confined to Scottish magic. When their tribes were threatened, the Picts disappeared into the Scottish Highlands, never to return. It has been argued that a pocket society still exists there, invisible and undetectable to those who are unable to discern that magic."

"Further, the term Gaelic is a consolidation of separate languages and cultures made by the uneducated or ignorant. In Ireland, the natives speak Irish, which has its roots in Gaelic. There is also Scottish Gaelic and Manx, which is spoken by the Scots and the natives of the Isle of Man, respectively."

"So when you asked Dumbledore to inquire from McGonagall about Gaelic lessons ... " Quinn said.

"I was referring to Scottish Gaelic," Kurt finished. "I've been learning Irish on my own and am most interested in seeing how the magics differ, particularly in regard to healing."

He rolled his neck and released a breath. "At any rate, to return to the subject at hand. Technically I am the Scion of the House of Potter; Harry and I, as we are brothers, are Heirs, but because I'm the eldest, I'm the Scion. The Potter family is Welsh in origin and was one of the First Families, those that were renowned before the terms Ancient and Most Noble came into vogue.

"Our claim to fame was, unsurprisingly, our skill at pottery, which was traded throughout the Isles and Gaul. In those days, if you had a particular ability, you developed what would today be akin to a monopoly. The Potter family eventually branched out into other industries, most notably dendrology. We specialized in the growing of hardwoods which the Ollivander family used to make wands.

"Along the way, we married into several other prominent families, particularly the Blacks, Whites, and Longbottoms. What it means to be a member of the Major Arcanum is that our family can be traced back to before records of magical Brittanica were kept. This is why our family has been deemed Ancient. Our skills in pottery, dendrology, and certain magical abilities led us to becoming Most Noble."

Santana frowned. "Magical abilities?"

He shrugged. "Talents, if you will, though it's more accurately called an affinity. You both have seen a predilection to certain magic follows blood lines? For example, Santana's family is renowned amongst her people for their ability at blood magic and ritual, while Quinn has inherited her family's penchant for evocations."

They both nodded.

"That avenue is even more clearly demarcated in British magical society. Entire familial branches have been spawned on the idea of keeping affinities within bloodlines. Unfortunately, this has had
the adverse affect. British magicals eschew non-magical knowledge to their detriment. A crash
course in genetics would do them a world of good."

He cleared his throat. "British magicals are, by nature, insular and distrustful of outsiders, even
their fellow countrymen. In order to confine their affinities to their line, they inbreed with their own
family members or those of families related to them by a relatively close degree. By doing so, they
have not only guaranteed that those affinities are extinguished, but they produce fewer offspring.
Said offspring are typically magically weaker than their forebears. Really, if not for their money,
they would be poor wizards and witches, figuratively and literally.

"The Potters, conversely, took the opposite tack, even if they didn't precisely understand why they
did so. For example, affinities for Transfiguration run in the Potter line, as was evidenced by
James, who was considered a Master before his graduation from Hogwarts. His father, Charlus,
was a Master of Martial Magic, or what the British call Defense Against the Dark Arts.

"However, they understood the value of expanding their gene pool, because it meant furthering the
chance that future generations would not only have enhanced affinities but a greater number at their
disposal. Charlus married Dorea Black, a Mistress of the Mind Arts who had more than a
considerable affinity for wandless magic. James married Lily Evans, who was a genius with both
Charms and Potions and had a strong interest in and natural affinity for magical esoterica."

"Well, that certainly explains some of your abilities," Quinn said thoughtfully. "I wonder which of
those, if any, Harry will inherit? Perhaps there are even more waiting to reassert themselves in your
generation."

Again, Kurt shrugged. "It's possible. My great-great grandmother was a gifted linguist, which
might explain my facility with languages. Of course, it could also be that I didn't inherit it from her,
but that it might be a new talent which will be passed down the family line. Not to mention, I
inherited abilities from Burt and Suzanne after my adoption.

"As to Santana's earlier question, an Arcana member, either of the Major or Minor Arcanum,
enjoys an elevated position in British magical society Often, the terms Ancient and Most Noble are
either disregarded or indistinguishable by those who are unfamiliar with their own history.

"They are indeed different with different protocols, but what matters is that we've been around for
a long time and most of the newer families have, at one time or another, been the beneficiaries of
some of our largesse. The Ollivander family, for example, is perhaps the most ancient, but they
became Noble in part because of the excellent wands they crafted from Potter trees.

"There are many benefits to being descended from one of the First Families. Even if you're
merely Ancient and not Noble, you're automatically presumed to be better and more powerful than
most other families, even though you're not as wealthy as the Most Noble. Those things are not
necessarily true, but it's still accepted. The First Families also possess larger blocs of votes on the
Wizengamot than those Houses which are neither Ancient or Most Noble. The entire Arcana is
comprised of members of distaff and cadet branches of the First Families.

"What about Dumbledore?" asked a curious Quinn.

"He is not Arcana and his seat is inherited, as his family is Germanic in origin. His seat originated
as that of another minor family which eventually married into the Dumbledore line before
becoming extinct. It holds a bit more power than it strictly should, as it grew in influence after his
defeat of Grindelwald. Even though Albus Dumbledore is the eldest issue, he cannot vote his seat
due to the fact that, as Chief Warlock, he oversees the Wizengamot. Therefore his younger brother,
Aberforth, holds the seat."
She nodded. "From what I unearthed, Aberforth Dumbledore cares little for politics and even less for his brother. He has thus given the Dumbledore proxy to another Ancient family, the Marchbanks, which is voted by its heir, Griselda, also the Governor of the Wizarding Examinations Authority."

"They were once affianced," he said. "They never married, though no one knows precisely why, but Aberforth still trusts her to vote his proxy. She often sides with Dumbledore, at least against the darker contingent, but is also one of the few light-oriented members to oppose him when she thinks him wrong - which occurs more often than people realize. Lady Marchbanks is almost as old as Dumbledore and probably knows more of his secrets than anyone."

"A definite point in her favor," Santana muttered darkly. She resolved to look further into the woman.

"What about Harry?" Quinn asked. "Everyone will assume he's the Scion of House Potter. I assume he'll eventually discover this and attempt to assume the mantle."

Kurt blew out a breath. "Well, that's where things get tricky. Dumbledore performed his illegal Obliviations after the Potter will was already witnessed. I was able to discover that it had never been probated; that's a matter of public record. Most likely Dumbledore sealed it using his powers as the Chief Warlock, which is illegal. I have yet to read the will and won't be able to until I present myself to the Goblins. Even then, I might hold off. There's no strategic advantage yet.

"If Harry has already been to Gringotts, and I assume he has by now in order to purchase his school supplies, then he assuredly knows he has a trust vault. At least I'm assuming he does; I can't imagine James and Lily wouldn't provide one for him. However, until I name myself Head of House Potter, Harry would be considered its Scion because, technically, Liam Potter no longer exists. I think it's entirely possible he will have questions about House Potter; whether he'll share them with anyone else is anybody's guess."

"I'd think he'd eventually ask someone," Santana remarked.

Kurt gave a mild shrug. "We shall see. He might not, especially if he learns with any due haste that he is the Heir Apparent of the Ancient and Most Noble House of Black."

Quinn and Santana stared at him.

"You realize what this means."

They continued to stare, so Kurt merely sat and waited for them to absorb the information.

"Sirius Black is innocent," Quinn whispered to herself, mind whirling with the possibilities.

"If Black is Harry's godfather," Santana continued, "there's no way he's guilty of betraying the Potters to Voldemort. Doing so would be in direct violation of his oath as magical guardian, for he would have been placing Harry in immediate moral peril."

She paused. "For that matter, if he had set up James and Lily to be killed, that in itself would have triggered the oath and he would have lost his magic and then his life. Presumably he still has his magic. There would be no reason to keep him in Azkaban if he didn't."

Quinn nodded in distraction. "Unless, of course, he believed Kurt was the child of the prophecy."

She then shook her head. "No, not even then. Being responsible for James and Lily's death would have violated the spirit of the oath regardless of which twin was the focus of the prophecy." She sighed and shook her head. "He's innocent, completely innocent, and he's been rotting in Azkaban
"for ten years."

"But this should have come out at his trial!" Santana insisted.

"What trial?" asked a sardonic Kurt.

Again, they stared.

"You're shitting me!" Santana finally spluttered. "No trial? The Wizengamot threw the Heir Apparent of an Ancient and Most Noble House into Azkaban without a trial?"

Kurt nodded. "Precisely." He allowed a moment for that to sink in. "Granted, he was captured quickly after the vanquishing of Voldemort and I'm certain the entire society was in a state of horrific flux, but such a miscarriage of justice is reprehensible as well as setting a dangerous precedent which the Arcana would not want on the books."

"What I can't believe," Santana said, nostrils flared, "is that no one has discovered this. The Black family is one of the oldest in existence. There's no possible way the family magic would allow Sirius Black to remain Scion and then become Lord if he had broken faith in such a way."

Quinn shook her head. "And the family is still extant; it hasn't died out." She raised a brow. "Yet no one has sought to determine who the Lord of the family is, as well as the named Heir? Further, you said that Harry is the Heir Apparent, not Heir Presumptive, which means Sirius can't change his mind."

"Well, that makes sense," Kurt said. "After ten years in Azkaban, there's no way Sirius will ever be capable of fathering his own children. I'm sure the remaining family members are assuming one of them will inherit when Sirius dies."

"Who's next in line?" Quinn asked.

"I am. Technically I would have inherited had Sirius not named Harry. Both Neville Longbottom and Draco Malfoy would have equal claims, should I be unable to serve, but they're both from distaff lines while Harry and I are from a cadet line."

Quinn huffed. "Normally I'd make a fuss about primogeniture and misogyny, but anything that keeps that little Malfoy shit from grasping even more money and power to himself is fine by me."

"What about Harry's godmother?" she then demanded.

"Alice Longbottom," Kurt promptly supplied, "formerly Rothschild, an ennobled if minor Pureblood family of which she was the last living member and was thus extinguished when she married Franklin Longbottom, Lord of the Ancient and Most Noble House of Longbottom."

"She's dead, as well?" Santana asked.

Kurt shook his head. "She's permanently convalescing in the Long Term Spell Damage Ward at St. Mungo's. She and her husband were tortured mercilessly under the Cruciatiscis Curse."

The girls hissed.

"And Neville Longbottom is their only heir?" Quinn guessed. She flipped through several folders until finding the one she required. "He is the Last Scion of the Ancient and Most Noble House of Longbottom and will be attending Hogwarts with us. Historically the Potters and Longbottoms have enjoyed a longstanding and fruitful alliance. Their banners have flown together for more than
five hundred years."

Kurt nodded. "Neville was born the day before Harry and myself."

Santana narrowed her eyes. "Another set of parents targeted by Voldemort's minions who left a young son as an orphan?" She curled a lip. "I sure as hell wish we knew what that prophecy said. I don't believe in coincidences."

He smirked. "Then here's another one for you: the Longbottoms were attacked shortly after Voldemort was vanquished by Harry, targeted by Bellatrix LeStrange, her husband, Rodolphus, his brother Rabastan, and a young man named Barty Crouch, Jr."

Quinn frowned. "Shortly after ... " She cocked her head. "But Harry should have been placed with the Longbottoms after the death of James and Lily." She bit her lip. "And I'm assuming that, by then, Sirius Black had also been eliminated as a choice of guardian."

He nodded. "Care to guess who was Chief Warlock at the time and did not demand a trial for Black, despite that one is required for all of her Majesty's subjects?"

Santana swore a truly creative litany in a variety of languages.

Quinn's brow was furrowed. "But what of your godparents? Were Sirius and Alice your godparents, as well?"

"No."

"Do you know who your godparents are?"

He smiled. "Yes. For that matter, so do they."

Quinn raised a brow, a silent urging.

So he told them.

And then there was more staring.

It had taken almost twenty minutes for the girls to get it all out of their systems and they stopped only when they realized Kurt would not be speaking of his godparents any time soon. He had explained that he had plans for his godparents and would be reaching out to them when it was the right time. He wanted their identities shrouded until it was absolutely necessary to expose them. As it was, they most likely assumed him dead.

"So Dumbledore's Obliviations didn't work," Santana surmised.

"Oh, he never performed them," Kurt said. "He incorrectly assumed Harry's godparents were my own. He was wrong."

"That seems like a rather large mistake for him to make," said a suspicious Quinn.

Kurt shrugged. "Perhaps, or maybe he simply didn't know. Dumbledore isn't a named godparent or guardian and wouldn't have been present at the ceremony. Twins are rare in the magical world. Those that are born typically have the same set of godparents so that, should something happen to the biological parents, the twins won't be separated."

"So there's a chance you and Harry could have been split up regardless of Dumbledore's
"Interference?" Santana asked.

"I doubt it. More likely, it was Lily's attempt to provide us even more allies. Sirius and Alice were chosen by James. Lily chose my godparents and it's obvious from that choice that she was operating outside Dumbledore's notice."

"Shrewd," she said. "She must have had cause to question his decisions."

"Of the four people involved, any of them would have taken Harry and me together, I think. Collectively, they're quite powerful and wield a lot of influence throughout Britain, though not necessarily in public."

After a moment of thought, she nodded.

"Why didn't you tell us any of this before?" Quinn asked.

Kurt blushed. "It wasn't because I didn't trust you, but because I prefer to handle as much of this amongst us as possible. I know you would never intentionally say anything to anyone and that your shields are impeccable. However, if anyone in your family or on your staffs had discovered you looking into these specific circumstances, they would have demanded answers."

"That's fair," Santana said, shrugging. "It's perfectly acceptable for you to keep secrets, Kurt. I trust you to ask for help when it's needed. Just because we're bonded doesn't mean you have to tell us every intimate detail of your life. You have the right to keep your own counsel."

A beat later, Quinn nodded. She admitted to herself that she was somewhat upset that Kurt had kept this to himself, but Santana was right: each of them had the right to privacy, regardless of the bond. Besides, Kurt's words had been true. There was every chance their detective work could have been inadvertently discovered through no fault of their own.

"So that's House Potter and House Black," Santana said after gathering a breath. "The others?"

"Just so we're on the same page," Kurt said, "let's review the composition of the Wizengamot. It is comprised of the Arcana and then the lesser Houses. Now remember that not all of those families are governed by an active Lord and thus are treated as temporarily extinct."

The girls nodded.

"The Major Arcanum is comprised of thirteen of the most decorated families Britain has ever produced. Some are Ancient, some are Noble, but most are both. If they are part of the Major Arcanum, even if they are not as Ancient or Noble as those of the Minor Arcanum, they are still regarded as more important for reasons most likely no one remembers. Major Arcanum members each hold a bloc of five votes on the Wizengamot; Minor Arcanum members, a total of twenty-three families, hold two votes each."

"Thirteen and twenty-three?" Quinn repeated archly. "Interesting."

"Isn't it? The total amount of votes in the Arcana's possession is one hundred-eleven." He held up a hand. "I know. I've done the numerology."

"And the rest of the Wizengamot?" Santana asked.

"Eighty-nine members with a single vote apiece. It was a check and balance instituted so that the Arcana wouldn't run amok and control the entire body. Of course, it's doubtful that would ever happen given the families' different allegiances." He exhaled. "Still, the Arcana nevertheless holds
themselves apart from the Wizengamot as a whole, even regarded as their own caucuses. Regardless, those other votes are coveted, so, naturally, factions have formed."

"Let's just get this done," Quinn said. History was not her favorite subject.

As they had already noted, the Houses of Potter and Black were both Ancient and Most Noble, as well as members of the Major Arcanum. Of the remaining Major members, they stood as follows:

The Ancient and Most Noble House of Longbottom was younger than both the Potters and Blacks but was nevertheless an important family who was also a Major Arcanum member. Their influence had waned in recent years, however, because they didn't have an active Lord to govern them. Instead, the Dowager Longbottom, Dame Augusta, served as Regent until her grandson Neville could assume the seat.

Neville would be attending Hogwarts with them, though he would be a First Year. Longbottom magic was well suited for Herbology and Potions, though Frank and Alice Longbottom had been Aurors, skilled ones, and had signed up most likely only because of the War against Voldemort. Allegedly the family had a talent for elemental magic, specifically earth and water spells.

"Gossip about Neville is slight," Quinn said, examining her paperwork. "He's not well-regarded by his peers and is considered to be a poor wizard in general, though this is based on absolutely no empirical evidence. He has a noticeable stutter which his grandmother has not bothered to have corrected. It is assumed she's the cause.

"The consensus is that Dame Augusta is a miserable old woman who has little real use for anyone, but she is a political powerhouse. She's younger than Dumbledore by only about forty years, and so has contacts in every family in wizarding Britain both light and dark. She has dirt on everyone, but she is also uncommonly fair, though not where her grandson is concerned. It's rumored she's one of Hecate's Daughters."

Santana raised a brow. "I wasn't aware there was a sect in Britain."

"For good reason," Quinn said. "Membership would be considered sedition against the Ministry."

The other girl rolled her eyes. "What a load of shit."

"Regardless, it's interesting," Kurt said, jotting down some notes.

House Bones was older than the Longbottom family yet younger than the Potter and Black Houses. The family was all but extinguished. Its Last Scion was Susan, who would also be a First Year. The Bones patriarch had been a victim of the War and had left a young widow. Sarah Bones was a first-generation magical, however, and was thus unable to serve as Head of House; she couldn't even serve as Regent. That role was currently filled by Susan's aunt, Amelia Bones, Director of the Department of Magical Law Enforcement.

Kurt knew the woman, as well as Susan, as he had tried in vain to recruit the latter for the Global Youth Ambassador Program. Since he had established a relationship with them, he was debating whether or not to reveal his true identity to Amelia and possibly reignite the long-standing alliance between the Houses of Potter and Bones. Susan would have to remain in the dark, however, depending on her skill with Occlumency.

"What are they like?" Santana asked.

Kurt blew out a breath. "Amelia Bones is a hard, difficult woman, but she is fair and just. Unlike Dame Augusta, however, she lavishes love and praise on Susan, who is already well-trained in
Martial Studies. Probably on par with a Second Year.

"Defensive magic is the hallmark of House Bones. Several of their ancestors are credited with creating a number of curses and jinxes still in use today. Voldemort made sure to eliminate them quickly after he rose to power. He murdered both of Amelia's brothers and spared Sarah and Susan only because Amelia was there to defend them."

He looked at the girls. "Amelia Bones fought Voldemort in single combat on two separate occasions to a draw."

"Impressive," Quinn said.

"And strange," Santana added, frowning. "Is she a Leviathan?"

"No," Kurt said, "but the Bones grimoire is filled with defensive magic that has fallen out of fashion or has been lost to time. She fought him to a standstill most likely because she used spells with which he was unfamiliar and could not easily counter. Many argued he tried to extinguish the line because the Bones family has always enjoyed above-average power and a lot of political clout, but I believe he was after the grimoire and honestly didn't expect Amelia to fight as hard as she did."

"She would be a good ally," Quinn said.

He nodded.

House Lovegood was an Ancient House with no current active leadership. Its former Lady, Eos, had been killed two years ago during an experiment with spellcraft. Her only child, a daughter Luna, would assume the mantle on her fifteenth birthday. House Lovegood was peculiar in its rules of inheritance in that it was one of the few that was matrilineal. Therefore, Luna's father, Xenophilius, was unable to act as Regent for his daughter and thus the House was considered temporarily extinct.

Xenophilius had been born a McKinnon, itself an Ancient and Noble House, but upon his marriage to Eos, per the strictures of House Lovegood, he had to surrender his surname and take that of his wife. At the time, there had been no issue as Xenophilius was the second son of House McKinnon and not expected to inherit. However, his brother Bibliophilius had been killed in the war by Abraxas Malfoy and, as Xeno was unable to inherit, the House was also considered temporarily extinct.

There was a good chance, though, that Luna would be able to stake a claim on the House when she reached her majority at seventeen, though many were unaware of this fact.

The House of Lovegood was shrouded in mystery and thus not much was well known about it. It supposedly had affinities for cryptozoology, zoolinguism, and oracular abilities. Their family grimoire was considered one of the most valuable in the world. Above all else, the Lovegoods were renowned spellcrafters with an arsenal of spells either believed lost to the world or created for their own purposes. Oddly, Voldemort had never troubled them.

The House of Ollivander was Ancient and Most Noble; in fact, it was one perhaps the most Ancient. Currently headed by Garrick, the House was primarily known for wandcraft. In fact, it had all but a monopoly on the art and had held it for untold centuries. Garrick was the last of his Line and, unbeknownst to most, his only living relation was Luna Lovegood. This meant Luna would be a highly-prized candidate for marriage when she announced herself and assumed leadership of the Houses to which she was Heir.
"We'll take care of Luna," Kurt assured Santana. "I promised Brittany, and you know I would never break a promise to her."

In fact, he had plans already in place. There was nothing he wouldn't do for Brittany. Or her cousin.

The House of Prewett had fallen into disrepair after the War. Its Heirs, twins Gideon and Fabian, had been eliminated by Death Eaters, leaving their younger sister Molly as the only remaining Prewett. According the bylaws of the House, however, a woman could not assume the Headship.

Molly had married Arthur, the Head of House Weasley, an Ancient House of the Minor Arcanum which had never enjoyed very much political power or renown. House Weasley was considered little more than comic relief in the current political landscape of magical Britain. While it held a seat in the Wizengamot, they could not cast their votes as they had lost the right.

The previous Head, Septimus, had been a hopeless alcoholic and gambler who had used his political capital to crawl out of debt. The problem was that he hadn't been able to manage fully. He died still in debt and that debt was inherited by Arthur. Until Arthur could afford to pay off his great uncle's loans, House Weasley was little more than a laughingstock and cautionary tale. However, per the Old Ways, Arthur had named his eldest son, William, as his Heir.

"Arthur Weasley is the Head of the Misuse of Muggle Artifacts Department," Quinn said snidely, sneering that such an office was considered necessary, "and is regarded as a genial man who loves his job and family. Many consider him to be submissive to the wife, who is widely known as a harridan with a penchant for Howlers."

Santana stared. "They use still Howlers over there? Idiots."

"Arthur is father of seven children - a rare feat and highly magical number. Six sons and a daughter. They have been Pureblood since time immemorial, though there are a few Squibs hanging on their branches. It's worthy to note that while the Weasleys are considered so-called Muggle lovers and blood-traitors, they do not interact at all with those members of their family who are not magical.

"Whether this is by choice or mere circumstance is unknown. The Pureblood elite deride them but do not discount them. The girl will be most likely be offered many betrothal contracts." She glowered. "Because why shouldn't women be considered chattel?"

She shook her head. "Five of the children have already matriculated at Hogwarts and are considered to be very magically powerful. The Heir, William, known as Bill, received Outstandings on all of his OWLs and NEWTs, was Prefect and Head Boy, and has recently completed an apprenticeship with Gringotts as a curse-breaker.

"The next eldest is Charles, or Charlie. His grades were exceptional but not outstanding, and he was also a Prefect and the Captain of the Gryffindor Quidditch Squad. He is currently earning his Mastery in Draconial Science and Psychology after having completed an externship at the Romanian Dragon Preserve."

Quinn pulled a picture of the two eldest Weasley children and sighed. "They're very handsome."

Santana looked over. "Yowza! They could make me reconsider some things."

Kurt cackled. "Sorry, hens, but Charlie bats for my team."

Quinn raced through her file. "There's nothing in here that supports that!"
He shrugged. "You didn't dig deeply enough. Dragonmasters are only circumspect about their work and the locations of the preserves. They gossip about everything else. Charlie has slept his way through more than half the male population of the preserve, leaving a trail of broken hearts in his wake. His former lovers consider him the dragon tamer who can't be tamed."

His eyes fell again on Charlie's picture. Burly and masculine and absolutely gorgeous. Total stud.

He blinked. Hormones were weird.

"And Bill?" Santana asked.

"An equal-opportunity lothario," Kurt replied, "but most likely will end up marrying a woman and having his own litter."

Quinn scowled. "Charlie has been named Heir to House Prewett, though Molly's great-aunt Muriel, the only other living Prewett, and by marriage at that, has refused to recognize this. Though she holds no position to abdicate in favor of Charlie, she has money, a lot of it, enough to ensure that the Weasley family would go broke several times over should they try to fight her. So until the old crone dies, Charlie will remain unacknowledged."

"He probably doesn't care anyway," Santana said.

The other two nodded.

Kurt himself was very intrigued by the Weasley and Prewett families, as they had produced two sets of magical twins, though identical and not fraternal. Fred and George Weasley would be their yearmates at Hogwarts and Kurt had every intention of studying them. Discreetly, of course.

"The next is Percy," Quinn continued, "and a more officious and obnoxious twit might never have been born." She paused in thought. "Except, of course, for Rachel."

Kurt nodded as Santana snickered. It tickled her how much Quinn despised that midget.

"Percy seems to be trying to beat Bill's academic record. He'll be a Prefect this coming year for Gryffindor House and has dreams of joining the Ministry. He disapproves of everything and everyone who does not bend over to kiss the very wide ass of Cornelius Fudge."

Kurt grinned. "I'm going to have fun with that one. I'll make sure to use my big boy words and most imperious voice whenever I'm around him."

"How would that be different from how you always are?" Santana asked.

He turned and glared.

She grinned and waved.

Quinn rolled her eyes at their antics. "The Weasley twins, Fred and George, are notorious pranksters but are widely considered to be geniuses, particularly in Potions and Charms."

That certainly caught Kurt's interest.

"The youngest son is Ronald, who will be a First Year. Finally there is Genevra, or Ginny. She will start Hogwarts next year."

"We should keep an eye on them," Santana said thoughtfully. "The clowns will make good scapegoats and Percy a good alibi."
Quinn and Kurt nodded.

The Browns were an Ancient family of the Major Arcanum, comprised primarily of merchants and farmers. They were responsible for growing, shearing, and producing more than seventy percent of the wool used in magical Britain. Every citizen therein owned at least one piece of clothing made from Brown materials. They had money, a lot of it, but not quite as much as a family that was both Ancient and Most Noble. Further, because their skill set was more pedestrian despite being essential, they weren't considered as upper-crust as other families. Their Scion was Lavender, who would be a First Year at Hogwarts come September.

"All I could get on her was that she subscribes to every teenage witch periodical in existence," Quinn said, frowning.

"So she's into fashion, makeup, and is probably boy-crazy," said a sour Santana. "I'll leave it up to you two. I'd probably just strangle her."

The Wood family was also Ancient and, like the Potters, were dendrologists. However, where Potter trees were used for wands, Wood trees were made into brooms. Their social position was similar to that of the Browns, though the history of the Wood family reached back further. Its current Scion was Oliver, who was going into his fourth year as a Gryffindor at Hogwarts and one of the youngest Quidditch captains in history.

Quinn and especially Kurt lingered over the picture of Oliver Wood they had in their possession, taken during one of his Quidditch games. While Oliver was sadly too old for either of them, at least presently, that didn't stop them from finding him an incredibly handsome boy. Santana agreed that he wasn't entirely unfortunate looking. Coming from her, this was indeed high praise.

They made quick work of the other families. The Noble Houses of Abbott and Nott and the Ancient and Most Noble House of Greengrass rounded out the Major Arcanum.

House Abbott became ennobled four centuries previous, which made them a relatively new House, and their Scion was Hannah, who would be a First Year and was a good friend of Susan Bones. The Abbott claim to fame was the production of ink, which, on the surface, didn't appear to amount to much. However, when one considered how much ink was used on a daily basis by the British wizarding world - from newspapers to text books, from receipts to government memos, etc. - the scope of Abbott wealth became much more clear.

House Nott was a so-called Dark family who had been proudly associated with Voldemort and, previously, Grindelwald. They had done little for the Dark Lords save open their coffers, which was offensive enough. However, they had been shrewd in ensuring that no punishable crimes could be traced back to them, which was not to say they hadn't committed any. Their Scion was Edward, who had just graduated from Hogwarts. Their other Heir was Theodore, commonly called Theo, who would soon be a First Year.

"He looks like a barrel of laughs," Santana snarked as she studied his picture.

Theo Nott was gangly with beady eyes and a pasty complexion. On the surface he didn't look very threatening; indeed he looked like a prime candidate for bullying, but pictures could be deceiving.

The Ancient and Most Noble House of Greengrass was a notoriously neutral family who supported no interests other than their own. They were insular, impenetrable, and were assiduously dedicated to advancing their own pursuits. Light and Dark families both found them beneath contempt, but the Greengrass status of Ancient and Most Noble afforded them, along with their massive fortune, the ability not to care. They had also cornered the market on rare and obscure potions ingredients,
many of which were used in healing, ensuring that while they might be frowned upon, they could not be dismissed.

Kurt and the girls were of the opinion that the Greengrass stance was an intriguing one. Selfish, perhaps, yes, but also extremely effective. After all, the family owed nothing to no one, and the fact that they freely donated so much of their stock to St. Mungo's indicated that they were not heartless but merely reserved. The Greengrass Heirs were, surprisingly, three witches, Queenie and her younger sisters Daphne and Astoria.

Despite the age of the family, Lord Cygnus Greengrass had no compunction about naming Daphne his Scion, uncaring that her gender traditionally should have made her ineligible to hold such a station. More remarkable was that he had passed over his eldest issue for the honor. Queenie Greengrass had graduated from Hogwarts in May with only average grades and no real occupational prospects. Her best hope was a good marriage, but as she wasn't as attractive or intelligent as her sisters, it would be difficult to procure.

"I wonder what she thinks about her father denying her?" Santana wondered.

Kurt pursed his lips. "I don't know. I know Daphne tangentially as she applied for the theoretical Ambassador position. I conducted a brief interview, but never would have backed her. She's already very pretty, highly intelligent and, I would guess, above average in magical strength, but I could never get a clear sense of her. I felt she was truly interested in the position, but couldn't discern whether that was outweighed by the power and prestige she would be afforded."

"So she's power hungry."

"Yes," Quinn said shortly. "I know Daphne. We are not friends. She's not a kind person but, as Kurt said, she is beautiful and smart and well aware of it. She's very shrewd and cunning, and highly ambitious; the epitome of Slytherin. She perfectly represents her family: neutral to the point of catatonia. She will never reveal what she truly thinks or what side she's really on."

"Maybe she's only on her own side," Santana said.

A thoughtful Quinn nodded. "What she desires most is to make her father proud of her. What her relationship is with her mother, I have no idea. She is very close with Astoria, but neither are close with Queenie. The age difference might be responsible for that, but there are rumors that Queenie resents them fiercely."

"Enough to harm them?" Kurt sharply asked.

Quinn met his eyes. "I don't know."

The Minor Arcanum was primarily considered Dark. Many of its members had sided openly with Voldemort and were well-known Death Eaters. While their statuses as Ancient and Most Noble, Ancient, or Noble could not be stripped from them, most of their political bite had been.

The Malfoy family was such an exception. The current Head of House was Lucius, son of Abraxas, and one of Voldemort's most faithful lieutenants. He was married to Narcissa, née Black, and his Scion was his only child, son Draco. Politically speaking, House Malfoy did not hold much power but did hold an obscene amount of gold, thanks to which Lucius held the ear of the current Minister for Magic, Cornelius Fudge.

However, there were chinks in the Malfoy armor, the most prominent of which was that they were foreigners and French at that. This did not sit well with many of the more
traditional English families of the Wizengamot. The second was they were a relatively new family, certainly far newer than the Abbots, and it was only their gold which kept them from being ignored completely. The third was that, though they were Pureblood, they could only trace their family back through the generations born and raised in England; their French ancestors were lost to time, or so they claimed. The fourth was that their title was bought, not bestowed.

The only reason Lucius had risen to such prominence, aside from his money, was because he used his wife's Black blood as leverage under the mistaken impression that Draco would inherit the Ancient and Most Noble House of Black. The Family Black was held in high regard by the Dark families and feared by the Light ones, despite the fact that Black line had been all neutered by the imprisonment of their Lord, who was, in fact, unknown to be the Lord.

"It would really pop Lucius' balloon were someone to leak that Draco has no chance of becoming Lord Black and thus wielding a dual lordship," Kurt mused, smirking. "That definitely goes on the back burner."

Quinn and Santana eagerly leaned forward.

"I suspect one of two things will occur," he continued. "One, Lucius will order Draco to befriend Harry and then seek to control him and wield his power as the Boy Who Lived. Hopefully, Harry will see through such a pitiful ruse." He paused. "Still, it would amuse someone like Lucius to no end to wield Harry's political power against him."

"And second?" Quinn asked.

"Draco will seek to antagonize Harry and attempt to stir him to foolish action." He sighed. "I don't know anything about Harry's character, so it's possible this is a more likely course." He grinned. "However, I also expect Lucius will instruct Draco to suck up to us faster than the speed of light. Despite the fact that he claimed Imperius, Lucius is nevertheless known for being a willing Death Eater; it's just not mentioned in polite circles. Still, he wants to parade himself as being neutral - not evil, just a traditionalist."

The girls nodded.

"Draco will be sicced on me because Lucius wants to be seen as having a powerful international alliance. However, Draco's real goal will be to court Santana. Given Esperanza's reputation and power, if Lucius believes that he could in any way form an alliance between her and Voldemort when he returns, he will win Voldemort's everlasting favor."

Santana snorted. "Unless Little Malfoy suddenly grows a vagina, that's not going to happen."

Kurt and Quinn howled with laughter.

"Still," Santana said, head tilted in thought, "he doesn't know that, does he? That could be useful. I wouldn't be averse to stringing the little bastard along. Or you'll have to, Kurt. I wouldn't be surprised if Lucius decides Draco should pursue you, regardless of the little asshole's sexuality." She shrugged. "Besides, with your title, you can effectively neuter them."

Kurt nodded reluctantly. He didn't enjoy using his political capital in such ways unless there was no other option.

Quinn frowned. "What were the circumstances of the Malfoy family's defection from France?"

Kurt blinked. "I don't know."
"I suggest we find out. It could prove helpful."

Santana nodded.

"I agree," Kurt said.

"I'll ask Fleur to dig into it," Quinn said. "So what do we do next?"

"Well," he began, "I already know Susan Bones and a few other students. I'll reach out to them for intelligence under the guise of security."

"The more that I think about it," she said, "the better I believe it would be if we didn't publicize our plans to attend Hogwarts."

Santana's eyes turned glassy. "She's right. It should be a surprise."

"Then it will be," Kurt said. "The contract hasn't been ratified yet and I doubt Dumbledore will fight us on it. In fact, it's to his benefit to agree. The Board of Governors might be annoyed, but they hold little power, despite what they might think. Besides, it's always easier to ask for forgiveness rather than permission. I'll alert Sylvester."

"And then?" Santana asked.

"Tomorrow morning, we're off to Gringotts."

An hour later, the Heads of House and Madam Pomfrey reemerged into the Headmaster's office. Albus had a grand time watching them try to assimilate what they had learned.

"Ten year olds with IMAGE scores," marveled Filius. Severus was equally impressed but was content to keep it to himself.

Pomona and Poppy understood the significance and admired the children's tenacity, but that was the extent of their awe. They were much more agog at how easily the children had handled Albus. It was plain to see on several occasions how poorly the Headmaster had conducted himself, so very obviously out of his depth with children who didn't care a whit as to his power and reputation.

Minerva, as usual, was the first to cast doubt, and she did so through very pursed lips. "The only reason I don't believe that boy to be another You-Know-Who is due to the fact that Fawkes approved of him."

Fawkes trilled his happiness, which soothed the frayed nerves of those present.

Poppy rolled her eyes. "Oh, honestly, Minerva, you're being ridiculous. Should they be faulted for competence? For possessing character and dignity and fighting for both? How long have we known each other? I see more than a bit of you in Santana Lopez."

Minerva glared.

Pomona snickered but otherwise remained silent. Her tenure was long and she knew how Minerva operated. Truthfully, while she liked the woman a great deal and certainly respected her abilities, they weren't close friends. They had little in common and, well, it seemed as though they had all chosen their sides long ago. Minerva and Severus were Dumbledore's bulldogs while she and Poppy were happy to sit with Filius on the sidelines and discuss events in a more deliberate and reasonable manner. Rolonda Hooch frequently joined them.
Argus Filch, Sybill Trelawney, and Hagrid were devoted Dumbledore acolytes, though none of them were close with Minerva or Severus.

The newer members of staff had yet to join either clique. Aurora Sinistra was far too occupied with watching the heavens, certain she could divine all the answers to the mysteries of life if she just stared through her telescope long enough. Septima Vector and Bathsheda Babbling had been best friends since their own years in Hogwarts and had little use for anyone else. Charity Burbage was desperate to learn everything she hadn't in her own Muggle Studies track and was constantly off on field trips to discover more information.

Silvenus Kettleburn and Irma Pince had no desire for friendship or collegiality. Silvenus only cared for his animals and how to avoid losing his remaining limbs while Irma claimed a librarian's work was never done, even in summer when the school hosted no students.

Finally there was Quirinus. Who knew what was going on there!

"Alas," Dumbledore said sadly, "Tom never had such approval." He turned regretfully toward Fawkes. "I should have listened to you then, old friend, and not been so cemented in my optimism that I blinded myself to the reality."

Fawkes flew from his perch, landed on the old man's shoulder, and nuzzled his cheek.

Snape couldn't remember Dumbledore ever looking as old as he did at this moment. It was frightening.

"He's brilliant," Flitwick said. "Not only intelligent, but extremely cunning. It's rare the two traits go hand-in-hand and I've never seen them merged so well." He heaved a sigh of disappointment. "I imagine he'll go to Slytherin."

Snape smirked.

"I wouldn't be too sure," Pomona interjected. "Never have I seen such loyalty as those three exhibited, not even amongst the famed Marauders. Albus was correct; it is as though they are one mind in three bodies. It's fascinating, really." She paused. "They're also extremely diligent and hardworking. I think they're just as much candidates for my House as Slytherin."

Minerva knew better than to involve herself in this. The children's bravery in taking on Albus Dumbledore on their own spoke for itself. There was every possibility they would become her lions. As suspicious as she was, she silently admitted most of it was caused by Albus' rather shady behavior with the young trio. She hadn't missed the time jumps in the memories he had provided. She'd think about that later.

"Albus, are you quite sure it's a good idea to bring the Lopez girl here? Her grandmother ... " She trailed off, shuddering.

Minerva once had the misfortune of meeting Esperanza Ramirez. The woman was absolutely terrifying. Malevolence poured off her in waves.

"Santana is not her grandmother," Pomona, the most sensitive of all of them, argued, "any more than Harry Potter is his father. The least we can do is give them an honest chance."

Albus was pleased and Filius game. Minerva was obviously reluctant while Severus no doubt had some scheme flitting through his mind. Poppy was mostly disinterested. As long as the children followed the rules, or broke them for a good reason, she couldn't have cared less as to their origins.
Albus beamed at them all in a slightly senile fashion. "I wish you all very pleasant dreams!"

Taking the dismissal for what it was, they filed out of his office in turn.

Amelia Bones had a conundrum on her hands and no one to whom she might unburden herself.

She found herself in a very awkward position and enlisting outside help was far too dangerous, both to herself and Sirius Black. She had certainly dropped enough veiled hints to Augusta, but the frustrating woman had been too focused on taking custody of Harry Potter. Not that that scenario wasn't worth a well of headaches of its own, but that was for later.

Right now was for Sirius Black and what Amelia had discovered in the Book of Names: Sirius Black was the Named godfather of Harry Potter, which led to only one inescapable conclusion: Black was innocent of the charges against him, at least those relating to the conspiracy to murder James and Lily Potter. Had Black indeed betrayed the Potters to Voldemort, he would have been struck dead immediately due to the vows he had taken to protect his godson.

She sighed and gently laid her head down upon her desk. It was well after midnight and, save the skeleton crew of Aurors, she was alone in the department. She was thankful for that, because, should the need arise to scream furiously in disgust, only a few people might overhear.

After Augusta had left with Harry in tow, Amelia had sequestered herself in her office, poring over any documentation relating to the capture and arrest of Sirius Black. Those existed in abundance. What did not, however, was even any mention of a trial.

Because there hadn't been one.

She ground her teeth in fury.

This was truly a can of worms she wished she had never been forced to open, but now that she had, she could not turn her back on a man she knew to be innocent incarcerated in a place like Azkaban.

The problem was that she couldn't determine any clear-cut solution.

Fudge would either pull his ostrich routine and stick his head in the sand or arrange an accident for Black to put to rest any possibility of embarrassment. Amelia believed that even if she suggested Fudge place the blame on Dumbledore, Crouch, and Bagnold, he wouldn't; he would fold in the wake of facing Albus.

Albus had always been a pain in the ass. She had never understood why everyone believed him to be the next coming. Yes, he was certainly very powerful but she was a suspicious person by nature and there were several facts about Dumbledore she found troubling.

First was that, despite his defeat of Grindelwald, Dumbledore had waited years - years - to confront the man. It was only after devastating loss of life and the very real possibility that the Statute of Secrecy was about to be annihilated that Dumbledore stepped in. She didn't have a problem with the fact he had waited to go after Grindelwald. After all, Dumbledore didn't owe anyone anything; his power was his own, to do with as he saw fit, and it wasn't as though he was an evil man.

No, her problem with him started after his vanquish of Grindelwald, when Dumbledore began using his victory to wedge him into any position of power available. The only reason he had never acquiesced to becoming Minister was, in Amelia's opinion, because the Minister ultimately answered to the Wizengamot. Why settle for that when you could head the Wizengamot itself?
She had to admire his cunning. Truly Dumbledore was a Slytherin in Gryffindor robes.

So Dumbledore became Chief Warlock, Supreme Mugwump, and, the pièce de résistance, Headmaster of Hogwarts. It was that position which had elevated Dumbledore to almost mythic proportions. When he wasn’t in his tower, he was presiding over his staff and students from his golden throne in the Great Hall. He projected the image of a benevolent leader who loved the entire wizarding world, yet he was remote and all but untouchable; the perfect icon.

Dumbledore had used his position as Headmaster to alter completely the social landscape of British magical society. He had gutted the curriculum which had been in place for centuries and replaced the lost classes with ... nothing.

Consequently, students graduating from Hogwarts knew less than their parents; each subsequent generation knew even less, until the result was either an overindulged Pureblood who sought a position in the Ministry which would require very little actual effort; or a Muggleborn, who, faced with the realization they would never attain a position in the government because of their blood status, moved to another country which welcomed them and their tax dollars with open arms but found their education lacking.

Half-Bloods, unless they were heirs to one of the old families, followed the Muggleborn in leaving.

Dumbledore had created sheep. There was absolutely no way Amelia believed that this was anything other than premeditated. The population turned to him for everything. Even when he was muckraked in what passed for wizarding journalism, he was still the final arbiter, the Savior. His word was law. This was literally true, as Dumbledore had spearheaded a number of laws which were restrictive to society as a whole, not really benefiting anyone.

He proclaimed a great love and admiration for the Muggleborn but had not authored a single piece of legislation which would make their entry and residence in the wizarding world any easier. He bleated about the need for equality among magical races but had done nothing to further diplomatic relations with Goblins, Centaurs, Merfolk, Veela, or any of the rest. He decried the use of blood status as a measuring stick but hadn't lifted a finger to alter anyone's thinking, despite the fact that he was responsible for educating entire generations of men and women.

He was tested again a generation later in the form of the Dark Lord Voldemort. Again Dumbledore had procrastinated in confronting Voldemort and that would have been fine, had he not insisted on involving himself in the war effort in other ways. He had created his ridiculous Order of the Phoenix, his own private army, who did little but get in the way of actual soldiers, the Aurors and Hit Wizards.

The Order had interfered often and with aplomb. They were condescending and patronizing, despite the fact that it was people like Amelia Bones, James Potter, Sirius Black, and the Longbottoms who had done the grunt work. Albus hoarded information like gold, delivering it piecemeal as it suited, and never to the proper authorities.

Amelia was still furious that Dumbledore had gotten his hooks into Potter, Black, and the Longbottoms. He had tried to recruit her numerous times, but she had always rebuffed him. He was little more than a child playing toy soldiers and she had never had any intention of being his cannon fodder. It still amazed her that intelligent people like Minerva McGonagall followed Dumbledore about like goslings.

Truly, however, that was merely par for the course. In fact, she could count on one hand those of her friends and colleagues who had never held Dumbledore in high esteem: his brother Aberforth, herself, Augusta Longbottom, Dorea Black, and Lily Potter.
Whatever had caused the split between the Dumbledore brothers was known to no one but them and Griselda Marchbanks, but it must have been severe to have lasted several decades.

Augusta regularly fumed that Dumbledore had insinuated himself in the life of her son and his wife. She absolutely held him partially responsible for their attack. After all, he had cast the Fidelius which had been meant to keep them safe. As Augusta herself had been the Secret Keeper, she often wondered how it was the LeStranges and Barty Crouch, Jr. had found them that horrid night. She had never come right out and admitted it, she wasn't politically stupid, but she suspected Dumbledore's involvement.

Amelia thought Augusta had something there but the old crone had never followed through, so it was hard to feel sorry for her. She realized Augusta would've gotten nowhere challenging Albus directly, but a well-placed word in a few politically savvy ears wouldn't have gone amiss.

Dorea Black Potter had been a fierce, prideful woman with the talent and magical power to back it up. The only thing that had kept her from becoming the Minister for Magic was that she had hated politics. Instead she had been one of the longest-serving Unspeakables in history. Most of the power structure of that department was unknown, but Dorea had been universally believed to be at the very top. Algernon Croaker now occupied that position, only because Dorea and her husband, Charlus, had been killed.

The death of the senior Potters was still a mystery. It couldn't even be determined if their deaths were natural, though Amelia knew she wasn't alone in believing they had been murdered. Dorea had many enemies, including several members of her own family. She had absolutely loathed Dumbledore and the feeling was entirely mutual. It hadn't escaped Amelia's notice that James became Dumbledore's follower only after his mother's death. Of course, Dorea had also run afoul of Voldemort several times. He had tried repeatedly to ferret Department of Mysteries secrets from her mind, but Dorea had been an Occlumens Mistress of incomparable caliber.

Lily Potter had never been fooled by Dumbledore's delusions of grandeur, though she had played that part to the hilt. Of course, that had been her job, though very few had ever known it. She had infiltrated the Order and passed along whatever information she could glean but had never allowed her cover to suppress her core identity. She was often the lone voice of dissent in the Order and, while many agreed with her opinions about how Albus ran things, they never spoke up on her behalf, so it was much easier for Albus to dismiss her.

The Order would appear at a battle, cast some disarming, stupefaction, and binding spells, and then sit back and watch as the Death Eaters revived each other and went on killing. Those that were captured were sent to Azkaban, from which Voldemort would eventually free them. The cycle had continued relentlessly. Amelia had never understood how one wizard with no more than two hundred followers at any given time, and most of them inept, had almost toppled their world.

But he had.

He had come so close, so agonizingly close, and their world had never recovered. Dumbledore preached redemption and turning toward the Light, and while that was very romantic and noble in theory, it was asinine in reality. He had commanded his Order never to kill, only to incapacitate, thus ensuring his hands and soul remained clean. That had only resulted in more deaths of good and honest witches and wizards, for Death Eaters were more than eager to kill anyone who challenged them. The *Avada Kedrava* was the one curse almost every Death Eater could perform with alacrity.

Dumbledore's method was not how wars were won, but how they were lost.
And they had, really. Voldemort's triumph had all been but a fait accompli ... until Harry Potter.

Amelia frowned heavily.

In the end, Dumbledore's efforts had resulted only in a number of good families to become extinct: the McKinnons, the Whites, the Carlisles, the Spencers. Dozens and dozens were gone, creating a vacuum which had never been filled. Meanwhile, Voldemort had exterminated entire lines, as well, both Light and Dark. He had no compunction about killing those who defied, failed, or disappointed him.

Amelia wondered about that now, about the fact that the Wizengamot was half the size it was only twenty years ago, that other families had never been nominated to replace the ones that had died out. Why hadn't that happened? Why hadn't she pressed for answers? There had always previously been nominations, lists of families to be considered. When had that stopped?

What would happen when the other Houses began to die out?

As it was, it was rare for a family to produce more than one child per generation. If the Heir was felled by disease or foe, that family seat would be empty in perpetuity. What would happen when there was no one left? Would the Wizengamot be dissolved and replaced with another body, perhaps one more representative of the people it was supposed to govern?

Again her thoughts drifted toward Sirius Black, as well as Harry Potter. The Black seat had been vacant since Arcturus had died almost a decade previous. The Light families were naturally pleased by this, while the Dark ones were content to sit and wait for young Draco Malfoy to claim the seat when he reached majority.

That was not going to happen, however. Harry Potter was the Heir Apparent.

The Potter seat had been empty since the deaths of James Potter, but Dumbledore had assumed the seat and named a proxy, claiming he had the authority via a vow with the late Lord Potter. Of course there was no possible way to dispute this, as Dumbledore claimed Lady Potter had been the bonder.

Amelia was certain the fact the Potter proxy always sided with the Dumbledore agenda was no mere coincidence and there was no way Lily would've allowed that old man to vote her son's birthright.

She frowned. Why was she only thinking of these things now? These were important matters that should have been considered immediately following Voldemort's vanquish.

It could be reasonably argued that Dumbledore had usurped the Potter seat while silencing the usually dissenting Black seat by unceremoniously tossing its Lord into Azkaban. Thus, Dumbledore controlled the two most powerful seats of the Wizengamot.

Dumbledore was diabolical, and while Amelia would have loved to see him knocked down a few pegs, she knew that if she attempted to do any such thing, she'd be all alone out on a precarious limb; one from which she would eventually be hanged. It was one thing to challenge the Minister when he was being particularly obtuse; it was something entirely to take on Dumbledore by herself.

So what could she do?

She supposed she had made a decent start by placing Harry Potter with Augusta Longbottom. Whatever the faults of the woman, she would ensure he was educated about his place in their
society before he reached Hogwarts. Harry was a bright boy; he would succeed if he put his mind to it. There was also the fact that Augusta might very well pass along her distrust of Dumbledore to Harry.

Amelia smirked. Wouldn't that be something?

Perhaps she should drop some hints about Harry claiming his Lordship. He could convincingly argue that, as the last issue of House Potter, he was entitled to assume its Headship. The law would back him up on that. Of course, should he assume the Black seat, or both at once ... hm.

She would think on it more at a later time.

Sirius Black was a much more difficult animal. Any Light family she approached on his behalf would scoff at her before running to Fudge and the media, calling into question her loyalty and sanity. Any Dark family would procrastinate to the point of doing nothing, too worried about how the release of Sirius Black would affect their political shenanigans.

However, the fact that the Chief Warlock, the Head of the DLME, and the Minister for Magic all conspired - perhaps unwittingly - to deprive the Lord of an Ancient and Most Noble House his freedom set a precedent which would not be tolerated.

Amelia knew this was a delicate matter and she would have to approach it as such. Perhaps she should begin by meeting with those Houses who placed House pride above political dreck. Maybe Cygnus Greengrass could assist her with that.

Of course, this was all predicated on her delivering to any possible allies a credible defense for Sirius Black and therein lied the problem. The Book of Names wasn't available to everyone and she couldn't see the Department of Mysteries opening its hallowed halls for the members of the Wizengamot to stomp through, not even in the name of justice.

So, these were facts she knew to be true:

First, Sirius Black, the Lord of the Ancient and Most Noble House of Black, was the named godfather of Harry Potter, Scion of the Ancient and Most Noble House of Potter. As such, he could not have placed Harry in any danger whatsoever, lest Sirius lose his magic and his life. Betraying James and Lily Potter to Voldemort would constitute such a danger.

Therefore Sirius Black was innocent of this charge and had obviously not been the Secret Keeper for the Fidelius placed on Godric's Hollow. Veritaserum would forever lay to rest the question of whether he had killed those thirteen Muggles, as well as Peter Pettigrew.

The problem in proving this was that she didn't have access to the Potter will. She knew one must have existed; it was mandated for every Lord to pen a will, save his title and wealth be absorbed by the government. All she had been able to discover was that the will had been sealed by the authority of the Chief Warlock, which, in this case, really was so much nonsense. No such authority existed and any Head of House would have their will probated by Gringotts, not the Wizengamot.

The Goblins certainly weren't going to open their files to her, even if she had a writ. The bank prided itself on confidentiality for all of its clients, be they Light or Dark. To betray that was a treaty violation. No Wizengamot member worth their salt would sign off on a writ, not the least of which is because they would earn the eternal wrath of the Goblin Nation. None of them were that stupid, not even the Crabbes and Goyles.
The fact that Dumbledore had suppressed the will suggested to her that Harry's placement with the Dursleys had, in fact, been the sole design of Dumbledore himself, not James and Lily Potter. Of course, this raised the question of why Dumbledore had put the boy at such risk. What was to be gained by denying Harry his freedom, his few remaining blood relatives, and knowledge of the world into which he was born?

She was positive it was a reason that would make sense only to Dumbledore, who would no doubt drag his nebulous Greater Good from his backside and parade it around as though it meant anything.

Fact the Second: Harry Potter was the Heir Apparent of the Ancient and Most Noble House of Black. This was something that could neither be changed nor challenged. Sirius was the named Lord Black, and nothing, not even his incarceration, could strip that title from him. Again, this was a precedent the Arcana would never allow. Further, ten years in Azkaban would have stolen from Sirius his ability to reproduce. Therefore, unless he disinherited Harry, the Potter Scion would be the new Lord Black upon the death of his godfather.

Harry Potter, at the tender age of eleven, had every chance of heading two Ancient and Most Noble Houses - or at least direct who could make decisions on his behalf until he turned seventeen. That actually offered him some protection from former Death Eaters like Lucius Malfoy. He wouldn't bring harm to Harry until the boy had named his own Heir. Were Harry to be killed prior to this, there was no certainty Draco Malfoy would inherit the House of Black. Andromeda Tonks was young enough to have another child, a son, and could demand the Regency. The same was true for her daughter Nymphadora. Neville Longbottom's claim was every bit as relevant as that of the Malfoys and Tonkses.

Fact the Third: Harry Potter had been abused by Muggles and this could not stand. The problem was how to deal with the situation before the media turned it into a spectacle. Harry Potter would either be deemed the next Dumbledore, which she speculated might be Albus' ultimate goal, or pitied, his character permanently assassinated as the boy who had defeated a Dark Lord but been felled by common Muggles.

Amelia pursed her lips. It would be so much easier, really, if the Dursleys simply disappeared.

Not that she would wish that on anyone, magical or Muggle, of course. And she would certainly never condone such action.

No, of course not.

Unbeknownst to Amelia, Augusta Longbottom had indeed absorbed the message that Sirius Black was the godfather of Harry Potter. She also knew what this meant.

As a Black, she was incensed that a member of her family was in Azkaban, its Lord and Head no less. As a Longbottom, she was infuriated that an innocent man had been tossed away like so much rubbish while those who had committed true atrocities sipped port from their Goblin-made goblets while running the country from the august body who should have shut them away.

This conflict was not a new experience. It had kept her company well over sixty years now, ever since Callidora Black had been reborn as Augusta Longbottom. In some ways, she was still very much a Black. She adored politics and thrived on intrigue. She was usually at least three steps ahead of her allies and five ahead of her enemies. She never forgot a trespass and never met a grudge she didn't enjoy holding.
Not that she was so petty as to hold grudges, of course! She never held grudges; she simply remembered facts.

And then there was the Longbottom side of her: scrupulously fair; a hatred of prejudice in any form; a distrust of government on principle; and a good woman utterly devoted to her family.

Blacks were notorious for being devoted to their family, as well, but the last several generations had corrupted that loyalty. It appalled her that Sirius was wasting away in prison, but she absolutely reveled in the fact that Bellatrix was housed there and hoped the Dementors tortured her every second she continued to draw breath. Bellatrix, in terms of degree, was no more or less a relation to her than Sirius.

Bellatrix had soiled the family name by allying herself with a psychopath. She had turned on family and slaughtered and tortured them for her Dark Lord's sick pleasure.

Augusta snarled.

Oh, how she wished she had been at home that night. She would have gutted that evil bitch and then played with her innards.

She repressed a sigh. Amelia had indeed made several valid points.

First, for better or worse, she was a Black; Harry Potter was thus her kin and Sirius, in a fundamental way, was her Lord.

Second, if Alice were able, she would have beaten her to a pulp for neglecting Harry. The boy was Alice's godson and that was a magical bond that could never be broken. Augusta should have, at the very least, demanded to know where Dumbledore had stashed him and his general condition. She should have been meeting with Harry at least twice per year to assess his general health and education.

Third, she had absolutely failed as Regent of the House of Longbottom due to the fact that, regardless of age, Harry Potter was an acknowledged ally. Augusta knew she served only because Frank could not and only until Neville was of age. The alliance didn't end with the death of James and Lily; indeed, it extended to Harry and it was her responsibility to nurture that alliance. Their banners had flown together for centuries and she had let it all fall to ruin.

These thoughts tormented her as she stared across the table into the startling green and jaded eyes of Harry Potter, eyes at once beautiful and repellent. They were shadowed, filled with mistrust and a world wariness which was absolutely depressing to behold.

He was glaring right back at her, and, she had to admit, she found it rather horrifying. She felt this mere wisp of a boy assessing her and couldn't help but imagine she had come up short. It wasn't so much he was disrespectful as it was he was leery of her and authority in general. She could certainly understand his attitude, given what he had been made to endure.

Still, it rankled that Amelia Bones had so obviously made a much better impression on the lad.

He didn't like her. This bothered Augusta, yet she could not explain why.

What she liked, however, was the protective arm Harry Potter had thrown around the shoulders of her only grandchild. When they had been introduced, when the context of their relationship had been provided, Harry Potter had looked at Neville Longbottom and saw not the friendship of their mothers, but a brother.
Harry Potter had declared himself the brother of Neville Longbottom. That declaration was all the more stunning and poignant when Augusta saw Harry glow as he said the words. Harry didn't notice and Neville couldn't see it, but she could, and she was humbled.

An unintentional vow, certainly, but the feeling engendered in the words anything but. She knew that if she checked the Tapestry later, Neville might very well also be listed as a Son of House Potter.

As Neville gaped and gawped over their new houseguest, as Harry gently deflected the worshipful stares by declaring himself ignorant of all things magical and pleading for Neville's expert assistance, as that infernal owl studied her as though she were a possible meal, Augusta couldn't help but wonder one thing.

Was Liam Potter truly dead?

Minerva McGonagall was sipping her nightly glass of whisky in her suite of rooms. She had only refilled the glass twice and felt she was showing an admirable amount of restraint. If anything demanded she become a hopeless alcoholic, it was this day.

Harry Potter.

How could this have happened? How could Albus have been so very wrong?

It was unsettling. It was frightening.

Oh, she wasn't frightened by the idea of Albus being wrong. What frightened her was that, until today, she had never conceived of the possibility that he ever might be wrong. She too had bought in to the legend and a child had been sacrificed because of her myopia.

What else had she missed? What else had she willingly overlooked because of Albus' suggestions? Had she made mistakes with other children? Her condemnation of Severus' treatment while in school haunted her. Why had she not stood up for him and against Albus? She should have gone to the Board; to anyone.

 Granted, her lack of response was of course tied to her feelings for Remus and most importantly James, a distant relation of hers whom she had come to think of as the son she'd never had. Still, those feelings should not have interfered with her duty as a Professor. Severus had been her student, too, and she had failed him.

She was furious and thoroughly disgusted by Filius' insinuation that Albus had altered her memory without her consent, but she couldn't dismiss it outright. She found it rather probable.

She took another long sip.

It appeared this day was that in which many of her delusions would shatter.

She had known the character of the Dursleys and had done nothing to stop Harry's placement with them. Even had Albus compelled her, she had been weary of those people and pleaded with him not to leave Harry with them. It had haunted her for years and for apparently good reason.

The medical report had been revolting. If there was one thing the magical world prided itself upon, it was the protection of their children. They were such a small subset of the population and families had been producing fewer offspring with each generation, all magical children were considered precious.
She grimaced. Except for Muggleborns, of course.

Asinine prejudices.

Even degenerate reprobates like Lucius Malfoy sincerely loved their children, though he had all but ruined young Draco by granting the boy's every spoiled and arrogant whim. She frowned as she thought of Narcissa. She had never liked or even warmed to the woman, even when Narcissa had been a student in these halls, but she found it hard to believe Narcissa had produced the brat who was her only child. Lucius must have been responsible for seeing to the lad's upbringing.

But for this to happen to Harry Potter, their hero and Boy Who Lived, was unfathomable and unconscionable. Pomona had been right: if word ever leaked out that Albus had spearheaded this debacle, the public _en masse_ would call for his head, with allegedly former Death Eaters like Lucius Malfoy leading the charge.

Dumbledore would be ruined, as would Hogwarts. What parents in their right minds would entrust the welfare of their children to a man who had, albeit unwittingly, contributed to the abuse of one of their own?

She had her misgivings about the boy being placed with Augusta Longbottom. She knew the woman well, and while Augusta was a good soul, she was a hard and unforgiving person. Despite her best intentions, she might not be able to produce the appropriate environment for a child such as Harry. At least he would have Neville for company, for whatever that was worth.

Minerva had attended too many functions with the Longbottoms and had witnessed first-hand Augusta's poor treatment of her only grandchild. Neville was not his father; he wasn't even his mother. He was his own person and Augusta was unintentionally doing her best to subvert that boy's development at every turn.

She vowed that should Neville end up in Gryffindor like his parents, she would take him under her wing. She wasn't sure she would do him much good but, at this point, figured she probably couldn't do him any worse.

She heaved a sigh and looked forlornly at the fire roaring in the hearth.

She couldn't believe how badly she had failed.

"Come in, Filius."

She was surprised yet not when Severus, Poppy, and Pomona entered with him. She stood with a grace that belied her age and poured each of them a glass, which they took with aplomb.

"What are we going to do about this?" Pomona demanded.

Severus downed his drink in one gulp and crossed the room to pour another with Minerva's silent permission. "We must be vigilant and definitely keep a rather close eye on Albus."

The others nodded.

"We must also determine how we are going to handle this, both as teachers and administrators," Filius said. "This year could very well prove to be our most trying. Once Harry arrives, all eyes will be upon us. Whether he likes it or not, whether we like it or not, he is regarded as a celebrity. People will seek to use him. People will tell lies about him, including to the media, which will try..."
to infiltrate this institution at every opportunity to glean information about him."

"Do you really think it will be that bad?" fretted Pomona.

Filius rolled his eyes. "Be serious. He is the Boy Who Lived. He vanquished Voldemort." He looked at each of them in turn. "Is there anyone in this room who believes otherwise?"

Poppy pursed her lips. "I examined him after James and Lily fell. He had the worst case of magical exhaustion I've ever diagnosed; that he was a mere toddler made it all the more dangerous, yet he was already recovering when Albus brought him to Hogwarts." She shook her head. "Whatever happened that night, and I don't believe even Albus knows for certain, Harry expended a great deal of his energy and magic."

Severus raised a brow. "I presume you've perused the St. Mungo's reports more thoroughly since our meeting with Albus. How bad is it?"

She glared sullenly at the fire. "It's horrible. If I thought I could get away with it, I would kill those people myself."

He flinched and looked away.

"You do realize that you're going to have to approach him carefully, Severus," Minerva said sharply. "You can't antagonize him. I'm sure you planned - or, more accurately, Albus had planned - for you to do just that. To push him, test him. You can't. As Filius already said, all eyes will be upon us. Any poor behavior on your part will mostly likely be immediately reported to Amelia Bones." She raised a brow. "She will come for you and not care a whit what Albus has to say in your defense."

He gave her a dismissive look. "I'm aware," he drawled. He colored slightly. "I had already decided to abandon Albus' ridiculous little game of espionage. He's deluded if he believes Harry Potter is his pawn." He smirked. "In fact, though I have no proof, I believe young Potter was so open with Filius precisely to ensure that he would be watched, that he would not find himself under the yoke of anyone."

Filius startled but finally nodded. "I find that all too possible."

"Really?" asked a surprised Minerva.

Poppy nodded. "Abused children may be physically and emotionally stunted, Minerva, but they're often far more psychologically advanced than their peers, than even most adults. They've been manipulated their entire lives and thus learn to manipulate in turn. They know how to go about unobserved. They learn how to control their emotions, though exceptionally trying circumstances often cause them to lash out.

"As Filius mentioned in Albus' office, abused children are secretive and distrustful. They regard adults as enemies because adults have always failed them. They disdain authority because it has never helped them." She clucked her tongue. "Harry will, as Filius said, not come to us with his problems but rather to seek to solve them himself. He has been thrust into a world he does not understand and for which he is unprepared. He will seek no aid because he doesn't believe it will be provided without an agenda."

"And he wouldn't be wrong," Severus remarked. "Everyone has an agenda where that boy is concerned, whether or not they wish to admit it."

"So what do we do?" asked an anxious Pomona.
"There is little we can do," Minerva said, "until he arrives and is chosen for a House."

"Actually," said a thoughtful Severus, "the choice of House is something we push in the right direction. He has an established relationship with Filius, so I propose we use that to our advantage."

Filius quirked a brow.

"As we all know, abused children are usually claimed by either one of two Houses: Slytherin or Hufflepuff. Unfortunately Slytherin is almost entirely Pureblood and comprised of children of former Death Eaters; the boy would be given no quarter if he were put there. The Hat does take into consideration the desires of the students, so it would behoove us if we could nudge him in Pomona's direction."

Pomona nodded swiftly.

"A Potter in Hufflepuff?" asked a surprised Minerva. "That hasn't happened in several centuries - no offense, Pomona - Potters tend to be Gryffindors or Ravenclaws."

"I would love to have him," Filius said quietly, "and while Ravenclaw would provide him some measure of anonymity, the students would either ignore him or observe him as though he were an exhibit in a zoo." He shook his head. "I agree with Severus. Hufflepuff would be ideal, but, if not, then he should be placed in Gryffindor."

Pomona and Minerva exchanged a long glance.

"Wherever he ends up," Poppy began, "I suggest we all keep an eye on him. Discreetly, of course. He will need help, whether or not he wants to acknowledge or admit it."

They collectively nodded.

Severus sighed. "It will not be easy. Potters are usually Gryffindors, yes, but the boy's grandmother, Dorea Black, was a Slytherin. The Hat initially wanted to put Lily in Slytherin, as well. I had warned her in advance how she would fare in my House, so she chose Gryffindor, thank Merlin."

Minerva blinked owlishly.

Filius nodded. "It's true." He shrugged. "Let's face it: had Lily been Pureblood and come out of Slytherin, she would have been on the fast track for Minister."

"So we are agreed," Severus said, "any House but Slytherin." He nodded to himself. "Filius, how serious were you when you said he was interested in Potions?"

"Oh, quite serious indeed," the man said. "It was the only subject other than history that he could correlate to his previous studies." He frowned. "Actually, he had a lot to say about our class offerings and I found myself agreeing with most, if not all, of his points."

Pomona raised a brow. "Such as?"

"The electives. He thought it a bit absurd, and I concur, that students must wait until third year to choose them. They are suddenly thrown into up to an additional three classes with no warning and little guidance." He looked at them. "Let's be honest: Albus has subtly warned us from counseling our students too closely with regard to electives lest we inadvertently champion or denigrate one specialization in particular."
He scoffed. "Have any of you actually ever *encouraged* a student to take Divination?"

A universal snort.

"It's a fair point," Pomona said. "Ancient Runes and Arithmancyc are so far removed from any other offering as to be ridiculous. The children have no idea what they're getting themselves into and it's rather unfair." She rolled her eyes. "Muggle Studies? Please. Even I know more about Muggles than Charity Burbage, though she tries her best and I give her credit for trying to revamp the curriculum."

"Solutions?" Minerva asked.

"Harry actually offered a few," Filius said, surprising the others, "but the issue is one of time management. The school has been understaffed for years. Even though we're operating at less than half-occupancy, there's no logical reason the faculty is so small in number. It's unfair the four of us are expected to teach seven years of classes across four Houses, prepare potential mastery candidates, as well as act of Head of House *and* Minerva serving as Deputy."

The others nodded, Minerva particularly fiercely. The paperwork alone was slowly killing her. With each passing year, Albus foisted more and more of his duties off on her while he ran about serving at the Wizengamot and ICW. She had never complained, so it was partly her fault. Perhaps it was time to reevaluate some things.

Filius leaned in, his eyes lighted with curiosity. "Another point Harry raised: Binns is a ghost. Is he paid? If so, where is that money? If not, why isn't that which is allocated for his salary being put to better use elsewhere?"

Severus stared. "I admit I have never considered this."

"But it's an excellent question," Minerva mused. She turned to Filius. "You were not joking when you said he was intelligent."

Filius nodded. "It's a very practical and pragmatic intelligence. He's spent years watching his relatives poormouth while trying to keep up with their neighbors and the latest whatsis. It is almost as though he studies systematically. That is, he looks at an idea or an organism or a society and questions it. He then organizes his questions, correlates them with the information he knows or is available to him, and then ponders the outcomes."

"What else did he say?" asked a cautious Severus.

"He thought the House system was archaic and that students should be grouped by year. I explained about House pride and school unity, and he found it completely absurd, arguing that if students were taught to keep matters in House and consider other members as family, as well as competing for the Cup, there would be no interest in trying to form relationships outside of their Houses."

"We've all said the same," Pomona complained.

"He also didn't understand why we didn't teach basic classes like arts and languages. He didn't understand why we studied Herbology, which he calls botany, but not biology; specifically, human anatomy and physiology. He also asked about music, maths and accounting, as well as literature. He wondered if in fact the magical world *had* any literature."

"Again, we've all raised these points with Albus," sighed a tired Minerva.
"As much good as he thinks he's doing, he's holding back the development of our world," Severus murmured. "In so many ways we're more advanced than Muggle society, but in many others, they are so far beyond us that it is truly laughable."

"How so?" Pomona asked.

"Muggles have walked on the moon, Pomona, and they did so almost fifty years ago. They have weapons of mass destruction; just one of their devices could completely annihilate wizarding Britain in less than ten minutes."

She gasped as a hand flew over her head. "Surely not!"

He gave her a grave look.

"Merlin!" she breathed.

"He also had some rather interesting views on blood status," Filius said, reiterating Harry's arguments.

"He raises a valid point," Severus argued. "By any stretch of the imagination, Lily Potter was the most gifted magical of her generation. That she would have been so diminished simply because of her parents' blood status is noxious."

He shook his head in anger. "We all understand. Filius has had to live with prejudice since the moment of his birth. I am considered a Half-Blood, but it would be more accurate to say that I, like Harry Potter, am a Three-Quarter Blood, though of course such a moniker is ridiculous. If I had pursued any field of study other than Potions, were I not as talented as I am, I would be lucky to hold the position of a clerk in a third-rate apothecary.

"Minerva and Pomona are the most learned Mistresses of their arts in the Isles, yet they have been held back because of their gender. The same holds true for Poppy. She is as knowledgeable as any Healer, but because she went to school when she did, she wasn't allowed to become one."

"I think this would be a good time to discuss these new First Years Albus has recruited," Pomona suggested. "What were your initial thoughts on the matter?"

"Albus has an agenda with those children," Poppy said flatly. "Out of nowhere he suddenly decides to start recruiting internationally? Preposterous."

Minerva raised a hand. "Before we begin, can we all agree that what were shown in that Pensieve was a highly-edited account of that meeting?"

Severus rolled his eyes.

"It was inane," Filius agreed. "As if we would simply miss the strange jumps in time."

"What do you think happened?" Poppy asked.

"He tried to use Legilimancy on them," said a decided Severus, "and they fought back."

"No!" Minerva breathed. "Please tell me he wouldn't do that to children!"

Severus frowned. "I actually believe that Albus uses the art far less than I have suspected of him in the past, but I do think that was the circumstance here." He shook his head. "Foolish. So incredibly foolish. Those children are exceptional by any definition of the word. The young princess is the
heir of Esperanza Ramirez, who is actually credited with revolutionizing the practice. Of course she taught her granddaughter, and probably her friends as well."

"It's much worse than that," Filius said, heaving a tremendous sigh. "Don't forget who those children are. Miss Fabray is the daughter of an MSE Senator and a member of Swedish Royal House of Lindenov. I did some checking: she holds the title of Countess and is to be addressed as Lady Lindenov. The Princess Santana is, as Severus noted, the Heir of Esperanza Ramirez, the Queen of Wizarding South America."

He exhaled. "And Kurt Hummel is the son of the Vice President of the Magical United States, as well as being a political dignitary - and a popular and respected one, at that - in his own right. He is also the Duke of Aquitaine, the Comte of Orange, and the Prince of Bavaria."

Severus began muttering darkly under his breath as the women stared with jaws agape.

"By using Legilimancy, coupled with the fact that they are minors, what Albus did was tantamount to declaring war upon five nations."

Minerva's eyes went very wide as the color bled from her face. She slumped over in her chair.

"Senile old fart!" She shook her head. "The man is a genius, but he is also foolhardy and reckless."

Poppy nodded. "You can be assured that Amelia Bones has already been alerted to this. It will be interesting to see how she reacts."

"What of the children themselves?" asked Pomona, trying to keep the discussion on track.

"They were definitely holding their cards close to the vest," Severus said. "I have no doubt that they know far more about Albus' real agenda with them than he realizes."

Minerva nodded. "But I also got the sense that they wanted to come to Hogwarts. Concessions were made on both sides, with Albus sacrificing much more than they, but I never believed they would decline."

"I agree," Filius said. "They have their own plans. I think what we must determine is not what those plans are, but whether or not we should interfere with them."

Pomona slowly nodded. "I must admit, their charges with regard to our curriculum and the state of wizarding Britain were difficult to hear, but I don't fault their opinions."

The others nodded in agreement.

"I was rather pleased that they held the four of you in such high regard," said a pleased Poppy. "For far too long, your talents have been overlooked in favor of Albus' legend."

Minerva blushed slightly. "I was rather thrilled with Mr. Hummel's assessment of my career. To know that such a young man is not only aware of my articles, but has read and understood them, is enthralling. I find myself looking forward to teaching him." She frowned. "Though I do believe he was vastly underselling his talents."

"Absolutely," Filius said. "Don't forget that I am aware of his reputation. As I said in the Headmaster's office, Kurt Hummel is a literal genius, and I rather suspect the same holds true for his companions. I know of his tutors, and if the girls are his fellow students, I think we will find that they are far more advanced than Albus realizes. They are most likely on the level of a fifth or sixth year in terms of theoretical knowledge alone."
He shrugged. "As for the practical, that remains to be seen."

"Who are his tutors?" Pomona asked.

He frowned. "I don't know all of them, but I do know he was taught Charms by Véronique Merteuil and Transfiguration by Heinrich Ericksen."

The others, save Severus, gasped.

"And Potions?" Severus croaked. "Do you know who instructed them?"

Filius smirked. "Indeed I do, Severus, as do you. Their mistress is Medea Dicoupoulos."

He turned white as a sheet. "I am to instruct her students?" he whispered, shaking his head. "She doesn't even accept students! She hasn't taught formally in decades."

Minerva grinned. "And what will you do, Severus, with three students who actually understand your art and most likely respect it?"

The look on his face was one of utter bliss until he became cognizant of their amused stares and schooled his features into one of bland disinterest.

Oh, but the thought of such students! He was almost giddy with anticipation. He wondered what they had studied, how advanced they were, what techniques they used, how their instruction had differed from his own. His mind was whirling with the possibilities.

"Mr. Hummel was impressed with you, Severus," Filius said cautiously, "but was also reticent about accepting your tutelage."

Severus only dimly registered his words, deeming them irrelevant. With students like Kurt and his friends - Merlin, he was already using their first names in his thoughts - he wouldn't have to be the dour bat of the dungeons. He would actually be allowed to have reasonable expectations! Ones that would most likely even be met, perhaps surpassed! Teaching might not be such a miserable chore had he students who knew what they were doing.

He was grateful he was already sitting lest he swoon and collapse to the floor like some simpering heroine with the vapors.

He blinked harshly. And if Harry Potter had his mother's talent with potions?

Dear Merlin! Was it even possible that his tenure at Hogwarts might become tolerable?

Pomona studied him with no small concern. "I think he might be broken."

Filius, Minerva, and Poppy laughed.

Severus cleared his throat and glared before lapsing into a smirk. "This has been very interesting. Wouldn't it be something were we to let slip these concerns to the analyst Ambassador Hummel is sending to assess the wards?"

Poppy cackled as Filius clapped with glee. Minerva and Pomona clinked glasses.
Neville Longbottom didn't quite know what to make of his new life.

The morning previous he had woken, resigned to yet another day of his stern grandmother berating him for his many shortcomings, complaining that he couldn't have been less like his parents, brave heroes permanently convalescing due to their fight against the Dark Lord.

Neville had never felt sorry for himself. He knew that Augusta genuinely did love him. She had just never been able to move past her grief for his parents and, somewhere along the way, he had become the focus of her rage and disappointment. He didn't like it but had accepted it, which, he supposed, wasn't very brave of him.

Hogwarts was calling and he had been counting down the days since his lackluster birthday party two days ago. He was desperately hoping to join Gryffindor House, the House of his parents, if only to prove to his grandmother that he was worthy of being their son. In his heart of hearts, though, he longed to go Hufflepuff. He was loyal and hardworking, the two traits that most defined that House, and wished to join their ranks.

He knew that if he made Gryffindor, he would feel the constant need to prove himself: to his classmates, his teachers, his grandmother, and all of those who had known his parents. Even the thought of such pressure all but paralyzed him. Still, at least he would be free of Longbottom Hall until next summer.

But then his grandmother had mysteriously disappeared later that day. Coincidentally, it was also the day of Harry Potter's birth. Long regarded as a day of celebration in their world, Neville had taken several moments to hope that Harry Potter was well and that their paths would soon cross at Hogwarts.

The Boy Who Lived had always served as something of a role model for Neville. Harry Potter was an orphan of the last war, and Neville was essentially the same. He had long ago abandoned hope that his parents would ever be restored. Surely he and Harry would find other things they had in common.

He had never been one of those to worship the Boy Who Lived. It had never made much sense to him that a toddler had defeated the most dangerous Dark Lord in recent history. Indeed, who could possibly be delusional enough to believe such a claim? Oh, he was sure that Harry had done something to the Dark Lord; even rumors often contained a kernel of truth. What that something was, however, eluded him.

He had overheard his grandmother on more than one occasion proclaim her belief that it had been Harry's mother, Lily, who had vanquished the Dark Lord. She had never explicitly stated her reasoning, at least not so that Neville could overhear, but it was to whom she expressed this belief that suggested to Neville at least two possibilities.

The first was Algernon Croaker, the husband the sister of Neville's grandfather, who was the Head Unspeakable in the Department of Mysteries. No one was to know that, of course; the identities of Unspeakables was shrouded in secrecy, even from each other, though Neville had discovered it five years previous and had never disclosed. The Department of Mysteries was nominally under the control of the Ministry for Magic, but those who were truly in the know understood it was an entity unto itself. He wasn't sure precisely how, no one was, but he knew it to be true.
Uncle Algie had never refuted Augusta's claims, which gave Neville pause. The fact that Uncle Algie didn't even bother to correct his grandmother suggested that he had known or was aware of Lily Potter. Had she been an Unspeakable herself?

The second person was Minerva McGonagall, who would soon be his Transfiguration Professor. He wasn't sure what exactly his grandmother and Professor McGonagall got up to, but he knew it included rites of magic to which he was not privy.

He had heard whispers. That was the advantage of being overlooked and unnoticed; in turn, you became very observant and began to notice that which others wished to keep hidden. He had never been able to find written proof and, although he couldn't remember the source, he had heard mention of the Sacred Feminine, a particular form of magic practiced exclusively by witches and primarily concerned with healing, fertility, and forms of divination other than the Sight.

The wizarding world, at least in the United Kingdom, had no official religion. Its witches and wizards weren't exactly atheist; the preponderance of ghosts proved that something existed beyond death. Perhaps agnostic was a better term, although it was problematic on its own.

The bottom line was that there was purported to be a secret society of witches who practiced ancient rites and spells passed down via oral tradition. He didn't know if it was true, but it sounded possible and Neville wasn't one to discount possibilities without a good reason.

At any rate, when Augusta had left for an impromptu meeting with Amelia Bones, he had suspected it was something to do with this society and hadn't thought much of it. Instead, he was glad for the reprieve and spent the day in his beloved greenhouses.

Augusta hadn't returned for several hours and, when she did, she had a small boy in tow.

The first thing Neville thought when he laid eyes upon this boy was that he was dying. He looked so sick and fragile, a tiny bird-like thing who would keel over from a sudden wind.

Then his grandmother announced that this was Harry Potter and he would be living with them from now on.

Neville knew better than to ask questions or demand answers that would not be forthcoming. He made sure his face betrayed no emotion, which was not an easy feat given the company. Instead, he mustered up all of his meager courage and welcomed Harry to his home.

Harry offered a polite if meek reply and then proceeded to hold a conversation with his owl.

Neville had never before encountered an owl such as this. He firmly believed no owl such as this had ever before existed. Her name was Hedwig and there was something quite magnificent about her. It wasn't just that Harry could talk to her - and after ten minutes in their company, no one could convincingly argue that Harry could not talk with her - and that she appeared to answer; it was the intelligence Hedwig possessed, evidenced in her eyes. She watched everything. She knew things.

This was no mere familiar bond. Neville had thoroughly researched familiar bonds when Uncle Algie had given him Trevor the toad. Neville loved Trevor, he supposed, but he knew the toad wasn't his familiar. According to his research, very few witches and wizards ever actually found a familiar, let alone developed a bond. Surely this meant Harry was powerful, even though he looked so unwell.

It was all so very curious! Familiars were almost exclusively magical creatures, not mundane ones, and while it was agreed that owls were an intelligent species, they weren't magical. Post owls were
such because a series of charms had been laid upon them, not because they had innate magic of their own.

He looked at Hedwig while he considered this and was almost certain the owl was laughing at him.

He blinked as his mind raced. Certainly he was no expert on familiars, or owls in general, so very possibly his research was lacking. He did know that owls were once held as sacred, heralds of Athena, the Greek goddess of wisdom in warfare.

Well, then, perhaps it was right Harry Potter had an owl as a familiar. The end of the last wizarding war was, of course, attributed to him.

Hedwig barked at him and he wondered if she was reading his mind. If she was, then could Harry? Could this owl read the minds of everyone?

She barked again and Neville quickly decided some mysteries were better left unsolved.

As dinner was served, Augusta deigned to explain that she, and thus Neville, was distantly related to Harry, which was how he came to be in her care. Neville understood the implication: Harry was a Black. He didn't often like to consider that he himself was a Black. After all, Bellatrix, a Black by birth, was the one primarily responsible for torturing his parents into their present condition.

He was suddenly infuriated. He despised Bellatrix and was disgusted that he was in any way related to her. She had broken the fundamental tenet of their House: she had attacked her own. If the Black family had a proper Lord, Neville could have gone before him and demanded redress. At the very least, Bellatrix would have been declared waerlogia, an oath-breaker, and been cast out.

He forced the angry thoughts away and focused instead on his new guest. He was just as stunned as Harry when Augusta stated that Frank and Alice Longbottom were Harry's godparents, and thus the bond between all present was further strengthened magically.

Harry was obviously touched to know that he had godparents and wanted to know where they were. Augusta briskly told him of Frank and Alice's fate and Harry was appropriately sorrowful and enraged. She then announced that James and Lily Potter had been, in fact, Neville's godparents. Harry was sad that his parents had effectively lost another child and vice versa. He had then looked at Neville and declared them brothers.

Neville gaped at him and stared for what seemed an indeterminable length of time, though conscious of Augusta's stunned reaction to the proclamation. She clearly knew something he and Harry did not. Harry then demanded to know why Augusta couldn't have been bothered to check in on him over the years.

Neville didn't understand Harry's anger. Everyone knew that Harry had been hidden away in the Muggle world with maternal relatives. Of course, a moment's pause compelled him to wonder as to why Harry was with them now. What had necessitated it? Had his relatives been injured or worse?

So Harry explained in very loose terms why he was there and Neville was appropriately horrified.

How could this have happened to Harry Potter? Who had allowed this travesty and what was being done about it? Neville was further appalled at Harry's ignorance of their world. He knew nothing! Had been told nothing of his family and their noble history!

Augusta, cheeks stained, revealed that she had trusted the wrong person, that she too had bought into the promises of the one who had taken Harry away from their world.
"Albus Dumbledore," Harry said, voice clipped.

"Yes," she seethed, "and had I been home that awful night, had Bellatrix killed me, I have no doubt Dumbledore would have had a similar future planned for my grandson."

That declaration served to quell some of Harry's wrath. He wanted to be angry at this woman. Oh, he didn't like her, thought her lazy and self-involved, but he also couldn't deny that she had been dealt more than her share of misery. She had lost her child and his wife and been left alone to raise a baby with no help from anyone. Still, if only she had bothered, if only she could have drummed up the interest, he and Neville could have been raised together as brothers, as their parents had clearly wanted.

"Why did you take me?" Harry asked. "You didn't have to do it. I managed to figure that much out for myself."

"Because you would have gone to former Death Eaters," Neville interjected. "There's no one else."

Harry stared. "Do you mean to tell me that there are members of our family who served that madman?" His eyes turned toward Augusta. "Are they who hurt your son?"

"Yes."

This was more worthy of consideration, Harry supposed. It mitigated some circumstances. In the end, Frank and Alice were his godparents. This woman didn't owe him anything. Of course, had it been his family in distress, he would've helped, but that was him. Further, Augusta had readily admitted she'd had no idea where Dumbledore had stashed him; no one had.

"Thank you," he said stiffly.

She nodded graciously. It was the least she owed him. She sighed and placed her hands on the table. "What can I do for you, Harry? How can I help you?"

"Educate me," he promptly replied. "I need to know everything about this world, how it works, and its major players. It's been made clear that there are expectations for me and I want to know what they are and how I'm anticipated to respond. Whether or not I will behave as expected has yet to be determined. I'm free of the Dursleys and I thank you for that, but in the space of a month I'm to be placed under the yoke of Dumbledore, as is Neville. We have to know how to deal with him."

Light sparked in Augusta's eyes. "And how do you wish to deal with him?"

Harry smirked. "Cruelly, but legally."

Oh, Augusta was coming to respect this boy.

"But it's Professor Dumbledore!" Neville insisted. "He's the Leader of the Light!"

Augusta rolled her eyes and huffed with disappointment.

Harry stared blankly at him. "What does that even mean?"

Faced with a pointed question, Neville found he had no ready answer.

Harry turned back to Augusta. "Here's what I think: for now, we're stuck with each other. What we truly think about that is irrelevant. Dumbledore is interested in me for whatever reason, and now that I'm here, that means his interest will extend to Neville. How do I protect him?"
Augusta eyes sparked with pride.

"Protect me?" Neville helplessly repeated.

Harry looked at him. "Dumbledore put me with my mother's sister and her family. They hated magic and thus hated me." He paused. "They were horrible to me, Neville," he confessed, hanging his head.

Neville's brow furrowed. Surely Harry didn't mean he was abused! Yes, he had before obliquely stated mistreatment and neglect, but not outright abuse!

"Harry," Augusta said softly, "drink your potions and I will explain to Neville why you're here."

"Perhaps that's for the best," Harry whispered, excusing himself and going in search of his new bag, which contained the potions he was to start this evening. Hedwig cooed at him as they left the room.

Neville turned furious eyes on his grandmother. "What the hell happened to him?" he snarled.

He knew it was awful when his grandmother didn't even bother to admonish him for his language.

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That first night had been so strange.

Neville had been so intrigued by Harry, but the amazing thing was that Harry was just as intrigued by him! Neville couldn't possibly understand why this was so; surely there was nothing very interesting about him. He assumed Harry's real interest had been about the wizarding world but, as the night wore on, Harry's questions were concerned primarily with Neville himself.

What was Neville's favorite color? What were his hobbies? What did he like to read? Did he like music? Did he play an instrument? What subjects did he think he would enjoy at Hogwarts? When did he get Trevor? Could Neville speak with Trevor as Harry did with Hedwig?

No one had ever asked these questions of Neville. No one!

Harry had been thirsty for any information Neville possessed about the Black, Potter, and Longbottom families. Who were their ancestors? Had they been notable for anything? How exactly were Harry and Neville related? Were there other relatives they would encounter at Hogwarts?

All of the questions he thought Harry would ask - about Hogwarts, people, traditions - he poised to Augusta. Neville guessed this made sense. His grandmother was a mover and shaker in their world, albeit from behind the scenes.

But when Harry addressed Neville, the questions were personal, almost as though Harry were trying to get to know him.

So Neville answered - haltingly, at first - until he grew more comfortable with himself.

One thing that became clear was that Harry didn't like the way Augusta treated her grandson. What was absolutely scandalizing was that Harry had no bones about telling her. Indeed, he wasn't intimidated by her at all!
As the night wore on and the Longbottoms became more accustomed to their guest, Augusta fell back into old patterns, criticizing Neville's interests and then offering backhanded compliments to assuage him. Finally, Harry had heard enough.

"Well, Neville, I can honestly say I don't know how you've stood it all these years. I mean, I understand what you're going through, of course, but I have to stay that I much preferred when the Dursleys just beat me. Their words were far more cruel and the figurative bruises lasted much longer than any punch or kick."

Neville's eyes all but fell out of his head while Augusta turned as white as a sheet before her face became florid. She opened her mouth to scold him but Harry cut her off at the pass.

"You know, in twenty years, you two will still have only each other, but Neville will be holding all the power. He is your only family. If I never saw the Dursleys again, it would be too soon, and the next time we cross paths, they might be lucky to escape unscathed." He glowered. "But as angry as I am with them, as angry as I will always be, I would still show them more mercy than they ever showed me. I can only hope for your sake that Neville feels the same about you."

"Who do you think ..."

"I don't like bullies, Lady Longbottom, and that's exactly what you are. You browbeat your grandson for not living up to ideals created entirely within your own mind. I don't think your own son ever met them. I doubt very much you could meet them yourself. The only reason you treat him as you do is because you know you can get away with it."

His eyes narrowed. "You won't with me around. Neville might not be willing to defend himself where you're concerned, so I'll do it for him. I've been pushed around my entire life by people a lot scarier than you and I survived, so if you think I'm going to roll over because of an exasperated sigh or a threatening glare, think again. You don't scare me. You don't intimidate me."

"And before you spout off about returning me to Amelia Bones, you might first think about what I'll say when she asks about my experience here and how I will answer."

Augusta snarled. "Just because you're the Boy Who Lived ..."

Harry laughed. "You say that as though it's supposed to mean something." He shook his head. "It doesn't. Master Filius told me about all of the books written of my allegedly charmed life, but you know they were nothing but lies. Being the Boy Who Lived means nothing to me. Who I am is the Boy Whose Parents Died."

He shrugged. "So go ahead and send me away. Call Madam Bones and have me shipped off to our darker relatives. You know where I've been. You know what I've been through. I can take the Malfoys. Even if I can't, so what? At this point, do you honestly believe I care whether I live or die?"

Augusta was horrified. "You can't mean that," she whispered.

"Sure I do. You have no idea how often I prayed for death, but it never came; it merely threatened. Threats therefore mean little to me. I've been brought to this world, completely ignorant of how it operates, but from what little I've seen, it's not so different. Children are still treated as little more than furniture instead of the people we are. Children have fought wars and built nations, Lady Longbottom. I refuse to be considered as less of a person simply because I'm young."

He gave her a dark smile. "This is what results when children like me are raised as we are. I don't
give a toss about authority because it's obvious that authority is just as corrupt, if not more so, than the majority. They simply have more money or power. I don't extend respect as a courtesy; it must be earned. Neville has earned mine; therefore, I stand with him. Even if that is against you."

Augusta could never say that he had just earned hers. "You are your mother's son."

He shrugged. "Again, that means nothing to me. I never knew her. I don't remember her. I expect the comparisons won't end there or with her. Master Filius made it clear this world will be watching me, expecting that I will be the reincarnation of my parents and their great love. I'm just me. I have no interest in being anything or anyone else. I'm not here to save anyone. I'm not here to make other people feel better about their lot in life.

"I'm here to learn to control my magic. When I complete my education, I may stay in this world or I may not. I'm not here to make friends. I don't wish to make enemies, but if it happens, that's life. I've learned to look out for myself because no one else ever has. No one else ever will, at least without their own agenda. I'm not going to be used. If I allow another to use me, you can best be certain I'll be getting something out of it."

Augusta had no words. She just felt terribly sad for this child and what had been done to him.

"I neither require nor desire your pity, Lady Longbottom," he said briskly. "We all must make do with the hand we've been dealt. Crying about it has never helped anyone and my own tears dried up long ago. Whining about your suffering or wishing it not to be has never helped anyone. If you want to survive this life, you have to learn to adapt. You learn and you adjust and you take action."

"Surviving isn't living, Harry," she said quietly.

The smile on his face was mysterious and sly. "Are you sure you truly know the difference?"

Harry had been given the room across from Neville, who had been awakened four times during the night because of Harry's screams. He could only imagine what the other boy's nightmares contained.

The third time he had awoken, he had gone out in the hall, lingering outside Harry's door. He wanted to go in but was reticent; it seemed awfully forward. Even though Harry was now living with them, even though he now knew what had been made of Harry's life, Neville couldn't say he felt as though he knew Harry. There was a very good chance Harry wouldn't welcome the interruption, no matter how severe the nightmare.

Still, this was his godbrother. That remained somewhat of a foreign concept to Neville, who wasn't sure just how far this relationship was to run, nor what Harry desired from it. Harry certainly appeared to be enthusiastic about their new relationship, but Neville had detected that Harry also possessed a deep well of pride. Perhaps he wouldn't want his godbrother to witness something so private.

He was warring with himself about whether or not to go into Harry's room when his grandmother appeared in her dressing gown.

"It's all right, Neville," she assured him. "I shall see to Harry."
Neville cocked his head and stared. "You like him, don't you?"

Augusta didn't see the point of lying or prevaricating. "I do."

"Even though he sassed you?"

A small smile played on her lips. "Ah, but he didn't, Neville. He was truthful and forthright, traits I admire. He might have been brutally honest and far too blunt for what our social circle deems appropriate, but I rather think the same could be said of me, don't you agree?"

He raised a brow.

She chuckled before sobering. "Neville, darling, do not fret so about Harry's presence here. I have no plans to return him to those miserable relatives of his, nor will I be sending him back to Madam Bones." She exhaled. "He needs help, Neville. He needs us. It was wrong of me not to inquire after his wellbeing all of these years." She shook her head angrily. "I never should have trusted Dumbledore."

Neville gnawed on his lip.

Augusta recognized that for what it was. "Ask your question, Neville. Never be afraid to ask questions. It is how you learn. If I myself have learned anything this night, it is that I have been far too strict with you. It is difficult for me to say, darling, but I love you very much.

"I know your parents would not be pleased with how I have raised you. I myself am not pleased. I justified my poor behavior by thinking I was too set in my ways, when the truth of the matter is that I was lazy and stricken with grief. Those are not excuses, however. Harry was right this evening. Soon you will be off at Hogwarts and under Dumbledore's mercurial eye. Nothing pleases me more than that you boys will be able to look out for each other."

"Why did Dumbledore do this?" Neville blurted. "Why did leave Harry with those awful people? Surely there must have been a reason. Harry should have been here with us!"

Augusta was about to respond, but her grandson summarily cut her off.

"Why wasn't he with us?" he demanded, eyes narrowed. "Mum and Dad weren't attacked until after the Potters fell. Sirius Black had already been imprisoned. Harry should have been placed with Mum and Dad immediately."

A gleam of approval entered Augusta's eye and Neville took that as permission to extrapolate further.

"It's well known the Potters had gone under the Fidelius and were later betrayed by Sirius Black."

Neville didn't so much as blink as he registered the shadow now present on his grandmother's face. Something to do with Black. He knew she wouldn't answer if pressed, so he filed it away to ponder later.

"We were also under the Fidelius," he continued. "I overheard you tell Uncle Algie that Mum and Dad didn't want it removed until all of the worst Death Eaters had been rounded up."

Neville didn't so much as blink as he registered the shadow now present on his grandmother's face. Something to do with Black. He knew she wouldn't answer if pressed, so he filed it away to ponder later.

"I don't know," she said honestly. "I've never known. I was not the Secret Keeper, my darling, and, even if I wanted to, I could have never told a soul. I've examined my Occlumency shields thoroughly several times over these past years and have found not a single shred of proof that I've"
been Obliviated. I even had Algie check."

His eyes widened.

"Even if I had been kidnapped and then Obliviated, I wouldn't have been able to be forced to reveal our location. I don't know how they found us, and believe me, sweet boy, that question had kept me up many a night since."

"Why did my parents go into hiding? Why did the Potters? I've checked the dates, Gran. It was about the same time. It must have been related. Do you know?"

"Yes," she admitted.

"Will you tell me?"

She hesitated. "Yes," she finally said, "but not tonight."

He nodded reluctantly. "It has something to do with Dumbledore, though. He's tried to see me over the years, but you've never let him in. He's tried to talk to me at Ministry function, but you always steer me away. You showed no surprise that it was him who did this to Harry. You don't like him and you don't trust him."

"I do not."

"Will Harry and I be safe at Hogwarts?"

"You will," she vowed. "I will see to that. There is much I need to tell you, Neville, and I was wrong not to do it before. Alas, my Gryffindor courage has failed me in this respect. However, now with Harry here, I realize I have been foolish. I've tried to so hard to keep you safe, but being kept ignorant will not keep you safe."

She stared at him. "How is your Occlumency?"

"Second level," he promptly replied, "but I have a feeling it needs to be improved."

"It does," she said, "and I will help you with that. You, in turn, must help Harry. Starting tomorrow, tell him the basics. Explain what it is and why it's necessary. Help him learn to meditate. There's no better way to learn than to teach, so teach him. He's a strong boy. He should pick it up fairly quickly."

"I can feel his magic," Neville whispered. "It's unlike anything I've ever experienced." He looked up into her eyes. "The books might be lies, but the legend is not. He is stupidly powerful."

She nodded. "He always was. Even as an infant, his incidents of magic were astonishing." She paused. "In fact, looking back, he had a level of control he should not have possessed. They could never be explained away as mere accidents. Yes, he is powerful."

"People will want him. They will want to use him, hurt him."

"They will," she said, voice shaking with anger.

"I won't let them."

She smirked. "I know." She then disappeared into Harry's room.

Neville stood outside for a few more moments until Harry's screams ceased. He then returned to
Amelia Bones was in her office bright and early the next morning, determined to find a resolution about how to deal with the Potter and Black situations while minimizing Fudge's interference.

Although she despised the man personally, he wasn't completely hapless as Minister. Cornelius had contacts in every corner of their society, even the dangerous and disreputable ones, and was often the first to know everything. He would feign surprises during briefings, but Amelia knew it was nothing more than acting. If nothing else, Cornelius Fudge was a consummate politician.

He was also very malleable if one knew how to approach him. The easiest way to do this was to anticipate his every question and demand, presenting him a skewed action plan which would leave him unscathed in the public eye. She believed she could accomplish this with regard to Harry Potter's treatment, but the Black case would require much more thought.

Sirius had managed to survive ten years in Azkaban and, as sorry as she was for it, he might have to spend a few more months there. Better a known evil like Azkaban then forcing a release without all her ducks in a row. The main duck would be Harry Potter himself and how open he would be to the idea percolating around her brain. She would require Augusta's assistance. Susan might also be useful.

She was jolted from her thoughts by the appearance of an elf who had blown through every Ministry ward and her own personal wards to stand unruffled before her.

Amelia's consternation slipped into cordiality. "Good morning, Nadia. What brings you from across the Pond?"

Nadia Goodacre, the Cultural and Press Attaché for Ambassador Kurt Hummel, smiled. "Good morning, Madam Bones. I sincerely apologize for this unannounced visit, but I have an urgent communiqué for you from the Ambassador."

Amelia raised a brow, wondering why on earth Kurt Hummel would be contacting her. She knew him socially and considered him an extraordinary person by every possible measure, but they were not confidants. They were not even countrymen! Their correspondence had dwindled since the Wizengamot had declined to participate in the GYAP, a decision which still rankled. Susan would have made an amazing Ambassador and what a coup for a British woman, regardless of age!

Nadia adjusted her skirt and smoothed her hair, swept up in an elaborate French twist.

Amelia couldn't help but stare. Nadia was an elf, yes, but she was not a House Elf, despite her appearance. She had diminutive size of the elves with which Amelia was familiar, though perhaps Nadia was two heads taller. Her features were vaguely elfin, but much more refined. Her eyes were unnaturally large but not protuberant. They were a dazzling shade of aquamarine with forest green threads and always appeared wary and alert. Her nose was petite and pointed, rather than long and bulbous, and her ears were almost human, though pointed at the tips. Her skin tone was pale and creamy, with a slight golden tinge.

Nadia also had hair, a lot of it, thick and wavy, its color a dark chestnut. She wore clothes - designer clothes - of the Muggle variety tailored to fit her small frame. In fact, she was currently donned in a navy business suit with camel piping, underneath of which was a silk taupe camisole.
She wore makeup and jewelry. Her posture was rigid and confident. Her diction was excellent and her grammar flawless.

She held a Masters in Public Relations from Yale, for Merlin's sake! After receiving dual degrees in Mass and Oral Communications from Harvard.

Amelia shook her head to clear it. "I apologize for my woolgathering, Nadia. This has been a most upsetting day and Albus Dumbledore is smack in the middle of it."

Nadia raised a brow. "Unfortunately I am about to add to your burden. For that, you have my apologies."

Amelia frowned in confusion.

Nadia pursed her lips. "Mr. Dumbledore paid an unannounced visit to Ambassador Hummel at his private residence yesterday afternoon."

Amelia's monocle fell from her eye. "He what!"

This was a severe breach of protocol! Regardless of the positions Dumbledore held, he should not have approached the Ambassador without clearing it through proper channels!

"Indeed," Nadia said coolly. "He used an unauthorized portkey and then presented himself to security after illegally making use of the Vice Presidential Apparation Hub. Your Chief Warlock then offered an invitation to Hogwarts and almost caused an international incident when he attempted to use Legilimency on Ambassador Hummel."

Amelia flushed bright red before just as quickly turning pasty white. What had that old fool been thinking! Accosting a foreign dignitary at his own home, and a child at that? Not to mention the titles the Ambassador held in France and Germany! Was Dumbledore trying to start a magical world war?

Nadia shrugged a shoulder. "Unbeknownst to him, the Ambassador is a master Occlumens, so the attempt failed." She smirked. "Rather badly, I should say. Dumbledore only escaped imprisonment by the Ambassador's grace."

Amelia placed her trembling hands on her desk to still them. "What are the Ambassador's demands?" she asked in a defeated voice.

She was furious with Dumbledore! She was so disappointed and ... and ... humiliated by his behavior and flagrant disregard for magical Britain's already sagging international reputation. She was proud of the relationship between the House of Bones and the Ambassador. In fact, should the Ambassador have been a subject of the Crown, they probably would have been allied.

And now Dumbledore had fucked up even more of her life!

Nadia regarded her with detachment. "My apologies, Madam Bones. This communiqué is not intended for the Director of the Department of Magical Law Enforcement, but rather the Regent of the Ancient and Most Noble House of Bones."

Amelia gave an exaggerated blink. "What?"
After the quickest and strangest Apparation of her life, Amelia Bones hurried through Diagon Alley toward Gringotts with Nadia Goodacre, who suddenly appeared quite anxious.

"My ... the Ambassador is in distress."

Amelia almost stumbled, for she was certain the elf had just been about to refer to Kurt Hummel as *master*, though he was in fact no such thing. What could possibly have her so worried? Surely the boy was safe within the walls of the bank!

"Ah, Amelia!"

She winced and cursed under her breath. If she didn't return the greeting, Lucius Malfoy would consider it a snub and would never allow her to forget it in the privacy of the Wizengamot. Blasted politics! She excelled in the art but absolutely loathed the alleged niceties she was compelled to observe.

If her she wasn't employed by the Ministry, if she honestly didn't believe she could make a difference, she would have declared vendetta against this peacock a decade previous. She had never been able to prove it, but she was certain Lucius had participated in the Death Eater raids which had killed her brothers. She often dreamed of him writhing beneath her Cruciatus curse.

"Lucius," she said shortly. "If you will excuse me, my attention is urgently required at Gringotts."

"Oh?" he asked, frowning. "For what, might I ask?"

She gnashed her teeth. This was taking too much time.

And then she had a *thought*, though not necessarily a welcome one.

She could play this one of two ways: she could brush him off and deal with the consequences for the next twenty years or allow him the illusion of lending aid. Even though she didn't need him, he would *feel* needed, would feel included, which would cause his head to swell even further but would also guarantee Draco would be on his best behavior around Susan. She was frankly worried Draco would one day be foolish enough to ask to court her, seeking to ally with a notoriously light house which enjoyed a position of prominence within the Major Arcanum.

"Lucius," she said unctuously, "I would be appreciative if you would accompany me. I may indeed require someone of your stature."

His chest swelled with hubris. "Of course."

She nodded once. "Walk with me. I'll explain on the way."

Amelia was grateful Lucius hadn't done more than look at Nadia with a speculative glance. He might treat his House Elves like offal, but knew better than to insult an elf who looked and was dressed as Nadia was. Obviously she was someone of some importance and he wasn't foolish enough to denigrate an unknown elf.

He wouldn't wish to incur the wrath of an enemy he had yet to engage. A Malfoy would never be
so reckless. Further, from her manner of dress, it could even be inferred that Nadia was a free elf. The magic of free elves was unpredictable and dangerous.

"Lucius, please allow me to introduce Nadia Goodacre, the Press and Cultural Attaché of Ambassador Kurt Hummel." She paused. "I'm sure you are aware of him."

"Yes, of course," the man said quietly, shocking her.

Oh, he was familiar with the boy, even if only by reputation. Draco had been extremely jealous that there existed a boy who had more wealth and power than he could ever hope to enjoy. He had even tried to submit his name as a potential ambassador for Britain before the Wizengamot had declined to participate in GYAP.

Lucius was frankly grateful the program had never gotten off the ground in the Isles. He loved his son but wasn't blind to him. It was more than likely that Draco would have caused several international incidents before he matriculated at Hogwarts. The Malfoys had money, but not enough to pay off the global community because of his son's poor behavior and insistence the world owed him something.

Not for the first time, he wished he had listened to Narcissa about keeping their son in a firm grip rather than letting him run amok like the spoiled brat he had become. It was incredibly embarrassing, especially for Narcissa, whose Black blood considered Draco's coarseness to be obnoxious. Perhaps he should have turned Draco over to her to groom. Lucius had never wanted to be the father Abraxas Malfoy had been; now he wondered if perhaps he had strayed too far toward the other end of the spectrum.

Perhaps it was also not too late. Outside of their immediate circle, Draco would soon be interacting with the Scions and representatives of the Arcana at Hogwarts. Lucius needed his son to make allies, not enemies, and a solid month under Narcissa's shrewd and watchful eye would at least curb some of Draco's rash behavior.

"Ambassador Hummel has elected to attend Hogwarts," she explained, missing his look of utter shock and the greed which entered his eyes. She immediately decided not to mention Quinn Fabray or Santana Lopez.

"You understand what a coup this is for our entire nation," she continued. "We absolutely cannot afford to alienate them. Our international standing is already on shaky ground."

He nodded. Britain was all but a laughingstock in the international community thanks to Dumbledore's lackluster and hapless leadership as well as the widespread corruption, in which Lucius himself participated with great relish. The old man might have been the head of the ICW, but it was no secret he governed the body poorly and wouldn't survive the next election. Still, that was at least twenty years away.

Amelia eternally debated how much to reveal. On the one hand, keeping Lucius in the loop created its own set of problems, but it might be worth it to turn him loose against Dumbledore. Hopefully, the two men would be able to keep each other on relatively short leashes. In fact, depending on how she played this, she might even gain aid for Sirius Black.

A lot could be said of Narcissa Malfoy, but she had never been proven to be a Death Eater. Indeed, though she was cold and reserved, she was nothing less than a model citizen. It was her reputation and her Black blood - and money - which had kept Lucius out of Azkaban. Above all else, she was a Black. If she knew Sirius was innocent of the charges against him, she would seek to set him free, regardless of their differences in politics or views on Voldemort. She would be compelled, as he
was her Lord and Head of House despite her marriage into House Malfoy.

Further, if Lucius was occupied with harassing Albus, it would also keep him away from the Harry Potter debacle, which she was still unsure how to redress. She knew if Lucius knew Harry's history, he would make a play for custody of the boy. He might even get it.

"Ambassador Hummel is already quite angry, and rightfully so, with our country," she said carefully. "He was recruited to Hogwarts by Albus Dumbledore, who was foolish enough arrive in the Magical United States via unauthorized means and then assaulted the Ambassador with an unwarranted and unprovoked Legilimancy attack."

His eyes widened to the size of salad plates. "Idiot!" he seethed. "Madam Bones, this is beyond the pale! He might as well have declared war!"

Not to mention the ICW might become entirely too interested in what went on in magical Britain.

"The Ambassador has declined to press charges," Nadia said smoothly, "though Dumbledore was warned it was a very near thing. As things stand, he is aware of his egregious breach of protocol and has been reprimanded, though informally. The Ambassador is only willing to attend Hogwarts after concessions were made by the Headmaster, who will sign a magical contract of noninterference to be ratified by the governments involved."

Lucius gave a thin, cruel smirk. Oh, how he would have longed to have been a witness to that. He knew little of the Ambassador save what he had been told, but the reputation of the boy's father spoke for itself. Burt Hummel was from an ancient Pureblood German line, but he was a man's man who wasn't afraid to get his hands dirty. He was not above using his considerable power to enforce his will on those who threatened his only child. They might be on opposite sides politically, but Lucius could not help but respect the man.

"And what do you believe is occurring inside of the bank?" he asked.

"Nadia?" Amelia prompted.

"The Ambassador has been rendered unconscious and is need of medical aid at once!" she hissed, hurrying her footsteps.

Amelia and Lucius exchanged a horrified glance and quickly gave chase.

Amelia Bones, when later asked, would claim never before had she witnessed such madness as she did that day in the early morning hours at Gringotts Banks. In the first place it was Gringotts; the very name conjured images of brisk solemnity, a crossroads in which various magical races intersected out of necessity, not brotherhood.

In the second, while the legend of bloodthirsty Goblins stretched long across Britain's history, nothing could ever compare to the sight of three tiny human children being held hostage at spear-point by vicious creatures with rows upon rows of razor-sharp teeth. The Ambassador was unconscious and very pale, setting Lucius Malfoy to sputtering.

The Princess Santana, who Amelia had never met but was nonetheless aware of, had a dagger of Goblin steel embedded in her shoulder as she screamed obscenities at the Goblins surrounding her,
half of whom were mocking and the other impressed by her creative use of vocabulary.

In the middle of it all stood a beautiful young girl with flaxen hair and eyes the color of warm chocolate. Her rosebud mouth was set in a stern moue of simmering rage. She said nothing, did nothing but hold her ground, betrayed only by small tremors in her fingers.

Then one very stupid Goblin, who would later be executed for his impudence, moved toward her, blade drawn.

The girl's eyes widened impossibly and her magic uncoiled and revealed itself. Visually.

"Dear Merlin," Lucius whispered, both terrified and enthralled.

The monocle fell from Amelia's eye.

The girl's aura flared and a strong wind made itself known, blowing her hair back from her face so that it streamed like a pennant behind her head. The very ground began to tremble.

"Big mistake," she seethed.

The Goblin sneered and grunted. "Do not be foolish, human child. You would be wise to consider surrender."

"Very well," she easily agreed. "I accept."

Lucius and Amelia's mouths fell open at her gall.

The Goblin croaked out a peel of laughter. "Idiot girl. You cannot hope to triumph. Your lives were forfeit when you entered this institution."

Her eyes lighted with unholy glee. "Is that so?" she sweetly asked. Her eyes narrowed and he was thrown yards back, crashing into the wall and slumping to the floor.

She then unceremoniously withdrew from her robe a small set of pan pipes.

At once, all other noise died.

"Impossible," Ragnok murmured, eyes large with fear.

"Is it?" the girl cooed before playing a quick series of notes.

"No!" Ragnok screamed, his hands tugging painfully at his ears.

There was an eruption of contained lightening and before them all suddenly stood a Goblin unlike any seen by mortal eyes in centuries. The creature was noticeably taller than their brethren, which was surprising, as she was also female.

"Baslissa," Quinn whispered reverently before dropping to her knees and prostrating herself before the Goblin Queen. Her action was almost immediately copied by every Goblin.

Amelia and Lucius followed. They weren't stupid.

The Baslissa frowned in confusion as her ancient eyes slowly panned her surroundings before widening with horror. "Who has done this?" she murmured.

Quinn's accusatory finger flew out and toward the Goblin she had incapacitated.
"Basílissa," Ragnok greeted before beginning to babble. "My sincerest apologies that you have been disturbed for so paltry a matter ..."

"Paltry?" the Queen smoothly repeated, voice silky and dripping with menace. "You consider this to be paltry, Kúrios Ragnok?"

"O-Of course not," he said quietly bowing his head.

"These klephites ..." the young Goblin heatedly interjected.

"Silence, Steelclaw!" Ragnok hissed.

A sneering Steelclaw threw a mutinous look but complied.

"Your Majesty ..." Ragnok continued

"Your underlings clearly lack regard for their betters, Ragnok," the Queen murmured, "and this blatant disrespect for their sovereign shall not go unpunished."

Steelclaw blinked owlishly, the consequences of his thoughtless and irrational actions infiltrating his brain.

"Tell me, Ragnok," she began, "am I to assume these young children are lying on the floor because they were found to be utilizing the private Apparition ports reserved for employees?"

"Yes, Your Majesty."

"Hm," she said thoughtfully. "Did none of your underlings find it odd they were able to do so? Did no one question the fact that access to those ports is controlled solely by me and, if they were able to use them, they must have had my permission? Did anyone even ask?"

All the color bled from Ragnok's face. "No, my liege," he admitted. "We were fearful the network had been breached."

"So protocol was ignored and human children were attacked inside of Gringotts London," she surmised, nodding. "Are you so very ignorant of public relations, Ragnok? Did I err in judgment when I appointed you to this post? Are you aware that your own employees have been gossiping about these events even while you and I are speaking of them, and to humans, no less?"

His face darkened. "I was not aware, my Queen. This error was mine alone and I accept full responsibility."

"And you will be disciplined," she said neutrally, "but I do not hold you solely responsible. There is a network of employees who work beneath you well trained in matters of protocol and security. Regardless of their overseer, these protocols were not followed."

"No, Lady."

"Tell me, Ragnok, do you have any idea who these children are, of the families they represent?"

"I do not," he said, looking abashed. He immediately understood that he should know, that if the Queen herself were aware of them, they were useful.

She nodded slowly. A flick of her finger locked down the Bank. "The young girl child with the dagger embedded in her shoulder is Santana, the Crowned Princess of Tahuantinsuyu, the Land of the Four Quarters, and named Heir of Esperanza Ramirez."
Ragnok closed his eyes in mortification as Santana smirked up at him.

Lucius Malfoy almost fainted. Had he not used his cane to support himself, he would have tumbled to the floor in an undignified heap. He knew of Santana Lopez and her close relationship with Kurt Hummel, but he had never lain eyes on the girl nor had he expected to in his lifetime. The Dark Lord had terrified and terrorized him, but Esperanza Ramirez was as close to the Bogeyman as anyone had ever encountered.

"I have no doubt you are aware of the struggles between her nation and our own?"

"Yes, Majesty," Ragnok whispered, swallowing heavily.

"Are you also aware that the young boy unconscious at your feet is Kurt Hummel, the son of the Vice President of the Magical United States?"

Ragnok knew then that beheading was a blessing he was likely to be denied. "I was not."

"Noted," she said briskly. "I am sure, however, that you are aware that he is the Global Youth Ambassador for his country?"

"I am."

"And that, as part of his duties, he is the assigned ambassador between the young of our nation and his own? That one of his most cherished friendships is with a Goblin? That he is, in fact, fluent in our language and more knowledgeable of our customs than many of our own people? That, should Esperanza Ramirez and Burt Hummel call upon their respective governments and withdraw their deposits from our coffers, we would be rendered bankrupt? And that is if they do not declare outright war.

"That, in the twenty minutes that have transpired between their entrance and my summoning, the dwarves have already sent envoys outlining comparable services for heavily discounted fees as well as military aid? I am sure you have no problem imagining, should Esperanza Ramirez and Burt Hummel agree, how our economy would be completely devastated, our international reputation destroyed, and a new series of rebellions, which would decidedly not be in our favor, spawned?"

Ragnok held his tongue, knowing better than even to offer promises, which, while heartfelt, would appear trite.

"Did you know that the child who summoned me, Quinn Fabray, is the Countess Lindenov, the daughter of an influential Magical United States Senator, the niece of the Swedish Minister for Magic," her eyes flared, "and my goddaughter?"

Lucius barely suppressed a squeal.

Ragnok sank to his knees.

There had been rumors, of course; everyone had heard them, though they weren't discussed. That the Goblin Queen had magically adopted a human child was unthinkable though unquestioned. Her purview was such that her actions were not debated but accepted, so if a human had been recognized as superlative, then clearly the Queen's judgment was sound.

The Queen gave a considering look at Ragnok and dismissed him from her mind, turning to the unusual elf she spied standing off to the side. Goblins and elves, despite jointly being thought of as lesser by humans, were not allies and never had been. Goblins excelled in the martial arts and were
powerfully magical creatures, but their magic paled in comparison to that of elves. Even the most destructive Goblin knew not to engage directly a human who had an elf in their stable.

Free elves were even more dangerous and possessive. She knew nothing tied this elf to Kurt Hummel other than a bond of true friendship, which was the strongest of all. Many in the international magical creature community had been stunned when a free elf had not only associated herself with a human, but had entered his employ.

Still, the reports murmured about in that same community indicated that Kurt Hummel considered her not only his equal, but his superior. He may have questioned her decisions, but never her judgment. He absolutely respected her and that relationship had caused much speculation and wonderment.

"Good morning, Nadia," the Queen said. "I am surprised you have not yet healed your youngling."

Nadia Goodacre bowed, but did not prostrate herself. Their political stations might not have been equal, but Nadia was the unacknowledged magical titan.

"I would not wish to presume to engage in magic within these hallowed halls without your permission, your Majesty," she said demurely. "However, if I have your leave ... ?"

"Of course."

Nadia strode quickly toward Kurt's prone form, her fingers stretched out above his body. She closed her eyes and let her magic build. She then frowned, which quickly segued to a glower.

The Queen was concerned; this could not mean anything good. "Is there a problem, Nadia?" she asked softly.

"I will be able to save him," Nadia said crisply, her magic already working, "but it will be a very near thing. He has severe neural injuries, your Majesty. Hands were laid upon him and he was shaken nearly to death. He has physical wounds, one of which has traces of poison." Her eyes opened and were empty as she stared at the Goblin Queen. "I might not be able to contain the political ramifications of this thoughtless action."

Santana was about to scream her rage, but a warning glare from Quinn bade her hold her tongue.

"Understood," the Queen whispered. "Please do all you can, Nadia. The entire resources of the Goblin Nation are at your complete disposal."

Nadia gave a curt nod and disappeared with Kurt's body.

The Queen turned her attention to those humans with whom she was unfamiliar. Amelia's Auror robes indicated her position within magical Britain, while the man's foppish finery suggested he was one of the bank's more well-to-do clients.

"It is best you leave," she proclaimed. "What will happen next is an internal Goblin matter and our rites are not to be witnessed by outsiders. Madam Auror, as none of these children are under your jurisdiction, your presence is not needed. However, since this attack occurred on English soil, we will comply with the Treaty and furnish you with a report of our findings."

Amelia rose to her feet, barely conquering her fear and upset, and gave a careful nod, knowing not to speak even though she had been addressed. No British subject had lain eyes on the Goblin sovereign in over five hundred years.
"Englishman," the Queen said to Lucius, "I know better than to demand you speak of this to no one, but you will be vigilant and circumspect with those to whom you choose to reveal today's events. You have no power over the Goblin Nation, while we still have much power over you. Now go."

Amelia and Lucius beat a hasty retreat.

"My darling," she cooed at Quinn, "tell me what happened."

Quinn stood but remained silent until her godmother gave her a look of appraisal and at last of approval. The Queen then proceeded to erect a privacy ward so that their communication would remain such.

Quinn recited the facts concisely and unemotionally in a mixture of English and the Goblin language, utilizing the royal dialect. She was suddenly struck by how odd that fact was to her, at how natural it seemed. She shook her head slightly to clear it and finished giving her report.

The Queen eyed her carefully. "There is much more to this story, child. You have neglected to tell me why you are here in the first place. There's no logical reason. All three of your families bank at Capitol Gringotts in Washington."

Quinn returned the steady gaze. "Are there humans in this bank other than us?"

The Queen raised a brow. Well, she would have if she had brows. "Currently there are not. Those that were present at the time of the attack have had their memories modified and been released."

Quinn's eyes darted to Santana, who gave a grave nod.

"You love her, Q," she said. "More than that, you trust her. I can count on two hands the number of people we trust and still have fingers left over. So if you do, then so do I."

The Queen kept her face blank, but was very pleased with the other girl's response.

Quinn looked up at her godmother. "Perhaps we might remove ourselves to a place that offers more privacy."

The Queen gave a small nod. She had suspected something of a stupendous nature had caused Quinn and her friends to appear here and it seemed as though she was correct.

"Ragnok," she barked. "We have use of your office."

The Chief Goblin bowed deeply and hurried to escort them, desperate for any chance to gain favor in the eyes of his sovereign. He led them through myriad halls until finally arriving at his private office, separate from the one he used to meet clients. He called for refreshments and then began backing out of the room.

"He should stay," Santana grunted. "We may need information he possesses."

Quinn and the Queen regarded her and nodded. Ragnok held his ground and awaited instructions.

"Godmother," Quinn began, "what I am about to reveal is extremely confidential. As you know, I trust you implicitly and know you have the power to command his silence and discretion." She nodded toward Ragnok, who said nothing.

The Queen was at once very concerned. "Are you in trouble, child?"
"No, or perhaps the better answer is not yet. What I need to tell you, however, is highly inflammatory and has the potential to turn wizarding Britain on its ear." Her face closed. "It is imperative no one learns about this until the right time."

"Understood."

Quinn ran her tongue over suddenly dry lips and took in a deep breath. "As you may or may not know, Kurt is adopted."

The Queen's eyes widened. She in fact did not know this information, but it was hardly cataclysmic.

"He was born Liam Potter."

She stared and took no notice when Ragnok tumbled to the ground.

"You understand what this means," Quinn said. "Kurt is the eldest issue of James and Lily Potter. He, not Harry, is the Scion of House Potter. Kurt was taken after the fall of Godric's Hollow and hidden with distant relatives of Alastor Moody at the behest of Albus Dumbledore."

"Is your friend the Boy Who Lived?" the Queen whispered.

"No. Kurt is adamant that it was Harry who vanquished Voldemort that Halloween, although he strongly believes that one of their parents, most likely Lily, was truly responsible for his fall."

The Queen repressed a smirk. The idea that it was the allegedly lowly Muggleborn, who had been treated little better than Goblins and elves by the British wizarding public, was delicious.

"But how can he know this?"

Quinn looked away. "He has what is called eidetic memory. Everything he has ever seen, heard, smelled, or tasted, he can recall. It's why he mastered Occlumency so easily; his mind was already organized far beyond that of which most are capable." She swallowed. "He remembers that night. He remembers Voldemort going for Harry first."

The Queen hissed. Voldemort was as anathema to the Goblin race as he was to humans.

"Moody gave Kurt to the Hummels, who adopted him legally, magically, and by blood." Quinn paused. "Are you aware of the lineages of Burt and Suzanne Hummel?"

"I am."

"Then you know that not only is Kurt the son of the Vice President of the Magical United States but, through his mother, he is also the Duke of Aquitaine and Comte d'Orange; through his father, he is the Prince of Bavaria, though as yet uncrowned."

The Queen released a slow breath. "And he is the heir of Gryffindor."

Quinn stared. This was certainly news to her.

"What!" Santana demanded before shaking her head. "He doesn't know."

"Most do not," the Queen replied. "British wizards are excessively proud of their lineage, but most records were lost in the Middle Ages and thus they cannot trace themselves back much beyond the seventh generation. Goblins, however, have always kept track. Of the Founders, Gryffindor and Hufflepuff are afforded the most respect."
"Most British witches and wizards can claim descent from one of the Founders, but not a direct connection. Ambassador Hummel and his brother can."

Quinn was already over this and plowed through the explanation of what they had been able to gather of Harry, how he was raised and by whom, the well-meaning treachery of Dumbledore, and their own plans to attend Hogwarts.

At last, Ragnok interjected. "I spoke with the account manager who met with Harry Potter, who was accompanied by Filius Flitwick. His report of the encounter matches your own. Dumbledore has vastly overstepped but there is little legal recourse that can be enacted."

Santana waved a hand. "We'll deal with Dumbledore. He has his fingers in too many pots without bothering to pay attention to them too closely. He's not nearly as monolithic as he and others proclaim him to be."

The Queen studied Quinn. "There is little aid I will be able to provide so long as you are in this country."

"I expect none," she said honestly. "There is really nothing you can do, though I appreciate the sentiment. What I would be most grateful for is the opportunity to speak with Ragnok as an advisor whenever one should become necessary. He is the most learned Goblin in the United Kingdom and knows all of the major players."

"He will do this."

Ragnok nodded quickly. He had no quarrel with the directive. He was certainly no fan of Dumbledore or in the poor directions the man had been leading the nation.

The Queen paused. "As Master Hummel is already an Ambassador to the Nation, I cannot award him another title to protect him. Our current relations with South America prohibit me from bestowing a similar title upon the Princess. However, you, my goddaughter, will make public our affiliation."

She shushed Quinn with a look. "I know how powerful and gifted you are, and you have done well to buttress yourself with such accomplished companions, but you are playing a dangerous game and the Ambassador and Princess have resources you do not. I am positive they would not hesitate to do everything in their power to protect you ... "

"You better believe it, lady," Santana barked.

The Queen repressed a grin. She definitely preferred the granddaughter to the grandmother. "... but I want the people of magical Britain to understand that you have your own army on which to call if necessary. Too long have they proffered the delusion that they are superior simply because they choose to believe themselves to be. I will name you a kore of the Goblin Nation. Let them dare come for you then."

Ragnok stared and Quinn eventually nodded her agreement. Both knew there were political shenanigans afoot but trusted the Queen's judgment.

"The question still remains," the Queen said, "of the role the younger Potter will play."

Quinn nodded. "That is where I will require some assistance from you, godmother. Before the ... unpleasantness ... this morning in the Bank, Kurt attempted to explain who he truly was but found himself unable."
Santana darkened. "What the hell was that about, anyway? None of were actually able to say that he was Liam Potter, so why can we do so now?"

The Queen frowned. "Thoughts?" she asked Quinn.

"I can only think of one," the girl replied, "and it has Dumbledore's fingerprints all over it." She blew out a breath. "He cast a Moratorium."

Santana's eyes widened to the size of dinner plate. "That miserable ... wait," she said, blinking owlishly, "he cast no magic while at the Residence, so how is that even possible?"

"He cast no magic in the house," Quinn corrected, "other than the aborted Legilimency attempt, which we expected. I believe he cast his spell on the Apparition Hub, which we used to get here. He created the Moratorium to render us unable to speak of Kurt as Liam Potter, so when we used the Hub ..."

"We were bound," Santana hissed. "That is completely illegal!"

"But not definitively provable," Quinn countered. "The Hub has far too many people using it on a daily basis to be able to trace the signature. Much more worrying is the fact that Dumbledore either knows or, more likely, expects we will become aware of who Kurt really is. He doesn't want us able to share that information until he deems it necessary."

"Then how can we talk about it now?" Santana demanded.

Quinn shrugged. "Most likely because Her Majesty and myself have a magical connection. After the ceremony, part of my magic became Goblin. The Moratorium most likely would not affect the members of the Nation, but who would they tell? Who would believe them? As Godmother is the Goblin sovereign, she has a connection with each of her subjects, which is how Kúrios Ragnok is even able to be privy to this conversation."

Santana glowered. "Options?"

"Few. A Moratorium is very similar to a Fidelius, but conceals an idea or fact rather than a location. Dumbledore probably named himself as Secret-Keeper, which means we won't be able to tell anyone else except those who already know; or members of our family, whom we don't wish to know. Only Dumbledore will be able to vanish the spell."

She paused. "It's possible Kurt will one day be able to overcome it, but not yet. He's very powerful already, but he can't take on Dumbledore."

Santana grunted. "What about the three of us together?"

Quinn thought about it for a moment. "Perhaps," she allowed, "but the backlash would be large enough that Dumbledore would know we canceled the spell, thus he'd know we know he cast it and why." She bit her lip. "I'm hesitant to give him that advantage."

Santana sighed but nodded. "How do we help Kurt?"

"Was Harry able to claim the Lordship?" Quinn asked Ragnok, who looked to the Queen.

"Answer her questions as you would my own."

"He was not," Ragnok replied. "He wasn't even aware of his station. I assume Flitwick has since had that corrected." He paused. "Or the Dowager Longbottom has. He is now in her custody."
"Why." Santana flatly demanded.

Ragnok revealed what had been discovered at St. Mungo's, a copy of which had been forwarded to the Potter account manager, though it was certainly unethical and illegal ... according to human standards.

Quinn had to sit down. "A rape exam?"

"He was not raped," Ragnok said quietly, "but the Dursley man ..."

"Must be eliminated," Santana finished, her tone broaching no argument.

"I concur," said both Ragnok and the Queen.

"Esperanza?" Quinn asked her friend.

Santana nodded. "It would be easiest."

Quinn nodded. "Do it."

"Why is Dumbledore doing this?" the Queen asked. "What is the purpose of all of this chicanery?"

Quinn looked at her. "Voldemort is still alive."

The Queen paled, which was actually rather frightening to witness, and lapsed into furious hissing in her native language.

"How was this accomplished?" Ragnok questioned.

"We suspect Horcruxes," Santana yawned.

"Abominations!" the Queen roared.

Quinn blew out a sigh. "The problem is how to find and eliminate them."

The Queen exchanged a look with Ragnok. "We can help you destroy them but are unable to assist in locating them."

"I'll check with Grandmother," Santana said, shrugging. "That's Old Magic, older even than Egypt. If she doesn't know, she can find out."

Quinn knew better than to ask her godmother about the destruction of the vile objects. She might be an honorary Goblin, but would never be entrusted that kind of knowledge.

"The question remains what to do about Harry," Quinn said. "The fact that he didn't know of or claim the Lordship means little. He is believed to be the Last Scion and is thus eligible to receive it early; others will ask him why he hasn't, especially the Arcana. The Potter seat controls a large bloc of votes and has been vacant for more than a decade. James Potter, while claiming the title, never sat on the Wizengamot. Harry is not only politically viable, but desired."

"What do you wish to do, godchild?" the Queen asked.

"Kurt already came up with an idea," Quinn confessed, "but I hesitate to involve you directly because it would violate the Treaty, which I would never ask you to do. Instead, I am hoping you will agree to a bit of circumspection."
"That seems feasible," the Queen said slowly.

"Kurt sent Nadia to gather Amelia Bones, planning to reveal the truth to her and then renew their families' alliance. He would then have had her help in telling Harry the truth." She shook her head. "That's no longer possible, so it must be revised. A better option would be to bring Bones here and have Kurt tell her his real identity via proxy, which would be you, Godmother."

"Reasonable."

"Due to the Moratorium, Kurt can no longer reveal himself to Harry for an undetermined amount of time. Harry will naturally be curious about the Lordship. However, if we could get Bones to agree to some subterfuge, an alternative option would be for her to tell Harry he is ineligible to claim the title until he reaches his majority. That buys Kurt some time to figure out how to quash the Moratorium and still manage the Potter estate.

"Harry could conceivably be distracted by being informed that he is also Heir Apparent to House Black, a title he can claim presently, one which would afford him as much, if not more, protection than that of Lord Potter."

Ragnok nodded. "Sirius Black, though imprisoned, was never technically disinherited by the previous Lord. As Harry Potter is his godson and named Heir, he could claim the title."

The Queen nodded. "He would have enough to do in order to get that House in order that he wouldn't necessarily bother with House Potter until his majority."

"Exactly," Quinn said.

"Sirius Black presents another problem," Santana interrupted. "We discovered he never received a trial and thus wasn't convicted. He was merely thrown into Azkaban and has been held there ever since. Bones most likely has already discovered this, which explains why Longbottom now has custody of Harry. Obviously Bones persuaded the old crone to accept as Augusta Longbottom was born a Black. The only other possible candidates would be Narcissa Malfoy or her sister Andromeda Tonks."

"We should wait to see how Bones proceeds with this information," Quinn said, "if she actually does anything. We all know how precarious the political situation in this country can be." She sighed. "At any rate, Kurt needs to establish himself as Head of House Potter. What we need Gringotts to do is merely keep that information confidential. We know you will, of course, but there have been times when secrets have been spilled and Dumbledore has spies everywhere."

"Not here," Ragnok seethed.

"Are you so very sure?" Quinn demanded. "Sure enough to put your reputation and that of the Bank and the Nation at risk? Because if even one word of this is publicized and is traced back to this institution, the fallout will make this morning's events pale in comparison."

"Ragnok will handle this assignment on his own with no help from his underlings," the Queen decreed. "Nothing shall be written down. If a problem arises, it will be escalated to me personally."

Quinn blushed. "That isn't necessary, Godmother. You have far more important duties to which to attend."

"I am not doing this solely for you, my darling. Kurt Hummel and Harry Potter are internationally-recognized figures. They are even renowned. Any scent of scandal surrounding them that can be traced, even obliquely, back to Gringotts will see our reputation destroyed. The Gnomes and
Dwarves are waiting in the wings for what they have deemed our inevitable fall.

"I am also not so foolish not to recognize that we are thin ice already with the various nations you lot represent. We are proud warriors, but we are not foolish. We don't fight for the sake of it. There is no honor to be had."

"So now I guess we wait for Kurt," Santana said quietly.

Will stormed Bethesda Magical and stalked the halls until he found Nadia.

"What the hell happened?" he demanded.

She offered a cool gaze in reply. She found this man almost insufferable and it was only his sincere devotion to Kurt that allowed her to put up with him.

Still ...

The worry and fear in his eyes and the grim set of his countenance could not be denied. William truly loved his nephew, his only relation after the death of his sister. As it was, he knew he was lucky that Suzanne and then Kurt had deemed him worthy of notice. He was, after all, nothing but an illegitimate child, a bastard who would normally be consigned to scathing looks and mocking taunts.

But Suzanne had been an inordinately kind woman and had loved her brother, despite their different mothers. After William's mother had perished from the pox when he was barely ten, Suzanne had raised him without a second thought and brought him with her to America after she married the Vice President, then a senator.

Kurt had continued and fostered that relationship. He and Will were not very close, per se, but recognized each other as family and that bond ran deeply between them. It also could not be discounted the level and quality of work William had performed on Kurt's behalf. He was truly an excellent administrator with a keen eye for detail and, when Kurt had been kidnapped the second time, it was Will who had found him and brought him home.

The question was how much to reveal and he appeared to understand this.

"Rest assured, Nadia," he said lowly, "that there is nothing about my nephew I do not know. That he was brought here from Gringotts London has already informed me of several things."

She sighed in both relief and annoyance. "He was attacked by the Goblins inside the bank. Santana was also injured, but not nearly as grievously. Quinn summoned her godmother and the battle was stayed. I brought Kurt home."

"The Queen is now involved," he said for clarification, exhaling when she nodded. "Quinn will handle the rest." He looked around anxiously. "Is there going to be political fallout from this?"

"I shall do my best to contain it, but there are no guarantees. Where is the Vice President?"

Will hesitated. "Kurt had contingencies in place should this happen," he finally answered. "I am not to inform the Vice President unless or until I have definitive information on Kurt's condition,
which I currently don't."

She scowled and shook her head. "I presume you do not wish me to inform you of the nature of his injuries."

"I would prefer not," he agreed. "Kurt is very determined to keep this an internal matter."

"Burt and Carole are his parents!"

"And do you truly believe they are as informed as we are about what is going on here?"

She reared back, eyes wide. "He hasn't told them?"

"There are many things he has not told anyone," Will said with determined vagueness.

She threw up her hands. "Well, then it's a moot point, isn't it? My vows make me unable to discuss this with anyone save those designated by Kurt."

Will offered a tight smile in reply. "Exactly." He cleared his throat. "Am I to assume we're leaving for Hogwarts at the end of the month?"

"We are."

"Then can we just deal with our personal shit right now?" he asked crossly. "Look, Nadia, I know you don't like me, I know my mere presence offends you, but that has no bearing upon that which we are about to embark. Kurt needs us both and I am determined to do anything he requires. I don't care how you feel about me, but we're going to be working together much more closely than we have in the past, so I'm asking you to set aside your antipathy and help me help him."

She gave him a measured look. "You really do love him, don't you?"

Will's eyes softened. "He's the only person in this world who gives a damn about me, Nadia. He's the only one with whom I can talk about my sister. Burt and I have never been close, but we're at least cordial. I know he feels some sort of responsibility toward me because of Suzanne, but I neither need nor want that. Kurt just loves me. That is a precious gift I am not about to surrender."

He was worthier than she had believed. As learned as she was, as powerful as she was, as much as Kurt respected her - perhaps even loved her - it never ceased to amaze her just how much more wise he was than she.
Early morning saw Harry, Neville, and Augusta gathered around the breakfast table in the lavish kitchen being served the repast by Misty, their scullery elf. At Harry's startled grunt, Augusta took the opportunity to explain about House Elves and their role in British wizarding society.

Harry couldn't help but draw parallels between that of the elves and his own existence up to this point. Augusta misconstrued his expression and repressed a sigh, overly familiar with how Muggleborn – or Muggle-raised, in Harry's case – and their views on slavery. She decided to confront the issue head-on.

"House Elves are not slaves, Harry," she said patiently. "They depend on magical families in order to survive. Our magic feeds their own."

Harry found that terse explanation entirely unsatisfactory and turned toward the elf in question.

"Excuse me," he politely began, "but would you answer some questions for me, please?"

The elf offered an owlish blink in reply and immediately looked to Augusta for a cue as how to respond.

"Please answer Master Harry's questions, Misty," she said kindly.

"What is Master Harry wanting to know?" Misty squeaked.

Discomfited at being addressed as *master*, Harry laid it aside temporarily and pressed forward. "If I understand Lady Longbottom correctly, you are a House Elf, yes?"

"Yes, Master Harry."

"As you might be aware, I was raised in the …"

"Muggle," Augusta prompted.

He turned toward her. "What is the origin of this word?"

She stared at him for a moment, her mind racing for an answer, and it soon became obvious she had no idea.

He ignored her. "I come from a non-magical home, Misty, and am thus unfamiliar with House Elves." He tilted his head. "Are you anything like the elves in non-magical literature?"

Neville cocked his head in interest. Muggles had a concept of elves, of magic?

"Misty does not know, Master Harry," replied the forlorn elf. "Misty has not read Muggle literature."

Harry's frown deepened. "Forgive me for being blunt, and please don't take offense, but are you able to read? Are you literate?"

"Oh, yes, Master Harry! House Elves can read. We's just don't be reading Muggle books."

The dichotomy between her obvious intelligence and her manner of speech was confusing, Harry thought, but he would think upon it later. "I see," he said slowly. He struggled for a moment as to
how to phrase his next question before nodding to himself. "Misty, how does the Ministry for Magic classify House Elves?"

"House Elves be magical creatures, so says the Ministry," Misty replied, averting her eyes.

Harry's face brightened. "And how do House Elves classify themselves, Misty?"

For just a moment, a mere second, Harry would have sworn he had seen Misty smirk.

"House Elves be considering themselves a magical race, Master Harry."

Harry smiled and nodded. Neville and Augusta paused in their consumption of porridge, spoons hanging from their fingers. This was certainly news to them.

"And do you have magic of your own?"

Misty paused. "Not as such, Master Harry," she finally said. "House Elves be magical, but innate magic is very weak, not even enough to care for oneself. When a House Elf be bonded to a Master or, better yet, a family, House Elf's magic grows and becomes much more powerful."

"Oh, I see. So the relationship is symbiotic," Harry concluded. "Both parties receive a magical boost from the bonding."

"Yes, Master Harry, sir."

"What if the wizard to whom an elf is bonded is magically weak?"

"Then House Elf's magic is still being stronger, but the stronger the Master, the stronger the House Elf. Best to be bonded to a family and serve in family home. House Elf then receives magic of family unit as well as ambient magic in manor house."

Harry nodded slowly. "What about elves not bonded to a master or family? How to they survive?"

Misty's ears drooped. "They's being sad House Elves, Master Harry. If they's being lucky, such House Elves bond to place, like Hogwarts. Lots of ambient magic in school because of all the students and professors, practiced over centuries. House Elves can draw from that magic."

"Is there more than one type of elf?"

"Oh, yes, Master Harry! There is being many kinds, but House Elves being the only elves left in Britain. House Elves being expelled long ago to this plane because there was being too many elves and not enough magic to sustain them. Elves that became House Elves were sent here during the Culling. Only way to survive was to work for wizard families."

Harry considered her words for several long seconds. "So the other elves are part of our world, but exist outside of it on another plane. They are out of phase with our reality."

"Master Harry is most wise!"

He fought off the blush threatening to erupt. "Thank you for speaking with me, Misty. I might ask you other questions later, if you're willing."

Misty appeared stunned he had thanked her at all, let alone the possibility he would willingly converse with her again. He filed that information away. He wanted to read more about House Elves before picking up the conversation again. He noted she looked immediately to Augusta for approval. The woman offered a regal nod in reply.
Misty curtseyed and popped out of the room.

"Was that Apparition?" Harry wondered.

Neville shook his head to clear it. He'd had elves all of his life and, until this day, he hadn't known most of the information Harry had uncovered in ten minutes. "No, Harry. The concepts are similar, but House Elf magic is radically different from wizarding magic. Elves don't use wands."

Harry stared for a brief moment. "Interesting," he said slowly. "Their magical strength is tied to that of their masters, yet they're unencumbered by our conventions." He looked off into space, contemplating what this might mean. He startled. "Do I own any House Elves?"

Augusta was momentarily flummoxed. "I am unsure, Harry. I know that the Potter line did have House Elves, but have no idea what happened to them after your parents perished." She frowned in thought. "Conceivably, if they were of relatively young age, they might have survived but, as you heard, their magic is tied to that of their masters. With no master, they too might have died."

Harry flinched at the hard truth. "But wouldn't I be their new master?" He shook his head. "Or perhaps not. The Bank told me I was ineligible to claim my House until I reach majority."

"That's wrong," Neville blurted before Augusta could interject. "You're the last of the Potters. You should have been able to claim House Potter the moment you stepped foot inside Gringotts."

The boy was right, of course, though Augusta wished he hadn't been so frank. Still, it was all very illuminating. Harry should have been able to claim Head of House and the Goblins should have guided him through the process. This only meant one thing.

Liam Potter was alive.

Amelia Bones returned to her office in a daze, trying to make sense of what she had just witnessed at the bank. Children attacked! The Queen herself!

She dearly wished she had been able to do something, but as the children were not British citizens, her hands were tied. She desperately hoped Kurt was doing all right and would recover quickly. She was ashamed that his introduction to wizarding Britain had been a series of attacks. First by Dumbledore, then the Goblin Nation.

She knew she must keep her mouth shut about this morning and mention none of it to Dumbledore. She could only pray Lucius would do the same.

She had taken a great risk by drawing him into this web, but she still believed her reasoning sound. If she could set him against Albus and keep him occupied, she would have more time to devote to Harry Potter and Sirius Black.

She absently reached into her pocket for the missive sent to her by the Ambassador in care of Nadia, but it was gone. She paled.

"Damn!"

The Lord Malfoy returned to his manor home as quickly as possible, ordering the nearest elf to fetch the mistress of the house and instruct her to come to the study immediately.

The elf popped away before Lucius could even wince, knowing he'd be in for it when Narcissa
deigned to put in an appearance. She absolutely despised being summoned.

His son Draco toddled into the room, whining about something either Crabbe or Goyle had said or done. Lucius found he didn't much care, deeply regretting allowing his son to enjoy any relationship with the other two boys. Minions were useful, certainly, and had their place, but Draco had inferred from his instructions that he should socialize with Crabbe and Goyle to the exclusion of all others, which was detrimental.

He could understand that his son preferred companions he could order about, but once Draco arrived at Hogwarts, he would learn that friends were much more necessary and much harder to obtain. Draco's penchant for melodrama and enforcing his will upon others would win him no allies and certainly none in Slytherin House, who would openly mock and scorn some ickle First Year who believed he was entitled. It was much more likely his Scion would alienate all of the potential fruitful alliances Lucius had hoped to obtain.

He merely stared at his son with an unimpressed look until Draco quickly took his leave.

Lucius exhaled and sat down wearily in his chair, realizing once again that he had been far too lax in Draco's upbringing. If events passed as he suspected, the House of Malfoy would find itself short of allies when the time came.

Narcissa soon breezed in, brow raised imperiously in silent demand.

Lucius sighed. "I apologize, my darling. I did not intend to summon you as a common Muggle, but the elf left before I could clarify my instructions."

She recognized his sincerity and gave a curt nod in reply. She gracefully seated herself in the seat opposite his and looked curiously at her husband. "What has happened, Lucius?" she asked quietly. "You look most distressed."

"I spent the morning with Amelia Bones."

Narcissa offered a bland look in reply, though she was unsettled, hoping all of that business was never to begin anew. Of course, with Harry Potter's reintroduction to the wizarding world, perhaps it was inevitable.

She waited for him to explain himself and, as his tale unfolded, she found it all rather improbable and, well, frightening.

"You actually saw the Goblin sovereign," she whispered.

"Indeed," he said briskly, trying and failing for nonchalance. He heaved a weary sigh. "It was terrifying. She was terrifying. Her magic is beyond anything I have known, Narcissa, including him."

Her eyes widened.

"The atrium stank of it." He paused. "But that's merely the opening salvo."

She sat listening, forcing her jaws closed to keep from gawping as his tale unfolded. Once he mentioned the names, she immediately knew the children involved. Kurt Hummel being in Britain wasn't terribly surprising; he had been on the Isle several times over the past few years when the GYAP was in its pilot stage. She had heard tell of Quinn Fabray, mainly that she was a regular companion of the young Ambassador and well-connected in her own right. The presence of Santana Lopez, despite knowing she was the Ambassador's other companion, was alarming.
The Fabray girl being the acknowledged and named godchild of the Goblin sovereign was remarkable.

She knew better than to repeat this information and even offered to take a Vow, but Lucius declared it unnecessary. She felt no gratitude. His trust in her was well-earned and hard fought.

"According to Amelia, the young Ambassador has accepted a place at Hogwarts," Lucius said.

Narcissa raised a brow. Had her usually intelligent husband not made the all but automatic leap that the boy's companions would be joining him?

Instead he revealed Dumbledore's recruitment and colossal blunders.

"He attempted Legilimancy?" she hissed. "His sanity has always been questionable, but this is downright idiotic!"

Lucius smirked at her accurate assessment.

She seethed at Dumbledore's disregard for the mental health and stability of children, more than ever concerned for what Draco might face at Hogwarts, but what was she to do? She would never let him attend Durmstrang, and Beauxbatons had long ago refused to accept students of known Dark families. She would just have to trust in Severus to do his best by his godson.

As Lucius pondered how best to ally Draco with the young Ambassador, which Narcissa knew would never happen, she decided to reveal the interesting information she herself had learned this day.

"I received word from my contact at St. Mungo's."

Lucius blinked and turned toward her. His wife's spy network was regrettably far superior to his own and she never had to resort to something as unseemly as bribery. Narcissa had been in the early stages of Healer training when the war began in earnest and the Dark Lord had ordered her removed from the hospital. She would have made too tempting a target for their enemies.

Oh, how she had raged about that. She had understood the need for safeguarding, but she had been a devoted student, first in her year, and had dedicated a significant portion of her life to becoming a Healer. She had been raised since birth to be a proper Pureblood wife but had always resisted the censure to aspire to be anything more. She was more than galas and simpering.

Her intelligence and cunning, for a truer Slytherin hadn't graced the halls of Hogwarts in decades, refused to be denied, however, and Healing was the only acceptable outlet for her talents. That she had been denied still rankled.

Lucius Malfoy was not a humble man by nature, but he was eternally grateful for his marriage. His father had first offered a contract for Andromeda and, though the woman was intelligent and a credit to her House, Lucius had not been pleased. Andromeda was his elder by a few years and he disdained the thought of being considered secondary to her. Thankfully the problem had been solved when Andromeda ran off with that Mudblood.

The contract had then been offered to Bellatrix, a most noxious turn of events that had caused Lucius to sick up when he first heard of it. He was probably equal to Bellatrix in power, but she had been insane even then, and from that insanity she drew upon a ferocity which was terrifying in its totality. He also knew the Dark Lord had designs on Bellatrix, though decidedly unromantic ones, and understood that, should he be affianced to the woman, he probably wouldn't have lasted a year.
Again, Fate intervened and brought that damnable Belgian family to Britain. Never had Lucius been more grateful for a family who had more gold than his own. LeStrange had offered a higher bride price and Bellatrix was married off, but everyone knew she held no allegiance to her husband and suffered him only as long as he proved amusing to her.

So he had been given to Narcissa – and that truly was the gist of it.

The House of Malfoy had been attempting to marry into the House of Black for centuries, since they had first come to Britain. Regardless of their tenure on the Isle, they had been and would always be considered French first and foremost, and thus beneath even the lesser British Houses. Still, they had gold, a lot of it, and respectable wells of magical power. That mattered.

The negotiations had been brutal, which had been anticipated, and Abraxas had made many willing concessions. He was far more interested in becoming a part of House Black than he was in his son's comfort or happiness.

To this day Lucius didn't know whether his father's interest in House Black was legitimate or a mission commanded by the Dark Lord. He supposed it no longer relevant. His father had won. He always had.

Narcissa's parents had agreed to the contract, not because of any real interest in House Malfoy, but to separate her permanently from Cygnus Greengrass, who had been successfully courting her for two years. Their youngest and most beautiful daughter would not be wasted on a neutral family. This only ensured Narcissa's undying hatred for her parents and Abraxas Malfoy, though she did not hold the sins of the father against the son.

Narcissa had scandalously bypassed her own parents to negotiate on her behalf, instead appealing directly to Arcturus, her Lord and the Head of House Black. It was Lucius's first exposure to her genius. The bride price had been doubled, Narcissa would be allowed to pursue a career unencumbered by her husband's feelings on the matter, and lastly, but most importantly, both Abraxas and Lucius agreed that the House of Malfoy would be considered secondary to the House of Black.

Narcissa had maintained primacy. Any subsequent children, while Malfoys in name, would be raised as Blacks. After Draco's birth and the resultant lack of future heirs, Narcissa had obliquely allowed Lucius to take the reins in Draco's education. It was only recently he had come to see that he had erred and proven Narcissa right once again.

Narcissa had been the jewel in the crown of House Black. Its youngest daughter of her generation, she was truly exquisite, easily the most beautiful of her family and Hogwarts year. That had mattered little to Lucius at the time, though it was palliative. He knew his primary duty was fathering an Heir upon a woman of superior stock. As the years went on, he had become increasingly appreciative of his wife's beauty.

However it paled in comparison to her extremely keen mind. Yes, she was the epitome of a true Slytherin, not only ambitious and cunning, but also that rare mixture of an outstanding intellect with the grounding of a dearth of common sense, which most wizards and witches lacked.

She was very powerful. Lucius suspected she was more powerful than himself, and he was certainly no slouch, and had been well educated by her more temperate family members. Her spell repertoire was superior to his own, to that of Bellatrix, and even that of Severus Snape and Minerva McGonagall. The breadth and depth of Narcissa's knowledge humbled him, though he had never told her and never would.
She had been highly coveted by the Dark Lord.

Narcissa had foreseen this and taken steps.

Those steps left Lucius in awe of her. He could say many complimentary things of his wife, but his highest praise was that she was a master stateswoman. She had built up an impressive social network during her schooling, one that extended across houses and over year groups. After graduation, she knew everyone worth knowing and they knew her. She also knew where all the bodies were buried and who had dug the graves. Everyone knew that, as well.

Narcissa Black was respected but not feared, a subtlety lost on most of her contemporaries and elders.

And Lucius did respect her. In fact, she was probably the only person who commanded this level of respect. He feared the Dark Lord. He loathed sycophants like Fudge and benevolent despots like Dumbledore. He tolerated those beneath his social level but could still be useful.

But he did respect his wife. He even loved her. He hadn't planned on it, had tried to resist it, but somewhere along the way, he had fallen in love with her.

He knew she didn't love him in the same vein. She had affection for him, certainly, and perhaps even maintained some platonic love, but she wasn't in love with him. This gave her power over him but, oddly, he didn't resent her for it. Perhaps because she had never tried to abuse it.

At the core of her being, Narcissa was and always would be a Black. Family was everything. She might not love him, but she would defend him to her dying breath.

"I love you."

She startled before staring into his eyes. "I know," she said easily. "I love you, too, husband."

Just not in the way for which he hoped, but that was fine.

"What have you learned, my darling?"

He was instantly concerned when her face became etched with fury.

"Harry Potter was escorted to St. Mungo's yesterday afternoon by Filius Flitwick and Amelia Bones."

Lucius stared at her as she laid forth what she had gleaned. Her outrage was unsurprising and vicious, but he was startled to find it matched his own.

The idea, the very idea that the Scion of an Ancient and Most Noble House had been left like litter on some Muggle doorstep was blasphemous. That said child was then subsequently abused by said Muggles was appalling. That he had been forced to endure a rape examination was unconscionable.

"Where is the child now?" he demanded.

"He was given to Augusta," Narcissa said with some disdain.

Lucius sighed. It was the obvious choice, of course. He could have a made a bid through his wife, but Dumbledore never would have allowed it to go through and there were other matters which required his immediate attention.
"What would you like to do about this?" He knew she was already hatching plots.

Narcissa held her silence for a pregnant moment. "At this time, nothing. It is imperative to gather further information and ascertain how Augusta will go about correcting Scion Potter's ignorance."

"Ignorance?"

"He didn't know he was a wizard, Lucius," she said darkly. "He didn't know magic existed. He knew nothing of our world or his place within it. He knew nothing."

His complexion turned florid. This was unacceptable. Regardless of his feelings about Potter, the Dark Lord, or anything else, the Potter legacy was the oldest of their kind. The boy should have been raised to lead the Arcana as was his birthright and regardless of his eventual affiliations, not be passed around like an albatross.

"It would be most helpful, dear husband, if you could find the time to keep Dumbledore occupied and away from Harry Potter. If I know Augusta, the first thing she will do is ensure the boy learns not to bow and scrape at the feet of the so-called Leader of the Light."

His smirk was cruel. "Amelia let slip that one of the conditions of Ambassador Hummel's matriculation was that Dumbledore allow an analyst of the Ambassador's choosing to assess the current condition of Hogwarts." The smirk stretched into a beatific smile. "All of the problems the Board has attempted to correct, only to be blocked by Dumbledore, suddenly take on new meaning."

She threw her head back and chuckled. "Excellent! And with you leading the charge, Dumbledore will do everything in his power to secure the Ambassador's attendance, if only to save face."

He pinked. "It has also become painfully obvious that I was … wrong … to assume control of Draco's upbringing these past years." He swallowed. "I would be most … grateful … if you would consider aiding me in correcting my error."

Her brows raised, surprised he was humbling himself before her, though pleased he not only saw the error of his ways but admitted needing her assistance

"Of course, my darling," she said easily. "There is not much time, but enough to ensure Draco doesn't go off to Hogwarts and alienate his peers straightaway." She gave him a bland look. "I have your assurance that you shall deal with him accordingly should he be resistant?"

He nodded. "Absolutely. Harry Potter has returned to our world, Narcissa, and you know what that means. This is not the time for petty rivalries or social climbing. You have my full support in whatever methods you require to ensure Draco's compliance."

She nodded, stood, and walked to his side, surprising him with not a perfunctory peck on the cheek, but a sweet kiss on the mouth.

"I'll see to Draco," she purred, "and touch base with my contacts about Scion Potter. You handle Fudge and Dumbledore."

He laughed. "I think I got the worst of the deal."

"Then here's a nugget of information which may help: Scion Potter is fully aware that it was the esteemed Albus Dumbledore who deposited him on a sidewalk like a bag of trash."
Susan Bones skipped through the long hall of her home toward the dining hall, a letter clutched fiercely in her hand. She knew it was beneath her to show off in the manner she was about to do, but she couldn't help herself. She hadn't yet opened the envelope but recognized the sender from their impeccable penmanship.

Kurt had written her!

She was rather enthralled that he had maintained their correspondence despite Britain's appalling stupidity and short-sightedness in turning down a place at the table of the Global Youth Ambassador Program. She had been greatly honored that someone of Kurt's station had not only taken notice of her, but had become her champion.

She knew the program had been a long shot despite Kurt's support, but she had been very grateful for his kindness and vowed to be worthy of his respect and belief in her. She fully expected to make Hufflepuff House when she got to Hogwarts and knew the eyes of her peers would be on her.

She certainly didn't enjoy the celebrity of Harry Potter, nor did she wish to, but over the years the press had drawn parallels between them, even though Auntie Amelia had tried at every turn to thwart them, finally resorting to legal action.

Like Harry, she was a Half-Blood born of a Pureblood father and Muggleborn mother. Like Harry, her entire family had been targeted and exterminated by the Dark Lord, leaving them to be raised by their aunts. Like Harry, she was the only Scion of a Light-oriented First Family whose origins predated the Wizengamot. Like Harry, she was destined to become the Head of her House and lead her generation to what would hopefully be better times.

Her parents, though well-regarded, were not considered the heroes that James and Lily Potter were, not that she cared. Her father had been powerful and had sacrificed his life for hers. Her mother hadn't been the powerhouse that Lily Potter had been, but, from the research she had gathered, no woman was. Lily Potter was widely regarded as the brightest witch of her age, but because she had been Muggleborn, she was considered merely a martyr while James Potter was heralded as a saint.

The misogyny of this world infuriated her and she was determined to change it. She had witnessed firsthand the sneers and taunts leveled at her aunt. Were Auntie Amelia not as powerful as she was, or as forbidding, she never would have risen through the ranks to become the first female Head of the Department of Magical Law Enforcement.

As it was, there were only a handful of past female Ministers, the last of whom had been Millicent Bagnold, whose poor record spoke for itself. It would be years before the magical world would again deign to elect a woman to its highest post.

Susan intended to be that woman. Her friendship with Kurt Hummel had only deepened her resolve. She wondered what Harry Potter thought of their world and if he too had aspirations to improve it.

She knew he lived with his maternal aunt. It hadn't been terribly difficult to deduce. She had pored through the records of those dark years and had come across the wedding announcement for James and Lily Potter, which made mention of Petunia. Lily Potter's parents had perished several months before the attack on Godric's Hollow, which left only Petunia to care for Harry. There were no other named Potters, so if Harry had gone to a paternal relative, they would have been magical and the press made aware.

She had postulated this to Aunt Amelia, who had confirmed the theory with her silence.
Susan was smart enough and savvy enough not to go around repeating this information. She wanted Harry as an ally. House Potter and House Bones, though always cordial, had not maintained an official alliance in over a century. Aunt Amelia had indicated that it had been discussed during the height of the last war, but then her parents had fallen.

Susan had been busy these past years. When she was not being tutored, she was cultivating a network, laying plans and making friends whom she hoped would one day be allies. She knew her greatest advantage in this endeavor would be becoming a Hufflepuff. Often overlooked and underestimated, it was the most social and accepting House – and the most loyal.

Many in the wizarding world tended to mock the importance of Hufflepuff House, dismissing its residents out of hand because they had not the cunning of Slytherin, the courage of Gryffindor, or the intelligence of Ravenclaw, but those people were fools. Hufflepuff embodied all of those qualities, but tempered them with kindness and wisdom.

She was close friends with Neville Longbottom and knew that his House had been allied with House Potter for over a millennium. She wanted to prove herself useful to both Neville and Harry, hoping it would lead to a triad alliance which would cement them as the preeminent powerbrokers of their generation.

Neville would take some work. He was woefully unconfident thanks to his grandmother, but she knew she could get him there, particularly if Harry was amenable to helping.

She enjoyed a close relationship with Hannah Abbott, though that was more out of proximity and convenience than any real feeling. Hannah was a lovely girl but already boy-crazy and considered a gossip. She wasn't malicious in her rumormongering, but she was a busybody and extremely gullible, the first to believe anything she was told and then spread it like it gospel.

Susan fully expected Hannah to make Hufflepuff as well, which was good. It would make it much easier to keep an eye on her.

Thanks to her aunt's position in the Ministry, she was well acquainted with many of the children of its workers. She knew most of the Weasley children. Percy was a bit much for her tastes, but his intelligence was remarkable. The twins, Fred and George, were immature in the extreme, but incredibly powerful. She doubted the family knew just how powerful.

Ron was … well, Ron. His only chance would be if a strong witch or wizard got hold of him and sorted him out. As it stood, he was an obnoxious twit who was always whining when he wasn't eating.

Ginny was more worthy of consideration. She was the first girl born in that family in generations, as well as being the seventh child. Seven was a highly magical number. Susan sensed that Ginny would be powerful, along the lines of the twins, and was interested in how the girl would fare when she arrived at Hogwarts next year.

Draco Malfoy was the affluent version of Ronald Weasley, albeit with the arrogance and entitlement only money could buy. Susan failed to see how Draco was not a huge embarrassment to his parents, but it really wasn't any of her business. She was thankful he mostly ignored her; as a Half-Blood, she was beneath his notice, although he marginally kept to the proprieties when they interacted. After all, her station was vastly superior to his own.

The only troubling thing about the existence of Draco Malfoy was that she knew there was a reasonable chance he might one day come courting her. She would never agree, of course, but she understood how his mind worked. In his view, she was of lower blood but higher rank, which made
her intensely desirable and valuable. If he married her, his own rank would markedly increase and their children would be considered Purebloods. Luckily he was unaware of the intricacies of House Bones. Even if she were stupid enough or bespelled to agree, her House would never be subsumed by his own, nor could he rule it.

She considered Cedric Diggory to be something akin to an older brother. He was a very beautiful and thoughtful boy, and would make someone an excellent match, though she knew it would never be her. He was another reason she would be insistent on Hufflepuff when it came time to be Sorted: she was determined to look out for him. He was too sweet and naïve to derail the girls and young men who would soon be circling him like vultures, so she would do it for him.

She nodded to herself.

The other Ministry children were more or less acquaintances than actual friends: the Greengrass sisters, Theodore Nott, Oliver Wood, and Lavender Brown. There were others, but Susan knew it wasn't yet time to consider them.

Daphne Greengrass was cold and aloof but managed the social niceties well enough; Astoria was much more pleasant company. Theodore Nott made her suspicious, though she couldn't exactly explain why. Oliver Wood was ridiculously good looking and a lot of fun, if more than a bit obsessed with Quidditch. She classified Lavender in the same vein as Hannah, surprised the two girls weren't closer friends.

Another one who worried her was Luna Lovegood, who would be in Ginny Weasley's class next year. Luna appeared to be a fanciful and eccentric girl, but Susan was very observant and saw through the carefully crafted veil.

Luna Lovegood was powerful and already in possession of a wand. And she knew how to use it. Her spell repertoire ran the gamut from standard charms to the most obscure hexes, probably owing to the fact her late mother was an Unspeakable – another fact Susan shouldn't have known but had nevertheless discovered. As the last Bones Scion, she also knew precisely the Houses to which Luna was Heir and was very interested in seeing what the girl would do once it came time to lay claim to her titles. Susan knew it would behoove her to form a closer relationship with her.

Luna Lovegood was a proper witch. Susan well remembered the girl's mother, Eos, who had been a close friend of Aunt Amelia, and Luna was an excellent blend of her parents. She had her father's paranoia and belief in all things being possible, but also her mother's intelligence and ferocity. She had purposefully cultivated a reputation as a misfit so that she might better keep a watchful eye on her surroundings and the people who moved within them, all the while encouraging them to discount her with their every glance.

Clever, clever girl.

Susan knew she herself didn't have the patience or personality to go that route, but she deeply respected Luna for playing to her strengths. Those who would dismiss her would come to learn the hard way what a mistake that was.

Luna also had her own defender in the form of Cedric Diggory, whose lands shared a border. Cedric loved Luna fiercely as the little sister he never had, even more so than Susan, and while he was simply too decent to defend himself, he would fight to the death for Luna.

Hogwarts was sure to be an interesting experience.

But now was the time for breakfast and Kurt's letter.
Excitement rekindled, she skidded into the formal dining room in time to see Aunt Amelia emerge from the Floo.

"At the office already?" she chirped.

Amelia rolled her eyes. "There was a situation which required my attention," she conceded, "but has since been resolved."

It hadn't been resolved in the least and she was desperate to know how Kurt was faring, but she knew better then to send an inquiry. Nadia would contact her at the appropriate time.

"What has you in such a good mood?" she asked her niece.

Susan thrust her hand in the air. "I received a letter from Kurt!"

Amelia managed not to stare and demand an explanation. She assumed correctly that the missive was sent prior to Kurt's appearance at Gringotts and the turmoil that had then unfolded.

"What news does it bring?"

Susan shrugged. "I haven't opened it yet. I wanted to wait for you."

Amelia smiled and ushered her over to the table, where breakfast appeared as they sat down.

"Well, don't stand on ceremony, girl!" she chuckled. "Go ahead and open it."

Susan ripped the envelope with enthusiasm, withdrew the letter, and began devouring its contents, a frown developing and increasing the more she read.

"Susan?" Amelia prompted.

"Auntie," Susan said slowly. "Kurt is asking for my impressions of my year group. He specifically names the Greengrass girls, Draco Malfoy, the Weasleys, Lavender Brown, and Hannah." Her brows furrowed. "But he doesn't really explain why."

She looked away, trying to process the reasoning behind the request.

Amelia tented her fingers and internally debated how to approach this. She didn't really see the harm in revealing Kurt planned to attend Hogwarts, but thought it wise not to mention Quinn Fabray or Santana Lopez. If Kurt hadn't indicated they would be joining him, there was a reason for it.

"I believe I can shed some light on this."

It was very early morning in the Magical United States when Kurt returned from Bethesda Medical with Will and Nadia in tow. They had crafted a clever cover story to appease Carole and Finn, who of course reacted to his condition with panic and smothering.

Kurt had insisted Nadia bring him home after he had regained consciousness. He hated hospitals and had no desire to stay in one, despite medical advice. Hospitals only reminded of his mother. He knew it was antithetical to his goal of becoming a Healer, but he had found that hospitals were more in the business of healing than actual healing. He planned to open his own clinic one day and would be running things very differently.

Santana and Quinn were naturally furious and overprotective. Quinn hadn't cared one whit about
his directive to Will and Nadia that his parents not be informed. She had taken it upon herself and summoned Burt and Carole before she and Santana returned to their own homes to change clothes and gather materials.

Finn had been practically hysterical to discover Kurt had been hurt, though he hadn't said anything. Instead, he'd merely crawled into Kurt's bed, cuddled him closely, and sang to him.

Kurt allowed it because he dearly loved his brother and Finn was one of the few from whom he tolerated physical affection. He also knew it was the best way to alleviate his brother's anxiety. Despite the fact that Kurt was the elder, Finn considered himself the older brother because he was taller and stronger than Kurt himself. Even though he knew Kurt was vastly more powerful, he still insisted he had an obligation to protect Kurt at all costs and his physicality was the only method he had to offer.

"Finn, I'm really okay," Kurt insisted.

Finn's response was to burrow against Kurt more deeply.

Kurt didn't know how Finn would react when he revealed he would be attending Hogwarts, but he doubted it would be good. Quinn's suggestion that Finn be sent to Beauxbatons was surely a good one, ensuring that Finn was in easy traveling distance so that they could check-up on each other.

Finn reluctantly released Kurt when Nadia announced Quinn and Santana had arrived. He liked Quinn well enough, but Santana was seriously scary and knew she only barely tolerated him. He didn't like her either, but refrained from being too much of a jackass around her, knowing it would only upset Kurt. He left the room declaring his intention to help his mother in the kitchen, most likely by sneaking cookies. He nodded to the girls when Santana stormed inside before scrambling away.

"All right," Burt said slowly, exhaling through flared nostrils, "now tell me what the hell really happened."

Kurt sighed and, with great brevity, explained what had occurred in Gringotts London.

Burt, of course, went ballistic, screaming about his baby and vowing to exterminate all Goblins. Quinn understood the impetus, but was nevertheless offended by his words.

Kurt fell silent and refused to speak until his father got himself under control, simply staring and waiting for the man to get it all out of his system. There was no point in explaining his plans when Burt was incapable of listening.

"Plan?" Santana repeated, glomming onto the word like a life preserver. "You mean you planned this?"

Burt saw his son looking at Will and immediately tried to launch an attack on the younger man.

"Don't you dare," Kurt snapped. "You leave Uncle Will out of this."

Burt paused. It was rare that Kurt invoked the blood relationship. Most people didn't even know Will was related to Kurt at all, only considering the man to be his personal assistant.

"Kurt," Will said softly, "you don't have to defend me."

"I know," Kurt agreed, "and I'm not. Nothing you've done requires a defense. You followed my wishes as I knew you would. If my father has a problem with that, he shall take it up with me, not
you."

Burt heaved an exasperated sigh and rubbed the bridge of his nose. "Tell me why."

"Are you going to listen?" Kurt asked archly.

Another sigh. "Yes, son. I promise I will listen. I'm sure I won't like it, but I'll listen."

Kurt pursed his lips. "As soon as I tried - and failed - to explain my presence at Gringotts, I knew what Dumbledore had done."

Nadia hissed.

Burt narrowed his eyes. "What did that old fool do?"

Kurt glowered. "He cast a Moratorium on our Apparition Hub."

"He did what?" Will barked. Nadia hadn't explained that part of it.

Kurt held up a hand in a bid for silence, his eyes never leaving his father's face. "The damage has already been done. Dumbledore cast a Moratorium on my real identity. It's affected me and the girls and thus everyone we knew or who has come into contact with the Hub. We are unable to tell anyone by birth name."

"That's not exactly the case," Quinn interjected.

Kurt's eyes flashed toward her. "Explain."

"I was able to tell Godmother."

He bit his lip, frowning in thought, before at last nodding. "I assume because you already shared a magical connection?"

"That's what I believe. As you know, Goblin magic differs slightly from human magic in matters of blood and family. Godmother is the Goblin sovereign and has a magical connection with Ragnok, thus he is also aware of who you are."

"We've all used the Hub," Burt said. "So outside of those who didn't already know, we can't tell anyone."

"Right," Santana said. "My grandmother knew, of course, so I spoke with her about what had happened to get her perspective. My parents and Quinn's parents, however, weren't told, and now they can't be; at least not by us. Finn can't be told either."

Quinn remained silent but thought that was probably a blessing.

Will stared at Kurt. "You know what this means."

Kurt looked down at his hands, now folded in his lap.

"What does it mean?" asked both Quinn and Burt.

Nadia snarled. "Dumbledore cast this spell so that if Kurt either knew or became aware that he was born Liam Potter, he would be unable to tell Harry. They share a blood connection, but not a magical one. Not anymore. Dumbledore purposefully and with malice severed their twin bond all those years ago."
"Bastard!" Santana screamed.

Burt looked at her and nodded. He liked that girl.

Quinn's eyes were stormy as she related her conversation with her godmother.

Kurt beamed with approval.

Santana cocked her head. "You never fought back. You let them hurt you."

He scoffed. "Of course I did. It would have been suicide to cast any spells inside that bank. I relied on Quinn to summon her godmother and explain the situation." He turned toward Quinn. "I knew that if I could sense the Moratorium, you certainly could."

She gave him a brusque nod. One of her talents was hypersensation, which meant she felt magic more keenly than most others. Although she had neglected to tell Dumbledore, she had already begun training in Arithmancy and could thus analyze a large number of spells and determine their purpose and their caster. She relied more on her innate sense than her training, however.

Due to their bond, Santana and Kurt also shared the talent, but not to the degree of which Quinn possessed it. That was true of all of their individual gifts.

Will had a wry smile on his face. "So you let the Goblins attack you knowing how Quinn would respond. You knew she would tell her godmother and formulate a counter methodology. You now have another way forward, as well as having the Goblins in your pocket, which is in addition to purloining their British chieftain as your adviser." He let out a low whistle. "Diabolical. Reckless and perhaps naïve, but diabolical."

Burt gaped.

Santana smirked. "With the added bonus of pushing Quinn front and center and giving her the confidence to know she's as integral to all of this as you or me."

Quinn's head swung toward her.

Kurt nodded. "Quinn, I cannot fathom why but, for whatever reason, you have always believed you're the lesser member of this trio." He shook his head. "It's not true. No matter how many times we've told you, you choose to believe you're the weak link." His eyes bored into her. "That's wrong. Can't you feel how important you are?"

"You and Santana are just so much more powerful," she whispered, looking down at the floor.

"Bullshit," Santana declared. "First of all, that has not been proven and it's not a given. Kurt is already more powerful than both of us and will likely remain such. My family might be older, Kurt's might be more renowned, but you have a legacy of your own, Q, one of which you should be damn proud. We all have our different talents and abilities, and every single one is needed. Second, we don't know how powerful we'll become and it ultimately doesn't matter. It's always going to be the three of us, Quinn. Always. Trust in that. Trust in us."

Quinn averted her eyes.

"Look at me," Kurt demanded.

Reluctantly, she complied.
"Santana is the emotion and I am the intellect. We draw tremendous power from that. But you're the balance, Quinn. You're our balance. We cannot do this without you and I, for one, have no wish to do so."

She blinked rapidly and turned toward Santana, who nodded and gave her a kind smile.

"Look at what you've already done," Santana said. "You shut those Goblins down. You brought their sovereign to our side. You procured for us an adviser who is probably more connected to everything that goes on in that country than anyone else. You came up with a plan - an excellent one, by the way - on the spur of the moment to help Kurt, to help Harry, and to help us vanquish Voldefuck for good."

She raised a brow. "Are you understanding the awesome here?"

Quinn's blush deepened.

"Remember that I was conscious for all of it, Q. I saw you. With nothing more than a glance, you threw that Goblin clear across the room and sent him crashing into a stone wall. That wasn't accidental. You were in complete control of your magic, which you produced in a physical manifestation. You cast silently and wandlessly, and achieved your goal while under enormous physical and psychological stress as the rest of the Goblins threatened you with grievous bodily harm and even death."

Will stared.

Burt smirked. "Good girl."

"That is most impressive magic," Nadia said quietly.

Quinn fought back her blush and focused on matter as hand. "What's our next step?"

"What do you think it should be?" Kurt volleyed.

She balked momentarily before asserting a measure of calm over herself.

Then she smiled.

Santana feigned sleep as she listened to Kurt and Quinn plot about how to get around the Moratorium. She approved of their ideas. They could handle this without her and were going to have to do just that.

The scene in the Bank had awoken a realization within her, one she didn't like. One she had never truly pondered. She still believed that attending Hogwarts was their best chance at getting Harry back. If it didn't work, it didn't work; other avenues could be explored.

The problem was that Kurt had allowed himself to be sacrificed, even if only temporarily, to further their agenda. Yes, the outcome was successful, or moderately so, but the bottom line was that he had been hurt and that was unacceptable.

She loved them. She truly loved them with all her heart and all her soul. She would not countenance them being lost to her again. Or ever.

That was the problem with Kurt Hummel and Quinn Fabray: they were, like her, geniuses; crafty and devious; cunning in the extreme. They were also moral. Granted, their morality was flexible
given the circumstances, but the adventure in the Bank demonstrated that, when push came to shove, Kurt would rather himself be hurt than either of them. That also extended to Harry, Finn, and his parents. Quinn was similar.

They had consciences.

Thankfully, Santana was not burdened with such trivialities.

She was cruel; she knew this and was untroubled by it. She didn't fear she was a sociopath; the fact that she truly loved Kurt, Quinn, and Brittany was proof of this. She loved them selfishly, perhaps, but she loved them.

She wasn't evil, but she was dark.

It was only now that she had come to understand that darkness would be necessary. She couldn't run from it. She couldn't hide from it. She had to embrace it.

She knew the moment they stepped onto British soil to attend that damn school, their plans would change. No matter how many safeguards they instituted, no matter how many contingencies they prepared, as soon as they entered Hogwarts, they would be put on the defensive.

So she would have to be their offense.

She wanted to help Harry, absolutely. She supposed she might even love him in some way as a distant idea or extension of Kurt. What had been done to Harry was disgusting and she wanted it righted. She wanted to help right it. But was he as important to her as Kurt or Quinn or Brittany?

No. It wasn't even a question.

Was he as important as Tina, Mike, or Finn? Possibly. Time would tell.

It wasn't that she didn't only distrust Dumbledore; she distrusted the entire British magical system. It was rigged; poorly, perhaps, but rigged nonetheless. She was perfectly willing to follow Kurt, to let him lead them through that system and undermine it, and she trusted Kurt to do whatever it took to keep her, Quinn, and Harry safe.

What she did not trust was Kurt's willingness to save himself. She had never been given reason to question this until today and, now, she could think of nothing else.

She cracked open an eye and her heart jumped into her throat.

She loved him. Merlin, how she loved him.

She had no doubt he would crawl through every pit in hell to save her and she would do no less for him.

If they had been born differently, if Brittany ...

But they were who they were and Brittany was Brittany, so Kurt could never be her everything, nor could she be that for him. As for Quinn, they might not always get on, but she loved her too and knew Quinn felt the same. They were sisters, true sisters in everything but blood.

She would not lose them.

If they were going to do this right, she had to ensure that every weapon possible was available at their disposal. Titles and crowns, IMAGE scores and transcripts; they were all well and good, but
at the end of all it was power.

She needed power. She needed it to protect them. She needed it to protect herself. She needed it to protect everyone else from her, because if she lost them ...

She wasn't worried about Dumbledore. He was powerful but constrained by his laws and his own morality. That morality was questionable, but it was also somewhat fixed. She could tell that just from her brief interaction with him. She also knew that was what made him dangerous. Nothing was more treacherous than a self-righteous enemy.

And he was an enemy.

Quinn had been wrong yesterday during their conversation with Sylvester. Dumbledore would need to be defeated; he was too entrenched in that society and his misguided belief in his own power for there to be any other option.

That he had severed Kurt's twin bond with Harry so callously, so egregiously, had mortally offended her. It was no longer a question of reestablishing the bond; Kurt and Harry would have to do that for themselves. No, it was a question of how long and in what condition she would allow Dumbledore to linger before punishing him for his hubris.

And then there was Voldemort to consider.

She wasn't foolish. She knew she didn't yet have the power to tackle either one. She might never have that power. She had been speaking truthfully before: Kurt was already far more powerful than either she or Quinn. When they dueled, Quinn, the most sensitive of all of them to the effects of magic, almost appeared to be in a drugged state in Kurt's presence. The amount of magic that he exuded was practically a narcotic to her.

That was another weakness which would soon have to be taken into account. They both needed to learn more self-control. Quinn was too susceptible to the feeling power engendered within her and Kurt leaked way too much magic.

It was possible that once they entered puberty, she and Quinn would catch up to Kurt. Girls tended to mature more quickly than boys, certainly, and Kurt was very small for his age. He had admitted, ruefully, that he didn't expect to have a growth spurt for a number of years.

Even if she and Quinn came to rival Kurt's power, when he finally matured, he would simply outstrip them again. It would make him a target. It would make him desired and wanted. People would try to use and abuse him. She and Quinn would stop it, of course, but the problem was that Kurt was a fundamentally good person. Yes, he was cynical and sarcastic, he could be cold and aloof, but he was genuinely good. He wanted to help people. He would place the welfare of others above his own. He would sacrifice himself for the greater good.

And that meant he was prey to Dumbledore's machinations. No amount of learning, of preparation, of calculation, or even power could compete with someone who could and would manipulate your basic character, be it virtue, flaw, or both.

So she would be vigilant. She would deal with those who sought to bring him harm. She would crush his enemies beneath her heel and feel not a whit of guilt.

Power.

Knowledge was power and, until her magic reached its plateau, it was the only guaranteed avenue to ensure success.
Dumbledore.

Voldemort.

Esperanza had tangled with both and won.

She closed her eyes and settled in for a true sleep.

Tonight it was off to grandmother's house she would go.

Albus rose wearily from his bed after a long and frustratingly sleepless night.

His mistakes with regard to the Potter twins – and, frankly, everything else – continued to weigh heavily on his thoughts. Minerva's long ago warnings about the Dursleys shouted in his mind, overlapped with the ravings of Filius, the seething condemnations of Severus, the mocking taunts of Poppy, and the quiet disapproval of Pomona.

He was seriously contemplating scheduling a physical with Poppy in the afternoon. The cold light of day suggested that he was mentally imbalanced, which was preferable to considering he was outright immoral.

He should never have sent Harry to the Dursleys. He had deluded himself with promises of safety for the boy, but Harry had obviously never been safe. Not even prior to his birth. He had dismissed Lily's numerous complaints about her sister's character as nothing more than sibling rivalry which would have been resolved had Lily not perished.

He had totally underestimated Petunia's jealousy and pettiness, despite knowing firsthand just how reflective they were of her personality. He had wholeheartedly believed that she would embrace the innocence and helplessness of her nephew and dedicate herself to doing the best she could for him in remembrance of her sister's sacrifice.

Was he really so naïve, so blind? It had truly never occurred to him that family could treat blood in such a cruel manner. He and Aberforth didn't often speak, but they loved one another. At their cores, they were family and that mattered. How could it not matter to Petunia? How could she not only authorize but abet her husband's abuse of a child?

No, this could not be allowed to stand. He would have to do something about those horrid people. He owed Lily and James that much, and he certainly owed Harry. He nodded to himself as his resolve deepened. He would visit that … domicile … and look into the Dursleys' eyes. He wanted their memories to betray them. He wanted to witness their shame so that Harry would not have to bear the brunt of that burden alone.

That poor child.

Albus had wept for hours as he pored over the hospital records. He had tried to so hard to protect Harry, to ensure he would be safe and loved, that the sacrifice of his parents would not be in vain. Instead, he had consigned the boy to hell because it was easy, because it was convenient, because Albus couldn't bear to look in those eyes and see Lily looking back at him.

His problems with Lily Potter had been legion, but he had loved that girl, as he had James. They had deserved better. Their child deserved the world.

Now he was faced with the reality that he had once again irreparably failed a child. In his fruitless quest to ensure there would never be another Voldemort, he had sentenced Harry to the same
environment which had produced the last Dark Lord.

It was actually even worse. Regardless of Harry's view on the Dursleys, they were his family, his blood, and they had betrayed him.

His hands curled into fists and shook with rage.

What on earth was wrong with him? How could he have not checked up on Harry? Yes, he had promised no contact, but that clause could have easily been revised. He could and should have demanded monthly visits to assess the boy's welfare. If Petunia's issue was with Albus himself, he could have appointed Minerva or Filius or someone who would fit more easily into the Muggle world and not raise Petunia's ire.

But he hadn't. He had convinced himself of what he knew now – and, frankly, had known then – was erroneous thinking.

Emotions had run high in his office last night, but Albus had nevertheless paid careful attention to Filius' words. The man's assessments of those miserable wards chilled Albus to his very bones. What he had done to Harry was inexcusable, very much akin to the Dursleys' own abuse. No matter his intentions, regardless of his supposedly brilliant strategy, he had fucked this up on a colossal scale.

_Magical Britain is not your fief, Albus. We are not your serfs_

He was so ashamed of himself, and this shame was so much deeper than what he had allowed Tom Riddle to become. He had been so certain in his beliefs, so resolute in his zealotry, so convinced that anyone could change if given the chance … and what were the results?

James and Lily dead. Sirius imprisoned. Remus exiled to Muggle Europe. Alice and Frank forever incapacitated. So many families gone, extinguished like vermin, when he could have saved them. So many orphans who most likely had no idea he was ultimately responsible for their lots in life.

Minerva's trust in him was perhaps irrevocably lost. He well knew she often exhibited a blind loyalty where he was concerned. At times, it had sincerely bothered him; at others, he had used it to his advantage; but her eyes had been well and truly opened last night. Never again would she merely take his word at face value.

He stroked his beard. Perhaps that was a good thing. Perhaps his greatest error these past years was not allowing someone to check him, to question him, to demand he explain his reasoning. He had been too insular, too ensconced in the power given to him, and everyone else had paid the price. If he had trusted in Filius – and, indeed, the man had never given a reason to distrust him – those wards would never have been created.

He had been outraged last night when Filius obliquely accused him of using memory charms on Minerva, for he had done no such thing … though had considered it at the time, believing it to be more expedient than pleading with her. The thought filled him with deep shame.

But in the end, as he knew she would, she had capitulated to his demands and Harry had paid the price. He knew it would be a very long time before Minerva would forgive him for this, if she ever did. He might have permanently alienated his dearest friend in all the world, all because he had been so sure of his right to make decisions for everyone else.

Unbidden, a long-ago memory of a conversation with Amelia Bones entered his thoughts, back from the height of the last war when he had been trying to recruit her for the Order.
"You mince around in your ridiculous robes and stupid hats preaching forgiveness and this nebulous concept of the Greater Good, but I've noticed you have never bothered to define this doctrine by which you insist the rest of us should live our lives. I wonder just why that is?"

He closed his eyes as resentment and anxiety bubbled in his blood. In his desire to correct his own past misdeeds, he had become the very thing he had tried so hard to fight. There was a thin line between love and hate, and, in reviewing his past actions, he had to admit there was now a thin line between himself and what Gellert had become.

The Greater Good. He scoffed. And what about the last time it had been his goal? What about all of the atrocities committed in the name of that erstwhile and ignoble goal?

"My brothers were fools to place their lives in your hands! They were so sure you held all the answers because you insisted it was so, but what did it get them besides six feet of earth apiece? The entire so-called Light side mourns their deaths, but what about Sarah, Dumbledore? No one cares about her; she's just another Muggleborn sacrificed on the chessboard you and Voldemort have made our lives! What about Susan? What am I to tell her when she asks where her parents are? Where her uncle, aunts, and cousins are? Why I am the only family member she has left?

"And what if something happens to me? What is to become of her? You might have fooled James and Sirius with all of your double-speak and righteous indignation, but I see through you. I always have. Rest assured, I'm not the only one. You stand back while that bastard and his minions murder our people with impunity and then command your illicit army only to stun and capture.

"You disgust me! You have tacitly allowed entire families to be extinguished, for the murder of women and children! Do you know why Death Eaters kill, Dumbledore? It's no great mystery. It's because they can. It's because they know they'll get away with it. And from whom did they learn that lesson? You."

He felt tears leaking down his cheeks and was further shamed by them. He had no right to cry. Amelia had been correct, then, but he had been too arrogant to see it; too convinced he had all the right moves if only the players would obey his edicts.

"People are not chess pieces, Dumbledore! They are living, breathing human beings. They have families and friends and children. They have lives! They do not exist merely to satisfy and pacify your ego. You stand here in your lofty ivory tower and dismiss the fact that our entire society is being decimated by a raving psychopath while bleating how we should let you make the hard choices, that only you can see the big picture. That's shit! Your meaningless platitude that we should all just leave the worrying up to you is so much nonsense. Let you do the worrying? Well, there's only wrong thing wrong with that, Dumbledore: you don't have to do the dying."

Oh, he had so been furious with her. She had always been a thorn in his side, one of the few students who not only questioned him but openly opposed him when she thought him wrong, which was often. His own bitterness had allowed him to dismiss her arguments and it was only now that he realized just how right she had been.

Minerva had lost her sons and Pomona her sister. Alastor had lost his wife. Molly had lost her brothers. Most of the Weasley family outside of Arthur's brood was ravaged. The McKinnons. The Whites. The Selwyns. The Devanes. The MacAllisters.

James and Lily. Frank and Alice.

So many gone with no thought and nothing more than two words.
Amelia had lost her entire family save Susan. As it was, he knew he was very lucky Amelia had agreed to let Susan attend Hogwarts at all. Amelia Bones was a popular figure in wizarding Britain, one of the few women who held power and one of the few all men respected, even those who disagreed with her politically. She was a fearsome witch and a righteous warrior. She had dueled Voldemort to a draw singlehandedly. Twice. No one else alive but him could make that claim.

She could have easily sent Susan to Beauxbatons and the majority of the Light-oriented Purebloods would have followed, as well as almost all the Half-Bloods.

And now, with poor little Harry's situation, she was undoubtedly even more revolted by Albus Dumbledore, not that he blamed her.

Harry.

"Oh, my boy," he warbled. "My dear, sweet boy."

He had been one of the first to hold Harry after his birth, surprised Lily had let him in the room. Perhaps she was just too exhausted to deny him, or possibly drugged. When an excited and babbling James had placed little Harry in his hands …

"I'm so sorry," he sobbed. "I'm so sorry, my dear boy."

And then his breath caught in his throat.

Liam.

No – he forcibly reminded himself – Kurt.

He had allowed Kurt to be forgotten; worse, he had forced the issue. He had sent the child away with little more than a thought, knowing Petunia would never take two. Why then, pray, did he believe she would do better with only one? He had denied Kurt his legacy, his heritage, his other half, and for what? To keep Harry safe?

Oh, he had made the argument then that Kurt would have been used against Harry, which was indeed a possibility, but why shouldn't the wards have protected Kurt as they were supposed to do for Harry? At least the boys would have had each other. Perhaps he even could have adjusted the wards insofar as, both boys being of Lily's blood, Petunia wouldn't have been necessary at all.

No, he might not want to have admitted it then, or even now, but he wanted Harry out of the wizarding world. He wanted the child humble and pliable. He had known Petunia would have been hard on Harry and, if he had known that, he should have anticipated her rancor and vitriol would be aimed at the child rather than the sister who had escaped her wrath.

Why hadn't it occurred to him that twins were far stronger together than apart?

Because they would have had each other. They wouldn't have needed him. He needed Harry to need him so that he could guide Harry toward his destiny.

But … what if that destiny was not as certain as he had convinced himself it was?

What if Harry didn't have to die?

What if he had been wrong? About ... everything?

"Merlin!"
What if Kurt truly was the power Voldemort knew not? Were that the case, how much time had he wasted? How much greater the danger for his missteps?

The Moratorium.

Oh, no!

Foolish! Idiotic! Stupid!

He had acted rashly again, so sure he knew best, and now …

Oh, this was disastrous! Not only had he tipped his hand, he had done it so blatantly. Surely Burt Hummel knew the true identity of his son and, once he used the Hub …

Albus gasped.

He had cast the spell on the Hub prior to using it himself! This meant he too was now its constraints! How could he have done something so positively amateurish? There was nothing he could do now, no one he could tell, until the charm was dispelled – which wouldn't be for years because he had thought he would need that time to prepare.

He had torn the twins apart all those years ago and, now, when it was within his power to reunite them, to apologize for his actions, to beg forgiveness, he was unable. He wouldn't be permitted to reveal Kurt Hummel as Liam Potter for another four years. He couldn't cancel the charm before then.

But Filius was sure to recover those Obliviated memories prior to that. Severus and Poppy, as well. Amelia Bones would come in demand of answers for Harry's placement with those awful people. Augusta Longbottom was tenacious and unyielding; she would offer him no quarter.

They would turn against him, certainly. They would denounce him as he most likely deserved.

Harry would be lost to him, would refuse to listen to him, and would be prey to Voldemort when the creature returned to a body.

Kurt already disliked him. That much was obvious. It was also apparent just how highly Kurt prized family. And loyalty. And honesty. When he learned what had been done to him, to his brother, he would seek vengeance, a ruthless justice. Aided by witches as powerful as Quinn Fabray and Santana Lopez, who brought not only strong wands and keen minds to the table, but entire nations …

Dumbledore moaned low in his throat.

"What have I done?"

Filius greeted the sun and began making mental lists of all he wished to accomplish this fine day.

He had managed, with considerable difficulty, to fall into a semi-restful sleep last night, despite the knowledge of what had befallen Harry Potter. He refused to consider Albus would refrain from interfering in the boy's life to atone for his grievous sins, so the old man would have to be circumvented at every possibility.

The first item on his agenda was to write to Harry and ask him how he was faring at the Longbottom estate, how he got on with Neville and Augusta, etc. He had tried at the bank to
remove that blasted mail interdiction Albus had placed on the boy, but all he had managed to do was modify it so that Harry would only receive mail from those who personally knew him. At least it was something, he supposed.

Of course, perhaps the interdiction served a useful purpose. Merlin only knew the kind of mail the boy had received over the years from unsavory characters. Maybe Albus hadn't completely fouled up that little manipulation.

He sat up in bed and stretched, a smug smile on his face. At the very least, the modification would ensure that Dumbledore himself would be unable to write to Harry, as he personally didn't know the boy. That should keep Albus busy for a while.

The meeting in Minerva's room the night previous was all well and good, but they had been in shock and alcohol had been involved, so it would be best to determine how much Minerva, Severus, Poppy, and Pomona had truly resolved to help Harry.

Harry's interest in Potions was genuine, so he thought he should suggest Harry study his textbook and forward any thoughtful questions to Severus. Although Severus was a terrible teacher who abhorred his students, he was a master in his field and usually tended to respond somewhat favorably to those who truly wished to learn.

Pomona was already aware of Neville Longbottom and his talent for Herbology, so he would also suggest that Harry have Neville write the woman with his own questions. It might obliquely spur a relationship between Harry and Pomona or at least manage to establish a rapport between them.

Harry had no real use for Poppy as of yet; his Healers at St. Mungo's had performed their examinations, written his prescriptions, and were monitoring the situation. If Poppy tried to insert herself in his care, Harry would be suspicious and rightfully so.

Still, Filius knew better than most that Poppy Pomfrey was a fierce ally and an even worse enemy. Her dealings with James and Lily had been confined to routine care, but she had established a deep and abiding friendship with Remus Lupin. Lupin had considered Harry an honorary pack member and thus Poppy held Harry in a particular regard.

Well, that was a thought, wasn't it? Remus Lupin.

That bore some consideration.

Filius desperately wanted to help Harry but sensed the boy wasn't too keen on assistance, at least none geared toward what the Dursleys had done to him. That would have to come later.

He had purposefully invoked Lily's name several times last night in a bid to get Severus thinking of Harry as Lily's son and not just the spawn of James Potter. He believed he had somewhat succeeded, but time would tell.

As for Minerva ... well, that would require some careful deliberation. He knew the woman had regrets and wanted to make up for them, but the onus of her absolution should not rest on the trembling shoulders of an abused boy. Once the school year began, he would suggest that Minerva keep an eye on Harry while in her class to determine if he had inherited any of his father's skill in Transfiguration. If he did, it was best to start encouraging him early before he began to lose interest. He planned on doing the same in Charms.

If Albus tried any of his nonsense about extra tuition, Filius planned to drop Kurt Hummel's name and see how the man would respond. He couldn't very well allow for advanced placement for one
boy and his friends without extending it to every student. Unwittingly or not, Albus had established a precedent Filius thoroughly planned to exploit. Of course, it wasn't so much established as it was reconvened.

In truth, he was annoyed that such exploitation might be necessary. In years past, most professors had a handful of promising students whom they mentored. The practice had fallen away in the past decade and for no real reason. Filius was determined to revive it. After all, Albus had certainly benefited from his own extra lessons, so who was he to deny the same opportunities to anyone else?

Albus was perhaps the most powerful wizard Britain had ever known, but he was a terrible administrator. Hogwarts had suffered under his tenure and Filius thought Severus' idea the night previous was a capital one. They should each list their grievances about the condition of Hogwarts and present it to the Ambassador's analyst when he or she arrived.

After all, it could do no harm and might very well help restore his beloved school to some of her former glory.

He figured he should also send a letter to Augusta as a formality, followed by same to Amelia Bones. He would then send a letter to young Susan and advise her to pay Harry a visit. He was pleased Harry would mostly likely have a friend in Neville prior to starting school, so why not more? Indeed, Pomona was going to recruit Cedric Diggory - and what an inspired choice that lad had been - but who else?

If he knew Albus – and he did – he knew the old man would probably try the same gambit, most likely with the Weasleys. Filius remembered that William had been a near genius with an almost instinctual grasp on magic. Charles had been talented but more interested in his creatures and enjoying life, which certainly had its place. Percy ...

Filius made a mental note to discuss with Minerva her choice of Prefect. Percy was certainly intelligent and capable, but also ambitious and, well, a prig. It wasn't that Percy couldn't think but that he preferred others to do his thinking for him; he much preferred following rather than leading, which meant he was ill-suited for the position. It couldn't be revoked now, at any rate, but the boy would need to be monitored. He vowed to block the inevitable Head Boy nomination.

He frowned as another idea occurred to him. He would have to check his new copy of the Charter and then meet with the other faculty depending on his findings.

Then he would have to examine his Occlumency shields and try to cancel out Albus' obliviations. He had no idea what memories the man had suppressed, but he had a feeling they were very important, both to himself and Harry.

Depending on what he found, he might have to kick up his plans a notch. Albus was always several steps ahead of most people because – intentionally or not – those same people found him too intimidating to challenge.

Filius, however, loved a good challenge and planned on challenging Dumbledore often.

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Pomona Sprout was bustling toward the modest Diggory Manor with a mission in mind.

She might not have been the magical powerhouse the other Heads of House were, and that was just fine with her; power bred hubris. Herbology might have been derided as a nonessential field and she couldn't have cared less. She might have been regarded as just a kind, matronly professor and
that showed her real genius.

She knew exactly what Herbology could do in the hands of someone who truly understood and appreciated the art. Severus could crow about his potions all he wished; without people like her, he might as well have been nothing more than a bartender. It was Herbologists who cultivated and processed the life-saving potions ingredients on which their world depended. That was why Healers were required to earn a NEWT in her subject were they to advance to an apprenticeship.

She might not have been the academic superstar Severus had been, but she could earn her Potions mastery today if she so desired. Her subject was not showy. Herbology was not a platform for grandstanding. It demanded hard, honest work, which was why she had been the perfect choice for Head for Hufflepuff House.

Slytherins were most often Purebloods who were groomed by the families for the Wizengamot. A disproportionate number of Aurors and Hit Wizards were Gryffindors. Ravenclaws tended to herd toward the more esoteric branches of magic such as enchanting and spellcrafting via Arithmancy and Runes.

But the Hufflepuffs did the rest of the work, often that which the other Houses felt beneath them. Hufflepuffs were Healers, barristers and solicitors, shopkeepers, and administrative personnel. They were in every branch of government. They were involved in law and medicine. They made the ink and parchment, and then wrote, assembled, and sold books. They headed farms, harvested crops, bred livestock, and then sold the results of their wares.

In essence, Hufflepuffs ruled magical Britain, even if it went unacknowledged, which meant Pomona Sprout had a network vastly superior to that of the Minister, Dumbledore, the Dark Lord, and everyone else. And she knew just how to use it.

She suppressed a smirk as she knocked on the door.

Diana Diggory quickly opened her home to her son's Head of House. "Professor Sprout, welcome! Please come in," she said, ushering the woman inside. "I was most surprised to receive your letter this morning requesting a meeting. It's all so very mysterious!"

Her gaze turned suspicious. "Has my son done something?"

Pomona smiled. "My dear, school is not in session. If Cedric has indeed done something, I assure you I know not what it is."

Diana bit her lip and nodded, before her eyes darkened. "Has my husband done something?" she demanded, hands on her hips.

Pomona's delighted laughter echoed throughout the first floor of the house. Cedric quickly came running to determine its origin.

"Professor!" he greeted her joyfully, torn between giving the woman a hug and hiding behind his mother. He opted for a handshake. "What brings you here?"

Pomona smiled and patted his head, pleased when Cedric beamed. She then sighed and shook her head. "Most unfortunate business, I'm afraid. I'm here to ask for your help, Cedric, and for that of your parents."

Cedric frowned. "I'll do whatever you require."

She patted his cheek. He was such a wonderful boy, a true credit to their House.
"Thank you, lad, but it's best I speak with all of you and explain the circumstances." She looked to Diana. "Is Amos here?"

Diana too was now frowning. "He is," she said slowly, "although he's due at the Ministry in a little more than an hour."

"I promise not to take up too much of your time."

Diana offered an absent nod and instructed Cedric to escort Professor Sprout into the parlor. "We'll be with you presently."

"Thank you, Mrs. Diggory."

"Please, Professor, it's Diana."

"I'll call you by your first name when you address me by mine."

Diana blushed, uncomfortable with calling a former professor by her given name, and removed herself to the kitchen in search of her husband.

"Can you give me a hint as to what this is about?" Cedric whispered, taking his professor's elbow.

Pomona gave him a sidelong glance. No matter the outcome, she trusted this boy. "Harry Potter, Cedric. It's about Harry Potter. He needs your help."
There's a lot of dialogue in this chapter and much information is being imparted. It might not seem relevant now, but it will for later chapters, so pay attention and please accept I know what I'm doing. If you see where the story might be going, by all means, please speculate. I probably won't tell you if you're on the right track, though. ;)

Susan was trying very hard to keep a lid on her excitement. It was the weekend and, for once, her aunt didn't have work. Aunt Amelia did her best to leave the weekends open, but inevitably there was always some crisis that demanded her attention. Today, however, Aunt Amelia had staunchly declared that her Head Auror, Susan's Uncle Rufus, was perfectly capable of handling things in her stead.

There were times in which Susan wasn't sure how much she actually liked her honorary relation. Uncle Rufus had never been anything less than kind to her, treating her as a member of his own family, but he was also ambitious and had his eye on Aunt Amelia's job. Of course, it was fairly well accepted that once Minister Fudge was drummed out of office – because everyone with higher brain function assumed he eventually would be – Aunt Amelia was the next in line for the top spot. Susan wasn't sure how she felt about that, either. She hardly got to spend any time with her aunt now; she couldn't imagine how difficult it would be if Aunt Amelia were to become Minister. Still, there were expectations and Aunt Amelia felt compelled to live up to them. Susan had decided long ago that she herself would never work for the Ministry. It seemed to be a thankless job no matter the role, and she would have enough to concern herself with the running of House Bones.

The idea of quality time with her aunt, though welcome, wasn't the only reason Susan felt as though she were walking on air, however. Not only was Kurt Hummel going to attend Hogwarts with her, but today she was going to meet Harry Potter! It was as though all of her dreams were coming true!

She had listened to all of Aunt Amelia's admonishments with a keen ear. She wasn't so immature and selfish that she thought she knew better and she certainly didn't want to embarrass herself. Kurt's arrival at Hogwarts was need-to-know; the only reason Aunt Amelia had clued her in was, first, because of Kurt's letter and, second, because she wanted at least one peer present at Hogwarts who wouldn't gawk and titter at him like a ninny.

Susan was very proud her aunt had that much confidence in her and was determined to live up to it.

In approximately two hours, Aunt Amelia would be escorting her to Longbottom Hall, where she would meet Neville and Harry. Susan knew to be on her best behavior; this wasn't merely the meeting of children, but of Scions of three of the Ancient and Most Noble Houses. She, Neville, and Harry would eventually helm the Arcana and she would make a good impression.

She also knew that Lady Longbottom would have her eye on her. The woman already liked her well enough, Susan supposed, but nevertheless she would conduct herself with dignity and decorum.

She didn't know precisely why Harry was staying with Neville, but she assumed it was because
they were godbrothers and thus family of a sort. Aunt Amelia had hinted that Harry's prior home life wasn't what is should have been, but didn't offer any specifics, and Susan knew better than to ask.

Aunt Amelia was holding a brief conference over the Floo with Uncle Rufus, so Susan decided to go up to her bedroom, tidy her hair, and pick out suitable robes.

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Diana Diggory sat regally in a Queen Anne chair in her parlor, the only clue to her upset her fingers digging into the armrests like claws. Her knuckles had turned white as she wrestled with her anger.

Amos and Cedric merely sat there staring, jaws agape, as they tried to process what Professor Sprout had just imparted.

Pomona, for her part, was rather pleased by how this was going. Initially she had toyed with the idea of demanding Vows, but Cedric was too young and the request would make Amos too suspicious. She had settled for oaths of secrecy.

"Who is responsible for this?" Diana seethed.

Cedric shuddered at the rancor evident in his mother's tone. It was unlike anything he had ever heard from her.

"There is only one man who could be," Pomona said softly, averting her eyes.

Diana's flared in response. She didn't say the name; it wasn't necessary.

"Dumbledore," hissed an unsurprised Amos.

He had been part of the Ministry long enough to understand who, or rather, what Dumbledore was. The man wasn't the Minister; he had too much power for that. Everyone knew that while Cornelius might have the title, it was Dumbledore who ran things. Amos had clued in a while ago that, despite Dumbledore's espoused progressive views, little had changed in the past ten years. In the past century, even.

He was Pureblood, yes, and took great pride in his lineage and familial history, but he was no ostrich. He knew how critical the Muggleborn were to the propagation of their world.

Cedric gave an owlish blink. But it was Professor Dumbledore! Surely the man couldn't be responsible for putting poor little Harry in such a situation. And Harry! He was a hero! His parents were heroes! How could anyone, Muggle or no, have treated him so deplorably?

"Dad?" he whispered. "I don't understand. How could … why? He's just a little boy."

Amos sighed and closed his eyes, placing a strong hand on his son's shoulder. He was angry he had to explain this to Cedric; angrier still an explanation was required. When he opened his eyes, he was unsurprised to see his son's guileless eyes staring back at him in confusion.

Cedric was still so very sheltered. He and Diana had tried hard to protect their only son, especially after it became obvious there would be no other children. Cedric was their world, their shining light. Just the idea of his son in young Harry's place caused his blood to boil.

"This is entirely unacceptable," Diana said crisply. "I was a witness to the Potter will and Lily made it quite clear Harry was never to go to her sister."
Pomona's eyes widened. "You saw the will?"

Diana frowned. "Of course. Lily was one of my dearest friends."

Cedric gaped. "She was? You knew Lily Potter?"

Diana nodded. "And you knew Harry, darling. You probably don't remember; you weren't even three. Before the Potters went into hiding, you and Harry played together frequently, along with Neville Longbottom. The boys saw you as something akin to a big brother."

Cedric flushed, feeling absurdly proud that the hero of the wizarding world had once considered him such, mad because he couldn't remember, and furious that Harry had been given to animals. He also felt bad because he hadn't taken a greater interest in Neville, with whom he was at least familiar due to various Ministry functions.

"Do you remember who the named guardians were?" Pomona asked.

Again, Diana nodded. "Sirius Black and Alice Longbottom were given joint custody, but Alice would be considered the primary caregiver and Sirius was to have unlimited visitation. James and Lily wanted Harry to grow up with Neville, with a family, and Sirius never expressed any interest in settling down."

"And neither one of them can serve," Pomona said, "for obvious reasons."

Cedric couldn't believe his ears. The most notorious mass-murderer of the wizarding world was named godfather to its savior?

He then frowned.

How could Sirius Black have betrayed the Potters and still be alive? His vows to Harry would have seen him fall dead the moment he had given You Know Who the location of the Potters.

One quick look at his mother confirmed she thought that same.

"I never believed Sirius to be guilty, honey," she said to her son, "but there was little I could do. He was convicted and sent to Azkaban." She sighed. "Regardless of my thoughts on the matter, I assumed James and Lily had revoked Sirius as guardian and selected another."

She frowned. "Still …"

Amos looked askance at his wife and nodded. "Awfully convenient the boy's guardians were … incapacitated, wasn't it?"

Diana gave a short nod.

Pomona wanted to vomit. Could Albus … Merlin! He better not have been responsible for this!

"It still doesn't make sense," said a decided Diana. "If Sirius or Alice were unable to serve, there were others listed. Irrespective of that, Harry should have been given to Dame Augusta."

"Which is where he now is," Pomona admitted.

Diana wrinkled her nose. She had little use for the Longbottom Regent and it was debatable whether or not Harry would have done well in her care.

"He should have been given to Amelia," she insisted. "Houses Potter and Bones were not allied at
the time, but Amelia had trained both James and Sirius for the Hit Wizard and Auror Corps, respectively. They trusted her implicitly and knew she would do well by Harry."

Pomona raised a brow. She couldn't wait to find out how Amelia Bones would react to that little tidbit.

"If Amelia didn't wish or was unable to serve," Diana concluded, "Harry was to be raised by Professors Flitwick and McGonagall at Hogwarts."

Pomona almost fainted. She knew Filius and Minerva would explode when they learned this information.

"Are you absolutely sure?" she pressed.

"Very. The will was drafted and then witnessed. None of the named guardians could themselves be witnesses, so Lily and James sought out others. James chose Dumbledore, who had already signed when Lily asked me to be her witness."

"So Albus isn't aware you were also a witness."

Diana gave a diffident shrug. "It's entirely possible he is not."

"That's why you weren't Obliviated."

Diana leaned forward. "What!"

Pomona sighed. "Filius remembers the will, but believes he was only a witness, not a named guardian. Last night, after taking Harry to Augusta, he performed a scan of his Occlumency shields and discovered he had been Obliviated. He insists the magical signature belongs to Albus. Severus and Poppy were likely Obliviated as well and will be conducting their own scans. Minerva is not an Occlumens and completely ignorant of all of this."

Diana clucked her tongue. "I don't envy you, Professor. I well remember being their student. I would not want to be in their vicinity when they learn this information."

Pomona slowly exhaled.

"I'll do it," Cedric blurted out. "I'll help Harry any way I can."

"Are you sure, son?" Amos asked.

"Of course. I can't do much, but I can look out for him, help him find his way around the castle and with his classes, introduce him to people. I can be his big brother again if he'll let me."

Amos once again felt that familiar burst of pride for his only son. Cedric really was the best of him and Diana. He was kind but not a doormat, smart but grounded.

Pomona also felt pride that this exceptional boy was a member of her House. She was not, however, blind to how naïve Cedric could be. Another year and he'd be fighting off the girls and boys with a stick, particularly older ones who thought him easy prey. He wasn't of course, he had a strong backbone, but it wouldn't take a very keen mind to take advantage of him.

She offered her thanks and promised to owl later, hopefully with an appointment for Cedric to meet Harry and, possibly, Neville. She frowned and decided to add young Miss Bones to that list as well. She knew Cedric and Susan were closer to each other than to their other peers.
"We're not just going to sit around while Santana is off at her grandmother's, are we?" Quinn demanded.

"Of course not," Kurt said easily. "I don't want to rush into anything without her input, but we can plan."

Her eyes gleamed. "You mean plot. Let's get started."

Amelia sent Susan down into the Bones ancestral vault to peruse their many artifacts, having sent word to Augusta to expect them an hour later than their scheduled meeting.

She had no idea why she was at Gringotts or what was expected of her, but one simply didn't ignore a summons from the ranking chieftain. She was intensely curious, and a not a little frightened, about what Ragnok wanted with her.

"Madam Bones," a Goblin condescended to address her, "Ragnok will see you now."

She stood and gave an abrupt nod. She didn't know the various ins and outs of properly conducting oneself with Goblins – those mysteries had never been imparted to her family – but she knew to be brusque, to the point, and respectful.

"Thank you," she said briskly.

He grunted and turned on his heel, stomping down the long and ornate hall.

She kept apace but silently marveled at an area of the Bank on which she had never laid eyes. She might have been the Regent for an Ancient and Most Noble family, but most never had reason to meet with Ragnok personally. She absently wondered how old the chieftain was. He had been in charge of Gringotts London for as long as she could remember, and her father before her.

So much of magic in general had been lost over the centuries and Goblins in particular were notorious for holding close their secrets. She couldn't blame them, not really. She had read enough of the Rebellions at Hogwarts and then in Auror training to know Goblins were and always had been resentful of the chafing yoke under which they had been placed by wizards.

She wished she knew how that had come to be. Goblins were perhaps the most powerful magical race, capable of feats most wizards could never hope to match. Why, then, had they allowed themselves to be reduced to playing bankers for the very people they hated? Of course, there was power in gold; some would argue those who controlled the gold controlled the society. Why weren't more witches and wizards aware that their entire economy lay in the hands of a race they sought to oppress?

She didn't have the power, not as Ministry official or a Regent, to be privy to the Goblin treaties with the wizarding world. They were held in utmost secrecy, so much so that it was debatable whether or not the wizarding world understood how to move within their constraints.

She was sure the Goblins knew, however, and that they were keeping track.

She shook off those thoughts and drew in a sharp breath, the ambient magic of the structure imbuing her with a sense of giddiness. She hadn't felt anything like this since her time at Hogwarts, though the magic was markedly … different.

She could never work here, she decided, even were she allowed. The halls were cavernous and unmarked; it was impossible to figure out where to go. Every door was shut, holding their secrets
tightly within.

"This way, please," the Goblin said with impatience as he careened to the left.

She hurried to keep up.

Another turn and, at the end of the hallway, there stood a massive set of doors, larger even than those that admitted students to the Great Hall at Hogwarts. The mahogany was innately carved with symbols and portraits she would never understand or recognize.

The Goblin knocked in a rhythmic pattern she couldn't discern, before opening a door and beckoning her forward. She hesitantly crossed the threshold and repressed a jump when the door slammed shut behind her.

"Good morning, Madam Bones."

She nodded and stepped forward. She recognized Ragnok from the escapade with Kurt Hummel and his companions, but it was only now she noticed that he was at least a foot taller than his brethren. She wondered about this, whether his height dictated his position or if it was a result of superior power.

"Good morning, Chieftain Ragnok," she said succinctly. "How may I assist you?"

He raised a brow, obviously surprised by her phrasing. It was obvious the woman was powerful and he had heard tell of her standoffs with the Dark Lord. Rumor had it she ran the DMLE with an iron fist, but she was fair always. She didn't tolerate nonsense and had no time or patience for foolishness. Her voting record on the Wizengamot suggested she was aware of the striations in magical society and repulsed by them.

"First, I must apologize for the scene you encountered the day previous here at Gringotts. I understand you are personally acquainted with the Ambassador?"

She gave a gruff nod, eyes burning with anger at how the child had been attacked.

"I myself was not," he admitted, "though that is no excuse. Please rest assured that those responsible for that farce have been appropriately punished."

Which meant they were dead. Well, she wasn't too bothered. She'd kill anyone under her command who had attacked children.

"Have you spoken to anyone of Quinn Fabray and her relationship with our sovereign?" he asked severely.

She stiffened. "Absolutely not."

"We appreciate your discretion, although it shan't be a secret for much longer. Her Majesty fully intends to acknowledge the girl once she arrives at Hogwarts."

Amelia frowned. "Are you anticipating she will require the protection of your Nation?"

"It is entirely possible," he demurred. "She has allied herself with Ambassador Hummel. He is already a forceful presence in the international magical community and his influence will only grow. Our Queen will not have her charge be without resources."

Amelia said nothing, working his statement over in her mind.
"Please ask your question."

She blinked. "Why? Why her and why now?"

"Why her? Truthfully, I do not know. It is none of my business and that only of Her Majesty. As to why now, that is because of the school she has chosen to attend."

"Dumbledore," she said before she could stop herself.

His eyes sparked with interest. "Indeed. What have you discovered?" He waved a hand. "Please be seated."

She did so with grace and met his gaze evenly. "I know that Albus Dumbledore went to the Magical United States to court the Ambassador to attend Hogwarts. I know he did this without the proper authorizations and without going through the appropriate channels. I know the Ambassador refused the invitation unless it was also extended to his companions, which it was. I also know Dumbledore attempted to use Legilimancy on three minor children of foreign governments and was repelled."

"This," Ragnok said roughly, "I did not know." He sighed and shook his head. "Idiocy."

"Very much so," she sharply agreed. "Given the countries of which those children are members and the state of relations between those countries and the United Kingdom, we are very fortunate they chose not to press charges."

"Indeed," he said curtly, though he wasn't overly concerned. He paused. "Might I ask how you came to be aware of these facts?"

"I was debriefed by Nadia Goodacre, the Press and Cultural Attaché to the Ambassador."

Ragnok rubbed his chin. "Ah, yes, the Elf."

Amelia hesitated and then decided to go for it. "It appeared Her Majesty was acquainted with Ms. Goodacre."

He sat back and offered a light smirk. "Are you aware, Madam Bones, of the state of relations between the Goblins and Elves?"

"I am not," she confessed.

"There is no reason you should be," he said dismissively, "and of course I am unable to discuss any particulars. Nevertheless, as you've already gleaned, Nadia Goodacre is known to us and held in high esteem."

"May I ask a question?"

"Of course, though I may choose not to answer it."

She nodded. "I was unaware that the Ambassador's purview extended beyond the wizarding world, but Her Majesty made mention he is also the YGAP's representative to the Goblin Nation?"

"Correct. Ambassador Hummel is his nation's representative to the entire global magical community. This includes the Goblin Nation, the Elven Realm, and the various other magical races. They might not choose to interact with humans, but the Ambassador is an intensely respectful boy and is respected in return. He is welcome everywhere."
"Though his government might not be."

"Very true. However, the Ambassador is quite unique in that, while he represents a government, he is not part of said government. His platform is the empowerment of children, specifically magical cooperation and global health. To that end, he desires only to learn." He cocked his head. "What do you know of affinities, Madam Bones?"

She was startled by the segue. "Magical affinities run along bloodlines," she said. "It is said that the First Families held many affinities, but they were diluted over the centuries due to violent inbreeding. Ironically, those families bred with each other to maintain the gifts, but instead they were phased out."

"Yes," Ragnok agreed. "Would you indulge me by naming some examples?"

She blew out a breath. "Occlumency and Legilimancy, along with the various other Mind Arts, most of which have been lost to time. Parseltongue and Alestongue; there are citations other animal tongues were once known to humans, but they cannot be verified. Affinities also extend to various magical disciplines such as Defense, Arithmancy, Runes, and so on."

He nodded. "Would it surprise you to know that there are many more?"

She blinked. "Yes."

"The various animal tongues fall under the umbrella of belua lingua. Those humans who have an affinity usually only possess such for one tongue, though there are humans in history who had more. Along similar line is omnilingualism, the ability to comprehend and speak any language encountered. The Ambassador has this affinity."

Her eyebrows were now hovering just beneath her hairline.

"The Mind Arts and their practice are not lost to time, Madam Bones, they are merely mostly lost to Britain. As you said, most affinities were phased out by inbreeding, but that is only here. They are well known throughout the rest of the world and across magical races."

Her monocle fell from her eye.

"The Mind Arts, as they have been so preciously termed, as well as other affinities are routinely practiced, but their users keep their secrets." He paused. "Can you guess as to why?"

"Government," she spat.

"Precisely. That is the reason your Ministry has outlawed the use of Occlumency and Legilimancy, not that there don't exist some excellent reasons for doing so. Affinities in and of themselves are nothing more than identifiable powers. There is nothing inherent in them which demands or even suggests their practitioners hold to any moral code."

That made sense. Someone well-versed in either discipline was powerful, but that didn't necessarily mean they were good. They could use their power to enforce their will on others, spy on governments, and commit any host of nefarious crimes.

"But that's not the real reason, is it?"

Ragnok smiled and it was frightening. "No. The Ministry outlawed the practices because there was no chance for oversight. Occlumens and Legilimans are, once their gifts are recognized and utilized, unable to be controlled. They are unable to be led or compelled. They cannot be deceived.
Now imagine such an individual who has affinities with other branches of magic as well as a large well of power."

She paled.

"The result is a Dark Lord or an Albus Dumbledore."

She pressed her lips so tightly together they all but disappeared.

"This is not to say that one without an affinity is unable to learn the Art, only that they will never truly master it. Occlumency is taught to every Heir of an Ancient, Noble, and Most Ancient and Noble Family so that they are able to safeguard the family magic. A concerted effort will result in an able practitioner, but never a master."

"And Ambassador Hummel has an affinity."

He nodded. "All three children do, but they have taken the discipline beyond that." He frowned. "Or perhaps they have rediscovered that which was long thought to be lost."

She frowned in confusion.

"Occlumency and Legilimancy are defensive and offensive techniques used to safeguard the mind," he patiently explained. "What is the logical extension of that?"

She knew the answer immediately but could scarcely believe it.

He nodded.

"Telepathy," she said faintly. "It's real?"

She felt like an idiot.

"It is, though rare. The Mind Arts once encompassed any number of magical talents, though most have bred out of existence. Interestingly enough, they appear from time to time in the non-magical population."

"What?"

He forced himself not to laugh. He thought it reprehensible, albeit hysterical, that the wizarding world, even its most tolerant members, knew almost nothing about non-magicals. In fact, they took great pride in their aggressive ignorance.

"Madam Bones, what is the population of the wizarding world in the United Kingdom?"

"As of the last census, just over eighteen-thousand persons, including Muggleborn."

"But not those Muggleborn who leave Britain, or those whom you deem Squibs and their subsequent children, correct?"

She nodded.

"And of course that doesn't take into account the other magical races."

She colored.

"And the population of non-magical Britain?"
Her flush deepened. "I can't say I know for certain, but what does this have to do …"

"Just over sixty-four million," he interrupted.

Her flush vanished and was replaced with a waxy pallor. "W-What?" she gasped.

"That is one witch or wizard for every thirty thousand humans." He leaned forward. "Tell me, Amelia, if the Statute were to collapse on a massive scale, which is indeed all too possible nowadays with the extent of non-magical technology, what chance would wizarding Britain stand?"

"Why are you telling me this?" she whispered.

"Because someone in your government needs to be aware, and you are the most reasonable and intelligent representative I have met in over six of your generations. Non-magicals have advanced to the point where it is not only possible they will discover us but, in all likelihood, probable.

"It is also imperative you understand that Britain is one of the only first world nations whose magical community is so ignorant. If you examined the bicameral legislature of the Magical Unites States and the extent of its integration with its non-magical counterpart, you would be amazed. France is a democracy but, as you know, its magical component is still monarchical. Even they are far more advanced in their relations with non-magicals than we are."

"Surely …"

"Non-magicals have explored in detail the entire planet. They have walked on the moon. They have international space stations. They have sent mechanical probes to Mars and telescopes into deep space, one of which has ventured beyond Pluto which, you may be unaware, is no longer considered a proper planet. They have satellites which orbit the Earth and can take detailed pictures of you as you walk down the street. They have infrared sensors which can detect heat signatures, even when, to the naked eye, it appears there is no source. They have weapons of mass destruction which could annihilate a nation such as Russia or China in mere minutes."

She just shook her head.

"I'm telling you this because, as it stands, the magical United Kingdom is the current greatest risk of exposure."

She set her jaw. "That is all well and good, if not absolutely terrifying, but what does it have to do with me? What am I supposed to do? I am one person, sir, and if you think the current administration has any use for me, you are sorely mistaken."

"The Goblin Nation wishes you to place yourself in consideration for Minister during the next election."

She stared at him.

"We have already discreetly conducted preliminary polls which suggest you would have little difficulty securing a nomination. You would win by a landslide."

She continued to stare.

"Voldemort will return."

She swallowed heavily.
"And when he does, he will be even more insane then when he was banished. He will try to assume control of the wizarding world and then extend his power beyond it. Given even only this brief summary, what do you think the world's response will be?"

"And the Ambassador has something to do with all of this?" she asked with noticeable skepticism.

"Why do you think the Global Youth Ambassador Program was initiated? Why now?" He shook his head. "The Astronomy component of the standard Hogwarts curriculum is severely lacking."

"You read the stars?" she drawled.

"Your ignorance is bothersome and unhelpful," he snapped. "The portents are there. Yes, we read the stars, though our methods are not as refined as those of the Centaurs. Did you know that Astronomy and Divination were once a combined course?"

"You mean Astrology?"

"Indeed, but the practice fell out of favor. Humans didn't really want to know the future, that a certain amount of predestination existed, that there were forces in this world beyond your understanding or control. It made humans feel tiny, insignificant, and subjects to the whims of destiny. You need only study how your race treated its great prognosticators to understand this simple truth. The greatest malice humans have ever incurred upon this world is their insistence that they are the apex of its civilization."

She felt shamed, though she didn't understand why.

"Once, very long ago, there was no wizarding world. There was only the magical world and all of its denizens lived together, though not necessarily in peace. They were, however, unified in protecting themselves. That way of life is lost and we will most likely never experience it again. Regardless, there will come a point where only cooperation, forced if necessary, will ensure our survival.

"Fate is real, Madam Bones, and it has no master."

She couldn't absorb this, not totally, not rationally, at least not now. She felt as though she had walked into Delphi and been imparted wisdom that should not be shared, that should not be known, lest she be driven mad. She was … Cassandra.

"What can I do?" she asked in a small voice.

He nodded in satisfaction. "You start with the Ambassador. He and his companions are only a few of many key players in what is to come, though he might just be the most important."

"How would you suggest I begin?"

He stared into her eyes. "That will require Vows. Many, many Vows."

It was all Amelia could do not to collapse under the weight of her knowledge as she returned the atrium to meet her niece.

Susan naturally knew her aunt was in distress but thankfully posed no questions. She either knew she would receive no answers or that her aunt was unable to communicate the situation.

Amelia wasn't sure which, if either, she preferred. Susan was an incomparably bright girl, but
having been brought up under her aunt's watchful eye and government position, knew the importance of discretion.

"Are you ready to go to the Longbottoms?" Susan asked evenly.

"Of course."

They left the Bank, not knowing they did so under Ragnok's watchful eye.

"What do you think?"

Ragnok turned toward his Queen. "She is not unintelligent. For a human."

"Will she be useful?"

His silence was long. "Yes," he said finally, "at least to the extent to which she is allowed."

The Queen nodded.

"Does the Ambassador know his true purpose?"

Her silence spoke for itself.

It took considerable subterfuge for Pomona to remove Poppy and the other Heads from Hogwarts, but she managed. The problem was where to meet.

Hogsmeade was out of the question. They were too well known and it would eventually get back to Albus, who had spies everywhere. He, of course, would have called them friends, but everyone knew what they truly were. Not to mention Aberforth knew everything that happened in the village.

She thought about London and Edinburgh, but ultimately decided against both. They were just too close to Hogwarts. Cardiff was likewise untenable. Best to leave the Isles altogether. Thank goodness for Apparition. Finally, she also realized they would have to go Muggle. The problem with teaching at the country's premier magical institution was that, as you had taught so many over the years, it was almost impossible not to run into someone who knew your name.

She finally settled on Calais, where there was a small wizarding neighborhood comprised of both French and English wizards. Those who had small children tended to send them to Beauxbatons if they could afford it; if not, the children were homeschooled.

"Is all of this really necessary?" Minerva demanded as she sat at the table Pomona had commandeered.

"What a ridiculous question," Pomona sniped. "I didn't summon you here for fondue!"

Minerva's eyes widened. She bit back a sharp retort, recognizing how thoroughly unseated Pomona currently was. That was highly irregular and she was doubtful it meant anything good.

"What have you learned?" Severus asked, cutting right to the chase.

Pomona opened her mouth. "This …" she trailed off and shook her head.

"Albus again?" Flitwick whispered.
"He can never know this," Pomona hissed. She then rolled her eyes. "If he doesn't already, which is entirely possible. I know that you, Severus, and Poppy are skilled enough in Occlumency, but Minerva and I have no such defense."

"Is it really that bad?" asked an unsettled Minerva.

Pomona merely raised an eyebrow.

"Damn."

"We aren't that skilled," said a rueful Poppy. "I was up all night scanning my shields. He Obliviated me too."

"And me," Severus reluctantly muttered. He was both annoyed and frightened. How had Dumbledore done such a thorough job and Severus himself been completely unaware? Had it happened before? If so, what had been taken from him? Had the Dark Lord also made modifications to his mind? He couldn't rule out anything at this point.

"Oaths?" Minerva suggested.

"Insufficient," Severus said, "not if what I'm thinking is only halfway as inflammatory as I suspect."

"Vows," Pomona agreed. "Poppy should be the binder. Her medi-witch oaths will offer us some measure of protection, though not much if Albus decides to pursue this."

"What has he done?" Minerva asked faintly.

"Do you agree to the Vows?"

She did, with considerable reluctance. The others nodded.

"I suggest we start walking," Filius said. "We should not be observed by anyone. The beach is lovely this time of year."

They paid for their drinks and left.

An hour later, they were all nauseated.

"Filius and I were listed as potential guardians?" Minerva helplessly repeated.

Filius was beyond furious.

Pomona, eyes cast down, nodded. "So was Severus, even if only as a last resort."

Snape halted in his tracks. "What!"

Poppy, Filius, and Minerva gaped.

"Diana told me it was a codicil added by Lily alone," Pomona explained, "though James agreed to it."

"I don't believe you."

She sighed. "You owe a life debt to James, yes?"
His eyes darkened though he said nothing.

"Is Albus aware of it?"

He gave a curt nod.

"Has he tried to manipulate you with it?"

He set his jaw and looked away.

"He was a witness to the will, Severus," she said patiently. "He not only knows you were named, but that James abrogated the debt. That was in the main testament, not the codicil. Albus knew."

Snape drew in a sharp breath.

"I don't know what happened between the three of you and I would never ask," she continued, "but, in the end, Lily trusted you with her child, Severus, even if only obliquely, and James with her."

"Why would Albus do this?" Minerva hissed, placing a comforting hand on Snape's shoulder which, surprisingly, he did not shake off.

"To keep his spy," Filius seethed. He raised his gaze and looked at each of them in turn. "Voldemort isn't dead."

Minerva and Severus exchanged a quick glance, but it did not go unnoticed.

"You knew," Poppy murmured. "You knew and didn't tell us."

"Isn't that something you thought we should know?" Pomona shrieked. "The most dangerous Dark Lord in history is still alive, probably plotting his return, and you didn't tell us? We're tasked with keeping safe our world's children! How could you?"

"Because there's much we do not know," Severus whispered. "Albus has many secrets, Pomona, and he only shares them piecemeal and with great reluctance. I imagine that, whatever Minerva and I know, is not known to the other."

They resumed walking.

"Who else do you think knows?" Poppy asked.

Filius shrugged. "Albus has many minions, but not many confidants. I would imagine Fudge knows something, though not much. Just enough to ensure Albus can keep him under his thumb through fear. Hagrid has always been of the belief that Voldemort was merely vanquished, not destroyed. I've often thought Augusta knew more than she was telling, given that James and Lily, and Alice and Frank, all went under the Fidelius at about the same time."

"How did Crouch Junior and the LeStranges gain access to Longbottom Hall?" Poppy wondered. "As far as I'm aware, the Fidelius was never removed. I know I've been there before, but I couldn't tell you where it was, which means the charm is still active and Augusta must be the Secret Keeper."

"I don't know," Minerva said. "I'm in frequent contact with Augusta, but I haven't been to the manor in years. Her Floo is open but selective. If you're right, and the evidence suggests you are, she has never disclosed how Frank and Alice were discovered, and I know she would have rather died than lose either of them."
"If Black wasn't the Secret Keeper," Severus said, "than he has been wasting in Azkaban for a decade for absolutely no reason."

"I'm not sure of that," Pomona said. "Diana said nothing about the Fidelius, only that Sirius Black was Harry's godfather. Theoretically, if he had betrayed James and Lily to Voldemort, and thus Harry indirectly, his vows should have seen him dead. However, there's no way to know if he was originally made Secret Keeper and it was later revoked, or if he did indeed sell them out."

Minerva sighed. "There's … there's something I remembered only just now. I don't know if it was because of a Dumbledore machination or if I simply blocked it out because of grief."

"What is it, Min?" Poppy gently coaxed.

"You all remember when Sirius left – well, escaped – Walburga. He sought refuge with Charlus and Dorea." She was silent for a long moment. "They named him a Son of the House of Potter."

"Then it is highly unlikely he surrendered James and Lily," Filius grunted. "Not impossible, mind, but unlikely. That, coupled with his vows as godfather, certainly makes his alleged crimes all the more suspect."

Pomona blinked. "Do you remember him having a trial? I don't."

They stopped and looked at each other.

"The Prophet went on and on about the evils of Sirius Black, but I don't remember any coverage of a trial," said an outraged Minerva.

"We need to research," Filius said darkly.

Severus turned thoughtful as he turned and stared out at the sea. "Arcturus died at the end of the previous spring. It was thought of as a given that he had disinherited Black. Walburga certainly suggested as much, loudly and as often as possible, but what if that wasn't the case?"

"The Arcana would ensure the Fudge Administration would fall," Poppy surmised.

"Not necessarily," Pomona countered. "It would have been Bagnold who was responsible. If not her, then Crouch at the very least."

"And Barty is the kind of arrogant cretin who would sacrifice another to shift the blame away from himself for how his bastard of a son turned out," Minerva spat.

"But at the core of this is Albus," Filius said, bringing the discussion back full circle.

"Amos suggested as much," Pomona admitted. "How convenient it was that both Sirius and Alice were taken so completely off the board."

Poppy frowned. "Albus has always thought everything was a metaphor for chess."

"Then I suggest it's about time we find out exactly what game we're playing," Filius said. "I refuse to be anyone's pawn."

"We'll need help," Pomona said.

"I will approach Augusta," Minerva said. "She and I have somewhat of a rapport."

"I promised to keep Diana in the loop," Pomona said. "She is absolutely furious and will ensure
Amos will use every contact at the Ministry to ferret out information."

"He is the hardly the most discreet individual," Severus observed. "Clearly the child inherited his intelligence from the mother."

"Perhaps it wouldn't be a bad thing for Amos to start asking questions," Poppy said. "Even if it doesn't bear fruit, it might get people thinking."

"As long as nothing can be traced back to us, I suppose it's a viable option."

"They took oaths," Pomona reminded them. "I'm sure they, minus Cedric, would agree to Vows if necessary."

They circled back and began ambling toward the Apparition point.

"What of the Dark Lord?" Poppy fretted.

Minerva heaved a great sigh. "I know that Albus has never believed the Dark Lord was dead. I don't know what that means, really, and can only infer the Dark Lord exists in some form."

"Perhaps he was discorporated at Godric's Hollow," Filius said. "That would take a great feat of magic."

"Lily was capable," Severus said stiffly.

"Tell me something I don't know, Severus," he snapped. "Your insistence that you're the only one left alive to mourn that girl is offensive. She was my best student for seven years. She earned her Mastery in less than a year under me. I loved her like she was my own."

Snape blushed. "I apologize."

Filius waved him off. "You've been hit with a lot today, Severus, and I understand your need to lash out. I know you are unable to do so at the person responsible. I know that you have regrets about your relationship with Lily. I know you feel you've been inadequate with regard to Harry. Know that you are not alone in that."

"It's true," said a sorrowful Minerva. "James was very distant kin to me. I watched him grow from a babe to a man cut down before his life could even truly begin. I knew those Muggles were horrible people and I allowed Albus to leave Harry with them." She shook her head. "And I know that was my decision. He didn't force me. He didn't compel me. I allowed it because for too long I have blinded myself to him."

"Albus isn't malevolent, Minerva," Pomona said. "I truly believe that. I have to if I don't want to go insane. That said, he thinks his ends justify the means and he is far too willing to make sacrifices of other people to achieve those ends. They aren't his decisions to make."

"And we're just as responsible," Severus said. "We, the entire wizarding world, has allowed his legend to eclipse the simple fact that he is a man, nothing more and nothing less. We've placed our burdens on his shoulders for generations and expected him to come to our rescue over and over again. And he has. We've never questioned his methods and we should have. We've never believed he has limits. It's entirely possible he now doesn't recognize that he in fact has limits; that everyone does."

"What will we do if the Dark Lord does return?" asked a worried Pomona.
"There is little we can do," Poppy said. "None of us, not even together, has the power to defeat him. We might be able to drive him off for a time, but the bottom line is that Voldemort has always been an exceptionally powerful wizard. Only Albus can rival him."

"I don't believe that is necessarily true," said a thoughtful Filius. "Amelia Bones twice dueled him to a stalemate. Alice and Frank were relentless in hunting down the Death Eaters. Sirius was above average in power; it wouldn't surprise me if the Dark Lord spread misinformation that Sirius was one of his." He sighed. "Then, of course, we must consider Lily and James."

"Potter was very powerful," Severus admitted, "and Lily was easily the most powerful of our generation. The Dark Lord pursued them several times. I've always wondered why the Dark Lord sought them that night. It was very unusual for him to participate directly in assassinations. After he was defeated by Bones, he usually assigned such tasks to Bellatrix or Lucius."

He wasn't going to mention the prophecy, not until Albus did. It would cause him nothing but grief in anything he tried to do for the Potter boy. They would always suspect him of something.

"Was Malfoy truly under the *Imperius* when he took the Mark?" Minerva asked.

Severus hesitated for a long time. Too long.

"You're under a Vow."

His silence indicated agreement.

Minerva stared at him. "For the sake of argument, let's assume he was under the curse." She tilted her head. "Had it been cast by the Dark Lord, you would simply say so. After all, it would only affirm the story Malfoy told the Wizengamot."

Severus averted his eyes.

Filius narrowed his eyes. "So someone cast the Unforgivable on Lucius, but it wasn't Voldemort." He nodded slowly and then smirked. "Abraxas, of course. I should have seen it sooner."

"That man was a pig," Minerva spat. "It doesn't surprise me in the least he would curse his only son and heir to further ingratiate himself with whoever promised him a modicum of power. I rejoiced when he died."

"How did he die?" Pomona asked. "Was it ever disclosed?"

"Officially, he perished from a manticore bite," Poppy interjected, "but that really was so much nonsense. Had that poor excuse of a wizard ever met a manticore, he would have been eaten and then sicked up from tasting so foul."

Pomona chuckled darkly.

"I killed him," Filius said with utmost nonchalance.

"What?" Severus gasped.

Filius was silent for a long moment. "All of you know that I took Lily as my apprentice after her second year, but did you know I had another apprentice at that time?"

"No," said a shocked Minerva.

"I walked into the classroom reserved for my advanced students and found Abraxas trying to rape
"Dear Merlin," Poppy gasped, placing a hand over her heart.

Minerva swallowed heavily. "Who …"

"Narcissa," he snapped.

It made sad sense. Filius had always been defensive of Narcissa, though none of them knew why. They could only imagine his rage after stumbling upon such a horror.

"By then, she was engaged; her parents having already sold her off like livestock to Lucius," Filius spat, "after Abraxas failed to secure Bellatrix and Andromeda. I've always believed Voldemort sent Abraxas after those girls in an attempt to get every member of the Black family under his thumb. Bellatrix was already his, of course, but Andromeda saw the writing on the wall and thankfully ran off with Ted."

"By the gods," Severus whispered. He had never been more than barely cordial with Narcissa, but no one deserved that.

"She was a brilliant girl," Filius said roughly, lost in memory. "Charms came so naturally to her. I barely needed to do more than tell her the incantation. She wanted to be a Healer. She had already been fast-tracked at St. Mungo's."

He gnashed his teeth. "Then Abraxas came. He was a contemptible individual who only barely qualified as human. After months of negotiating – and it was done on behalf of Narcissa by Arcturus; she had removed her parents entirely from the equation – she agreed to marry Lucius because she knew other prospects were likely to be much worse. She never would have been allowed to marry the boy she truly loved."

"There was someone other than Lucius?" asked a surprised Severus. He was annoyed to be ignorant of this. Narcissa had been in Slytherin with him and he prided himself on being one of the most observant members of his House.

"Cygnus Greengrass."

"Ah," Severus muttered. Now it made sense. Narcissa's parents would never have consented to her marrying into a neutral family, not even one that was Ancient and Most Noble.

"Narcissa was the epitome of Slytherin," Filius said, with considerable pride. "Brilliant, beautiful, and cunning. She is more powerful than Andromeda and even Bellatrix, but her real skill was appearing to be nothing more than the perfect Pureblood princess."

He laughed. "She outmaneuvered Abraxas on every score during the negotiations before finally consenting to the match. Truth be told, I don't believe Lucius wanted to marry her, but he wasn't given the option. He knew then she outclassed him in every respect and he has always been a vain and prideful man. That said, I do believe he truly loves her now."

Severus jerked his head in agreement. He didn't understand it, couldn't correlate the husband of Narcissa with the Death Eater Lucius had been, but there was no doubt in his mind Lucius loved the woman with everything he was.

"Abraxas hated her," Filius continued. "He hated anyone who could get the better of him, but the idea that it had been a woman – a girl, really – vexed him to no end. He felt emasculated that Narcissa, as a Black, would maintain primacy in the marriage. In essence, he had surrendered his
"heir to another family, not realizing what he was doing until the contract had been signed. Being the domineering, misogynistic, arrogant fuckwit that he was, he wanted revenge."

"Bastard," Poppy seethed.

"Abraxas was no stranger to rape," Filius growled. "I've heard rumors that was how he forced Phoebe Lovegood into marriage. He knew she despised him and would never consent, so he dosed them both with a fertility potion and raped her. She fell pregnant." He turned to Minerva. "You and Phoebe were friends in school, yes?"

Minerva said nothing. She refused to discuss Phoebe and what that villain had done to her.

"But the Lovegood line is a matrilineal House!" Pomona protested. "Surely the Lady Lovegood at the time would never have allowed …"

"Artemis wasn't informed until after the fact. She may have been Lady Lovegood, but she was married to a Crabbe. It was thought then that that marriage had been coerced as well. Antinous Crabbe was a lesser member of the House and determined to better his lot in life. He didn't realize until after the marriage that House Lovegood could only be inherited by women. He resented Phoebe and blamed her for the rape, claiming she had allowed herself to be sullied and therefore bore the consequence of her indiscretion."

He sighed. "At any rate, Abraxas, being the utter reprobate that he was, felt that he should be first to sample the goods, even of his future daughter-in-law, and so snuck into Hogwarts and attacked Narcissa.

"Narcissa is very powerful, but he had the element of surprise and was on her before she even knew what was happening. Thankfully I interrupted the assault and incapacitated him."

"And how did you do so?" Poppy asked.

"I summoned his heart."

Severus blew out a breath. He was once again thankful he had never gotten on the bad side of Filius Flitwick and had accepted his warning all those years ago to leave the Ravenclaws alone. The amount of power that spell would have taken, breaking the sternum and shredding the organ in the process, was astounding.

"Narcissa and I never spoke of it. She didn't wish to report it to Albus, though I firmly believe he would have sided with her without question. Before I could even speak, her wand was out and she had taken oaths of secrecy and confidentiality. She didn't want to offer a Vow because someone would have to act as binder and she was utterly humiliated. She wanted no one to know. She then summoned her House Elf, who was bound only to her, and had Abraxas' body removed to the Forbidden Forest.

"I don't know what yarn she spun to Lucius, if she even bothered, but it wasn't much later he announced the death of his father to The Prophet. It's entirely possible Narcissa told him nothing and Lucius made up the affair with the manticore to spark outlandish gossip and derail any potential questions, as well as to take immediate control of House Malfoy. Whether or not Narcissa ever told Lucius what Abraxas tried to do to her, I don't know, but I sincerely doubt it."

"Do you think the Dark Lord was behind the match?" Pomona asked.

He nodded. "As I said, I think Voldemort wanted every Black in his crown of Purebloods, but Narcissa especially. I don't think he expected her to involve Arcturus and invoke primacy. No, I
rather believe he thought she would be married off to Lucius and then under both their yokes. He was probably furious when it didn't happen."

"So that's how she was able to escape taking the Mark," Severus said.

Filius nodded again. "Even had Voldemort placed her under the *Imperius*, her primacy would have been invoked and her Vows to the House of Black would have superseded the curse."

"Clever, clever girl," Minerva murmured, shaking her head. She had obviously misjudged and underestimated the woman.

"I believe Voldemort recognized Narcissa's power and wanted to control her, thinking he could do so through Lucius. When he discovered he couldn't, he forced Narcissa to abandon her apprenticeship with St. Mungo's and retire to Malfoy Manor, where she would host parties to cultivate new followers. He knew she would loathe it and oppressing her was as close as he dared to punish her.

"Whatever Narcissa thought or thinks about Lucius, she would never repudiate him. Voldemort knew this and thus promoted Lucius up the ranks, just to rankle her further, to unseat her, to make her question what would happen to her if Lucius were to be killed. Her parents were still living at the time and simply would have married her off once again. Then, once she fell pregnant with Draco, Voldemort had a new weapon in his arsenal against her."

"Sick," Pomona hissed.

"I don't believe Narcissa would ever have crossed wands with Voldemort, but the thought that she might probably worried him. He knew if he killed her, the other Blacks would turn against him en masse and, let's face it, that House is darker than any other and has access to magics we could never conceive. Voldemort most likely wanted to ensure Narcissa wouldn't become a double agent, so to speak. She might not be as powerful as he was, but as cunning? Yes, I do believe she could match him on that score."

Severus easily agreed.

"It's interesting, isn't it?" Poppy observed. "Every potential vanquisher of the Dark Lord we've discussed has been a woman: Amelia, Lily, Narcissa."

"Women have always been underestimated in our society," Severus said, "much to our detriment. It could very well prove to be our undoing."

Poppy, Minerva, and Pomona gave him speculative if appreciative looks.

Filius nodded. "Amelia is the only woman other than Minerva whom Albus courted for the Order. Of course she refused him; she has always had his full measure. Alice joined at the behest of Frank, and James had to drag Lily kicking and screaming. It's no surprise to me that Albus discounts women more than even he realizes. He is too weighted down by chivalry and his peculiar moral code to dispose of Voldemort like he should have all those years ago."

He held up a hand. "I am not condoning murder. Voldemort was a tyrant who exterminated entire generations of multiple families. He committed genocide and no one wishes to discuss it. Why? Because we allowed him to do it. We didn't stand to him. We were so ensconced in our fear that we did nothing. We are all guilty."

"Why didn't you join the Order?" Minerva asked him.
"Because I didn't believe in Albus' aims," he said frankly. "Stunning and binding someone bent on murdering others is pointless. It's absolutely asinine. It solves nothing. It was war, not a child's game. The Death Eaters should have been put down like the rabid dogs they were and are. How many people died because Albus couldn't bring himself to put those criminals out of their misery?"

It was an uncomfortable truth.

"I know you, Minerva," Filius continued. "In some ways I know you better than Albus ever could, and I know you executed Trejanus Yaxley."

She said nothing.

"That bastard murdered your sons in cold blood. I'm glad you killed him. Merlin only knows how many people you saved by doing so. I only hope you haven't suffered guilt for it."

Severus, Poppy, and Pomona stared at them.

Minerva's eyes turned distant. "I've never regretted killing him. The manner in which I did so? Yes, perhaps, on occasion."

"What did you do?" Pomona asked.

Minerva met her eyes calmly. "I cut off his head and limbs, transfigured them and his trunk into logs, and burned them in my hearth."

Poppy nodded. "Good."

"Fitting," Severus agreed.

"That's why you're the Head Lioness, Minerva," Pomona said. "You never hesitate to protect the young."

Minerva sighed. "But Filius is right. I should have done more."

"We all should have," Poppy said sadly.

"So the question," Severus said, "is what do we do now?"

"We start with what we agreed upon last night," Filius said. "We keep Harry away from Albus as much as possible. Albus wants that boy for something and, until we know what it is, we need to shield him. Augusta, regardless of her personality, will be a good guardian, but it is under the eye of Albus which Harry will find himself for nine months out of the year."

Pomona nodded. "We will nudge him toward Gryffindor or Hufflepuff. Regardless of where the Hat puts him, we all agree here and now that we never allow Harry to be alone with Albus. As the Heads of House, we have the right and are expected to accompany our charges whenever a student is called before the Headmaster."

Everyone nodded.

"But you can't rule out Albus attempting to contact Harry on his own," Poppy said.

"As Deputy, I will know whenever he summons a student," Minerva said. "I will inform you if it happens."

"Good," Severus said, "because it might not just be limited to him. If Albus is denied access to
Harry, he will use other means to try and discover information about him. Now that Harry is under the care of the Dowager Longbottom, he will eventually turn his attention toward her grandson as well."

"And any other child Harry befriends," Pomona mused.

"If we're right," Filius began, "and Voldemort is seeking to return, then Albus has wasted these years. Oh, I'm sure he was doing something, but nothing that will be actively helpful. Harry obviously has some key role in all of this, yet Albus consigned the boy to a Muggle upbringing. There is much he could have been taught."

"So you don't believe it was just Albus trying to shield the boy from his many worshippers?"

Poppy drawled.

Filius rolled his eyes. "Please. No, it's much more likely Albus wanted to keep Harry ignorant. The question, of course, is why? What would that accomplish?"

"It would make Harry entirely reliant upon him," Severus said quietly. "If he saw Albus as his savior, pulling him from the abyss he had been cast into by the Muggles, Harry would be inordinately grateful. He would listen to Albus above all others."

Severus knew all too well the games Albus played.

The others thought it was ghastly, but it made sense.

"Setting up yet another sacrifice?" Poppy wondered, eyes panning to the others. "Remember the blood wards. Remember what they did to Harry."

Filius shook his head. "I won't allow it. I failed Lily; I will not fail her child. I won't allow Harry to be laid upon the altar of Albus' ego. I won't let him lead another lamb to slaughter."

Santana Portkeyed into the room adjacent to the court which housed her grandmother's throne, surprised to find it empty. She slowly walked forward and stood before the seat of Esperanza's power which would one day be hers, in search of answers. She found nothing but the obsidian casting her own reflection back at her.

Obsidian was a very powerful magical gemstone, grounding and centering spiritual energy in the physical plane. Being a Mistress of the Mind Arts and advancing revolutions in Occlumency, it made sense Esperanza had chosen it.

It was in these quiet moments that Santana had severe doubts about her capability in leading her people. She knew she was powerful, that her power would only grow, but Esperanza was perhaps one of the strongest magical practitioners in an aeon. She not only knew but had perfected magics that were thought to be nothing more than fairytales, things only believed to be the byproducts of the fertile imaginations of non-magicals.


All of these Esperanza could perform and without a wand.

Those were just the tip of the iceberg. There were others, things which Esperanza either did not know or would not admit to knowing. There was a whole other world of magic beyond wands.

Witches and wizards had become so dependent on sticks they had forgotten their origins. They had
forgotten what magic was and whence it came. They had convinced themselves that they alone were magical, when the truth was that Magic, like Fate and Destiny, was a force unto itself. They had forgotten to be respectful.

And the result would be coming home to roost.

She had seen snippets, Esperanza had seen more, but the final nail in their collective coffin had been shown to Brittany. That was the only reason Santana believed what was to come. It was why she was so frightened.

She didn't believe she was cut out for this, ruling an entire nation. She just wanted to be with Kurt and Quinn. She wanted to marry Brittany. She might even want children someday, if she could get in writing that they wouldn't be annoying.

At the same time, she knew she was needed: by her people, by her friends, by Brittany. They needed her to do what was best for them, even if she didn't yet know just what that was.

She closed her eyes and sighed.

"I know you're there."

"You are troubled," the rumbling voice said from behind her.

She gave a bleak nod. "Not so much by Voldemort, but what will come after. I will lose people. I might die."

"It's possible, but it's up to you to decide what you want your death to be. Do you want to stick your head in the sand and wait for it to be cut off, or do you want to go out with swords blazing? The choice isn't easy, and it shouldn't be, but it is only yours to make."

She walked toward the throne and gently caressed one of its arms. "Why am I so tethered to this life? Why are all of us? I know there is existence beyond death. I know that I will eventually be reunited with those I love. Why is this so hard?"

"Fear. You fear what you don't know, what is not in your control. There is no shame in it, but you mustn't wallow in it. You understand the existence of the soul, but you have only been able to experience the physical realities of this world, of visceral things. Once you are able to let go of the material, the ethereal will make itself known to you."

"And I shouldn't fear it?"

"Fear of the unknown is logical. Allowing yourself to be ruled by it is not."

She turned and stared. "Are you absolutely sure the bond was the way to go?"

"You doubt your compatriots?"

She shook her head. "Never. I doubt that I will be able to allow myself to care for anyone other than them. I love Brittany, I love my family. I would die for them. I would kill for them. But Kurt and Quinn? That's beyond visceral. It's a magic of its own."

"You've unlocked the first piece. Perhaps the spiritual is not as unknown to you as you believe."

Santana frowned.

"Your grandmother is approaching. Unburden yourself to her and accept her wisdom. You are not
alone and, no matter how knowledgeable and powerful you are, you're still your age. You have more support than you realize."
Santana returned to the Residence three days later, still thinking heavily on everything she and her grandmother had discussed. There was a lot to unpack.

She was grateful she had convinced Kurt to bring in Esperanza on the secret years ago, believing it could only help their then fledgling plans, especially in light of the Moratorium Dumbledore had since cast. That still frosted her cookies, that he would dare cast such restrictive magic upon them after that aborted Legilimancy attempt.

Esperanza then had the audacity to argue in Dumbledore’s favor, which Santana fiercely resented, though she could not scoff at her grandmother’s points as she so desperately wished.

First, the Moratorium was just as useful to them as it was to Dumbledore. Esperanza had said that because Dumbledore must have cast the spell on the Apparition Hub before using it himself, he was now also bound by its limitations. Santana felt stupid she hadn’t realized this herself.

Regardless, it was welcome information. Yes, Dumbledore had ensured they could not reveal Kurt to Harry for some time – the length of which they still did not know – but it also meant Dumbledore had to keep his fat mouth shut. Esperanza was certain, and Santana agreed, that given the man’s penchant for keeping information to himself, he had never spoken to anyone that James and Lily Potter had twins, with the exception of Alastor Moody.

Moody was someone else they would need to consider – and make plans accordingly.

This meant they had a while before Dumbledore could insert himself between Kurt and Harry, though he would most certainly try. It also meant no other professors at Hogwarts could act as his agents in the matter, since they didn’t know the secret. That was the great beauty and major drawback of a Moratorium – once it was cast, the secret could not be revealed to anyone else, even at the Secret-Keeper’s behest. The secret was essentially a closed system.

Second, with no one able to reveal Kurt as the Potter Scion, he couldn’t be used against Harry. She expected that Dumbledore would try to find some way around that, but doubted he would be successful. Given that no one had ever looked for Liam Potter, it stood to reason that either British magical society either didn’t know Lily had birthed twins, or those that knew had been Obliviated. She suspected the latter and Dumbledore was the most likely culprit.

Considering how much Dumbledore planned ahead and played the long game, Santana believed they had years before the Moratorium could be dispelled, which meant they had time to build up a
network of allies that could, if not rival Dumbledore, at least make him pause and question. Again she was reminded that Quinn and Kurt thought of the old man as merely an obstacle, not an enemy.

She herself had a very different opinion, one that had been reinforced by her grandmother. Esperanza had relayed some very interesting information regarding Dumbledore. In fact it was so explosive, Santana would do nothing but sit on it for now. She knew when to bide her time. There was also enough of it to dole out piecemeal for years if Dumbledore insisted on being an idiot.

Esperanza had poked another hole, though, and Santana was grateful for it. She knew she was a genius and that Kurt and Quinn were, as well, but they were still their ages. They were up against an opponent with literally more than ten times their years and experience, as well as an entire society. She had to remind herself frequently that she was a neophyte at this, despite her cunning, and allowing herself, Kurt, and Quinn to become isolated and hubristic would be a terrible mistake. She refused to allow them to become another Dumbledore.

What her grandmother had pointed out – and what Santana rued she herself had missed – was they were only assuming no one else knew who Kurt really was. Yes, it was very doubtful anyone did, but the possibility existed. They couldn’t afford to go traipsing around and being indelicate. If someone out there did know, Kurt couldn’t count on them having been Obliviated by Dumbledore. It therefore also must be assumed they weren’t subject to the Moratorium, for they hadn’t passed through the Apparition Hub or come into contact with someone who knew the secret.

There was a bright spot, however: even if someone did know the secret and blabbed, there would be no one or nothing to confirm their story. All of the major players either had their memories erased or were bound. Heritage tests, per the Treaty, could only be administered by the Goblins, who were squarely on Kurt’s side – at least for the moment. Even though a royal decree had been made, there were Goblins who cared far more for gold than their Nation, and would talk if the right amount of coin passed their hands. Thankfully, with Ragnok administering everything himself, this might not become an issue.

She was so preoccupied, she had been completely oblivious to the loud argument Quinn and Kurt were having. She was taken aback for a moment; Kurt and Quinn never argued. She herself argued with both of them frequently, and sometimes even against them together, but they did not argue with each other.

“What the hell is going on?” she demanded as she stormed into Kurt’s bedroom.

A panting and flushed Kurt immediately fell quiet and turned his back, attempting to catch his breath and get himself under control.

Quinn glared at him before rolling her eyes and turning to Santana. “I only did what you both suggested and took some initiative. Kurt has taken umbrage with my methods.”

Kurt growled and Santana raised an eyebrow.

Quinn threw up her hands. “First of all, I did not sabotage any of our plans nor did I compromise any classified information. Conducting our own investigation into Hogwarts and our future classmates is all well and good, but it would be naïve to ignore other sources of information!”

Santana nodded. “I agree.”

“So I wrote to Viktor Krum,” Quinn continued, “and asked for his opinions about the state of wizarding Britain and how he thought we would fare at Hogwarts, in addition to soliciting his opinion on how we should deal with what we might encounter.”
“Smart,” Santana said, “and valuable.” She glanced at Kurt, who still had his back turned, and then looked again to Quinn. “Krum is intelligent and resourceful. He’s a good observer and an excellent tactician, which is why professional leagues are already scouting a fourteen year old. His mother is Undersecretary for the Bulgarian ministry and her brother is the country’s representative to the ICW. What’s the problem?”

“The problem is this!” Kurt thundered, spinning around on his heal and brandishing a sheaf of paper. “Viktor thinks we should stick with our tutors but, if we insist on formal schooling, we should consider Beauxbatons. He even offered to secure us places at Durmstrang, though he knows we were already accepted! He argues we should abandon this plan altogether and stay as far from Hogwarts as possible.”

“Yeah, and?” Santana barked. “How’s that any different from what each of us thought before we agreed to do this?”

“Thank you!” Quinn shouted, raising her hands into the air once more.

Kurt’s pale complexion turned florid. “I didn’t do all of this only to be kept from my brother even longer!”

“You’re ridiculous,” Santana said. “No one said anything about following Krum’s suggestions. He doesn’t pontificate and we don’t take orders. He’s only concerned, which, given Hogwarts’ reputation, is more than reasonable. Why are you carrying on like Rachel Berry?”

Kurt’s eyes became the size of dinner plates. “Take that back,” he hissed.

“I don’t think I will, so stop carrying on like the midget banshee and tell me what’s got you so pissed off. It has to be more than this.”

“He wants to Pledge me!”

Santana offered an owlishly blink in reply. “Okay,” she said slowly, “that is weird and unexpected. I didn’t think people did that anymore.”

“European Purebloods do,” Quinn said, “and if Kurt would just take breath and stop and think about Viktor’s reasons, he would agree they’re sound.”

Kurt snarled in frustration.

Santana was now firmly on Quinn’s side. Whatever issues Kurt had, they were obviously personal and he wasn’t looking at the larger picture – something they had both agreed was Quinn’s specialty.

“I’m only eleven! I’m too young to be engaged, especially to someone I only know superficially!”


“Well, doesn’t it?” he screamed.

“No,” she said quietly, “not at all.”

He stopped ranting. “What?”

She sighed. “I’m sorry, Kurt. I should have been more thoughtful about why Viktor’s suggestion was upsetting you. Pledging isn’t a betrothal contract.” She crossed the room and took his hands in
Santana cottoned on and scowled. Between the ages of five and seven, Kurt had been subjected to no less than several hundred betrothal requests, all sent to him under the guise of mere interest, when in fact they had been far more sinister: compulsion spells, letters soaked in potions, hidden portkeys and the like. Most were from parents attempting to advance the stations of their sons and daughters, but there had been many from adult wizards and witches who wanted to control Kurt’s fortune, get closer to Uncle Burt, and some who were pedophiles.

It had scarred Kurt badly. Those scars were only exacerbated when Finn was subjected to the same treatment, though a much smaller volume, after Carole and Uncle Burt had married.

Quinn gathered a breath. “Pledging is nothing more than a formal declaration to begin courting when the younger person comes of age. It’s just paperwork, but the benefits are incalculable.”

Kurt cocked his head. “Explain, please.”

She heaved a sigh of relief. “What Viktor is proposing is that he asks Uncle Burt for the privilege of Pledging himself to you. As I said, what this means is that Viktor would declare himself a potential suitor for your hand. It is a formal arrangement which is basically nothing more than a precursor to dating.

“What it is not is a mechanism designed to subvert your choice in partners. It does not mean that you have to date Viktor when you’re ready to begin dating, nor would he have any rights to your body, your person, your power, or your money. He would have absolutely no control over you.”

He released a slow, controlled breath. “And the benefits?”

Santana decided to tackle this, sensing Quinn’s edges were beginning to fray badly. “The benefit is the Pledge Ring. If you consent and Pledge yourself to Krum, you both would wear rings to signify the arrangement. Pledging is an old custom, yeah, but it was designed by the European Houses to ensure their Scions and Heirs couldn’t have their wills suborned by love potions or kidnapping.”

“How?”

“The Pledge Ring is a remarkable piece of craftsmanship,” Santana continued. “They are warded to detect love potions in food or drink, will repel minor curses and jinxes, and act as personal, inexhaustible Portkeys. If the Ring sensed you were in physical danger, you would be transported from that danger to an agreed-upon safehouse without you needing to say a word, in case you had been gagged or silenced.”

Kurt gave a thoughtful hum.

“You would be at Hogwarts while Viktor would continue at Durmstrang,” Quinn added. “This would be nothing more than an extra layer of protection – one which you sorely need. Viktor rightfully pointed out in his letter that many of the British Houses would be too eager to get their claws into you. We don’t know what you might be subjected to at Hogwarts, but we can’t afford not to consider it.”

“She’s right,” Santana said. “Dark, Neutral, and Light doesn’t matter here. Whether you like it or not, whether you want to admit or not, you’re a prize. You have money and power – lots of both – and people will try to use you for their own benefit. Your father is the Vice President. You are Pureblood going back centuries and hold numerous, coveted titles. We’ll be going to school with kids a lot older than us and we have no idea what their intentions are or where their motivations
truly lie. We’d be foolish to ignore them.”

“I concede your points,” he said quietly, “but I don’t understand why Pledging is necessary. Yes, I see the benefits of the Ring, but how are they any different from what my Orléans, Aquitaine, or Bavarian jewels offer? Or the House Potter ring, for that matter.”

“Because Viktor is already on his way to becoming internationally renowned,” Quinn said. “He’ll turn professional before he graduates and will become a media sensation. If you are Pledged, anyone stupid enough to go after either one of you would see them tried in the court of the press on a global scale. They would be annihilated. And that doesn’t begin to cover what the Krum family would do to them.”

“Why would Viktor do that for me?” Kurt wondered. “I barely know him.”

“I don’t think his motives are so altruistic,” Santana said, smirking. “Don’t you get it, Kurt? He receives just as much unwanted attention as you. By Pledging yourselves to each other, you essentially remove yourselves from a pit of vipers just waiting for you to fall in.

“Plus, Pledging isn’t permanent. You can dismiss the arrangement whenever you want if you find someone more suitable. Also, there’s nothing in the agreement which precludes you from dating other people, only from committing yourselves to them.”

“It just makes good sense,” Quinn insisted. “Do you really think Dumbledore is beneath pointing witches and wizards allied with him toward us?”

“Harry,” he whispered.

Santana nodded. “Which is why he needs to assume the mantle of House Black sooner rather than later. Also, once you gain access to the vaults of House Potter, you’re going to need to do something about the betrothal contracts which have doubtlessly piled up within it over the years.”

“But what about you two?” he demanded. “If you think I’m going to stand around with some ring on my finger while Dumbledore …”

Santana held up her hand and displayed her ring finger. “Royal Heir, ascendant sovereign, et al.”

Quinn did likewise. “Kore of the Goblin Nation. Godmother gifted it to me this morning.”

He sighed with relief. “I only promise to consider it, and I’ll want to discuss it with Dad, Nadia, and Uncle Will before I do anything, but … thank you. Thank you for being my friends.”

Quinn shook it off before she got teary and turned. “What did Esperanza have to say?”

Santana’s eyes lighted with glee. “Oh, many things.”

Harry was still trying to consolidate all of the information he had learned in the past three days, yet still felt he was woefully behind where he needed to be.

He was angry and resentful. He was furious with his aunt for denying him his heritage and with Albus Dumbledore for same. He had been expecting the Headmaster to make contact, if only to explain his side of things, but nothing had been forthcoming. When he mentioned this to Augusta,
she offered that Longbottom Hall was under an obscure and difficult charm called the *Fidelius* and that anyone who wasn’t aware of the Secret would be unable to find them.

Harry found the idea of such a charm to be intriguing, but was flummoxed when he learned his parents’ cottage in Godric’s Hollow had been under the same charm. This led to an impromptu discussion of what a Secret-Keeper was and how the person selected to hold the Secret ultimately decided its value.

Augusta had revealed it had always been assumed Sirius Black, his heretofore unknown godfather, had been the Secret-Keeper, but apparently this was wrong. Even worse was that Black had spent the last decade in what sounded like was hell on earth to suffer for his crimes. When Harry learned Black had been denied a trial, he was outraged. This was stoked further when told Albus Dumbledore had been the Chief Warlock at the time of Black’s arrest.

Harry didn’t often write things down. He was very observant and had an excellent memory. He could read a book and then later recall every word, including the page on which the words were located, with no trouble. His former school librarian explained he had what was called a photographic memory and this was apparently rare. Only an eidetic memory was more uncommon.

He was surprised neither Augusta nor Neville had heard of them, so he read passages of various books to slake their curiosity. They in turn explained about memory spells and Obliviations, which Harry thought were heinous. He was particularly appalled that these were frequently employed against non-magicals. He demanded to know by what right witches and wizards were allowed to tamper with the memories, the very selves, of those who could muster no defense. He thought the Statute of Secrecy to be a rather sorry excuse.

He thought much of the wizarding world was sorry, a fact which dismayed Neville and angered Augusta, though she agreed with much of his reasoning.

The more he thought about what magic could do to those who didn’t possess it, he couldn’t help but wonder if the Dursleys had fallen victim to it. He had heard both Aunt Petunia and Uncle Vernon bemoan over the years that they weren’t able to move house as they would have liked. Inevitably, he was blamed for this, either by words or fists, but he was never sure why they had insisted he was responsible.

Master Filius, however, had insisted the wards were tied to Harry himself, not the house, so why couldn’t they move? Had there been something other than the wards which had forced them to stay? If so, what?

A few careful questions to Neville affirmed that there existed charms of compulsion and obedience. Harry didn’t dare presume it was out of the realm of possibility that the Dursleys had been subjected. His anger only grew. He didn’t yet know for sure if such spells had been cast, but he would be foolish to rule it out. Were it true, it was no great surprise that his family hated and resented him as much as they did, though that didn’t excuse their behavior toward him.

Nothing excused that.

He had then received a letter from Master Filius enquiring about how he was faring with the Longbottoms and whether or not he had glanced through any of the books he had purchased. If so, did he have any questions?

Harry was surprised that he had no suspicions where Master Filius was concerned, which was very unusual. As a general rule, he didn’t trust adults nor did he respect them. Trust and respect could be earned, but he didn’t grant them freely. He was always polite if distant but, for whatever reason, he
trusted Master Filius and, to a lesser extent, Madam Bones.

He also had a very strong inclination to trust Madam Longbottom, which was a new experience. Never before had he actually desired to trust someone. At the very least, he respected her. She answered questions honestly and wasn’t perturbed if he didn’t agree with her answers. Indeed, she allowed for disagreement, as long as he understood the traditions for why things were the way they were. It was a good lesson. You couldn’t change what you didn’t like about a system if you didn’t know how to work your way within the system.

Harry had read through many of his books this past week. They weren’t terribly difficult, almost as if they were geared toward idiots, and neither were any very long, so he had made short work of them. His good memory aside, his speedreading ability was actually due to the Dursleys. They had enrolled Dudley in speedreading and time-management courses to facilitate his lackluster academic prowess, but Dudley had stopped going to both, throwing out the texts, which Harry then purloined.

Both had helped him tremendously with his primary schoolwork, as his chores for the Dursleys ate up most of the time he wasn’t in classes. Speedreading and time-management had allowed him to complete his homework often in little more than an hour.

He had already decided he wasn’t going to play the dullard at Hogwarts. He no longer had to sacrifice his intelligence to make a fat reprobate feel better about being stupid. Indeed, Madam Longbottom had made it clear that she not only expected him to do well, but practically demanded it as a condition to his living in Longbottom Hall. He didn’t much mind; in fact, he looked forward to proving himself, if only to himself.

The only books that gave him issue were the various tomes on magical theory, and this was primarily because they didn’t agree with each other. It seemed as if no actual investigation had ever been performed to determine what magic was and why only certain people had it. Most of the so-called theories instead discussed how magic could be wielded, but even then there was disagreement.

Harry had reached the disappointing conclusion that no one really knew how magic worked.

He hummed absently as he wrote Master Filius three pages of questions, documenting the sources he had already checked and asking for further references, preferably primary sources, to explore.

As if on cue, Hedwig soared through the window and landed on his shoulder, giving him a questioning look. If there was anyone he trusted absolutely, it was her, and he told her as much.

She preened his hair before hopping to his other shoulder and rubbing her soft head beneath his chin.

“No, I agree,” he said, “we need to start somewhere and Master Filius is our best bet. Do you want to read the letter before I seal it?”

She nodded and looked over his words, muttering complaints about his dismal penmanship.

Harry rolled his eyes. “I know, I know. Madam Longbottom has been instructing me, but my handwriting was horrible before. It’s much more difficult with a quill. I received delivery of my biros, but I think I should at least make an effort for the professor.”

She nodded again and barked at him.

“That’s a good idea. I very much doubt that any other human and owl has what we do. Neville and Madam Longbottom certainly don’t with their post owls.” He looked up at her. “You’re not really a
post owl, are you?”

She laughed as he rolled his eyes once more and amended the letter. He sealed it and attached it to her leg.

“You take care, okay? I don’t want anything to happen to you.”

She barked once more.

“I am not impugning your abilities!” he exclaimed. “I just want you to be careful. This world acts as though I’m their property, and I don’t want anyone laying hands on you just so they can attempt to claim Harry Potter’s owl.”

She gave his finger an affectionate nip and flew out the window, all the while chastising him for doubting her.

“Ornery owl,” he said, sighing, as he sat at his desk watching until she was out of sight.

He turned back to Master Filius’ letter.

“Susan Bones, hm? Must be some relation to Madam Bones. Hope she’s just as forthright.”

The primary faculty was assembled at the staff table in the Great Hall for luncheon, eating in companionable silence. All of them looked up with interest as a majestic snowy owl soared through one of the windows lining the eaves.

“Oh, my!” Filius exclaimed. “It’s Hedwig!”

The others halted their repast and waited to hear what news of Harry Potter was being brought.

“She’s a beauty, she is!” Hagrid rumbled.

Even Snape agreed. The owl was a magnificent specimen, all the more so for being a familiar.

Hedwig swooped down in a lazy spiral before coming to land in front of Filius’ bowl.

“Greetings, my lady,” he said happily, inclining his head.

The others were astonished when Hedwig bowed to him in kind.

“A most intelligent owl,” Pomona observed.

Minerva was kind enough to transfigure a saucer into a goblet filled with water. Hedwig bowed again and began drinking after allowing Filius to remove her letter.

He opened it with great zeal and, after a moment of reading, began chuckling. His laughter increased the more he read, arousing the interest of the others.

“How is Lord Potter faring, Filius?” Minerva asked.
Filius laughed, shaking the letter in his hand. “Questions! So many wonderful questions! If this were an assigned essay, I’d have little choice but to grant it an Outstanding. Young Harry did research! Critical thought and extrapolation! Cited sources!”

She arched an eyebrow. Unusual indeed, but less so for a Muggleborn or Muggle-raised child.

“May we know the contents, Filius?” asked a subdued Albus.

“I don’t see why not,” the little man replied. He passed Harry’s letter to Severus, who appeared perplexed as to why he was being considered at all, let alone first. He narrowed his eyes and began reading, eyes turning more and more thoughtful the further he read.

“I see what you meant about pragmatic intelligence, Filius,” he said. “It is rare for a first-year, regardless of blood status, to raise these questions. Usually they simply accept what they are told and attempt to navigate the rather murky waters of magic to the best of their ability. This letter exhibits philosophical and metaphysical ruminations about the nature of magic itself, as well as its mechanics and limitations.” He paused. “This research is easily on par with that of a third year if not higher. He purchased these books of his own volition?”

Filius nodded. “I gave him no guidance in reading material, save offering comment on those books which are known to be nothing more than speculative rubbish.”

Severus nodded and passed the letter to Minerva as he considered this.

Harry Potter was not what he expected, no, but he found he no longer dreaded this. He had already informed Albus that he intended to treat Lord Potter as he would any other student. There would be no abuse, no provocations, no overarching menace. He made clear that the other Heads agreed with him on this and that, should Albus force the issue, they would take it collectively to the Board.

Shockingly, Albus had agreed wholeheartedly. He didn’t want special treatment for the Potter boy. Severus knew this was most likely because Potter already had suspicions about Dumbledore and Albus wasn’t anxious to arouse them further. He didn’t much care; he was just relieved he wouldn’t have to fight the old man on the matter.

The fact that Potter apparently had Lily’s intellect was very … ameliorating.

“Some of this is NEWT level theory,” Minerva murmured.

“Though it really shouldn’t be,” Filius interjected, smiling when Severus nodded in agreement. “We were all taught theory before practical, yes?”

The others nodded.

“Headmaster Dippet altered the curriculum with regard to magical theory,” Albus said with some heat, “despite my vociferous objections. His argument was that, as no cohesive theory had ever been agreed upon, it was a waste of time and resources that could be put to better use elsewhere.”

“I never knew that,” Pomona said.

Albus sighed. “Armando changed much in the manner and method of class offerings. Unfortunately, at the time, the majority of the Board were his friends and associates, and they didn’t hesitate to ratify his dictums in the interest of the almighty galleon.”

The others fell silent for a moment, embarrassed for having blamed Albus so much over the years about the lamentable state of the Hogwarts curriculum. Albus himself took the letter Minerva
passed and read it carefully before smirking and handing it Pomona.

Dumbledore sighed again, this time more heavily. “I have tried many times over the years to restore the curriculum to what it once was, but have been blocked by the Board at every turn. They have as much interest vested in education as they do in the state of the school brooms.”

Rolanda Hooch let out an impressive snort at the end of the table, signaling her agreement on the matter.

Filius frowned. “Albus, just how much say does the Board have in the running of the school?”

This was a test, the other Heads knew. Filius had since provided them with copies of the Charter, which had well and truly opened their eyes about just how the school was to be administrated.

Albus stroked his beard as he became lost in thought. “In truth,” he said finally, “the power of the Board of Governors is mostly ceremonial. Nevertheless, they have co-opted a great deal more over the decades. At one point, the Board was elected, not appointed, and seats were not handed down as a matter of tradition.”

“Which is as it should be,” Minerva huffed.

“I agree,” Albus said easily, “however, you must realize, as I’ve had to, that the current Board hasn’t much changed since Voldemort rose to power and these people will not go easily or quietly.”

“You’re using them,” Pomona said, frowning. “It’s rather ingenious.”

“Thank you,” Albus said. “They were somewhat of a barometer of how Voldemort was influencing the upper echelons of our society and I was able to deflect much of their more insidious plots to make the school more susceptible to him.”

He grimaced. “But it’s a very fine line I walk. The elder members, those of my generation and the one just behind me, truly do want Hogwarts to be the premier magical school of Europe, but they are also stuck in their ways. Tradition is all well and good, until it begins to impede on progress. Unfortunately, after my meeting with the Ambassador and his friends, I became acutely aware of just how far our star has fallen.”

The others shifted restlessly.

“Is it really that bad, Albus?” Poppy asked quietly.

“I’m afraid so. The children rightly pointed out that our curriculum, as it stands now, is very much generalized and not at all suited to, shall we say, our more industrious and determined students. I was very heartened to hear them extol the prowess of our faculty, but there is also a reason why we have almost no students from outside the Isles, whereas Beauxbatons and Durmstrang receive students from across the entire continent.”

Filius cleared his throat. “I did some checking. Much of Durmstrang is, as you know, a mystery, but Beauxbatons offers more than a dozen courses we do not.”

“So much,” Minerva whispered, lost in thought.

“It is within my remit as Headmaster to dissolve the Board,” Albus said slowly, “but there would be severe consequences. The Pureblood stranglehold is so great, it is a very real possibility they might turn into a bloc and remove their children entirely. We could not afford to operate without
their tuition galleons."

Severus glared at his now-empty goblet. “What about expanding the Board? Not their powers, of
of course, but the membership? I know we couldn’t add Muggles to reflect our large number of
Muggleborn students, the parents and families wouldn’t even be able to see the school, but what
about adding Half-Bloods?”

Albus stroked his beard. “I am certainly not opposed but, again, we must take into account how the
Board would react.”

“What about making them abide the Charter?” Minerva demanded. “If they are in default with
regard to their duties and responsibilities, it is not only our right but our duty to force their
compliance.”

“That is an intriguing idea,” Albus said, “but, alas, I do not possess a copy of the Charter. All
copies disappeared prior to my accepting the title of Headmaster. I have had Irma scouring the
library for years to unearth a copy, but she has never found one. I do not know if Armando had one
in his possession, but it grieves me greatly that I was forced to take oaths to uphold a document I
myself have never read.”

Filius slyly passed him a copy he had duplicated. “A bit of light reading for you, Albus. It should
prove highly entertaining.”

Albus blinked in astonishment before a low chuckle erupted from his throat. His eyes twinkled with
amusement. “Oh, well done, Filius! Well done, indeed!”

“That was unexpected,” Filius murmured as the Heads and Poppy once again convened, this time
in Pomona’s suite.

“But fascinating,” Severus said. “Too often have we thought Albus the beginning and end of all
things, failing to take into account just how political his position is, and the demands required of
him.”

“We need to be more organized in our approach,” said a decisive Minerva. “I still agree that we
should bring our concerns to the attention of the Ambassador’s analyst, but we should also do our
due diligence before they arrive and consult with Albus. If we can resolve some of our demands
without forcing his hand, we should.”

Pomona sighed. “I must confess I am very indecisive about that man. He’s played it so cagey and
for so long, that it’s almost impossible for me to determine his true agenda.”

Poppy scoffed. “That’s because he has many and plays them, and the players, against each other. I
agree that there is much more to this than we realized, and Albus has very well been hamstrung by
those interfering when they have no right, but he’s not an innocent in this. He has let too much
slide for far too long, despite his admission that he has more power than we realized or that he
uses.”

“We need to think long-term here,” Filius said. “What are our goals? Further, what is the worst
scenario that could result from Albus’, shall we say, rather hands-off approach?”
“The Ministry,” Severus said. “They have no power over the school, but they, like the Board, could assume powers they do not possess all under the guise of protecting the children and ensuring their right to a superlative education.”

The sarcasm dripped from his words.

Filius nodded. “They will be looking for openings, especially with Harry arriving at the new term.”

“It frightens me,” Pomona whispered, “just how much of a catalyst this boy is.” She looked at them in turn. “It’s almost as if people have been lying in wait for his return.”

“Because they have been,” Filius said, heaving a dejected sigh. “Whoever controls Harry Potter controls the wizarding world for at least the next ten years, possibly longer. We are slow to change, yes, but the child’s name alone is a lightning rod.”

Minerva gave an angry nod. “Fudge, of course, will be after him. Upon his majority, Harry will control a large voting bloc in the Wizengamot.”

Severus pursed his lips. “Fudge is an idiot and a magical weakling, but he is conniving in the extreme. If he feels he cannot bend the Potter Scion, he will seek to discredit him and destroy his reputation, most likely through the media.”

“Harry’s just a child!” Pomona protested. “Granted, the laws governing journalism are laughable, but they still exist! They can’t libel a minor.”

Filius shook his head. “We can’t think like teachers, Pom. We have to think like politicians. They create and enforce those laws and know how to manipulate them to suit their whims. They will argue that Harry, as an international figure, even an icon, should have no rights to privacy. You know of the books. His birthday is a national holiday. People want to know him, know about him; they won’t care if their relentless thirst hurts him, as long as it is slaked.”

“What can we do?” asked an anguished Pomona.

“Next to nothing,” Severus hissed. “No matter our individual reputations, we are dealing with something on another level entirely. We have some power here in the school, but even that is mitigated.” He gestured toward the window. “But out there?” He shook his head. “We will be of little use.”

Filius could no longer contain his curiosity. “Your involvement in this surprises me, Severus. Why are you so willing to help Harry?”

“Not because of Albus,” Snape said quickly, anxious to derail that train of thought. “The will, Filius. The will. James, no matter what he did to me, abrogated the debt. He didn’t have to. No matter what I feel about him or that night, he saved my life at what very well could have been at the expense of his own. That matters to me. I might not have your morals, but I do have honor. That Albus knew the debt was forgiven and chose not to tell me enrages me.”

Filius wasn’t so easily placated. “And Lily?”

Severus dropped his head. “I believe my feelings for Lily are clear to you all. After she died, I swore on her memory that I would protect her son. I foolishly mentioned this oath to Albus, who has spent the last ten years plotting to use it to his advantage. The plans he had for that boy … I will not sit back and allow them to come to fruition, not after learning that he consigned Harry to hell for a decade because it was convenient.”
His voice trembled with more passion than any of them could ever remember him possessing.

Snape regarded Flitwick with a cool look. “What else did his letter say? I know part of it was charmed.”

Filius smirked and inclined his head. “He wanted my advice. Apparently, while at the Ministry that first day, he overheard Amelia drop something quite scandalous into Augusta’s lap. Since he has free rein of Longbottom Hall, he has made judicious use of the library, yet he needs more direction than books can provide.”

Minerva leaned forward. “What is he planning?”

Pomona frowned. “He knows what Albus has done, doesn’t he?”

“Yes,” Filius replied, “and he plans to address it. Legally.”

Poppy chuckled darkly. “Clever boy. By involving Amelia, that ensures the involvement of the Ministry, which means Cornelius. Our dear Minister might supplicate himself before Albus prior to making any decision, but he resents him for it. If the Boy Who Lived pits himself against the Leader of the Light, it’s rather obvious on whose side Cornelius will stand, isn’t it?”

“Cornelius cannot be trusted,” Minerva insisted. “No matter how shrewd Harry might be, he is still a child and Cornelius is not without resources.” Her eyes panned to each of them in turn. “I believe you’re all familiar with Dolores, aren’t you?”

Scowls were her only answer.

“True, Minerva, true,” Filius said, “but we must also stop to remember that the people involved only view Harry as the Boy Who Lived. They forget with great frequency just what else he is. Remember that first night in Albus’ office. Even he himself had forgotten.”

“Harry is the Scion of House Potter,” Poppy said. “Regardless of his alleged blood status, that matters to the Purebloods, independent of their affiliations. Should Harry expose Albus’ schemes, they will come for him in force. How he expected to get away with this, interfering with the Major Arcana in such a gross and massive manner, is beyond me.”

“I’m sure Augusta is already planning to reactivate the alliance,” Severus said, nodding.

“And others will come to his side,” Pomona surmised. “Amelia, certainly. House Diggory most probably.” She paused and shook her head. “I don’t know enough about the First Families to say who else will fly their banners with Harry.”

“As I said previously,” Minerva interjected, “James was distant kin to me through Charlus. Clan McGonagall will stand with Harry Potter.” She tilted her head. “I don’t imagine it will be too long before Oliver Wood makes an overture. House Wood, though minor, is still an Ancient House who was, for centuries, aligned with House Potter.”

“So,” Severus said quietly, “Houses Longbottom and Bones, both Ancient and Most Noble, are givens, in addition to Clan McGonagall. The Noble House of Diggory and Ancient House of Wood are strong possibilities.” He shook his head. “Pomona and Filius are two of the most beloved figures in our world, with Poppy not far behind. I, however, am of little to no use.”

Filius chuckled. “Oh no, Severus, that’s where you’re very much wrong. Your skills will be invaluable to this little assignation.”
Severus arched a brow.

“You, like Harry, are considered a Half-Blood, though you both had one Pureblood parent. You may have been raised Muggle, but I well remember your mother and find it difficult to believe Eileen didn’t instruct you in her traditions accordingly.”

Severus offered a swift nod, eyes burning with curiosity.

“Unfortunately James had no opportunity to teach Harry of his heritage and, while I’m sure Augusta will do her best to provide him with what knowledge she possesses, it won’t be enough.” Filius frowned. “For whatever reason, Harry is ineligible to claim House Potter until his majority.”

“That’s highly irregular,” Minerva interrupted, also frowning. “Harry is not only the Scion, but the Last Scion of House Potter. He should be able to inherit immediately.”

“But he’s not,” Filius argued. “I don’t know why, whether it was due to James’ instruction or some other legal loophole, but the Goblins insisted Harry was ineligible and they would know. They’re independent of the Ministry, but they still must follow the law, so obviously something or someone is standing in Harry’s way.”

He shook his head. “Regardless, Harry will need instruction in addition to whatever Augusta drills into him, as well as how to negotiate our world and its denizens. A disproportionate number of Scions and Heirs will be entering this castle and they will seek him out. He will need guidance so that his ignorance can’t be used against him. That is where you come in, Severus.”

“I can do that,” the man said softly.

“There’s something else,” Pomona said, eyes narrowed at Filius. “What did young Harry overhear between Amelia and Augusta?”

Filius smirked. “That he is the Heir Presumptive of House Black.”

Minerva and Severus choked.

“And there’s nothing stopping him from claiming it.”

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Narcissa Malfoy tossed the piece of parchment into the hearth and watched as it was consumed by fire. She had been waiting for the appropriate moment since it had been delivered that morning by House Elf. She knew its sender had taken all appropriate precautions, but she could not allow herself to become lax.

She was deeply grateful. If she truly called anyone a friend in her often lonely existence, it was Filius Flitwick.

_Potter is the new Black._

The roar of the fire cast a carnal glow upon her usually ivory skin as her mind sorted the information, correlating it with what she had thought had been true, creating and discarding scenarios as quickly as the thoughts could form.

This could either be the most glorious turn of events or the most insidious. She would make no
move until she had a better understanding of the players.

“Interesting,” she said as the embers began to die away. “Very interesting.”

The following day, as Santana received her grandmother’s guidance while Kurt and Quinn were in receipt of Viktor’s letter, Harry Potter met Susan Bones.

He found her very disarming, not the least of which was because he didn’t quite know what to make of her. Usually children his age had little talent for subterfuge and, while he thought her to be a lovely girl, he understood there was much lurking beneath the surface. He didn’t necessarily distrust her, but he was wary. He rather thought she knew it.

Augusta had led Amelia and Susan into the conservatory, where both boys were busy reading. Neville immediately leapt to his feet and bowed; Harry copied him.

“No, Harry,” Neville said quietly. “You don’t bow as deeply to Madam Bones as I do.”

Harry frowned. “She is a respected and influential leader as well as the Regent of House Bones. Was I improper?”

“Not at all, Mister Potter,” Amelia said kindly, pleased by his description, “and I thank you for the courtesy.” She smiled. “However, young Neville is correct. It is unnecessary for you to bow so formally to me and Susan. Despite our high rank, yours is superior. I don’t wish to appear ungrateful, but if any of the more, shall we say, spirited Purebloods had seen this, you would have been mocked, perhaps even ridiculed, for your ignorance.”

“You asked for education, Harry,” Augusta interjected. “Perhaps we should begin here.”

Harry offered a hesitant nod.

“Long before Arthur ruled and the Britons and Celts were still living in mud huts, there was very little difference between those with magic and those without. Magic made life easier, of course, but there wasn’t a formal separation between our worlds. That came much later.”

Harry nodded again, curious as to why he hadn’t discovered this in any of his history books.

“Those who could wield magic did so openly, for the benefit of all, not just themselves and their few allies. The Isles were a collection of small kingdoms, but more analogous to city-states.”

“Like the Greeks,” Harry said.

Augusta gave a small smile and nodded. “You are familiar with Ancient Greece?”

“I’ve read extensively about it, yes.”

“Each kingdom had a specialty, a skill that made them unique and therefore zealously guarded. Yours was pottery, hence your surname. Unsurprisingly, each kingdom also had a ruler, or chieftain. Often this person was magical.”

Harry frowned in thought. “You said person. So these leaders were not all men?”
"Indeed not," Augusta said, "which is a topic we will revisit later. At any rate, life went on as it always does. The kingdoms experienced periods of peace and war, often correlated to advancements in magic and Muggle science and technology." She paused. "Then the Romans came."

Harry listened attentively as Augusta brought history to life. Names and dates he had memorized out of interest and not demand suddenly took on new meaning for him. Battles, ancient civilizations, creatures both magical and mundane he had believed were mere myths, Druids, and gods.

"The gods were real?" he murmured. "Are they still?"

"No one knows, Harry. They vacated this realm long ago, much like the Elves. Whether they left of their own accord or were driven out is lost in the annals of history. We might never know."

He wondered as to the relationship between these gods and magical humans, for surely one had existed.

"Boudicca was a witch?" he asked.

"Yes. Much like her Muggle legend, however, her magical history has been sacrificed to placate some and subjugate others."

He frowned more deeply and asked her to continue.

"Much of what I’m about to tell you is contested. The only agreed-upon fact is that much of the history of King Arthur is lost, if it was ever known."

"Why aren’t there better, more accurate records?" Harry demanded.

"After the fall of Camelot, it was not only Muggle Europe that plummeted into what is now called the Dark Ages," Augusta said sadly. "So much history and knowledge was lost during those centuries, as well as much magic."

"Magic was lost?" Harry helplessly repeated.

"Not so much lost as dormant," Amelia interjected, "for reasons which Augusta will elucidate."

Augusta cleared her throat. "You must first understand that Camelot existed prior to Arthur, who was raised there as its prince, along with his half-sister Morgana, by their father King Uther. It was on par with the other capitals, but it was not particularly exceptional or notable. That changed with the arrival of Merlin.

"You see, Harry, as you may have realized, magical strength exists on a spectrum. Very little of magic is truly understood, especially why some possess it and others do not, as well as the amount they can access and wield."

"Genetics," Harry muttered as he stared at the floor, mind racing.

"Pardon?" Augusta asked.

Harry blinked and then closed his eyes, navigating his inner library and plucking the desired tome from its shelf. "Genetics is a branch of biology, the scientific study of heredity, especially the mechanisms of hereditary transmission and the variation of inherited characteristics among similar or related organisms."
He then opened his eyes to find himself the recipient of several befuddled stares.

He repressed a sigh. “I have what is called a photographic memory. I can recall with ease everything I have ever read or seen.”

Amelia was floored by this, which indicated to Harry this was indeed atypical amongst magicals, which he found annoying. He would have to be careful to whom he revealed this in the future, lest his unwelcome fame only increase.

“This is something we will not reveal to others without your permission,” Neville said quickly, glaring at the others.

Augusta nodded slowly. “That is a remarkable skill, Harry, and one which you should safeguard closely.”

He nodded.

She exhaled. “At any rate, Merlin’s arrival. You must first understand that, despite what the fables claim, Merlin and Arthur were peers. Only a few years separated them, with Merlin being the younger. He was an autodidact of tremendous power, which saw him expelled from every village in which he tried to establish himself.”

“Pitchforks and torches.”

“Exactly, and it was not only the Muggles who led the charge. Power incites fear, Harry, but it is also one of the greatest aphrodisiacs.”

Augusta noted Neville and Susan were confused, but soldiered on. She had greatly underestimated Harry’s intellect, to both of their detriments. She had been so careful these past few days, treating him as a wounded child when it was clear he was anything but. Wounded, yes, but not a child; he had never been allowed to be.

Amelia was unsurprised. She had dealt with enough abused children to understand that, while they were sometimes emotionally immature, they were often psychologically and intellectually superior to their peers.

“Arthur,” Augusta continued, “with Merlin at his side, ushered in a Golden Age for Camelot and they succeeded in uniting the kingdoms under a common banner.”

Harry gave an absent nod. “So the kingdoms retained most of their autonomy and independence, but Arthur was the ultimate authority. The High King, so to speak.”

“Exactly, and he knew that if he were to rule successfully, he would need to establish a panel of advisers – a cabal, if you will – that would keep him apprised of the threats facing his nation.”

“The Round Table?” Harry assumed.

“Precisely. Arthur appointed an ambassador from every kingdom, with himself representing Camelot. They became the Knights of the Round Table and numbered thirteen.”

“Thirteen is a highly magical number, Harry,” Susan said. “Are you familiar with numerology?”

“Not really,” he admitted. “I’ve read about it of course, though not in any great depth. Aunt Petunia did enjoy reading her horoscope. I believe the practical definition is the branch of knowledge that deals with the occult significance of numbers.”
“Not entirely accurate, but serviceable,” she quipped. “Numerology is indeed a branch of knowledge and is often considered a subset of the study of Divination.” She held up a hand. “Don’t be so dismissive. You now know that magic exists, that an entire world exists beyond what you perceived. The same holds true for seers and prophecies. They are quite real, Harry.”

Harry gave a frustrated sigh, but at last nodded. Susan was right, he knew, and it would be inordinately stupid of him to discount an entire school of thought because he previously believed it held little value.

“Divination rightly has its many detractors,” Susan continued, “but that is because magicals no longer possess the knowledge to practice it with any great skill. Centuries ago, anyone could practice divination with moderate success, but that no longer holds.”

“What do you mean?” Harry asked.

“Harry,” Neville began, “real divination is not horoscopes or tea leaves or palm readings. Those are merely methods aspirants use to unlock their subconscious minds, to free themselves from the senses that are confined to flesh.”

“To what end?”

“Knowledge, mainly, but sometimes more. Pythagoras believed the entire universe was comprised of numbers and that, by understanding those numbers and their properties, you could unlock the secrets of the gods.”

Harry nodded. “Musica universalis. The Music of the Spheres.”

Neville blinked.

“Was Pythagoras a wizard too?”

“Yes,” Susan murmured, studying Harry more closely. He was far more interesting than she could have ever conceived.

“How does all of this relate to Merlin and Arthur?” Harry asked. “As well as magical strength?”

Augusta, who gave Neville a scolding look, took back up her tale. “As stated previously, there is no agreed upon theory regarding magic and its practitioners; however, there are observable events. The primary of these is that unto each generation is born a witch or wizard whose power so eclipses that of his or her brethren, they are referred to as a Titan.”

“Again with the Greeks,” Harry muttered.

“Yes,” she agreed, “but there’s more. Nature abhors a vacuum, Harry, and regardless of magic, the universe operates on a set of known laws.”

He cocked his head. “You’re speaking of physics and the laws of thermodynamics.”

“I am unfamiliar with these terms.”

“The First Law of Thermodynamics states that energy can neither be created nor destroyed.”

Augusta hummed for a moment and at last nodded. “That is appropriate here. If we deem magic to be energy, it is true that it is neither created nor destroyed; instead it is invoked. Magic exists in unknown quantities and circumstances. We as practitioners may not be able to qualify whence our
magic comes, but it is generally believed that it exists in two parts.

“The first is that we, that is witches and wizards, possess magic. Our magic is our own and is ours to govern. How it comes to us is unknown, as is why some are more or less powerful than average. The second is that Magic is a force unto itself. That is, it possesses a consciousness or a will of its own to which we must answer. Magic is a gift, not a right, and it can be taken just as easily as it was granted.

“Again, how this comes to pass is unknown to us now, but it is believed much more was known during the time of Camelot. Such a loss nowadays is seen primarily in the renunciation, purposefully or not, of an Oath or Vow.”

Neville turned toward him. “This is extremely important, Harry. In our world, words matter. If there ever comes a time when you are confused by or don’t know the meaning of a certain word, always ask before you act. Gran is right when she says that your magic can be taken away from you and, if you’re not careful, those who seek to harm you can do so with your unwitting assist.”

Harry paled and at last gave a shaky nod. “What is the difference between an oath and a vow?”

“In common parlance, very little,” Susan said, “but then Magic gets involved. Incidentally, be aware that you need not be in possession of your wand to make an Oath or Vow. Your wand is an extension of your magic, but not the magic itself. You can make an Oath or Vow without a wand and the consequences are just as dire.”

Harry blew out a breath and gestured for her to continue.

“A magical Oath is arguably the most serious, at least as far as most are aware, in that it contains an element of the Divine. When you make an Oath, you are swearing before Magic itself and asking It to witness the event. This event can range from anything to a promise that you are speaking the truth as you know it to announcing your intention to eliminate an enemy.

“With Magic as the bonder, you are acknowledging that, should you lie or waver, your magic, and in some cases your life, can be stripped from you as consequence.”

“My word is my oath,” Harry whispered.

Susan nodded, desperate for him to understand the seriousness of this. “Zeus oversaw all Oaths made by the Ancient Greeks. He was not considered to be a tyrant and literature depicts him as fair and even-handed, especially considering that one of his many functions was the Lord of Justice. When the gods themselves made Oaths, they swore by the River Styx, a primordial essence far older than they.”

“As a matter of course, Oaths and Vows are never demanded of a witch or wizard, nor can they be forced,” Amelia said. “They must be offered or entered into freely, otherwise they are only words.” She frowned. “Which is not to say there would not be consequences for falsely swearing either.”

“Vows are more problematic,” Neville said, “because they are much less clearly defined. Oaths are considered to be the most powerful binding that exists but, as Susan suggested, they are often confined to a singular event. Vows, on the other hand, often refer to behavior and there is usually no time limit associated with them.

“The person or persons making the Vow are committing themselves to act or behave in a certain way for an undetermined length of time. When you make a Vow, you are setting yourself on a course in which the outcome is unknown or undefined. Should you deviate from the course, either
in thought or deed, your magic, as well as your life, could be forfeit.”

“Until death us do part,” Harry said.

“Yes,” Amelia said, “which is why Vows haven’t been in fashion for affianced couples for centuries. They were simply too dangerous. No matter your conviction, you cannot foresee the variables that might be thrown in your path. You have no guarantee, prior to the Vow, that your course is the correct one or that your commitment to it might change over time.”

The weight of the Vows she had sworn in Gringotts almost sent her to her knees, but she refused to buckle. Despite their seriousness, or perhaps because of it, she was now more certain than ever she had made the right decision. Doing what was right was not always easy, but it was just. Harry Potter had many injustices committed against him. She would do her part to see them corrected.

“What about the other laws you mentioned, Harry?” Neville asked.

“Well,” he said slowly, “they don’t dovetail quite as nicely with the concepts you’re imparting, but I am reminded of Newton’s Third Law of Motion: for every action, there is an equal and opposing reaction.”

“Yes!” Augusta exclaimed. “That can be reduced even further: for every force, there is an equal an opposing force, and so it with magic. Let us return for a moment to Merlin. As I explained, he was what’s known as a Titan, someone with far more magical power than what is otherwise observed. I also said that Nature abhors a vacuum. Therefore, when someone of his strength exists …”

“Someone of equal strength rises to oppose him,” Harry concluded.

“Yes. This has been true of every generation of witches and wizards.”

“So Voldemort was the strongest of his generation.”

Augusta paused, then nodded. “Yes, as Albus Dumbledore was of mine.”

“And I am expected to be the Titan of my magical generation?”

Her silence spoke for itself.

“And our parents’ generation?” Harry asked, gesturing at himself, Neville, and Susan. “Who is the Titan?”

Neville and Susan looked at their elders with curiosity and expectation. Clearly, they didn’t know. Amelia and Augusta exchanged an awkward glance.

“It was your mother, Harry,” Augusta said quietly. “Lily Potter.”

Neville’s eyes bulged, but Susan didn’t look nearly as shocked.

“There are others,” Amelia added, “not quite as strong, but stronger than average; enough so that, if necessary, they could band together and challenge the Titan. They are known as Leviathans.”

Susan wondered … if it were true that Harry was the Titan, could Kurt be a Leviathan?

“These Leviathans,” Harry said. “They became the Knights of the Round Table, didn’t they?”

Augusta nodded, a small smile on her lips. “Indeed. Arthur was the High King, but his Knights were the kings of the other realms, all Leviathans in their own right. At this particular point in
history, they so happened to be men.”

“And they challenged Merlin?”

“Not as such,” Amelia said, “and though Arthur and Merlin were devoted to each other, both were wary of the power the latter held. The Leviathans joined forces with Merlin when his opposing Titan made herself known.”

Harry raised a brow. “Herself?”

“That is often the case, Harry. You will hear much about the nature of magic: light, dark, neutral. The truth is that Magic in and of itself is neutral, but most wizards and witches don’t want to believe this because it calls into question their codes of conduct and morality. Magic is both light and dark because Nature is both, loving and cruel all at once. It is masculine and it is feminine. The sun and the moon, Heaven and Hell, man and woman, child and elder, the philosopher and the simpleton.”

“The Tarot?”

Amelia smirked. “Oh, Mister Potter. You do have your mother’s mind.”

“So two Titans exist at any point in time?”

“Usually, yes,” Augusta said, “though not always of the same generation. Also, Titans are not restricted to the Isles. There are many Titans currently walking the earth.”

“So was my mother destined to fight Voldemort?” he whispered.

“The truth is we don’t know, Harry,” Amelia said kindly. “There is just so much we don’t know.”

“Are there any Leviathans currently in Britain?”

Amelia turned circumspect. “It is my belief that there are.”

“Have you met one?”

“Possibly more than one,” she admitted, “though they are unlikely to announce themselves as such.”

He looked up and stared into her eyes and saw the truth looking back at him. She was one.

Amelia realized he knew and was grateful for his silence. “Dorea Black, your paternal grandmother, was a Leviathan, Harry.”

He looked away. “My mother, my grandmother … it’s no coincidence, is it?”

“Nothing is coincidence.”

He nodded. “And the Knights of the Round Table, these Leviathans, we’re all descended from them, aren’t we?”

Amelia nodded as Susan and Neville balked.

“There is magic in blood, Harry,” Augusta said.

“Was Arthur a wizard too?”
“No one is certain.”

“But there are theories,” he insisted.

“Many. The predominant one, and no Pureblood would ever tell you this, is that it is from Arthur that all Muggleborn descend.”

“What!” Neville gasped. “I’ve never read …”

“You wouldn’t,” Augusta said quietly. “You will never find any of this information written down, Neville. Were it true, it would destroy the very foundation of Pureblood ideology.”

“Oral tradition,” Harry said.

“Yes. After Camelot fell and the Knights scattered, it wasn’t long until Britain descended into the Dark Ages. Superstition and fear bred with each other and magics pulled away from the Muggles, not so much that the worlds separated, but they did become segregated. It wasn’t until the Middle Ages that the magical world removed itself entirely from the Muggle one.

“The legacy of the Knights is the First Families, those whose lineage can be traced back before the establishment of the Round Table. Horrifically, some of those families are no longer extant, thanks to Grindelwald and then Voldemort. However, the two eldest Families still exist today: Potter and Black. Other descendants include the Longbottom, Bones, and Wood families. Ollivander, from whom you purchased your wand, is perhaps the eldest, though it wasn’t always British. Another quite Ancient house is that of Lovegood, which is also the only matrilineal House.”

Augusta gave him a tired and understanding smile. “So, Harry, yes, much is expected of you, but not necessarily because you vanquished Voldemort. While that event consumes the minds of the masses, the First Families will be watching how you adjust to your role of leader, not war hero.”

Harry gave a brief nod. This was revelatory. He had no real interest in placating simpletons who demanded he perform great feats of magic because of an event he couldn’t remember. But living up to his family name? Being worthy of it and doing his best to represent and honor his parents and grandparents? Indeed, his entire line?

That mattered.

“Then I have a lot to learn and not much time. Nev, tell me more about the bowing.”

“I was wondering when you would show yourselves,” purred the throaty voice of an unknown woman.

The three who had just arrived in the clearing turned toward each other and rolled their eyes.

“I can smell them, your Chosen, your Bonded, moving closer to my domain every day.”

“You are not to interfere,” barked the First. “They are not for you.”

“Not yet,” she agreed, “but there is time enough for me to sway them.”

The Second laughed, the sound light and musical as it echoed around them. “Hardly, lady. They’re
“Don’t you know?” the Third taunted. “Haven’t you seen the portents?”

“Portents of what?” she demanded, voice turning icy.

“Maybe you need to pay more careful attention,” the First advised. “It could only behoove you to stay out of this altogether, unless you care to condescend to offer your assistance?”

“Stop speaking in riddles!”

“It returns.”

Message delivered, they disappeared.

“No,” she whispered. “It can’t be. It just can’t be!”

Kurt, Santana, and Quinn looked up in interest as his bedroom door was flung open and Brittany stormed inside, simmering rage clearly present on her usually docile and lovely face.

“What the hell is going on here?” she demanded.

They glanced at each other before slowly turning back toward her.

“What are you talking about, Sweetness?”

“Don’t Sweetness me, Kurt Hummel! Goblins? Moratoriums? Attacks?”

He swallowed. “How much did you see?”

She gave him an incredulous look. “What does that matter? The better question is why I had to see anything at all? Why didn’t my best friends tell me what was happening?”

He looked down, guilt and shame apparent on his face.

“We didn’t want to involve you any more than necessary,” Santana said calmly. “We didn’t want to risk exposing you to Dumbledore.”

Brittany sighed and gave her a sad look. “Oh, Sanny.” Her eyes turned cold. “What a pile of shit!”

Quinn’s eyes widened to the size of moons.

“Just because we’re going to be attending different schools doesn’t mean you can cut me out of this,” Brittany roared, “and to do so for my alleged protection is myopic and stupid! We’re supposed to be a team! I might not be as powerful as you, but that doesn’t make me less important. You’re acting exactly like Dumbledore!”

Kurt shuddered as the truth of her words hit him straight on. “I’m so sorry.”

She glared at him for minutes, obviously more angry at him than the girls for removing him from the equation. “Don’t forget we all have our parts to play, Kurty,” she said softly. “I deserve the right to fight for you just as much as you do for me.”
“I know,” he whispered. “I’m sorry.”

She considered them for another long minute before at last nodding. “Very well. Don’t let it happen again.” She raced over and threw herself on the bed. “Now, it’s very obvious I arrived in the nick of time, because you three can’t see the forest for the trees.”

“What do you mean?” Quinn asked, head cocked.

Brittany rolled her eyes. “As smart and strong as I know you are, you all can be very dumb. You’ve been running around, ranting and raving about Dumbledore’s Moratorium, when the obvious solution has been staring you in the face!”

Santana blinked. “What solution?”

Brittany gave her a most unimpressed look before turning back to Kurt. “You can’t reveal your true identity to Harry or anyone else because of the Moratorium, right?”

They nodded.

“There’s nothing stopping you from writing to Harry and telling him he has a brother who loves him and has been kept from him. You just can’t name yourself.”

Kurt’s mouth opened. “Well, shit.”
The next two weeks left both Harry and Kurt, still separated by an ocean, thoroughly exhausted, for different yet eerily similar reasons. They were desperately trying to prepare themselves for their first Hogwarts term, less than a month away, and both were very conscious that time was slipping through their fingers like sand.

Each had read and memorized their assigned textbooks and were underwhelmed.

For Kurt, this material was basically review; there was very little in the way of new information, save for the minor differences between American and British usage of spells. He was annoyed with Dumbledore anew for not allowing him and the girls to matriculate as fifth years, for that was easily their current level, though each of them placed higher in various disciplines.

He had spoken with Quinn and Santana, all of them agreeing to procure extra assignments and tuition from their tutors, lest the ten months at Hogwarts bore them to tears and stagnate their education. He absently wondered if that was Dumbledore’s intent.

Harry found the material interesting but disjointed. None of the books were able to tell him exactly what magic was or how it operated. He was further confused as to why what should have been a cohesive subject had been fragmented into so many disciplines. History and Astronomy he could understand and, to a lesser extent, potions; these were subjects which didn’t require wands. The others, however, at the end of the day, boiled down to magic. Why weren’t things more coherent?

His letter to Master Filius had yielded little fruit, save some recommendations for books which basically contradicted each other. Apparently there was no universally accepted hypothesis. Still, he dutifully added them to his growing library.

He had then asked Augusta, who ruefully told him the entire curriculum had been revamped during the first rise of Voldemort, so that those students whose magic was called to a specific discipline could advance more easily. She admitted that when she had been at Hogwarts, magical theory, contradictions and all, comprised the first two years of study. This made sense to Harry. How were you to use magic when you didn’t understand what it was?

Apparently, however, one’s magic instinctively knew what to do and didn’t require understanding. As magic was sentient, Harry supposed it made sense, but it made things unnecessarily difficult.

He had the feeling this new world would be filled with much difficulty.

He was grateful Augusta took seriously his desire to be educated, as there was a lot outside of tuition at Hogwarts he would be expected to know. He was furious that none in the magical world had considered this when they had dropped him off at the Dursley house all those years ago.

Harry posited, and Augusta agreed, that the only possible explanation was to keep him ignorant, and thus pliable. He did agree that Dumbledore’s mail interdiction was probably a wise move. Augusta assured that, especially in the early days following Voldemort’s vanquish, any number of his supporters would have tried to find and kill him, and that sympathizers would have attacked him via post. He didn’t like it, but he accepted it because it was rational.

All of the rest of it, however? No. Dumbledore’s actions were inexcusable and he would be made to answer for them.

Harry was not, by nature, a patient person, but he could be for the right cause. After Augusta
explained just who Albus Dumbledore was in the wizarding world, he knew it would be next to impossible to punish the man as he desired. So he would wait. He would observe and learn, and his vengeance would be all the sweeter for it.

In the interim, he needed to project the image Dumbledore had denied him, which started with his appearance. Augusta had tried to coerce his hair into behaving, but nothing she did worked. No matter how she cut or styled it, the following morning saw his hair return to the rat’s nest that had plagued him all his life.

On the fifth day, Augusta became contemplative and asked him about his hair. He explained Petunia always tried to wrest it under control, but each attempt met with abysmal failure, which usually saw Harry punished for freakishness. Augusta was quiet for a long time before launching into a lecture about various magical abilities called affinities, which often ran along bloodlines. Harry likened them to genetic traits.

After a brief but cogent summation of the concept, she agreed, and then told him it was likely he had a slight Metamorphmagus affinity and could change some his physical features at will. His subconscious likely resented Petunia’s attempts and rebelled against them.

Apparently his grandmother, Dorea Black Potter, had the same affinity. Augusta said there was currently another Black who was a full Metamorphmagus and Harry was interested in meeting her, this new cousin of whom he had never heard. Augusta said it was a possibility, but demurred about setting up an actual meeting. Harry filed that away in his mind to ponder later.

Neville had been teaching him Occlumency, but Harry wasn’t sure he was doing it correctly. His godbrother insisted meditation and constant practice were the only ways to organize the mind and construct Occlumency shields, but Harry’s mind, by its very nature, was already organized.

He said as much to Augusta, who frowned in thought. Harry’s photographic memory was an anomaly in the magical world, for neither she nor Amelia had ever heard of any such thing. Regardless, they knew Harry’s ability to recall large amounts of information with a simple prompt was very real. It was entirely possible his mind was organized. Traditional methods might even hamper that organization.

She told him she would raise the issue with Amelia who, given her position, was an accomplished Occlumen and Legilimens. At the very least, she would be able to test Harry’s progress.

Augusta was otherwise satisfied with Harry’s development. Indeed, she was elated, but kept it to herself so as not to discourage Neville in his own studies. She had secured an entirely new wardrobe for her ward, despite his frugality. She insisted it was an investment in his future and that do less would be an affront. She didn’t specify to whom or what, and Harry decided this was not a battle he was interested in fighting.

She had also procured him new glasses, ones which actually framed his face well. He was rather sad to learn there was no spell or potion that could fix his sight, but he knew the potions regimen he was on from St. Mungo’s was a delicate balance to help him with muscle mass and bone density; as such, he wasn’t willing to risk his bettering health for the sake of his vanity.

Augusta had explained that many in the wizarding world wore glasses because there was no easy fix. Instead, those who could afford it had charms applied to their spectacles to make them more useful. It was a branch of magic called enchanting which, unfortunately, was no longer taught at Hogwarts and only at the Mastery level and beyond.

Harry was pretty impressed his glasses had enchantments that would dispel fog, water, and glare.
The lenses would also tint themselves on a spectrum according to the level of sunlight in which he found himself. It wasn’t as good as not having glasses at all, but it was ameliorating. Besides, he had seen commercials for LASIK surgery. It was an option he would consider after puberty.

Kurt had his own difficulties with his father and brother, neither of whom approved of his pledging Viktor Krum. Kurt himself still wasn’t sure it was the right decision, but was affronted at their insistence he shouldn’t do it simply because they demanded it. They truly should have known better. Besides, Brittany had said it was the wisest course of action, and there was no one, even his girls, whom Kurt trusted more than Brittany.

She fully supported Quinn’s plan to have Kurt Pledge himself to Viktor Krum, arguing it was best to do it sooner rather later. Kurt was still very reticent, but Brittany calmly explained her reasons, arguing, as Quinn had previously, there was virtually no risk and much potential gain. She extrapolated further that should Kurt somehow find his way around the Moratorium, or should Dumbledore dispel it before Kurt was ready, he would be made vulnerable.

Once Kurt was again on UK soil, regardless of his rank and other titles, he would be playing on Dumbledore’s turf. It would not pay to underestimate the man.

“You and the girls are becoming overconfident,” Brittany said softly. “Your power and knowledge aside, you’re playing life and death games with a man who is ten times your age with the accompanying experience and wisdom.”

“We have allies, Sweetness,” Kurt gently protested.

“None of whom will be at Hogwarts with you,” she said forcefully. “Viktor, Fleur, your father, Sanny’s grandmother, the others … they’re all well and good, but you cannot allow yourself for a moment to forget that Dumbledore controls that castle. He controls the wards and thus who is allowed to enter and leave the school. Sure, it would be illegal if he held you, but the question is what could he do to you before help arrived?”

That stopped him cold.

She nodded. “Planning is great, Kurt, but you can’t follow your path blindly. Doing so assumes no one else has agendas other than you, ones they have spent years honing, and they are just as dedicated. Even if Dumbledore is not completely malignant – and I don’t think he is – he will not easily cede control of a game he has dominated for decades.”

He swallowed heavily and nodded. “Have you seen anything?” he cautiously asked.

She sighed. “Not much that will be of use to you in the immediate future.”

He tilted his head and frowned, nudging her shoulder with his. “Something’s bothering you, I can tell.”

She was silent for a long moment. “I’m worried about Luna,” she finally admitted. “I’ve seen things concerning her, but I don’t know what I should do about them, if anything.”
“Why not do something?”

She gave him a sad grin. “That’s what I mean. You’re so determined to be proactive rather than reactive, and that’s good, but it also means you miss things in your haste to dive into a situation. You need to learn to be more patient.”

He struggled not to lash out. Despite his relationship with Quinn and Santana, no one meant to him what Brittany did, and he greatly admired and appreciated that she was always honest with him. He knew the other girls sometimes went along with him when they instead should have questioned him further, while Brittany never let him get away with anything. He loved that about her.

“I’m just trying to understand. Luna is your cousin and you’ve told me how special she is. I just want to protect her.”

“And I appreciate that, Kurty, but people need to learn to protect themselves. Always relying on someone else to do it for them does them no favors.” She arched a brow. “After all, isn’t that pretty much what Dumbledore does? And look at the state of his nation.”

He flinched and ducked his head, falling silent. It was a comparison he didn’t favor, but he couldn’t fault her for making it.

She shook her head. “I’ll need to approach Luna myself and warn her. What she does with the information is up to her. All I can do is ask you to help her if she decides to come to you.”

He nodded. “Of course.”

They sat in contented silence for several long moments.

“Please don’t be angry with me,” she said after some time.

He shook his head. “Never. I’m angry with myself. Apparently I’m more hubristic than I realized.”

“Not hubris, Kurty, but righteous indignation. You’re allowed that. Just don’t let it define your actions. Let it fuel you, but not rule you.”

He forced a smile. “Now, more than ever, I really wish you weren’t going to school in Delphi.”

She turned toward him, eyes grave. “You can do this, Kurt. I have no doubt about that. Just don’t turn into what you’re trying to fight. Remember: Dumbledore is a tool, not the goal. Your primary concern is Harry. You need to get Dumbledore to work with you and not against you, because Voldemort looms on the horizon.

“At the end of the day, you don’t have to outgun Dumbledore, but you do have to outthink him. That will not be easy. Take it slowly. Be deliberate. Make this Moratorium work for you. You have the time, so use it wisely.”

He bit his lip and nodded. “You still think I should contact Harry?”

“Yes,” she said firmly, “but, Moratorium aside, you can’t tell him who you really are. Be his brother, but he can’t know your name. Don’t try to sneak in clues. I know it’s awful, I know it sucks, but until you have his full measure, you can’t predict how he’s going to react. The last thing you need is Harry trying to force answers Dumbledore is unable or unwilling to provide. All that will do is expose you and put everyone in danger.”

“So where do I start?” he asked helplessly.
She smiled. “You already know those answers. You just have to stop trying to second-guess yourself. You can do this, Kurt, and you don’t need me. Not really. You just have to remember not to walk into situations blindly and with anger in your heart. Our magic draws strength from our emotions, but often in ways we can’t anticipate or control, so you must control yourself and, in turn, your magic. If you don’t, someone will do it for you.”

She pulled a loose thread from his comforter and transfigured it into a brush before handing it over and presenting her back to him. “French braid, please.”

He smiled and began gathering silky strands in his fingers.

“Tell me what else you need to do.”

He slowly exhaled and let his mind wander, focusing instead on the task at hand. “I’ve already written Susan Bones and asked her for intelligence about our classmates.”

“Don’t you think she’ll find that odd?”

“Probably, but her aunt knows we’re going to Hogwarts, and I’m assuming she’ll tell her niece.”

“Don’t you already have a lot of information on them because of GYAP? I know you had several dozen applications.”

“I … I didn’t think of that,” he eventually admitted, though he, Quinn, and Santana had discussed those same people at length. Perhaps he had simply wanted a different perspective.

“And now you’ve piqued Susan’s curiosity.”

“It was a gamble,” he acknowledged, “but there are a lot of kids who didn’t apply.”

“But will Susan necessarily know them? She’s probably unfamiliar with the children of non-magicals. Most of her friends are going to be the children of the adults in her aunt’s circle, the same ones who applied to the program.”

“I’m not going about this very well,” he said, sighing.

“I didn’t say that,” she insisted, “but you need to be more aware. Your actions will soon come under closer scrutiny and you have to minimize exposure whenever possible.”

He tilted his head. “What should I have done differently?”

“Paid the Goblins to do the research for you.”

He blinked. “Brittany, I’m scared.”

She looked over her shoulder at him. “That’s not necessarily a bad thing. Fear can make you hesitate to action but, at this stage, you’re not really taking action. You’re gathering information. It would behoove you to do so as unobtrusively as possible. Fear also makes you cautious, which would currently work for you. Aside from Susan, what else?”

“The girls will be with me, of course,” he said, “as well as Nadia and Uncle Will.”

“And he’s an unexpected source of knowledge and power.”

He gave her a dubious look. “Uncle Will?”
“Why are you suddenly underestimating him? You don’t tolerate others to do the same.”

He flushed and returned to the braid.

“Most are unaware he is your blood relation, which can work to your advantage. He’s moderately intelligent and powerful but, more importantly, he doesn’t draw suspicion. To most, he is nothing more than your personal assistant. He’s young, attractive, and affable. He is unassuming and overlooked.”

She quirked a brow. “How many times has he come across information helpful to you because no one even knew he was listening?”

“Many.”

“He loves you, Kurt, and you him. You have protected him over the years. Do you really think he wouldn’t do the same for you?” She sighed. “Leaving that aside, those who understand elves will know who and what Nadia is. She’s a resource, but Mr. Schuester would make an excellent mole.”

He bit his lip.

“I’m not saying that you should manipulate him. He wants to be useful. Ask him how he can be. I’m sure he has ideas.”

He nodded.

“When are you claiming the Headship of your House?”

“I really hadn’t thought about it,” Kurt said honestly. “I’m afraid of doing anything because of how it might impact Harry.”

She shook her head. “Santana should know better.”

“About what?”

“Kurt, you don’t have to do anything once you accept the Headship. In fact, it would be better if you didn’t. Even though the Goblins wouldn’t reveal a claimant had come forward, word will still get out, so you need to cut it off at the pass. Claim the House and then make Harry your proxy. He’ll have to appoint a regent, but everyone will simply assume he’s the Head, which is reasonable because he’s believed to be the last Potter. It should stall Dumbledore for quite some time while giving Harry added leverage.”

He blinked and tied off the braid. “Wow.”

She smirked. “You should know by now not to believe anything you’ve heard about blonds.”

“It’s not that,” he said quickly, kissing her cheek. “I’m starting to realize that I’m not the best person to be handling this.”

“Wrong,” she snapped. “There’s a difference between being a leader and a tyrant, Kurt. Dumbledore is a tyrant. Voldemort is a tyrant. Why? Because they refuse to listen to the wisdom of people more knowledgeable and experienced. Your father doesn’t do that. Esperanza doesn’t do that. So why should you?”

“Because …”

“No,” she interrupted. “No one expects you to know everything. No one expects you to be perfect
or always make the right decision. You’re already ahead of Dumbledore because he confides in no one. He lives in his own head and doesn’t recognize his mistakes because he believes he’s infallible. You’re not like that. You never have been.”

She turned and took his face in her hands. “It’s okay to have doubts. I’d be really worried if you didn’t. What you must never do is bury them. Face them, discuss them, and then move forward. That’s why you, San, and Quinn were given to each other. That’s why I was made a part of this, because I can see what you three can’t.”

“So what should I do now?” he whispered.

She kissed his forehead. “Write your brother, honey. Tell him how much you love him.”

Nadia had spent the better part of an hour arguing with Kurt about deliverance of his package to Harry. Kurt insisted Nadia had better and more important things to do than to play courier for him. She countered that, whatever else they were, they were friends first, and it would be her honor to play some small part in reuniting him with his brother.

She also pointed out that, according her research, the address of Longbottom Hall was not listed anywhere, which suggested a Fidelius. No human would be able to pass through the wards, but she, as an elf, was more than capable.

When Kurt continued to protest, she politely told him to shut up, popped the sheaf of papers in her hand, and then popped herself halfway around the world.

“Ornery elf,” he muttered in the wake of her departure.

Spending his formative years in the company of the Dursleys, Harry was acutely aware, even while asleep, of when someone infiltrated his space. Nadia barely had time to place the papers on his nightstand and pop herself away before he was awake and alert, sitting up in his bed and scrambling for his glasses.

His eyes quickly adjusted to the darkness and Harry peered around his room in concern. At last his eyes fell on a slightly glowing box atop his dresser. Frowning, he climbed out of bed and approached it with caution.

That is was glowing obviously meant it was magical or that it had been imbued with magic to protect its contents. The question was how it had arrived in his room. Augusta had been candid with him about Longbottom Hall being under the Fidelius charm, so whoever had placed it here either had her permission for entrance or had found a way around it.

“Neville! M-M-Madam … Gran!”
Augusta tore into Harry’s bedroom after first checking on Neville. At finding him asleep, her heart clenched with the realization that it was Harry who had summoned her, had called her Gran. She was sure it was entirely unconscious on his part, but that just made it so much sweeter. He called for her. He respected her. He wanted her.

She quickly roused Neville and they dashed across the hall, throwing open Harry’s door, only to find him staring at a glowing box which had no reason to be on his dresser, let alone in the house.

“What happened?” she carefully asked.

Harry blinked owlishly and turned toward her, his eyes wide and pupils blown.

He was terrified, Augusta realized after a beat, never expecting him to display such powerful and overt emotion. Then she understood it was because Harry had begun to feel safe here, that this was his room, and its sanctity had been violated. She was enraged.

So was Hedwig, who flew straight through a pane of leaded glass, screeching like a banshee, before alighting on Harry’s shoulder and nuzzling his cheek. She then proceeded to preen his hair. Neville and Augusta stared, incredulous, as the broken window then repaired itself.

“I woke up,” he said softly, his voice was fraught with tension as he absently stroked Hedwig. “I could feel someone in here. Someone I didn’t know.”

She raised a brow. Harry was obviously aware she checked on him throughout the night and felt no need to question or halt it.

“Did you recognize it all?”

His brow furrowed. “It wasn’t human.”

Neville’s eyes widened. “One of the elves?”

Harry shook his head. “It didn’t feel like their magic.”

“You can feel their magic?” Augusta gently questioned.

“Yes,” he said. “All of them.”

She was astonished. Harry not only recognized the differences between human and elven magic, but could identify the magical signature of each of their elves. Dear Merlin, how powerful was this child?

“Misty!” Harry suddenly exclaimed.

“Master calls?” the little elf asked, appearing at once and trembling.

Neville raised a brow at the address. It wasn’t everyday an elf bonded to one family acknowledged someone of a different bloodline as master. Yes, Harry was technically in Longbottom custody, and of course both he and Harry were of Black blood, so perhaps that explained it; or maybe the elves recognized their godbrother bond, the one his grandmother didn’t think he knew about.

Harry fell to his knees before her, shocking Misty so greatly she almost passed out. Hedwig flew
from his shoulder and roosted on one of his bedposts, glaring at his dresser.

“Misty, someone was in my room.”

She slowly tilted her head and frowned, greatly perturbed by this turn of events. She released tendrils of magic to suss out how it had occurred.

Harry’s mouth fell open.

“Master Harry can see Misty’s magic?” she squeaked.

He nodded. “It’s … it’s beautiful,” he whispered.

She blushed but said nothing, inwardly marveling at this ability. Never had she known a human to see elf magic. Neville and Augusta were similarly floored.

“Unknown elf was here,” she finally hissed, eyes narrowed, outraged some strange elf had dared to cross into her territory.

“They left that,” Harry said, pointing to the box. Hedwig barked.

Misty popped from Harry to his dresser and examined the box. “No hexes, jinxes, or curses,” she said. “Box is blood warded. Can only be opened by Master Harry.”

Harry blanched. “But to do that, it would have to be warded by someone of my blood.”

Misty nodded.

“Dursleys,” Harry murmured, sweat breaking out across his brow.

“No, Harry,” Augusta soothed. “Those people, and I use the term loosely, don’t have the ability to ward, and I very much doubt they have an elf in their employ.”

Harry turned and stared at her.

“What do you know?” Neville demanded of his grandmother.

Augusta was proud of his fire and determination to protect his godbrother. “I know that Harry should open the box,” she said, “and that he deserves privacy while he does so.”

“Can Misty stay?” Harry blurted.

“Misty will stay,” the elf vowed, not even acknowledging her master or mistress.

Augusta smirked. She never realized her favorite elf was so feisty, but she approved.

And that box could only have come from Liam Potter.

These were certainly interesting times.

After ten minutes of staring at the box and Misty’s assurances it wouldn’t harm him, Harry carefully approached his dresser, Hedwig growling all the while.
“How do I open it?” he wondered.

“Bit of blood, Master Harry,” Misty said, conjuring an athame. “Just a drop.”

Harry accepted the blade. “Misty, are you able to sense my magic?”

“Yes, Master Harry.”

“Can you tell if I have any House Elves?”

Her ears drooped. “None alive, Master Harry.”

“Then I did have them,” he said, resigned, “and it’s my fault they’re dead. They didn’t have my magic to sustain them.”

“No, Master Harry,” Misty insisted. “Fault is with wizard who took you from good elves. Elves would never blame Master Harry. Elves died in service of House Potter. That’s why they good elves.”

“I wish to honor them.”

Misty stared for a long moment. “There be elven ritual to do so,” she said with reluctance.

“Am I allowed to perform it?”

“Yes, Master Harry,” she said, tears leaking from her eyes. This young wizard was too kind, too gentle for this world. He had strength and power to fight the humans, but was at heart a good boy.

She led him in the ritual, still disbelieving he would actually do it, as it required blood. Never had she heard of a human wanting to acknowledge an elf as little more than property, let alone willingly shedding blood for an elf. Mistress and Little Master were good owners, but this was another level entirely. She silently called all Longbottom elves to witness this.

When they appeared, she telepathically communicated what was about to happen, and they were barely able to stand.

“Do you know their names, Misty?”

He wished to know their names? Who was this child?

She again silently reached out with her magic, tapping into the collective unconscious into which all House Elves were born. She posed and relayed the question, hoping there were elves still alive who would know the answer.

She received a response and was startled when she felt all elves stopping their duties to take part in this ceremony. Whisperings filled with disbelief roared in her ears, her blood coursing with the silent lamentations and breathless murmurings of what was about to happen.

A human, a child, paying honor to elves he couldn’t even remember.

“They’s were being Tess and Clive and Sylvie and Jigs, Master Harry,” she whispered, surprised three of her brethren had been given human names, almost as if they had been equals.

She led the strange boy in the ritual, which began with him slicing open his palm and then placing his hand over his heart, after removing his shirt. Misty barely suppressed a growl when she inadvertently saw the scars on his back. He bowed his head and repeated the names of his lost
elves, stunning her when he applied his own surname to each one and thanked them not for their service, but for being part of his family.

The other Longbottom elves were overcome and began keening, so Misty quickly ordered them to return to their duties. Once the ritual was done, she advised Harry to lay his bleeding hand on the box, which he did. She then healed the cut for him, blinking when he stared at the vanished wound in awe.

She had overheard their discussions, elves always did, but until this moment, it had never truly registered that Harry Potter had been raised a Muggle and in complete ignorance of magic. She thought it reprehensible and had some ideas of her own as to how to deal with his relatives. She rather believed that, should she approach Mistress with them, she would receive permission to act.

“Thank you for your assistance, Misty,” Harry said quietly.

“Master is to call Misty if he needs anything,” she said sternly.

He nodded and waited until she disappeared before opening the box, which was incomprehensibly bigger on the inside, like some kind of strange TARDIS. It was all but overflowing with papers. Hedwig returned to his shoulder.

He removed the first piece and laid it aside, sifting through the others. There was a large stack of letters banded together, all of which were addressed to him. Many of the envelopes appeared aged and weathered. He noted the childlike scrawl and kept looking. There were dozens of crayon drawings and finger-paintings, all of which featured him as a small child. Next to him was another little boy, but with red hair and light brown eyes: Harry and Liam.

Who the blazes was Liam?

There were also two adults, a woman with bobbed red hair and his green eyes, and a man who looked a lot like Harry, even down to the glasses. His parents?

One of the drawings featured a sickening lime green light, which triggered a memory Harry only ever saw in his dreams. Vernon and Petunia said it was most likely the traffic light his parents had run that ended in their deaths, but now he knew their lies.

What the hell was happening here? What was this?

Hedwig began anxiously clucking.

With trembling fingers, Harry unfolded the letter, which he supposed served as an introduction to this mystery.

*My Dearest Brother …*
him and saw his parents, her fallen friends gone much too soon, but the physical was where the similarities ended. The boy had his mother’s intellect and temper, and his father’s cynicism and bizarre sense of humor, but even these were only hallmarks, not reproductions.

Harry’s intellect was much more practical than Lily’s had been. She’d had a voracious appetite to learn everything, to know as much as possible, while Harry only desired to learn that which interested and would be useful to him. That wasn’t to say he wasn’t a curious boy, for he was, but he wanted to know how something worked; he didn’t care about the why, claiming as there was no universal theory of magic, it ultimately didn’t matter. He wanted knowledge not for its own sake, but to use it.

His photographic memory was an enormous advantage in this. It was perhaps the most peculiar thing she had ever encountered. When Harry opened a book, he not only read it, faster than she had ever seen anyone reading anything, but took a mental picture of the page and stored it in some internal filing system he alone controlled. In two weeks, he had gone through the entire Longbottom library, which was massive, and memorized it.

When asked about something he had read, there was a slight delay before he explained a concept in perfect detail while correlating it with other information he had gleaned.

What was truly amazing, however, was not this ability. It was the delay. When prompted, in those scant two seconds, Harry not only called up the information, but reread it, familiarized himself with it, and then verbalized it in his own words, boiling down tremendous amounts of information to its salient points.

At the end of those two weeks, Amelia brought him copies of her Wizegamot and DMLE law books and manuals. Five days later, Harry Potter was perhaps the most learned solicitor, politician, and bureaucrat in the country. That was not to say he was ready to use this knowledge or that he would necessarily use it well, but it was available to him at just a moment’s notice.

Perhaps the most frightening thing about this wasn’t his knowledge, but the fact that Hedwig sat on his shoulder and read with him. Amelia had actually seen the owl’s eyes scanning the pages. She not only read, but understood, everything Harry himself was learning. It was thoroughly unnatural yet incredibly compelling.

Amelia Bones sincerely doubted there had ever been a familiar such as this owl. She honestly didn’t know what she felt or thought about this, other than that she was unsettled by it. It was common knowledge that familiars gained intelligence and power when bonded with their witch or wizard, including longevity, but this went beyond that.

If she didn’t know better, Amelia would swear that Hedwig was either an Animagus who had been cursed or one who willingly held her form permanently, or some known but not well understood magical creature. More than once, she wondered if Hedwig was in fact a phoenix in disguise, though she had no proof and realized she was grasping at straws.

Her concern was so great, she had gone so far as to bring up the matter with Ragnok who, while also unsettled, dismissed her fears. She was meeting him in his office after hours, lest one wonder why she was visiting Gringotts with regularity. She had been cleared to use the Apparition hub which had caused so much trouble for the Ambassador.

“I can understand why this might be concerning,” he acknowledged. “However, what we discussed those weeks ago is valid in this situation. Much knowledge of magic and how it works has been lost in the centuries since the Ancients.”
Amelia frowned. “The Ancients? Do you mean the gods?”

“Not particularly,” he said blandly, “but that is as good a place to start as any. What do owls symbolize?”

“The owl was an attribute of the Greek goddess Athena, a symbol of her wisdom.”

He shook his head. “No, but that is a common misconception. Athena was not the goddess of wisdom, but of wisdom in warfare. It was said an owl perched itself on her blind side so that she could see the whole truth. The owl became a symbol of higher wisdom, and then a protector of the Acropolis. Knowing now that the Dark Lord still exists in some form, is it really so surprising Harry Potter would have such a familiar?”

She blinked and offered an abrupt nod. It made sense.

“Remember when we spoke of how many witches and wizards used to be able to speak with animals? Most of them had familiars and, though there are few extant records, there are some accounts remaining which suggests Harry Potter’s bond with this owl is not new. Such a familiar is called a Guardian.”

Amelia raised her brows.

“Not much is known about Guardians, though theories abound. One even argues that Guardians are in fact animated by the spirits of witches and wizards, though I have always found this overly simplistic and myopic. Magic is a force unto herself, Director Bones, and I believe there are some things we are just not meant to understand. Humans in particular find this troublesome, for it suggests that Fate is real and has power over them. But why should Fate, though immutable, be thought of only as a bad thing?

“We must look deeper,” Ragnok insisted, “and, in this instance, beyond stories of owls that accompanied humans and gods. Look instead at the owl itself. You are wary of this owl because they are viewed as creatures of the night. For humans, the night has always been associated with mystery and the unknown. Yet owls live within this darkness, which is also associated with magic and ancient, primal knowledge.”

His lips quirked up. “However, that doesn’t much apply here. You said this Hedwig is a snowy owl, which means she is not nocturnal but diurnal. She is active and hunts both day and night. She never rests. I would posit that even while she and her wizard sleep, she sees far. Remember also that while owls are seen as symbolic of wisdom, this wisdom is not intellectual, but rather wisdom of the soul.

“You said this owls stares at you and at everyone whom she encounters. That is why. You can be sure she is assessing everyone who crosses her master’s path, deciding whether they are friend or foe, and you can best believe she shares her impressions with him.”


He nodded. “You are a member of Dowager Longbottom’s social group, are you not?”

Her eyes flashed.

“You have nothing to fear from me, Director Bones. We Goblins have long been aware of, and continue to worship, the Sacred Feminine. There is a reason our sovereign is female.”

Amelia forced herself to suppress a shudder. The Goblin Queen still terrified her. The look Ragnok
offered suggested she was wise to be fearful.

“What does that have to do with anything?” she demanded.

He gave her a disappointed sigh. She rather thought he could give Dumbledore lessons in how to do that properly, for she had never been so chagrined.

“A Hogwarts education certainly is not what it used to be,” he said savagely. “You are not an unintelligent woman, Director Bones, so think and put the pieces together yourself! Owls have always been associated with the Moon. What does that tell you?”

Her heated glare fell by the wayside as she considered his question. “Various cultures across time and continents have always associated the Moon with death and rebirth, as well as regulating our tides, and thus came to be analogous with the feminine and fertility.”

His nod urged her to continue extrapolating.

“The owl was also associated, to a lesser extent, with Artemis, the Greek goddess of the Moon and the Hunt.” Her cheeks reddened. “I … I am sorry. I do not know more.”

He waved a dismissive hand. “Your ignorance is not your fault. As I said, Hogwarts is not what it once was, and many magical traditions have slipped away from humans. Please do not believe I think less of you, Director. Ignorance is curable, while stupidity is forever. You are not stupid.”

His words were blunt and perhaps unintentionally condescending, but to be told the Goblin Chieftain thought her intelligent was a boon.

“I am going to tell you more about owls and, while I make my points, I ask you to consider them in relation to Harry Potter.”

She nodded.

“Tradition holds the owl is a harbinger of death. Death is also associated with the Moon, particularly with the goddess Hekate, the patron of magic, and, more importantly in this instance, the Tarot. Death does not necessarily mean a loss of life, but a death of tradition, of old and stagnant mores, of previous modes of thought. Death, in whatever form, is symbolic of change.”

She frowned. The reappearance of Harry Potter in the wizarding world certainly heralded change. He was their savior, their icon, though he fiercely resented their fickle worship, praising his name while leaving him to languish with abusive Muggles. If Harry decided to make public what his childhood had been, it would turn their world on its ear.

His very personality, once shown, would bring death to the myth of the Boy-Who-Lived. He hadn’t been raised in a castle with adoring servants at his feet. He hadn’t spent these past years slaying dragons and staking vampires, but huddling in a boot cupboard in fear for his life. That life hadn’t been a dream, but a sick nightmare instigated by their world’s alleged Leader of the Light.

As the Heir to House Black, Harry had the opportunity either to embrace or change the tradition of that House. She still had no idea on which side he would fall, but suddenly remembered the tale Filius had told of the wand Ollivander had insisted was meant for him. She also remembered Harry’s refusal of said wand. She wondered what materials comprised the other wand that had chosen him. Susan had asked, but Augusta had interrupted, firmly stating it was no one’s business but Harry’s.

Amelia agreed with that sentiment, for that knowledge could be used against a witch or wizard, but
she still wondered.

“Now,” he continued, “from what you have told me of Heir Potter, you find him to be a most practical human, someone concerned more with the how than the why, yes?”

“Precisely.”

He shook his head. “That is subterfuge. I have been briefed on the boy’s intellect from the Goblin account manager who met with him his first day in the wizarding world. Heir Potter is not your normal wizard. Why? Because he never knew he was one. He was raised as a Muggle. He believed he was a Muggle. You see, wizards tend to underestimate Muggles, much to everyone’s detriment.

“So many wizards believe Muggles to be intellectually inferior, which is truly so much nonsense. Instead, consider this: Muggles overrun this planet and their numbers far outweigh those of magicals. We make up less than one percent of this world’s population, Madam Bones. Do you really think Muggles would have not only survived, but thrived, if they were not profoundly intelligent, curious creatures?

“Muggles don’t create and invent to keep pace with what magic can do, for most of them will never know magic exists. They have far surpassed us in many fields, but magicals dismiss this as luck or crude technology because they cannot admit we are stagnating as a society. Yes, we have potions which cure diseases and mend wounds far faster than Muggle counterparts. Yes, our lifespans are almost twice theirs, but the feats they accomplish in their most active years are extraordinary!”

“But their technology is so unstable and ephemeral it cannot even bear the presence of magic,” she argued.

“That is a lie perpetrated by a weak and fearful government who wish to live in ignorance. To them, technology is merely Muggle hocus-pocus. Magic and technology, a field called technomancy, exists and has long been perfected, although not on these Isles. You can be sure that when Ambassador Hummel arrives at Hogwarts, he will have in his possession computers, mobile telephones, and any number of other instruments which will turn the school on its ear.”

“Dumbledore will never allow it.”

He shrugged. “There is nothing in the Charter which precludes it, and the Ambassador is well versed in its contents. In fact, and I have a copy for you here, the agreement he and his companions reached with Dumbledore clearly states that, in dealings with them, the charter must be obeyed – not in letter, but in spirit. Dumbledore won’t risk violating the Charter, because doing so would see him dismissed at Headmaster. You probably are unaware, as are most people, that the castle is sentient and imbued with certain powers set in place by the Founders.”

“I beg your pardon?”

He nodded. “Should Dumbledore act in a manner which the castle considers untoward, he can be dismissed via the Sorting Hat. Also, students can make appeals directly to the Hat when they feel the Headmaster has treated them unfairly.”

She stared at him.

He smirked. “You can be sure the Heirs and Scions are well aware of these allowances, which is why Dumbledore has never really acted against them or pushed true equality amongst the blood divisions.”

“I had no idea.”
“Most do not. The Charter clearly states that the Board of Governors is an elected body; seats are not to be appointed or inherited. Board rulings are arbitrary and can be set aside by the Headmaster, who can also disband it at his or her whim.”

She was stunned. “Then why …”

Ragnok tented his fingers. “Ah, yes. Why hasn’t Dumbledore done more to curb the influence of the Dark families? Better the devil you know, Madam Bones. Why hasn’t the Board moved to replace Dumbledore, considering how much they despise him? For the same reason. Also, they well understand Dumbledore is a Titan. Should another witch or wizard of tremendous power attack the school, Dumbledore is the best hope to keep the children safe.”

She digested that and nodded after a long moment. “Is Harry Potter a Titan?”

Ragnok blinked. “Yes, of course. You didn’t know?”

“I suspected, given his mother, and that James was, like me, a Leviathan. Do you know if there are others?”

He tilted his head and considered her.

“This information would, of course, remain in strictest confidence, but would help enormously if I am to guide Harry and the Ambassador.”

His lips thinned and he at last grunted. “Very well. Your Vows will suffice in ensuring your silence. Ambassador Hummel, the Princess Santana, and Quinn Fabray, the Lady Lindenov, are all Titans.”

She blanched. “And they’ll all be at Hogwarts, with Harry. Surely Albus must know or, at least, suspect?”

“Albus Dumbledore is an old man set in his ways,” Ragnok said, “and, despite his legend and power, he is not omniscient, Director Bones. There are many things he does not know. The ability to recognize the magical origin or strength of a person or object is an affinity called hypersensation. It is extremely rare and almost unheard of in humans. In fact, there are only a few of whom I aware. They include Quinn Fabray and another girl who is the life partner of the Princess Santana and the dearest friend of the Ambassador.”

Amelia closed her eyes and sighed. “Of course.”

“Hypersensation is, however, common in other magical races, particularly elves and centaurs, though there is a smattering of the talent amongst Goblins. Therefore, we have an adept who scans each magical child upon their first visit to the Bank.”

Her eyes widened.

“Listen closely, Director Bones Bones, because this is information I will not only never repeat, but firmly deny. As it stands, there will soon be six Titans who walk this isle: Albus Dumbledore, Harry Potter, Kurt Hummel, Quinn Fabray, Santana Lopez. A known seventh is her grandmother, Esperanza Ramirez.”

Amelia narrowed her eyes. “You said there were six, yet named only five. Queen Esperanza was an afterthought.”

“The Dark Lord Voldemort does not currently walk this earth. He is but a shade.”
She thinned her lips in challenge. “You either misspoke, which I sincerely doubt, or you’re obfuscating, Kurios Ragnok.”

He set his jaw and looked away. “Narcissa Black, the Lady Malfoy.”

Amelia sat back, spine rigid. “I am unsurprised.”

“Titanship is incredibly rare and almost exclusively matrilineal. Therefore, it is no great shock that Harry Potter, Kurt Hummel, and Santana Lopez are Titans. Indeed, the Fabray girl is an aberration I am unable to explain, as neither of her parents are Titans or Leviathans.”

Amelia nodded. Potters and Blacks had interbred for generations, so it certainly wasn’t out of the realm of possibility that Narcissa was a Titan. Admittedly, she was curious about Miss Fabray.

“Regarding Leviathans,” Ragnok continued, “there are many, which is not terribly unique. They tend to be born immediately following eras of great strife and upset. It is a magical safeguard to prepare for the next insurrection. As for the ones of whom I am aware, there is, of course, yourself, born shortly after the fall of Grindelwald. There is also Aberforth Dumbledore, Minerva McGonagall, Bellatrix LeStrange, Sirius Black, Alastor Moody, Cygnus Greengrass, Assumpta Zabini, and Molly Weasley.”

Amelia quickly assimilated the information. Aberforth and Minerva were no surprise, nor was Alastor. Bellatrix was a given. Sirius didn’t quite make sense, for she had never perceived him as being particularly powerful, and usually Leviathans were aware of those equal in strength. Cygnus was mildly surprising, but the Greengrass family was very insular and kept close their secrets. She barely knew the Widow Zabini.

She should have been taken aback by Molly Weasley, yet somehow was not.

“I would have thought Malfoy or Snape,” she casually remarked.

“I’m sure they wish they were,” Ragnok sneered. “If they weren’t terrified of the ramifications of purporting themselves as such, you can best believe they would claim so. They are merely dilettantes, Madam Bones. They have a wide breadth of knowledge, to be certain, but superlative ability in only a very few magical disciplines.”

“And of the youngest generation?” she asked.

“The Weasley family is incredibly powerful. That in itself is quite frankly bizarre. As you know, Purebloods rarely have more than one or two children; when they produce more, the level of inherit ability decreases proportionally. All of the Weasley children, however, save Percival and Ronald, are Leviathans, as is your niece, Susan. Neville Longbottom is also a Leviathan, as is Daphne Greengrass.”

“So many,” she whispered.

He snorted. “Actually, there are quite a few more, and you’ll notice I named no Muggleborn, though there are a few. I also named only those in Britain.”

He paused. “And then there are the Adjacents, those with the innate potential to become a Leviathan or Titan, but we are not as yet able to discern if they ever will. Adjacent Leviathans include Lavender Brown, Theodore Nott, Oliver Wood, and Cho Chang. To my knowledge, there is only one Titan Adjacent: Luna Lovegood.”

She blew out a breath.
“But let us return to owls.”

Half an hour later, Amelia was only more convinced that Hedwig was more than she appeared, and much more than even Ragnok understood.

Then, incredibly, the owl in question flew into Ragnok’s office, alighted on his desk, and barked at Amelia, silently demanding the woman remove the letter affixed to her leg. Amelia immediately recognized Augusta’s handwriting.

She tore open the letter and quickly scanned its contents.

“How does Harry know.”

Ragnok kept his face placid, though he knew he must inform his Queen as soon as possible. “Then you should make haste, Director Bones, for everything is about to change.”
Harry pored through the contents of the box, his mind racing, his circuitous thoughts all revolving around a single point: he had a brother.

A twin brother, if this was to be believed, and he rather thought it was. He couldn’t imagine why someone would conceive so great a lie, and there were far too many details to dismiss the idea out of turn.

He looked around at the piles of drawings and letters and private investigation reports now littered about his bed. His heart ached at the sight of it, of what it meant. His brother had been searching for him for years. He had spent a considerable amount of money in the endeavor, never giving up hope regardless of how fruitless the outcomes.

His brother – Liam – had written him countless letters, all of which had been returned unopened. What must that have felt like, to summon up the hope required for each missive, only for it to be ripped to shreds with every failure?

Years. Years and years of letters, beginning when Liam was only two or three years old. Harry had seen the progression from crayon to ink, from block printing to elegant cursive, from a toddler’s vocabulary to that which rivaled the most learned adults.

Harry had asked Lady Longbottom for an education, and Liam had seemingly heard the call. Enclosed were countless treatises on his studies, including various magical disciplines, magical theory, the benefits and hindrances of a wand, and recommended reading lists. There was also practical advice about the House of Potter and the standards to which it should be held.

Liam had sometimes written him up to four times a day, just brief notes about the weather, about books, about his family, and every single one of them closed with his unyielding love and the hope he would find his brother.

Harry clutched at his chest as tears sprung to his eyes.

He was loved.

He always had been. He just hadn’t known to look for it.

This pain, this tremendous pain, was agonizing, though he never lost sight of what Liam had endured. Harry knew he was fortunate in that he had been blessed with ignorance, but Liam hadn’t been so lucky.

He had known of Harry, had remembered those fifteen months together, and had mourned it every single day for ten years. He had never given up hope, despite the many times it had been thrown back in his face. He had done everything in his power, in his family’s power, to find his brother, and he had failed.

Harry closed his eyes as the tears began dripping down his face.

The most recent letter penned only last night was filled with apologies and regret: that Liam hadn’t tried harder, that he hadn’t done more, that he hadn’t done enough, that he was so sorry, that he hoped Harry might one day forgive him.

Harry shook his head, bereft.
All those years in the cupboard, all those sleepless nights spent wishing and hoping and praying for rescue, and someone had been trying. Liam had been looking for him, wanting and loving him, and been denied his brother because of the machinations of one man.

The tears froze on his face as Harry seethed. Dumbledore would pay for this, he vowed. Perhaps not any day soon, but it was coming. He would be patient and bide his time. Best served cold, after all.

He knew he needed to snap out of this, that he was letting his emotions get the better of him. He couldn’t afford that now, not with all the information contained in those letters. This was beyond him. He needed help and, for once, he would ask.

He found Lady Longbottom and Neville in the dining room, picking at their breakfast.

“Harry!” Neville exclaimed, jumping to his feet, his eyes darting about as he wondered what to do. “Are you all right?”

“Not really, but thank you for asking.”

Neville bit his lip and nodded, slowly retaking his seat. “Can I do anything?”

“Actually, yes. What, exactly, is a Moratorium? I don’t remember reading anything about it.”

Augusta, though understandably curious, refrained from answering, wanting to give Neville an opportunity to prove himself. She had so often denied him, she realized now she understood almost nothing about him.

Neville blinked. “Probably because it’s a terribly complicated spell. It doesn’t require a tremendous amount of power to cast, but it draws on several disciplines that demands a certain mastery of knowledge.”

Augusta raised a brow.

“It’s loosely classified as a charm,” Neville continued, “but contains elements of Arithmancy, Runes, Warding, and a working knowledge of Divination; specifically, numerology. Did you come across the Fidelius charm in your reading?”

“Yes,” Harry said, “after I learned our parents used it to hide themselves from Voldemort, I studied as much information as was available. Most of what I read was theoretical. There was little practical instruction.”

Neville nodded. “Because such magics are based on intention. Now, a Fidelius requires an obscene amount of power. In the case of a Moratorium, however, it is not a well of magical power that is demanded, but an incredible strength of will. As you probably know, a Moratorium is similar to a Fidelius in that it is used to conceal information, but whereas the latter is used to conceal a location, such as Longbottom Hall, the former is used to conceal knowledge.”

“What are the parameters of this charm?”
“Mostly unknown. These types of magics can’t be learned from a book, Harry. They are part of our oral tradition of spellwork. Perhaps a student might learn the spell as an apprentice, but even then, that doesn’t mean the apprentice could put it to use. Magic is an art, not a science, and it is the skill of the artist that determines the potency of the magic.”

“Well done, Neville,” Augusta praised.

Neville pinked. “However, the strength of the caster cannot be discounted. Spells like the Moratorium require more finesse than power, but if the caster is sufficiently powerful, they can sort of … punch their way through it. The result isn’t pretty. The Arithmancy will not be as stable, and feedback loops are a possibility. That means the spell may have consequences or parameters unknown to the caster, binding him or her in ways they could never anticipate.”

Harry frowned, wondering as to the implications of this. Dumbledore cast the wards at Privet Drive and the Moratorium, so was he bound to the spells in ways no one yet understood? “Does a Moratorium require a Secret-Keeper?”

“I don’t know,” Neville said, lost in thought. “Gran?”

“It does not,” Augusta said. “However, the idea that is being concealed must be known to only a handful of people, otherwise the constraints of the spell become too unwieldy.”

Harry slowly nodded. That jived with Liam’s speculations about their separation, particularly mass Obliviations. Dumbledore would have wanted as few people as possible to know about Liam, and even then had probably altered their memories of him.

“How may we help you, Harry?” Augusta asked.

His eyes narrowed. “You knew.”

“I knew something, I’ll grant you,” she acknowledged, “but nothing that would have been helpful. Until that box appeared in your room, until Misty announced it was charmed with blood magic, I had believed your brother dead.”

“Brother?” Neville whispered, falling silent at his grandmother’s stern glare.

Harry stared at her for a long moment and at last nodded. He sensed no treachery. He believed her. “Who else knows?”

“That’s the question,” Augusta said darkly, “and the truth is I don’t know. I remember when you and Liam were born, Harry. Alice had just delivered Neville when Lily went into labor. Remember that our families were in hiding during this time.

“Alice, Frank, and I were aware of Liam’s birth, and also Poppy Pomfrey, who delivered you both and Neville. Sirius Black and Remus Lupin, your father’s best friends, knew. I can’t hazard a guess who else was told, other than Liam’s godparents.”

Harry blinked. “We don’t have the same godparents?”

“No, and that was a clever ploy devised by your mother. Given the precarious times, she thought it prudent to have two sets of potential guardians for her children, though they were unknown to each other. Both sets, however, agreed to care for you both should the worst happen. Your father chose your godparents, and Lily chose Liam’s. You and Liam had separate ceremonies, attended only by your parents and godparents.
“As you know, Sirius Black and Neville’s mother, Alice, are your godparents. They were selected by your father. I’ve never known who Liam’s godparents are, and they have never revealed themselves.”

Harry pursed his lips. “Probably for good reason. And Dumbledore?”

Augusta offered a tight nod. “He knew.”

Harry chewed on his lip lost in thought. “Sirius Black is incarcerated. Aunt Alice and Uncle Frank are incapacitated. Convenient, isn’t it?”

Neville’s eyes widened.

Augusta glowered. “I’ve always thought so, yes.”

“So why didn’t Liam’s godparents claim me?”

“I’ve often wondered. The easiest explanation is that they couldn’t find you; no one could. Yet another Dumbledore machination. However, there are other considerations, particularly the vows to which all the godparents swore. I don’t know what those were, Harry. They are not to be shared with others.”

“Do you have any ideas as to whom my mother chose for Liam?”

“I’ve considered it often over the years,” Augusta said, “but the truth of the matter is that while I liked Lily a great deal, I didn’t know her well. Very few did. Alice was her closest friend, a title once held by Severus Snape before they had a falling out.”

Augusta kept to herself her belief that confrontation had been engineered by Lily to protect Severus from the darker aspects of Slytherin House.

“Diana Diggory, Moira Fitzpatrick, and Eos Lovegood were also in your mother’s circle. Her mentor was Filius Flitwick. For a long time, I believed him to be Liam’s godfather, and I know he searched for you for several years, though Dumbledore denied him every time.”

Harry chewed on that, debating asking Master Filius directly. It was possible Master Filius knew of Liam, but couldn’t tell him because of his vows. It was just as possible he didn’t know or had been Obliviated. He couldn’t trust the post; the wards at Hogwarts were controlled by the Headmaster. No, he had to proceed as though Master Filius were compromised.

“Did my parents know they were having twins?”

“No, and I know you weren’t expecting that answer. The truth of the matter, Harry, is that twins are not a common phenomenon in the magical world. This has less to do with – what did you call it? Genetics? – and everything to do with magic.”

Harry took a seat. Now that he knew she was more than willing to answer questions, he was content to drag them out, to form them more completely. In the meantime, yet another Wizarding World Lesson would probably not go amiss.

“How so?” he asked.

“I know it’s different in the Muggle world. I know they have made remarkable advancements with their technology, particularly in healthcare. I know there are machines that can take pictures of what is happening within the body, including offspring.”
Harry nodded. “Sonograms and ultrasounds.”

“That is not the case in the magical world,” she continued. “There are many who decry Muggles and their inventions yet have no compunction about adapting some of them for use here, but not when it comes to pregnancy and childbirth.

“These were once mystical rites, Harry, and as I’ve told you previously, no one really knows how magic works … or how it might disrupt.”

Harry chewed on that for a moment before giving a thoughtful nod. “What about magical children born to non-magical parents?”

“I don’t know everything, of course, but as a member of the Wizengamot, I have read reports of the birth of Muggleborn: of how their magic has conflicted with technology, of how they have survived conditions which Muggle newborn would not, and of how mothers recovered far more quickly and with fewer complications.”

“The Statute of Secrecy.”

“Precisely, but not only that, Harry. Please do not think we live our lives only in a reactionary state. As I said, pregnancy and childbirth were once revered, even worshiped. Knowing how biology operates is a far different animal than knowing how magic conducts itself.”

He nodded, urging her to continue.

“There are spells Healers and Mediwitches and Mediwizards can use to approximate the dates of conception and delivery. There are charms to determine gender and the general state and well-being of the fetus, but they must be used sparingly and with due caution. Do you know why?”

“Because … because it cannot be speculated how the child’s magic would interpret that of the caster?”

Augusta nodded. “Exactly. Whenever magic is cast upon you, whether for good or ill, your body is aware of it, even if you are not. How this is sensed and interpreted, however, is unknown to us. There have been many cases in which routine examinations with the most innocuous of spells have resulted in miscarriage or stillbirth.”

Her eyes darkened. “We protect our children, Harry.” She sighed and looked away. “We should have done more to protect you.”

Harry wasn’t interested in that, however. He had no patience for yet another endless debate about how he had been done wrong. He was here, and he was alive and relatively healthy. That was not to say he didn’t have his problems, but other concerns were paramount. Now he knew he had a brother, a twin, and that was so much more important. There would be time for redress later.

“Why are twins so rare in the magical world?” he asked. “They are in the non-magical world, about one in thirty births as I recall, but not so much that it’s unheard of.”

Her eyes widened. “One in thirty? I guarantee it’s nowhere near that here. In fact, in your generation, there are only two known sets: the Weasley and Patil twins. Incidentally, both sets are identical. Fraternal twins almost never occur.”

“Why?” asked a flummoxed Harry.

“We don’t really know. It’s an observable fact with no answer, so all I can do is extrapolate. What
you must first understand is that magical pregnancies are fraught with difficulty. If you were to examine the family trees of your generation, you would see that almost every magical family has produced only one heir.”

He blinked. “I thought that was because of the war.”

“It certainly played a part,” she agreed. “Voldemort exterminated entire families in his quest for dominion but, and please take no offense, the only child he killed, or attempted to kill, was you.”

Harry had questions but was content to traverse that path later.

“Despite his evil or his insanity, or whatever it can be called, Voldemort was also a traditionalist. He understood that magical children were, and have always been, our future.”

He snorted. “His future subjects, more like.”

She offered a grim nod. “Indeed, but back to the topic at hand. Many families have only produced one child. In previous generations it was more, but not by much. In particular, the Black family was known for producing multiple children, but if you look at the others, well.”

“Has no one considered or examined the biological etiology of this?” Harry asked. “I studied the tapestries, Gran, and …”

He trailed off, blushing and completely mortified. He had certainly not intended that slip.

Augusta sailed right over it, believing discussing it would only cause the child unnecessary anguish. Besides, she wanted to encourage the use, not deter it. “You wouldn’t be wrong, Harry, if you believe inbreeding plays a factor.”

He blinked. “No offense intended, but I’m surprised the magical world is aware of the concept.”

“Of course we are,” she sniffed, “and to those capable of rational thought, we do not engage in such behavior. However, do remember it was the modus operandi in royal families for aeons.”

Harry nodded. “To solidify power.”

“Quite so. Bloodlines were thinned in the extreme to ensure power. No one really knows what happens in a marriage, and sometimes not even the mother is aware of the identity of her child’s father. By intramarrying, you hope the same blood is passed down from both parents.”

Neville shuddered.

“The result, of course, is often idiocy, sterility, or both. This is why Potters and Longbottoms never closely marry, though because of custom, they often choose pureblood spouses. All purebloods are distantly related, as I’m sure you know, but many families look beyond Britain for a partner. That is not to say that we don’t intermarry, but the degree of relation is as low as possible.

“The Black and Longbottom family trees share many branches. I was born a Black, and my husband was a very distant cousin. Your father, Harry, married a … non-magical, and despite what anyone might have thought of Lily’s bloodline, no one believed she was anything other than enormously powerful, and that power was delivered unto you and your brother.”

“My mother was a Titan, and many believe I will be, as well. Do you think Liam is a Titan?”

“That I do not know. Remember, fraternal twins are exceedingly rare in the magical world. My
personal belief is that the reproductive systems of magicals are different than … I keep trying and failing to use other descriptors in place of Muggle, for I know it irks you.”

“Please speak freely,” Harry said. “It is not my place or desire for you to alter yourself to suit me.”

She blinked. He certainly was a rarity, especially for someone with so much power. Finally, she nodded.

“Thank you. My belief is that magic plays a key role in our reproduction. You have to remember that when a magical is conceived, they develop with their own magic. They might inherit abilities from their parents, but their magic is their own.

“You also should consider how the mother’s magic will react to this influx of unfamiliar magic within her body. Perhaps the magic will be complementary, but it could also be dissonant. My theory is that the more inharmonious the magics, the more difficult the pregnancy.”

Harry nodded. The logic was simplistic, but sound.

“Now, consider twins. Identical twins develop from the same egg, and they will produce identical magic, sympathetic by nature, but also remember that magic is doubled and housed within the mother. If that magic is discordant with her, and, again, this is only a hypothesis, the pregnancy will result in miscarriage.”

Neville frowned in concentration, learning more in this discussion than he had in years from various tutors. Harry, meanwhile, was taking mental notes, transcribing them into the photographic memories he had of his biology texts, which were quite simplistic considering his age and level of schooling.

“And then you have fraternal twins, two biologically distinct individuals developed from two different eggs. They share approximately half their genetic material, each inheriting half that material from their parents. Consider the many permutations that might result from that sharing, not only biological, but magical, and the mother must compensate for all of it.”

“And my mother?” Harry whispered.

“Far more powerful than anyone, even her most ardent defenders, ever assumed or understood. I believe it was that power which Voldemort sought to extinguish. He would have come for her regardless, Harry. Neither you nor your brother, no matter how powerful you are, no matter what threat you might have presented to his regime, is responsible for her demise.

“Think on my words, Harry, and remember them, because there are those – those who believe your mother got what she deserved by nature of her blood, those who were jealous of her power, those who supported Voldemort and continue to hold to his ideals – who will tell you it was your fault. Don’t believe them.”

Harry gave an absent nod. “What about records? Surely Liam’s birth would have been recorded by the Ministry for Magic. For that matter, shouldn’t he have been listed on the Hogwarts Registry?”

Augusta laid her hands on the table and spread her fingers. “Consider who runs both institutions.”

And enter Dumbledore. Again.

Still, Harry wondered if one person could truly hold that much power. The Registry was one thing; he could accept Dumbledore controlled Hogwarts, but the Ministry was another animal. Surely there were others who had known or suspected, but perhaps the simplest answer, again, was
Obliviation.

“What about the family tapestry?” Neville asked.

“An excellent question,” Augusta said. “I don’t know what became of the Potter Tapestry. James closed Potter Castle before going into hiding, so it’s possible the Tapestry is still there. The Castle, however, is Unplottable, and no one knows where it is.”

Harry furrowed his brow. “So why didn’t my parents just stay there?”

“I wish I knew, Harry. I’ve never understood that decision. I cannot even speculate as to why it was made. Now, Liam’s birth should also have been recorded on the Black Family Tapestry, which is housed in the family townhouse in London, though I do not know precisely where. As I am a Black by birth, theoretically I should have access to it, but I don’t remember its location.”

“Fidelius?” Neville asked.

“That is my belief. Arcturus, the previous Head, removed himself from wizarding society and sealed the home with himself inside. The Black wards are ancient and strong enough to compel any ten Dark Lords or Ladies, but I believe Arcturus also cast a Fidelius. When he died last year, the knowledge of the Secret went with him.”

“So,” Harry said, “conceivably, it will reveal itself to the next Black Head?”

She nodded.

He smirked. “Well, good thing that’s me.”

Kurt paused in his reading, looking up and cocking his head, drawing the attention of Quinn and Santana.

“Everything all right?” Quinn asked demurely, not wanting to spook him.

“I don’t know,” he answered, his tone light and wispy. “For a moment, just a second, I felt something familiar.”

“What do you mean you felt something?” asked a concerned Santana.

“Like our bond, but different. There was … an awareness, a suggestion I wasn’t alone.”

“Legilimancy?” Santana barked, looking around for imagined threats.

“No. It was too gentle, too organic.”

Brittany smiled. “It was Harry. He opened the box.”

Kurt swallowed and turned toward her, eyes watering. “Really?”

“He’s your twin, Kurty. No spell or block can ever change that.”

“You think their bond is reestablishing itself?” Quinn asked.
“I don’t think it was ever truly severed. Dumbledore might have dampened it, but he didn’t destroy it. He couldn’t.”

“What do I do?” Kurt whispered.

“Enjoy it. Revel in it. Explore it if there’s time and opportunity, but remember the Moratorium, Kurty. You can’t tell him who you are. Not yet. The consequences could be catastrophic, and not just for you or your bond with the girls. We don’t know what it would do to Harry.”

Augusta read the most recent letter from Liam Potter with a discerning eye and soupçon of incredulity. The child was terribly brilliant.

She certainly didn’t disbelieve the identity of the author, but found it difficult to reconcile his wisdom with his age. He did mention advisers, but the wording suggested contemporaries, not seasoned adults.

Harry was obviously highly intelligent, but his brother was possibly a genius. There was simply no other word for it.

An enthralled Neville was currently reading, with Harry’s permission, some of the letters regarding education, and taking diligent notes. Augusta looked forward to reading them later.

The letter in her hand, however, was extraordinary.

She saw traces of Lily’s intelligence and James’ reasoning, but they were only traces. No, Liam Potter was a perfect blend of his paternal grandparents. His thought processes, with all their requisite cunning, were eerily reminiscent of Dorea Black, while his strategies and logistics clearly hallmarked Charlus Potter.

Liam wanted Harry to have the best life possible and, due to the Moratorium, had no idea when they might be reunited. He wanted Harry safe and protected until that time and beyond, and had constructed a credible, viable plan to ensure it.

The first step had been ceding the title of Lord of House Potter to Harry. As Liam was the eldest issue, that was his right; it was irrevocable and couldn’t be overturned. Ever.

Liam Potter had willingly surrendered his birthright to his brother. Augusta doubted Harry understood just how tremendous this was, of the sacrifice that had been made, because he hadn’t been raised in this world. Liam, however, clearly had, and argued that by heading the two most Ancient and Noble Houses of magical Britain, Harry was nigh untouchable: by the Ministry, the Arcana, and anybody else.

As soon as Harry claimed the Headship, he would be emancipated. It could neither be refuted nor overturned. Those who had known of Liam believed him dead, and thus Harry was the obvious successor, the Heir Apparent, to the title; therefore, as the last Potter, his leadership could not be challenged.

Harry was then to claim the Headship of House Black. That Liam had known Sirius Black was
Harry’s godfather was interesting, for that information wasn’t widely known or available; unlike Amelia Bones, Liam Potter had no access to the Book of Names. He had determined the relationship in some other way, and Augusta was very curious as to how.

The letter didn’t outright say Liam believed Sirius innocent, but it was in the subtext of the language. Sirius had made Harry his Heir Presumptive, but due to his incarceration at Azkaban, it was unlikely he would ever father his own heirs or found to be mentally competent, even if he were released.

Harry’s status as Heir to House Black was strong, but nebulous. Heir Presumptive was not equitable to Heir Apparent, and familial degree would be considered were he challenged. Again, however, Liam Potter had engineered the perfect solution.

He and Harry were most closely related to Sirius, but Liam had the higher birth order and would so be considered the Heir Apparent. He had again relinquished his claim to the title, which left Harry, the next in line of succession, perfectly placed to assume it. Neville and his cousin, Draco Malfoy, were next in line, and while the Malfoy Heir might want the title, he would lose were he to fight for it. Neville had no interest and was adamant about that fact.

Liam wrote that Harry should immediately name heirs to the Houses and tell no one who they were. By law, as Lord, he wasn’t required to disclose his choices, neither to the Ministry nor Gringotts. This protected both Harry and the heirs. Aggrieved parties who might consider removing Harry from the equation altogether would realize the foolhardiness of the notion, for they would have no idea as to who would inherit or the action taken for the offense.

Liam suspected the Wizengamot would try to compel Harry to name a Regent for each House, tricking him into overturning his own emancipation. Harry must steadfastly refuse the political games and appoint Proxies, making it clear that he was not only aware of the power he held, but that he fully intended to exercise it.

“What are you thinking?” Harry quietly asked her.

“That your brother is a political animal the likes of which this world hasn’t seen for decades,” was the frank response. “He must also share your incredible power of memory, or some variation. He always remembered you, Harry, even though you were separated before you were two years old.”

She paused. “It makes me wonder what else he remembers.”

Harry frowned. “What do you mean?”

“He doesn’t outright say it, but I suspect he was adopted by blood into another family. I don’t believe he grew up unloved or unwanted, and this family must have money. Look at the resources he expended trying to find you. It wasn’t cheap, and he would have been too young to authorize such charges himself. That means his family is also aware of you and the legacy into which you were both born. They’re helping him with this.”

His eyes widened.

“So let us extrapolate. Obviously, he was delivered to this family by Dumbledore. He was one of the few who knew where the cottage was located, and Filius told you that you were given to Hagrid, who was to take you to … your relatives.

“Now, I agree with Liam that people were Obliviated, but Hagrid is part giant, and magic works differently on him. If anyone could cast the spell, it’s Dumbledore, but he wouldn’t take the chance
of altering memories of Liam only for it not to work. I think it’s safe to assume Hagrid was never
told you had a twin, which means someone else helped Dumbledore with this escapade.”

“Perhaps he gave Liam to this family himself.”

“Possible, but unlikely. The demands on his presence during this time was extreme, and he was
never unavailable.”

Harry nodded to himself. “But why did you question what else Liam might remember? What do
you think he knows?”

She hesitated. “I’m not sure of anything, you understand, but from these letters, from the pictures
he drew of you, of Lily, and of James, I think it’s possible he remembers that night. You told us
you dreamed of the green light of the Avada Kedavra. Liam has included it in these drawings.”

Harry blanched.

“I think he might remember Voldemort coming to your home and killing your parents, and of
trying to kill you.”

Neville gasped sharply and they both turned toward the sound, having forgotten he was there.

Her face softened. “If that’s true, it suggests you were Voldemort’s target all along. It’s possible he
also attacked Liam, but we might never know until the Moratorium is dispelled. What I do think is
highly likely, is that Liam witnessed your mother’s death, Voldemort’s attempted murder of you,
and then Voldemort’s demise. And he’s remembered that for ten years.”

Harry turned away, involuntarily swallowing the bile that had collected in his throat. “What do I
do?”

“Exactly what he suggests. It’s a good plan, and well-researched. His point that you are not
required to inform anyone of your accession to Houses Potter and Black is well made. You will
eventually have to present yourself to the Wizengamot, but even that can be done via proxy and
with certified statements from Gringotts.

“I have to assume that, on your birthday, sometime after you visited the Bank, Liam took control of
House Potter and made his wishes clear. You mentioned that you met with your account manager,
but your brother has somehow conscripted Ragnok himself to oversee your accounts.

“That’s not entirely out of the question, of course, given that you’re Heir to two of the First
Families, but he doesn’t involve himself in such matters on his own initiative. Liam must therefore
have some sway with the Goblin Nation. He couldn’t have just walked into the Bank and
demanded Ragnok’s participation. Ragnok had to agree. And the notes he’s made as to how you
are to conduct yourself with Ragnok and the Nation are not common knowledge. Goblins are
notoriously secretive, certainly distrustful of humans, if not outright antagonistic. Liam has power
there, though I can’t imagine how he obtained it.”

Harry nodded and turned his head, finding Neville intensely scrutinizing one of the picture Liam
had drawn. “Neville?”

Neville looked up and blushed. “Did you see this, Harry?”

“I didn’t look at all of them, no,” Harry said quietly. “It was … it hurt.”

Neville gave him a kind nod before pushing the drawing across the table.
Harry reached out and slid it toward him, eyes widening. He didn’t know how he had missed this. Perhaps he had just been drowning in emotion. He and Liam were in the picture, holding hands, and Neville was standing next to Harry. Behind the three boys stood another, taller boy, obviously older, named Cedric. Behind them were James and Lily, Alice and Frank, and a woman named as Auntie Eos, who was obviously pregnant.

“I don’t know all of these people. Do you?”

Neville nodded. “Cedric is about a year and a half older than us. He’s going to be a Second Year at Hogwarts. He is Heir to the Noble House of Diggory. His father, Amos, works for the Ministry, and his mother, Diana, is an Arithmancer.”

Harry turned toward Augusta. “You mentioned a Diana who was close to my mother. Is this her?”

Augusta nodded. “And Eos was Eos Lovegood. In this picture, she was pregnant with her daughter Luna, who was born shortly after you and your family went under the Fidelius.”

“Is she dead?”

Another nod.

“And Luna?”

“Luna is incredibly powerful,” Neville cut in.

Augusta gave him look of surprise and skepticism. She didn’t know the Lovegood Heiress well because she couldn’t tolerate the child’s father and his eccentricities.

“What do you mean?” Harry asked.

“Luna’s had a wand for years, and she knows how to use it.”

Augusta stared.

“I thought law mandated you couldn’t purchase a wand until you were eleven,” Harry said.

“The primary word there is purchase,” Neville said. “There’s no law which states a child, especially an Heir to an Ancient House, which Luna is, cannot use a wand prior to that age. She could be using her mother’s wand, or one of any among the many generations of Lovegood women. Besides, she lives in a wizarding residence and the Ministry can only monitor underage wand use in non-magical settings.”

“How do you know she has a wand? Does she tell people?”

“No, but I’ve seen her cast magic when no one was looking.”

“And no one stopped her?” Augusta asked carefully.

“She cast silently.”

Augusta offered an owlish blink.

Harry raised a brow but otherwise offered no comment.

Liam had included a sheaf of letters – almost like a book, as it was bound – concerning theories of magic and its usage, along with his own observations and practical advice. Harry had only been
able to thumb through it, but it was compelling reading and much of it flew in the face of the books he had purchased with Master Filius.

He wasn’t sure about showing it to Augusta, who had proven to be very traditionalist, though sometimes open to out-of-the-box thinking. Still, something told him to wait. He had shared with Neville bits and pieces, however, written in other letters. Considering the boy believed himself worthless with regard to magic, which Harry thought was patently untrue, he hoped by Neville learning the British Way wasn’t the only way might alleviate some of his anxiety.

He wanted to get Master Filius’ opinion, as well, but felt uncomfortable showing him. If the man had been Obliviated with regard to Liam’s existence, he didn’t know what knowledge might trigger memories or questions. Liam had warned him to be careful about making even oblique references to him because he was unsure about the parameters of the Moratorium.

Still, he was anxious to put into practice what his brother had committed to paper.

“I’d like to meet Luna,” Harry said. “Will she be in our class?”

“No,” Neville said. “She’ll be in the year following ours, though I think she could easily be a second or third year just based on the knowledge and experience she has.”

“Aren’t there placement exams or something she could take?”

“There are,” Augusta affirmed, “but I rather think her reticence is based on being separated from her father.” She sighed. “Eos died last year during a spellcrafting incident. It was … well, horrible, really, and Luna was there to witness it. Her father, Xenophilius, has always been quite eccentric, and from what little I’ve heard, Luna is more his caretaker than the reverse.”

Harry frowned.

“Her lands are adjacent to House Diggory,” Neville said.

“Cedric, right? I wonder if he remembers us.”

Neville shrugged, honestly unsure. “I haven’t spent a lot of time talking with him, but he’s a very nice boy. I’ve never heard an unkind word about him.”

Augusta suddenly straightened and then closed her eyes. “Amelia and Susan are at the ward boundary, asking for entrance.”

Neville nodded and stood, heading toward the door to admit them.

“May I ask a question?”

“Of course, Harry,” Augusta said.

“I know that Longbottom Hall is under the Fidelius. Are you the Secret Keeper?”

“I am not,” she said easily.

“How is Madam Bones aware of where the Hall is located?”

“That is indeed an excellent question, for which I have no answer. Amelia was the Auror Captain who oversaw Frank and Alice, and I have always assumed one of them was the Secret-Keeper and that they included her in the spell. I have no proof of this, and I cannot ask her, for only the Secret Keeper can reveal those who know the Secret.”
Harry bit his lip and furrowed his brow.

“I don’t know how they got in, Harry,” she said quietly. “We were never close with that branch of the Black family, and certainly never close to Bellatrix. Believe me, I have spent many a sleepless night wondering how we were betrayed.”

“You know Occlumency. You’ve been teaching Neville, who’s been trying to instruct me. Could your shields have been breached? Could you have been Obliviated?”

She nodded. “Obliviation is possible. I am a highly skilled Occlumens, though not quite a master of the art as your grandmother, Dorea, was. Incidentally, it was her who taught me the discipline. Occlumens can be Obliviated, but the memory is never truly removed, merely hidden. Those who are skilled will eventually unearth it, if they know to look for it.

“I have scanned my shields rigorously over the years, Harry, and I could find no trace of Obliviation, nor a magical signature of anyone who could have even attempted it. Also, the Fidelius is unique in that, should the Secret be pried from one’s mind using Legilimancy, the knowledge would immediately disappear from the mind of the Legimens.”

Harry nodded, scowling in frustration. “Is there nothing we can do to determine how it was done?”

She was warmed he cared so much, that he was so outraged by what had been done to Frank and Alice. “I believe Magic will always find a way, Harry, though it is not always immediate or apparent.”

He nodded again. “Are you able to test my Occlumency?”

“I’m not a skilled Legilimens,” she admitted. “I can send a basic probe, but I lack the finesse necessary to determine your level of skill. Amelia, however, is quite good.”

He eyed her. “You trust her absolutely?”

“Absolutely.”

“I think I shall then, too.”

He had a lot of questions and many plans to make.

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