The Well Groomed Mind

by Lady_Khali

Summary

On Halloween 1994, Harry learns his mind isn't his own. On Samhain morn, he vows to question everything. Armed with logic and an unlikely ally, Harry makes a last ditch bid to reclaim his life. The goal: survive at all costs.
Chapter 1

Chapter Notes

See the end of the chapter for notes

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All author's notes will be located at the end of the chapters.

Professor Dumbledore was now looking down at Harry, who looked right back at him, trying to discern the expression of the eyes behind the half-moon spectacles.

"Did you put your name into the Goblet of Fire, Harry," he asked calmly.

"No," said Harry. He was very aware of everyone watching him closely. Snape made a soft noise of impatient disbelief in the shadows.

"Did you ask an older student to put it into the Goblet of Fire for you?" said Professor Dumbledore, ignoring Snape.

"No," said Harry vehemently.

- Harry Potter and the Goblet of Fire, Chapter 17

My mind laid in shambles, ransacked by an unknown invader. Friendless. Bereft. The hope I clung to that Dumbledore would stop this sick farce, that he would protect me, was utterly destroyed. Moody was the only one who believed I didn't put my name in the cup. Even McGonagall defended Dumbledore's age line, not me. If my own head of house wouldn't defend me, who would?

The headmaster?

Twinkling blue eyes partially hidden by spectacles appeared in my mind's eye. Calm swept through me. Peace. For the first time since my name came out of the cup, I believed everything would be fine.

My thoughts reordered themselves. Hermione and Ron would stick by me. With them, I could do anything, even take on a thousand-year-old basilisk and Voldemort. As long as I had them and Professor Dumbledore, I was fine.

I would live though this. Thrive even.

Then, a memory intruded.

Moody pointed his wand at me and whispered, "imperio". I struggled against the curse, half-obeyed. Immediately afterward, I felt floaty, happy, but violated, like an unseen invader had systematically destroyed everything that made me me and then left a note gloating about it.

My mind wrenched. The calm gave way to terror, horror, and revulsion as the same psychological backlash I associated with the imperius curse flooded my senses.
What the hell was wrong with me?

Why did thinking about Dumbledore make me feel as violated as I did after Moody's imperius? I leaned against the wall in the deserted corridor, drowning in my own fears as I tried to reconcile my feelings with reality.

What was reality? My breath caught in my throat when I realized I didn't know. A distant recollection flickered across my mind. I knew once, I thought. At least, I knew who I was, what I felt like, the indescribable sensations that encompassed my unique presence. By age three, I understood everyone had a presence and could easily identify Aunt Petunia (tart and prickly), Uncle Vernon (squicky like six-week-old gym socks), and Dudley (rotten apples; mushy, smelly, and above all disgusting). As I child, I relied on this sixth sense, comparing how I felt to others, constantly seeking someone like me, a place to belong. I stopped shortly before I started Hogwarts.

Didn't know why. I just woke up one day and decided to stop judging people based on ephemeral sensations that might not be real, but what if I was wrong?

I closed my eyes, searching for my center—a vibrant ball of particolored light inside me that I discovered when Uncle Vernon locked me in my cupboard for my seventh birthday. Sweat pored down my brow. I pressed my cheek against the cool stone wall and focused. Reaching it shouldn't be this hard.

A vortex, once orderly colors as jumbled as the rest of my mind, appeared before me. I touched the edge. It sucked me inside like Odysseus's raft caught by Charybdis.

Debris swirled around me. Thoughts, memories, emotions, fragments of everything that made me me, slamming together until they pieced themselves back together, forming a facsimile of myself.

Recoiling in horror, I pulled back until I had a bird's eye view of the vortex. Stretching out my hands, I let my magic flow out my fingertips and snagged a broken memory. I would fix this or die trying.

Dudley chased me and I appeared on the school roof. Picked last for rugby, as always. A teacher talked with Aunt Petunia, saying I needed glasses. She bought me reading glasses at the supermarket. I lied to my teacher, pretending I could see perfectly when I couldn't tell the difference between half the letters on the board. Drawings, punishments, Uncle Vernon bellowing. Suspicions. A small hand twist unlocked my cupboard and I snuck out to steal food. More petty theft, all in the name of survival. Taunting Dudley and running before he could retaliate.

The spinning slowed as memories settled into their proper order. I lost all concept of time as I pushed and pulled, matching memories with different aspects of my personality.

The sorting hat insisted I would have done well in Slytherin.


Everything fell into place. I screamed.

A hand grabbed my shoulder and shook me. "Potter," someone yelled.

My eyes flickered open. Moody stood over me, one eye whirling in a constant three-sixty sweep,
"Who attacked you?"

"No one," I said in a hoarse whisper. My throat felt raw, like I'd been screaming for hours. How long was I in there?

He gave me a piercing look and nodded once. "As you say, Potter," he said, grabbing me by the elbow and hauling me to my feet. He frog marched me down the empty corridor, up two flights of stairs, through the defense classroom, and into his office where he released me and gently pushed me into a chair.

I slumped over, clasping my head in my hands, mind still reeling, the grandfather of all migraines building behind my temples.

He shoved a vial under my nose. "Drink," Moody ordered.

Wordlessly, I took the potion and chugged it. Headache reliever, I realized when the rampaging hippogriff in my head subsided. He passed me another. I glanced at the label. Calming draught. Not necessary.

"Standard procedure," he said. Standard for whom? Aurors? "Helps you process the facts so you can deal with the emotions."

Sounded good to me. I tossed it back, grimacing at the taste, and set the vial aside. The panic receded. "Thank you," I said several minutes later.

"What the devil happened?"

"I'm not sure," I said, searching for an answer that would both satisfy him and protect me. I paused. Protect me? I trusted Professor Moody, didn't I? He was a friend of Dumbledore's. My eyes widened.

I didn't trust Dumbledore. Something I did changed how I felt about Professor Dumbledore. Now I regarded him much like I did Uncle Vernon and Aunt Petunia, as someone to be endured but never trusted. What happened?

He flicked his wand, summoning the chair behind his desk, and sat down. "Then tell me what you did."

"Meditation," I said, settling on a likely muggle explanation. A lie. It was magic of some sort.

My hands shook. He conjured a handkerchief and handed it to me. "Wipe your nose," he said with a softer tone.

I did. The handkerchief turned red with blood. Shocked, I stared at it. How long had I been bleeding? Why didn't I notice?

"Meditation doesn't cause nose bleeds, Mr. Potter, but a legilimency attack does."

"Legi what?"

"Legilimency. Literally, it means 'read mind'. It's a technique whereby a wizard delves into another's mind."

"How?" I asked, feeling nauseous.
"Depends on the wizard. Most need a spell, but all a master needs is eye contact."

Eye contact? Dumbledore's twinkling blue eyes hovered in my mind. Did he…”What exactly can a master—"

”—legilimens," he supplied.

"What can a master legilimens do?"

"Tell if your lying, for one. Why do you think Albus defended you tonight? He knew you were telling the truth better than you did."

"What else?" I whispered, throat suddenly dry.

"Access your thoughts, emotions, memories. A true master can twist your perceptions, maybe even alter your personality, but you don't have to worry about that."

"Why not?"

"Albus wouldn't."

Albus? Wait, he meant Dumbledore. Dumbledore was a master legilimens and earlier, I deliberately made eye contact with him. Shit.

"Who else?"

"In Britain, the Dark Lord. Six, maybe seven in the States. The Canadians and Japs both have a few, but they're all aurors. The Jap's one of the best interrogators I've ever seen. Watching that woman work is a thing of beauty, I tell you." He got a creepy smile on his face. I shuddered. Anyone who made Mad-Eye that happy wasn't someone I ever wanted to meet.

"Could the spell cause…" I trailed off before I gave away my secrets.

He gave me a knowing smirk. "Perhaps. Do you remember seeing anyone?"

I shook my head. "No. I was heading back to my common room. Next thing I knew, you were there." Not a lie, but not the whole truth either.

"Very well, Potter," he said, standing. He took a book off a shelf and handed it to me. "Here."

The Aware Mind, I read. Interesting. If some wizards could read minds, maybe there was more to my make-believe sixth sense than I thought.

"Read and practice," he said, jabbing the book with his wand. "Every wizard worth his salt knows basic occlumency. Mind you, keep it hidden. The ministry banned that book. If anyone catches you with it, you didn't get it from me."

I nodded tightly, clutching the book. Moody didn't give me the book out of the goodness of his heart. He had a hidden agenda, but the library didn't house banned books. Even if it had one on occlumency, I couldn't check it out anonymously. Not to mention, it was probably in the restricted section. Most helpful books were. Right now, I would take what help I could get.

"You'll be needing a note," he said, summoning a parchment and quill. He scribbled something illegible and passed it to me. "Filch gives you any trouble tonight, come to me," he said in dismissal.
I accepted the excuse and tucked it inside the book. I raised my head, eyes darting around the room as I noted all the changes. Lupin always had a dark creature stashed in a corner, bright candles, and books scattered everywhere like Hermione does when she's researching. Moody's office contained whirling sneak-a-scopes, a rather odd mirror with roaming eyes, and books with morbid titles like Dead vs Dying: How to Guarantee Your Enemies Never Get Back Up and Only Dead Imbeciles Stun. Still reflecting on the differences and wondering if I might learn as much from Moody as I did from Lupin, I left his office.

As I walked to the dorm, my mind churned with half-baked plans and ideas. I needed to step back, set goals, analyze my situation, and formulate a strategy, just like I used to do when Vernon locked me in my cupboard, Dudley stole my homework, or Petunia spread yet another nasty rumor about me.

What was my ideal outcome? I paused on the stairwell, not caring when it moved.


I paused. Everyone said he murdered my parents. Did I really want to let that go? Maybe. Judging by what little information I had pieced together, my parents voluntarily took up arms. They had me in the middle of a war and rather than leave, like sensible people would, they chose to stay in Britain and fight.

Any fool can tell you people die during war. Being parents didn't make them exempt from that cardinal rule. Their deaths were an easily predicted outcome caused by their choices, not mine.

I spent most of my life believing they died while driving drunk. Before I came to Hogwarts, I wasn't going to hunt down the other driver and murder him or her. Why should I fight Voldemort when I didn't even know what my parents were fighting for? If I could find out why he was after me, maybe I could negotiate something. Say a visa and no more Dursleys?

I mentally added that to my list.

No more Dursleys.

I took a deep breath and finally understood what I had to do. Before I came to Hogwarts, I was a conniving little snake. Although I still used that trait to its fullest during the summer, fighting my battles with calculated words and trickery, for some reason, I abandoned those aspects of myself the moment I entered the castle.

I needed to stop being half a person. I needed to become the real Harry Potter.

With my bed curtains spelled shut and the silencing charm the twins taught everyone in the dorm as a joke on Ron applied, my bed was as private as I could make it. Moody's book laid on my pillow. His warning echoed in my ears. Gryffindor Tower was infamous for its complete lack of privacy. Something about being sorted into the house of bravery was supposed to make you want to bare your soul to your peers. Utterly barmy. Unfortunately, the mild shocking charm I'd added to the curtains was the only security spell I knew. If someone wanted in, they'd get in.

Eying the cracked, leather spine, I gnawed on my bottom lip. Reading a banned book in my dormitory where anyone could see me was a risk. Laughter echoed up the stairwell. The tension bled out me. It was only a risk if there was someone caught me. With everyone in Gryffindor either celebrating my inclusion in the tournament or gossiping about me, my dorm was deserted and likely to remain that way until the wee hours of the morning. At least, the goblet served as a
distraction.

Gently, I opened the book and examined both the title and the copyright page. The title matched the spine, but the date gave me pause.

1811, the year before the Ministry of Magic began censoring books, including the resale of older books, by subject matter instead of title. I knew because after I learned I was a parselmouth, I spent weeks combing the library after curfew, searching for information on the ability, more specifically, why everyone hated me because I had it. Voldemort wasn't an adequate explanation. The prejudice was too ingrained.

What I discovered made me sick. In 1812, *The Daily Prophet* gleefully reported the executions of numerous parselmouths, including a four-year-old girl, on trumped up charges. A little more research at the muggle library over the summer gave their actions a name: moral panic. The library book referred to the Red Scare and the Holocaust as notable examples. It took me all of five seconds to realize moral panics were a human, not a muggle, condition. Before then, I pretended I wasn't a parselmouth because Professor Dumbledore told me I acquired the ability from Voldemort. After my research, I hid it out of fear.

If I studied and applied Moody's book, would have I have something else I had to hide at all costs? Did I care?

Whatever I did unearthed almost forgotten memories, thoughts, and feelings, many of which centered around escaping from both the magical world and the Dursleys. I desperately wanted out, but I never left. Gut feeling, someone cast a spell on me, like Lockhart tried to do to make us forget about the Chamber, to make me ignore my true feelings.

My stomach clenched. Bile filled my mouth. Foreign urges warred with my desire to survive, transforming my mind into a dark labyrinth with no way out. The minotaur lurked in the shadows, stalking me. The moment it consumed me I died and it took my place, becoming me. No one would ever mourn me because as long as my body lived, breathed, and spoke, who would say the minotaur killed me? No one.

I gnashed my teeth. If I was going down, I was taking the bastard who placed the minotaur in my head with me. Maybe he'd cushion the landing.

I almost laughed at myself. Aunt Petunia always told Dudley not to borrow trouble. Funny, I should think of her advice. I was just a fourth year student. I didn't know what happened. Maybe I did something real, maybe not. Maybe the minotaur was just a figment of my imagination, triggered by recent events. Not real. Gut feelings weren't proof. I needed to understand my situation first, then identify the culprit (if there was one), then put all my years getting petty vengeance on the Dursleys to good use and make the bastard pay.

My gaze fell on Moody's book. What was his game?

Among the faculty, it was an accepted fact that Harry Potter was a lazy student. I spent more time playing quidditch than in class. Instead of homework, I played chess, exploding snap, or explored the castle. The only way to teach me was to show me, like Lupin did with the patronus charm, because I couldn't be bothered with cracking a book. Sure, my nighttime wanderings frequently brought me to the library, but I'd grown more savvy over the years and doubted anyone knew. Even then, I researched issues specific to my mysteriously survivable, end-of-year adventures or subjects I found personally relevant, like parseltongue. I didn't research course work because I had Hermione.
Assuming Moody knew my reputation, why did he give me a book? Did he see through my Hogwarts mask to the real Harry Potter?

I shook myself. Not likely. Even the Slytherins, who should know better than to take someone at face value, didn't.

My breath hitched as the answer hit me. Moody had a reasonable expectation I wouldn't read it, much less apply it. He gave it to me to look like he was helping me without actually helping.

To hell with that.

I opened the book to the prologue. The pages were still crisp, indicating a preservation spell. Sentences were underlined in pencil. Skimming to the first chapter, I spotted notes in no less than five hands. With the notes to explain things further, the text wasn't overly difficult.

I would master this, I silently vowed, or die trying.

Hours passed. My dorm mates trickled in. First Neville. Then Ron. Around midnight, Dean dragged Seamus up the stairs. Each time, I doused my lumos, waited until I heard their bed curtains shut, and recast it, mouthing the spell instead of saying it. It wasn't as powerful, but it worked well enough. I wondered if words were always necessary, but pushed my question aside and focused on the book.

Three pages into the book, my worst fears were confirmed. Whether someone, I refused to think names yet, did it or not, I didn't know, but a skilled legilimens could tweak things just enough to add their own thoughts, emotions, and personality to someone else's mind. The book even listed examples. By page six, I knew why the ministry banned the book. An expert occlumens could completely counter veritaserum, fight off the imperius curse, which I suspected I did through magical power and stubbornness. It even provided limited protection from dementors, which meant if Sirius knew occlumency prior to his incarceration, he'd be a bit saner.

In short, occlumency was the mental discipline for the paranoid crazies who believed the world was out to get them or, at least, control them. Moody'd probably say it's not paranoid if they're really out to get you. I completely agreed.

In true Moody fashion, I turned to the first exercise, which was designed to show how insidious legilemency really is, fetched a stack of parchment and ink from my trunk, and began listing major events in my life. In truth, you were supposed to have a legilimens plant information, then list everything out, and use deductive reasoning to identify the plant. Since I wasn't about to ask Dumbledore for help identifying information I suspected he planted, I wrote down everything I could, often working backwards from a major incident while I tried to identify what information Hermione, Ron, or myself might have legitimately known. Without asking them to do the same exercise, I couldn't be certain about some things, but for example, a second year, no matter how smart, discovering Slytherin's monster was a basilisk before the teachers was a touch suspect.

Jotting down a few notes about my time with the Dursleys, I realized that before today, I didn't remember opening the cupboard with magic and my food theft was limited to whatever I could steal off plates or out of the trash. In my newly organized memories, I vividly recalled stealing a loaf of bread, boiled eggs, fruit, even a chocolate bar. When I was four, Uncle Vernon twisted my arm, accidentally breaking it. I shattered every window in the house. Until today, I didn't remember any of it.

An obliviate? I checked the index and flipped to chapter six. After skimming the information, I realized my memories weren't missing or fragmented. Frustrated, I almost slammed the book shut,
but a foot note caught my eye.

Although not widely used, memory suppression, a pure legilimency technique, is more subtle than the obliviate spell. Rather than making the memory disappear, suppression persuades the subconscious the memory is unimportant, thereby placing less emphasis on the memory over time until the memory has little to no impact on the subject's life. As suppression can be overcome if the subject possesses sufficient magical strength and knowledge, it is rarely used.

Unimportant described my feelings perfectly. The memories and feelings weren't important until they suddenly were, almost like I flipped a light switch in my head or performed accidental mind magic.

My hand shook, spattering ink over my bed spread. Dumbledore really did it.

But why make me deemphasize stealing food? Stealing wasn't part of my personality. "No, but I stole to survive," I whispered.

Before Hogwarts my survival instincts were so ingrained, they were an integral part of my personality. A stolen apple off the lunch cart. A half-eaten sandwich another student threw away. The pencil Peirs dropped on the floor that mysteriously disappeared before he could pick it up. All the little lies I told my teachers and class mates so they wouldn't know the truth about my home life. A million things that combined meant I was a sneaky, conniving child, always on the lookout for my next meal. Even after I started Hogwarts, I left the dinner table with half my meal in my pockets, but the conniving stopped. Why?

With shaking hands, I noted the personality change on a separate sheet of parchment and began searching for the next. As I continued examining my life, more issues cropped up, like I remembered Aunt Petunia making me watch the bacon, but I thought I didn't start until I was ten. Now, I remembered standing on a chair beside the stove. I must've been five, maybe six. Malfoy's dueling trick in first year was almost identical to one I pulled on Dudley when I was eight, save the being out after dark part. If I'd stopped and used my brain, which I did before Hogwarts, I would've seen through his trick.

Starting to hyperventilate, I sank back into my mind. Hogwarts, I thought to myself. "Start with Hogwarts and work your way forward. Focus on surviving now. Deal with early childhood later," I whispered to myself.

When I started Hogwarts, Malfoy was more Gryffindorish than I was. So why, two months after I arrived, did I leap on a troll's back and stick my wand up its nose? Hermione's my friend. I'd do almost anything for her, but back then, she was an annoying little snot, and Harry Potter didn't stick his neck out for anyone.

The real Harry Potter would have stayed in the middle of the group heading back to the dorms so if the troll attacked it ate someone else, not him. He might have told a prefect she was missing, but probably not. Sure, he laughed when she ran off, but Ron was the one who bullied her. She was Ron's responsibility, not Harry's.

The real Harry Potter, the boy Vernon locked in a cupboard for a month after he set a boa constrictor loose, would have let Hermione die in that bathroom. I doubt I would've lost sleep over it.

That scared me. Both because I was a bit cold back then and because my personality did a one-eighty almost over night.
When I started the exercises, I suspected I might find one or two actions that weren't entirely my own or an epiphany I couldn't have derived from the knowledge I possessed at the time. For example, why did I suddenly wonder if Myrtle was the student killed by the basilisk? She isn't the only student to die while attending Hogwarts so that wasn't a rational theory. Looking back, I started suspecting she was the student back in January. Months before I acted on the information. The book mentioned triggers. I wondered if Ginny being taken into the chamber was the trigger. If so, did that mean Dumbledore knew about the diary beforehand?

With shaking hands, I grabbed a sheet of parchment and tore it into strips. If I broke everything into small pieces, maybe I could process it.

Four hours later, I leaned against my headboard and rubbed my eyes. A light glowed above my head. Small piles of torn parchment littered the bed, each bearing a major event, interaction with Dumbledore, unexplained sensation, or broken rule. All sorted by year. The rules were further divided neatly into caught and punished, caught but not punished, and not caught stacks.

Looking at the pile, I was shocked that I survived the first six months, and I certainly should have been expelled many times over, but Dumbledore…First year, he caught me out of bed, gazing into the Mirror of Erised. By all rights, he should have given me a lecture and detention. Instead, he told me he saw himself holding a pair of socks.

I barely knew him, but it felt like meeting an old friend. He talked to me like I was an equal, not a snot-nosed brat. He probably lied about the socks, but he still shared a desire, meaning I could relate to him.

Racking my brain, I searched for similar incidents. The cloak. What responsible adult gives an eleven-year-old an invisibility cloak? Yes, it was my father's, but still. He might as well have given me a hand written invitation to break curfew.

Bloody hell, the first thing I did with it was break into the warded restricted section. Surely, the protections registered my magic, but no one punished me. Did Dumbledore clear the ward or brush off Madame Pince? I pursed my lips, struggling to recall her behavior.

Judging by the way she glared at me afterward, he swept it under the rug.

Then, in the hospital, after the stone, he joked with me about earwax-flavored jellybeans. It was almost like I was talking to Ron instead of an adult.

Instead of expelling me for entering a forbidden zone, he awarded house points, giving Gryffindor the house cup, which made all the Slytherins and Ravenclaws hate me.

I snarled. As much as I despised him, Snape had a point. Dumbledore favored me to an obscene degree, but why?

I tabled that thought for a moment, picked up my entire first year stack, and skimmed through it. The answer was right in front of me. I could sense it, but didn't understand it, yet.

The first piece only said "Hagrid".

I stared at the parchment, tracing Hagrid's name with my fingertip. Hagrid is, and probably will always be, one of my dearest friends, but I needed to be objective. I needed to step back and look at this as if he were a complete stranger, which he was back then. I had to look at Hagrid the way the magical world saw him and view myself as the so-called 'boy-who-lived'.

Hagrid was a groundskeeper. When I was eleven, my fame rivaled Dumbledore's and, according to
Ron, I'm the sole heir to a wealthy, pure blood family.

Sending Hagrid to deliver my letter and introduce me to the magical world was like Eton sending a janitor to pick up Prince William. Given my celebrity, which I will always despise, I should have been introduced by either McGonagall, Dumbledore himself, or a board member. Not that I would've wanted Lucius Malfoy to take me to Diagon Alley. Then again, Mr. Malfoy probably wouldn't have shouted my name in the middle of a crowded pub.

What did Hagrid accomplish?

Nibbling on my quill, I recalled our first meeting. Five big things. He sang Dumbledore's praises, told me about my parents, let me see him fetch the stone, preached that all bad wizards came from Slytherins—despite him believing Sirius Black, Gryffindor extraordinaire, betrayed my parents—and gave me my first birthday present Hedwig.

"Be suspicious," I whispered to myself. "Sure, Hagrid's the kindest man I know, but I must be objective."

Hagrid claimed he knew me as a baby. Probably true, but Voldemort could truthfully claim he knew me, as well. Looking like my parents was special, but only because I had never seen a photo of them. Then the shock and awe of discovering the magical world combined with how my parents actually died...It was overwhelming.

And his rants about Slytherin...Ron said similar things on the train, but Ron was just another kid. I probably would've dismissed his opinion if I hadn't already heard the same thing from Hagrid.

If I hadn't met Hagrid, my tie would be green and silver. Talk about bad PR for Dumbledore's side.

My mind bounced to the Weasley's. Mrs. Weasley broke at least two laws when she announced Platform 9 3/4 to the entire station. Why?

Coincidences kept piling up, but I was no closer to an answer than I was initially. Then, I remembered.

When Hagrid told me about my parents, he said he took me to the Dursleys. On Dumbledore's orders.

How did I miss that?

I spent my entire summer blaming Voldemort for the Dursleys. He killed my parents, but he didn't place me with the Dursleys. Dumbledore did.

Funny. One moment I was thinking about Dumbledore and the next I was recalling a show Aunt Petunia taped and made Dudley watch ad nauseam. Last summer, Dudley's, not mine, year five teacher was convicted for sexually molesting one of his students. The local news pushed traffic accidents and robberies aside in favor of talking heads, urging parents to question their children and teach them how to recognize predators. Uncle Vernon glared at me whenever it came on like I should have been the one the victims.

The psychologist's voice droned in my memory. "Children, who come from abusive or broken homes, are generally more vulnerable to child predators than children from stable environments. During the targeting stage, some predators deliberately seek out vulnerable children as they are typically starved for affection and attention, making them more susceptible to the positive reinforcement used during the grooming process."

Did Dumbledore know how the Dursleys treated me? I wasn't sure. I did encounter wizards prior to attending Hogwarts. Any one of them may have told him about my general situation. First year, Hagrid met the Dursleys and had some choice words for Uncle Vernon. Looking back, Hagrid probably knew.

Then when I asked to remain at Hogwarts, Dumbledore refused, sending me back to the Dursleys.

I was positive the twins told their parents about the bars on my window. I distinctly remembered the phrase, "they were starving him".

Even if Hagrid didn't mention anything, the Weasleys probably did.

Dumbledore knew. He had to, and he deliberately left me in a situation where I was a vulnerable child who was saved every Sept. 1st by the Hogwarts' Express.

Add in my height being in the lowest 4th percentile for my age group—I overheard the school nurse tell Aunt Petunia her concerns a few weeks before my old junior school let out for the last time—body weight that hovers between the 5th and 15th percentile, depending on punishments, and regular stays in the Hogwarts Hospital Wing, including multiple stays during my first year when I know for a fact my stats indicated chronic malnutrition—the nurse in Surrey tried to talk Aunt Petunia, who swore I ate twice as much as Dudley, into taking me to a nutritionist for prescription supplements—Pomfrey would have to be the most incompetent nurse on the planet to miss my physical condition.

Chills ran down my spine.

The nurse said something else. She claimed I was a little timid, almost submissive, in class and during recess. She informed Aunt Petunia that submissive behavior was a symptom of malnutrition, which thrilled Aunt Petunia beyond words. The nurse went on to describe how I ran from Dudley and the other children, all Dudley's gang, on the playground and was unusually quiet during class.

That fit my emerging grooming theory perfectly.

I snatched another piece of parchment up and tore it into strips. After dipping an extra quill in green ink (I used blue for the events), I started jotting down the stages of child grooming. My memory was a little fuzzy. I spent most of that day vacuuming and gardening, but they replayed the segment at least six times.

I laid them out on my bed, placing categories underneath each major stage. Sitting on my heels, I studied them.

*Targeting - vulnerable children*

*Recruitment*

*Show trust/favoritism*

*Special Gifts*

*Isolate/alienate from peers/other adults & secrecy*

*Desensitization (process used to test child's resistance and engage them in abuse)*

*Maintenance (progression of acts and checking of risks)*
Feeling ill, I pooled my previous stacks together. When I first wrote down the major events, I noticed they all shared a common thread: me risking my life/nearly dying.

When I was small, Uncle Vernon would sit at the kitchen table and rant about child soldiers in Lebanon. Caring about them when he never cared about me confused the hell out of me, but I did learn one thing from his speeches.

Children do not belong in war.

Children are not supposed to risk their lives for anyone's cause.

And yet, every thing, from the troll to the dementors, desensitized me to my own mortality.

I wished I prayed. Uncle Vernon said I'd pollute the church. I didn't attend and had only a passing acquaintance with religion. If I did pray, I would be praying my emerging conspiracy theory was completely wrong.

Tentatively, I took the first item—Hagrid telling me all Slytherins were evil—and placed it under "isolate/alienate". I sorted the next item and the next until my pile was redistributed by stage, not year.

First year alone was damning.

Under "show trust/favoritism", I had house points for stealing the Sorcerer's Stone, no detention for being out of bounds the third time I saw the mirror, being put on the Quidditch team for flying without supervision (an offense Madame Hootch said she'd expel us for), telling me about the socks, and informing me that he had destroyed the stone.

The cloak may have been my father's, but no sane educator would ever give an eleven-year-old an invisibility cloak. Unless, he had an ulterior motive. I stuck that underneath "special gifts" along with all the tidbits Dumbledore, Hagrid, and McGonagall, who was added sometime during the night, told me about my parents. The tidbits were more special to me than the cloak. I reluctantly added Hedwig and my photo album because I couldn't prove the gifts were really Hagrid's idea.

The last minute house points at the end of first year alienated me from every house except Gryffindor. In second year, when everyone was whispering that I was the heir of Slytherin, he told me I acquired the ability to speak parseltongue from Voldemort, but he didn't tell anyone else. If he had, I might not have been reviled by everyone in the school, including my own house mates. His inaction damned me in their eyes.

I gnawed on my lower lip. Did he lie about that? Parseltongue isn't a common gift, especially not after the Ministry of Magic labeled it dark and kissed every parselmouth they could get their hands on between 1812-1814, but while it is still considered rare, there are parselmouths outside of Britain.

The Muskogee in America venerated the sint hilo, also known as the horned serpent, aka the basilisk. They believed they appeared to "wise young men".

And they aren't the only snake speakers. India, Brazil, Canada, the US, South Africa, Australia, all boast parselmouths.

Just like there are witches and wizards outside of Britain, there are also parselmouths.

Based on my admittedly limited understanding, parseltongue is genetic. Killing curses, no matter how powerful, do not transfer genetic material.
On another sheet of parchment that had migrated to my pillow, I made a note: research family tree and find out more about parseltongue genetics.

Every so-called adventure was piled underneath "desensitization". They presented an ever escalating level of personal risk and danger. The teacher's were right outside the door when Ron and I went after the troll. Last year, it was just me and a patronus-less Hermione.

But the earlier stages paled when compared to maintenance.

After every adventure, Albus Percival Wulfric Brian Dumbledore pulled me aside for a polite chat. Once, he told me my mother's love protected me. Voldemort couldn't bear to touch someone who'd been marked by something so pure. He even claimed I survived the killing curse because my mother loved me.

That's just what every orphan wants to hear.

In reality, it's highly improbable that I am the only child in the history of wizarding warfare whose mother sacrificed her life. The killing curse dates back to the early middle ages. If love could block the killing curse, they would've renamed it by now.

Voldemort did offer her a choice. In theory, that could have played a role, but there's not a difference between leaping in front of a curse intended for someone else and refusing to step aside. They are both conscious choices. They both involve someone sacrificing their life for someone else. There's no difference. Since the early middle ages, it's highly probable both situations have occurred numerous times. Despite how desperately I wished it was true, my mother's love didn't make me unique.

With only one survivor, Dumbledore's explanation was just a poorly formulated hypothesis more grounded in wishful thinking than fact.

I added "love, magic, killing curse" to my notes and moved on.

In second year, he reassured me that I made the "right choice" when I begged the hat to not put me in Slytherin. He kept telling me "it's our choices that define us" or some such rot. While that may be true, what he told me was also a classic maintenance tactic: assuring the child of the rightness of what they are doing.

It fit the pattern all too well.

He also emphasized the people I saved, how they would be dead without me. Sirius, in particular, stood out.

Why would you tell a child who has never cast a corporeal patronus to illegally use a time turner to rescue an escaped convict from dementors when you are an adult wizard with a proven ability to cast said patronus? Either you want the child and the to-be-rescued adult to die, a distinct possibility, or you have another motive. Yes, he knew we were alive and he heard me say I saw my father, but we didn't use the time turner until after that conversation. Although the event had happened, we hadn't rescued ourselves, yet. The future wasn't fixed until we used the time turner. A teacher under a glamor charm could've accomplished the same thing without risking a failed patronus.

I stared at my bed. Every major event for the last three years fit the model perfectly. My lips quivered. Tears pricked the corners of my eyes. Before the first sob escaped, I snatched my wand up and cast a silencing charm. No one would ever see me cry.
Wrapping my arms around my knees, I sobbed so hard the bed curtains shook. The few happy memories I possessed were in shreds, tainted by my spur of the moment analysis.

I smiled sadly. Wasn't it better to know?

I took the sheet of personality changes I'd noted throughout the course of my analysis. Without both a master legilimens and a mind healer, I couldn't completely assess the damage to my psyche, much less fix it. I set it aside.

I carefully documented my other observations, especially the child grooming ones. I doubted muggle psychology was popular in the magical world—who needs grooming when you have the imperius—but everyone knew Dumbledore kept up-to-date on all things muggle. If he found something useful, he'd use it.

I levitated my parchment scraps and cast a quick incendio. The ashes fell onto my bed. I brushed them off. Dean smoked in the dorm all the time. No one would notice the smell.

Three long sheets of parchment remained behind: my child grooming conspiracy theory, personality changes, and a long list of questions. Mostly about my parents, the list contained everything I'd learned from Dumbledore and Hagrid along with a few questions of my own.

I slipped outside the bed curtains. Ron's snores rattled the window panes, but everyone remained asleep. Quietly, I levitated my trunk onto my bed, shut the curtains, and cast another silencing charm. Then I unlocked the trunk and dumped my clothes on the bed. Underneath the clothes was a student dictionary roughly the size of my fist, my lock box.

I bought it last summer in Diagon Alley. Mr. Fortescue recommended a little luggage shop at the intersection of Diagon Alley and Knockturn after he saw me lugging around a large sack of gold. He said things go missing sometimes in a dorm and I should store my vault key and galleons somewhere safe. The lock box cost two hundred fifty galleons—a fortune, in my opinion—but it had two compartments about the same size as my trunk and it was keyed to my blood, wand, and a password. Without all three, it wouldn't open. An anti-theft spell supposedly burned anyone who touched it without my permission.

Questionably legal, but secure.

The dictionary disguise kept Ron and Hermione from examining it too closely. I doubted Ron even knew what a dictionary was. Hermione owned three better ones.

I cut my finger with my potion's knife and dribbled some blood on the tip of my wand. Then I touched it to the box lid, pictured a snake, and hissed, "Dudley looks like a pig in a wig." The lid vanished.

The left side was a terrarium with temperature controls, sunlamps, and what the shop keeper called an "always right side up" charm. (The shop owner didn't ask questions and I didn't volunteer.) In a nest of leaves, lay Dyfi, a melanistic common adder a little under three feet long. I rescued the bossy snake from one of Mrs. Figg's cats two days before I blew up Aunt Marge. (She deserved worse than she got.) I tried to release Dyfi several times, but she always came back, muttering about Hedwig and free mice.

She spent last summer prowling around Aunt Petunia's garden and my bedroom, informing me of both her needs and mine, and casually commenting about biting my relatives. Remembering when Dudley deliberately pissed all over the bathroom wall instead of in the toilet, I smirked. I really should have let her bite him on the pecker. With any luck, it would've fallen off, removing any
future Dursleys (Vernon had a vasectomy when I was five and Marge is childless) from the gene pool. A true favor to humanity.

She'd agreed to hide during the school year and preferred her sun lamps to biting cold, Scottish winters. Good thing. If my dorm mates discovered I had an adder hibernating in my trunk, they'd lynch me.

Still smiling, I laid the papers inside the second compartment, checked her water and the temperature, and shut the lid, satisfied that my notes were temporarily safe. I repacked my trunk, leaving out an invigorating draught I filched from Madame Pomfrey last year, and levitated it off my bed. A faint thump sounded when it hit the floor, but my dorm mates remained asleep.

I swallowed the draught, grimacing when my heart rate sped up and my eyes tingled. Then I sat down and began reading Moody's book, which would also take up residence inside the box. Today, I'd study occlumency as much as I could alone. I hoped I'd at least grasp the concept well enough to detect low-level intrusions. I'd also write Sirius.

Biting the inside of my cheek, I wondered if I should tell Ron and Hermione. They were almost as involved as I was. I weighed the pros and cons. No, I decided. If Dumbledore found out I told them, he might target them, either directly or through their families. I didn't know Sirius well enough to tell him anything, yet. Maybe after a few years, but not now. However, I could ask him a few questions about my parents and see if he contradicts Dumbledore.

Meanwhile, I'd follow my new rule: question everything, especially if I learned it from Dumbledore.

Chapter End Notes

This story began as a series of emails discussing Harry Potter plot holes with my critique partners. At some point, they challenged me to write a few one shots exploiting said holes. Thinking it would make an excellent voice experiment, I agreed. Then, it grew.

Part 1 (Year 4) is complete. Baring any major disasters, I plan to post one chapter per day until part 1 is posted in its entirety.

Part 2 is in pieces and about 40% complete. I do not know when it will be finished or if it will be appended to this story or posted as a separate story.

I'm certain I will receive complaints that I didn't post any warnings about Dumbledore bashing. Before you send them, let me state that I do not believe it is possible to bash Dumbledore because he's not a 'nice' person. Yes, I've read pro-Dumbledore stories, a few Rowling interviews whose only reason for existence is to make him look better... However, I also read the books.

Book 1 (Sorcerer's Stone to us Yanks; Philosopher's Stone for Brits) began with a crime. I'm not referring to the murder of the Potters. Three teachers, who are trusted with thousands of children over their tenure, left a fifteen-month-old child on a doorstep at night in November without informing anyone at the residence. That is child abandonment, which in the UK is punishable by up to 10 years in prison (Children and Young Persons Act 1933). In my opinion, Dumbledore, McGonagall,
and Hagrid shouldn't be allowed within a mile of a school, and any parent who continues to send their children to them for an education after learning about the living conditions/life of a child previously in their care (aka the Weasleys) is an idiot and, perhaps, negligent.

If your still scratching your head on this one, ask yourself this: would you want someone who abandoned a child outdoors in the cold teaching your children? No.

Now that my little rant is taken care of... As there is some inconsistency between the interviews, movies, books, Pottermore, and various timelines and wikis constructed by fans over the years, nailing down dates, times, class sizes, and such is exceedingly difficult. For the purposes of this story, only the books count. Occassionally, I'll pull in a minor (not story changing) detail from the movies. Here's a few examples why.

In earlier interviews, Minerva McGonagall was described as being a "sprightly 70" during the first book, but her new (Pottermore) birth date is 1935, meaning she's 56 during the first book. So either the interview is incorrect or Pottermore is. (Personally, I think JKR uses wizard math on occasion without telling the rest of us.)

In post DH interviews, we're informed Snape is the only DE capable of casting a patronus. Yet, the book states if Voldemort had asked to see Snape's patronus, he would've known Snape remained loyal to Lily, not him. So why would he ask to see something Snape shouldn't be able to cast? He wouldn't. The implication is DEs can cast patronus charms. (I would dearly love someone to use this as the premise for a story. Hint. Hint.)

See you next time.

Khali
Chapter 2

Chapter Notes

See the end of the chapter for notes

Disclaimer: Harry Potter and related characters, situations, settings, and plots is the original work of J.K. Rowling and under copyright. While I enjoy playing/experimenting in her sandbox, it's not mine and never will be.

All author's notes will be located at the end of the chapters.

The following week rivaled the week after the school learned I was a parselmouth for worst school week ever. I was shunned by students and teachers alike. Save occasional snide comments, Ronald ignored me while Hermione tried to divide herself between us as best she could. She stuck by me, but I wondered how long she would last.

According to her, Ronald will soon realize he's being a complete prat and apologize. If that happens, Dumbledore will expect me to forgive him and welcome him back with open arms because that's what the boy-who-lived does with a little mental conditioning.

Unfortunately, I no longer trusted Ronald.

When Ronald looked in the Mirror of Erised, he saw himself as Quidditch Captain and Head Boy. He saw himself standing apart and above his family. No friends. He desired recognition and acclaim more than anything else.

That should have clued me in, but I ignored that sign and every other until my first friend abandoned me because some prick put my name in the Goblet of Fire and ensured I would be chosen.

I also had serious concerns about the circumstances of our first meeting and any grooming he may have been subjected to prior to Hogwarts.

Eventually, she'll choose between us. I knew I'd lose. I always did.

Could I pretend to take him back? Maybe let him 'help' me prepare for the tournament and still keep my secrets? Perhaps. If I pulled it off, it would be an Oscar-worthy performance.

Sighing, I looked over my shoulder, checking for spies. The stacks remained deserted. The history section wasn't the most unpopular section in the library, but it was a close second. Plus, the books weren't considered dangerous so Madame Pince only recorded when you took them out of the library. With any luck, no one would ever know what I was reading.

Bound copies of the Daily Prophet, dating from 1648 to 1993, were hardly an impartial source, but there was a treasure trove of information buried underneath the ministry propaganda. I sorely needed information. Even gossip could be useful.

I selected four volumes: Jan-Jun 1980, Jul-Dec 1980, Jan-Jun 1981, and Jul-Dec 1981, the height of the last war, otherwise known as Harry Potter: From Conception to Catastrophe.

The New Year's Day paper greatly resembled the paper they printed on New Years every year. I wouldn't be surprised if they recycled the articles. I flipped to the next paper, keeping a close eye
Dumbledore waggled his fingers, smiling at the camera. I skimmed the article. Interesting. He proposed Hogwarts cut Divination. The board demanded he interview teachers before deciding there wasn't anyone qualified to teach the subject.

Dutifully, I jotted it down and turned the page.


I stopped, my hand arrested mid-turn. "Order of the Phoenix?" I whispered.

I reread the article, paying attention to details. Apparently, there was a running duel between my father and Sirius and a pair of Death Eaters in muggle London. Things escalated, culminating in both Dumbledore and Voldemort arriving on the scene.

Intriguing. The generals, as I've begun collectively referring to them, didn't both show up at the other battles. What was special about this one?

I tapped my quill on the parchment. Muggles were involved, both as witnesses and casualties. The article implied all the muggles were killed by Death Eaters, but a small photo taken during the battle showed my father cast a cutting curse that hit a muggle. Odd, but not unexpected. Even if they examined the bodies for magical signatures, the dead muggles were cursed multiple times by both sides, just collateral damage.

"Albus Dumbledore, Hogwarts Headmaster, Grand Sorcerer, Supreme Mugwump of the ICW, Chief Warlock of the Wizengamot, and leader of the Order of the Phoenix declined to comment," it said.

I was familiar with all the titles except the latter. Quickly, I skimmed my notes and found a few other references. All referred to skirmishes—I had trouble calling a duel a battle. Whatever the "Order" was, my father and Sirius were both members.

In the right corner of my parchment, I wrote "Order of the Phoenix" and their names along with Dumbledore's. I continued flipping through the paper, slowly collecting a list of possible Order members.


"Tempus," I whispered. Half-past five. Hermione would be here any minute. I rolled up the parchment and put the books back on the shelf. Although I desperately wanted her advice and help, I couldn't ask.

One of the first things I researched was the non-trial of Sirius Black and the powers, duties, and responsibilities of the Chief Warlock—the wizarding equivalent of the Lord Chancellor. He had a legal and ethical obligation to ensure everyone, death eater or not, received a fair trial. He swore an oath to "do right to all manner of people after the laws and usages of this realm, without fear or favor, affection or ill will". The moment he let them send anyone to Azkaban without a trial he broke his oath.

It was that simple.

"Harry?" Hermione said, interrupting me mid-rant. Probably a good thing. Lately, mental rants
ended in explosive accidental magic. "Did you finish your herbology essay?"

I nodded and held up a book on magical contracts. "Thought I would do some more research."

"Harry, if Dumbledore says the contract is binding, it's binding."

"Don't start."

She took the seat across from me and tucked her hair behind her ear. "I've read the contract sixteen times. You've probably read it thirty. I know you're not happy about this, but you have to accept it. You need to concentrate on your spell work and focus on learning things that will help you survive the tournament, not searching for a loophole everyone agrees doesn't exist."

I massaged my temples. Should I tell her what I figured out the first time I read the thing? Hermione pursed her lips in disapproval, set her shoulders, and opened her mouth to begin what promised to be a lengthy lecture on accepting reality if I didn't head her off. "There is an easy out, Hermione," I said, deciding I'd rather argue over my theories than her concept of duty to house and school. "I agree with you. There's not a force majeure clause nor does the Goblet understand the concept of mutual agreement. The contract cannot be voided. However, the contract only says the champions will compete in three scored events. It does not specify any requirements for the events."

"What?" Hermione cocked her head and looked at me like she'd never seen me before. "But that's…" She trailed off. A smile spread across her face. "Brilliant. Instead of breaking the contract, you'll fulfill it, but with safer tasks."

"Not safer, Hermione. Even the supposedly safe Triwizard tasks were deadly. Manticore, active volcanoes, kidnappings, they've done it all. Based on what I've read, the creators of the Triwizard Tournament were beyond insane. I'm thinking exploding snap, treacle tart eating, and maybe a foot race around the Great Hall."

She snickered, but sobered quickly. "There's too much pride at stake. They won't agree to it."

"I know, but they might agree to true tests of magical skill, not stupidity. Potions, original transfiguration, spell crafting, subject matter sevenths years would know, but I wouldn't."

"That could work. Have you asked Professor Dumbledore, yet?"

"Not yet. I sent him a note this morning. I have an appointment tomorrow afternoon."

"Thank goodness." Humming happily, she took out her charms homework. "Have you finished Flitwick's essay on summoning charms, yet?"

"No."

"Good, we can work on it together."

With a sigh, I took out my half-finished essay. Not finishing my homework would draw too much attention. In the professors' minds, increased library time correlated with better grades. High quality homework, something I never cared about before, was necessary to ward off suspicion. The last thing I needed was McGonagall asking why I was spending so much time in the library.

Thus far, no one had called me on my stellar DADA grades. Defense encompassed all subjects: charms, potions, transfiguration, and history as well as jinxes, hexes, and curses. (After three years of magical education, I've concluded the difference between a jinx, hex, and curse is more political
than actual.) Poisons were also taught as part of the standard Defense curriculum. It was more practical than the other courses, but it was either the same or similar material.

No one noticed the discrepancy, but they'd probably never had a student deliberately fail select assignments because he didn't want to draw too much attention either.


I repeated the basic instructions over and over in my mind like a mantra. I used to do this all the time when the Dursleys took away my food as punishment. I could walk around in a mental bubble for days before the hunger caught up with me. This meeting wasn't any different.

Think Dudley. Punches. Hunger so intense it feels like your stomach is eating your backbone. Fear. Pain.

"Come on," I whispered as I reached into my center and dredged up some of my worst memories. The familiar bubble enveloped my mind like a warm blanket.

My occlumency was pitiful. At best, I'd get a warning. I couldn't keep Dumbledore out. However, reading the mind isn't like reading a book. As long as I focused only on the Goblet of Fire contract, my research into magical contracts and past tournaments, and my discussions with Hermione, he wouldn't have any reason to be suspicious. However, I had to maintain control of the conversation. If I let Dumbledore redirect me or reel me back into another life threatening situation, I would lose more than house points.

The bubble quivered. I hunched down. This promised to be the most difficult confrontation of my life. If I lost control, I'd have to fall back on an 'accidental' magic outburst and hope I broke enough things that Dumbledore shoved me out the door before he invaded my mind.

"Cockroach cluster," I said. The gargoyle leaped aside and stairs rose from the floor. Rather than ride them up, I waited a moment and then walked up them. This meeting was all about control. I couldn't let him control any aspect other than the meeting time or I would lose before I even stepped through the door.

Steeling myself, I entered the office. Fawkes crooned softly and arched his head towards me, begging for a chin scratch. I wished I could give it to him, but Phoenix song was too calming. One trill and I'd drop my guard. Probably why Dumbledore kept him around.

Dumbledore sat behind his desk, smiling. He appeared genuinely happy to see me, and I momentarily regretted my suspicious mind. "Professor, thank you for seeing me on such short notice," I said.

"No trouble at all, my boy. Am I correct in assuming Ms. Granger explained the contract?"

No, I wanted to say. Contrary to popular belief, I can read. "Yes, sir," I replied. "However, the contract is only specific as to the selection and participation of champions from the three schools. As the goblet actually serves to enforce a contract between the three schools, I fail to see how it can enforce a contract on a fourth party without the fourth school entering into a contract with the other three schools."

He nodded sagely and stroked his beard, an affected gesture much like the kind smile and twinkling eyes. His grandfatherly act seemed so transparent now that I've stepped back and started considering little things like motive and opportunity. I'd almost prefer the all-powerful Chief
Warlock to the kind grandfather. The illusion of family, complete with terms of endearment, was almost too much for me to handle. "I see," he said after a long pause. Dumbledore stood and walked around his desk. He took a pinch of floo powder off the mantle and flung it into the fire.

"Alastor!" he yelled, startling me. Why was he calling Moody? I wasn't prepared for both of them.

"What?" Moody snapped.

"Step through, please. Mr. Potter has something he wants to discuss."

My stomach clenched. One well-reasoned, but defiant statement and I went from Harry to Mr. Potter. Another slip and he'd be yelling "boy". I mentally shook myself.

I was imagining things. Even though Moody was an old friend of Dumbledore's, he was still a new professor. Maybe Moody preferred formality. Highly unlikely given Moody's abrasive personality, but possible.

Moody stepped through the fireplace and brushed the soot off his clothes onto Dumbledore's antique Persian rug. Dumbledore winced and waved his wand at the rug, cleaning it before Moody ground in the ashes.

"What is it?" Moody demanded. His magical eye focused on Dumbledore while the normal one watched me.

"Mr. Potter," Dumbledore said, enunciating my name in the same manner my first year teacher addressed Dudley when he hit the Jones girl, "has a most interesting theory about the contract. I must warn you, Mr. Potter. Playing word games with magical contracts can be most hazardous."

I sighed and plastered a pensive expression on my face. "I understand, sir. Please hear me out. I'm still trying to understand all this, and I have several points that were not discussed when my name came out of the goblet. First, the contract is only specific as to the selection and participation of champions from the three schools. Arguably, my name was submitted under a fourth school, which isn't party to the original contract. As the fourth school has no agreement with the other three schools, in theory, I am not under a binding magical contract as the Triwizard contract is between Durmstrang, Beauxbatons, and Hogwarts only and only binds champions for those three schools. To verify this, I asked Madame Pince to show me Hogwarts's original contract. As it doesn't list a fourth school, I'm not bound by the contract in theory."

Moody stared at me, slack jawed. He jerked and licked his lips. Nervous habit? "Are you willing to stake your life on that theory, Potter?"

"No," I answered. Dumbledore's shoulders slumped in relief. Before he could mutter an empty platitude, I pressed ahead. "Unfortunately, we don't have any evidence that I was entered under a fourth school. For all we know, there was a delay on the confundus charm and the perpetrator used a time-delayed sticking charm to trick the cup into thinking it hadn't picked a Hogwarts's champion and choose my name as the Hogwarts's champion after the Hogwarts's champion was selected, meaning there were only three schools and Cedric and I are both bound by the contract."

Moody's eyebrows were raised, and Dumbledore peered over the top of his glasses, much like he did when he asked me what happened in the Chamber of Secrets. "Why do you think that, Harry?" Dumbledore asked in his kind headmaster voice.

"Because it's what I would do," I said, dropping all pretense that Hermione helped me come up with this elaborate scheme. "We all agree that whoever entered me in the tournament likely wants
me dead. If I wanted to kill me, I would take steps to ensure either the contract itself or the tasks killed me. That means the more obvious out—the contractual object being created solely to bind together three schools, not four—wouldn't be a valid assumption. If I tricked the goblet into thinking it hadn't picked for one of the schools and had it choose my name, I could ensure that I would die either because I believed I was entered under a fourth school and disobeyed the contract or during the tasks."

Moody's approving smirk spoke volumes. "Well, Albus?" he prompted after Dumbledore spent several minutes staring into the flames. Dumbledore jerked his head up before turning his attention on me. His eyes met mine and I felt a casual brush against my mind. I would have missed it if I wasn't expecting it.

Feigning shock, I recoiled. "What was that, professor?"

"I'm afraid you'll have to be more specific, my boy," Dumbledore said. Despite his friendly tone, his eyes narrowed. The next brush felt more like a punch.

I flinched, twisting my head to the side, wrenching my gaze away. Moody's lips twitched. "Albus," he said, "I hear this winter will be quite brutal, especially for Azkaban's older residents."

Dumbledore shifted uncomfortably. "Yes, well," he paused, fingers picking at the trim of his garish orange and purple robe. "Harry, I must ask you to not entertain such thoughts. I assure you this year's tournament will be quite tame by Triwizard standards. The risks are minimal. I'm confident that with a little work you will succeed beyond our wildest expectations. Perhaps Alastor could offer some extra tutoring?"

The offer hung in the air. Moody glanced at me and nodded once. While I wouldn't say no to tutoring, it was the option of last resort.

"There is one other option," I said softly.

"The contract is quite binding, Mr. Potter," Dumbledore said. His harsh tone was reminiscent of the one he used on Fudge last year.

"I know. However, 'tasks' are defined clause two as 'three undertakings designed to test magical skill as determined by the three host schools'. When the tournament was announced and later at the welcoming feast for the other schools, you specifically thanked Mr. Crouch and Mr. Bagman, both ministry officials, for their parts in arranging the tournament. You further stated that Mr. Crouch and Mr. Bagman had both reviewed the tasks. In addition, the official ministry announcement, as released in *The Daily Prophet*, clearly stated the specific tasks were included as part of the negotiations between the French, British, and Norwegian ministries. A fact you publicly supported when you announced that Mr. Crouch and Mr. Bagman had reviewed the tasks. Durmstrang, Beauxbatons, and Hogwarts are all private institutions, operating under charters that predate their associated ministries. Additionally, the first recorded usage of the Goblet of Fire was in 1294. Our Ministry of Magic didn't exist until 1629. The goblet only recognizes the schools, not the ministries. Under the contract, the ministries do not have the authority to determine the tasks. Therefore, the tasks as selected by the various ministries are invalid."

"But the Wizard's Council did exist," Dumbledore said. He eyed me over the rim of his tea cup.

"By that argument the Wizengamot should have sent the negotiators, not the Ministry. Regardless of who represented what government, representatives of the three schools are the only parties permitted to select tasks. You, Madame Maxime, and Head Master Karkaroff can override the ministries. You, acting on your sworn duty to protect your students, have the authority to change
I snorted. "Forgive me, professor, but I don't trust your judgment in this matter. After all, three years ago, you decided Hogwarts would make an excellent vault. You secured the sorcerer's stone behind various fantastic-on-paper protections. All of which were defeated by three first years. You didn't even put a proper lock on the door."

"But you saved the stone, Harry," he said. Last year, I would have lapped up his tone. No longer. The moment I said "that's what I would do", I said too much. If he didn't suspect I was on to his game then, he certainly did when I shied away from his legilimency attack. Pretending no longer benefited me.

"Professor, the stone was your responsibility, not mine. You endangered it and subsequently destroyed it—an act which murdered your mentor Nicolas Flamel and his wife."

"They were ready."

"I don't care if they were or not, professor. Both the law and your oaths very clearly state you have a duty to protect your students. Baiting a trap with the sorcerer's stone, which you housed in the same building as your students, violated your oaths. If the Ministry had a wit of sense, they would've demanded an unbreakable vow when you became headmaster."

"Be that as it may, I determine what tasks are suited to this tournament. The tasks were approved by myself and the other two heads, yesterday. They will not be changed."

"They damn well will be changed!" My magic slipped out my grasp. Dumbledore's whirling, silver instruments exploded. Shrapnel bounced off Moody's hasty shield and landed in the far corner. "You swore no underage students would be in this tournament. You failed to protect the cup adequately, not me. You have a duty to me as your student to protect me from life threatening situations, a duty which you have forsworn every year I've attended this school. Not this year."

Shaking, I stop speaking. Sparks rained down on us from the ceiling. My outburst had destroyed everything save the desk and Dumbledore's chair. Even the prize rug was ashes beneath my feet.

I glared at Dumbledore, daring him to reprimand me. He just steepled his fingers and peered at me. "My decision stands, Mr. Potter. However, you are correct. I have, at times, been remiss in my duties to you as your headmaster. Alastor, you will tutor Mr. Potter six days a week. As there's no Quidditch this year, that shouldn't be a problem. Please see to it that Mr. Potter is adequately prepared for the trials ahead."

"You no good, son of a—" Moody grabbed by arm, pressing tendon to bone. I rounded on him, swinging wildly. He blocked my arm, pinned my arms to my sides, and yanked me through the floo. A dizzying trip later we emerged in his office.

"How dare you! He had no right—"

Moody shoved me into the empty defense classroom and slammed the door. He whipped out his wand. Hundreds of glass bottles appeared. "Best let it out, Potter," he said and tossed me my wand.

I lost all concept of time. He conjured; I smashed in a never ending cycle until I collapsed. A hand fell on my shoulder.

"All right, Potter?"

"Yes, sir. Thanks."

"So you finally remembered the Queen's English." I flinched. While I enjoyed speaking with Dyfi, I hated being a parselmouth. It was yet another thing that marked me as different. Special. Feared. Hated. Despised. It unnerved everyone, even Hermione who was infinitely more open minded than Ronald. "I know better than to believe the Ministry's propaganda. Paracelsus was a renowned physician and surgeon and a well-respected parselmouth. Don't be ashamed of your blood."

Odd thing for one of Dumbledore's friends to say. He should be ranting about Slytherins and Voldemort. "It's not my blood," I said, volunteering the information Dumbledore told me in second year. "I got it from Voldemort. Dumbledore said he left something of himself behind that night."

A deep chuckle echoed in the room, giving way to full-blown laughter. "And you believed that, Potter?" he said, gasping for breath. "After I thought you showed promise."

"Well," I hesitated. Moody was Dumbledore's friend, but he wasn't like McGonagall or even Hagrid. Maybe he wouldn't judge. "Not exactly. I don't know much about parselmouths, but I do know it's a family trait. The killing curse is done from a distance. It might transfer magic, but it doesn't transfer genetic material."

"There may be hope for you, yet, Potter." He sat down beside me, propping his peg leg at an odd angle. "Joseph Leeds."

"Who?"

"Joseph Leeds. Been teaching at Salem since 1856. Muskogee. Probably going on 250 by now. He's a parselmouth and rather dirty dueler. Write him. Ask him your questions. If he can't answer them, I guarantee he'll point you to someone who can."

"As long as it's not Voldemort."

"I'll warn you, Potter. He might. Joseph Leeds is as neutral as they come. He doesn't give a flying shit about either the Americans or us. He's not overly fond of Dumbledore, which shouldn't be a problem as I gather you aren't either."

"Does Professor Leeds have any other names I should be concerned about?"

"No, and it's Dr. Leeds. Mind you. He's real ticky about proper titles so make sure you address the letter correctly. The Dark Lord created a torture curse during the last war. Vicious thing, the victims felt like they were being burned alive. It left no scars and was specifically designed to keep its victims sane. Better for interrogation. It could only be removed by a parselmouth. Old Crouch wrote 'J. Leeds' instead of Joseph Leeds, Ph.D. on the envelope. Took him two months to respond. At that, he simply stamped 'Return to Sender' on the envelope. Didn't even read it. Crouch had to hand deliver an apology before Dr. Leeds would even look at the case."

"Did he remove the curse?"

"Took him two minutes. Left the aurors with a three thousand galleon bill. Crouch cursed for the next month."
I smiled. "Sounds like quite a character."

"That he is. Write him tonight. I'll send the letter by International Mail tomorrow. Let's see what we can find out about your abilities outside of Albus's crackpot theories."

"Okay." I cocked my head at him. I couldn't figure him out. "Why are you helping me?"

"Not many kids can stand up to Albus like you did. Fewer would start off by using logic. You lost your head at the end, but you show promise, kid. However," he barked, "you must learn to control your temper. Your emotions should never overrule your rational mind like they did today. We'll work on that. That's all for today. Go eat a decent meal and get some rest."

I nodded. Feeling a little relieved that someone at least seemed willing to help me, I stood. "Thank you, sir."

"Don't. I guarantee you'll hate me before the month's out. Be here tomorrow 5:30 am. Don't forget the letter."

"Yes, sir," I said. Cringing at the ungodly hour, I headed for the door.

Chapter End Notes

Even though Harry vowed he'd be sneaky, as you can see, he's still a hot-headed fourteen-year-old.

The 2005 constitutional reforms changed the Lord Chancellor's duties. He/she is no longer head of the judiciary. As this chapter is set in 1994, I referenced the Lord Chancellor, instead of the Lord Chief Justice. The Chief Warlock oath is an excerpt from the Lord Chancellor's oath.

The books suggest the Minister of Magic declared a state of emergency, which may have resulted in the suspension of habeas corpus. This issue won't be addressed until part 2.

A force majeure clause covers things like volcanic eruptions, wars, etc. Under select circumstances, parties to a contract can be freed from liability or obligation.

Mutual agreement (consensus ad idem) is what bit Harry in the butt. Basically, all parties the contract must intend to be parties to the contract. Dating this concept is difficult, but from what I've read, the Goblet of Fire predates it.
Sweat poured down my face. A stinging hex rushed towards me. I dropped, hitting the ground hard enough to knock the wind out of me.

Another hex flew towards me. I rolled. It singed my sleeve, but missed me. Mostly.

"Accio glasses," Moody said calmly from his lounge chair.

Belatedly, I snatched at my glasses, missed. They zoomed to Moody. Or what I assumed was Moody. Without my glasses, I couldn't tell the difference between Professor Moody and Norbert.

A hex hit me in the forehead. Blood seeped into my eyes.

Correction. Dragons weren't as vicious.

"Enough," he called. I collapsed, letting the frost caress my face. Pre-dawn November in Scotland was uncomfortably cool until Moody decided tutoring meant dodging practice.

His artificial leg dragged on the ground as he limped towards me. He knelt, waved his wand over my head, and muttered a spell I didn't quite catch. The cut sealed up.

Dangling my glasses in my face, Moody, the most sadistic ex-auror on the planet, gave me an odd half-smile and a nod. "Needs work, Potter." He grabbed me by the elbow. "Up you go," he said, hauling me to my feet.

I reached for my glasses, but he snatched them back and examined them like a child does a dead butterfly.

"When's the last time you had your eyes checked?" he asked.

I blinked. "Never. Aunt Petunia just has me try different pairs on at the supermarket until we find some I can see out of."

"Are your relatives that bad off, Potter?"

I shrugged. "No. They just don't see the point spending money on a freak like me. My glasses. Please."

Sneering, he returned them and I put them back on. "There's an oculist in Hogsmeade. Write and make an appointment for the 21st."
"I don't have the money."

"You're a Potter. Of course you have…" he trailed off. "Do you know anything about your finances?"

"No," I said, shaking my head. "I didn't even know my parents left me anything until Hagrid took me to Diagon Alley."

"Hagrid?" His mouth hardened. "Never mind. An exam and glasses will run about 35 galleons. If you don't have it, tell the store to bill your account manager."

"But I don't have an account manager."

"Of course you do." Moody paused, his eye whirling madly. "Albus," he growled, paused, and shook himself. "If you want to play games with the likes of Albus Dumbledore, Potter, I suggest you have a good understanding of your available resources and any restrictions they might have before you charge into his office. Clear?"

"Yes, sir," I said, chastened. He was right. I lost my advantage the second I asked Dumbledore for a meeting. Now, I was worse off than before. Dumbledore was keeping a close eye on me, and Moody the Sadist owned me from 5:30-8:30 am, Sunday through Friday.

"Walk with me," he said and ambled down the path towards the lake. I jogged after him, catching up quickly. We walked in silence, enjoying the quite morning. About a mile down the path, he spun around. "How's your occlumency coming?" he asked abruptly.

"Slowly."

"That's to be expected at your age. Quite frankly, I was surprised you caught Albus."

I shrugged, not knowing what to say.

"I don't want to know what was going through your head yesterday, Potter, but if you want to play games like that, you need a far better understanding of occlumency than you have."

I gnawed on my bottom lip. Why did Moody always have to be right?

Snarling, he popped my cheek. "Mind your expression. Don't give away your hand or your mistakes."

My face slipped back into the mask I'd worn the day before. My Dursley face, I called it.

"Better," Moody said. "Now, Albus wants me to tutor you at your year level. I say I'll teach you whatever I bloody well want. If he gets his knickers in a twist, it's not my problem. Agreed?"

"Perhaps," I said slowly, not wanting to agree before I knew exactly what he wanted to teach me.

"You're learning, boy."

"What exactly do you plan on teaching me?"

"Occlumency for starters. The rest will depend solely on you."

I pondered his words. If I wanted any chance at freedom, I needed occlumency, but the book said the only way to learn it was to work with a trusted legilimens. I didn't trust Moody. "Would you agree to a blood oath?" I asked. I wanted to ask for an unbreakable vow, but we'd need a binder. No
He raised an eyebrow. "Been sneaking into the restricted section?"

I kept my features schooled. Prove it, I wanted to say, but held my tongue. The last thing I wanted was Moody and his wretched eye camping out in the library under an invisibility cloak.

"Don't care what you do in free time, Potter." He scratched his chin, running his nail over a nasty scar that looked like the White Cliffs of Dover. "Terms?"

I swallowed hard. Blood oaths were serious business. He should have refused outright. "You will not reveal any information you learn during my occlumency lessons to any past or current employee of Hogwarts School of Witchcraft and Wizardry, Albus Dumbledore, Severus Snape, any member of the Order of the Phoenix—"

"—where'd you hear that name?" he demanded.


Moody stared at me like I was a bug under a microscope. "Odd request, Potter. You'd let me tell the Dark Lord all your secrets so long as they're kept from the people closest to you."

I shrugged. "Honestly, I doubt Voldemort's interested in the inner-workings of a fourteen-year-old boy. Professor Dumbledore on the other hand…"

"Let me think about it. I'll have an answer for you tomorrow. Now, did you write that letter?"

I took the unsealed envelope out of my robes and passed it to him. He opened it, skimmed the brief letter. "Adequate," he said and sealed the envelope. "Why have the reply sent to me?"

I squared my shoulders. Last night, Moody seemed privately amused by my argument with Dumbledore. He wasn't acting out of altruism, but I got the impression he derived some sick amusement from seeing me and Dumbledore square off. "Between Hermione, Professor McGonagall, and Dumbledore, my mail isn't private. As far as they're concerned, I've never meet Dr. Leeds and have no reason to write him, but you do. If I received a letter from Dr. Leeds, it would start an inquisition. You receiving one is just catching up with an old acquaintance."

"I underestimated you, Potter."

He pulled out an old pocket watch and checked the time. "Times up. Tomorrow. Front entrance. Same time." He took a swig from his flask and headed back towards the castle.

Thus began my strange relationship with Alastor 'Mad-Eye' Moody, a slightly mad genius with rather sadistic training methods.

Moody greeted me the next morning with a knife and a sheet of parchment. "Follow me," he said gruffly and stumped down the path towards the lake. We trudged down the path. Some would call the predawn oppressive. Not me. I spent my formative years in a cupboard. The half-light welcomed me with open arms, drawing me to her bosom like a long lost child.

We walked past where we had our discussion yesterday. Magic skated across my skin and receded. I frowned.

"Albus has a few special wards lying around," he said with an insane grin. "Not to worry."
Hogwarts' wards extend twice as far as his.

"Special?" I asked, fearing the answer.

"He cornered me in my office last night and asked why I made you bleed, Potter. That ward's keyed specifically to you."

My eyes widened. "What?" I breathed.

"Apparently, Albus saved some of your blood the night he cast the wards around the Dursleys."

"My blood?"

"You didn't think your muggle aunt's muggle blood held the wards, did you?"

I shook my head. Honestly, I never thought about it. Huffing, Moody cast a *lumos* and shoved the parchment into my hands. "Read," he ordered.

*The party of the first part hereby vows on his life's blood he will not reveal any information learned during the study of occlumency to Albus Dumbledore, any person associated with his organization the Order of the Phoenix, who is not a party to this agreement, including, but not limited to Remus Lupin, Minerva McGonagall, and Sirius Black, any current employee of Hogwarts School of Witchcraft and Wizardry, who is not a party to this agreement, including Severus Snape, any member of the Weasley Family, current Ministry of Magic employee, and/or Hermione Granger.*

*The party of the second part hereby vows on his life's blood he will not reveal any information learned during the study of occlumency to Albus Dumbledore, any person associated with his organization, the Order of the Phoenix, who is not a party to this agreement, including, but not limited to, Remus Lupin, Minerva McGonagall, and Sirius Black, any current employee of Hogwarts School of Witchcraft and Wizardry, including Severus Snape, any member of the Weasley Family, and/or Hermione Granger.*

"Professor, why does it say 'party' instead of our names?"

Moonlight glistened off his magical eye. "Have you ever seen you birth certificate, kid?"

"No." I assumed Aunt Petunia had a copy. Hogwarts might have one on file, too, but I'd never asked.

"Then how do you know Harry's your real name? I didn't attend your naming ceremony, and you were too young to remember it. For all we know, Harry's a nickname."

My breath hitched. Nickname? My parents named me Harry, didn't they? Everyone called me Harry. It was my name. Right?

"Don't think about it too much, son. Names are powerful magic. Your father wasn't much for tradition, but the James Potter I knew wouldn't have risked anyone knowing your full name other than your mother and godparents. If he followed custom, it's not on your birth certificate either. Your first name might be Harry, but teaching occlumency is risky. Sometimes when you throw someone out of your mind, the connection's reversed, meaning you might see into my mind. I won't lie, Potter. My head's not a pleasant place. I've fought far too many battles. Teaching occlumency to a minor is as illegal as using legilimency on one. I have no desire to holiday in Azkaban because you saw some random image and asked someone the wrong question."
Cocking my head, I studied him for a moment. "Understood, professor. The oath's fine."

He sliced his palm and passed me the knife. I did the same. We clasped hands. Magic coiled around our arms, binding our hands together as we each swore the vow. Him first. Then me. The magic flashed like a miniature lightning bolt. The wound sizzled and healed. Then he let go.

"Let's get back inside Albus's little bubble before he has a stroke," he said, heading back up the trail.

He rounded the bend and stopped in the shadow of an elm tree. Moody gestured for me to sit. "Have you finished the book?"

"I've read it twice, sir."

"Good. Now, there are three ways to teach occlumency. The easiest method for the teacher is to continuously cast legilimens. In essence, the student learns by first recognizing the spell and then their teacher's presence. It's brutal and ineffective. The second method, and the one we'll be using, combines guided meditation with the first method. I will guide you through multiple meditations and exercises and after your mind is focused solely on meditation, I'll cast legilimens. Once you learn how to maintain your meditation during the legilimens spell, we'll move on to practice duels and then random shots."

"How did you learn? If you don't mind me asking."

"A master legilimens can impart the same techniques I will teach you solely through guided meditation. I was blessed to study under a true master."

"Wow."

He sat down across from me, leg folded, the prosthetic at a slight angle.

"Sit up. Legs crossed. Spine straight," he said softly, his voice lost its gruffness, becoming smoother, more cultured. "Cup your hands slightly and press them together," he said, demonstrating. Hold your hands about a foot away from your body. Close your eyes until you're looking through your eyelashes. Breath in through your nose." He counted to eight. "Exhale slowly through your mouth, aiming the breath at the gap between your thumbs. As the air strikes your palms, let calm and relaxation wash over you, dissolving your anger and stress. Both your mind and your emotions will become tranquil, calm, at peace with yourself."

I let my breath follow his count. Slowly, but surely the rage I'd felt since my name came out of the goblet fell away. I lost track of time, focusing only on my breath and Moody's voice.

"Staying focused on your breath, open your eyes. Legilimens," he whispered. "Breath out. One. Two."

I sensed him enter my mind. My focus shifted. Dumbledore's face appeared.


I sensed him withdraw. Reluctant to leave that peaceful state, I regulated my breath and closed my eyes. Time stopped. Calm flooded my senses. For a short time, I forgot about tournaments and headmasters. Then Moody tapped my shoulder.
"Open your eyes," Moody said softly. Moody awarded me a small smile. "Not bad for a beginner. You wavered for a moment, but you pulled yourself back. Another week and we'll be ready for the next step."

Returning the smile, I stood and offered him my hand. Helping him to his feet, I said, "Thanks for the lesson, professor."

"Same time and place tomorrow. Read up on the summoning charm tonight. You'll learn it first thing tomorrow. Then we'll work on occlumency. Meditate before you go to bed each night."

"Yes, sir."

"Potter!" Moody yelled when my summoning charm failed for the thousandth time. Today marked my fifth day attempting the summoning charm. It was supposed to be my off day, but Moody had arbitrarily decided I had to earn my off time. Since I couldn't perform a simple summoning charm, I obviously didn't need to sleep in Saturday morning.

Folding his hands behind his back, he bowed his head and stared at the stained DADA classroom floor. We were inside for now, but occlumency would still be under the tree.

"What's the most powerful charm you know?" he asked.

"The patronus charm."

"Show me," he said, imperiously waving his hand.

I focused on the magic, the way it felt when Prongs first appeared. "Expecto patronum." The silvery stag erupted from my wand and galloped around the room.

Moody cocked his head, good eye narrowed. I mentally groaned. That look guaranteed another lecture.

"A corporeal patronus at fourteen. I doubt Dumbledore could do that," he muttered. "I wonder how it would fare against a dementor."

"I drove off several last year," I volunteered before I could stop myself.

"So Albus said, but I didn't quite believe it." He whipped his wand out and pointed it at my patronus. "Tell me, Potter, what's the difference between when you cast your patronus and when you cast a summoning charm."

"The wand movement and the incantation."

"Wrong," he bellowed. A stinging hex hit my left hand. "You did deliberate magic as child. Correct?"

I winced. Yesterday, he saw the first complete memory during occlumency practice. He watched me open the cupboard lock, steal food, sneak back in, and lock the door behind me. Moody seemed shaken afterward. He dismissed me early with instructions to meet him the next morning. "Yes, sir, but I didn't remember that until a few weeks ago."

Moody tripped over a desk. "How could you…Never mind." He straightened the desk. "Magic is intent, Potter. There is no difference between summoning an object and casting a patronus or opening a lock and casting a successful killing curse. Every spell in existence, regardless of its
reputation or how you choose to use it, is grounded in intent. When you cast your patronus a moment ago, you weren't thinking about a happy memory, were you?"

Mutely, I shook my head. I'd never cast it that way. I couldn't. I didn't have a single memory happy enough to power the charm.

"Emotions are a short cut. If someone's happy enough, they can cast the patronus charm, but when faced with a dementor, they will fail nine times out of ten. Do you know why?"

Dear Merlin. The answer was obvious. Why didn't Lupin warn me? "Dementors feed off happy emotions. When you're around a dementor, you don't have the emotions needed to power the charm."

"Exactly. Now, if you practice the patronus charm for years, your mind will eventually link the intent with the charm. You might delude yourself into thinking it's powered by a happy memory, but it's not. That charm only works against dementors when it's intended to repeal dementors.

"Your wand helps you focus your magic, but waving it around like an orchestra conductor won't make your spells more powerful. In fact, there is little difference between casting a spell with a wand and so-called accidental magic. It's all intent. You have to want it." He lazily summoned my glasses. "How badly do you want these, Potter?"

I glared at the blob, raised my wand. "Accio glasses." I said, focusing on getting my glasses back. They flew into my hand.


I flicked my wand, thought about burning the book, and muttered the charm. The book sailed towards me. Halfway across the room it spontaneously combusted.

Moody blinked. Then he snickered. "Nice." He held up the current defense text. "Summon it."

For the next hour, I summoned the book. With the proper focus, the spell was shockingly easy. Finally, Moody called a halt. "Walk, Potter," he said in his customary gruff manner. I didn't need to be told where we were headed. Instead of trailing after him like I had at the beginning of the week, I walked beside him, down the stairs, out the entrance, and to our tree. I sat down without being asked and waited patiently.

Twirling a twig between his fingers, Moody settled across from me. "How are you, Potter?"

I jerked. Since when did he care? "Fine, I guess."

"Between yesterday's Prophet, the badges, and the way everyone's treating you, you're not fine. Talk. Get it off your chest before you land in trouble."

Sighing, I stared past him at the sun rising over the lake. Yesterday, Sirius replied to my letter about the tournament. He insisted we talk. I had until the 22nd to prepare for our discussion. The article. Those stupid badges. Then Draco hexed Hermione. Moody's occlumency lessons were the only reason I wasn't sitting another detention with Snape. Thanks to him, I kept my head, barely.

"The article…It wasn't that bad, but they'll get worse. I feel it in my bones, but I don't know what to do about it." A thought struck me. "Professor, does the magical world have defamation laws like the muggle world does? Can I sue The Daily Prophet?"

"Nope." A Cheshire grin spread across Moody's craggy face. "It has the same laws."
"I don't understand."

"It's called the Ministry of Magic, not the United Magical Kingdom. The Minister of Magic reports to the Prime Minister of the United Kingdom, not the other way around. The Death Eaters who claimed they were under the imperius curse were never questioned under veritaserum because their lawyers used muggle law to prove that forcing veritaserum down someone's throat is as illegal as beating a suspect until they confess. If they can use muggle law to their advantage, so can you, Potter."

My grin matched his. "Do you know a good solicitor, Professor?"

Moody grimaced. "I've been out of the game too long. Gringotts has a decent legal department. They'll take contract work for a fee, usually a percentage of the winnings. They charge more than most, but I'd use them while I searched for my own."

"I want a neutral barrister."

"Most are. I know for a fact Malfoy and Albus use the same firm."

"Isn't that a conflict of interest?" I asked, throwing out a phrase I'd heard on the news once.

"So long as Albus and Malfoy don't object it's not."

"Thanks for the advice, professor. I'll consider it."

Moody shifted and rested his hands on his knees. "Today, we'll begin guided imagery. Guided imagery is focused thought where a calm, clear mind is a blank slate. With guided imagery, you will eventually be able to control what the legilimens sees. You can direct them to some memories. Deny them access to others.

"Not everyone is capable of this level of occlumency. Today's purpose is to determine if you have potential in this area. Regardless of the outcome, we will continue working on your basic occlumency. Teaching misdirection is significantly different from teaching basic occlumency. I've never taught it before and there are substantial risks involved to both your mind and my own. If you show any aptitude towards it, I will need to consult a master legilimens concerning how best to proceed."

"Not Dumbledore."

"Not Dumbledore," he agreed. I sighed and settled into my meditation pose, listening to the melodic, refined voice Moody used during directed meditation.

He wasn't entirely trustworthy, but I preferred his sardonic wit to Dumbledore's empty platitudes.

Chapter End Notes

This chapter hints at the political structure, which will become a major plot device in Part 2, but isn't terribly important in part 1.

Reviews are always appreciated.
Friday morning, nearly two weeks after my first morning lesson, Moody again took me past Dumbledore's ward. He transfigured a log into two chairs. "Sit," he ordered.

Confused because we were supposed to practice spells for the first hour, I gingerly perched on the edge of the chair, waiting for the first hex.

"Relax, Potter. I'm not going to hex you."

Feeling sheepish, I settled back in the chair. "Sorry."

"Never apologize for being wary, Potter. Vigilance will keep you alive. Now, the first task is dragons."

"What?" Dragons are XXXXX creatures—known wizard killers. 'Safe tasks' my ass! I thought Dumbledore was manipulating me so I would do his dirty work for him, not trying to kill me.

"Calm down, Potter. Now, Albus has a bizarre sense of fair play. He's keeping both you and Cedric in the dark about this, but I guarantee you Krum and Delacour know. Karkaroff and Maxime will do just about anything to give their champions an advantage. By telling you, I'm just leveling the playing field a bit. Understand?"

"Yes, sir," I said, still in shock.

"Don't worry so much, Potter. You don't have to kill it."

I exhaled slowly, trying to still my mind. Not another basilisk.

"They're bringing in nesting mothers, nasty pieces of work. Your job is to retrieve an object from the dragon's nest without damaging the eggs, yourself, or causing permanent harm to the dragon."


"Calm down, son. You can do this. You just need a plan."

"A plan? It will eat me in the first minute."

Moody grasped my shoulder. "It's not that bad, Potter. Just play to your strengths."

"I'm a bloody fourth year. I don't have any strengths. At least I could talk to a basilisk."

His hand dropped. "Not what I meant, but not a bad thought. Unfortunately, few dragon breeds
understand parseltongue and we can't guarantee you'll draw one."

"Draw?"

"You'll pick your dragon out of a bag. As the youngest, you'll either go last or first. Don't bet on having a choice. Chinese Fireballs and Peruvian Vipertooths can both understand you, but the fireball can't respond. Vipertooths can, but the Romanian Dragon Preserve is supplying the dragons. They don't have a vipertooth."

"Damn."

"Albus says you're a talented flier, true?"

"I'm fair," I said with shrug.

"Youngest seeker in a century and owner of a Firebolt—a broom that can match a dragon's speed and maneuverability."

"Professor, I doubt they'll let me bring my broom."

"You're allowed a wand, Potter."

I blinked, suddenly understanding why he focused so intently on the summoning charm. As long as I had my wand, I could summon whatever I needed. "Professor, why not just summon the object?" I asked, realizing there might be an easier way.

Moody cocked his head quizzically. "Never thought of that. Doubt the judges will either. Try summoning first. If it doesn't work, you can always summon your broom."

My panic eased. Wizards weren't known for logic. They often ignored the simplest solutions. Maybe I could survive this.

Moody took a package out of his cloak and handed it to me. "This arrived for you last night. It's from Dr. Leeds."

With shaking hands, I unwrapped the package. Removing several layers of paper and twine revealed a seamless, paperboard box. I turned it over and saw a note scribbled on what I assumed was the top.

*Speak open in your native tongue.*


A thick envelope lay on top of four books. Two small bottles wrapped in wool were in the top right corner. After setting the box on the ground, I removed the letter and opened it.

*Dear Mr. Potter,*

*I apologize for not responding to your inquiry in a more timely manner. In your November 8 correspondence, you raised several issues that I will endeavor to answer to the best of my ability.*

*Mr. Moody likely informed you that Albus Dumbledore and I rarely agree. I am first and foremost a scientist. Your headmaster is a philosopher. I will not argue the merits of one perspective over the other in this letter; however, I shall describe the differences.*
Philosophy begins with an intuitive conclusion. Then the philosopher employs deductive logic to prove or disprove the conclusion. It suggests what the world ought to be.

Science, on the other hand, utilizes an objective model. Where a philosopher is concerned with what ought to be, we are concerned with what we can measure. Science is admittedly limited and imperfect. Using evidential truth, I can say the universe exists, but I cannot tell you whether there was a beginning of the universe.

Thus, Albus and I often have conflicting world views.

I do not say this disparagingly. Albus is a learned academic and on the few occasions he has applied the scientific method, most notably his research on Dragon Blood conducted jointly with Nicolas Flamel (a true scientist who is sorely missed), he earned his accolades. (Although, I still contend oven cleaner is not a legitimate use. Only an idiot would clean an oven with a rare and expensive magical substance.) However, I believe his interpretation of both your survival and your parselmouth ability is based more on spurious conjecture than fact.

My inquiry began with your muggleborn mother Lily Evans. You were probably told at some point that a muggleborn is born from two muggles. They are the first person in their family with magic, meaning your mother wasn’t a parselmouth because that trait only exists in a handful of old lines, including Slytherin's and my own.

This assumption is false.

A true muggleborn, someone born from two individuals who are genetically muggles, does not exist.

In 1990, Terrance Morath, a Canadian wizard/geneticist, and his team identified the two genes related to magical ability as well as genes for parseltongue and legilimency, among others. Their 1991 publication, *Genome Patterns in Magical Populations*, revolutionized how we identify student abilities, allowing us to arrange special courses for students with abilities like yours and also to divide incoming classes based on achievable power levels. I have enclosed a book, *The Muggleborn Myth*, which is required reading for incoming Salem students. (I suggest you hide the book as the study and all works derived from it are banned in the United Kingdom due to the primary author’s vampirism.)

In short, two genes govern magical ability.

All humans are born with magic. The ability to access this magic is governed by a dominant silencing allele (S). When expressed as either SS or Ss, you have a muggle. Witches, wizards, and squibs are ss, meaning their access to magic isn't silenced.

Magical strength is determined by two possible alleles, M and M'. These alleles share incomplete dominance. M is the stronger magical power. M' is the weaker. A strong wizard, such as myself or Dumbledore, is a MM. An average strength wizard is a M'M or MM'. A squib is a M'M'.

A true squib is ssM'M', meaning they have access to magic, but do not have sufficient magical strength to perform spells. A ssM'M couple has a 1 in 4 chance of birthing a squib. The same chance they have of birthing a powerful ssMM wizard. However, in observed populations, only 1 out of every 100 is an MM, meaning most wizards are M'M or MM'. I've always considered this statistical anomaly magic’s way of compensating for the significant differences between the two types of wizards.

Britain presents a unique case. The high inbreeding coefficient among families, including the
Blacks and Prewetts, has likely caused inbreeding depression. (I say likely because none of the identified families were willing to submit to genetic testing. We can only hypothesize based on family trees, reported magical strength, and reported squibs. Based on reports from Britain's previous two wizarding wars, the living Blacks and their descendants, including supposed squibs, are all assumed to be MM.) Inbreeding depression is essentially a reduction in the health and viability of offspring. For example, the Black lifespans are reportedly half the expected minimum lifespan. Studies of isolated magical villages in the Andes and Himalayas show that an inbred person's magic attempts to compensate for their health deficiencies, reducing their available magic. Hence, the theory that some British wizards were mislabeled as squibs when genetically-speaking they were wizards, not squibs.

A muggleborn is simply the product of two lines of falsely identified squibs. A true squib ssM'M' cannot produce a a witch or wizard unless they marry someone who is ssM'M', ssMM', ssMM (guarantees a magical child), sSM'M, SsM'M, sSMM', SsMM', SsMM, or sSMM. In other words, a true squib will only produce a magical child if they marry someone who is also of wizarding descent.

As you may have noticed, a SsMM or sSMM has the highest genetic level of magical strength, but their access to magic is blocked because instead of seeking out an unrelated magical mate, their ancestor married a true SS muggle. Although our culture considers these individuals to be muggles, they are technically wizard descendants. This is why magical populations with high levels of inbreeding and interaction with the muggle world exhibit significant fluctuations in the number of muggleborns entering their population each decade. Indeed, if one were to graph the reported muggleborns in the United Kingdom for the last thousand years, it would look like sine wave. Large numbers of muggleborns marry into the population, bringing down the inbreeding coefficient within select families. Those families intermarry with the other purebloods. For a few generations, you have exceptional witches and wizards. Then, the inbreeding coefficient creeps back up. Reported squibs increase. A few generations later, those supposed squibs introduce muggleborns into the wizarding population, restarting the cycle.

According to the latest studies, approximately 0.5% of the total current population (muggle and wizard) are either sS or Ss and 0.11% are wizards or witches. However, both muggle and magical census data (see The Muggleborn Myth, Ch. 12) shows a steady decrease in witches and wizards as a percentage of the total population beginning in 1835 (0.36% in the United Kingdom) and continuing to the present day. This coincides roughly with changing attitudes towards muggles. It is important to note the total wizard population in the United Kingdom did not change significantly between 1834 and the present day.

Although The Muggleborn Myth includes data from several studies on SsMM and SsM'M couples and the likelihood they'll produce magical children being greater or lesser than the accepted 50%, the sample sizes were all too small to be statistically relevant. (One study suggests an 80% chance their children will be magical. Another suggests 5%.)

Parseltongue is a dominant trait. Both heterozygous (Pp or pP) and homozygous (PP) individuals are parselmouths. Although the gene is dominant, it remains a rare trait, affecting 1 in 20,000 magical persons.

I have enclosed two potions: the blue one tests genetic power levels and the green tests for special abilities. Ten sheets of sterile, individually packed, paper are also included. Coat the square in the upper left corner with the potion. Place three drops of blood on the square. Wait five minutes. The results will be printed below the blood. I've enclosed enough potion and paper for five tests. Please note the expiration dates on the bottles.
Please test yourself before reading the second letter. If the test is negative for parseltongue, I will need to adjust the recommended course of study.

Sincerely,

Joseph Leeds, Ph.D.

Dean of Dark Arts and Archaeological Studies

Salem Witches Institute

Head spinning, I put the letter down and looked up. The sun was rising over the lake, overshadowing Moody's *lumos*. Moody still sat across from me, watching without interrupting. He raised an eyebrow.

"Well?" he asked.

Not knowing what to say, I handed him the letter. While he read, I carefully pried the potions out of the box, unwrapped them, and set them aside. The first book was *The Muggleborn Myth*. A runic book, title untranslated, lay beneath it along with *Language of the Naga* by Nagendra Bhatt and *A Parselmouth's Guide to Spell Casting and Rituals* by Joseph Leeds. The latter was a thick, spiral bound manuscript. I lifted it out of the box and leafed through it. The first chapter included a chart listing the major parseltongue families and their countries of origin.

My eyes fell on the next section. The power of language was an utterly engrossing discourse on how languages acquire magical power over time, making spells cast in ancient languages stronger than ones cast in more modern languages, such as English. Did this mean spells cast in parseltongue were stronger? If so, what types of spells could you cast? Would they offer another layer of protection between me and Dumbledore? Maybe spell that reflected his attack, making him attack his own mind. The occlumency book suggested such protections existed centuries ago, but not anymore.

A blank sheet of paper sealed in a plastic bag suddenly covered the text. I looked up. Moody pointed to the potions and resumed reading. Sighing, I closed the book and picked up the potions. "Which should I do first?"

"Both," Moody muttered.

After tearing the plastic off and removing the paper, I unscrewed the lid on the blue potion and removed it. A small glass rod with a ball on the end was glued inside the lid. I touched the ball to the square, swirling it on the paper to smear the potion around and resealed the potion.

After repeating the process for the second potion, I hit my left index finger with a minor cutting curse, dribbled blood onto both pieces of paper, and set them on a nearby stump.

"Professor," I said after I healed my finger, "why haven't..." I paused, searching for the right words. "If genetics is common knowledge overseas, then why..." Not right, either. "I mean like all the wizards like Malfoy who believe in blood purity and—"

"—politics," Moody said, setting the letter aside. He regarded me thoughtfully, tapping his fingers on his knee. "Here's the rub. Albus built his career on muggle issues. He holds people like your mother and Ms. Granger up as shining examples of what muggles can create and contribute to the magical community. The pure bloods, including Malfoy, do the opposite. They claim their blood is superior to muggleborns because they have magical ancestry. If what this letter is true, then *Genome Patterns in Magical Populations* says both sides are wrong."
I closed my eyes and imagined a blackboard covered with the goals and ambitions of each group. I didn't know much. The Prophet said very little about why the Order and Death Eaters fought, but one glaring fact stood out. "But the Death Eaters were less wrong because they advocated magical blood staying within the magical community. They thought anyone who married a muggle was destroying magic. If the person was an SS muggle, they're right, especially if they're descendants continue marrying SS muggles, which comprise the majority of the population.

"Dumbledore points to half-bloods as proof muggles and wizards can peacefully coexist without harming either race, but the study says those half-bloods aren't half-bloods. Their muggle parent was a squib descendant, not a muggle."

I opened my eyes. Moody beamed at me. "Spot on, Potter. Your five minutes are up."

Startled, I leaped to my feet and dashed for the stump. Typewritten on the first sheet was the phrase "MM - high power". The second was more interesting.

**Expressed**

*IL - Legilimens; heterozygous*

*OO - Occlumens; homozygous*

*pP - Parselmouth; heterozygous*

**Carrier**

*Tt - metamorph*

"Interesting," Moody said, looking over my shoulder. I jumped. He plucked the paper out my hands, reading through it a second time. "Both your parents were potential occlumens, but one was a potential legilimens and a parselmouth."

"Potential?" I asked, homing in on the word.

"A genetic ability is meaningless without training. However, snakes seek out parselmouths so most of them are aware of it. How old were you when you found out?"

I frowned. "Ten when I realized it, but I don't think that was the first time."

"Why not?"

I gnawed on my bottom lip. Moody rapped his knuckles on my skull.

"What did I tell you about facial expressions?"

"Mind them," I answered. "There was a garden snake when I was four. I took him to Mrs. Figg's. Told her he was my best friend. Uncle Vernon killed him the next day."

"Makes sense. Albus wouldn't want you befriending snakes," Moody said gruffly.

I froze. "Who told him? My aunt and uncle wouldn't spit on him if he was on fire."

His eye whirled around, checking for eavesdroppers. "Arabella Figg was a member of the Order of the Phoenix during the last war," he whispered.

"What? Batty, old Mrs. Figg? My crazy, cat-loving babysitter was in the Order with my parents."
"Squib. Never understood why Albus recruited her."

Well, that put a new perspective on things.

Glancing at my palm, I checked the schedule I'd doodled on my hand. Oculist at 10, solicitor at 1, account manager at 3. Somehow, I had to squeeze the usual Hogsmeade activities, buying parchment, ink, quills, spare potions ingredients, and whatnot, into my packed day. At least, Ronald still wasn't speaking to me. Not really a good thing, but he'd pitch a fit about me meeting with the lawyer and an account manager. Hermione was already having kittens.

"Harry," she said for the hundredth time since we'd left the castle, "I still don't understand why you won't ask Professor Dumbledore for help. Let him take care of Skeeter. You don't—"

"—Hermione," I said, cutting her off before she entered full lecture mode, "I'm the last Potter, not Professor Dumbledore. I have an obligation to my parents to protect my family name, and I will not sit back and let that woman drag either of us through the mud. Maybe you don't care about her lies, but I do."

Hermione covered my hand with her own and squeezed gently. "I know. I'm just worried about you. You're taking on so much. First the tournament and Moody's lessons. Now this. You're working yourself to exhaustion, Harry. I don't know what Dumbledore was thinking ordering Moody to tutor you. If Dumbledore won't help you get out of this, he should be tutoring you himself."

I smiled faintly. After the meeting, I told Hermione everything that happened in Dumbledore's office. When I repeated what I told Dumbledore about the sorcerer's stone, Hermione turned pensive and fled immediately after I informed her I had tutoring every morning.

Between Moody's lessons, studying for said lessons and classes, classes, homework, and my research, I was insanely busy. Hermione and I still met up in the library every day, but we didn't talk about anything other than classes and homework. I didn't know if her opinions were changing or if she backed off to spare my feelings. She seemed like a less rabid Dumbledore fan, but she still supported the headmaster. Difficult to say.

I shoved the issue to the back of my mind and grinned at her. "You're still coming with me, right?"

"Of course, Harry."

I took my glasses off and twirled them in my fingers. "What do you think?" I asked, looking at her while trying not to squint. "Round, square, rectangular, or oval?"

Smiling, she took my glasses and tapped them with her wand, morphing them into oval lenses. Hermione popped them on my face, shook her head, and tapped them again. "Not sure. What look are you going for? Smart, but sophisticated? Forever geek? Fashionable?"

"I thought you didn't care about this sort of stuff."

She squared her shoulders. "I don't," she said, sticking her nose in the air. A grin split her face. "But it's not every day I get to make over my best friend, Harry Potter, the boy who lived to have the worst fashion sense in the history of Hogwarts."

I groaned and buried my face in my hands. "Who are you and what have you done with Hermione?" I was only half joking. She sounded like a poly-juiced Lavender Brown.
Hermione poked me in the ribs. "Shut up, you," she said playfully as the carriage pulled into Hogsmeade.

Two hours later, we left the oculist, laughing as we walked towards the Three Broomsticks. My spatial senses were nonexistent. The oculist assured me I would adjust within a few hours. Meanwhile, Hermione kept me from running into lampposts. The new glasses, good ones crafted especially for my eyes, were amazing. I'd never seen the world in such detail. Never knew Hermione had freckles on her nose, noticed that she had Madame Pomfrey fix her teeth, or possessed what looked like a permanent ink stain on her right middle finger.

The silver frames were lighter than my old pair and rectangular, making my cheekbones stand out. With the new frames, I looked less like my father, more like a mix of both parents. Speaking of which, I made a mental note to ask Sirius a few questions about my mother. At Hermione's urging, I added a self-repairing and a locator charm. The anti-summoning charm was purely for Moody's benefit.

When we entered the Three Broomsticks, a brief hush fell over the room before the noise resumed. The whispered words and pointed fingers bothered me, but I hid my true feelings behind my carefully crafted mask. Hiding my emotions was better than wearing an invisibility cloak. I'd rather everyone think I'm emotionally stunted than a coward.

Even after seeing my puppet strings, part of me still clung to the brash Gryffindor personality that I now understood wasn't really me. I felt odd sometimes, like my mind was literally splitting in two. Part of me wanted to ask Moody for help, maybe an introduction to his legilimens friend. I sorely needed assistance putting my head back together, but I held back. I enjoyed our lessons. I learned more during those two and half hours than I did in a week of classes. Despite his insane auror reputation, or maybe because of it, the man was a brilliant teacher.

But he was Dumbledore's friend. Until I figured out how far Dumbledore's manipulations stretched, I'd sooner ask Lucius Malfoy to poke around in my mind than a friend of a friend of Albus Dumbledore.

Hermione nudged me in the side. "Professor Moody's waving at us."

I jerked out of my reverie. "Sorry, lost in thought," I said as I steered her through the crowd to Moody's table, which he was sharing with Hagrid. Moody waved his wand and drew up two additional chairs.

I sat down, still examining all the new details. Where before Moody's face looked misshapen, now I could see each scar in clear detail. The missing chunk on his nose was particularly gruesome. Hagrid's face was more lined than I remembered, especially around his eyes. Suddenly, I realized Hagrid probably attended school with McGonagall. He was a few years younger, but the difference looked like decades. Maybe it was the giant blood.

"Finished counting all the dents and dings, Potter?"

Hagrid flinched. Hermione looked appalled and kicked me under the table, muttering something about manners. I gave Moody an unrepentant grin and tapped my glasses with my finger. "These are phenomenal. Thanks, professor."

"Don't mention it. Seriously, Potter," he said when I started to thank him a second time. "Someone should've taken care of that years ago."

"What?" Hagrid asked, squinting at me. "Nice glasses. Reckon you got those over the holiday."
I opened my mouth to reply, but Hermione stopped me. "Harry, time."

Glancing up, I noticed the clock read 12:50. I stood and excused myself. Ignoring Hagrid's curious expression, I walked up the stairs to the private rooms, found Room 6, and knocked on the door.

Lunch with two humans and a goblin was a unique experience. The solicitor, Silas 'just Silas' Matthews, Ravenclaw Class of 61', and the barrister, Pherkad Norton, Slytherin Class of '49, pointedly ignored Ralmuth, a taciturn goblin who took his beef raw and dripping. I wasn't so fortunate. Watching Ralmuth lick blood off his fingers made me seriously consider becoming a vegetarian.

I pushed my half-eaten meal aside and sipped a butter beer, waiting. They hadn't said why they came together when their letters indicated separate appointments. Silas and Ralmuth glared at each other whenever they thought the other wasn't looking while Mr. Norton rolled his eyes at their antics. They clearly weren't friends.

"Mr. Potter," Mr. Norton said, setting his napkin on the table, "Gringotts has several concerns that must be addressed before we extend an offer to represent your interests. I am here to offer an expert legal opinion. Depending on my opinion, Silas and Ralmuth may or may not assist you."

I exhaled slowly. "I understand, sir," I said politely.

"I find your situation most unusual, Mr. Potter. Typically, a legal guardian selects and hires solicitors, not the child. Your guardian, in particular, currently retains one of the best firms in London. I fail to understand why you believe you need Gringott's services."

Frowning, I cocked my head. "I'm sorry, sir, but to my knowledge, my aunt doesn't have a solicitor."

"Your aunt?" He opened his satchel and pulled out a sheaf of papers. "The Ministry," he said, shuffling through the papers, "doesn't list an aunt." Mr. Norton handed me a small scroll.

I opened it. Application for Guardianship of a Minor Child, it said. I skimmed it, noting my name and my parents along with their birth and death dates. My stomach flipped when I read the applicant's name and date. Albus Dumbledore applied for guardianship on November 1, 1981, the day after my parents were murdered. Sirius was arrested on November 3, two days after Dumbledore claimed my guardianship. I swallowed hard. "Did Sirius Black ever apply?"

"To my knowledge, the only other applicants were Frank and Alice Longbottom, Andromeda Tonks, and Narcissa Malfoy. The latter two on grounds that they were your closest wizarding relatives."

"Did my parents have a will?" I asked, struggling to not hyperventilate.

"Wills," Silas said, emphasizing the 's'.

Mr. Norton glared at him before turning back to me. "As he says. The wills were sealed by the chief warlock, who also served as their executor." He tapped line on the scroll.


I read the scroll three times before I set it down. "I don't understand. I lived with my aunt and uncle until I started Hogwarts. I still reside with them every summer. At no point have I ever lived under Professor Dumbledore's roof nor has he offered to take me into his home. I never even met him.
until after I started Hogwarts. How can he be my guardian?"

"We believe," Mr. Norton said, passing me a sheaf of newspaper clippings detailing Voldemort's supposed death and Dumbledore hiding me in the muggle world, "that Mr. Dumbledore employed a loophole that allows the headmaster of Hogwarts or a head of house to assume custody of muggle raised minors. This allows the school to arrange medical care and such for students whose parents and/or legal guardians are unable to visit the castle, but doesn't require the student live with the headmaster year round."

My eyes shut. I breathed deeply, hearing Moody's voice softly instructing me to relax and calm myself. After the urge to strangle Albus Dumbledore passed, I opened my eyes. "You're saying this is perfectly legal."

Ralmuth gave me a toothy grin and leaned forward in his seat.

"That depends," Mr. Norton replied. "On 1 November 1981, Dumbledore addressed the Wizengamot concerning the Dark Lord's defeat. In his address, he clearly stated your father died first, then your mother, meaning your guardianship fell either solely or jointly to your mother immediately after your father's death, depending on whether he listed her as your primary guardian. As most parents list each other as sole guardian first, I suspect your mother's will should have determined your guardian, not your fathers. Unless, you know something that wasn't included in Dumbledore's testimony."

"I remember. I heard my father die and saw Voldemort," they all flinched, "kill my mother. Dad died before Voldemort came up the stairs. Then he killed mum. I'm sure."

Mr. Norton arched a blond eyebrow and turned to Ralmuth and Silas. "It is my opinion that Albus Dumbledore's guardianship of Mr. Potter is invalid. If he challenges our representation, I'm prepared to argue that in court. However, parents normally use mirror guardianship clauses. If James Potter's will lists Dumbledore as Mr. Potter's guardian, Lily Potter's probably does as well. As the wills are sealed, we cannot know for sure. Therefore, we can reasonably argue Dumbledore does not have guardianship of Mr. Potter as the guardianship papers reference the wrong will."

"Flimsy," muttered Silas, "but workable." He handed me a thick scroll with the Gringotts seal affixed to one end. "Have you reviewed our standard contract?"

"Yes, sir." They sent it earlier in the week. After going over it with both Hermione and Moody, I felt confident I understood it. I unrolled the contract and cast a revealing spell Moody taught me. "Can never be too careful," he'd said. "You wouldn't be the first wizard who signed something with provisions written in invisible ink."

The parchment turned blue. Negative. Good. I skimmed through it, comparing it with the one I'd read. Save for my name, it looked the same. "I'll sign."

Mr. Norton placed a small case on the table and removed a quill. He passed it to me. "You'll sign first, Mr. Potter. Then Ralmuth will sign for Gringotts."

I accepted the quill. A sharp pain stabbed through my hand when I wrote the first letter. I stared at my hand in shock. A bloody 'H' was etched into my skin.

"Blood quill," Silas said. "Ties the contract to your blood, not your name. If an impersonator signed your name, they'd be bound by the contract, not you."

I turned the quill over, studying it. "Are these legal?"
"They are for goblins," Mr. Norton replied. In other words, no.

I quickly scrawled my name on the scroll and passed it and the quill to Ralmuth. While he signed, I covertly rubbed my stinging hand.

"Dittany," Mr. Norton said, passing me a small bottle.

Grateful, I uncapped the bottle, poured a dollop in my hand, and rubbed it in. The burning stopped and my name disappeared from my skin.

"So Mr. Potter, what can Gringotts do for you?" Silas asked, picking up his quill.

"I want to sue *The Daily Prophet*, Rita Skeeter, and her editor for libel. Although I was interviewed for the tournament, the interview was interrupted by Professor Dumbledore immediately after she asked how my parents would feel about me being in the tournament. I never answered. Yet, her article claimed I said my parents would be proud of me. She also claimed I'm dating my best friend Hermione Granger."

"What is the nature of your relationship with Ms. Granger?" Silas asked, scribbling furiously.

I paused, considering the question. "Hermione's like an older sister," I said after several minutes. "She's bossy, a little annoying, and always has to be right. I love her dearly, but not like that."

"All right," he said. "What do you want?"

"I don't understand."

"Suing *The Prophet* once is simple," Mr. Norton said, taking over the discussion. "How do you want them to treat you afterward?"

I sipped my water as I mulled over my options. "I want them to leave Hermione alone. I don't want my name mentioned in *The Prophet* unless I agree to an interview and approve the final draft in writing beforehand. I would dearly love for Rita Skeeter to spend the rest of her life scrubbing toilets the muggle way, but I'll settle for her spending her career writing obituaries." Looking up, I set my water aside.

All three wore matching grins. "I can't promise anything, but I think we can help," Silas said. He placed a wooden case on the table and opened it. A silver bowl, etched with runes, rested on a velvet cushion.

"This is a pensieve," he said, touching his wand to his temple. "Close your eyes and submerge yourself in a particular memory. While drawing your wand away from your temple, focus on needing to preserve the memory. A copy of the memory will collect on your wand tip. To place it in the pensieve, simply place your wand on the rim and think the pensieve is a good place to store the memory," he said, demonstrating each step. "Place the interview in the pensieve. We'll need it for the lawsuit."

It took three tries to place the memory in the pensieve. Then, Mr. Norton showed me how to review it while Silas and Ralmuth compared notes. Together, Mr. Norton and I touched the silvery liquid and fell inside the memory. After Dumbledore terminated the interview, Mr. Norton turned to me.

"Mr. Potter, Silas will be handling most of your affairs. However, if Dumbledore challenges Gringotts, I will be representing you before the Council of Magical Law and the Wizengamot, not Gringotts. Gringotts has separate in-house counsel. Do you understand?"
I nodded, wondering why he was explaining this.

"If there's anything else relating to your guardianship case, abuse, neglect, anything, you need to leave it in the pensieve. If Dumbledore challenges our representation, we may need to attack his guardianship more directly."

My stomach twisted in knots. I understood perfectly, but what would everyone say if they knew the complete truth? Where would I go? Did my parents list anyone other than Sirius and Dumbledore? "Yes, sir. Can you get my parents' wills unsealed?"

"No," he said, turning shifty-eyed, "but you can."

"How?"

"The minister can override the Chief Warlock's seal. I'm just another barrister, but you're the boy-who-lived. Offer an endorsement or campaign contribution in exchange. Fudge won't say no."

When we emerged from the pensieve, I felt hopeful. If Dumbledore sealed both wills, he likely read them, but he claimed my guardianship with my father's, not my mother's. Maybe mum had different provisions. I could always hope.

Chapter End Notes

Although not the earliest census, Britain began conducting a modern census in 1801. The genetics lecture is a combination of a two page handout my second cousin asked for help with (Harry Potter specific, but I have no idea where her teacher found it) and my admittedly spotty recollection of college biology. The stats are all me. (Sorry, sometimes I need to indulge my love for numbers.) If anyone is interested with my spreadsheet, which uses the average generation length, lifespan (wizards), Hogwarts student body size, and % of the population enrolled in Hogwarts to estimate the total number of wizards and witches in the UK, I'll try to figure out a way to share it anonymously.

I spent several years of my life after graduation drafting wills and trust agreements, meaning I don't always explain what for me are common phrases adequately. Sorry.

Mirror Guardianship Clause Example:

Lily's Will
1. James
2. Sirius
3. Dumbledore

James's Will
1. Lily
2. Sirius
3. Dumbledore

Although I've seen a few joint wills before, women's rights made them less common. Additionally, if James had a large estate, he probably provided for Lily separately from Harry, especially if there was property like the invisibility cloak that could only be left to a heir of the body. I think I've seen two wills that explained why the testator/testatrix (person making the will) left a responsibility or bequest to someone. If they deigned to leave behind a reason (don't count on it), it's normally in a letter or video.

Information wise, this is by far the most complicated chapter, but it was necessary to get all this out of the way.

Please read and review. Thanks!
Chapter 5

Chapter Notes

Disclaimer: Harry Potter and related characters, situations, settings, and plots is the original work of J.K. Rowling and under copyright. While I enjoy playing/experimenting in her sandbox, it's not mine and never will be.

See the end of the chapter for more notes

One in the morning two days before the first task found me crouched by the fire, greeting Sirius, the-idiotic-escaped-convict-who-was-asking-to-get-caught, while I mentally cursed his sense of timing. Moody had long ago exorcised the phrase 'take it easy' from his vocabulary. My lesson started in four hours and I needed sleep. Damn it!

"Karkaroff's a death eater," he said after the barest greeting.

"So's Snape," I replied, irritated. Did he really fire call me to tell me something I could read in the newspaper?

Sirius coughed. "Yes, well," he shifted uncomfortably, "Dumbledore vouched for Snape. Not sure why. The group he hung out with all turned out to be death eaters, but the ministry let Karkoroff off because his testimony landed Rookwood in Azkaban. I never understood why Crouch—"

"—Crouch?" I asked, recalling the pinch-faced man who declared the contract was binding.

He took a deep breath. "Old Crouch gave his own son a show trial and chunked him Azkaban, not that little Barty didn't deserve it. They should have kissed him and the Lestranges for what they did to Frank and Alice."

I withheld my comments. Guilty or not, everyone deserved a fair trial. The more I learned about Dumbledore and Crouch's actions after the war, the more I wondered who was worse: them or Voldemort.

"Karkoroff may have had the opportunity to put my name in the goblet, but not the motive. If he snitched on his comrades, he's probably the last person who wants Voldemort in power. Regardless, right now, I don't care who submitted my name. The fact is I have to compete."

"I know, but it's not as dangerous as it could be. Dumbledore and Moody will do everything in their power to protect you."

I rolled my eyes. "Dumbledore won't do a damn thing to protect me," I said, throwing out some bait. I planned on saying some very unflattering things about the dear headmaster. If he or Moody confronted me about them, I'd know either Sirius wasn't trustworthy, a distinct possibility considering his past allegiances, or someone monitored the floo.

"He's doing the best he can," Sirius protested.

"Sirius, he had the opportunity to change the tasks. Make them something that legitimately tests
magical skill instead of needlessly risking my life. He didn't. The first task, instead of challenging us to create a difficult potion, master a spell, or even duel each other...Dragons, Sirius. The first task is Dragons. We have to steal an object from a class XXXX magical creature's nest! Does that sound like he's looking out for me?" Please say no, I silently begged. Sirius was my last link to my parents, the person who they charged with protecting me. For once, I needed him to put me before Dumbledore

"He wouldn't have asked Moody to tutor you if he didn't care."

My heart plummeted into my shoes. Of course. I shouldn't have expected him to be different from anyone else. Angry with myself, I gnashed my teeth. "Who told you that?"

He turned pensive. "You told me, didn't you?" His head disappeared and I heard paper rustling. Sirius's head popped back into view, but his eyes were downcast like he was looking in his lap. "You said..." He trailed off.

I merely raised an eyebrow. "I never told you Moody was tutoring me, Sirius. Who did?"

"Professor Dumbledore might have mentioned it."

I grinned like a cat with a mouse. "So you, an escaped convict, have contact with the Chief Warlock of the Wizengamot, and you still can't get a trial. Doesn't that tell you anything?"

"He can't help me."

"Can't or won't? He has a sworn duty to help you, Sirius. Just like he had a sworn duty to ensure your cousin Bellatrix Lestrange received a fair trial complete with counsel and the right to not incriminate herself."

"I'm not Bellatrix."

"You're not," I agreed before he flew into a rage. Throwing out the most inflammatory name I'd found in the old Prophets wasn't my brightest idea, especially when her maiden name was Black, especially when Sirius wasn't always rational. "You were a member of Dumbledore's Order of the Phoenix, the winning side. You'd think Dumbledore would want to know how deep your treachery went, how many people you'd sold to Voldemort. Yet, you were never interrogated, just tossed in Azkaban with less regard than a fishmonger shows week old fish. What does that tell you?" Maybe if I removed the blinders for him, he'd see the truth.

"It wasn't like that," he said, dashing my hopes. "I don't have time for this," he wiped his face with his hand, "how do you plan on handling the dragon?"

"Moody and I," I said, emphasizing Moody's name, "already have a plan. If it doesn't work, I'll just hide behind the judges."

Sirius frowned, either at my un-Gryffindorish idea or Moody's new role in my life. I couldn't tell. "Harry, you should at least try. Gryffindors don't hide."

Which explains why members of the other houses live longer. I shrugged. "They're the idiots who picked dragons, not me. If it's going to eat someone, it should be them."

Sirius gave me a searching look before taking a deep breath. "Just stick to the plan and obey Moody. He knows what he's talking about better than anyone. Steer clear of Karkaroff. I know you don't think he's dangerous, but he's taught every student who went through Durmstrang the dark arts. I don't care what the Ministry believes, he's not reformed."
"Okay." I had no reason to seek out Karkaroff. "Before you go, could you tell me a little about my mum? Everyone always talks about my dad, how brave he was, the pranks he pulled, but no one ever says anything about her except she had green eyes and was good at charms."

He sighed. "Truth is I didn't know Lily very well. I got to know her after she and James started dating in Seventh year. She was smart and pretty, a bit like your friend Hermione, but I didn't know her well. If they'd lived longer, I probably would've gotten to know her better, but they died so young and with the war…I'm sorry, Harry. I can tell you she was a brilliant witch, but I don't know much beyond that."

"Who would?" I asked, feeling desperate. After my meeting with Gringotts, I made a list of what I knew about my parents. It was pitifully small. My mother's consisted of five points: green eyes, red hair, head girl, willow wand, and good at charms. I knew nearly four times as much about my father. I just wanted to know something even if it was something trivial, like she wore quills in her hair. Aunt Petunia never mentioned her. I had hoped Sirius would.

"The only person I can think of is Snape. Everyone else either died during the war or would be better off if they had."

Snape? My mother was friends with the dungeon bat. I couldn't ask him. I shoved my revulsion aside. Maybe I could. He hated my father. If I played on that, maybe he'd say something about her.

Footsteps sounded on the stairs. "Someone's coming," I said. Sirius ducked out, ending the call. I spun around. Ron stood on the bottom step, rubbing his eyes, his ankles and wrists poking out his too short pajamas.

"Thought I heard voices," he muttered.

I glared at him. "Maybe you should get your head checked," I said with a sneer, knowing I sounded too Slytherin, but not caring.

Rubbing his eyes, he turned and headed back to the dorm. I glared at his retreating form.

In that moment, I realized that I would rather die than take him back. Regardless of my plans, the act I desperately needed to put on, he abandoned me. When I needed him most, he turned his back and loudly proclaimed that I was a liar. Even Malfoy with his retched buttons treated me better. Because Malfoy never pretended to be my friend. Malfoy didn't betray me. Ronald Weasley did.

Brimstone tickled my nostrils. The crowd roared outside the tent. Nervous, I rolled my wand between my fingers. First Diggory. Then Delacour. Then Krum departed. The crowd's roars dropped to a low-pitched buzz between matches until the next champion was ushered out to face winged death with naught but a wand and courageous stupidity.

Why would anyone in their right mind sign up for this? Maybe the other champions were all secretly insane. Or maybe the headmasters liberally applied the imperius. No sane person would volunteer for this.

The whistle blew, but I didn't enter the make-shift stadium. Instead, I stayed in the tent. Alone. Five minutes passed before Moody appeared in the doorway. Guess they sent him to fetch me.

"Your turn, Potter," Moody said, limping through the tent flap.

I raised my eyebrow and took a pointed step backwards. Someone would make me go out there, eventually, but that horntail would be wearing a purple hat and serving snow cones before I
voluntarily ventured outside.

"Potter," Moody growled, "we discussed this. You said yourself you had to participate."

"That was before I met her," I said, dangling the miniature horntail between thumb and forefinger."

Moody snorted, grabbed my arm, and yanked me outside. "Go," he ordered and stalked away, leaving me alone at the vaulted entrance that ran underneath the magicked stands towards the life-size horntail. She roared. I tiptoed towards the entrance. Poking my head out, I made a quick survey. Judges twenty feet to my right. Hoard of dragon keepers, including a shock of red hair, probably Charlie Weasley, seventy-five feet to my left. The judges were closest, but that area of the stands was walled off. Even if I drew the dragon over there, I'd still be between the judges and the dragon. Not acceptable.

A waist high wall separated the dragon from the dragon keepers. Doable, I decided.

Faking confidence, I entered the arena. The horntail thrashed her tail, bronze spikes nearly as tall as I was gouging the earth. Great, my opponent felt the same way I did. Wand in hand, I skirted around the edge, staying as far away from the irate mother as possible. I wished she understood parseltongue. Then I could at least explain that I didn't want to be here any more than she did. Once I was two feet away from the dragon keepers, I raised my wand and said, "Accio the Hungarian horntail's golden egg." When Moody taught me the spell, he said it needed to be as specific as possible. Without knowing the dragon's name, that was as specific as I could manage. To my shock, the egg rose out of the nest and flew towards me. The dragon bellowed, lunged for me. The chain around her neck yanked her back. The egg fell into my hands. The chain snapped.

The ground shook beneath her feet as she ran towards me. I tucked the egg under one arm, vaulted over the fence, and shoved a dragon keeper aside.

People screamed as the low wall caught fire. A hand grabbed my shoulder and yanked me back. I turned, watching the dragon keepers surge forward. In the judges box, Karkaroff, Maxime, and Crouch drew their wands while Bagman ducked under the table. Coward. Dumbledore merely leaned back in his chair, arms crossed as if he hadn't a care in the world. The dragon keepers surged forward.

"Stunners on three," someone yelled.

Around me, witches and wizards pointed their wands at the incoming dragon. "Stupefy," they bellowed.

The dragon fell.

The hand steered me behind a nearby crate. We stopped.

"Potter, look at me," Moody said.

I raised me head, starring unseeingly at him. In my minds eye, the dragon's chain broke in an endless cycle. My lungs burned for air like I couldn't breath, but I could feel my sides heaving as I sucked in deep gulps of air.

He cursed under his breath. "Placidus," he said and marched me to a tent. Hagrid met us at the
door and pried the egg out of my hands. Moody gently pushed me onto a cot before Madame Pomfrey shoved him aside, muttering about mad headmasters, dragons, and dementors.

Hermione, followed closely by Ronald, slipped inside. Deep scratches covered Hermione's face, like she'd wrestled with Crookshanks and lost. Fear, I realized, recalling how she clutched her face before McGonagall returned our graded exams. She did that to herself because of me. Ronald looked pale as a ghost, but otherwise fine.

"I…Dragons…you'd have to…" Ronald said at last.

I eyed him. He seemed sincere. For now. Until the next thing came along. "Please go," I said softly.

Madame Pomfrey's hands fluttered as she searched her pockets, dropping potions on the cot. "Out, Mr. Weasley," she said after Ronald remained standing resolutely at my side.

His shoulders slumped. "I really am sorry," he whispered as he exited the tent, giving me one last beseeching glance.

Hermione shot him a mournful look, but didn't berate me. Perhaps she thought apologizing for being an utter prat right after I was nearly dragon food was more than anyone could handle. Even me.

Then whatever spell Moody used to calm me down enough to walk to the tent wore off.

Tremors spread until my entire body shook. Tears streamed down my face, but I didn't know why I was crying. I felt like my body was ripping itself apart. Panic gripped me, freezing my lungs.

"Drink," Madame Pomfrey said, holding a vial to my mouth. I tipped my head back. The calming draught slid down my throat. Several minutes passed before it kicked in. Blinking back tears, I raised my head.

"All right, Potter?" Moody asked.

"Yes, sir."

"Go get your scores," he said, helping me up. Hermione slid an arm around my shoulders. Still unsteady, I leaned on Hermione until I got my bearings. Then I straightened and ducked out the tent.

On the way back to the stands, Hermione gave me a spell-by-spell account of the other champions' battles, but I didn't pay much attention. We were all still alive. No one was seriously injured. Everyone's chain held, but mine. And the contest was still perfectly fair. If you called sending sixteen and seventeen-year-olds up against a fourteen-year-old so scrawny he could pass for a first year, fair.

When we drew the dragons, no one recoiled in shock, cursed our idiotic school heads, or started plotting ways to murder the psychopaths who determined dragons were a perfectly acceptable task. The others appeared accepting, but determined, meaning they knew. Someone, probably Hagrid (given his love for dragons, I couldn't imagine him staying away), even informed Cedric just like Moody told me. Even without Dumbledore's help, the teachers ensured we were all on even footing.

Not that I cared.
So long as I was alive afterward, I didn't care who won their stupid contest; provided, it wasn't me.

I almost smiled. I felt more like the real Harry than I had in a long time. The little voice in the back of my head that screamed things like 'be brave', 'it won't hurt', and 'everyone will love you' was silent. Perhaps it realized killing me would kill it. Pity it didn't think about that before.

"They score out of ten," Hermione whispered as Madame Maxime, the first judge, raised her wand. A ribbon shot out of the tip and formed a silver eight. Followed by Crouch's nine, Dumbledore's five, and Bagman's ten. Karkaroff shot Dumbledore a smug smirk and flicked his wand, sending an eight into the air.

"I don't understand," Hermione said. "You were perfect."

I shrugged. I knew Dumbledore wouldn't approve of me summoning the egg and hiding behind someone else. After all, he groomed me to be stupidly brave and self-sacrificing with zero sense of self-preservation. I just showed him it didn't take.

In the distance, a green bowler hat moved through the crowd, trying to reach Dumbledore, who was chatting with Crouch. I touched Hermione's elbow. "Don't wait up," I whispered.

"What?"

I showed her the invisibility cloak tucked in my pocket. "You know Gryffindor. Any excuse for a party. I refuse to celebrate barely escaping a dragon that I shouldn't have been up against to begin with," I said and disappeared into the crowd. Craning my neck, I followed the green bowler hat, bumping into people, knocking one of the Creevey's over. Colin, I hoped. After what he told Skeeter, he deserved more than a few bruises.

I broke free of the crowd. Fudge shook Dumbledore's hand, said something, and turned towards the exit. I ran down the steps and intercepted him under the stands. "Minister," I said breathlessly. "I'm so glad I caught you. I never got a chance to properly thank you for helping me last year with my aunt."

Fudge clapped me on the shoulder. "Think nothing of it, my boy. I'd do the same for anyone."

I doubted that. "I know. I just wanted to say thanks. It meant the world to me. I'd vote for you. If I could vote, that is."

My carefully rehearsed words hit their mark. "Is that so?" he said, beaming.

Hoping he'd put the business with Sirius and Buckbeak behind him, I said, "I mean I know I can't vote yet, but maybe I could tell my friends what a good job you're doing. I mean you really helped me out and I'd like to return the favor and..." I paused, giving him what I hoped was a gullible expression. When I practiced it in the mirror, I wasn't sure what a gullible child looked like, so I merged my best innocent expression with Hermione's over eager student look and hoped it worked.

"Well," he glanced over his shoulder, "there is this...Never mind. Albus would never allow it."

"I really want to help, sir. I mean as long as my aunt says it's okay."

"Your aunt?" he peered at me. "She's a muggle, correct?"

I nodded fervently. "When Ms. Skeeter interviewed me, I wanted to tell her about how much you helped me, but I couldn't because my aunt hadn't okayed the interview."
"Well, I don't see why that would be a problem. I'm sure she wouldn't object to a little interview."

"She doesn't, sir, but I didn't have time to write her before." Not that I would ever write Aunt Petunia.

"Maybe you could mention it during your next interview. I'm sure, given your scores, there'll be another opportunity."

"I'd like that, sir. If you don't mind, that is."

"Think nothing of it. I'm honored you remember. Let me know if there's anything I can do for you. Outside this tournament business that is."

"There is one thing, sir," I said, hoping I wasn't acting too soon."

"Yes?" he said, alert.

I mentally cursed my impatience. I should have waited. Time to play the orphan card. "I don't have much from my parents. Just my father's old cloak and a few pictures Hagrid gave me during first year. I read in the library that wills contain a little magic. I don't really remember my parents. I mean I remember their deaths, but…"

"Dear Merlin, you remember that?"

"Yes, sir. I didn't until last year. When the dementors searched the train, I remembered. Voldemort offered to let my mum go. Did you know?"

"No, I had no idea," he whispered, looking horrified.

"Anyhow, I read in the Daily Prophet that Professor Dumbledore sealed their wills. I know he did it to protect me, but it's the only thing my mum left behind. I'd like to feel her presence. If only for a moment."

"Mr. Potter, Harry, why didn't you just ask Professor Dumbledore? I'm sure he would have unsealed the Wills."

"I can't. He's already done so much for me." Not. "I don't want him to think I'm ungrateful or anything."

"I understand," Fudge said, regarding me thoughtfully. "It'll take a little time to get them out of storage. I can't guarantee their magic still lingers. After all, it's been thirteen years since their wills were probated."

"I understand, sir. Thank you."

"You're most welcome, Mr. Potter. Let me know when you give that interview so I can arrange an appropriate press release."

"I will, sir."

"Lucius," he called, waving at the last person I wanted to encounter.

I slipped away before he could drag me over to my arch rival's father, pulled my invisibility cloak on, and headed for the astronomy tower. I needed to think.
Someone nudged my side. I turned over, burrowing my head underneath my pillow. Cool air hit my feet. Yelping, I sat up, yanking the covers back over my feet. I blinked. Where? Didn't I fall asleep in the astronomy tower last night?

A fire blazed beside me, casting a cheerful light over what appeared to be a small sitting room. An armchair was near the fire, floor to ceiling bookcases lined the walls, and my cushy sleeping bag lay on a wool rug done in shades of green and cream.

Professor Moody handed me my glasses and sat down in the chair. I put them on, throwing the room into sharp relief. A quick glance revealed books covering topics ranging from geography to muggle history to advanced transfiguration. It was nice in a Ravenclaw, closet Slytherin kind of way.

"Are you mad, Potter?"

"What?" I asked, still trying to understand why I wasn't in the tower and, more importantly, where I was.

"Sleeping in the astronomy tower in the middle of November! If you want to die that badly, Potter, tell me so I can stop wasting my time on you."

Oh. That. "I didn't mean to fall asleep. I just…I couldn't go back to the tower, all right? They hate me one minute and love me the next. I couldn't deal with them, not after the way they've treated me. I just couldn't celebrate nearly being eaten by a dragon with anyone, especially them."

He gave me a searching look before nodding once. He tossed me a bundle of clothing. "Shower's in there," he said, pointing at a closed door. "Use it. I'll start breakfast."

I cringed. Moody began each morning with 'dodging practice'. If I ate before our lesson, I'd be wearing my breakfast, but arguing would earn me an extra twenty minutes. I kept my mouth shut. Maybe I could manage a piece of toast.

Tucking the bundle under one arm, I entered the bathroom, a simple affair with plain white tile and a mirror that had seen better days. The shower stall, sink, and toilet arrangement was more basic than I expected. A shaving kit, jar of self-flossing mints, and a bottle with the word 'teeth' written on it in block print were on a small shelf over the sink, meaning I was probably in Moody's quarters. If so, teacher accommodations weren't as grand as I'd always assumed.

I opened the bundle and shook it out, surprised when I found my own school robes, socks, and shoes. A small package wrapped in wax paper turned out to be new underwear. My face heated. Aunt Petunia gave me an stack of Dudley's most stained and holey ones before I left for the Burrow. (The new ones I bought in Diagon Alley last year had more holes than cloth.) Mrs. Weasley didn't buy school robes, socks, or underwear this year, just my dress robes. I was too embarrassed to ask her for anything that wasn't on the school list. Who bought these? Moody?

Shaking my head, I stripped off my robes, which still smelled like brimstone, and stepped into the warm shower. It felt heavenly, but I didn't dare linger. Who knew what Mr. Constant Vigilance had in store for me afterward? I'd better not keep Moody waiting.

Still, I felt better after I was clean. Drying my hair with a towel, I checked my reflection. My ribs were less prominent than they were at the beginning of the year, but I still looked a bit underfed. Nothing a few more months of good food wouldn't fix.

I dressed, reveling in the feel of never worn underwear that actually fit, before I exited the bath.
Across the room, Moody sat at a small table eating porridge. Mahogany cabinets that matched the book cases lined the wall behind him. Bluebell flames danced under a small cauldron on the table. With a flick of his wand, fruit peeled and sliced itself before settling into a bowl.

I eyed the small kitchenette in wonder. Moody attended feasts and meals, but come to think of it, I'd never seen the paranoid, old codger eat in public. He pointed his spoon at the seat across from him and resumed eating.

Taking the hint, I took a seat and poured myself a small cup of tea, eschewing the porridge, eggs, fresh fruit, and yogurt. No toast, beans, or bacon. Apparently, Moody was more health conscious than most wizards.

Moody reached across the table, spooned some porridge into my bowl, and looked pointedly at me. "Eat."

"I'll grab something after lessons."

"Now," he ordered.

Feeling like I'd lost a war I didn't even know I was fighting, I poured milk over the porridge and added a little sugar. The spoon was half-way to my mouth when he slid The Daily Prophet across the table. I glanced at it and almost dropped my spoon. They printed a full retraction. Front page, above the fold. My eyes darted to the corner. Today's date. "How?" I asked. My mind spun, processing the implications. Silas said it would take at least a month. How did he do this so fast?

"Extra sickle a month for early delivery," Moody said. "It's not quite Skeeter's head on a pike, but close enough."

Grinning, I took my first bite as my eyes drank in the article. They only retracted the interview, but the editor apologized profusely for Rita's actions and stated that formal apologies would be delivered to all the champions and Hermione before the close of business today. The Daily Prophet would also be paying my legal fees and a small settlement for my troubles. Another article, front page, below the fold, showed Krum battling his Dragon and gave a brief blow by blow of each of our battles along with a points tally. I wondered what Silas threatened them with or if Mr. Norton got involved. Regardless, hiring Gringotts Legal Services was an excellent decision.

"Thank you, sir."

"I didn't do anything, Potter. You did this all on your own. Although I should warn you, Albus will be livid that you went behind his back."

"Part of the credit's yours, professor. If you hadn't told me about Gringotts, I never would have known."

He gave me a small smile and jabbed his spoon at the table. "Eat." I obeyed, still grinning at the article. I bet the look on Rita's face when she found out was priceless.

As soon as I finished the porridge, Moody plopped two eggs in front of me, followed by the fruit. I dutifully ate them, minding my manners. How can Dudley stand being so full all the time? I wondered as I ate the last slice of orange. Moody dished up some yogurt and gave me a pointed look, but I couldn't. "Thank you for the breakfast, sir."

"Finish."

I spent several minutes searching for a polite response. "I can't," I said, finally.
"What do you normally eat in the mornings?"

"Just some toast and tea. Bacon and eggs on Saturdays."

Moody closed his good eye. His magical one rolled back in his head. "Potter, you're fourteen, right?"

"Yes, sir."

"And you probably weigh ninety pounds soaking wet."

True, but not how I would have put it. "I'm small for my age, but I'm still within acceptable limits," I said, recalling my old school nurse explaining the height-weight chart to Aunt Petunia. Of course, the nurse was more concerned about Dudley than me. I was just short and a little scrawny, not as round as I was tall.

"Small?" he said, shaking his head. "Maybe Poppy, Minerva, and Albus are that delusional, but I'm not. Lily was five foot eight; James six feet. By all rights, you should be a good half a foot taller than you are now.

I gaped at him. I always thought my parents were small people, like me. I mean in the pictures Hagrid gave me they didn't look that tall. I stopped. No, they didn't, but they didn't look like midgets either. They were normal height adults, and Aunt Petunia was a bit tall for a woman.

"I didn't ask before because I thought Albus had things handled, but I'm an auror first, friend second. Do you understand what an auror does, Potter?"

"Yes, sir," I said in a small voice. "You gather evidence, build cases, and catch criminals."

"Exactly. Now, children weren't my thing. I focused solely on dark wizards, but that doesn't mean I slept through child abuse awareness."

My stomach sank into my shoes. I knew where this conversation was headed. My reception teacher called child services on my aunt and uncle. I spent the next week in my cupboard. When I returned to school, I had a new teacher. I stood. "Sir, we should get started on—"

"—not today. Sit down," he ordered.

I scrambled back into my seat.

"Now, I thought we should get past the first task before we had this discussion."

"I'm fine," I said, hoping to head off the inquisition. Fudge was going to send me the wills. I had a plan and a solicitor. I was fine. I didn't need Mad-Eye butting in.

"Potter, I've been in your head a few too many times to believe that. I know this isn't easy, but I'll tell you the same thing someone told me when I was your age. I've been where you are. I know what it's like to dodge fists and hide behind a mask. I can also guarantee that if you don't let someone help you, it will destroy you."

Like my mind's imploding on itself? I wanted to ask, but couldn't.

"That's his speech. Here's mine. We can either talk about this over a nice spot of tea, or we can have this discussion down at the ministry with four aurors and a vial of veritaserum. Your choice, Potter."
I laughed bitterly. "Threats, professor?"

"Promise." Moody huffed and waved his wand. The teapot hovered over my cup before pouring a perfect cup of tea. Another flick poured a little milk into the cup and dropped in two sugar cubes. I raised the cup to my lips, inhaling the fragrant aroma.

"I'm not abused," I said after several sips. A little too sweet, but still nice.

Moody looked incredulous. "So I didn't see your uncle break your arm?" he said when I started to reply.

I shuddered at the reminder. Why couldn't I throw him out every time? "He didn't mean to." True, he meant to throw me in the cupboard. Any injuries I sustained were bonuses.

"How old were you?"

"Four. They took me to the emergency room and everything. It was my fault. I was trying to get away and Uncle Vernon grabbed me. If I hadn't run at the same time he yanked, nothing would have happened."

"Uh huh. How old were you when they moved you to the cupboard?"

"Aunt Petunia may have kept me in another room when I first arrived, but I don't remember it," I said, hedging my answer, suspecting Moody wouldn't like the truth. The teachers at school didn't. Then Aunt Petunia told them we lived in a four bedroom house and I was lying to get attention. No one believed me after that. Why should Moody?

"Always, then. Answer the question next time, Potter. Don't tell me what you think I want to hear. When did they put the keyed locks on your door?"

"Summer before second year. I can't manage deadbolts without a wand, but I learned how to unlock and lock my cupboard."

"Eleven or twelve. Do you know it is illegal to imprison someone like that, especially a child?"

"They have their reasons," I said, suddenly defensive. "They just don't like magic. When I came home from Hogwarts, I didn't tell them I couldn't perform magic. I pointed my wand at Dudley. Then Dobby floated that blasted pudding, and the ministry sent a letter...It was partly my fault."

"Why did you threaten your cousin?"

"Because I was tired of being beat up. I wanted him and his gang to leave me alone. All I wanted was a summer free from Harry Hunting." My magic swirled beneath my skin, threatening to break free. I took a deep breath, struggling for control.

"Explain Harry Hunting."

Why can't he just leave me alone? My home life wasn't any of his business. "My cousin invented this game. He and his friends would chase me around the block. When they caught me, they'd beat me up."

"Were your aunt and uncle aware of this?"

I nodded tightly. Hell yes, they knew. "Uncle Vernon caught him once. He asked what we were doing. When Dudley told him about the game, he laughed and said to 'carry on'. I don't know
exactly how much Aunt Petunia knew, but I know she saw the bruises and my broken glasses. When Dudley hit me in the house, she would either ignore it or assign me another chore, but Aunt Petunia and Uncle Vernon have never crossed the line into abuse. Dudley's just a bit of a bully." An understatement.

"How did they punish you?" he asked.

"Nothing major. Just locked me in my cupboard and didn't feed me. Sometimes they gave me more chores."

"How many bedrooms does the house have?"

"Four. There's the master bedroom, the guest room, Dudley's room, and Dudley's second bedroom, but that's mine now. They let me sleep there after I got my first Hogwarts letter."

"Before you received your letter, where did you sleep?"

"In the cupboard under the stairs," I said as if it was the most normal thing in the world. As long as I pretended their treatment didn't bother me, that everything was perfectly normal, it didn't hurt too much. My attitude was a well-honed defense mechanism sharper than Buckbeak's talons. Unfortunately, Moody saw straight through me.

"So from the time Albus placed you in her arms to the time you received your Hogwarts letter, you slept in a locked closet," he said in a harsh tone.

I shrugged. "They only locked it when I performed accidental magic."

"How often was that?"

"I don't know. About once a month or so. They let me out after a few days. And Professor Dumbledore didn't exactly give me to them. He sort of left me on the doorstep like a bottle of milk."

He sneered. I shrunk back, recalling the lesson after Dr. Leed's letter. I was still hung up on the genetic test. Why didn't Dumbledore tell me one of my parents was a parslemouth? I had Dumbledore, the Chamber, and snakes on the brain when Moody broke into my mind. He got a front row seat to the zoo and its aftermath. He withdrew from my mind and spent an hour smashing things, but never told me what pissed him off.

"Last summer, how much did they give you to eat on a daily basis, Potter?" His voice dropped, becoming deadly serious.

"I don't know."

He turned, snatched a book off a shelf, and hurled it at me. I caught it reflexively. *Complete Guide to Calories*. "Sir?"

Moody stood and limped across the room. He opened a door and disappeared, returning a few minutes later with a pencil and parchment. "Write out your meals and look up the calories on the first sheet. Use the second for your chores. You shouldn't have any problems recalling what they did and did not feed you. Do a few examples for each summer after you started Hogwarts, include the serving size."

Sighing, I picked up the pencil. As I wrote down my meals and looked them up, my mind descended into disbelief. Sure, I was skinny, short, and spent ten years always feeling a little
hungry. Intellectually, I understood I was malnourished and the psychological consequences Dudley eating my dinner caused. Namely, submissive behavior, which I still wasn't sure I exhibited. Even in first year, I stood up for myself. I paused and nibbled on the eraser.

"Potter," Moody growled.

I jerked the pencil out of my mouth, feeling sheepish. "Sorry, professor. I'll get you a new one."

"Don't worry about the pencil, Potter. Keep writing."

My hand wrote on autopilot while I mulled over my past behavior. If Snape had singled Ronald or even Malfoy out in class on the first day like he did me, how would he have reacted? Either would have written his parents, probably talked to McGonagall or Dumbledore. Malfoy would have filed a formal complaint and contacted The Daily Prophet. I shuddered. When did Malfoy become my definition of a normal child? If Snape had pulled that stunt on any other child in that classroom, he would have been out on his ear by the end of the week. Yet, I did nothing.

Who would I tell? Hagrid? Not likely. I didn't know or trust McGonagall or Dumbledore. Aunt Petunia didn't care. If Snape shoved me off the astronomy tower, she'd send him a thank you letter.

My hand stilled. I stared at the totals. Less than 1400 calories a day. Was that really it? Even when I wasn't doing chores, I was an active child. With Dudley around, being active was a survival skill. I bit my lip. Maybe they fed me less after I started Hogwarts. I searched my memory, looking for any big, filling meals. None.

Not once did they let me eat my fill.

Before I came to Hogwarts, I never felt full. Being hungry was normal.

Moody lifted my arm and took the parchment. I looked up, not quite meeting his eyes. Why was he making me do this? I had a plan, damn it! I would get the wills, have Dumbledore removed, and never return to the Dursleys. Ever. Again.

"Write a typical chore list," he said gently. "Ages 7, 9, 11, and last summer."

Moody poured himself another cup of tea and settled in his arm chair with The Muggleborn Myth in one hand. Since he was more interested in the topic than I was, I lent it to him while I poured over Dr. Leed's manuscript.

"Write," he reminded me.

Sighing, I began writing Aunt Petunia's standard list. Make the beds, vacuum, clean the bathroom, dust, fold the laundry, weed the garden, water the garden, plant flowers, mow the lawn or shovel snow or rake leaves, wash the car, put away clothes, take out the trash, iron Vernon's work clothes. Sometimes, she had me watch the bacon, but she didn't expect me to prepare a full meal until I was nearly eight, and she watched the entire time. I think she was afraid I would burn the house down.

Save for the quantity, the list looked age appropriate.

I stopped. Moody closed the book and dropped it on a small side table. The thud echoed in the silent room. He held out his hand for the list. Wordlessly, I passed it to him. The list wasn't that bad, I told myself. A little excessive, but not horrendous.

Moody read through it silently, face impassive save his spinning magical eye. "Are the Dursleys poor?" he asked, tapping his wand against his artificial leg.
"No, sir."

"How well off are they?"

"I don't know," I said with a shrug. "Upper middle class, I guess. Dudley always has the newest gadget. Uncle Vernon replaces his car every few years and wears tailored suits. Aunt Petunia buys a party dress at Harrod's every year, but she normally shops at the local stores. Dudley attends Uncle Vernon's old school, Smeltings. I overheard Aunt Petunia tell the neighbor tuition costs £5000 a term."

"Tell me something, Potter. If they are so well off, why do they send you to school in rags? Why don't they feed you anymore than absolutely necessary to keep you alive? Why doesn't your aunt hire a maid or, better yet, give your cousin some of your chores?"

"Because Dudley's normal. I'm the freak."

"Potter, I'll say this once and only once, so listen up. What they're doing to you is wrong. They're the head cases, not you. I don't know what makes them think they have the right to treat any child like this, much less a magical one."

"I'm a burden," I answered automatically. Despite my misgivings, I trusted him. To a point. He already knew about the Dursleys. Confirming it wouldn't hurt me.

He snorted. "Did it ever occur to you, Potter, that if you didn't live under their roof, they couldn't afford their lifestyle? How much do they receive each month?"

"£1500 per month from the Lily Evans Potter Trust. According to Ralmuth, Dumbledore withdraws the money each month and has it direct deposited into their joint checking account. Ralmuth said Dumbledore believes, correctly, I assure you, that if the Dursleys knew the money came from my trust fund and not Dumbledore, they would try to gut the trust."

"Gut a Gringotts Trust?" He snorted. "Only if they wanted to declare war on the goblins. Add researching Gringotts to your list." Moody steepled his fingers. "The Lily Evans Potter Trust? I thought James handled the finances."

"According to the goblins, my mother created my trust three weeks before she died. It's all that's left."

"That can't be right. The Potter fortune rivaled Malfoy's."

"So I've heard, but whatever fortune may have existed disappeared before my parents died. My mother deposited one hundred twenty five thousand galleons, the maximum she could withdraw, into a discretionary trust that lists me as the sole beneficiary. The Potter accounts were closed after my parents died and the balance, a little over twenty thousand galleons, was added to the trust. That's all that's left."

"Interesting."

"That's not what I found interesting," I said, leaning forward. I shouldn't share this, but Dumbledore already knew the trust terms and the morning paper clearly stated I had contacted Gringotts. "Everyone always told me my vault was left by my parents, as in plural. They either lied or didn't know better, but Dumbledore's a co-trustee with extremely limited powers. He knew. The minor detail that my vault's a trust vault was overlooked somehow. I knew there was a three hundred galleon per year withdrawal limit, but I always assumed the vault functioned like an underage bank account in the muggle world."
Moody looked stunned. He leaned forward, shaking his head as if he couldn't believe his ears. "How limited?"

"Dumbledore can't make any distributions outside three hundred galleons a month for my health, education, welfare, and maintenance. The trust requires him to turn over the funds to whomever I reside with for nine or more months out of the year or after I start Hogwarts, the entire summer. Under the trust provisions, second year, the Weasleys should have received half the Dursleys' monthly stipend from August through December. The books show they didn't receive a knut. Gringotts controls all other distributions, including my Hogwarts tuition and my upcoming legal bills, which Ralmuth authorized during our last meeting. After I turn seventeen, I'll receive the Dursleys' stipend until my twenty-first birthday. Then, the trust converts to a bare trust, but Gringotts and whoever is my guardian on my seventeenth birthday will remain co-trustees. On my thirtieth birthday, I will become the sole trustee."

"Did they say what happened to the rest of the fortune?"

"Not without either a subpoena or a request from my guardian. Next time Professor Dumbledore calls me to his office, I intend to ask him."

"You're playing a dangerous game, Potter. Between the Dark Lord and Dumbledore," he shook his head. "Be careful, Potter, or they'll eat you alive."

It clicked. When he taught me occlumency, he sounded like a different person. Still a little crazy and brilliant, but not as rabid. He encouraged me to study parseltongue, even cited parselmouths who weren't dark lords. No member of the Order of the Phoenix would ever encourage me to explore an ability associated with Voldemort, but he didn't call him Voldemort, You Know Who, or even Tom. He said "the Dark Lord" with a faint note of reverence. I had no idea who he was, but I was ninety-nine percent certain this man wasn't the real Alastor Moody.

The enemy of my enemy is my friend. My current enemy was Albus Dumbledore, the fool who thought dragons would make a good test and didn't even raise his wand when the chain broke.

The fake Moody probably put my name in the cup as part of one of Voldemort's grand schemes. It seemed a little elaborate, but Dr. Leed's book said some rituals required complex trials. By having me go through the tournament, Voldemort increased the odds he would succeed.

Judging by Moody and Dumbledore's actions, right now, Voldemort wanted me alive more than Dumbledore did.

I almost laughed when I realized I didn't care if he succeeded as long as I was alive afterward and not imprisoned somewhere. It seemed odd. He killed my parents, but my parents volunteered to fight. They put themselves and me in his path. If I let their choices dictate my life, I would die before my seventeenth birthday.

I made a decision.

"I know," I said, "but I don't have a choice. When my name came out of the goblet, I realized that I have let Professor Dumbledore dictate both my actions and my beliefs. I followed him blindly because he knew my parents and everyone said he was a great man. It occurred to me that Voldemort could make the same claims as Hagrid and Professor Dumbledore, and the muggles called Stalin a great man. Everyone expects me to trust Professor Dumbledore because my parents did. The truth is I don't know why my parents trusted him. I do know they were young and had just graduated from a school where nearly everyone worshiped the ground he walked on, so I suspect hero worship had something to do with it. Nor do I have the slightest clue why my father threw
himself headlong into a war or why my mother followed him. I suppose it was the Gryffindor thing
to do. By that argument, I should abandon all sense of self preservation and rush headlong into a
battle I don't understand because like them I am a Gryffindor. However, I'm only in Gryffindor
because I argued with the hat. The hat wanted me in Slytherin. Actually, it still wants me in
Slytherin. Damn hat tries to resort me every time I speak to it."

He coughed. "Slytherin?"

"Yes, sir. This tournament did accomplish one thing. It took away all the distractions. No
quidditch, Ronald, chess games, or exploding snap. It's hard to be social when Hermione's the only
person who'll speak to you besides the professors. Did you know there are some fascinating books
in the library?" I said conversationally. "Among other things, I looked up the fidelius charm. My
mother may have been a charms genius, but she was only twenty-one. There's no way she cast a
charm Professor Flitwick would have trouble with. You tell me. Who in the Order of the Phoenix
would have cast the charm?"

"Probably Dumbledore."

"I agree. Yes, Pettigrew," he choked, but I pressed ahead, "betrayed my parents. However, I would
be a complete idiot if I ignored who cast the fidelius. I'm not my parents. I will not die for anyone,
especially not the man who led them to their deaths. Voldemort may have held the wand, but as far
as I'm concerned, Albus Dumbledore as good as spoke the spell."

"At least you're thinking, Potter." He glanced at a clock. "Better get to class. Breakfast here,
tomorrow at 5. Don't forget to meditate tonight.

* Reception is the UK equivalent of kindergarten. I'm from the other side of the pond, which
means you won't see me use UK lingo very often. When I do (I think this is the only example in the
entire manuscript, but I could be wrong), I'll mark it.

Chapter End Notes

As you may have noticed, Harry's not a reliable narrator. He'll get more reliable as he
learns more about his world, but he'll still be biased. In an effort to answer some of the
questions asked over on FF, I would like to publicly answer a few questions now that
Harry knows Moody isn't Moody. (You didn't want me to spoil it, did you?)

In the books, Moody had little interaction with Harry outside class, and Harry never
rebelled against Albus Dumbledore. Although Harry isn't a true threat to Voldemort at
this point, he has enormous propaganda value, especially to Dumbledore. Think about
the opening chapters of Order of the Phoenix. Harry's name recruited/kept many of
those members. They helped watch him over the summer and even dropped by
headquarters just to meet him. In Half-Blood Prince, his name recruited the teacher
Dumbledore needed memories from. His value isn't his wand. It's his fame.

Now, step back and say you're a death eater. You see this kid rebelling against the man
his name has always been associated with, trying to split off and go out on his own.
Now, consider how valuable him succeeding could be to your side. Now, let's say the
same person the kid's rebelling against assigns you the task of tutoring him. Imagine
what you can do with that opportunity. It may not be the original plan, but there are
other alternatives and the long-term value of a permanent split between Dumbledore and Harry is arguably more valuable than Voldemort's resurrection plans, which wouldn't be derailed if he used Cedric, who's arguably also an enemy.

Notes for this chapter:

Sirius has zero expectation that Harry will seek out Snape. He says it so he can feel like he's giving Harry something when he knows he can't give Harry what he seems to want: Sirius's support against Dumbledore.

Technically, I used the movie version with the dragon chained down because the book version with the free-roaming dragon (book) seemed hazardous to the spectators and judges. Since the tournament was originally cancelled because a rampaging cockatrice injured the heads of all three schools, this seemed like a sensible precaution.

Karkaroff gave Harry a decent score for two reasons: 1) to piss Dumbledore off and 2) to make Dumbledore look bad by showing even he can be fair and impartial. (It didn't extend to Cedric.)

Although the next chapter hints at this, before any of you send me PMs with the work "creepy", the underwear were provided by the house elf who fetched Harry's clothing for Moody, not Moody. However, this is in Harry's POV. He doesn't know about the elf. Also, this is an interrogation by a teacher Harry's begun to both respect and know well enough to realize he's not asking these questions to hear himself talk.

On a side note, I would like to take a moment to remind everyone of a few facts that are occasionally overlooked in the quest for fanfiction. A healthy human can survive up to eight weeks without food; provided, they have water. The same human will only live three-five days without water. All of that being said, starving someone means you don't feed them enough. You can feed someone three meals a day, everyday. If you don't give them adequate calories for their age, height, sex, and activity level, they can still die from starvation.

I hope to get AO3 caught up with FF by tomorrow evening. Afterwards, posting will be same day.

Please read and review!

Thanks.
Drenched in sweat, I pointed my wand at my head and cast a mild cleaning charm. The sweat transformed into an invisible layer of gunk. Gross, but with the low for the last Saturday in November hovering just above freezing, dried gunk was preferable to walking around outside, soaking wet.

I rubbed my hands together. Then, I cupped my hands over my ears, trying to warm them so my ear canals would stop aching.

"All right, Potter?" Moody asked.

I hid my grimace. A sane person would ask that immediately after they slammed someone into a tree, not an hour later. "Fine, professor."

"I'll be the judge of that," he said, flicking his wand.

I leaped aside and brought my wand up, eying him warily. Moody's first rule was 'a wand is a lethal weapon'.

"Easy, Potter. Just a basic diagnostic. Madame Pomfrey will have my head if I let you walk around with broken bones."

I relaxed my stance, but kept my wand out. He'd never checked me before, but today was our first 'duel' (stinging hexes, disarming charms, and shield spells only). The lesson concentrated on using the terrain, reading your opponent's body language, and aim, not spell work. I dodged everything except a brutal disarming charm that caught my left shoulder and tossed me into a tree trunk.

He waved his wand and my left little finger glowed. "Jammed," he said and whispered a spell under his breath. The swelling and pain disappeared. I flexed my hand.

"Thanks, professor."

"Go get cleaned up. Then, bring your homework down to my office."

"Sir?" On paper, my Saturday lessons ended at 8:30 am, but they usually ran fifteen to thirty minutes over. Since Moody added dueling after occlumency, I estimated it was closer to nine than eight. I had planned on studying with Hermione, maybe joining my Quidditch mates for a pick up game.

"Books, notes, assignments due this week and next. Bring the works. My office at," he pulled a pocket watch out of his robes and checked the time, "9:45. I'll have a snack waiting."
"But…" He raised an eyebrow. My protest died on my lips. During our first week, I tried arguing with him. After a lifetime of Harry Hunting, dodging practice seemed unnecessary. At the time, I refused to tell him the real reason I didn't need practice, but I did cite bludgers, trolls, and Malfoy as proof that I already knew how to dodge. He spent the next three days proving me wrong. On the fourth day, after I dragged my aching body outside, he sat me down, explained that arguing with him had consequences, poured a healing draught down my throat, and launched into a lecture on tactics (i.e. dodging with purpose). "All my assignments or just the ones I haven't finished?"

"Everything."

I bit my lip. Everything was a lot. During my third year Diagon Alley stay, I had a choice: lock box or expandable messenger bag. Picking the lock box meant using Dudley's ancient backpack for another year. Although I planned on replacing it this year, I forgot to ask Mrs. Weasley to pick up a new one for me when she went to Diagon Alley so I was stuck with Dudley's for at least another year. Even with the packing spell I looked up in the library, I'd need three trips.

Moody sighed and ran his hand through his hair. "Tell you what. Place everything on your bed, organized by subject, and I'll have a house elf pop it down."

"Thank you, sir," I said.

"Bring all your school supplies and Leed's books, too. I need to see what I'm working with." He checked his silver pocket watch again. "Thirty minutes. I suggest you hurry."

I sprinted back to the castle, narrowly avoiding a group of first years when I burst through the rear entrance. Several portraits yelled at me to stop running, but I ignored them. Five minutes to run to the tower. Ten to shower and dress. Five to walk down to Moody's office. That left ten minutes to gather my things and try to organize the mess. I wondered what I should do about my notes. Rather than use a new sheet of parchment for each class, I used a new sheet whenever I ran out, meaning my notes weren't sorted by subject. Worse, I was conditioned to not waste anything. When I ran out of space, I turned my parchment sideways and wrote in the margin.

Still pondering my dilemma, I entered the tower and climbed the stairs to my dorm. My notes were sort of in chronological order. What if I skimmed the dates at the top of each scroll and organized them by date? If I showed Moody that my notes were organized according to my system, maybe he wouldn't care if they weren't organized by subject and date. The margins weren't his business. I pushed the door open and crept inside.

Ronald's curtains were still closed, not surprising as he'd sooner kiss Snape than wake up early on a weekend. I glanced at the other beds. Dean and Seamus were already gone. Neville was sitting on his bed with his curtains open and his transfiguration book and parchment propped on his pillow. Once again, I wondered why Hogwarts didn't bother providing their students with desks. Most boarding schools include an individual desk, chair, and chest of drawers with their accommodations, probably made too much sense for wizards.

"Neville, would you tell Hermione I can't study this morning?" I said over Ronald's snores.

"Moody?"

"Who else?" I replied, opening my trunk. I quickly sorted my books into separate piles, dumped my school supplies into my backpack, stacked my scales and telescope in my cauldron, and piled my notes together. Then, I leaned into my trunk and unlocked my lock box, coughing to cover the hissed password. I wrapped Leed's books in my cloak before I took them out. Moody said the parseltongue books weren't illegal, but I didn't trust my dorm mates. I doubted Neville would say
anything, but if Ronald woke up and saw them…I shuddered.

Belief-wise, Ronald was Malfoy's polar opposite, which meant they were both bigots. Ronald didn't mind me using my ability to rescue his sister, but he was firmly in the 'decent wizards don't talk to snakes' camp. If he ever learned I was actually studying parsel runes and had a snake hidden in my trunk, I'd be lucky if all he did was set my bed on fire.

I levitated everything to the bed in one go. The piles looked like they were still stacked around a trunk, but I didn't have time for much else.

"Harry," Neville whispered in awe, "you didn't say the incantation."

Damn. "I've been working on it since second year," I lied. "Every year, someone tries to kill me. Right now, it's the only advantage I have. Please don't tell anyone."

"No need to ask. I wouldn't."

"Thanks," I said, grabbing a fresh school robe and ratty underclothes. I wished I had muggle trousers that fit. Even after three years, I still felt like I attended classes in a dress, but the only thing I had to wear underneath the robe was a pair of old boxer shorts held up by a safety pin. First year, I tried wearing Dudley's trousers underneath my robes, but they were so big I tripped over them without the robe. Add a robe and moving staircases and I was lucky I didn't break my neck. After the first week, I sucked it up and lost the pants.*

I entered the bathroom, stripped off my school-issue athletic robes, and chunked them down the laundry chute. I glanced at the clock, 9:35. Cursing Moody under my breath, I turned the water on, jumped in, and scrubbed myself as thoroughly as possible in three minutes or less. I shut the water off and exited.

Wet because drying off would take too much time, I slipped on the tiles. My still sore shoulder slammed into the towel rack. I clenched my teeth and pushed the pain aside. No time for a healing draught or numbing spell. I needed to get downstairs before Moody decided to add ten minutes of dodging practice for every minute I was late. I gritted my teeth and pulled my school robes over my head.

The fabric clung to my wet skin. I grimaced and plucked at my robes, trying to pull them off my skin. Air, please.

A gust of warm air rose from my feet, drying everything, even my hair and the floor. My eyes widened. The last time I did intentional, wandless magic I was ten. Over the past month, I'd tried little things, but nothing happened. If magic's intent, did I not want it bad enough before? Now, when I was desperate, it came to my rescue. Grinning, I held out my hand.

My wand was on my bedside table. I needed my wand. If I didn't have my wand, Moody would give me to Snape for potion ingredients. The bathroom door swung open, my wand twitched before rolling off the table. I glanced at Neville's empty bed. He must've left for breakfast, I decided before focusing my entire being on needing my wand. It zoomed across the room and landed in my hand.

Wicked! A little practice and wandless magic would be my next hidden ace.

I stuffed my feet in my duck taped sneakers, which were just beginning to fit, tucked the laces inside because I didn't have time to tie them, and ran to the fat lady.

Outside the tower, the hallways teemed with barely awake students, doing the zombie march to the
Great Hall. Filch, professors, and prefects were out in full force. Running to Moody's office would be beyond stupid. Walking as fast as I dared, I threaded my way through the crowded halls and took the stairs to the deserted third floor corridor.

It never occurred to me before, but DADA was normally on the third floor, meaning Dumbledore moved it so he could store the stone. As a first year, I thought the third floor had always been deserted. In reality, eighty-five percent of the student body knew their way around the third floor, including the hidden staircase that dumps you out outside transfiguration. Dumbledore might as well have handed out engraved invitations and maps to the stone.

Taking calming breaths so I didn't accidentally set Moody's classroom on fire, I entered the DADA classroom where I discovered my books and in progress/complete assignments stacked neatly on ten desks, one per subject, including parsel runes. My book bag, notes, and Moody were all missing.

"Stop dawdling and get in here," Moody yelled.

I winced. "Yes, professor," I replied and climbed the stairs to his office.

A small table with a tuna sandwich on whole wheat bread, grapes, and a glass of milk was beside a leather chair, which I knew from experience was the only comfortable chair in Moody's office other than his. He normally stacked books, dark detectors, and coats on it to discourage visitors. I wondered how he discouraged people like Dumbledore, who I imagined would either conjure his own or steal Moody's.

Moody dropped my book bag on his desk and prodded the holes with his wand. "Hopeless," he muttered. He emptied the bag, sorting through my quills, ink, parchment, pencil nubs, and a broken ruler I used for a straight edge into piles. "Eat."

Gingerly, I perched on the edge of the chair and picked up the sandwich. It smelled amazing. I took my first bite. Fresh tuna. Homemade bread. A hint of cheese, pickles, and spices. Even the mayonnaise tasted divine. The kitchen elves really outdid themselves. I took another bite. Superb. I wondered what I'd have to do to get the recipe.

A chuckle intruded. My eyes flew open. Moody raised an eyebrow. "Glad you like it. I know your not used to regular meals, much less snacks, but with the amount of exercise you're getting, snacks and meals must be part of your routine. I've made arrangements with the kitchens. They'll send up a nutritious snack after our morning tutorials. You should have plenty of time to eat before your first class. If you don't, tell me and I'll adjust the schedule. They'll also provide nuts and dried fruit to snack on throughout the day. When you eat in the Great Hall, they'll send you a separate plate with the correct nutrients and calories for your activity level. You will clean it before eating anything else. I cannot stress enough how important this is, Potter."

I met his eyes so he knew I was listening and finished the last two bites of my sandwich. I washed it down with half the glass of milk. "I understand."

"I don't think you do. Personally, I wanted you cleared by St. Mungo's before we started dueling. Albus," he sneered, "overruled me. Claims you've been in the hospital wing enough that if there were any problems, we'd know. Bollocks, I say!" He slammed his fist on his desk, knocking off two sneakascopes and a pile of essays. With a wave of his wand, the essays restacked themselves on a table behind his desk. "Never worked anyway," he said, kicking the sneakascopes under his desk.

Artificial eye glowing like a Christmas tree, he fixed his disconcerting gaze on me. "Poppy is a
nurse, not a healer. She's great for broken bones and sniffles, but I doubt she even knows the charms for a basic physical, much less a complete medical history, which I know you haven't had because Poppy told me she's fought with Albus over this exact issue every year, which means your health is an unknown. I don't like unknowns, especially not with what Albus wants me to teach you. Too dangerous. But unless something goes catastrophically wrong, ensuring you eat properly and working up to the more strenuous stuff gradually is all I can do."

I picked at the grapes while I analyzed the issues. I knew my body sustained some prolonged damage, but Hogwarts' food plus half of one summer away from the Dursleys and an escaped convict godfather hanging over their heads the next fixed most of it. They may have fed me Dudley's diet, but they didn't lock me up for days or call a can of unheated soup an adequate meal. As long as they feared Sirius, I had food. I also had three years of Hogwarts meals. Physically, I was in far better shape at fourteen than I was at eleven. Still, Moody had a point. Watching my calorie intake wouldn't hurt. "I'm not used to eating big meals, but I'll try to eat more throughout the day."

"Acceptable."

My mind latched onto something he said. Why did Dumbledore order him to teach me dueling? "No offense, sir, but why dueling?"

"Because Albus has this asinine belief you'll need the skill."

"I don't want to be auror."

"Never said you did. Just put up with it for now. I'll keep it as interesting as I can and make sure it overlaps with other areas. No sense in only learning one area of magic."

"Thank you."

He leaned back in his chair. "Have you given any thought to what you want to do after you graduate?"

I snorted. "Professor, maybe it escaped your notice, but I'm the ruddy boy-who-lived. I don't get to choose what I want to be when I grow up. Everyone expects me to either be like my father, who I'm fairly certain didn't have a job, or join the ministry. Truth is they'd have to imperius me to make me work for the ministry. I wish them luck with that." My hand flew over my mouth. Embarrassed, I hunched over and let my face fall into my hands. "Sorry, professor."

"Don't apologize, Potter. If you weren't upset, I'd think there was something wrong with you. Let's try this again. Before Hogwarts, what did you want to do after you graduate?"

"It's stupid," I muttered.

"Try me."

Once again, I wondered who he really was. A death eater, most likely, but who? Would he understand that I once had dreams that didn't involve wands, Dumbledore, and Voldemort? Would he laugh at me like my relatives would if they knew I ever aspired to be something more than a bus boy? "A doctor," I whispered. "My year four teacher used to tell us stories about University College London. I thought maybe if my grades were good enough I could get a scholarship to study medicine. Either emergency medicine or pediatrics. I wanted to help kids like me."

Moody studied me for several minutes. "Do you still want that, Potter?"
"Sometimes. Yes." My shoulders fell. "It doesn't matter."

"Look at me, Potter." He waited until I raised my head. "The only person who can live your life is you. You have a fundamental right to choose how to live your life, including your career. No one can take that right away unless you let them. Let me show you something," he said. A book flew into his hand. He flipped it open and passed it to me.

Guide to Magical Careers? Interesting. The career section in the library had a book for each career, but not one for all of them. I skimmed through the description of an Auror, wondering why Moody gave me a book on the subject when he could tell me about aurors in his usual cynical fashion.

"Read the requirements."

"Minimum requirements," I read. "N.E.W.T. Potions, Defense Against the Dark Arts, Transfiguration, and Charms with a N.E.W.T. Score of Exceeds Expectations or higher for each required subject."

He snapped his fingers and I returned the book. Moody flipped to another section and handed it back. This time it was on Healer. I avidly read the description.

Healers study, diagnose, and treat maladies and injuries of both mundane and magical origin. Although many healers are generalists, some specialize in specific magics, like spell damage or dark curses, while others specialize in children and the centenarian age groups.**

Moody reached across his desk and tapped the minimum requirements section with his wand. "As far as Hogwarts subjects are concerned, the only difference between a healer and an auror is N.E.W.T Herbology."

A slow smile spread across my face. Until I was seventeen or challenged Dumbledore's guardianship, Dumbledore owned me. He had the authority to override my decisions. For example, as long as he was my guardian, I couldn't transfer, change my electives, or take extra O.W.L.s without his approval, but I graduated after I turned seventeen, not before. I could always say I enjoyed Herbology and wanted to continue because my friend Neville, who was nearly N.E.W.T. level already, took the class. As long as I paid lip service to the auror insanity, no one would suspect anything because save for herbology, the requirements are the same. "Brilliant," I whispered.

He grinned. "Glad you agree," he said, returning the book to the shelf. "Mind you, it's just something you should consider. You don't have to make any decisions until after O.W.L.s."

Shuffling through the papers on his desk, he pursed his lips and shook his head. Not finding what he was looking for, he rummaged through his desk drawer and withdrew a paper-clipped stack of parchment, a cloth bound, navy blue A5 notebook, and a black fountain pen. I schooled my features, trying to hide my shock at seeing a wizard, other than Mr. Weasley, owning muggle products.

He chuckled. "My guardian used to buy these by the case," Moody said, taping the notebook. "Cheaper than parchment, easier to carry, and you don't have to bind them yourself." He twisted the cap off the fountain pen and opened the journal to the first page. My jaw dropped. Not only did he own muggle items, he actually knew how to use them. "Up to now, I've focused on two things during our sessions: the fourth year syllabus and you surviving the first task. I want to change this."

"How so?" I asked, feeling uneasy.

"That depends on you. Tell me, Harry," I jumped, unaccustomed to him addressing me by my
given name, "what do you think about your Hogwarts education? Do you feel it will prepare you for life after Hogwarts? What, if anything, would you like to change?"

Ever since McGonagall transfigured her desk into a pig and then lectured us on the limits of transfiguration, I've dreamed of someone asking me that question. What use is being able to transfigure a desk into a pig if you can't eat the pig? Just my luck the first person who cared enough to ask was a disguised Death Eater. If there were gods, they must hate me. Why ask when the answers wouldn't change anything? My mask slipped, letting my incredulity surface.

"I don't think you understand how much power Albus gave me where you're concerned," Moody said carefully. "For example, when Ms. Granger was hexed by Malfoy, Snape didn't assign you detention even though he normally hands them out if you breathe too loudly."

True.

"When you start Hogwarts, your head of house becomes your de facto guardian. They must sign off on all extracurricular activities, disciplinary actions, extra credit projects, and electives. The moment the sorting hat said Gryffindor, all your records were transferred to Minerva's office. When Albus ordered me to tutor you, those duties and your records transferred to me. The next morning, I informed Snape that unless he's willing to swear a blood oath to be fair towards all his students, he can't give you detention."

I whistled. "Nice."

"Glad you approve. Don't think you have carte blanche. Act out in his class and you'll deal with me."

"Understood," I said, hardly believing my luck. Contrary to popular belief, I didn't act out in class. I sat beside Hermione and tried to blend into the woodwork. Moody's edict marked the first time in my life an adult intervened on my behalf.

"Back to the question. What do you think about your Hogwarts education?"

I bit my lip. Even though I didn't consciously think about it until recently, during second year, when I was terrified I'd either end up petrified or murdered by my classmates who believed I was the heir of Slytherin, I spent weeks researching other schools and writing transfer requests. I never heard back from any of them, but I still remembered why I chose those schools. Dumbledore already knew my true feelings. Moody wouldn't kill me anywhere it could be traced back to him. Sharing them was safe enough. "No offense intended, sir, but a Hogwarts education is grossly inadequate. What use is transfiguring a hedgehog into a pin cushion when you can't balance a checkbook? I like being here because it's an escape, but as a school it sucks. Over half the magic has little to no practical application other than to help students progress to flashier, but still pointless magic. The student teacher ratio is so hideous I'm amazed muggle parents let their children within ten kilometers of this place. Despite having three quarters of the available classrooms unused and a 400 million galleon endowment, the class sizes remain at least three times larger than they should be, resulting in fewer hours per class than any other school because the teaching staff is too small. No offense, but the professors are all unqualified in their subject or unqualified to teach or both. Students aren't advised properly when they chose their electives, much less yearly. Each house needs at least three more adults to supervise them. On that note, most boarding schools add houses when their population grows and separate students so they have a good mix in each house. Not here. Here we have less than half the houses we need, and the sorting hat's either mad or a joke. Take your pick. Worst of all, even in subjects like charms, the curriculum is a joke."
I blinked and spun on my heel, suddenly realizing I began pacing during my rant. "Everything we learn is based on so-called fundamental laws of magic, but those laws are based on a few anecdotes. Most of which were distorted into children's tales centuries before Waffling failed to comprehend the difference between a scientific hypothesis, a theory, and a law. We are taught poorly formulated hypotheses are unbreakable magical laws. That's not what I consider an adequate education." I pressed ahead before he could object. "I've read Waffling's works. He never tested anything. Without repeated experimental observations, it's just a load of hot air that wizards call fact. It's not. In fact, his first law assumes a source of life and an essence of self, a soul, exist when there's no scientific proof in either the muggle or the wizarding world either exists, never mind both. Before you say ghosts are proof of soul, ghosts only appear when someone dies in an area with a high concentration of magic. If you move a ghost into a lesser magical environment, they will eventually disappear. That's one of the reasons the ministry cited for chaining the Bloody Baron to Hogwarts. Additionally, when a ghost passes through you, you can feel it, which means ghosts have mass. If they have mass, they can't be souls because a soul is, by definition, incorporeal, as in without body or substance. Ghosts are just magical constructs that contain some memories of the person they appear to be. They are proof that person existed, nothing more. Based on what I've read, magical theorists would claim February causes the flu, completely discounting all the cases that occur in November. Instead of accepting evidence that disproves their hypothesis, they make the evidence fit the hypothesis and call it a theory."

Moody gaped at me. I shrugged. "I was an extremely curious first year with an invisibility cloak and insomnia. There's only so much exploring you can do with the teachers and prefects patrolling the halls, but as long as they don't see a light, they don't bother with the library. I thought the theory section could answer most of my questions, and the theory books don't scream when you open them."

Moody scribbled something in his notebook. "Minimize ministry certified British authors," he muttered. The parchment rustled as he selected two sheets and set them aside before returning the sheaf to the drawer. "What would you like to study?"

"I don't know." I sank down in my chair, suddenly lost. How was I supposed to explain that while I knew what I hated about Hogwarts, I wasn't sure what subjects I enjoyed? When I attended muggle school, I loved science, math, and geography, but the only magical subject I marginally liked was Defense.

"What interests you?"

"Magical or muggle?"

"Either. Both. Contrary to popular belief, ideas don't exist in a vacuum. Take alchemy or healing. Both combine magic and science."

"I thought healing was just diagnostic and healing charms and potions."

"The difference between a healer and a nurse is their understanding of the human body. How it works? Why? Those are questions the biological sciences answer. A healer applies their knowledge to create new healing charms, diagnose unusual illnesses, all sorts of things. Alchemy combines chemistry, potions, and transfiguration. Creating a new substance without understanding the elements and how they interact on an atomic level is nearly impossible. Indeed, some believe transfiguration began as way to teach beginner alchemy. Forget about the tournament, O.W.L.s, careers, the dark lord, and your barmy headmaster for a minute." He paused. "Now, tell me what you like."
"Science. Math. Defense is fun sometimes, but I'd rather never need it."

"You and everyone else. Continue."

"Charms and herbology are okay. I like Hagrid, but not Care." I shrugged. "I don't know. I've read the textbooks and can do the spells, but after first year, magic seems so devoid of life, purposeless. I keep telling myself there is more to magic than conjuring water and dueling. There has to be something more because if there isn't, it's not worth learning."

Moody sighed. His pen thumped against the desk as he pushed his notebook aside. He leveled his gaze on me. "Son, what are you really giving up on: magic or Hogwarts?"

His question rocked my psyche. My freedom plans varied from living under my invisibility cloak to going muggle, permanently, and included everything in between. I knew I wanted to escape from Dumbledore, a real home—not a school I was only welcome at nine months out of the year, somewhere I could pet Hedwig and talk to Dyfi at the same time if I wanted without anyone whispering that I'm evil—anonymity and freedom most of all.

I closed my eyes. "I'm not sure."

"Take a few hours and think about it. Go for a walk, read a book, play a game of chess, find Malfoy and hex him," I smirked, "or just skip rocks across the lake. Figure out what you want to get out of your education. We'll talk over dinner."

Mutely, I nodded. Smoothing out my school robes, which were getting a little threadbare and short in the sleeves, I headed for the door.

When my hand touched the knob, he called my name. I looked over my shoulder. "While you're thinking, remember this. Only the educated are free."***

* It is worth mentioning that the uniforms worn in the films DO NOT match the uniform described in the books. In the film, the boys uniforms (all years shown from 30s through 90s) include pants. Yet, when Snape was hauled up by his ankle in the book, his old underwear were on display, meaning the robes were pant-less!

** Healer definition adapted from physician wikipedia entry.

*** Epictetus

Chapter End Notes

I struggled with the chapter break on this one, but eventually decided 15,000 words was too long for a single chapter and broke it up as best I could. The next chapter will be up in soon.

The muggle notebook and fountain pen hints at our Moody impersonator's backstory. It is essential, and it does tie in to him being a death eater. In about 7-8 chapters, you'll see how.

Harry's ghost speech probably makes this chapter one of the more controversial ones for some people. It is not intended to be offensive. However, it is from the point of
view of a teen, who has very little exposure to religion outside the muggle school system. (His uncle told him he'd contaminate the church.) Kindly, do not send reviews flaming Harry's lack of religion. He didn't openly worship anything/one in the books, either.

Please read and review.
Chapter 7

Chapter Notes

Disclaimer: Harry Potter and related characters, situations, settings, and plots is the original work of J.K. Rowling and under copyright. While I enjoy playing/experimenting in her sandbox, it's not mine and never will be.

See the end of the chapter for more notes

With my winter cloak draped over my shoulders, I roamed the grounds as I pondered Moody's question. I lost track of how many times Dumbledore's wards crawled across my skin as I entered and exited, never straying outside the protective embrace of Hogwarts herself.

I wondered about her. Was she sentient? If so, what did she think about being able to protect one thousand and twenty eight children, but not me, the unfortunate one thousand twenty-ninth?

A gnarled house elf popped in three times, bearing food, which he watched me eat with gimlet eyes that seemed out of place on his smiling face. Each time, I finished the meal before wondering back to the lake or the quidditch pitch or the many trails leading to the forbidden forest.

Eventually, I found myself underneath the elm tree. I sunk to the ground, back pressed against the trunk, knees drawn up to my chest.

Doodling in the dirt with a stick, I raised my head and stared at the castle. The motte rose from the earth, hiding the first level of the dungeons. The astronomy tower, arrow slits at regular intervals, loomed over the castle like a king on his throne. Battlements capped the towers and entrance ways.

Looking at her fortifications, I doubted Hogwarts started off life as a school built by the founders. Maybe they opened one later or someone donated the castle for their use, but at her core, I believed she was more like Windsor Castle, built to help a king hold the surrounding territory. I couldn't attribute the same strategic importance to Hogwarts as Windsor, but magic felt stronger here. Perhaps, that was Hogwarts strategic value.

Regardless of her purpose, did she still hold value to me? Did magic? Sighing, I began sketching the pros and cons in the dirt, trying to let logic dictate my decision when my heart kept interfering.

When the last rays of sunlight reflected on the lake, I headed inside where I ducked down a secret passage. One passage led to another and another, eventually placing me outside Moody's quarters. I raised my hand to knock, but the door opened before I could.

"Sit," Moody directed. I took my usual seat at the table, which was covered with correspondence, paperboard-covered notebooks smaller than the one I saw him with earlier, his fountain pen, and books on everything from transfiguration to advanced algebra. A tray laden with four covered plates, tea, and frosted glasses of pumpkin juice hovered nearby. He thumped to the mantle, cut his hand with his wand, and grabbed something I couldn't see. Wards stronger than any I'd felt before snapped into existence, cloaking the walls in a white glow before they disappeared.
"Condition of my employment. Designed to keep Albus's crooked nose out of my business," Moody said. A flick of his wand stacked everything on a nearby armchair. He placed the plates and drinks on the table, banished the tray and covers, revealing roast mutton with mint sauce, turnips, mashed potatoes, a spinach salad, roll, and treacle tart and strawberries for dessert—an obvious bribe for eating everything on my plate. Not that I minded. Treacle tart was my favorite, and Moody's cooking rivaled Mrs. Weasley's.

"What's your answer?" he asked, placing his napkin in his lap.

"I gave up on Hogwarts during second year." I took a bite of mutton and chewed, while I searched for the proper words. "I haven't given up on magic, yet. It's part of me. It's always been there. Snapping my wand would feel like killing half of myself, but it's not all I am." He started to reply, but I cut him off. "Hear me out first, please. Intellectually, I know I was born into a magical family, but the only memory I have of my parents is my mother's death. I grew up muggle. I wasn't prepared for magic, much less being famous for surviving the worst day of my life. Psychologically speaking, I'm the least equipped person in the British Isles to handle complete strangers shaking my hand, hugging me, hating me one minute and loving me the next. No one has tried to help me cope or hide. No one ever will.

"Hogwarts represented nine months escape from the Dursleys, not school. In all honesty, I could probably learn to like dementors if it meant not living with my relatives. If your name isn't Harry Potter, maybe Hogwarts is a school. To me, it's not. A school protects and educates the children in its care. Hogwarts doesn't.

"Instead of worrying about final exams, each year I face off against my defense professor. Even Lupin, my father's friend, tried to kill me. Not that exams matter because I never see my final grades. All I want is somewhere safe. Hogwarts isn't, but as long as Dumbledore is my guardian, I'm stuck here. I want to learn, but I hate my classes because three-quarters of what we learn depends on magical theory I could disprove by the time I was seven."

"How?"

I swallowed a mouthful of turnips before answering. "By asking why."

He smirked. "Fair enough." We ate our meal in companionable silence, accompanied by clinking silver and occasional murmurs of enjoyment. I wondered why the meal I was served me by the lake and the ones I ate with Moody always tasted better than the ones they served in the great hall. Less grease, more vegetables, still tasty. Easier on the stomach, too.

Moody poured himself a cup of tea and leaned back in his chair. "I spent the past few hours consulting with experienced teachers from other schools, including Leeds. I think I may have a solution for you, but first I need you to answer a few questions."

"How invasive?"

"Not as invasive as our occlumency lessons, but close. If you don't feel comfortable answering, don't."

"Okay."

Hot tea splashed into my cup. He nudged the sugar and milk towards me. I added a small splash of milk and one cube of sugar. I appreciated a touch of sugar, but didn't like my tea too sweet.

"How much are you holding back during class?"
"I'm not," I said quickly.

Moody snorted and rolled both his eyes in opposite directions. Creepy. "I wasn't born yesterday, Potter. Earlier today, you treated me to a very enlightening discourse on magical theory that most N.E.W.T. students couldn't grasp. I've personally witnessed you use a N.E.W.T. blasting curse and a patronus, which isn't taught until after Hogwarts, if at all. Not to mention, we covered all the charms and transfiguration work through second term in less than two weeks."

"Spells are easier than they were before," I said, hoping he'd buy my explanation. It was true. After his intent lecture, I got most spells within half an hour instead of a class period or four.

"I'm not interested in land in Camelot, either." He sighed and twitched his fingers, wandlessly summoning a scroll and a thick blue folder with St. Gregory's Primary School* emblazoned on the front. At the sight of my muggle school records, my stomach dropped into my shoes. Headmistress Roemmele, a close friend of Petunia and Vernon, hated me with a passion that rivaled my uncle's. I dreaded whatever was written in that folder.

Moody unrolled the scroll. "I want to read you something. Although Mr. Potter rarely gets the spell on his first attempt, by the end of class, his spells are both more powerful and on target, a feat his classmates cannot claim. After observing his spell casting over the past year, I've concluded he always precedes his first attempt with a small flick. The flick bleeds off enough magic to make his otherwise perfect spell fail in a manner similar to his classmates. His error is consistent and he always succeeds the second or third time he casts. When compared to his classmates, who make similar errors, both his error and the number of tries prior to success are too consistent. All I can conclude is Mr. Potter is deliberately holding back. Why I cannot fathom. I have mentioned my concerns to Professor McGonagall and the Headmaster. Both are either content with his current mediocre performance or willfully blind. As I cannot assign additional topics or extra credit work without their approval, I am forced to let Mr. Potter's talents languish. Here's another," he said, opening the scroll to a later point.

"As expected, Harry completed the obstacle course without any problems. His greatest exam accomplishment was a perfect patronus, which he cast at a boggart. Once again, I find myself questioning his stellar performance in my class. Tell him a charm or transfiguration is defense-related and he perfects it with little to no effort. In conversation, he clearly understands the theory and its applications. Indeed, during a recent discussion, he demonstrated the same advanced understanding I would expect from a seventh year, but his course work rarely rises above an A. Based on my observations, the E and O assignments were all completed on his own without his friends. When I discussed this matter with the headmaster and Professor McGonagall, I was informed that unless Harry's grades are insufficient to advance with his classmates, they are not my concern. Regardless of their opinion, I remain concerned as rather than live up to his own potential, Harry prefers to restrict himself to his friends' level. In this regard, the dementors were a blessing as they forced Harry to learn magic far beyond the ability of his classmates," he read.

Moody set the scroll down and eyed me. "The first was Quirrell dated 3 June 1992. Second was Remus Lupin dated 6 June 1994. In other words, three out of three Defense Professors agree that one Harry Potter is deliberately sabotaging himself."

Busted. I feared the day would come when Moody realized I was playing games, but I didn't think anyone else knew about it. Hearing that both Quirrell and Lupin tried to intervene and failed left a bad taste in my mouth. If it was so obvious, why didn't Dumbledore or McGonagall call me on it?

"Their evaluations raised some questions so I pulled your Hogwarts record and noticed your defense grades do not correlate with your other subjects. As Defense is really pieces of multiple
subjects, you normally see a very close correlation between Defense, Charms, and Transfiguration. Not so with you. At first, I ignored it because Quirrell was always one for hero worship and Lupin was a marauder. I figured they doctored your grade. Then, Albus told me about your patronus. Curious, I reread their evaluations and pulled Granger and Weasley's records. Did you know," he said conversationally, "that other than defense, your scores are always within two points of Mr. Weasley's? Suspiciously consistent, but what would I know? I'm not a trained educator so I asked an old friend, who has both an education certificate and over twenty-five years teaching experience, to take a look."

I glared at him. "You gave someone my school records! Are you bloody insane?"

"They don't call me Mad-Eye for nothing, kid. Now, where was I? My friend agreed with me, but he wanted more information. He asked me if Hogwarts had your muggle school records." My eyes widened. "Albus didn't, so I fetched them myself. Admittedly, I can't make heads or tails of muggle school records, but that's what friends are for. Imagine how stunned I was when he told me you scored in the top .5% on your Eleven Plus Exam and during your reception year, your teacher nominated you to skip first year. However, after your first term, your performance closely mirrored your grades at Hogwarts. Mediocre." He stood and limped around his desk. With a flick of his wand, he summoned his chair. It landed across from mine. He sat down. Leaning forward, he placed one hand on my knee. "Potter, I'm afraid this is going to be one another difficult conversation."

I cringed, remembering when he made me write out my meals and chores.

"I need you to answer me honestly. Will you do that?"

Like I had a choice. "Is it part of our occlumency lessons?" I asked, stalling for time.

"Since it's related to a topic that has already come up, it's covered by the oath."

"Okay," I whispered.

"Your first year of school, what happened when your relatives found out about your grades?"

I closed my eyes, wishing my interrogator would disappear. I remembered Uncle Vernon shouting "cupboard" and a black eye, courtesy of Dudley. Aunt Petunia called the school and told them I cheated off Dudley. "They punished me for cheating."

"So I read," he said, tapping the folder with his wand. "Thing is, Potter, you and I both know you didn't cheat. What did you do the next term?"

"Nothing much. I..." Words failed me. I did what I had to to survive. Nothing less.

"Here's what I think happened. If I'm right, nod your head."

I nodded my agreement and clenched my hands into fist. My nails bit into my palms and I desperately wished I could disappear.

"You figured good grades meant no food." I nodded. "So you let them slip until you were within a few points of your cousin." Another nod. "Most impressive. You perfectly judged his abilities and made yours match. Most adults can't do that."

I swallowed and relaxed my grip. Maybe I wasn't in as much trouble as I thought.

"But something changed Year Six. Can you tell me what?"
I took a deep breath and opened my eyes. "The first week of school," I said in a monotone, "they had an assembly for the kids who were attending Stonewall High the next year. Dudley was already down for Smeltings so he didn't go." Luckily. "Stonewall's a comprehensive, but they use the Eleven Plus Exam to divide the students. I think they changed that after the local primaries adopted the National Curriculum in 1992. Anyhow, at the time, they offered accelerated classes within the usual Higher GCSE/A-level track. A girl came and talked about the program. She expected to finish her A-levels a few weeks after her sixteenth birthday."

He leaned forward, resting his elbows on the table. "Were Mr. Weasley and Ms. Granger your first friends?"

"Yes," I whispered. "Ronald first. Then Hermione."

"Mr. Weasley is strictly an A-E student. Did you think if you scored higher than him he wouldn't be your friend?"

I wanted to say something about the tournament, but bit my tongue. Instead, I sipped my tea, reflecting on my first term at Hogwarts. Hermione ended up in the bathroom trapped by a troll because Ronald bullied her. It wasn't the first time he bullied someone for being better than him academically, nor was it the last. Had I picked up on that and subconsciously decided to hold myself back? "Maybe, but Ron wasn't the only factor. I already stood out because of the boy-who-lived nonsense. I didn't want to stand out more."

"And now? You're still following the same trend, even though you're not on speaking terms with Ronald Weasley."

"I want to push you. Find out what you're capable of alone and help you exceed it," he said abruptly. "Hogwarts breaks magic into individual subjects and pretends you can pick and choose what to study and still see the whole picture. You can't. In my opinion, that's a big part of the reason you're not sure magic is worth studying. I want to teach you transfiguration, chemistry, potions, herbology, arithmancy, runes, and history at the same time. Show you how all the puzzle pieces fit together and teach you how to formulate your own opinions on what's possible and what isn't without spoon-feeding you the answers. Teach you Latin and how to manage your own power levels so you can learn spell crafting without risking blowing up Hogwarts. Show you where mathematics and arithmancy meet and how algebra, trigonometry, and calculus influence spell outcomes."

"Can I study biology?" I asked tentatively. My head spun with the implications. Would he really let me pick up the muggle subjects I loved while studying magic at the same time? What happened next year? Everyone knew defense professors, impostor or not, didn't stick around more than a year.

"Of course. Physics, too. A wise man once told me magic doesn't change the laws of physics; it just delays them. Your analysis of Waffling is correct, but there is so much more out there. There are potions theories dating back to Aristotle that we have scientifically proven are correct, medical charms millennia old that we didn't know how they worked until a muggle discovered pathogens, Boudica, who nearly defeated the wand-wielding Romans without a wand, Paracelsus, who had the sheer gall to contradict Galen and conventional medical wisdom of his day, and so much more than you've ever imagined."

I gnawed on my bottom lip. "Are you sure you can teach me all that?"

His laughter echoed off the walls. He clenched the edge of the table and calmed himself. "Potter, I graduated Hogwarts with 12 O.W.L.s and 10 N.E.W.T.s. I dropped History and Divination, more
appropriately known as creative writing."

A snicker escaped my lips when I imagined Trewlaney's expression if she heard that. Creative writing, how apt! Making up dire predictions of my own demise (the bloodier the better) guaranteed an O in Trewlaney's class.

"While I'd prefer you pass your Divination O.W.L., I'll understand if you don't. Utterly useless subject, and don't get caught up in the numerology mess some idiot added to arithmancy either. The future is the future. Leave it be."

"If I pass, I can still drop it, right?"

"If I thought Albus wouldn't have conniptions, you'd drop it tonight. As for the other subjects, I sat my A-levels in Latin, maths, English language and literature, chemistry, and physics. Straight As. I never progressed beyond O-level biology and only have a basic understanding of anatomy, so I won't be as much help in those subjects. If I don't understand something well enough to explain it, I'll tell you and help you find someone who does. Afraid I won't be much help with the publicity issue either, but I can teach you how to hide yourself in plain sight with charms and potions."

"The conditions?" I asked. My mouth felt like cotton as I waited for his answer. I wouldn't claim I'd do anything for hiding lessons, but I'd do a lot. Since he was getting Moody's mail, he probably knew a way to change my name, too. With a few facial alterations, I could disappear the day I turned seventeen and sit my N.E.W.T.s at the ministry under my new name with no one being the wiser.

"You will stop pegging your grades to your friends. It's too late for this term, but I expect straight Os next term except Divination where anything A or higher is acceptable."

I gave him a beseeching look. "But Snape hates me."

"You will still put forth your best effort in his class. I'll regrade your essays and exams to see what level they actually are. Even the idiots at the ministry understand Snape's grades aren't worth the parchment their written on. We'll work at least a week ahead of your class. More if you can handle it. Sunday morning, we'll meet in the lab attached to my office so you can brew."

"Okay."

He raised an eyebrow. "Are you sure, Potter? Once you agree to a condition, there will be no negotiation. It's set in stone. You'd better adhere to both the letter and the spirit. Got it?"

"Yes, sir. I will put forth my best effort in all classes, even Snape's."

"You will stick to a study schedule I assign, take notes in a manner I approve, and stay awake in every class."

"But Binns could put a toddler on a sugar high to sleep."

He smirked. "Read a book. Look up old History OWLs and research the topics. Find something to occupy your time during History of Magic that will help you pass your OWLs."

My cheeks flushed and warmth crept up my neck. "Yes, sir," I mumbled.

"You should be embarrassed, Potter. Your idiotic decision to follow Mr. Weasley's lead nearly limited you to a career driving the Knight Bus. It still might. If I catch you slacking off, today's dueling session will look like a tea party in comparison to what I'll do to you. Do you understand?"
"Yes, sir."

"Good. At most, you'll have twelve free hours a week: four Saturday afternoon, two and a half Sunday night, and an hour every night except Monday when you have late Astronomy. If you wish to spend them studying, you may, but it's your time. Do what you like. However, by 9:30 p.m., you should be asleep. I know curfew isn't until 10:30, but you're up by 5 every morning."

"No arguments here," I replied. "I normally try to be asleep between 8:30 and 9:00."

"Glad you figured it out on your own. Next, I want a blood vow you will not play Quidditch during your O.W.L. or N.E.W.T. years."

"Do you have any idea what people will say about me if I don't? What my housemates might do to me?"

"Exams are more important than catching a snitch. Plenty of students sit out their exam years. You won't be the first."

"Gryffindors don't!"

Moody slammed his fist on the table, rattling the cutlery. "Charlus Potter, your grandfather, was three-hundred-forty-eight-years-old when he died of complications from dragon pox. As he had next to no relation to your grandmother, Dorea Black, and your father married a squib born, there is a very good chance you will live just as long as Charlus did. Unless you try my patience." I gulped. "In the grand scheme, which is more important: two years of Hogwarts level quidditch or a hundred years pursuing a career you choose, instead of one forced on you by your grades?"

"The second," I whispered.

"Precisely." He paused and sipped his tea.

I studied him for several minutes. I tried looking my grandparents up in the library, but didn't find anything. Now, I knew why. I didn't go back far enough. "Professor, how long do wizards live?" I asked.

"Depends on the lineage, power level, and inbreeding," he said with a shrug. "Families like the Blacks used to average two hundred years, but in the past two centuries, most don't live past seventy. Dorea was only fifty seven, still middle age by muggle standards, but she caught dragon pox and died a few weeks after your grandfather. Most wizards live between one hundred fifty and two hundred fifty years. For example, even with his power level, the best Albus can hope for is two hundred years, but I put it somewhere around one hundred fifty, maybe one seventy five if he takes care of himself. The Dumbledores aren't known for their longevity, but other lines...There are wizards who live three hundred fifty years or more without a philosopher's stone." My confusion must've shown on my face because he drummed his fingers on the table, a classic Moody thinking pose. "You've met Lucius Malfoy. Correct?"

"Yes."

"How old would you say he is?"

"Early thirties," I said, "but there's no telling how much he spends on beauty treatments."

"True," he conceded. "Lucius always was a prissy little snot. Pity his son takes after him and not Lucius's father Abraxas. I digress. He's forty, putting him in the one hundred fifty age range. Used to, a healer from St. Mungo's tested every student on their graduation day and gave them an
estimated life span. They quit in 1949 when the Blacks petitioned the Wizengamot to stop the practice on the grounds it was inaccurate."

"Is it?"

"If your inbreeding coefficient is less than 6%, it's accurate, but most purebloods are at least 12%, if not more."

"Oh. So no quidditch next year or in Seventh?"

"Afraid not. If you take your N.E.W.T.s early, it means no quidditch in sixth."

"No quidditch. Fine. Besides," I said, trying to rationalize my decision, "playing seeker is actually pretty boring. You just sit on a broom and watch. As long as I can still fly during my free time, I won't mind not playing."

"It's called free time for a reason, Potter. Do what you like with it," he growled. "That's it. If you agree, we'll start tomorrow. If not, we'll continue with morning dueling without any extras. You're choice."

"I agree."

"Excellent." Moody shuffled through his stacks and removed the blue notebook he had out earlier, a parchment form I didn't recognize, and a Gringotts letter, which I recognized by the gold seal on the front. "First, we're going to rectify a mistake you made when you asked the sorting hat to place you in Gryffindor."

"Wasn't a mistake," I mumbled.

Moody sighed. "Believe me, I understand why you didn't want to be in Syltherin. I wouldn't want to share a dorm with the Malfoy brat either." He raised my chin with his finger, forcing me to meet his gaze. "Minerva is an excellent teacher. What I'm about to say has nothing to do with her and everything to do with Albus. If this situation is any one's fault, it's his."

"What situation?" I asked, curious despite myself.

"Your earlier assessment of Hogwarts was too generous. In the muggle world, big name boarding schools typically have one teacher per twelve students or less. Hogwarts has one staff member, not teacher, per fifty. If you get the chance, ask the Durmstrang or Beauxbatons students how many students they have per potions practical. I guarantee you it's not more than twenty. In comparison, Snape has seventy students per practical. I assure you he doesn't like grouping students for their assignments, but he doesn't have a choice because he can't watch seventy cauldrons at once. It's impossible. The same goes for every other teacher here, but Albus refuses to hire more than one teacher per subject, just like Dippet before him. Minerva McGonagall is the deputy headmistress. At any other school, she would have to choose between being an administrator or a teacher. Not here. Here, she has all of the deputy duties plus ninety percent of the headmaster's because Albus spends most of his time on Wizengamot and ICW matters. In addition, she's a head of house and teaches one thousand and twenty nine students. She has six N.E.W.T. students, who help her grade papers, but that's all the help she gets."

"Do you?"

"Yes. My point is Professor McGonagall is working at least three jobs. It's no wonder Gryffindor doesn't have monthly reviews or weekly house meetings like the other houses do. She has to choose between her Gryffindors or the school as a whole. Her lions always come up short. That's
why your first official meeting with her wasn't until you picked your electives for third year. It's also why even though every year the head house elf submitted a written report, stating you didn't have adequate clothing for our Scottish winters or sufficient school supplies, she never checked your trunk. I don't believe she even had time to read the report, much less act on it."

I flinched. When he provided new underwear, I figured he knew more about my situation than I wanted anyone to know. Mrs. Weasley knew everything I owned was a little big and handed down, but all the Weasleys wore second hand clothing. She might have thought mine were a little worse for wear, but wrote it off as a muggle style. Also, since I always rotated between the same two sets of clothing, which fit better than the others, she didn't see the worst of it, which I hid in my trunk. "It's not that bad," I said, rushing to McGonagall's defense. "It gets a little cold in February, but as long as I wear a few layers, I'm fine."

"You need layers because your school robes are cotton. You should have at least three wool uniforms."

"But the list—"

"—is a guideline. They only send out the minimum requirements and assume parents and guardians have enough sense to fill out their child's wardrobe as needed and within the dress code." He deflated. "It's not your fault, Potter. Fortunately for you, when Albus assigned you to me, he gave me the authority to correct this problem."

"I'm not having another discussion with the hat."

"Not what I meant, and mind your tone." His voice hardened. "I can't interfere with your housemates, but I can and am with you." Moody turned, gathered up a pile of parchment, and a pair of scissors. He handed the lot to me. "We'll start with fixing your notes. What are you more comfortable with muggle paper or parchment?"


"I'll let you in on the best kept secret at Hogwarts," he said. "Parchment is only required for essays and exams, and quills aren't required at all."

"But I heard they use a special quill for the O.W.L.s."

"Only when they're administered at Hogwarts. Take them privately and the examiner just casts an anti-cheating charm on your preferred writing instrument."

Skeptical, I eyed the pile of parchment. "If it's not required, then why is it on the list?"

"For the same reasons pencils and paper are on the list for muggle schools; it's a reminder you need basic school supplies. As to how I know, I studied muggle studies and arithmancy under a private tutor and sat those exams at the ministry. I took them with a muggle fountain pen. If quills continue to be an issue for you, you should fill out the forms to sit your O.W.L.s during spring holidays next year."

Sitting there, I realized I was speaking with the real man, not the Moody act. It was odd really. I spent many hours pondering the line between the Moody act and my occlumency teacher. This person was my occlumency teacher, not fake Moody. Although I was surprised a death eater knew what a fountain pen was, I didn't doubt he took his exams with one. "I don't think Dumbledore will let me," I said.

"There are ways around Dumbledore. As one of your independent study projects, I'd like you to
spend some time digging through the older laws that weren't repealed because they involve ancient magics that predate the Wizengamot. Off the top of my head, I can think of four you might find useful."

"What are they?"

A Cheshire grin spread across his face, changing the topography from a'a lava to a mountain valley in the Alps. I wondered if I'd ever see his real face or learn his name. A huge part of me didn't want to know, but I was still curious. "Not my project, is it? I almost forgot. When I assign something, you will do the work and the research for yourself. You will not ask Granger for help. If she discovers what you're working on and suggests a book or a shelf in the library, fine. Otherwise, you will do your own work."

"Yes, sir."

"Fountain pens work on both paper and parchment and are easier to use, hold more ink, and not half as messy. Here." He shoved his uncapped pen in my hands and placed a blank sheet of parchment in front of me. "Pens adjust to the owner. Normally, I wouldn't let anyone touch mine, but you need to feel it and see if you like it. Go on," he said when I hesitated.

I'd never touched a fountain pen before, much less used one. Vernon owned a silver and gold fountain pen that even Dudley wasn't allowed to touch. Petunia accidentally washed it once. It dyed everything in the laundry pink. Vernon had a fit, but Petunia's indignant shrieks were so loud the neighbor called the cops because he thought someone was dying. Of course, the Dursleys punished me for that.

Slowly, I wrote my name. With increasing confidence, I slid the nib across the page, using a light touch like my quills required, but the fat barrel was much easier on my fingers. Best of all, I didn't need to stop and dip it in ink. He snapped his fingers. Reluctantly, I returned it.

"Like it?"

"Beats anything else I've tried, even pencils. I still have a little left for the year. Maybe I can order one."

He dangled the Gringotts letter in front of my nose. "Read," he ordered.

_President Moody,_

_After reviewing the head house elf's complaint and your statement, the Lily Evans Potter Trust is authorizing a distribution of no more than 400 Galleons for the following purchases:_

- **adequate school supplies as determined by you, not Mr. Potter;**
- **books for new subjects and supplementary reading for existing subjects;**
- **five school uniforms, underclothes, including socks, and two pairs of school shoes;**
- **two sets of appropriate athletic wear and one pair of athletic shoes;**
- **replacement supplies as needed;**
- **one standard Flourish & Blotts Introduction To The Wizarding World kit;**
- **additional potions ingredients through year six (double the standard amount);**
- a basic hygiene kit.

At this time, I cannot authorize the purchase of a complete muggle wardrobe as supplying non-

school clothing is my co-trustee's duty, not mine. In keeping with the letter of the trust agreement, I

recommend purchasing muggle athletic wear and shoes, as I hear many young witches and

wizards prefer exercising in pants, jackets, and sneakers.

As I understand, Mr. Potter cannot presently visit Diagon Alley or London and many things he

may need are not available in Hogsmeade, I have enclosed an order form for The Other World, a

shopping service Gringotts patronizes. The account information is already filled in. I've authorized

a rush (house elf) order. You should receive everything within either six business hours or by 10

a.m. the next day, whichever is first.

Please have all supplies delivered to you as it is my understanding Mr. Potter doesn't always

receive his mail.

Ralmuth of Gringotts

Institutional Trustee of the Lily Evans Potter Trust

P.S. As discussed, please have Mr. Potter fill out the enclosed forms, documenting his use of his

personal stipend to cover school supplies that should have been paid by his guardian's stipend. I

will arrange reimbursement and file the documents in an appropriate, goblin-only location.

Several minutes passed before I picked my jaw up off the table and stared at Moody in wonder.

"How?" During our meeting, Ralmuth alluded to some education stipulations, but never told me

the exact details. Reimbursing three years of school supplies amounted to about one hundred fifty
galleons. I cringed. "They won't take the money from the Dursleys, will they?"

"I don't believe so. Why?"

"Because I may still have to return there this summer. I'd rather not get beat up because Vernon

couldn't buy Dudley the latest toy."

"Noted," he said, scribbling on the order form. "Place your thumb here," he directed, pointing to

the bottom right corner. A green dot indicated where to place my right thumb. The moment I

touched the parchment it glowed yellow.

Ghostly hands formed in mid-air, moving me like a marionette as they measured my arms, legs,

height, waist, neck, wrists, and shoe size. Then, purple ink appeared at the top of the form, noting

my sizes, both muggle and magical. Tailoring instructions for Madame Malkin appeared in a box

below the sizes along with a list of muggle athletic shoes I would find comfortable.

"Notebooks or parchment?"

"Notebooks," I said, relieved I wouldn't have to spend the rest of the year wrestling with scrolls.
Parchment is great for fine writing, but class notes are not wedding invitations.

My dragon hide gloves plopped in my lap. "Try them on," he said.

Grimacing, I made my hand as small as I could and squeezed it into the glove.

"Replace," he said. "For future reference, dragon hide is magic resistant, which means no growth

charms. Check your gloves after every potion and herbology session. Most aren't corrosive enough
to burn through dragon hide, but some are. Wearing holey gloves is a good way to lose a finger."
I peeled the gloves off and tossed them aside. "What's next?"

"Do you have an actual potions kit? I'm not talking about shoving the jars and bags the ingredients came in into your school bag. I mean a real potions kit with preservation charms and a handle so you can carry it to class."

"No. Hagrid said…"I stopped when I realized how ridiculous I sounded. My chief complaint against Hagrid as a teacher was he hadn't taken the exams he was supposedly preparing us for. He didn't know what I needed beyond third year.

Moody checked his pocket watch, stood, and ambled over to his bookcase. He selected a book and tossed it to me. I checked the title.

Shock coursed through me. Where did he get a copy of Fahrenheit 451? Why did he have it? Better yet, why did he give it to me?

"I think you'll enjoy that one. It makes a lot of valid points about both the wizard and muggle worlds, but it's still a good read. Why don't you head back to your dorm? You still have an hour or so before bed. Get a little reading done. Maybe talk to Ms. Granger about something that's not homework. We'll straighten out your notes," he said with distaste, "in the morning."

"All right." I held the book up and grinned. "Thanks, professor." For once, he didn't tell me to not mention it.

All told, Moody spent 261 Galleons, 11 sickles, and 5 knuts of my money. Saying I was upset with the expenditure was like calling a blast ended skrewt a house pet. At first, I railed about the potions supplies—my old scale worked fine as long as I kneeled and used my wand as a straight edge so I could see when it was level—five school uniforms—two more than I needed—and enough socks and underpants to outfit the Weasleys. Instead of hexing me like I deserved, he put me through a series of exercises designed to prove his point. By Sunday afternoon, I conceded my old potion's kit was inadequate and organizing my notes by subject and date might be a good idea. I still wished he'd asked before he called all my ingredients contaminated and binned them, though.

By Monday night, I was sold on his draw-it-yourself planner with a vertical monthly overview, weekly overview, weekly goals, daily study diary, and daily to dos. Admittedly, I still found filling it out a bit daunting, but having study time pre-blocked for each subject plus my extra tutorials forced some order on my days and made the new schedule more manageable.

After my new Tuesday morning jog around the lake, I appreciated running shoes that fit and weren't held together by duck tape and chewing gum. The moisture-wicking training pants weren't too bad, either. I still wasn't sold on the school robes and boots, though.

My opinion changed during my Wednesday night astronomy class. The indoor class took place in a frigid classroom near the base of the astronomy tower. Professor Sinistra, as usual, set her classroom temperature to the temperature outside. For the first time ever, my teeth weren't chattering when I left her classroom. I reluctantly conceded that merino wool robes might be worth the extra 4 Galleons.

I snagged a chair in front of the fire and took out the five by seven refillable journal Moody picked out for my planner. At least, he let me choose the color, a pleasant saddle brown that suited me, not my house. I think he was surprised I picked something I liked without considering how others would see it. I uncapped the blue Lamy safari fountain pen that came on Sunday with the rest of my things and opened my journal to today's two pages. I jotted down what we covered in astronomy
and a few questions I had about the winter solstice, which the professor only mentioned in passing.

Then, I flipped back to my weekly view and made a mental list of to dos for tomorrow. Smiling to myself because tomorrow afternoon marked my first science lesson in over three years, I began writing down a short to do list, including finding references for the wand legislation essay I read during Tuesday's history of magic class. I drummed my fingers on the leather chair arm, a bad habit I picked up from Moody. Did wand legislation have a link to the ministry's idiotic classification of thinking creatures as non-human beings?

Hermione plopped down on the arm and looked over my shoulder. I slammed my planner shut and turned my head, smirking at her.

She scowled and reached for my planner, but I shoved it between the cushion and the arm, safely away from her prying eyes. "Hermione, has anyone ever told you curiosity killed the cat?"

"I'm not a cat," she replied, straining her arm.

She slipped. I caught her wrist before her hand landed somewhere neither of us wanted it. "Ask first, Hermione. I don't mind you borrowing my things, but please do me the courtesy, as my friend, to ask my permission first."

"You've never cared before."

I sighed and turned in the chair, drawing my knees up on the seat so I could see her without craning my neck. "I did care, but I thought you wouldn't be my friend if I didn't let you. I valued your friendship more than my privacy, but we're getting older now. There are some things you don't want to know about me, and vice versa." I hoped I didn't sound too condescending. Hermione's OCD traits were always scarier than other peoples, and she hated being talked down to.

She sniffed. "You're hardly the type to read porn in the common room."

"Maybe not, but I'm still entitled to my privacy." I fished my planner out and offered it to her. "I don't mind if you read my planner," I said, trusting my subject/textbook abbreviation system to keep certain studies private. "However, you need to learn to stop and think about my feelings before you invade my privacy. It's common courtesy, Hermione. I do the same for you. I'm just asking you to return the favor."

"Fine. Shouldn't you be working on herbology then?" she asked, pointing to my 10:30 to 11:30 astronomy study time slot.

"From nine to ten on Tuesday," I answered. Gut feeling, she ignored everything I said after I gave her my journal. For her sake, I hoped she didn't. If she discovered my independent, non-Moody approved, research and jumped in in her usual graceless manner, she could get us both killed.

A brilliant smile lit up her face. She began examining the few pages I had filled in, mostly the term goals, and monthly and weekly goals. "This is brilliant, Harry. I've never seen a planner that included a daily study diary and weekly views mixed together like this. Sure, you can sort of do this with a Filofax, but not completely. You always end up with two weeks at a time because they print both front and back. I never imagined you, of all people, would come up with something like this."

I scowled at her. "I'm not that bad."

Neville, who was laying on the rug in front of the fire place reading Magical Water Plants of the Mediterranean, snickered. "Face it, Harry. Last week, your homework was so waded up, Professor
McGonagall made you use an ironing charm on it before you turned it in."

"Last year, you turned being disorganized into a chronic disease," Hermione added, playfully. "but you've changed. Was that an expanding file I saw you with during Potions? I didn't think you even knew what filing was, much less how to do it."

My scowl turned into a Snape-like glare. It wasn't my fault I didn't own anything other than parchment and quills. What did she expect me to use to file things, blood? "Had your fun, yet?" I asked with a faint lisp. Behind me, someone gasped. I glanced over my shoulder and met the doe-like gaze of Ginny Weasley. "Sorry," I whispered.

"Not your fault. Just bad memories. I think I'll head to bed," she whispered and scurried up the stairs leading to the girl's dorms.

The smile dropped off Hermione's face. "She's right, Harry. I tried convincing the Weasley's to get her counseling after the Chamber, but they won't budge. Apparently, Professor Dumbledore told them all she needed was some sleep and a home-cooked meal." Bitterness crept into her voice.

I sighed. "Hermione, after the last few years, we all need counseling, but I doubt we'll ever get it."

A hush fell over the common room. "What do you mean?" Neville asked.

I shrugged, unwilling to reveal too many secrets in such a public setting. "It's just a feeling. Nothing more."

Neville watched me with worried eyes, but didn't press further. I've always liked that about him. He has a sixth sense when he should drop a subject and obeys it, unlike a certain best female friend of mine.

Hermione's smile returned, but it wasn't as bright as before. "Well, I for one am glad you're finally taking your studies seriously. Although, I wonder what's behind it."

"A crazy professor, hell-bent on making me use all my brain cells plus a couple million I don't possess," I answered, trying to lighten the mood. "Do you know he threatened to permanently attach my planner to my nose if I didn't use it properly? Mind you, he and I have very different definitions of properly, and he meant his properly, not mine. He checks my to do list every morning and reviews my study diary and class notes every afternoon."

"It's high time someone did," Hermione said, returning my planner. "I can't change my schedule this close to exams, but next term, I'll rearrange mine so we can study together."

I regarded her for a moment before nodding. Even though Moody wanted me months, if not years, ahead of my peers, I still had to keep up with my regular classwork. Hermione was always a term ahead, minimum, so she probably wouldn't care if I slipped up and used something too advanced. "Thanks. I'd like that."

"So," Neville said, marking his place with a strip of parchment and closing his book, "I get the new uniforms—Godric knows you've needed proper winter robes for years—but what's with the new potions kit?"

"He's just being a great prat," Ronald yelled across the common room. "Throwing his money around like a new cauldron will help his grade. As if!"

I closed my eyes and counted backwards from twenty. Must not hex Ronald, permanently maim or disfigure Ronald, or demonstrate the creative use of wingardium leviosa and aquamenti on Ronald.
"I replaced my cauldron when I learned the British Magical World last changed the formula for pewter in 1348," I said calmly. Hermione's eyes widened. I wondered if she'd made the connection. "The pewter used in the size 2 cauldrons on the Hogwarts' list was once known as trifle pewter and is four percent lead. Every time you drink a potion made in a pewter cauldron, you are ingesting a neurotoxin. In other words, poison." My fellow Gryffindors had a mixture of expressions ranging from so-what to abject horror. "Among other things, lead poisoning causes kidney damage, slowed body growth, and reduced IQ, which explains why the ministry chooses to regulate cauldron thickness, but not what metals should be used to make a substance you will ingest. For the record, magic does not cancel out lead poisoning, which causes your body to automatically consume your magic in ever increasing amounts as it attempts to heal. Eventually, your magic will run out. If you are unfortunate enough to have a large amount of lead in your system when that happens, you will slip into a coma and die. Magic can't save you from your own stupidity. If anyone is interested, my cauldron is a tin-lined, size 2, Admiralty Brass cauldron, purchased from Gruoch's Potions and purchased from Gruoch's Potioneers in Diagon Alley. They have a wide range of lead-free, antimony-free, and arsenic-free cauldrons. For two galleons, they'll tin-line old copper and brass cauldrons, which you really should have done because in large doses copper, which is in pewter, brass, and of course copper cauldrons, is also toxic."

I smirked at Ronald, who was starring at me like I'd grown a second head. "Of course, Ronald, since you're already suffering from brain damage, I'm afraid changing cauldrons won't make much difference." I shrugged. "At least, it's not too late for the rest of us."

Ronald's face turned as red as his hair. He clenched his fists and squared his shoulders, much like Dudley does moments before he beats up a ten-year-old. He stormed across the room, halting with his nose two inches from mine. "You think you're something, don't you? Everyone always loves Harry Potter. Harry Potter gets whatever he wants because he got a boo boo on his forehead. You may have everyone else fooled, but I know exactly what you are. A liar and a thief."

I leaned back in the chair, nonchalantly draping my right hand over the armrest so my wand remained out of sight, but at the ready. "Do you remember what you saw in the Mirror of Erised? I do. At the time, I thought you were driven. Then, you said a few things after the goblet debacle that made me think you were jealous. Then, I looked up the word jealous in the dictionary and realized what an idiot I was being. You see, Ronald, I wanted to believe you were jealous, meaning on some level you were afraid I would die competing in the tournament. I was completely wrong. You're not jealous; you're envious. You want to be the orphaned, single child with naught but a scar and enough galleons to see him through school. You've seen enough of my life to know the difference between reality and your pathetic delusions, but you still want to be me. Guess what? I have neither the time nor the inclination to pander to your ego. I neither need nor want your friendship. I could care less what you think about me buying a few school robes and a proper potions kit."

Sputtering with rage, he raised his fist. I let my magic flow through my fingertips. A shield charm on the tip of my tongue, I raised an eyebrow and opened my mouth to comment on how stupid he was for attacking a fellow Gryffindor in public when Fred and George grabbed him by the arms and hauled him away. "We'll keep him in our dorm tonight," George called over his shoulder.

"When Mum hears…" I heard Fred mutter before they were out of earshot.

I slumped in my chair, relieved I didn't have to maintain the facade any longer. When I said I didn't care, I lied. Ronald was my first friend. Part of me still yearned for the good times we had together, but I understood they were in the past. Last year, when Lupin taught me the patronus charm, an intellectual gap began to form between us. We never acknowledged it, but we both knew it existed. The gap compounded with his envy and my trust issues meant our friendship started unraveling months before my name came out of the goblet. The goblet just accelerated things.
Hermione rubbed my left arm in soothing circles. I raised my head and gave her a wane smile, but didn't say anything. How do you tell the best friend you can see yourself remaining best friends with for years to come that your friendship with your former mutual best friend is broken beyond repair?

"Give it time," she whispered and squeezed my hand once. She moved to a neighboring chair and dug through her satchel. I smiled faintly when I noticed the large planner and pencil in her hand. She opened it to the paperclip she used for a bookmark. "Gruoch's, right?"

I nodded.

She scribbled the name down. "Does your pen work on parchment?" Again, I nodded. Imperiously, she held her hand out and snapped her fingers. "Hand it over." Bemused, I passed her my pen. She uncapped it and held it up to the light. "Lamy, plastic, size EF nib."

"It came with a F nib, but the stroke was a little too broad for me so I changed it," I volunteered. "If you want one, you should ask for a converter, too, and ink. I think mine's Waterman Florida Blue. Moody ordered me an ink eradicator so I can erase stuff if I need to. You can't use India ink or iron gall ink, though," I said, naming the two most common inks in the wizarding world.

She shrugged. "I use fountain pen inks my dad purchases at the local stationary half the time anyway." With a flick of her wand and muttered incantation, she summoned my bag, then flushed. "Sorry," she mumbled. "May I?"

Counting my blessings I only had my astronomy books and some Hogwarts-related supplementary reading with me, I nodded my assent. Humming to herself, she began sorting through my things. Hermione squealed and clutched my copy of _Study Methods and Charms_ like it would disappear if she put it down. "I don't believe it! It's brand new. There hasn't been a new edition since 1972." She opened the inside cover and checked the copyright date. "Where did you get this?" she asked, frowning.

"Moody. He said the author owed him a favor."

"Must be some favor to get you an advance copy of a book that retails for thirty galleons used." Eyes shining, she raised her head. "Please?"

"I should be finished with it by Sunday morning. I'll let you borrow it then, but I need it back in case Moody quizzes me on it."

Reluctantly, she put the book down and returned to examining my school supplies. "You don't honestly expect me to believe you took the initiative and ordered all this yourself, do you?" she whispered.

I shrugged. "No, I just didn't want everyone else to know the head house elf reported me for not having adequate clothing or supplies for the fourth year in a row. Professor Moody let me pick the colors, but I didn't get much say in what he ordered."

"Oh, why didn't you…" she trailed off and turned away. "I understand. I just wish someone had helped you before. The new potion's kit is because Hagrid didn't know triple beam balance scales are easier to use and more accurate than equal arm beam balance scales, and no one told you how to store your ingredients properly so everything was contaminated, right?"

I nodded. "Plus, Professor Moody changed my schedule to include a Saturday morning potions tutorial. I needed extra ingredients so I have enough for my tutorials and class."
"When's your first session?" she asked. I noticed Neville eying us with interest. He hated Snape's class as much as I did.

"We started Sunday afternoon." I grinned. "He's loads better than Snape. I think I learned more in a four hours than I did in first year."

"Really?" Neville asked. "What did you do?"

"I ate grilled cheese sandwiches," I said seriously. Neville looked perplexed, but Hermione gaped at me like I'd claimed the moon was made of green cheese. "Seriously. He took me to the kitchens and asked the elves to make three grilled cheese sandwiches: one with a cast iron skillet, another with steel, and the last used the steel pan and a spatula dipped in garlic butter. He blindfolded me and had me taste sandwiches." I gave them a rueful grin. "I didn't get it at first either. Then he asked me if the sandwiches tasted different, which they all did. The sandwiches were edible demonstrations of the different causes of contamination," I explained. "Certain materials used in cauldrons, knives, and certain types of stirring rods can contaminate your potion as can dirty equipment—hence, the garlic butter—and improperly stored ingredients. Then, we went back to the classroom where I practiced different knife cuts for three hours." I extended my hands so they could see the small nicks my fingers.

"Ouch," Neville muttered.

"I think it's great," Hermione said.

"You would," I said dryly. Hermione shot me a dirty look, as if to say she'd cut off her own arm for daily one-on-one tutoring from a professor. "You know how Moody acts during class? Take that and multiply it by a hundred and you have what he's like in private."

Hermione shrugged as if to say she still wouldn't mind and returned to cataloging my school supplies, stopping to write in her planner every few minutes. I suspected she was making her Christmas list and made a mental note to write her parents and tell them I'd already ordered her a replacement cauldron.

* Technically, the HP wiki identifies the school as St. Grogory's. As there is a St. Gregory, but not a St. Grogory, I changed the name.

** Although there is one quote from the books about a transfiguration department, the evidence shown by class schedules and students of all age groups comparing said schedules (such as the twins and Harry) indicates the departments only have one professor each. Since Hogwarts has fewer teachers they have fewer total classes than comparable schools. This results in more free periods than you would expect. In comparison, comparable schools have 3-5 hours instruction in each main subject per week. Hogwarts only offers 1 1/2 or 2 hr. 15 minute per week.

*** Gruoch of Scotland is the historical basis for Lady Macbeth.

Chapter End Notes

There is some debate over how many students attend Hogwarts. In interviews, Rowling has claimed both 300 and 1000. I'm putting it at around 1000 both to make the student teacher ratio more outrageous and to make the wizarding population
largely self-sustaining. (That is self-sustaining barring those who believe their family tree should resemble the Hapsburgs.)

Onto the more mundane notes... Antimony, which is used in place of lead in modern day pewter, mimics arsenic poisoning. In short, regardless of how old the pewter is, you shouldn't drink out of it, much less cook with it. The melting point for modern day pewter is 338-448 F, compared to admiralty brass at 1652-1724 F. Even with the high melting point, you still shouldn't cook in untinned or unlined brass pots.

Lamy safaris are a common starter/intermediate fountain pen. I've had mine for over ten years and prefer it to the more expensive pens in my collection. I suppose it's used to me. (As a general rule, a decent fountain pen and a bottle of ink are cheaper over their lifespan than purchasing multiple disposable ink pens over the same period.)

Special thanks to evil genus, who encouraged me to try for two chapters in one day. Don't know yet if I can repeat this marathon tomorrow. We'll see.

Please read and review.
Chapter 8

Chapter Notes

Disclaimer: Harry Potter and related characters, situations, settings, and plots is the original work of J.K. Rowling and under copyright. While I enjoy playing/experimenting in her sandbox, it's not mine and never will be.

See the end of the chapter for more notes

First day of the winter holidays found me holed up in the library with my spare notebook, where I had transcribed all my crazy theories, and my pen. My chosen table was in the back, under a window, far away from any portraits or popular areas. Following our talk, Moody let me pick an individual study project in addition to our occlumency, my individual parseltongue study, and whatever we were studying in my other subjects. True to his word, as long as I kept my grades up and stayed ahead in all my classes, he would teach me anything within reason. I picked security spells, including anti-eavesdropping charms, because the week after the first task, after I finished studying the old Prophets, I began digging through Albus Dumbledore's voting record during my limited spare time. Then, using a handy search spell I found in Study Methods and Charms, I expanded my search to include known members of the Order of the Phoenix and supporters, including the Weasleys.

It wasn't a pretty picture.

Ephias Doge and Albus Dumbledore voted for every piece of legislation banning books and so-called dark artifacts, an interesting term the law didn't clearly define. Save for blood quills and deadly cursed objects (deadly was still a matter of opinion, ability to apparate, and proximity to St. Mungo's), dark artifacts were identified by the Department of Magical Law Enforcement at the time of the search.

If Mr. Weasley searched my trunk and determined my lock box was dark, debatable under the current law, he could arrest me and send me to Azkaban to await trial. A trial, which according to the laws, jointly authored by Bartemius Crouch and Albus Dumbledore and passed immediately after Voldemort fell, did not necessarily have to occur. Under wizarding law, all they had to do was accuse someone of being a death eater and they could incarcerate them for life without trial. No evidence required. They didn't even have to check for the dark mark.

It got worse.

From a purely political angle, my parents and Sirius were the least valuable members of the Order. My father had an old name, but he lost most of the family wealth before he died and didn't hold any sway with the ministry or Hogwarts. As the only Black that didn't side with Voldemort, Sirius's name was worthless. He was also the heir's heir, so he only had access to his trust fund, not the family money. My mother was just a housewife who married well.

Out of the four marauders, Lupin's situation bothered me the most. I always assumed no one knew he was a werewolf, but Greyback's attack made the 27 May 1964 Daily Prophet, complete with pictures of Lupin's parents at his bed side in St. Mungo's. He may have hidden his affliction from
his classmates, but the adults knew. Additionally, he was one of twenty-three magical children bitten by a werewolf in 1964 and was the only one to attend Hogwarts. For that matter, Hagrid was the only half-giant in the school's history. Allowing either of them to attend Hogwarts technically broke the law, not that Dumbledore cared about such trivial matters, but it also gave the person who let them attend their undying gratitude. They'd do anything for him.

Maybe that was the key. The giants and werewolves aren't politically powerful pieces. Indeed, they're practically pariahs, but if you need to mount a defense or wage a war, they're invaluable. Was Dumbledore attempting to use Hagrid and Lupin to recruit them or was he playing a more subtle game? Based on his dealings with me, I voted for subtle.

What did Dumbledore admitting them to Hogwarts show the werewolves and giants? The great Albus Dumbledore accepted them when no one else would. He fought for them. Look what he did for Lupin and Hagrid, they'd say. With such shining examples, no one would care that his voted for giant relocation programs and authored a law requiring all werewolves incarcerated in Azkaban for any reason sterilized to 'reduce their aggression'. I felt ill.

Last year, I trusted Lupin. Not anymore. Looking back, there was always something forced about our interactions. When he taught me the patronus charm, he never asked the obvious questions like why I picked riding a broom as my happiest memory. I supposed he was a decent teacher. I did learn the patronus charm, eventually, but he was also criminally negligent when he forgot to take his wolf's bane. Despite being free for my entire childhood, he never contacted me or Aunt Petunia, who wrinkled her nose like she smelt something foul when I asked her last summer before she told me she'd never heard from the bloke. For once, I believed her.

Lupin claimed he was grieving for his friends, too troubled to spare a minute for the sole survivor, but I had trouble believing he grieved for over ten years without any contact with the land of the living. I bowed my head and breathed deeply. No use puzzling over Lupin's grief. He left me, came back into my life, and repeated his disappearing act, not even bothering to contact me when my name came out of the Goblet. Enough said.

Like Lupin, Pettigrew was a follower, and his rat form made him a valuable spy.

I drummed my finders on the table. What an intriguing thought! The Weasleys were Dumbledore supporters during the First War, and Mr. Weasley did jointly author several muggle bills, including his infamous Muggle Protection Act, which made defending yourself with magic against an armed muggle an Azkaban worthy offense, with Professor Dumbledore.

According to Caring for Magical Pets, Pettigrew's species of rat lives an average of three years. The Weasleys had him for twelve, and they're neither stupid nor completely unobservant. Did Pettigrew buy their silence? Dumbledore's? Information is power, and a rat animagus could learn a lot if he was in the correct location.

The other Order members were teachers, ministry officials, jurists, aurors, and one criminal by the name of Mundungus Fletcher who probably knew more about the black market than all the others combined.

On paper, looking solely at job descriptions, actions at the end of the last war, and their leader's voting record, the Order of the Phoenix bore an eerie resemblance to the Stasi.

"There you are. We've been looking everywhere for you," Hermione said, dropping a stack of books on the table. I nearly groaned. Although she initially accepted my Ronald decision, her acceptance diminished with each passing day.
"Where's Ronald?" I asked before she launched into another lecture.

"Playing chess with Dean. He should be doing homework like you..." she trailed off, leaning across the table and trying to read my notes upside down. I covered them with my arm, but I was too late. She snatched my notebook up and brought it to her nose.

"Give it," I said, trying to reach it before she read anything incriminating. Hermione turned at the last second. When I made another attempt, she stood up, continuing to read. "Do you recall our conversation about privacy?" I drawled, hitting her hand with a stinging hex.

She jerked. "Yes, but—"

"No buts, Hermione. You're fifteen-years-old. It's time you learned to think about the possible consequences of your actions before obeying your imbecilic impulses. Did it never occur to you that if you do not learn how to curb your incessant curiosity, one day you'll learn something you shouldn't know?" I whispered, keeping an eye out for eavesdroppers while I mentally kicked myself. Sweet Circe, she was doing so well with respecting my privacy, I dropped my guard, leading to this. "How much did you read?" I demanded.

"Enough," she said, squaring her shoulders. Her eyes returned to the page. Though I was sorely tempted, I didn't curse her. Cursing people in the library led to awkward questions, which might lead to my research and a mental session with Dumbledore. Not worth the risk.

My magic boiled underneath my skin. I closed my eyes and counted backwards. Once my magic stilled, I held my hand out for the notebook, but she didn't return it. "Hermione, you really don't want to get involved in this."

She shrugged. "It's no different from every other year."

"Trust me," I said. "You do not want to be caught between Dumbledore and Voldemort, which will happen if you don't walk away and forget about this." I was partially quoting Moody, who I still hadn't identified, I hadn't had an opportunity to check the map without him noticing. That damn eye of his could see through the desks. Whatever his name was he was right. I was playing a deadly game. If I failed, I didn't want Hermione to go down with me.

Her eyes widened. She gasped. "Harry, this is..." Hermione's bottom lip quivered and her face crumbled like her entire world had just disintegrated beneath her feet, casting her into an endless chasm. My heart clenched. I knew exactly how she felt. "Are you sure?"

"Ninety percent sure," I said softly, holding my hand out for my notebook. She didn't return it. Instead, she seated herself beside me, clinging to the notebook like a lifeline. With shaking hands she laid it on the table and smoothed the pages out.

I peered over her shoulder. She was stuck on my chart comparing the Stasi to the Order of the Phoenix.

_Hogwarts: A History_ had some fascinating information on the portraits. They are bound to the castle and, by extension, the headmaster. A spy can bend the truth or flat out lie. They can't.

Where the Stasi tapped phone lines, drilled holes in apartment walls, and bugged confessionals, Albus Dumbledore controlled the portraits of past headmasters and headmistresses. With a few exceptions, they were the most revered wizards and witches of their time. They had portraits in private homes, the Ministry, St. Mungo's, and businesses, including Gringotts and the Daily Prophet. The headmaster only needs to order them to visit one of their portraits and return with the
information. The ultimate spy network.

Dumbledore claims he doesn't want to be minister. In one speech, he even laughed at himself and said he didn't want power.

Lie.

Whoever controls Hogwarts controls wizarding Britain for generations. The headmaster, not the ministry, has final say over syllabi. He determines what books are purchased for the library, labels some restricted and removes others. He teaches generations of students how to think, what to think, and, just as important, identifies and squashes his competition. Add in the portraits and the minor detail that he leads both the Wizengamot and the ICW and you have a dictator in all but name. He even has his own 'secret' organization to support his agenda. Sometimes, they even openly attack his political opponents, like when Mr. Malfoy was opposing the Muggle Protection Act and Mr. Weasley raided his manor without a search warrant, even though both muggle and wizarding law requires one. *The Daily Prophet* legal section documented Mr. Malfoy's complaint, but it vanished about a week after Dumbledore was removed from the school.

"Harry," Hermione whispered. I met her eyes. "This is mad. You took the books and twisted them into this insane conspiracy theory. Professor Dumbledore would never—"

"—Sirius Black," I said firmly.

She blinked, nibbled on her lip. "But Harry, he's always protected…" Hermione stopped, clearly distressed. "Well, he did hide the stone in the school, and he didn't exactly do anything about the basilisk. That was, forgive me, painfully obvious to anyone with half a brain."

"No offense taken."

"But he was friends with your parents," she said as if that made all the difference. It didn't. Jack the Ripper probably had friends or at least people who thought they were his friends.

"Hermione," I said as gently as I could without giving her false hope, "my parents were twenty-one when they died. Professor Dumbledore was their headmaster for seven years. I highly doubt they suddenly became best friends the instant they graduated. Any friendship he claims they had is highly suspect."

"But," she protested.

Sighing, I ran my fingers through my hair. "Hermione, you want equal rights for house elves, right?" She nodded fervently. "When you were researching how house elves are treated or for Buckbeak's case, did you ever research our government system? I'm not talking about how the Wizengamot's setup or how the minister's selected; I'm referring to the regime type and policies."

"We're a constitutional monarchy with democratic institutions."

I snorted. "Open your eyes and look at the world around you. The Ministry of Magic, our legal government, ordered a man who was imprisoned without a trial kissed on sight. There's another phrase for that: summary execution. We're not at war with anyone, they didn't declare a state of emergency, or take any other step to legalize it because they consider it perfectly legal. Before you claim Sirius is an exception, do the research. He's not the first person they've targeted; he's just the first who's survived more than a year." I grabbed her hand. "Summary executions are the stuff of totalitarian regimes and nightmares. It's currently our government's policy. I'm sorry. I know you want to believe Dumbledore fought for what's right. I want to believe the same thing about my
parents, but the fact remains summary execution is wrong as is political censorship, show trials, state-controlled mass media like The Daily Prophet and the Wizarding Wireless Network, and warrant-less searches. All of which the Ministry of Magic, led by Minister Fudge and Chief Warlock Albus Dumbledore, practices."

"But Dumbledore's a great man." Her tone turned hysterical. Under the table, I shot a silencing charm at her before she attracted an audience.

"Lord Acton said it best, Hermione. Power tends to corrupt, and absolute power corrupts absolutely. Great men are almost always bad men. What makes you think Dumbledore's exempt?"

Knowing Hermione was psychologically unable to drop this without understanding the full picture, I handed her my time line, legislation lists, and everything I knew about the show trials and false imprisonments. "Read," I ordered in a tone similar to Moody's. "If you must double check, the books are in the history section. I've noted the references. You will not leave this table without me. My notes do not leave my sight ever. I also require an unbreakable vow that you will not share this with anyone without my written consent or write anything down."

She gaped. With a flick of my wand, I canceled the silencing charm.

"But, Harry, unbreakable vows kill. You can't expect me to—"

I grabbed her chin and jerked her head around, bringing my face inches away from hers. "Hermione, I know you. Without a vow, the first thing you'll do is run off to McGonagall, just like you did with the stone and my firebolt. If you don't make the vow, I'll have to obliviate you." I'd only practiced the obliviate once on Mrs. Norris, and I wasn't sure how successful I was or how much damage I caused. Judging by the way she walked into the wall afterward, I'd say it wasn't my best spell. I hoped she picked the vow.

"That broom could have killed you."

"Hermione, if I'm right and you let something slip, there is an extremely good chance we will both be killed or chunked in Azkaban. Now, I'm willing to sit here and watch you read my notes and conclusions. Then, I'm willing to take you to Moody and ask him to serve as our binder. Otherwise," I said, placing my wand between her eyes, "I can and will obliviate you."

She gulped and nodded slowly, eying my wand like it was a snake poised to strike. To her, it probably was. Losing knowledge was her worst nightmare. I hated myself for threatening her, but I also feared what they might do to her if she told the wrong person. I asked for a vow to protect us both.

While Hermione read, I opened my planner and began listing my questions for Professor Dumbledore. I thought he'd forgotten about the first task when McGonagall asked me to stay after my last transfiguration lesson. She handed me a note, indicating a meeting at 9 am on December 21st, and asked me if I'd reconsidered forgiving Ronald—not in this lifetime—before she dismissed me.

I needed to plan our interaction, including what questions I could safely ask and what questions I shouldn't answer. My occlumency had improved sufficiently that I would know if he touched my mind, but not enough to keep him out. Moody said keeping someone Dumbledore or Voldemort's caliber out required years of study. At my request, Moody was attending the meeting with me. If Dumbledore revealed anything sensitive, not bloody likely, I could always out Moody at the end of the year. If things turned sour during the meeting, I would need the mad, but well-connected, auror (or at least his impersonator) in my corner.
Several hours passed before Hermione put my notebook down and folded her hands in her lap. I looked up. "Well?" I asked.

"I'm not saying you're right. It's a little far fetched, but...I just don't understand why I didn't notice anything. You're not dumb, Harry, but you're no Einstein. Why would you notice something like this before I did?"

I was taken aback by her perspective. Was it the shock talking or did she really believe I suffered from a sub-par IQ? I closed my eyes and counted backwards from ten, calming my magic before things began exploding. "Tell me the truth, Hermione. What house did the hat want you in?"

She bristled, hair crackling with static—a clear sign she was highly annoyed. "Gryffindor, of course."

I snorted. "Sure, and the hat wanted Ronald in Hufflepuff."

"Fine." Hermione crossed her arms over her chest and huffed. "Ravenclaw. We can't all be perfect."

I grinned. "I'll tell you a secret, but you have to promise you won't tell Ronald."

Hermione leaned forward. "Not another conspiracy theory?"

"Nope, and it's a good one, but one I don't want getting around."

"It won't hurt anyone, will it?"

"Only me."

"I promise."

"The hat wanted me in Slytherin."

She covered her mouth with both hands. "Seriously?" she squeaked.

"Seriously."

"Ron would die if he found out."

"That's why no one will ever tell him. Correct?"

"Of course. Your secret's safe with me." Hermione tapped my notes. "What does the sorting hat have to do with you noticing this before I did?"

"Our brains are wired differently. Take Hogwarts: A History. You read it cover to cover because you wanted to know everything about Hogwarts. You appreciate knowledge for knowledge's sake, not what it can get you. I read Hogwarts: A History because I wanted to know more about the headmaster's powers within the castle, his legal authority, the rules as they apply to both teachers and students, and the charter. In other words, I read it because knowledge is power. I read it to learn more about Professor Dumbledore's resources and find out if I could utilize any of them for my own benefit."

"I understand," she said with a determined look on her face. "Will you promise you'll keep an open mind about this? If I find proof you're wrong, will you listen?"

"If you can find proof without arousing suspicions or discussing this with anyone, I'll listen."
However, you should keep in mind that after my parents died, Dumbledore sealed their wills, tossed my legal guardian into Azkaban without a trial, had himself appointed as my guardian and co-trustee, and packed me off to the Dursleys, who treated me only a little better than the Malfoy's treated Dobby." She grilled me thoroughly after my meeting with Gringotts. I wasn't telling her anything she didn't already know or suspect. My reminder was intended to stop her from haring off on a 'prove Dumbledore's innocent' mission when my personal experience with the man proved the opposite.

She held out her hand. "Let's find Moody. I'm not sure you should trust him with this. He is one of Dumbledore's Order members. Maybe we should ask a student or someone from another school."

I returned her smile. "Moody's different than he seems. He already suspects I'm aware of this. I'm confidant he won't tell Dumbledore."

Moody wouldn't. Last week during occlumency, I deliberately showed him my thought process when I realized he wasn't the real Moody. I made sure the impostor understood I planned to keep my mouth shut. He'd chew me out for dropping my guard around Hermione during my next lesson, but he would help.

Chewed out was an understatement. After Hermione made her vow and left Moody's office, Moody announced that instead of our usual morning lessons, my morning tutoring would run from 5:30 to 8:30am, per the usual. Then I had lessons with him from 9:00 am to 12:00 pm. He gave me an hour for lunch. Then back until 5:00 pm. Moody never asked why I needed an unbreakable vow, and I didn't volunteer the information, but he did correctly assume I was investigating something I shouldn't be and Hermione caught me. The extra hours were both a means to keep an eye on me to ensure I kept his secret and punishment for getting caught.

The day before my meeting with Dumbledore, Moody worked me until I passed out from magical exhaustion. Then he shoved chocolate down my throat and launched into a lengthy lecture—the gist of which was there would be no repeats of the Hermione incident or he'd take payment in blood.

Oddly, the harsh treatment made me feel warm and fuzzy.

I rounded the corner and spotted Moody waiting for me beside the statue that guarded the entrance to Dumbledore's office.

"Ready?" he asked.

"Yes."

"Remember, don't lose your temper and mind your tongue," he said, repeating the same maxim he said daily since the first task.

"I won't, and I will."

"All right, then." Moody tucked his wand up his sleeve and turned to the gargoyle. "Candy canes," he said.

"Being this obsessed with candy can't be healthy," Moody muttered under his breath as we walked up the stairs.

I repressed my snickers as we entered the office. Silver gadgets twirled and puffed smoke, either restored or rebuilt after my last visit, but the rug was different. Still antique, it was worked in
shades of crimson, purple, and green, but the overall look was more muted than its predecessor. Not stunning, but not an eyesore either.

"Harry, Alastor," Dumbledore greeted us from behind his desk, waving his hand at three leather arm chairs. He stood, brushing off his robes. His tyrian purple robes would've been regal if they weren't covered with 'festive' twinkling silver stars and dancing gingerbread men. I wondered when he last had his eyes checked. That fabric should be illegal. Dumbledore seated himself in one of the arm chairs. Moody and I followed suit.

"I must say," Dumbledore said, smoothing his robes, "I was impressed by your performance during the first task. Quite an unorthodox method. We didn't anticipate a simple summoning charm."

"Then why did you give me such a low score?" I asked, keeping my tone curious, but deferential.

"Because we were charged with judging your ingenuity, spell expertise, and bravery. Your solution was quite ingenious, but you only cast one spell. Then you hid behind the dragon keepers. Although I must say, I'm pleased you didn't carry through with your threat to hide behind the judges."

"How did you find out about that?" I asked. My ears flushed with anger that was easily mistaken for embarrassment. I hoped.

"It's nothing to be ashamed of, dear boy. It's a perfectly understandable reaction. I was just surprised when Padfoot mentioned it. It didn't seem like you."

"It seemed like the thing to do at the time. I think I made the best choice given the situation." I hesitated to condemn Sirius. Even though he claimed Sirius told him, I wasn't sure. Dumbledore could have learned that from a portrait or listened in on the floo. Still, I didn't remove the black mark. Dumbledore sent Sirius to prison without a trial. Yet, Sirius still defended him.

"Really?" The back of my neck prickled when he brushed against my shielded mind. I narrowed my eyes. Dumbledore's mouth quirked and his presence disappeared.

"Yes, sir. My dragon was the only one that broke free. If I hadn't hidden behind the dragon keepers, she would have eaten me."

"Now, Harry," he said in a patronizing tone. "Things weren't as out of control as you seem to believe. We had everything well in hand. If you were in any danger, I would have stepped in."

"Forgive me, sir, but being trapped in an enclosure with a pissed off horntail is the very definition of danger."

Dumbledore sighed and toyed with his wand. Fawkes crooned at us. I gave the bird a small smile. Say what you will about Dumbledore, but I still liked Fawkes. "After everything you've faced, I hardly think a dragon was much of a challenge. I was confident you would rise to the occasion."

"I suppose we'll have to agree to disagree, then."

"Perhaps." Dumbledore raised his eyes to the sorting hat for a second before giving me a watery smile.

"Did you ever find out why the chain broke?" I asked.

"Never investigated. Someone," Moody jerked his thumb at Dumbledore, "banished it before we could check it."
I already knew. Moody told me two days after the task, but I needed to see Dumbledore's reaction.

"Alastor, this isn't a conspiracy. No one went near the chain. We just underestimated the horntail's strength."

"In other words, no one weighed it, asked any questions about how protective nesting mothers are or the horntail's temperament, or considered that a fail safe might be a good idea," I said before Moody went into another tirade about proper procedure. "It doesn't matter anymore. The first task is over. Was there anything else you wanted to discuss, professor?" I asked Dumbledore. "Professor Moody has a dueling lesson scheduled this morning. I'm afraid he won't release me until midnight if we delay him much longer."

Moody rolled his magical eye. To most people, it looked like one of his random sweeps, but I'd spent enough time around him to recognize an eye roll when I saw one.

"I take it your tutoring's going well, then?" Dumbledore said.

"Yes, sir. I'm learning loads." Like what not to say when confronting a manipulative headmaster.

"Excellent." Dumbledore clapped his hands and a tea tray appeared. "Tea?"

Moody shook his head.

"No, thank you," I replied.

Dumbledore poured himself a cup and added three sugar cubes. A little sweet for my tastes, but less sugar than I expected. "Harry, I've hesitated to bring this up because I didn't want you to get your hopes up. This changes nothing about your living situation. It's more a formality than anything."

"You're my legal guardian," I said before he uttered another excuse. "Gringotts informed me when I inquired about my trust fund."

Dumbledore coughed delicately. "Yes, well...I always planned on telling you, but I was afraid that—"

"—I would ask to live with you," I finished for him.

"Yes. You see, Harry, your mother's sacrifice allowed me to cast a powerful charm on you."

"Does this charm have a name?" I asked, letting my doubts bleed into my voice.

"The bond of blood. It was the strongest shield I could give you and will only work so long as you reside with your aunt."

"Are the charm's protections, I said dubiously, "proven?"

Dumbledore glared at me, but held onto his barmy-old-man smile. Quite the feat. I wondered how he managed it. "When you came to Hogwarts, you were neither as happy nor as well-fed as I'd have liked, but you were alive. (1) Without the charm, you wouldn't have lasted a month."

I stared at him in disbelief. My mind struggled to process his words. He knew? The bloody bastard knew! "Forgive me for asking this, sir," I said coldly, "but are you telling me you, the Chief Warlock of the Wizengamot and the Headmaster of Hogwarts, knew I was chronically malnourished. You were aware that you placed me in an abusive environment. That the Dursleys
would treat me worse than the lowest house elf. And yet you send me back there every year. Did it never occur to you that I might need protection from the Dursleys more than Voldemort?"

"I knew when I left you there I was condemning you to ten dark years, but it was the only way to keep you alive."

I took a deep breath. "Professor Moody, does St. Mungo's offer psych evaluations?"

Moody shot me an amused look. "Yes, Potter."

"Maybe we should request one for Professor Dumbledore. He seems to have taken complete leave of his senses and professional obligations."

"Harry," Dumbledore said sharply.

I raised an eyebrow at him. "Please call me Mr. Potter, professor. You lost all right to address me so familiarly the moment you left me on a doorstep in November. You didn't even bother to knock. Just left me there like a bottle of milk or a paper. That's not how you treat a child you want to survive, professor. It's how you treat something you want to throw away, which is exactly what you did. Don't bother denying it."

Dumbledore appeared to age ten years as he slumped back in his chair. "I did what was best."

"Best for you or best for me?"

"For both of us. For all of us. You'll understand one day, Harry. It was all for the greater good. The dark...you have no idea."

I hid my ire behind an emotionless mask. Dumbledore was a master statesman. His speeches were well documented, and if you had a passing familiarity with muggle political philosophy, exceedingly familiar.

"This is the only opportunity I will ever give you to explain your actions," I said, tempering my tone. "Professor, if you want me to take you seriously, I wouldn't recommend quoting Jeremy Bentham. The muggles regard him as quite mad, you know. Just like Marx, he took his idea to its most logical extreme. Then, the maniac started writing constitutions for countries he didn't live in and presented them, uninvited, mind you, to their unsuspecting legislatures. At his death, Bentham had his body dissected during a public lecture. Then his bones were dressed in his clothing, fitted with a wax head, and displayed in a glass box. I hear the University College London still has it. They trot it out for occasional board meetings and list it as 'present, but not voting'. I realize you're fond of quoting him, especially when you're discussing the differences between light and dark magic, but I don't recommend it."

Moody's shoulders shook with silent laughter while Dumbledore stared at me, gobsmacked. "What?" I said. "I do read. Not as much as Hermione, but the library's the only place safe from Dudley. My fourth form teacher told us about the body. I looked it up."

"You're something else, Potter," Moody muttered between snickers. Dumbledore glared at him before turning to me with a benign smile.

"Bentham was a great man, Harry."

"The Mongols say the same thing about Genghis Khan, but I doubt the Tangut would agree. It's Mr. Potter."
"Your parents would be ashamed of you, Mr. Potter." Dumbledore dropped the grandfather act. His tone turned harsh.

"You are not my parents, Professor Dumbledore. They sacrificed their lives for mine. I'm confident they would support any action on my part intended to keep me among the living, which is exactly what I intend to do. Now, you can either tell me the truth or I can return to my lessons."

"Very well." Dumbledore looked like he was sucking on a lemon. "There was a prophecy."

"Excuse me?" I asked, stunned. That was the last thing I expected him to say.

"You asked me in first year why Voldemort tried to kill you. I said I'd tell you when you were older. I still don't think you're old enough, but you give me no choice. A death eater overheard a prophecy that was given to me and reported it to Voldemort. The prophecy stated you would be the one to kill him."

I raised an eyebrow. I seriously doubted the prophecy was that specific. "Please start at the beginning, professor. When did you receive this prophecy?"

"January 4, 1980."

"The circumstances?"

Dumbledore glared at me. "I was interviewing Sybill Trewlaney for the Divination position. Halfway through the interview she went into a trance and gave me the prophecy."

"She spoke it."

He nodded. "Just like you described to me last year. She didn't remember a word of it afterward."

I stopped the question on the tip of my tongue and asked a different one. "Where was this interview? I have trouble imagining a death eater overhearing you interviewing someone in your office." Okay, my tongue escaped a little.

"The Hogshead."

I blinked. "Do you normally conduct job interviews in the worst pub in Hogsmeade?"

"Not normally, but under the circumstances..." he trailed off as if even he realized how ridiculous it sounded.

"How many other job interviews have you conducted in the Hogshead?" I asked, feeling slightly proud I didn't fall for the circumstances trap.

Dumbledore stirred his tea, gritting his teeth. "None."

"What made you believe the prophecy was real?"

"Her manner, the phrasing, everything was authentic."

"Was the prophecy verified by a third party?"

His eyes lost their twinkle. "I delivered it to the Department of Mysteries. They verified it and recorded it."

"So no one witnessed the prophecy other than you and a death eater?"
"Are you questioning my word?" Dumbledore demanded. "It was verified."

I shrugged. "Forgive me, professor." Not really. "But you're Albus Dumbledore. If you told them shit smelled like roses, they'd start selling shit perfume the next day."

"No need to be crude," he said over Moody's snickers.

"I'll watch my language in the future, professor. So this supposed prophecy was spoken by Sybil Trewlaney on January 4, 1980. A death eater witnessed part of it and told Voldemort, who attacked me because of the prophecy. Correct?"

"Exactly."

"Where was I born?"

"St. Mungo's," Dumbledore replied, shooting me a bewildered look.

"Did the prophecy name me by name?"

"It said, the one with the power to vanquish the dark lord will be born as the seventh month dies —"

"—that's all I need to know," I interrupted him.

"But the rest—"

"—is completely irrelevant. Do you honestly expect me to believe Voldemort came after my father and I, both Potter's by blood, but not my mother because Trewlaney spoke a string of nonsense? How stupid do you think I am, professor? For starters, I can count.

"According to Fudge and McGonagall, my parents went under the fidelius less than a week before they were killed (3). That's nearly two years after Trewlaney's supposed prophecy. If Voldemort was actually concerned about that prophecy, he would've attacked St. Mungo's at midnight on August 1st and killed every infant in the hospital. He wouldn't have waited nearly a year and a half."

"You were protected," Dumbledore interjected.

"Maybe. Maybe not. All I'm saying is I don't think Voldemort believed your prophecy. I have no idea why he really attacked that night, but I've met him. He strikes me as a rather driven individual. Why would he wait?"

"He wasn't sure who the prophecy referred to."

I laughed. "You honestly expect me to believe that? You said yourself Tom Riddle was one of the most brilliant students Hogwarts has ever seen. He still holds the top NEWT score for every subject except potions, Snape beat him by one point, and divination, which the old yearbooks say he dropped after his OWL. In his student days, he sounds like a Slytherin version of Hermione. I highly doubt he slept through the first day of divination. I know I didn't."

The color drained out of Dumbledore's face. "What do you mean, dear boy?"

"It's called the inner eye, professor, not the inner voice. Let me tell you a story. I'm sure you'll find it interesting.

"A few weeks ago, I started wondering about the prophecy Trewlaney made last year so I went to
the library where I discovered that all the divination books on prophecies are in the restricted section. I almost gave up. Then I remembered one of my muggle teachers telling us about the Oracle of Delphi. It was a long shot, but I was already there so I asked Madame Pince if we had any books on the history of the Oracle of Delphi. We have four, by the way.

"Influence of the Oracle contained a very enlightening preface. According to the author, a true prophecy is a symbolic vision. A sphere preserves the vision much like a pensieve, and trained experts attempt to interpret the images. A khrēsmoi, Greek for words spoken by an oracle, on the other hand, is oracular, meaning it's spoken. In the entire world, there might be a dozen real prophecies, but there are thousands upon thousands khrēsmoi.

"All khrēsmoi are induced. The oracle, which can be anyone, even magic-loathing Vernon, takes a hallucinogenic, falls into a trance, and mutters a few phrases. They're typically ambiguous so the oracle can claim the losing side misinterpreted the supposed prophecy. Some hallucinogenic potions can actually tie the oracle to a specific person and make them say something that person either wants to hear or is interested in.

"Which means Trewlaney's supposed two true prophecies aren't worth the air they took to speak."

Dumbledore's hands were clenched into fists and his face was red with rage. "You do not know of what you speak."

"Not completely, but I know enough. I contend that you laid a trap for Voldemort. You held Trewlaney's interview at the Hogshead, hoping someone would overhear you and report back to him. You fed Trewlaney an illegal hallucinogenic drug, she spewed a few phrases of nonsense, a death eater happened by, and reported everything he overheard to his master. You waited nearly two years for Voldemort to take the bait. When he didn't, you encouraged my parents, most likely my father, to do something abysmally stupid to get his attention and that's why he targeted us. My only question, professor, is what did they do?"

"Out," Dumbledore bellowed, shooting a spell at us. Moody and I hurtled through the air. The gargoyle leaped aside at the last moment, and we landed in a heap at the bottom of the steps.

Moody grunted and elbowed me in the ribs. "Off," he muttered.

I stood up and brushed off my robes. Moody sat up and leaned his back against the wall. He gave me a searching look. "Potter, you're either incredibly brave or the dumbest kid I've ever met."

I smirked at the portrait over his head, knowing it would report our conversation back to Dumbledore. "I'm not, professor. Real or not, that prophecy is a huge propaganda tool. When Voldemort returns, all Dumbledore has to do is trot it out and point to me, abrogating himself of all responsibility. If I let him, he'll turn me into a bloody martyr. Well, I won't allow it. That prophecy doesn't say who the Dark Lord is. It just says the Dark Lord. If Dumbledore or any of his supporters ever uses that prophecy to force me onto a battlefield, I'll call Dumbledore the Dark Lord and join wands with whoever opposes him."

Moody closed his good eye and shook himself. "You're one weird kid, Potter," he said and took a healthy swig from his hip flask.

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(1) Harry Potter and the Order of the Phoenix, Ch. 37
(2) Harry Potter and the Order of the Phoenix, Ch. 37
(3) Harry Potter and the Prisoner of Azkaban, Ch. 10
This note was written in response to a few questions raised on FF, but I left it because it's still applicable.

If you're looking for a super-Harry fic, you've come to the wrong place. My Harry is a neglected 14-year-old. One day, he may be the most powerful wizard in Britain, but he needs at least a few decades seasoning first.

Dumbledore is a member of an older generation that had very different views on proper treatment of prisoners than we hold today. Not everything he does is intended to be vicious. Sometimes he's just a product of his generation. (I'm also expanding on some things that are hinted at in the books, but aren't explicitly stated. For example, we know Umbridge was behind the anti-werewolf legislation.)

The phrase "the greater good" has its origins in the writings of Jeremy Bentham (founder of utilitarianism), who some modern day psychologists believe had asperger's syndrome, which does explain his theories. It doesn't explain the wax head, but very little does... The detail about the body is what made me look him up when I was a little younger than Harry. Even though Dumbledore has distanced himself from Grindewald, in the books, he still appears to be a utilitarian. (I peg him as an act utilitarian, but that's a different matter and has little impact on the story.) In utilitarianism, someone loses happiness so society as a whole can be happier. My Harry has the great misfortune to be that someone. (A bit of a simplistic explanation, but you get the gist without me writing a thesis.) I think the best and most concise critique of utilitarianism I've seen to date is from Pope John Paul II: "Utilitarianism is a civilization of production and of use, a civilization of things and not of persons, a civilization in which persons are used in the same way as things are used." In my opinion, this explains Dumbledore's perception of reality almost perfectly.

I'm not aware of a specific date for Trewlaney's interview. I picked this one because it puts her interview during the school year, but between terms, allowing her to start at the beginning of a term instead of the middle and fits the general timeline.

The inner eye detail comes from Harry's first divination lesson.

The khresmoi stuff comes from a few books I read years ago about the Oracle of Delphi, how modern day archaeologists believe she entered her trances, and her 'prophecies', including a fascinating story about Croesus of Libya being told he'd destroy an empire if he attacked the Persians. The empire he destroyed was his own.

Thank you for your continued support.

Please read and review.
Chapter 9

Chapter Notes

Disclaimer: Harry Potter and related characters, situations, settings, and plots is the original work of J.K. Rowling and under copyright. While I enjoy playing/experimenting in her sandbox, it's not mine and never will be.

See the end of the chapter for more notes

When I discovered Dumbledore's mental machinations, I thought I knew everything. In my arrogance, I assumed I'd found everything. There was nothing more to know. I was such a fool to think a man as brilliant as Dumbledore didn't install at least one fail safe in my head.

In the days following my outburst, I repeatedly questioned why I argued with him, revealing some of my research, my mindset, informing him I no longer trusted him. Stupid.

As I danced the first dance with Parvati, I glimpsed Dumbledore standing beside Madame Maxime and felt an insane impulse to tell him everything I know, then kneel at his feet and beg forgiveness for ever doubting him. I knew it wasn't me, but it's still there.

How do you fight an enemy that shares your mind? You don't. You play a never ending game of hide and seek until one of you dies. I feared I was the dead man walking.

I didn't feel it at all during our first meeting. I felt it during the second, but dismissed it as unimportant until I reviewed my actions later and realized how much I revealed. It sounded like a trigger, a legilimency concept Moody's book only mentioned in the vaguest of terms. Feigning academic interest, I asked if he had more information. He didn't, but as he promised when he proposed expanding my academic interests, he acquired the information. Yesterday, he presented me with two thin handwritten books: one documenting how a master legilimens can implant and use triggers, the other explaining triggers from an occlumens's perspective—two sides of the same experiment. I pretended I didn't recognize the master legilimens's handwriting. Moody let me pretend.

Normally, triggers are just words. You say a phrase and the person does whatever they were programmed to do. But if you're really good and have regular access to the subject, you can make the trigger as specific as you dare. The occlumens described the sensation as an overwhelming need. An adequate description, but it didn't do the sensation justice. Maybe my problem was repeated overexposure to the trigger.

If the trigger was me speaking with Dumbledore after discovering his personality adjustments, it explained why I told him exactly what I was thinking and revealed part of my research years before I was ready. The real Alastor Moody was many things, but even the death eaters who escaped Azkaban described him in the papers as a consummate professional. No wife or children. His job always came first.

Using legilimency on a minor is an Azkaban worthy offense. However, in the wizarding world, using magic to alter someone's personality is worse than either rape or murder because it locks
away part of the victim in their own mind, leaving them aware of the torture until they eventually succumb. It's considered so heinous the old punishment—hang, draw, and kiss—remains in effect.

The real Moody believed in rule of law. If he even suspected Dumbledore of such a heinous crime, he'd arrest first, ask questions later.

Practicing occlumency helped. Now that I was aware of the situation, I could focus my meditations on suppressing it, but I couldn't keep it at bay for more than a few hours. If Dumbledore caught me unawares, the impulse might come back twice as strong. Avoidance seemed the best policy, but there are some functions we both must attend. The Yule Ball, which technically occurred on Christmas Eve, three days after historical Yule, was one such event.

The music stopped. Parvati took my arm and I led her off the dance floor, shoving my fears away in favor of not tripping over my own feet. As we entered the crowd, the countless pairs of eyes that tracked my every movement, waiting to pounce on my mistakes, vanished. I sighed with relief, turned to Parvati, and grinned. "We did it," I said.

She gave me an amused smirk that asked what I meant by we and squeezed my hand. "Of course," she whispered. "I told you not to worry. You were fine."

My ears burned. After my meeting with Dumbledore, I worked up the nerve to ask Parvati, whom I barely knew, to the ball. My reasons for asking her were simple. Lavender Brown, who I heard was going with Seamus, suggested her when I asked if she knew anyone who didn't have a date and was a good dancer. The next morning I made the colossal mistake of letting Moody know my dancing skills were limited to a single, one hour lesson with McGonagall. That evening, Parvati and I both received notes, asking us to join McGonagall and Moody in an empty classroom for private dance lessons. Later, Moody pulled me aside and explained I had nothing to be embarrassed about. Karkaroff, Maxime, and Professor Sprout were providing similar lessons for the other champions.

On the plus side, other than proving I have two left feet, I made a new friend. Admittedly, I doubted we'd ever be best friends, but we got along well, especially after McGonagall stubbed her toe on Moody's artificial leg. I also learned her father was the Indian Ambassador to the British Ministry. She grew up attending parties and balls and knew exactly what was expected of us. Without her, McGonagall, and Moody, I would've made a complete idiot of myself.

We reached the champions table, and I pulled out her chair and helped her be seated before reaching for my own. Out of the corner of my eye, I noticed Moody give me a tight smile and a nod of approval. I tentatively smiled back. So far so good.

A hand grabbed my elbow. I turned my head and froze. Twinkling blue eyes bore into me. I shoved as many thoughts of Parvati as I could to the forefront of my mind and smiled. "Good evening, professor," I said evenly, wishing he'd disappear.

"Evening. Miss Patil, you don't mind if I borrow Mr. Potter for a moment, do you? I assure you I'll return him shortly."

Confusion flashed across Parvati's face, making me wonder if Dumbledore's well-mannered words broke some unspoken rule I'd yet to learn. She nodded her head once. "Would you like me to order for you?" she asked me.

I picked up the menu. Dumbledore's smile froze at the delaying tactic. "Please. The goulash and," she frowned.
"Since you're going to be dancing later, you might want to pick something with a little less spice," Dumbledore whispered in my ear.

Good point. I doubted Parvati wanted to breathe my dinner all night. "The pork chops," I said after consulting the menu again, "with steamed vegetables and fruit."

She shot Dumbledore a grateful look, then smiled. "All right."

I pasted a smile on my face and allowed Dumbledore to guide me outside. His wand materialized in his hand. A few flicks and incantations later, anti-eavesdropping charms and facial obscuring spells covered us both. The smile slid off my face. I eyed him cautiously. "What can I do for you, professor?" I asked courteously.

He tucked his wand back up his sleeve and folded his hands. "I just wanted to check on you, my boy. I fear I wasn't the best host the other day."

"It's fine," I said, hoping to end the conversation. "I wasn't the most polite guest, either."

"You were a tad forceful," he said with a laugh, "but I shouldn't have lost control of my magic."

I shrugged. "It can happen to anyone, sir. I don't hold it against you." Unlike his knowledge of my life with the Dursleys.

"Be that as it may, I hope you'll forgive me. I haven't lost control of my magic like that since I set my bed curtains on fire when I was about your age."

"You're already forgiven, professor," I said, glancing back at the party.

"I won't keep you much longer," he said, patting my arm. "I just thought I should pull you aside and ask how things are with Alastor. I know he can be a harsh task master, but I had hoped…" He shrugged.

"Professor Moody's wonderful, sir. Best teacher I ever had."

"Excellent. Now, I understand he's begun teaching you occlumency." His smile didn't reach his eyes. "While I completely agree with him that you should learn it, it's a discipline best taught by a master legilimens. I'd like to offer to take over your occlumency lessons. Think of it as an apology."

I fought the urge to run off at the mouth and tell him where to shove his apology. A hand grabbed my shoulder. Not alone. I almost sagged with relief. "It's your choice, Potter," Moody said. "It won't hurt my feelings none if you decide to study under Albus."

I kept my face impassive and stared into the distance, careful to keep my gaze away from Dumbledore's. Moody and I were the only ones who realized he wasn't asking me to choose between occlumency teachers. He was asking if I'd changed my mind since I informed him I knew he wasn't Moody. He didn't realize if I accepted Dumbledore's offer Harry Potter died; the manticore acquired a new Harry Potter suit. "Thank you for the offer, professor," I said to Dumbledore, "but I'm afraid I can't accept. Professor Moody's already seen the worst stuff," I said, hanging my head. "Talking it through it once was hard. I don't think I can do it again."

Dumbledore smiled sadly. "Of course, dear boy. Go enjoy your evening. Miss Patil looks quite fetching tonight. Don't you think?"

I turned and smiled when I saw Parvati talking animatedly with Hermione. "She does."
Dumbledore's smile turned genuine for a brief second. "Make sure you tell her that."

Moody gave me a gentle push back towards the ball. "Mind your manners. Use your napkin and eat a self-flossing mint before you ask her to dance."

"Just read the end of term reports," Dumbledore said as I threaded my way through the crowded room. "Phenomenal progress, Alastor, especially with young Harry, but I can't help wishing he'd trust me again."

"Give it time. That kid don't trust easy with good reason. Be patient with him. He'll come around eventually."

"At least he still trusts one of us," Dumbledore said before I passed out of earshot.

The marauders map crinkled in my pocket when I sat down, but I squashed my curiosity for a few precious minutes.

"Everything all right?" Parvati asked.

I nodded. Hermione raised an eyebrow and glanced at Dumbledore, who was heading to his seat at the head table. "Fine," I said, smiling at Parvati. "Just wanted to wish me a happy Christmas."

Hermione pursed her lips. Before she could demand an answer, Krum whispered something in her ear. She blushed and giggled, most un-Hermione-esque behavior. Krum brushed a stray curl out of her face and tucked it behind her ear.

"So what happened while I was gone?" I asked and laid my napkin in my lap.

Twinkling blue eyes gazed into mine. My mind twisted in on itself, fighting a battle between two antithetical personalities—me and the boy-who-lived alter ego who sought to exorcise the boy who survived the Dursleys (so far).

My cupboard walls appeared. My stomach ached with hunger. I raised my hand, intending to unlock the door with my magic, but nothing happened. I tried again, willing the simple latch to unlock. A deadbolt shimmered into existence.

A haze settled over my mind followed by blackness. Someone shook me. "Harry," Neville whispered, "wake up."

I woke, cracking my forehead on Neville's when I tried to sit up too quickly.

"Ouch," he hissed, rubbing his forehead.

"Sorry," I mumbled.

"Do you want to talk about it?"

I shook my head.

Neville shrugged and stumbled back to his bed. Tugging the curtains closed, he whispered a hasty goodnight. I waited in the dark dorm until his breath evened out, mingling with Ronald's snores. Then I picked my wand up off my bed stand and cast a quick tempus. 4:00 am. Too early to be awake, but too late to go back to sleep.

Moody canceled our early morning lesson. He said I should enjoy the ball and he'd see me at 10.
Consider it a late Christmas present, he told me after my morning lesson. I thanked him politely, both for the time off and the wand holster he gave me as a present, and excused myself. Parvati didn't understand why I hid an old sheet of parchment under the dinner table during one of our dance breaks or why I kept glancing between it and Moody, also known as Bartemius Crouch. Since Hermione was still dancing with Krum, Parvati probably wrote it off as a weird boy thing. I hoped.

I covertly folded the map up and returned it to my pocket. Then I put Crouch and McGonagall's etiquette and dancing lessons to good use.

After everyone started mingling and the Weird Sisters replaced the orchestra, the dance was quite enjoyable. Parvati, bless her, was a perfect date. We danced, mostly with a group so it wasn't too weird, and chatted. It amazed me how little we knew about each other after living in the same house for three and a half years. I quite liked her. Best of all, she didn't have any unreasonable expectations about our non-existent relationship.

But Ronald…I should throttle him for the way he treated Hermione. He had no right to say anything to her about her date, especially when he went stag. Luckily, Victor spotted the situation early on and quickly extricated her from Ronald's clutches. The rest of our evening was quite enjoyable. Plus, I doubted Hermione would continue pushing me to make up with Ronald. Not after the way he attacked her for actually having a date.

I turned my attention back to the mystery named Bartemius Crouch.

Sitting on my bed, I folded my legs, rested my hands on my knees, and closed my eyes. Old articles about Bartemius Crouch appeared in my mind's eye. I silently thanked the impostor for the meditation/occlumency lessons. My recall now rivaled Hermione's. Mentally, I flipped through them.


I focused on the day my name came out of the cup, conjuring the great hall in my memory. Bartemius Crouch, Sr. stood beside Professor Dumbledore while Moody occupied his usual seat at the teachers table. I smirked. Crouch, Sr. would sooner die than help Voldemort. The map's Crouch had to be Crouch, Jr.—a young death eater convicted of torturing the Longbottoms on such flimsy evidence the muggles wouldn't have managed an indictment, much less a conviction. Not to mention, being convicted by his own father should've granted him an automatic appeal. Unless I missed my guess, he, not Sirius, was the first person to escape Azkaban. What was it the papers called him?

Barty.

Alastor Moody was Barty Crouch, Jr., death eater, and Albus Dumbledore didn't know. If I was truly a conspiracy theorist, I would hypothesize that Dumbledore knew the moment he entered the castle, but was keeping him close by so he could monitor his attempts to either kill or kidnap me, but there were too many inconsistencies.

Judging by my own analysis and my last meeting with Dumbledore, Dumbledore viewed me as some sort of weapon. Sure, if I died because of Crouch, Dumbledore could spin a good story and maybe pin his prophecy on another poor sap, but I doubted it. I wouldn't claim Dumbledore believed the prophecy, but he seemed certain I would believe it, meaning it was specific enough for him to pin it on me and Voldemort. Provided, he used the right propaganda.
By telling me about the prophecy with the fake Moody in the room, Dumbledore revealed a piece of his master plan to the enemy. Admittedly, I gave him little choice. However, if he had any concerns about Moody, he could have asked him to step outside. He should have, but Dumbledore appears to trust Moody implicitly.

The paranoid auror served as a perfect cover. His well-deserved reputation explained any new eccentricities, and his habits isolated him from the other teachers. Outside staff meetings, he didn't interact with the others much because the real Moody didn't trust his best friend not to poison his drink. Then again, if I was best friends with Dumbledore, I wouldn't either.

Taking a deep breath, I pushed my new found knowledge into a dark corner of my mind. Crouch took Dr. Leeds test an hour after I did, and he shared the results. MM, Oo, and a metamorph carrier like me. He was a master occlumens, but he could not become a master legilimens because he didn't have the genes. Already, I could direct him away from select memories. I wasn't an expert, but he said I'd outgrow his ability to teach me occlumency within a year. Crouch didn't need to know I knew he was Crouch just as Dumbledore didn't need to know the full extent of my research.

With a sigh, I slid off the bed and padded to my trunk. I opened the lid, dug through my clothes, and removed my lock box. A quick nick later, I hissed the password. carefully opened my document/key compartment. Dyfi nearly bit me last time I woke her up, and I did not want to explain an adder bite to Madame Pomfrey. She woke up every few weeks, grabbed a mouse, drank a little water, curled back into a ball, and went to sleep.

We last spoke after I realized Moody wasn't Moody. She sleepily advised me to stay safe, but keep an open mind and crawled back under her leaf pile.

I removed Language of the Naga and started Moody's assignment. I didn't dare think of him as Crouch. One public slip and I would lose my temporary ally. He contended that if I could speak parseltongue, I should learn to read and write parsel runes. Like any form of writing, they were developed after speech, meaning understanding the written form wasn't genetic. Three days a week, we worked on translations over breakfast, but it was slow going.

Moody was gifted with runes, but he couldn't speak the language. At first, I tried saying things slowly, figuring parseltongue was like any other language. It wasn't. Moody's mouth was incapable of making the more nuanced hisses that distinguished between nouns and verbs, and his ears couldn't hear the difference between most words. He could probably learn enough to enter the Chamber of Secrets, but he'd never be able to open the statue, never mind converse in the language.

After my last translation attempt, he arranged an international fire call with Dr. Leeds, who I was relieved to see existed outside books. Sure, I looked him up in the library. There was a Dr. Leeds teaching at Salem. His penmanship looked nothing like Voldemort's, but I feared for a short time I was corresponding with Voldemort, not a crusty Native American who thought Britain was a land of idiots with an inferior education system. He spoke parseltongue with a slight accent, occasionally using words from his native tongue (Muskogee) that had no true English equivalent, and ordered Moody to rap my knuckles every time I lapsed into English during our fire call. Against my better judgment, I liked him.

I placed a sticking charm on my curtains, cast a lumos, and settled back against the headboard with my unduly complicated, independent study work.

On Boxing Day at six thirty in the evening, I found myself in The Three Broomsticks, sitting in a private room with Silas, Rita Skeeter, and her photographer. The timing was unexpected; the
interview wasn't. Following the retraction, Silas negotiated a new interview with *The Daily Prophet*. We agreed upon the questions in advance, quick quotes quills were banned. Originally, I pushed for a different reporter until both Silas and Mr. Norton pointed out that even after the retraction, Rita was *The Prophet*'s most popular writer—a dangerous potential enemy—so I extended the olive branch.

Under the guise of interviewing all the champions, Rita arranged my interview first and McGonagall rode into Hogsmeade with me. She greeted Silas by name, reminisced briefly about his time in her class, and asked him if he would be representing my interests or the paper's. After we both assured her Silas represented me, she excused herself, saying she'd wait downstairs.

Rita set her glasses on the table. "How are you, Harry?"

"Better than when we last spoke. You?"

"Managing. Do you mind if I ask a few questions about your new look?"

I looked to Silas.

"You may ask, but Mr. Potter is under no obligation to answer you and we may elect to have the questions and answers removed from the final article."

She pursed her lips, clearly disliking our editorial control. "Acceptable. My editor wants to run the article on January 9th. I'll be out of the office until the 4th. Is the 6th of January acceptable for the review copy?"

"I'd prefer before the New Year, but I understand if you have other obligations," Silas said.

"I'm leaving for my mother's in Ireland tonight. If it's acceptable, I can have a house elf deliver it on the 31st. Otherwise, I fear I'll beat the owl back to London."

"Have your elf deliver the article to my office."

"Working on a holiday?" she asked coyly.

I cocked my head, amused by their byplay. Silas acted businesslike, but he smiled a little more easily, eyes crinkling. Rita wasn't as subtle, but she was a well known, single reporter, not a solicitor. Interesting. If they hit it off, Rita might evolve into an excellent press contact. Of course, Silas's advice might not be as reliable where she was concerned either. Something to consider.

"Always."

Rita gave him a small smile and picked up her quill. Turning to me, she said, "shall we begin?"

I nodded my assent.

"I suppose we should start where we did last time." She glanced at her parchment, grimaced at the plain language, and read the first question. "Why did you put your name in the goblet of fire?"

I took a deep breath. "I didn't put my name in the goblet nor did I ask an older student to enter for me."

"If you didn't enter, who did?"

"I don't know. Professors Moody and Dumbledore believe whoever entered my name is trying to kill me."
Rita raised a manicured finger. "May I ask if you believe that? My readers will want to know."

Silas turned to me. "You don't have to answer."

"I will." I closed my eyes, wondering how inflammatory I should make my answer. A basic yes or no would imply I either trusted Dumbledore and, by extension, Moody, or I didn't. Other than his apology during the ball, Dumbledore hadn't confronted me about the prophecy again. He was waiting for something, biding his time and sending me watery smiles like he knew something I didn't. Telling him off in private was worlds away from sharing my true opinion with Rita Skeeter. Still, I could imply I had a few concerns without saying I didn't trust Dumbledore anymore than I did Uncle Vernon. Considering Uncle Vernon would gleefully sell me to Voldemort (or Dumbledore)...I tilted my head and gave Rita a wane smile. "I don't know. It seems a little elaborate just to kill me, but I can't discount their opinion because this year is really no different from my previous three years."

Rita's eyes lit up and she leaned forward. "No different? Have you risked your life every year?"

"I wouldn't say risked my life so much as placed in harms way."

"Do tell."

Silas narrowed his eyes, but I held up my hand, forestalling his objection. I might not have another opportunity to tell my story without Dumbledore's interference. "First year, a teacher let a troll in. It entered a girl's bathroom that was occupied by Hermione Granger. Ronald Weasley and I heard her scream. The teachers weren't around so I distracted the troll and Ronald knocked it by dropping its club on its head. Then, the same teacher, Professor Quirrell, attempted to steal the Sorcerer's Stone, which Professor Dumbledore had hidden on the third floor behind a set of protections that three first years, myself, Hermione, and Ronald, got past with little difficulty."

"Did Quirrell get the stone? Was that why he suddenly disappeared?"

I winced. "Not exactly," I said, turning to Silas. "If I say what happened down there and she publishes it, can they arrest me?"

Rita's eyes bugged out. She covered her mouth with one hand. "Harry? Are you saying..."

"Don't answer, Harry. Rita, I'm sure you can spin this in some way that implies Harry wasn't responsible for whatever may have happened to Professor Quirrell."

"Of course. Harry, this is completely off the record," she said and set her quill down. "Was Quirrell alive last time you saw him?"

"No."

"So someone covered up a death at Hogwarts."

"I'm not sure how covered up it was. Most of the students knew at least some details of the incident after it happened."

"Yet, no one ever reported it to The Prophet, which implies a spell of some sort prevented the students from telling. If that's the case, then why are you able to talk?"

Silas rubbed his jaw absently. "You were in the hospital wing immediately afterward, correct?"

I nodded.
"I'll have to look into it, but the spell was probably cast either during a school-wide assembly or individually for each house. Whoever cast it acted quickly if no one's parents rushed to the ministry after receiving an incriminating letter."

"Any way to know for sure?" Rita asked, almost dancing in her seat.

"I can ask a few colleagues to bring their children in over the holidays and have a curse breaker check them out."

"Make sure the curse breaker is an expert in mind magic, preferably a legilimens," I said.

They both turned speculative gazes on me, but I shook my head. "Trust me, you don't want to know. Not yet."

Rita was obviously reluctant to abandon a potential story, but she restrained herself. "Of course, Harry. Do you mind if I follow up with Silas on this? A cover up at Hogwarts would be quite the story."

"Sure, but please leave my name out of it for now."

"Certainly." She picked her quill back up.

"In second year, a basilisk petrified four students, Nearly Headless Nick, and Filch's cat Mrs. Norris." I rolled up my right sleeve, revealing the scar from the basilisk fang. Fawkes countered the venom and healed it, but even phoenix tears couldn't remove the scar. "Ronald and I found its lair, but the ceiling caved in when Professor Lockhart tried and failed to obliviate us. Separated, I went on ahead. Fawkes, Dumbledore's phoenix, brought me the sorting hat with the sword of Gryffindor inside it. I killed the basilisk with the sword. My friend Hermione Granger was the one who realized Hogwarts had a basilisk problem. She was thirteen. I am curious why a thirteen-year-old muggleborn, who had little exposure to magical creatures, was able to figure out what type of creature was attacking students before either Professor Kettleburn or Professor Dumbledore."

"Strike the last sentence, Rita," Silas instructed.

She grimaced. "But…Fine. May I still look into what the professors should have known?"

"Yes," I said. "But please—"

"—don't mention your name. I understand. May we take a photo of your arm? I won't release it without your written permission."

Cautiously, I nodded my head. After the Chamber, my injuries were never documented. While the scar wasn't proof, it was better than nothing. The camera man directed me to lay my arm on the table, steadied his camera, and took a few shots. When he stepped back, I rolled my sleeve back down.

"Dare I ask about third year?"

I smiled, recalling Aunt Marge floating on the ceiling. "Actually, third year started on a high note. My muggle uncle's sister was visiting. She called my mother a bad egg and said she, and I quote, ran off with a wastrel. I lost control of my magic and inflated her. She ended up on the ceiling. I was terrified, like any kid warned constantly about performing magic outside school would be, so I grabbed my stuff and ran away. I accidentally summoned the Knight Bus and they took me to Diagon Alley."
"Accidentally? You didn't know raising your wand would call the bus?"

"No, ma'am. I'm muggle raised. Until Hagrid introduced me to the magical world, I didn't even know all the weird stuff I did was magic."

They both looked horrified. "The gamekeeper?" they said at the same time.

I hesitated, wondering if I should volunteer additional information. Well, as long as it only reflected poorly on Dumbledore and the Dursleys…" My relatives didn't want me to attend Hogwarts. When no one replied to the letters, Professor Dumbledore sent Hagrid to deliver my letter and take me to Diagon Alley."

"Doesn't Professor McGonagall introduce muggle raised students to the magical world?" Rita asked Silas.

Silas shrugged. "She did last time I checked."

"How do you feel about the gamekeeper introducing you instead?" she asked.

I sighed. "Hagrid is one of my dearest friends. In first year, he wrote to all these people who knew my parents and got them to send pictures. He put them in an album and gave it to me right before school ended. It was the first time I'd ever seen their picture. I can't imagine my life without him." I could happily imagine it blast-ended skrewt free, though. "Still, he wasn't the best person to introduce me to the magical world because he's wizard raised. There's a lot of things muggle raised students don't know like how to enter Platform 9 3/4. Unless you're used to dealing with muggle raised children, you don't know what we do and do not know. So many things are second nature. Take your quill, for example. You've always used quills and parchment."

"True."

"I used spiral bound notebooks." Rita gave me a blank look. "It's like a book, but with thin, lined paper and held together by a piece of wire that corkscrews through the edge of the pages. I'd never touched a quill. My muggle school used pencils and pens, thin sticks about as long as your hand with ink preloaded in the middle. Even though I've used them for the past three years, I still struggle with quills and parchment. It takes me twice as long to write an essay as it does a wizard raised student."

Judging by their shocked expressions, they never considered the challenges muggle raised students face.

"I think I wouldn't have struggled quite as much during the first few months if Professor McGonagall had explained the magical world first and then introduced me to Hagrid over lunch, but Professor Dumbledore sent Hagrid instead."

Rita sipped her tea and composed herself before asking her next question. "Back to your third year," she said, drawing a circle around the information on Hagrid and the Dursleys and stenciling a small 'year 1' in the margin beside it. "What happened after you returned to your relatives?"

I grinned. "I didn't. Minister Fudge met me at the Leaky Cauldron. He smoothed things over the Dursleys, had Vernon's sister obliviated, and arranged for me to stay in Diagon Alley until term started. He was wonderful. I can't say enough about how much he helped me that summer. He was so kind and understanding. He made me feel," Silas quirked his upper lip, our prearranged 'stop, you're laying it on too thick' signal.

"You said earlier that this year was no different from your others. Was your life also in danger at
any point during the school year? Did Sirius Black attack you?"

"He didn't, but the dementors searching for him did. Three times. The first was on the Hogwarts Express. Remus Lupin, our defense professor last year, conjured a patronus and ran it off. The second time was during a quidditch match. When the dementors attack, I see Voldemort kill my mum. At the time, it was both a horrible memory and one I wanted to see because it's the only memory I have of my parents. Anyhow, I passed out from the dementors and fell off my broomstick. I found out later that Professor Dumbledore conjured a patronus while Professor Flitwick slowed my momentum so I didn't break all my bones when I hit the ground. The third time was out by the lake at the end of last year. That was the first time I managed a corporeal patronus."

"Really?" she said, motioning to her camera man. "Can you show me?"

Silas nodded once and I raised my wand. "Expecto patronum." Prongs pranced around the room and the camera flashed.

"That's an impressive feat of magic, Harry. If you don't mind my asking, what memory did you use? One of your daring feats perhaps?"

I gnawed on my bottom lip, mulling over my answer. The truth would raise a few questions about my home life earlier than I intended, but I'd already implied a few things. Making up a memory, pretending I had a happy enough moment, might hurt me in the long run. The court might think a child with a happy enough memory to conjure a patronus obviously didn't have a difficult home life. Using my true home life to escape the Dursleys and Dumbledore was my option of last resort. I didn't dare jeopardize it. "I don't have a memory capable of powering a patronus charm. I can cast the charm because I want it badly enough, and I have the raw power to pull it off."

Rita fumbled with her parchment, apparently not knowing what to say. An uncomfortable silence descended over us. She cleared her throat. "The first task showed you were able to compete against students older and more experienced than yourself. How did you feel when your own headmaster gave you a lower score than he did the others?"

"Mad. I got my egg in the shortest amount of time without injuring myself, the dragon, or her clutch. No one else managed that, but after speaking with Professor Dumbledore I sort of understand why he gave me the lowest mark. They did have to judge our magical skill, and I only cast a single spell. I'm tied for first, so it's not like I'm in last place because my own headmaster didn't approve of my act of self-preservation."

Silas chuckled. Rita relaxed slightly.

"Yes, that was an interesting strategy."

I shot her an unrepentant grin. "Originally, I planned on hiding behind the judges. They were the ones who picked nesting mothers. That horntail was a nasty piece of work. If she wanted to eat someone for disturbing her nest, it should have been them, not me. But that plan fell through when I saw the wall between the judges stand and the dragon. The dragon keepers were a safer bet."

"You didn't think hiding was cowardly? Maybe un-Gryffindorish?"

I shrugged. "I'm a fourth year. The dragon keepers were adults, trained to handle dragons. I thought letting them do their job was the best overall choice."

"Are you worried about dying in this tournament?"

"Yes," I said bluntly. "I could care less if I win. My only concern is staying alive."
She'd reached the end of our pre-arranged questions, but she pressed ahead. "I notice you changed your glasses. Is this a sign of a special someone? Any other changes we should expect?"

I laughed. "Not really. I just felt it was time for a change. I'm tired of everyone comparing me to my father. A few people have even called me James. I appreciate everyone remembering my dad, but the trouble is I don't remember him. Yet people, including my teachers, expect me to be just like him. I'm not him. The round frames accentuated the similarities, making it easier for people to look at me and see James, not Harry, so I changed them. My friend Hermione helped me pick these out. Do you like them?"

"It's a good look for you. Now we just need to do something about that hair," she said, reaching across the table to tug on the rebellious lock that flopped over my scar. "Maybe a little length."

"Maybe," I said, wishing she'd stop acting like Mrs. Weasley.

"So are you in a relationship with the lovely Ms. Granger? Or are she and the exotic Ms. Patil both vying for your affections?"

"It's nothing like that," I said, laughing in a relaxed manner. "Hermione's like an older sister to me. I asked her to help me pick out my glasses because I knew she'd tell me the truth." I shuddered. "Maybe I should have asked her to break it to me gently because she said one pair made me look like a turtle." Rita laughed. "As for Parvati, we're just friends. I'm only fourteen, and I'm one of the youngest in my class. I'm not looking to date anyone just yet. Give me a few more years."

Rita wrote down my answer and set her quill down. Then she extended her hand. "It's been a pleasure, Harry. Thank you for giving me a second chance."

"It was no trouble at all, Ms. Skeeter. Good luck with your other interviews."

"Thank you. If I find anything indicating a cover up at Hogwarts, would you like me to share my findings with your solicitor before it goes to press?"

The offer stunned me. Maybe I made a better second impression than I did a first. "That would be wonderful. Thank you. Happy holidays, Ms. Skeeter."

"Happy holidays to you, too, Harry, and please call me Rita. Mrs. Skeeter is my mother."

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(1) December 26

Chapter End Notes

When I turned on my Kindle earlier and saw "the pain meds were talking" as my chapter note, I knew I was in for a rough bout of editing. The chapter's as ready as it will ever be. After the fiery confrontation last chapter, it's is almost a let down, but I keep reminding myself there's more than one game afoot. I almost deleted the last scene, but elected to leave it in the story because it shows one of Harry's many steps towards freedom. I know Rita Skeeter is the reporter we all love to hate, but think about her readership. People trust her. If Harry ever needs to come clean about the Dursleys in a public and embarrassing to Dumbledore fashion, she's the best ally he could have.
As you may have noticed, Harry's goals are mostly short or medium term. Arguably, his long term goals, like no Dursleys, are more wishes than goals. On the other hand, Dumbledore and Voldemort both tend to think five years, if not more, ahead. Dumbledore, especially, plays a long game. I hope this chapter hints that just because you saw Harry back Dumbledore into a corner in the previous chapter Dumbledore had other considerations and tricks up his sleeve. He'll drop the prophecy issue, for now, because arguing over it with an irrational 14-year-old (Dumbledore's opinion, not mine) doesn't benefit him and just makes Harry more rebellious.

The Yule Ball always struck me as odd because it doesn't occur on Yule. Yule is technically the midwinter celebration. In prechristian times, it occurred on the winter solstice. In 1994, the winter solstice was on December 21. I have trouble believing witches and wizards who still study the witch trials and witch burnings would move their Yule celebration to December 25, which occurred due to Christianization.

Organizing the mind is a fanfic trope, which I'm intentionally not using in this fic. (Others have already done it far better than I ever will.) However, meditation does improve recall.

In HP&GoF Ch. 30, when Harry asks if Mr. Crouch's son might not have been involved, Dumbledore tells him he has no idea. Dumbledore also states the Longbottom's evidence was unreliable, but implies the case amounted to a witch hunt. Sadly, this matches the justice system we're shown with Hagrid during second year and Sirius during third.

Thank you for your continued support.

Please read and review.
On the second day of the new term, Moody grabbed me by the arm and yanked me into his office. He slapped a roll of parchment on his desk and stabbed them with his finger. "Explain," he growled.

Bewildered, I looked at the top paper. My antidotes test. My heart sank. A "T". I studied for weeks and even compared my answers with Hermione afterward. I knew I made at least an "E". With shaking fingers I picked up the parchment and unrolled it.

The first third had a few snarky comments in the margins, but no point deductions. The bottom two thirds was covered in dried green slime. I clenched my fists, wrinkling my exam. "That sorry son of a bitch."

"I take it you completed the exam."

"Of course I did," I said, rounding on Moody. "I don't want to fail potions. My trust fund has enough money to support me for a while, but not for life. I need potions. Even if I get an O on my Potions OWL and NEWT, employers will still look at my grades and class standing."

"Easy, Potter," Moody said as his dark detectors, obviously malfunctioning, quaked on their shelves.

I closed my eyes and took a deep breath, falling into a more controlled state. "My apologies."

"Don't apologize for something that's not your fault, Potter. I thought you were backing out of our agreement. My mistake. I should have suspected Snape before you."

"I'm not backing out."

"Good to hear," he said and seated himself behind his desk, propping his leg up on a padded stool. "What are you going to do about it?"

"Follow procedure," I said half-heartedly. When I discovered Hogwarts had procedures intended to deal with professors like Snape, I was ecstatic. Then reality intruded. If after thirteen years 'teaching', the wizarding world's euphemism for abusing students under his care, Snape never lost his job, odds were he wouldn't lose it just because I joined the legions of complainants.

"Which is?"

I sighed. Why did everything have to be a lesson? "The Hogwarts Charter by reference to statutes, Acts of the Wizengamot, and Acts of the Board of Governors entails the following steps," I said. Moody demanded detailed answers. When I couldn't give one, he ordered me to research the topic.
and then we discussed it two days later. If I failed his second exam, which only happened once, the
next oral quiz occurred during dueling practices. Wrong answers added hexes and curses to the list
he was allowed to use, but since it was technically my third exam on the same topic right answers
didn't earn me anything. "In 1512, the Board of Governors, inundated with complaints concerning
Brandon Derwent, the Charms—"


"—Brandon Derwent, the Transfiguration Professor, passed an Act of the Board, which established
procedures for filing a formal complaint. Step One: meet with the professor and your head of
house and discuss why you believe your grade is incorrect. Step Two: File a written complaint with
the deputy head. Step Three: Written appeal to the headmaster. When the headmaster rejects my
appeal, I'll file a formal complaint with the Department of Magical Education," I said, already
cataloging the many incidences of discrimination and downright bullying I'd endured at the hands
of Severus Snape.

"Why do you think it will fail?"

I stared at him incredulously. "Step One: Snape would sooner die than admit I earned anything
higher than an A. Step Two: I can count on one hand the number of times McGonagall has taken a
student's side over a staff member's. In her eyes, staff members are always right. Period. Step
Three," I rolled my eyes, "I think we both know how well that will go over."

Moody drummed his fingers on his desk. "How will you handle Snape?"

"Same as always. My attitude won't make much difference."

"Not what I meant, Potter. Meeting with Snape is no different from meeting with Albus. Analyze
his character. What do you know about him? His personal situation? How can you use that to your
advantage?"

I had a flash of insight. "Library," I yelled over my shoulder as I dashed out the door. Moody's
chuckles followed me down the hall.

Following an hour digging through the library, three quick notes to Silas—all delivered by Dobby
for the grand price of five knuts—and four hours locating various classmates and convincing them
to hand over memories and old exams, I rapped on Snape's office door.

"Enter," he called.

I pushed the door open and slipped inside. Snape was bent over his desk, grading papers. He had an
ink smudge on his nose. Without looking up, Snape waved his hand at a small table. "Put
everything there. I'll check it later."

 Unsure what to do, I stayed standing in front of the door.

"Cold," a low voice whispered.

Parseltongue, I realized after a few seconds. I scanned the room, eyes roaming over meticulously
labeled bottles, books, spare cauldrons, and seven stacks of essays. Everything had a place. A bit
OCD for my tastes, but if it wasn't related to magic, Aunt Petunia would love it.

"Severus, heat up my rock," a voice to my right hissed.
I turned my head. A gorgeous, mottled boa constrictor, male judging by the head, was coiled in a chair near the fire. A glass habitat with an open lid was built into the same wall as the fireplace. I silently crossed the room to the snake.

"Hello," I said, keeping my voice low so I didn't disturb Snape. The boa lived with Snape. Judging by his size, Snape probably got him when he was around my age. Thus, the boa represented a new source of information.

"How interesting. Why didn't Severus bring you to see me before?"

"Because he hates me."

"Ah, you must be the Potter boy he fusses so about."

"Guilty." He must understand English, a rare skill even among captive snakes. "How does he warm up your rock?"

"With his wand."

I rubbed my right thumb and middle finger together. My wand dropped out of the holster into my hand. "The big one?" I asked, sticking my wand inside the habitat.

"Yes."

Warm 35 degrees Celsius, I thought, focusing on Dyfi's preferred temperature as the magic flowed into my wand. The warming charm hit the rock. Heat warmed my hands and I withdrew my wand, stowing it back in the holster strapped to my right arm.

"Thanks," the boa said, slithering back towards his habitat. Not surprising. According to Dyfi, dry heat isn't scale friendly.

"What's your name?"

"My first human named me Franklin. The other snake talker tried to teach me to answer to something else, but I'm afraid I'll always be a Franklin."

"Other talker?" I asked.

"She found me in a park where my previous owner had abandoned me. She took me home and nursed me back to health. Her family wouldn't let her keep me, so she gave me to Severus."

She? When Franklin said other, I thought he meant Voldemort. Excitement filled my veins. Maybe…"Do you remember her name?"

"It's been so long since she last visited me. She wasn't like you, though. She wouldn't talk to me here in the castle. Wait for summer, she said. Even then, she never spoke with me in front of my human."

"What do you want, Potter?" Snape's biting voice cut off what was turning into an enlightening conversation. I sighed and turned my attention back to the matter at hand. Grade first.

"I cast a warming charm on Franklin's rock, but it will wear off by tomorrow night," I said, seating myself in the small chair across from his desk. The wooden slats dug into my back. Clearly, he didn't want visitors.

He sneered at me, but did cast a quick spell at the habitat, checking the temperature before setting
his wand on his desk. "Don't you have anyone else to pester?"

I took my exam out of my pocket and set it on his desk. "Please explain this," I said as politely as I could manage.

"There is nothing to explain. You got exactly what you deserve."

"You may have given me the grade you think I deserve, but I want the one I earned." I unrolled the parchment and pointed to his comments. "Not one point deduction and you gave me a T. I'm sorry, professor, but I fail to see your logic."

"You clearly didn't finish."

My eyes turned cold. "I most certainly did finish," I said, letting the lisp all parselmouths have slip into my speech. Aunt Petunia would be appalled. Four years of speech therapy—a nephew with a speech impediment was worse than a delinquent nephew—at my muggle school wasted.

Snape blanched. I crowed inside my mind. My crazy gambit worked! According to the old Prophets and Sirius, Snape was definitely a death eater. Dumbledore vouched for him, meaning Snape turned traitor. I didn't think my slight accent sounded like Riddle's. In the chamber, he used an exceedingly snobby, received pronunciation. However, the slight lisp still affected Snape, possibly conjuring memories of Voldemort. Not someone I wanted to be compared to, but Snape's fear was dead useful.

"Professor, when I turned my exam in, the only thing on this parchment was ink. When you returned it, two thirds of it was damaged by some sort of potion. Did you grade it before or after the damage?"

"What happened to your parchment after I graded it isn't my concern."

"Then you do know what happened to it."

"Nothing. It was exactly like that when I received it."

The cunning head of Slytherin slipped up. I bared my teeth at him. "Which is it, professor?"

Snape ground his teeth, his fingers inching towards his wand. I rubbed my fingers together, retrieving my wand from its holster.

"That was your test, young one?" Franklin hissed as he climbed out of his habitat and slithered towards us.

"Yes. Did you see what happened to it?"

Snape eyed Franklin with trepidation as he climbed onto a table and nudged a potion's vial with his nose. "Severus tested that potion on it."

A label written in block print read 'Kenneth Towler, 5th Year, Gryffindor. I blanched. Towler was Gryffindor's equivalent of Marcus Flint, as in he made trolls look smart. "You poured fire protection potion on my exam," I said through gritted teeth.

"I was merely testing a student's work."

"Luckily for me, my exam didn't burn. If it had, which I'm sure you intended, I wouldn't have had grounds to question my grade."
"Ruddy snake."

"Now, professor, did you test the potion on my exam before or after you graded it?"

"After."

"Before," Franklin hissed, returning to his habitat.

"Funny. Franklin says before. I'm more inclined to believe him than you."

"That's not my problem, Potter. Go ahead. Go crying to McGonagall. Your only witness is a snake."

I reached into my robes and removed another sheet of parchment, which I slowly unfolded. The parchment crackled, drawing Snape's eyes to my hands. Even with his patented Harry-Potter-sneer plastered on his face, I could see curiosity burning in his eyes. I smirked at him. "Franklin's word is good enough for me, but I would never dream of going to McGonagall with only his word. Of course, your own contradicting statement is rather incriminating, but even that wouldn't be enough. No, professor, I merely came to discuss a few matters."

"Get on with it."

"The ministry doesn't bother comparing statistics between departments," I said, handing him the parchment, "but I thought it might make for an interesting exercise. Guess what I found, professor. Since you began teaching at Hogwarts, less than 1 out of 10 students take the Potions NEWT. Down from 6 out of 10 for your predecessor. That's an 80% decrease in NEWT potion students. Admittedly, your NEWT pass rate is 100% where your predecessor's was 80%. Still, he graduated 4.8 NEWT potions qualified students for your 1. That's still a 79% decrease. That means there are 79% fewer Hogwarts graduates qualified to be aurors, healers, and potioneers. As Hogwarts accounts for forty-three percent of total OWL graduates and fifty percent total NEWT graduates, these numbers are reflected in a 37% drop in applicants to St. Mungo's and a 52% drop in applicants to the Auror Academy. Because of you, an entire generation is relegated to lower paying jobs, and our society faces the very real possibility that we will have to extend the retirement age or face severe shortages at both St. Mungo's and the ministry. Congratulations, professor," I drawled, "you have single-handedly done more damage to our society than Voldemort ever hoped to."

The color drained out of Snape's face.

"I suppose that was your plan all along. When Voldemort returns, you'll hop off to your master, confident that he'll forgive your betrayal because, thanks to you, there aren't nearly as many aurors to contend with."

"It's not my fault you lot are bigger dunderheads than the last generation."

"Try the last twelve, professor. Horace Slughorn and his predecessor had nearly identical stats. Now, here's my dilemma. I could have taken my exam straight to Dumbledore and asked him to rein you in. Trouble is, that would only fix my problem once. Of course, there is the small matter of a prophecy."

Snape inhaled sharply. "He told me you didn't believe the prophecy."

"I don't. The facts don't support Voldemort believing in it either."

His hands stilled. "What did you say?"
I calmly repeated the same argument I told Dumbledore, complete with eye rolls at key points. Snape clenched his jaw several times, but didn't refute my logic or make any snide comments. I wondered why he cared about the mutterings of a stoned drunk, but I didn't care enough to ask. "That aside," I said, "I came here to discuss your future at Hogwarts."

Snape snorted. "You're delusional, Potter. Dumbledore controls Hogwarts, not you."

"True." I smirked. "However, Hogwarts is accredited by both the ministry and the ICW. It also receives forty percent of its funding from the ministry, who also administer both the OWLS and the NEWTS. I checked the ICW rules. As the current headmaster of an ICW accredited school, Dumbledore is prohibited from sitting on their education committee, and the current members aren't among his biggest fans. I am prepared to very publicly challenge Hogwarts' accreditation.

"I've drafted complaints against both you and Professor Binns, who we all know should be sharing Myrtle's toilet, not teaching. In your case, I've gathered pensieve memories along with old test papers and returned essays. As we speak, my solicitor is closeted with my barrister. They plan on finalizing the complaints over the next week and filing them with the appropriate authorities. I've also arranged to forward both my findings and my complaints to Rita Skeeter, who is chomping at the bit to rip into both you and Dumbledore. If you do not agree to my terms, I will have your job and your reputation, and the next time I encounter our mutual acquaintance, I might just decide to distract him with tales of all the times you saved my life. Who knows, maybe I'll even mention the little life debt you owe my father," I said.

"Do you want me dead?" He snatched his wand of the desk and pointed it between my eyes.

I raised an eyebrow. "You finally understand, professor. If you want me to call off my legal team and keep my mouth shut, it will cost you," I said, ignoring the wand in my face. Before I came down, I visited Gryffindor tower and announced I was visiting Snape to the entire common room. About fifty people knew where I was. If Snape cursed me, it'd be the first nail in his coffin.

"What do you want?" he whispered.

"For starters, a fair grade. You will grade all students by the same standard you do your Slytherins. You will stop your incessant bullying. I don't care if you hated my father, but you will accept that I am not him. I don't even remember him. You will find the capacity somewhere in your shriveled heart to acknowledge that my name is Harry, not James. From what little I know about him, I'm nothing like my father."

"You are exactly like him. Swaggering around this school like you own it." Spittle hit my face. I glared at him and wiped it away with my sleeve.

"If you knew anything about my life, you'd know I don't swagger, but you're stuck in some pathetic fantasy. I don't care if you remain in it, but you will not share it with anyone and you will treat me no differently than you do any other student. If you wouldn't say something to Malfoy, you won't say it to me, Hermione, Neville, or any other student. You will penalize students for tampering with another student's potion. You will control your temper, stop stalking around the classroom like a caged animal, and actually teach. Or, I swear on my mother's grave I will use the fame I never wanted to destroy you."

He opened his mouth to speak, but I cut him off. "Tomorrow, we have class. I will know your answer by your behavior. Good night, professor."

I strode to the door and spun on my heel. "One last thing. Before Hogwarts, I loved potions and history. They were the classes I looked forward to the most. In less than three minutes you and
Binns both destroyed that love. I understand Binns. He's a ghost, permanently stuck in the past, who doesn't even notice his current students aren't the ones he had when he died. But you…I spent years thinking I did something wrong. That I somehow offended you, justifying the abuse heaped on me by a man twenty years my senior. However, there is no excuse for asking a first year, who didn't even know he was a wizard until he got his Hogwarts letter, OWL and NEWT level questions on the first day of class, mocking him for being a celebrity because he survived when his parents both died, or punishing me," I whispered, "for making mistakes in class that are your job to teach us how to avoid."

"You're just another Potter," he snarled.

"My mother's name was Lily Maia Evans. I'm half of her," I said between clenched teeth. He stilled. Fury and pain blended on his face with another emotion I couldn't name. His fingers clenched around his wand. "Choose wisely, professor." I dropped my exam on his work table and swept out of his office.

There was still time. He hadn't officially returned them, yet.

My next potions class was an experience. Snape still stalked between our cauldrons, sneering at our efforts, but he kept his comments to himself. Once, he snatched an ingredient out of Neville's hand, visibly steeled himself, and then showed Neville how to chop his newt tails and guided Neville's hands through adding them to his cauldron and stirring. Neville shook like a leaf the entire time, but by the end of class, he had a small smile on his face. For the first time ever, Neville Longbottom brewed a passable potion.

That wasn't the only change. When Malfoy tried to throw porcupine quills into my cauldron, Snape stopped him by hitting his hand with a minor stinging hex. Then he proceeded to lecture the entire class on the dangers of sabotaging another student's cauldron and assigned Malfoy detention with Filch. He didn't take any points, but I didn't expect perfect behavior, yet.

The biggest shock came at the end of class when Snape officially returned our antidote exams. He placed my parchment beside my cauldron and handed Hermione hers with a whispered, "well done." Praise from Snape? I was tempted to run outside and see if the sky was falling.

I unrolled my parchment. The T was crossed out with an O written beside it. Wide-eyed, I brushed the grade with my fingertips as if it would disappear. Then I skimmed my paper. It was clean. He'd cleaned off the potion and restored my answers. I lost five points total.

Grinning, I rolled it up, tucked it inside my bag, and packed up my cauldron. Hermione looked at me, mouth opening to ask me how I did. "Later," I mouthed.

"Dismissed," Snape said, face twisted in a grimace like his actions caused him physical pain.

I slung my bag over my shoulder and slipped out the door. I whispered my grade in Hermione's ear and ducked into a hidden stairwell before she could formulate a question or demand proof. Whistling to myself, I climbed the stairs, exiting at the dusty corridor that ran behind Moody's office.

I followed two sets of footprints, mine and Moody's, to a blank wall where I tapped the stone six up and twenty-four over four times: three longs, one short. A door appeared and I entered Moody's office.

Moody set his quill down and regarded me coolly. "Well?"
Grinning, I took my exam out of my bag and handed it to him. He unrolled it. His eyebrows rose as he read the grade and Snape's comments. "Much better. Care to tell me how you managed it?"

I flopped down in the chair across from his desk. Grinning, I relayed my meeting with Snape and his snake. Moody's eyes bugged out when I told him about my threats. When I finished, Moody regarded me coolly, his lips twitching. Then he started to laugh. His booming laughter completely drowned out the whirling and whistling gadgets he surrounded himself with. Still shaking with silent guffaws, he cocked his head at me. "If I wasn't holding the proof, I'd never believe it. Harry Potter blackmailed Severus Snape, Head of Slytherin House."

"Blackmailing," I corrected.

"Indeed."

Chapter End Notes

This is the shortest chapter in the manuscript, but I hope it's not too big a let down. This chapter took a little longer to get out because I have this six-hundred-wordish exchange between Harry and Snape that was in the original that I adored. (Yes, I know writing is all about killing your babies, but I REALLY liked it.) It doesn't fit anywhere else in Part 1 or Part 2 and it contained some things I've always wished someone would say, but after putting the story down for an hour and rereading the chapter with all the edits, I finally admitted to myself that Harry isn't the right person to say it. Sorry for the delay.

Whether Snape responded to Harry's threat or was stunned by how much damage he personally created is your call.

About the statistics...I began with an assumption. The British wizarding population is mostly self-sustaining, which translates into a total magical human population greater than 50,000. A few people have mentioned in PMs and reviews they believe it's actually closer to 70,000. Since it only took a few tweaks to a spreadsheet and adjusting two sentences, I went with 70,000. If you assume the average generation length is 24 (which seemed reasonable given the known ages of Harry's parents and his classmate's parents), the average lifespan is 211 (a little high, but anything lower and the student aged population was too high to justify Hogwarts's influence), and 1000 students attend Hogwarts at a given time, then on September 1, 1994, you have 2,326 witches and wizards between ages of 11 and 17. Thus Hogwarts educates 43% of the population.

Please read and review.
On the first Saturday of the new term, I was eating breakfast with Moody when a house elf popped in laden with a package and a letter addressed in blue ink.

"Please sign," the elf squeaked.

Confused, I looked for a signature sheet. Nothing. "Where?"

"Tap the elf on its right shoulder with your wand," Moody said, rolling his good eye.

How was I supposed to know? I grew up muggle. Sure, Gringotts sent all my correspondence via house elf because mail delivery wasn't guaranteed otherwise, but I never had to sign for anything. The elf always popped in, shoved the correspondence in my hands, and left without uttering a single word.

With my wand, I tapped the metal brooch that covered the elf's right shoulder. A surge of magic left me. The brooch glowed for a second before returning to its normal bronze color. Apparently satisfied, the elf deposited the package on the table, handed me the letter, and popped out.

I turned it over in my hands, studying the unfamiliar handwriting. Who? The interview was slated for publication on Monday, but I wasn't expecting anything from Rita. The unfamiliar elf wasn't wearing a Gringotts crest. So who?

"Don't dither, Potter. Either read that letter or eat. Your eggs are getting cold," Moody said, feigning disinterest, but I could read his minute expressions. He was as curious about the package as I was.

Deciding I should open it here in case it contained something I needed to hide from Dumbledore, I broke the seal.

Harry,

Two weeks ago, per both your verbal request and your formal petition submitted by Pherkad Norton, QC, I quietly obtained a court order to unseal your parents' wills and pulled the Last Will and Testament of James Charlus Potter and the Last Will and Testament of Lily Maia Evans Potter from storage. Your father's will is perfectly in order and still bears traces of his magical signature. Your mother's does not.

The magical signature on her will is a ministry stamp used when a will is amended by a codicil. From what I and my staff can discern, it appears her codicil was never probated. However, our
records indicate Lily filed it with the ministry on 11 October 1981.

The official responsible for ensuring her codicil was forwarded to the proper authority after her death has since retired and relocated to Bermuda. He hasn't responded to either my owls or my fire calls, so I have no explanation to offer you for this unfortunate error.

As you indicated your mother's signature was the one you were most interested in feeling, I tasked an aide with searching for any other documents your mother may have filed with the ministry as I hoped traces of her magical signature might still linger.

Yesterday, my aide brought me the file I've enclosed along with the original wills.

Words cannot adequately express how sorry I am to inform you that your mother's codicil was misfiled with her Divorce Petition. Until now, I was unaware your parents were experiencing marital problems at the time of their deaths.

You may not be aware only 2.7% of marriages between a witch and a wizard end in divorce. Most couples opt for legal separation over the finality of divorce. I won't speculate as to what drove your mother to this rather extreme course of action. If you want to know more, I suggest you ask either Albus or Minerva. They both knew your parents far better than I did.

Both documents are dated 8 October 1981. Perhaps, this explains the mix up. Our records indicate your father was notified of her petition on 14 October 1981.

Both myself and my staff have taken oaths that we will not reveal this information as we have no wish to speak ill of the dead or cause you any further anguish.

Although I read both the wills and the codicil, I am not an expert on trust and estates law. Based on my layman's understanding, there are some potentially serious problems with your mother's estate. I have enclosed a spare copy (bound in red twine) of all the documents my office recovered. I highly advise you to forward these documents to your solicitor.

On a lighter note, Rita sent me an advance copy of your interview earlier this week. I'm thrilled you two have worked past your differences. Rita's a lovely lady.

Please let me know if I can be of further assistance.

Best of luck in the tournament.

Sincerely,

Cornelius Fudge

Minister of Magic

Order of Merlin, First Class

I was discombobulated. My parents were happy, right? Everyone said they were the perfect couple. They loved each other deeply. My mum glowed in her wedding pictures. They always looked so happy. Three times they fought against Voldemort together—the only battles my mum participated in, according to The Prophet. There was even a quote from an auror describing how in sync they were, like two halves of the same whole. What happened?

"Potter?"
I raised my head, unshed tears pricking the corners of my eyes. Moody waited patiently for an explanation, but I didn't know what to say. Several minutes passed before he extended his hand. "May I?" he asked, gesturing to the letter.

Mutely, I nodded, still trying to comprehend it. A divorce? My mum filed for divorce. No way Aunt Petunia and Uncle Vernon knew. If they had known, they would have tormented me with it somehow. Probably turned me into an abandoned child instead of an orphan. Even your father didn't want you, they'd say.

The wizards never mentioned it. Fudge said he didn't know, but she filed three weeks before she died. They probably only told close friends. Remus wasn't trusted. Pettigrew might know. Sirius. Probably. Definitely. Sirius and my dad were as close as brothers. Why didn't he tell me?

Was he ashamed? Did he think it didn't matter because they died before it was finalized? Were they trying to work things out?

Moody cleared his throat. "I'm sorry, Harry. We can cancel today if you need some time. You're already on fifth year material. Taking a day off won't hurt."

"No, I'll work."

"Okay. Do you want me to send for Minerva or maybe Hermione?"

I shook my head vehemently. No, the last thing I needed was more lies or Hermione trying to analyze everything. "No, sir."

"Would you like to talk about this? I know I'm not the best at this sort of thing, but I'll consider it part of our occlumency if you want."

I hesitated. The man was a death eater. What did he care about my feelings? He hadn't used them against me so far, but that didn't mean he wouldn't. However, he'd shown more regard for my well-being, both psychological and physical, than anyone else ever had, including Professor Lupin, one of my father's dearest friends.

Also, I knew the real him, not the crazy auror act he put in front of everyone else. The moment we were out of sight he dropped the act, including the Scottish accent and the weird diction.

When I hit a stumbling block, usually Dursley related, with my occlumency, he patiently talked me through my problem. He was sadistic at times and some lessons were brutal, but he always patched me up after our lessons and explained my mistakes. Sometimes, he even praised me.

Fake Moody forced me to eat balanced meals. Some days, I sorely missed fried eggs, bacon, and chocolate cake. Not that I didn't get occasional treats, but the unhealthy choices were only options after I finished my meal.

He also kept a close eye on my grades, punishing me with brutal dodging sessions when I scored less than an E, even in History. A few times, when I scored an O in Potions or Flitwick bragged about my charm's essay, he even rewarded me with a chocolate frog.

Moody was always decent towards me, but he'd changed since Dumbledore first ordered him to tutor me.

At first, he looked at me like I was a frog pinned to a dissection tray. Then I turned into a puzzle he couldn't quite figure out. Now, I wasn't sure how he viewed me. Most days, he treated me like I was a person. Still a teenager. Not yet old enough or experienced enough to fight my own battles,
no matter how hard I tried to.

I genuinely liked the man he was when no one else was around. His Mad-Eye persona was a bit frightening, especially when he started ranting about constant vigilance. Still, I knew when the time came he wouldn't pick me. I accepted it the day I realized my tutor was an impostor. Part of me wished he would, but I knew better. Oddly, I was okay with it.

I'd never had a parental figure before. Sirius got himself tossed in Azkaban and was now on the run. Lupin never bothered meeting me until third year and hadn't written since. Aunt Petunia and Uncle Vernon…Moody said they didn't deserve the title family, and I completely agreed with him. For a while, Dumbledore seemed like a good candidate, but he never showed any interest in me as a person. He was always more concerned with managing my beliefs and encouraging me to risk my neck. Moody was different.

Soon, he would abandon me. Hell, he'd probably stun me and deliver me to Voldemort with a bow tied around my neck. I couldn't bring myself to care because for the first time in my life an adult cared about me, protected me. He would desert me in the end, but for now, it was enough.

"I thought they were happy," I said. "No one ever says much about them except how in love they were and how much they cared about me. I'm not an idiot. I know they told me exactly what every orphan wants to hear, but I'd look at their picture and just know it was true. Now…It doesn't make sense. If Mum was leaving Dad, why were they both at Godric's Hollow that night? What about me? Did they even want me?"

"Stop right there, Potter. Parents do not die for an unwanted child."

"Sorry. I just don't understand. Sirius never said anything."

"Black?"

I nodded. "I met him last year. Pettigrew was hiding out as Ronald's pet rat. Sirius kidnapped Ronald to get Pettigrew and Hermione and I followed him through the tunnel underneath the womping willow."

Moody bowed his head and steepled his fingers. "That was incredibly stupid, Potter."

"I didn't know it was Sirius. I thought it was just a dog. Then he transformed and he and Professor Lupin confronted Pettigrew. It was a right mess."

"It sounds it. If you ever find yourself in a situation like that again, what will you do?"

I paused, thrown but the abrupt change in subject. "Logically, I would get a teacher, but the teachers never believe me. They always brush me off, and I have to do something."

"Potter," he said evenly, "there is a floo connection in every common room along with floo powder. You can't use it to enter or exit the castle, but you can certainly use to call the DMLE. Next time you find yourself in a situation like that, take your ass to the Gryffindor Common Room, throw a pinch of powder in the fire, stick your head in the fireplace, and say Ministry of Magic Department of Magical Law Enforcement. Tell whoever answers what happened and let the aurors handle it. You are a fourteen-year-old wizard. You have zero authority, and while your spell casting has improved, you aren't up to the level of a NEWT defense student, much less a death eater.

"What if you had rushed after your friend and stumbled across a Sirius Black who was every bit as guilty as everyone believes he is? You would have either died along with your friends or, if you
were extremely lucky, you would have managed to incapacitate Black and escape. If you were unlucky, you would have killed him. Had that happened," his voice dropped to a whisper, "they could've tried you for murder and sentenced you to Azkaban. People may want you to act the hero, but our legal system is not designed for vigilante justice. Do you understand me?"

"Yes, sir," I said, feeling numb. I had considered the Azkaban angle several times, especially when I thought about Quirrell. However, I never thought about it in relation to Sirius.

"So the next time you discover someone's trying to steal a valuable object, what will you do?"

"Call the DMLE," I said glumly.

"And the next time you find a basilisk in the castle?"

"Talk to it?" I quipped. Moody scowled. "Fine. Call the DMLE."

"Escaped felon kidnaps your best friend?"

"Call the DMLE."

"See that you remember that. I don't care what anyone else tells you. Until you are of age, your only duty is to do well on your exams. Even then, unless you do something abysmally stupid like volunteer to be an auror, you have no obligation to the Ministry of Magic or Albus Dumbledore beyond paying your taxes in a timely manner. You aren't that stupid, are you, Potter?"

"No, sir."

"Good. Now that you've stopped feeling sorry for yourself, would you like to talk about the other?"

I blinked. Trust Moody to distract me with a lecture. "Yes, sir."

"What went through your mind when you found out?"

I slumped in my chair. "Disbelief. I already knew my father wasn't how everyone described him. I looked up the detention records in the library. He and Sirius broke records, and the pranks Sirius describes so lovingly sound quite vicious."

"They were."

I filed the information away. Maybe if we both survived the year, I'd ask him what he remembered about them. Since he was younger, I doubted he knew them well, but he might be more willing to talk about what he recalled than Sirius. "The detention records and Sirius's descriptions make them sound like bullies and bigots. My mother was a good student, and everyone describes her as sweet and loving. I just wanted one of my parents to live up to the hype."

"Potter," he paused. "Harry, your mother's decision to leave your father doesn't mean she wasn't sweet and loving. She obviously loved you very much."

"Professor, you don't honestly believe my mother's love blocked a killing curse."

"I don't," he conceded. "I do know there are several old and highly illegal rituals that require a willing sacrifice. Under the proper conditions, one of those rituals could block the killing curse. I believe your mother loved you enough to undergo such a ritual and use herself as the final sacrifice."

I exhaled slowly. "Really?"
"Those rituals have a ton of requirements. I'm stymied as to how she even learned about such magic, much less met all the necessary conditions, but it is the only logical explanation."

"Still, why did she file for divorce?"

"I don't know. Why don't you read the divorce petition and find out?," he said, standing. He limped over to a book shelf and selected a worn copy of *The Count of Monte Cristo*. Muggle novels were an odd choice for a death eater. I asked him about them once. He told me wizard fiction was total rubbish, too little imagination. Plus, I imagined he adored the story of the legendary count who escaped the Château d'If in a body bag.

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Two days later, I was still reeling.

My mother filed for divorce because my father wouldn't tell Dumbledore 'no'. She cited unreasonable behavior, claiming my father was loyal to Dumbledore over his family and his loyalties were putting us directly in harms way. She recounted in dizzying detail exactly how the family fortune was donated to the Order of the Phoenix to fund the war effort in increasingly large amounts and how my father had either gifted or lent (she said gifted, but Moody pointed out it was a divorce petition, so she may have used stronger language than absolutely necessary) family heirlooms, including the Peverell invisibility cloak, to Albus Dumbledore that were entailed to heirs of the body, meaning they belonged to the bloodline. They weren't my father's to give.

The invisibility cloak made me wonder. I always thought my father left it in Dumbledore's keeping, meaning Dumbledore took the cloak after my father died and held it in trust until he returned it to me. However, my mum indicated my father gave Dumbledore the cloak a few months after I was born.* Would that night have gone differently if my father had still had it? If we'd had it, maybe I would still have one of my parents.

What would possess someone to give away the one thing that could have hidden their loved ones—an object that could have bought us precious time, allowing my mother to escape or my father to escape or attack Voldemort from behind?

"Harry?"

I jerked. My elbow struck my pumpkin juice. Krum caught my cup a second before it landed in his lap. "Sorry," I mumbled. "What were we talking about?"

"You've been distracted for days," Hermione said. "I wish you'd tell me what's bothering you."

"I can't."

"Can't or won't?"

"Please don't push." I added another chicken salad sandwich to my plate and a few more apple slices and grapes. Even though I didn't always eat extra portions, whenever I ate in the Great Hall, the house elves, bless them, always prepared a little extra just in case.

"Let it go," Krum whispered in Hermione's ear. I regarded him thoughtfully. Ever since Christmas, they spent most of their free time together. Hermione and I saw each other during meals and studied for potions, history, and herbology together with Neville. That was it.

"I meant to ask you before your interview was published, but I forgot," he said to me. "During my interview on Saturday, Ms. Skeeter asked my headmaster a few questions about Durmstrang's policies." He paused and chewed on the inside of his cheek. "It sounded as if she interviewed you
I took a sip of juice. "Both times," I answered. Krum's frown made me wonder what I said wrong. "I hired a solicitor after the first disaster. Professor McGonagall took me to the interview, but since I already had someone with me, she didn't attend."

He relaxed a little, but the crease between his eyebrows remained. "Solicitor or not, Headmaster Karkaroff would never let me meet with the press without a school representative, normally himself, present. It's a liability for the school."

"Really?" Hermione asked.

He nodded. "If half what the article mentioned is true, I'm surprised your guardians didn't transfer you. A troll and three dementor attacks?"

Unwilling to discuss the Dursleys with someone I barely knew, I shrugged. "It wasn't that bad."

Since we might need the basilisk and sorcerer's stone incidents to show Dumbledore was an unfit guardian, Silas asked Rita to hold them back. While her article didn't paint a rosy picture, the worst incidents weren't mentioned. I made a mental note to send her some flowers as a thank you.

Krum propped his elbow on the table and frowned. "I don't know how Hogwarts handles such things, but when I made the Bulgarian team, my dorm mates became unbearable, selling pictures and stories about me to the tabloids. It got so bad my parents petitioned the school to move me into a private room. The teachers also began assigning detention to any student found invading my privacy." He inclined his head towards the Creevey brothers. "Those two would've earned a month's detention for that stunt they pulled with Skeeter. If they were caught trying to photograph you again, they would've been expelled. Maybe it's because Durmstrang teaches some of the more dangerous spells that aren't legal in the United Kingdom, but we have a strict no bullying policy."

Krum's revelation made me wonder how another school would handle Malfoy's constant taunts and ambushes or Finch-Fletchley's accusations back in second year? At Durmstrang, at least according to Krum, Malfoy would have earned numerous detentions. If he failed to conform to the school's standards of behavior, they wouldn't have thought twice about who his father was. Given their shared history, Karkaroff probably shared my tutor's disdain for all things Malfoy. Draco Malfoy would have either shaped up or been expelled by the end of second year.

Hermione frowned. "It's not that bad, is it? I mean it's nothing you can't handle, right?"

I opened my mouth to reply, but Krum beat me to it. "Hermione," he said gently, "I'm not saying he can't handle the pressure. I'm saying he shouldn't have to."

"I agree," Neville said. Surprised because Neville rarely uttered a word during meals, I turned to him. Sheepish, he toyed with his fork. "Sorry, Harry. I know it's not my place to say anything, but it's true. McGonagall should've stopped Colin years ago." He bit his lip and whispered, "did you really not know about magic before you got your letter?"

"Yes," I said, wondering why it bothered him. Aside from the boy-who-lived insanity, I was just another muggle-raised wizard like Dean and Hermione. Nothing special.

He leaned forward so only Hermione, Krum, and I could hear when he whispered, "I don't know what's going on, Harry, but I always thought you knew because before you started Hogwarts there were a few pictures of you in The Daily Prophet. They said you were safe and happy. I think one time they claimed you already knew how to cast a lumos."
"Without a wand?" I asked.

He shrugged. "I could be wrong," he answered. We all knew he wasn't.

Before I could ask what else he remembered, an owl swooped over our table and dropped an envelope on my plate. Knowing post was rarely delivered after breakfast, I drew my wand and cast every detection spell I could think of. When everything turned up clean, I turned the envelope over.

Dumbledore's handwriting and purple ink stared back at me. With a resigned sigh, I opened the letter, hoping against hope it wasn't another meeting request.

Harry,

When I approved your interview with Rita Skeeter, I erroneously believed you were mature enough to stick to the facts surrounding the tournament. I was greatly disappointed when I read your interview this morning and discovered you spent more time discussing Hagrid helping you around Diagon Alley than you did the ongoing tournament.

I never believed you would risk your muggle relatives lives by claiming you don't have a happy enough memory to power a patronus. I acknowledge your relations with them are strained, but that's no excuse to needlessly risk their lives. Maybe you weren't as happy or as well-fed as I would have preferred, but they did give you house room and still take you in every summer. If the wrong person reads this and discovers where they live, the implication behind your words will condemn them to a grisly fate. I beg you to either retract this statement or write a letter to the editor providing more context to your words. Something along the lines that you still mourn your parents or were teased at school for being a little different than others will greatly reduce the risk. They are your only living relatives. You owe them this.

As an aside, believe it or not I was your age once. I understand what you're going through. At this time in your life, it's normal to feel confused, lose your temper more easily, feel like no one will ever understand you, or even like there's someone else inside your head. These are all very normal feelings. I can help you if you'll let me. My offer will always stand.

If you ever need my assistance with anything or just want to talk my door is open.

Albus Dumbledore

Icy fingers crept down my spine. Dumbledore knew.

I resisted the urge to turn and glare at the head table. Instead, I neatly folded the letter and tucked it in my bag. During my next study break, I'd pay Dobby to take it to Mr. Norton. He didn't admit much, but you never know what will be the deciding factor.

After my last class, I met Dobby, who brought me a note from Mr. Norton, stating he'd read the wills and requesting a meeting during my next Hogsmeade visit, in an empty, portrait-less classroom. I scribbled '1:00 at The Three Broomsticks?', handed the note back to Dobby along with three knuts for the delivery. Bowing, he popped out.

I checked the time. Two hours 'til dinner. I'd already finished my homework for the week, but I could work ahead. I rummaged through my bag, looking for my history book. My fingers brushed against the worn copy of *The Lord of the Rings* Moody tossed at my head last Friday.

Friday, the day before I learned about the divorce, the day before reality slew the image of my happy family. Maybe I shouldn't spend my unplanned afternoon off—Moody said I'd pushed
myself too hard over the weekend—studying.

I transfigured a broken desk into a pillow and lay down on the floor to read. Two chapters in, a wand tapped me on the shoulder.

"Mr. Potter." McGonagall's voice yanked me back into the present.

"Yes, professor?" I dog-eared the page so I wouldn't lose my place. Since most of the pages were already creased, I didn't think Moody would care if I added a few of my own.

"I need to speak with you. Are you free this evening?"

"No, ma'am. I promised Hermione I'd meet her in the library after dinner, but I'm free now."

"What about Professor Moody?"

"He gave me the afternoon off."

"Come with me," she said, turning on her heel and heading towards her office. I grabbed my things and followed her amicably, wondering what she wanted. After the ball, she stayed out of mine and Hermione's split from Ronald. She considered herself above the tournament, neither condemning me nor offering her assistance. My grades in her class had risen from As and Es to Es and Os. If I hadn't goofed off the first two months of the fall term, I would have managed an O in her class last term. Looking back, I could clearly see his negative influence on my grades.

She bade me enter her office and clapped her hands, summoning a house elf. "Tea and biscuits," she ordered, seating herself at a small table piled high with papers. McGonagall waved her wand. They flew to the credenza behind her desk, neatly stacking themselves.

"Please have a seat, Mr. Potter," she said as the elf popped back in bearing a tray, deposited it on the table, and departed.

Feeling nervous, Professor McGonagall did not normally have tea with her students, I took the seat across from her, perching on the edge. She poured the tea and placed a small plate of sweets before me. I tentatively took a chocolate one and nibbled it.

"I read your interview in the Prophet this morning. It was surprising."

Which part? Rita's take on my first three years as "fraught with such danger no sane guardian would ever permit him to return to Hogwarts", a sentiment I completely agreed with, Hagrid telling me I was a wizard and taking me to Diagon Alley (grossly irresponsible, she said), or the bit about me not having a happy enough memory to power a patronus.

McGonagall sipped her tea. "How much of Skeeter's interview is the truth?"

"Every word," I answered, blowing on my tea to cool it.

"So she didn't exaggerate your trip to Diagon Alley with Hagrid?"

"No, ma'am. If anything, she downplayed it because I didn't tell her the whole story."

"Downplayed?" she said, clinking her cup against the saucer.

"Yes, ma'am."

McGonagall stared pensively at the wall behind me. "When Hagrid returned with the stone, I asked
Albus about your trip. I knew you had trouble getting your letter, but I was told Petunia finally came to her senses and asked for Hagrid to accompany you because she was uncomfortable in Diagon Alley and remembered your mother mentioning him."

Did someone slip something in her pumpkin juice? McGonagall was never this forthcoming. She almost sounded critical of Dumbledore. "I imagine she would be," I said diplomatically.

"I never imagined..." she trailed off, pursing her lips. "What's done is done," she said, waving her wand. A box about the same size as *Hogwarts: A History* flew of a shelf and landed on the table. "This is the prospectus and aides we normally give muggle raised students. It includes a penmanship kit and pamphlets on the ministry of magic and various wizarding institutions, including Gringotts, which you seem to have learned how to use on your own."

I nodded. "Penmanship kit?"

She nodded tightly. "Did you think Ms. Granger entered Hogwarts knowing how to write in straight lines on unlined parchment?"

Yet another thing I'd never considered. "I assumed she took a calligraphy class."

"I doubt it," she said, opening the box and removing a quill, ink, sheaf of parchment, and two slender books. "Since you swapped to a fountain pen, your writing's improved, but not enough for OWLs. Even if you continue using muggle implements, you should still learn how to use a quill properly, if only to improve your penmanship. When you learned cursive, did your teacher tell you what style you were studying?"

"No, professor, but we only studied it for a year. After that, the school got a computer lab and they started teaching us typing instead of penmanship."

She gaped, but recovered quickly. "Well, that explains a lot. I take it your aunt encouraged this."

"She didn't care."

"All right. We'll start from the beginning. Most magical parents teach their children either a round hand or an italic script. What they teach depends mostly on their age and region. For example," she said, summoning a quill, parchment and ink from her desk, "I learned a round hand variant the muggles call Vera Foster civil service script." She quickly wrote a few sentences and turned the parchment so I could see her example. "I grew up in rural Scotland where this hand is still taught. Take a wizard or witch from my class who was born and raised in London or Bristol and they probably wrote italic." Slowly, she copied her sentence in the second style.

"Which did my parents use?"

"Lily used italic. Your father, when he deigned to make his papers legible, used round hand."

I smiled at her comment. "Are there any class distinctions associated with one hand over the other? I would hate to cultivate one and find out later that my penmanship limits my job opportunities."

"An astute question, but no. It's more a matter of region and age. For example, someone Professor Dumbledore's age probably won't write italic. While some students learn multiple styles of calligraphy in addition to a standard style, you also can't say all muggleborns use italic. Miss Granger, for example, writes in a very elegant round hand as does Mr. Finch-Fletchley. There's even some variation within families." She summoned an essay from her desk.

"This is something you don't see everyday," she said, pointing her fingernail at the first sentence.
I noted the name: Draco Malfoy. Why was she showing me his essay?

"See how he writes his 'e's and 'r's? Mr. Malfoy's father writes round hand, but his mother, like most of the Blacks, writes italic. Look at how he forms his letters. You can clearly see that both his parents taught him how to write."

"If my parents were still around, would I write like this?"

McGonagall pursed her lips. "Probably not," she said after a long pause. "James was a wonderful man, but I doubt he would have taught you how to write. Fly a broom and play pranks, yes, but he'd have left the three Rs to your mother."

"Oh," I said, suddenly wondering if my mother felt like she had two children sometimes. Three, if you counted Sirius.

Waving her wand, she sent the essay back to her desk. "Who showed you how to cut a quill?"

"Ronald."

"Ah," she said, "I imagine his parents cut his beginner quills for him. I doubt he even knows there's more than one way to cut a quill. The standard way is very difficult for a beginner. I'm surprised I didn't realize your problem when your first essays were covered with ink blotches." Thus began my first ever lesson on writing with a quill. McGonagall patiently walked me through the art of writing in a straight line, informed me my usual hand was a bastardized italic, and recommended I work my way through A Handwriting Manual by Alfred Fairbank, a muggle book included in the box. She assured me that with a little practice my hand would improve sufficiently that I wouldn't get points docked off my OWLS.

I left her office in a considerably better mood than when I entered, deposited my packages in my dorm—Fudge's package went straight into my lock box. I hadn't read the wills or codicil, yet. I planned to on Saturday, after my half-day studying under Moody. As for my handwriting, I didn't have time to practice now, but I would during the summer. By next fall, I hoped to have legible handwriting my mother would be proud of.

* Letter to Sirius from Lily in Harry Potter & the Deathly Hallows, Ch 10.

Chapter End Notes

First, I'd like to thank you all for sticking with me, so far.

2.7% is the UK divorce rate in the early 1900s, which is about where I think the wizarding world is stuck. Now, we all know the books never mentioned a divorce. My grandmother was a huge Harry Potter fan. She died before they finished the movies, but she read/memorized all the books. This scene is based off something she said after finishing book 5.

If I knew there was a crazy man out to kill my baby, you'd better believe I wouldn't stay in the same country as him.

The rest of the discussion included all the reasons she believed Lily should have divorced James and distanced herself from the war rather than agreeing to go under the
fidelius. Although Lily's reasons for divorce in this story are a different (don't ask because you still won't find out until Harry does), she made a very convincing argument. We always talk about Lily's sacrifice being that of a mother for her child. I completely agree with that perspective, but I always hated how she and James both supposedly remained heavily involved in the war effort. Forget about the prophecy and fidelius charm for a moment and ask yourself this question: if I had a infant during war, should my husband (or wife) and I both stay involved in the conflict or should one of us withdraw so our baby had at least one parent?

In my opinion, family is more important than your political ideals or your country. This is why you see many historical examples of mothers who sent their children overseas rather than keep them in war zone. It's also one of the reason many parents in the UK voluntarily evacuated their children from urban areas during WWII. How irresponsible were Lily, James, Alice, and Frank that they had children they KNEW someone wanted dead that they didn't do everything in their power, including separating themselves from their child, to keep their children alive? I'd say very.

I don't believe the typing instead of penmanship thing can happen in the UK under the current National Curriculum, but it appears to be possible prior to its most recent revision/implementation. I know it happened during the late 80s - early 90s in the US.

Please read and review.
Chapter 12

Chapter Notes

Disclaimer: Harry Potter and related characters, situations, settings, and plots is the original work of J.K. Rowling and under copyright. While I enjoy playing/experimenting in her sandbox, it's not mine and never will be.

See the end of the chapter for more notes

Disgusted, I slammed Survival Techniques and Spells shut and flicked my wand, returning it to the shelf. Solving the egg was easy. A few hints from Moody about magical languages, a library book, and a bathroom sink dashed my hopes of surviving this bloody tournament. I didn't know whose bright idea diving into the Black Lake at the height of winter was, but if I ever found out I had two choice words for the them. On second thought, my death promised to be painful. Why should I give them the easy way out?

Magic crackled on my fingertips. I closed my eyes and stilled the magic before it exploded and Madame Pince banned me from the library. My survival was paramount. I needed to focus on my options and find a way around the most insurmountable obstacle I'd ever faced, water, nine hundred seventeen feet deep.

Option A, jumping into the Black Lake in the middle of February without knowing how to swim, guaranteed I'd drown.

Option B, using gillyweed—I snitched Moody's book off Neville's nightstand—guaranteed I could breath under water for about an hour, depending on freshness, but I'd still drown if I was stuck in the middle of the lake when the herb wore off.

Option C, encapsulating an air supply with the bubble head charm combined with a warming charm, had the same inherent problem option B did.

In short, when my air ran out, I was screwed, leaving option D, learning to swim in three and a half weeks or less. Option E, sharing Myrtle's toilet, wasn't an option.

Unfortunately, the library didn't carry any books on "essential life skills best taught by trained professionals" to quote Madame Pince. Neither Tomes & Scrolls nor Flourish & Blotts listed a how to swim book in their catalog. I toyed with asking Hermione if her parents might send me a book on the subject, but discarded the idea. Hermione would ask too many questions and then insist on talking to a teacher, who'd either shout my deficiency from the rafters or berate me for not paying attention when some nonexistent adult taught me how to swim.

I cast a silent tempus and realized I had wasted thirty minutes sleep searching for a nonexistent book. Sighing, I packed my things and headed back to the dorm where I spent a sleepless night, mulling over possible solutions.

Five found me exhausted and solution-less outside Moody's door. The door flew open. Without looking up from his morning paper, Moody (I still didn't dare think of him as Crouch) pointed to my chair. I crossed the room and fixed myself a cup of tea.
My wand danced through detection charms. When nothing glowed, I raised the tea to my lips. A stinging hex slammed into my hand. The cup dropped, shattered when it hit the floor, dousing my sneakers in scalding tea.


I cast another charm. The spoon glowed green, indicating a poison. Sighing, I levitated it, sniffed. Lemon, an unusual scent for a poison. My shoulders slumped. Why couldn't we have one normal breakfast without vigilance lessons? He didn't do this to me last month. No point. He knew I knew wasn't Moody.

Moody cocked his head and narrowed his good eye. "That's not like you, Potter. What's wrong?" He repaired my tea cup and summoned a fresh spoon, which I dutifully cast the detection charm on.

Mourning the lost caffeine Moody vanished before it stained his rug, I poured a fresh cup and added sugar. I curled around the cup, fighting the urge to hug my knees to my chest.

"Potter, have I steered you wrong, yet?"

I shrugged. Other than putting my name in the goblet, no.

"Having trouble with another memory?"

I flinched. "Not exactly."

He spooned eggs onto my plate and looked at me expectantly. "Out with it," he said in an uncompromising tone I recognized from dodging practice.

"It's about the egg," I whispered.

His head snapped up. "You told me you solved the clue weeks ago."

"I did. It's not..." I hesitated. If he wanted me to die during the tournament, he wouldn't have told me about the dragons. Death by dragon would've been quick and public, perhaps public enough to discredit Dumbledore. In theory, he entered me in the tournament for some other reason than killing me in a gruesome and public fashion. Drowning during the second task would probably screw up his plan. If Voldemort's plans didn't include me surviving until the end of the tournament, odds were I wouldn't survive anyhow.

I gnawed on my bottom lip. Even when I slipped during occlumency and showed him my worst childhood memories, he didn't call me names, whisper tales in Malfoy's ear, or ask uncomfortable questions about why I didn't use magic to defend myself. Personally, I suspected magical interference of some sort prevented 'accidental' self-defense, but wasn't sure. Still, hadn't didn't mean wouldn't.

"Out with it, Potter."

"I can't swim," I said, making a snap decision.

Both eyebrows disappeared into his hairline. "Well, that is a problem." He folded his paper and set it aside. "Eat," he said and snapped his finger. A house elf dressed in a Hogwarts tea towel appeared. "Fetch Potter's swim robes."

The elf bowed in acknowledgment and popped out, returning seconds later with a pair of maroon
shorts and my quidditch undershirt. The elf deposited them on the table and popped out.

"I thought you said robes," I said, eying the most normal wizard clothing I'd ever seen.

Moody's lips quirked. "Count your blessings Madame Malkin took a few cues from the muggles. Otherwise, you'd be swimming in a tunic."

I shuddered. Robes were bad enough. I couldn't imagine drowning in a medieval tunic in public. Moody summoned his pen and notebook as I finished my eggs and began eating the oatmeal and fruit.

"Have you ever swam before, Potter?"

I rolled my eyes. "Can't," I answered around a mouthful of oatmeal and blueberries.

"Mind your manners," he said absently. "I know no one has taught you how to swim. I meant have you ever dog paddled or floated. Do you have any experience in water deeper than your knees?"

"Dudley tried to drown me in a pond, once."

"What happened after?"

"I'm not sure. I remember him and Piers throwing me in and holding me under. Then, there's a blank spot and I woke up in my cupboard. Why?"

"Accidental magic most likely. Are you sure you didn't keep yourself afloat?"

I shook my head and took another bite of oatmeal.

"Answer me honestly, son. Are you afraid of deep water?"

I froze. Hell, yes, but I'd never admit it. "More cautious than anything."

He snorted, but didn't push the issue. He poured himself another cup of tea, setting aside his Moody persona for a moment. "Change of plans," he said, stirring in a sugar cube. "Instead of dueling, I'll teach you how to swim. Doubt you'll have time for more than the basics, but at least you'll know enough to float. What's your plan for the task?"

"Gillyweed or bubblehead for air, but I'm still worried about hypothermia."

"Gillyweed will prevent it, but you don't want to be too far out when it wears off. Still, you need a good grasp on the basics and you'll need to watch your time. A dose'll give you about an hour. Give or take five minutes. Unless you want to test your swimming skills, I suggest you make it back with five minutes to spare."

"Will tempus work underwater?"

"Yes, but we'll order you a waterproof watch just to be safe. I'll also be placing a locator charm on you beforehand. No arguments."

"Understood," I said, surprised by the offer. Unless he used my blood, his charm would wear off within a day, meaning its only purpose was to find me. Before or after I drowned was debatable.

"How's your point me spell?"

I extended my hand, wand flat on my palm. "Point me," I ordered. My wand spun and pointed
"Good. Works a little differently underwater, but it serves the same purpose." He flicked his wand. A battered, yellow booklet titled Advanced Map and Aeriel Photography Reading printed by His Majesty's Stationary Office in 1942 landed beside my plate. "Notes in the margin explain how to use maps with the spell. Ask Madame Pince for a topographic map of the Black Lake. That should get you there and back with a little time to spare. Look up a map of Hogwarts' grounds so we can practice using maps next week."

I nodded and put the booklet in my bag. Moody either gave me books or assigned them from the library at least twice a week, so the only thing odd about the pamphlet was its muggle origins, but Moody also had shelves of muggle literature, including Shakespeare and Dickens.

We finished breakfast in a companionable silence. I stacked my yogurt bowl on my plate and looked expectantly at Moody. "Where to?"

"Go change. I'll be damned if my only student drowns."

I started to point out that he had hundreds of students, but bit my tongue before he hexed it off for back talking. I collected my things and went to the bathroom where I changed.

When I exited, I was greeted with a most disturbing sight—Mad-Eye Moody in a 1900s vintage swimsuit, complete with black and white prison stripes. Ropey scars twisted around his arms and legs like someone beat him with a fire whip. How could anyone suffer that many wounds and live?

Moody rapped his knuckles on his wooden leg. "Water proof," he said as I traced the leg up to his swimsuit. Straps as thick as my wrist bulged under the fabric, securing it at his hip. A solid ridge halfway up his thigh indicated where his flesh began. He tossed his robe over his shoulders and jerked his head at the door. "Get the staring out of your system and follow me," he said and left.

I grabbed my robe and ran after him.

After a quick walk to the fifth floor, we stopped in front of a statue of Boris the Bewildered. Moody turned to me. "Before we do this, I want you word that you will not come here without permission."

"Come where?" I asked.

He grinned. "The prefect's bathroom."

"Fine," I said grudgingly, "I won't come in here without permission."

"See that you don't. Pine fresh," he said to the statue. I snickered. Really, a muggle bathroom cleaner for the password in a magic school. "Scrap the attitude, Potter, before I reconsider. Swimming lessons are not in my job description."

The statue slid out of the way, revealing a vaulted room with stained glass windows, a swimming pool sized tub, and four bathroom stalls. After we entered, Moody pointed his wand at the statue and muttered something under his breath. "There. Now, the bath's closed for maintenance." A swish froze the portraits. He shucked off his robe and hung it on a hook.

"Come on then," he said, limping towards the bath. With a flick of his wand, the taps opened and warm, suds free, water flowed out the taps, filling the pool. With my stomach twisting in knots, I discarded my robe and tiptoed towards the steps.

Ignoring Moody, I stared into the pool, eying the steps that led into its depths. Dudley was miles away in England, I told myself. He wasn't here. No one would jump on my head and hold me under, but experience told me otherwise.

My hands shook. I slowly stepped down. The water rose to my knees. I clenched my jaw. Maybe this wasn't such a good idea. Moody grabbed my arm before I fled.

"Try sitting on the first step, Potter. You don't have to go any further. Just sit beside me and get used to the water."

Nervous, I crouched and eventually settled myself on the step, putting two arm lengths between us. The step wasn't long enough for three.

"Let your legs dangle in the water. Close your eyes and breathe. Imagine your somewhere else if you have to. Tell me when your calm."

"What if I can't?"

"Then we'll keep trying until you can. It might not be this morning or even tomorrow, but eventually you'll overcome your fear. Then, and only then, will we move to the next step," he said calmly.

I sighed and obeyed. I had no idea how long I meditated before I pushed aside the recurring memory of Dudley holding me under. My heart rate gradually slowed as I found my breath and focused, but my body remained tense, as if I was expecting an attack any second. "Can the portraits hear us?" I asked, seeking a distraction.

"Nope. Monitoring charms are disabled, too."

Clenching my hands into fists, I forced myself to keep breathing. It's just a massive, magic bath tub. The water wasn't that deep. Maybe. I hoped. "If parseltongue is snake language, why is there a written form? Snakes don't have hands." I needed to focus on something—anything—else.

Waves lapped against my legs when Moody submerged himself in the pool and swam away, giving me the space I craved. He stopped halfway across the pool. "You're looking at it backwards," he said. "Parseltongue is first and foremost a language, just like English or Latin. Yes, it allows people to communicate with snakes, but it also allows people to communicate with people. The only difference is most people are not able to speak or understand spoken parseltongue."

My hands dropped to the steps as my shoulders relaxed.

"I can read the runes, but despite your attempts to teach me a few words, I can't distinguish between the different sounds, much less speak the language. If I can read the runes, but am incapable of learning to speak than a few words, then?"

I fiddled with hem of my shirt. "The runes aren't part of the language," I answered tentatively.

"Not quite. The runes are a strictly human language, which is why you didn't automatically know the runes. They were created by human parselmouths, not snakes."

"Was there a parselmouth civilization?" I asked, scooting down a step. The water crept up my
chest, but the conversation kept me from panicking too much.

"There are ruins in India that suggest one existed at one time, but nothing definitive."

"Were they magical?"

"To my knowledge, yes."

My feet hit the bottom of the pool. Taking a deep breath, I grounded myself. This wasn't so bad. Just water. No grindylows, sharks, or giant squids. I could even see the bottom. Moody was across the pool. He couldn't reach me. I was safe, if I ignored the wet stuff. Yes, this wasn't so bad. I could do this.

Moody watched me with a small smile. "Better?" he asked.

"Yes, sir."

He swam to me, stopping a few feet away. "The first step is simple. About twenty feet out, the water will reach your chin. After that it's over your head. Go as deep as you feel comfortable. I promise I won't let you drown."

"Why?" The challenge in my voice reminded us both that I knew he wasn't who he pretended to be.

He laughed softly. "For starters, I value my own life enough to not let you drown in my presence. Your safe, Harry. You control the pace, not me. When you're ready, give it a try."

Biting the inside of my cheek, I grabbed the side of the pool and crept forward. Water inched up my chest. Panic threatened to overwhelm me, but I ruthlessly suppressed it. If I didn't want to drown in the Black Lake, I had to do this. No choice.

"What next?" I asked, pretending to be the brave Gryffindor everyone except Moody and Dumbledore believed I was. In comparison with keeping my personality from splitting, this was easy.

"When you're ready, place your face in the water. Don't submerge your head. Breath out your nose so you don't get water up it while you put your face in. Then use the air you have left to sing. When you run out of air, take your face out of the water." He lay back in the water and floated towards the deep end, leaving me to my own devices.

He knew me too well, I thought, as I placed my glasses on the edge. I'd never try this while someone was close enough to grab me. I took a deep breath and blew out my nose as I pressed my face against the water's surface. I ran out of air before I could try singing, but I smiled when I raised my head. As long as I controlled the situation, this was doable.

Moody pretended to ignore me while I tried a second, third, and fourth time. By the fifth, I'd mastered only using a little air to protect my nose. I opened my mouth, but lost my nerve and surfaced. Six tries later, I sang my first notes and laughed when my voice emerged distorted.

"Good. We'll try the next step tomorrow morning," he said and swam to the steps. He hauled himself out of the pool. Flushed with success, I climbed out.

"Pay attention, Potter. I'll only show you this once," he said and pointed his wand at himself. With a clockwise half-circle and a right flick, he intoned, "siccus."

I mimicked his wand movement and repeated the incantation. Water disappeared from my skin,
leaving me comfortably dry.

"Siccus" from the Latin root *sicc*, meaning dry. If I used a drying spell with the root *ar* as in *āreō* instead, what would you expect?"

I pursed my lips. The Latin verb *āreō* meant dried, parched, or withered where *siccus* meant dry, sober, or thirsty. The difference was how dry. "Used in a duel or for housekeeping?" I asked, putting on my glasses.

Moody tossed me my robes. "Duel."

"A withering curse," I answered, tugging my robes over my head. "Given approximately sixty percent of the human body is water with the brain being seventy percent, if a curse with the root *ar* struck someone, I'd expect death."

His eyes shone with approval. "Now, since any wizard worth their wand doesn't advertise the spells they use during a duel, what color is a withering curse?"

I closed my eyes, picturing other curses. My mind turned to the killing curse. Green signaled spring, the birth of new life. The killing curse was green because it took life. "Light blue," I answered.

"Exactly," he clapped me on the back. "I knew having you memorize roots was a good idea. Should be an admission requirement. Let's collect your things and get to class. Keep tomorrow free. We'll review your parsel runes, work on ingredient preparation, and test your memory of the reaction tables. Be prepared to discuss the International Statute of Wizarding Secrecy over dinner."

"Professor," I said as we walked back to his quarters, "why do we cast some spells in Greek and others in Latin?"

"Two reasons. One, we were conquered by the Romans. Two, the Romans absorbed other cultures and even added words from their languages. While most of our spells are of Latin origin, some, such as *episky*, retain their Greek origins, but not the original word. That's why roots are so
important. What does epi mean?"

"Upon or over," I replied as we entered his quarters.

"But you can't derive the meaning repair, can you?"

"No," I said, slinging my bag over one shoulder.

"That's because the word's mutated almost beyond recognition. In this case, you need to listen to the pronunciation, which is close to episkevi, Greek for 'repair'. In general, the older the language of origin, the higher chance we've forgotten how to properly pronounce the spell. The closer you are to the original pronunciation, the better your results will be, but only if you know the meaning of the words. The big exception is spells cast in magical languages."

"Like," I glanced at the nearby portraits, "you know?"

"Or Mermish or any other magical language for that matter. Now, get to class. Minerva'll have my hide for a scratching post if you're late."

A week later, I swam my first stroke. Moody called it a cross between the breast stroke and doggy paddle, but it kept my head above water and got me across the shallow end of the pool, eventually. Not efficient and I certainly couldn't hold my wand while swimming, but it worked.

By the second task, I had a semi-proficient side stroke, which I preferred because my head stayed above water at all times, a lazy tread, and I could float for fifteen minutes in water over my head without panicking. Moody swore he'd never tell a soul that learning to float for more than two minutes required a calming draught. After I'd done it a few times, I was okay, but the first two…I'd rather be caught stealing from Snape than face that again.

I surfaced with Ronald Weasley, two guesses who's wonderful idea that was, in tow, thinking the exact same thing I did when Dumbledore unceremoniously shoved me in the lake. Anyone who willingly jumps into a lake in Scotland in the middle of February is a bloody moron. Anyone who thinks giving their students hypothermia is a perfectly acceptable challenge is certifiably insane.

"What?" Ronald said groggily.

"Shut up and swim," I said between clenched teeth. Then I ducked back under the water, swimming towards the platform as quickly as I could with Ronald bobbing behind me like cork. The gillyweed I owl ordered from the apothecary in Hogsmeade would only last for an hour. I had ten minutes to make it back to the dock.

Aconite. Two-hundred-fifty species. Also known as monkshood and wolfsbane. I began reciting the standard list of potions ingredients in my mind.

By the time I reached dandelion roots, the dock pilings came into view. I swam to the ladder, yanked the rope until I saw him grab the ladder and hands descended to help him climb up. I poked my head up enough to prove I was there, waiting for the gillyweed to wear off, and ducked back under the water before my gills started screaming for air.

The next two minutes passed with me staring at the second hand on my watch, counting down the seconds before my neck started burning. I fought with myself, struggling to not breath in water. The burning passed and I felt like my lungs would explode. The icy water seeped into my skin, chilling me to the bone. I surfaced, gasping.
Snape, of all people, hauled me out of the water. He dropped a towel over my head while Moody cast a drying charm and wrapped a mercifully warm blanket around me. I glared at Dumbledore and the other judges, who were standing on the edge of the dock, peering into the murky depths.

"Would it be terribly wrong of me, sir, if I gave them a little push?"

Snape's eyes widened minutely.

Moody shook his head. "Don't, Potter. I'd hate to see you hauled in front of the Wizengamot for attempted murder."

"Still," I said, boring holes into their backs. "I'm not the deranged person who decided swimming outdoors in Scotland in the middle of freaking February is a perfectly safe activity."

Snape coughed, hiding a smirk with his hand. Moody steered me towards Madame Pomfrey who was waiting in a small triage area with more warm blankets and pepper up. Grateful, I accepted the potion and chugged it. Fleeting warmth suffused my bones.

I glanced at Ronald, whose shivers had already subsided. "Freezing cold, mate," he whispered to me.

Clutching the blanket tighter around my shoulders, I nodded.

"Is the little Veela girl still down there?"

"Think so," I muttered.

"We should've saved her."

I shook my head. "It was one each, Ron," I said softly. His name caught in my throat. Maybe learning to swim so I could rescue Ronald the Betrayer wasn't such a horrible thing. Maybe it meant I got my friend Ron back on terms we could both accept.

"We'll go back," he declared. "How'd you do it?"

"Do what?"

"Hold your breath for so long. Tell me how you did it so we can go back down there and get her."

I sighed. "No. It's a task, Ron. A silly game, nothing more. Can you imagine the bad press if they let a child die at the bottom of the lake? They might not do anything to protect the champions, but I guarantee you she'll be fine."

"She's Fleur's sister. We have to help her." His face turned as red as his hair.

"I said no. I rescued you like I was supposed to. I'm not going back in there." My hands shook again like they did when I first learned to swim. My chest tightened. I feared I'd hyperventilate any second. He didn't understand. I physically couldn't go back in the water. Getting to the mermaid village and back to the dock without a panic attack required reciting names and dates, potions recipes, everything I could think of to take my mind off the walls of water pressing against me. Gills and flippers helped, but no. Just no.

He grabbed my arm and dragged me off my bed. "Let's go," he demanded.

I dug my heels in. "No!"
Ron… No, this was Ronald. My friend Ron would never do this to me. Ronald adjusted his grip, using his superior weight and height to drag me closer to the water. Shrieking, he released me.

Soft arms drew me away from the edge and lifted a vial to my lips. "Drink," Madame Pomfrey instructed.

Obediently, I tilted my head back, letting her tip the calming draught into my mouth. Several minutes passed before I regained my senses. By then, she'd passed me off to Moody and McGonagall and was bent over Ron's bed with Professor Snape hovering at her elbow.

"He okay?"

"Burned his hands," Moody answered. "Might have a little scarring, but nothing serious. Poppy and Severus got to him quickly enough."

They kept me out of the way while Cedric and Cho were tended to by Madame Pomfrey while Snape remained chanting healing spells over Ronald's hands. Then the crowd began cheering again as Hermione and Krum approached the platform. I bit my lip, not willing to look at Hermione, who I left behind once I realized Krum didn't have a reason to rescue Ronald, but would get his girlfriend out of there.

My gaze fell on Fleur, who was curled on a cot, partially sedated, recovering from her encounter with the grindylows.

I wondered at myself. When school started, I would have rushed to her aide, but not anymore. When I saw the grindylows attack her, I reacted exactly the way I would have before coming to Hogwarts. I counted my blessings they were occupied with someone else and slipped past the obstacle, intent on getting this unpleasant business over with before my gillyweed ran out and all of Hogwarts witnessed my pathetic attempts to float in frigid water.

In some ways, my mind was piecing itself back together, but I still woke up with nightmares. The mental ripping sensations were getting worse. Despite my best efforts, my mind wasn't healing.

Drugged and caught in my musings, I barely noticed the Merchieftainess rise from the water with the blond child in her arms and pass her to Madame Maxime. Dumbledore spoke to her briefly in Mermish. Bagman canceled his sonorous charm and the judges huddled together, obviously discussing the merits of each champion. Dumbledore looked like he was sucking on a particularly nasty lemon. I didn't need to speak Mermish to know the chieftainess had either told him that I saw Fleur attacked and didn't intervene or the scrape on Ronald's forehead was from the hut he bumped against on the way out.

McGonagall squeezed my shoulder when Ludo Bagman announced with great fanfare they had reached a decision. He awarded Fleur twenty-five points for essentially surviving the grindylows long enough for someone to rescue her. Then gave me a beaming smile.

"Harry Potter," Bagman said, "was the only champion to retrieve his hostage within the hour time limit, having a total time of fifty-five minutes. Despite his brilliant use of gillyweed and excellent time, some of us," he shot Dumbledore a nasty look, "feel he did not show a proper level of concern for his hostage. Therefore, we award Mr. Potter forty-eight points."

He proceeded to award Cedric forty-seven points and Krum forty. I blinked. First place? What the hell were they thinking? I didn't want to be in first place. I was supposed to be in last place. A very comfortable position given the most likely reason Crouch entered me in this damn thing.
This entire chapter began with a single sentence scribbled into my notebook: "Dudley learned how to swim; I learned how to mop." It's difficult to say how true this may or may not be. Swimming is part of the National Curriculum in the UK. Based solely on a few news articles that discussed drowning and parents having to pay for school swimming pool fees, I decided Harry probably wouldn't know how to swim because even if his school offered lessons, the Dursleys wouldn't pay his fees.

Please read and review.
Chapter 13

With each passing day, I felt my very being stretch itself to the limit as the real me struggled to survive. My rational mind fought the blob, losing to a sea of whispered voices telling stories about my parents that didn't jive with the First Codicil of Lily Maia Evans Potter, who was either brilliant or insane, depending on who you asked.

Some days, I woke up convinced I should file the damn thing and let things fall where they may. Others, I shied away. Better what you know, I would whisper to myself. Just a few more years. Dumbledore's predictable. As long as you don't meet with him alone, you'll be fine.

Everything changed when I woke up with my cheek pressed against a blood soaked pillow. Cupping my hands over my nose, I sat up and leaned my head forward so the blood didn't run down my throat. Blood spattered on Moody's rug. Pinching my nose shut, I stood and stumbled across the living room to the kitchenette where I sat at the table and waited for the bleeding to stop.

I stared at the coals smoldering in the grate. Moody offered me house room the week before, saying if I didn't want to face my own house, I could at least save him the trouble of hunting for me. I was initially hesitant, but I agreed when I realized I didn't want to return to a common room full of celebrating Gryffindors and if Moody had to hunt me down in the freezing cold, he'd take payment in sweat, maybe a little blood.

I closed my eyes and sank into my mind.

Rip. Tear. Kill. Like the basilisk traveling through the pipes except this enemy was inside my head. Destroying me with a corrosive poison that melted all it touched into a formless blob, waiting for someone to reshape it into what Harry Potter should be, instead of who he was.

I was me; I wasn't.

My mind shattered and mended in a perpetual cycle that made me wonder how much longer I had before I broke or went insane. Accidental magic at its best and worst, I supposed.

My vision shifted.

In a moment of stark clarity, I saw Dumbledore's game laid out on a marble chess board.

A single pawn stood in the center of the board, color indeterminate, ushered by a white queen and her rook. The pawn took another pawn. Then a knight. Each time protected by either the rook or the queen, but still pushed deeper into the fray than either of them would ever journey.

That was Dumbledore's game.
Shepherd the pawn, me, until it turned into a queen. Then, wield it.

I was such a fool.

Dumbledore knew about my occlumency studies. At first, he didn't know why I was interested in the discipline, but after the first task, he knew. He practically admitted it in writing. All this time, I thought I was staying one step ahead, holding him at bay.

Wrong.

Dumbledore allowed my little rebellion because he knew my mind would eventually shatter.

Thanks to Hagrid, Ronald, and my own stupidity, I didn't have anyone I could ask for help other than Dumbledore and his cronies. Dumbledore fully expected I would come crawling back, begging for his help, an apology on my lips, willing to do whatever he asked of me if he would make the pain stop.

I paused. Was my assumption true?

No.

Dumbledore discussed the prophecy with me in front of Moody the Impostor. Dumbledore daily left his pawn in his enemy's care. He never questioned me about my lessons, but in passing, he sometimes made vague references to material Moody taught me months ago as if I was still studying it, but I wasn't. Once I made the connection between intent and magic, I learned a year's worth of spells inside of two months. I didn't have all the incantations memorized, but I had performed all the spells.

Between Dumbledore's outside duties and my tutoring, he only saw Moody at staff meetings and over dinner. Moody knew about battles he fought against dark wizards. He talked about them like he was there because he was, fighting for the opposition. He even received the real Moody's mail. Dumbledore looked at Moody and saw what he wanted to see, the real Alastor 'Mad-Eye' Moody.

He didn't know the one thing I knew.

Dumbledore's rook was black.

I had to choose.

Would I sacrifice my true self and become the heroic boy-who-lived, martyr? Could I retain my sense of self and live with the magical world's scorn without further harming myself?

More importantly, would Barty Crouch help me if I asked?

Maybe, but I'd have to show him everything. He'd accept nothing less.

I cast a cleansing charm on the rug and pillow and rinsed the blood of my face. Then I grabbed my glasses off the mantle, took my lock box out of my bag—I didn't leave it unattended lately—and balanced my wand on top of it. On stocking feet, I padded across the living room and knocked on the bedroom door.

"Just a minute," a baritone voice said, trying and failing to emulate Moody's curse-scarred vocal cords.

"No need to take your polyjuice, professor," I said softly. According to him, his quarters were
secured by numerous protections and warded against all eavesdroppers, including house elves, but I wasn't willing to take any too many chances.

"Why not?" he asked cautiously.

"Because what I need to talk to you about will be a bit easier if you don't look like Dumbledore's old war buddy."

The door cracked open, revealing a sandy-haired man in his early thirties. He pointed his wand between my eyes and I held out the box with my wand balanced on top. "May I come in, Professor Crouch?" I asked.

His wand dropped a fraction of an inch, and he nodded curtly, taking the box and my wand from me. He motioned me to an arm chair in the far corner and sat on the bed, trying to examine the box while keeping an eye on me. Raising the box to his ear, he started to shake it.

"If you wake Dyfi, I will tell her to bite you, not me."

"Dyfi?" he asked.

"Common adder about yea long," I said, miming her length. "Sarcastic, and a bit bad tempered, especially when you disturb her sleep."

"You have a pet snake," he said incredulously.

"I'm pretty sure she sees herself as the owner, not me. I rescued her from one of Mrs. Figg's cats summer before third year. Hedwig made the mistake of bringing her a mouse. Now, she refuses to leave."

"Only you, Potter. How did you know my name?"

I stood slowly and pointed to the box. "May I show you?" I asked.

"Depends on what you need to open it."

"My blood, my wand, and a password."

"I don't think so, Potter."

"If you'll cut my finger for me, coat the tip of my wand in my blood, and touch it to the lock, all I'll need to do is say the password. I need to get in the box anyhow. There are several things I need show you."

"All right," he said, picking up my wand, "but no heroics."

I nodded in agreement. Barty flicked my wand and the cutting curse hit my outstretched finger. "Strange," he muttered. "This wand feels almost like…"

"They're brother wands," I said after I realized whose wand he was referring to.

His eyes widened. "Interesting," he said, rolling the wand tip in my blood and pressing it to the lock.

I hissed the password. The lid vanished. Barty looked inside, grimacing when the dim lamp light cast the interior in deep shadows. He waved my wand again and the lights brightened. Another wave healed my finger. He set my wand aside and picked up his.
"Not bad," he said, "but this one fits me better."

"Look in the right compartment."

He quirked his lips. "I'm impressed, Potter. I thought you were hiding your study materials under your mattress or inside a locked trunk. This is far more secure than what I expected."

"Blame Florian Fortescue. He insisted I have a secure place to store my vault key. I went shopping and it sort of evolved."

Humming to himself, he removed my books, the packet from Fudge, a sheaf of correspondence from Gringotts and Rita Skeeter, two notebooks—red for Dumbledore and the war and blue for everything I thought he did to me—and the Marauder's Map. Barty turned the old parchment over in his hands, clearly puzzled as to why I had a ratty piece of parchment stashed in a high security lock box.

"Tap it with your wand and say, 'I solemnly swear that I am up to no good,'" I directed.

Snickering at the password, he touched his wand to the parchment and uttered the phrase. The map sprang to life, drawing out a detailed map of Hogwarts. He flipped through it, pausing on Severus Snape pacing in his private lab. "Where did you get this?"

"That is the Marauder's Map."

"Pettigrew made this?" he said in disbelief.

"Actually, I have it on good authority that Sirius Black came up with the idea, but Remus Lupin did the work. My dad, Sirius, and Pettigrew just explored the castle."

"Amazing," he whispered, studying his quarters and his office where you could see Alastor Moody situated about where Barty had Moody's seven compartment trunk.

"Do not take my map apart," I said when I noticed the Ravenclawish glint in his eye.

"Just a few spells."

"No. If you must know exactly how it works, I'll write Sirius. I'm sure he can wheedle the spells out of Lupin."

Barty hesitated, his fingers twitching. "Acceptable. What is it you need to talk about at, " he cast a tempus, "three thirty in the morning?"

"Sorry, Professor. I didn't realize the time. We can talk about this later."

"Now is fine, Potter."

"The night you gave me the occlumency book I was attacked."

He snorted. "Clearly," he said dryly.

"By Dumbledore. Right after they announced the champions. I was headed to the dorm when I performed some sort of accidental mind magic. It reversed a lot of stuff, or at least that's what I think it did, but every thing's still there. The stuff he added and the real me and..." I trailed off, not sure how to properly explain what happened.

"Dear Merlin," he breathed.
"I wrote down everything I could think of. It's all there," I said, pointing to the notebooks. "The stuff I noticed about me and the things I read in the library. Everything I've pieced together. I need you to read it. Tell me if I have an over active imagination or if what I'm seeing is real. Please?"

Rolling his wand between his fingers, Barty regarded me. "You realize, Potter, that I'm loyal to the Dark Lord," he said, rolling up his left sleeve and revealing the snake and skull tattooed on his arm. "The mark doesn't take if you're not completely sure. You can't put someone under the imperius and have it take either. Do you understand?"

I stared at the dark mark for second before I nodded. "Yes, sir."

"Why ask me? Why not Granger or Black?"

"Because despite everything I've shown her, Hermione still believes Dumbledore is, if not good then, the lesser of two evils. Before my mother filed for divorce, my parents had mirror wills. The guardianship provisions listed each other, then Sirius, Pettigrew, Marlene McKinnon, Dumbledore, and McGonagall. Dumbledore was their executor. My mother's codicil changed both her executor and the guardianship provisions." I closed my eyes, willing myself to continue.

"She removed everyone. My dad, Sirius, Dumbledore. All of them, but I don't believe she told anyone about the codicil."

"That's odd."

"You gave me this piece in one of our earliest lessons. When it comes to testamentary guardian ships, the Ministry of Magic follows muggle law. No one knew what happened that night except me and Voldemort. He was disembodied and I wasn't old enough to talk. Whatever Dumbledore told the world was what happened. There was no one left to contradict him.

"Dumbledore claimed my guardianship under my father's will and placed me with my mother's half-sister."

"Full sister."

"Half. My mum attached detailed family trees for both sides of my family to her codicil as exhibits, but that's irrelevant for now. By law, unless a parent designates otherwise, the guardianship of a minor child falls to the surviving parent. My father's will designated my mother."

Barty rubbed his jaw. "Go on."

"Dumbledore told everyone my mother died last, which means her will and codicil should determine my guardian, not my father's because my father left the guardianship to her and she survived him. Dumbledore can only claim my guardianship as long as her will and codicil remains 'lost'. I believe he assumed my mother hadn't changed her will, told everyone she died first, then buried her documents when he realized he wouldn't be able to control me."

He whistled under his breath. "That's quite a conspiracy theory, Potter. I'll grant that you're a talented kid. One day, you'll be a great wizard, but you have decades to go before you get there. You're a politically valuable piece, but you're only important if the prophesy is valid. You said yourself it's not."

"I know I'm missing something huge, but what I know fits. Dumbledore let your father put Sirius, one of his loyal Order member's, in Azkaban without questioning him. The only logical reason for Dumbledore to do that was if he believed Sirius was innocent of all charges. I think Dumbledore knew Sirius wasn't the secret keeper. If Sirius had killed those muggles, he would have confessed
under veritaserum. Go straight to Azkaban. Do not pass go." Confused, he wrinkled his brow.
"Sorry, muggle thing. The point is Marlene McKinnon died months before my parents, and Peter was supposedly dead. With Sirius out of the picture, custody fell to Dumbledore. As long as he kept Sirius illegally imprisoned, Dumbledore controlled my entire life. Sirius refuses to see it. He still sings Dumbledore's praises. I know they're in contact. I can't ask Sirius because I am ninety-nine percent certain he'll tell Dumbledore. If I'm even half right, I'll probably end up dead or in Azkaban for killing Quirrell. I can't take that risk."

He steepled his fingers, regarding me through hooded eyes. "All right, Potter," he said, handing me my wand. "Go get dressed and make us a pot of tea. I'll start reading through this." A flick of his wand summoned fresh parchment and a pencil. He scribbled a note on it and handed it to me. "Exit my quarters and call your elf friend. Have him give this to McGonagall."

I skimmed the unsealed note.

Minerva,

Potter had a rough night. Kept us both up with nightmares. I'm keeping him out of classes today. Master's prerogative. Ask Albus if you don't know what I'm talking about.

Tell the brats to read the next two chapters.

Alastor

"Master's prerogative?" I asked.

"Do I look like an encyclopedia, Potter?"

"No, sir. I'll look it up," I said and exited the room. After I changed into my robes, I exited the wards and called Dobby, who eagerly popped off with Barty's note.

By the time the bedroom door opened and Barty emerged, I had two steaming mugs of strong tea prepared and his copies of Hogwarts: A History and Practical Magical Education Law, which made up for not being as comprehensive as the library archives by being easier to understand. I silently thanked Crouch for showing it to me after the Snape incident.

"You need to reread chapter three in Hogwarts: A History first. Then read pages 416 through 459 for the specific language and examples," he said, seating himself across from me.

"Thought you weren't an encyclopedia," I quipped.

A stinging hex hit my hand. Cursing under my breath, I rubbed it. "Language, Potter. Just because I can't understand you doesn't mean I don't understand what you mean."

He set his wand aside and began sipping his tea with his left hand while he scribbled in the margins with his right. After all the work I put into my theories and notes, I wanted to rip the fountain pen from his hand and demand he use a clean sheet, but I restrained myself. I asked for his opinion. Writing in the margins was a small price to pay.

"What about the Chamber of Secrets?" he asked between sips. "You or Dumbledore?"

I set my mug down. "Me, I think. They were going to close the school, send me back to the Dursleys. I didn't have an acromantula hidden in a cupboard. I had to go after the real thing. As to how I found the entrance, made the leap of faith that Myrtle was the girl who died the first time, I think that was Dumbledore. I didn't plan on fighting the basilisk. I thought I could nip down there,
find Ginny, and get her out without encountering any resistance, but when I got down there..." I trailed off, lost in memory. Tom leeching Ginny's magic. The basilisk. Fawkes.

"I've seen it, remember?"

I awarded him a half-smile. "I know." He nudged Hogwarts: A History towards me. "Why are you being so nice to me?" I asked.

"A lot of reasons. Now, stop your incessant questioning and let me finish going through this. Then, we'll talk."

I sighed, but I did stop talking. Barty waved his hand, wandlessly summoning three muggle psychology books, a fresh stack of parchment, and the notebook he used during my lessons. He began searching through the books, leaving me to look up the answer to my earlier question.

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When I first read the Hogwarts Charter, I ignored several anachronistic provisions that were last used in 1782, including the section on master-apprentice relationships. In retrospect, I should have paid attention.

In wizarding Britain, out-dated doesn't mean not done. When Dumbledore ordered Moody to tutor me, he gave his consent, meeting the first two conditions (guardian and headmaster consent). When Crouch set my hours so more than half my total instructional time was spent working with him, he met the third (master's offer). When I asked him about libel and defamation laws, I unknowingly met the fourth condition (student seeks master's counsel for non-academic matter), enacting a magical contract both older and more powerful than the Goblet of Fire. A perfect arrangement in Dumbledore's opinion because even if he lost control of me, I was still controlled by one of his men.

Luckily (or not, depending on your perspective), the contract was between me and Crouch, not Moody because the real Moody never received the request.

The contract wouldn't let Crouch order me into a life threatening situation, but he could advise me to do it. If he advised me to do something and I went against his advice, he could end the apprenticeship. After studying under him for a few years, I might be so emotionally dependent on him I would jump off a cliff if he asked. While master/apprentice situations weren't designed to be that insidious, they could be.

On the flip side, the contract negated any magic intended to make one party perceive the other in any manner that ran counter to reality, which meant I may have had assistance making the leap that Moody wasn't Moody. It also meant Crouch was the one person Dumbledore couldn't trick into believing the Dursleys were good people.

A truly fascinating piece of magic that I would explore further on a later date.

"I see you figured it out," Barty said, setting his pen down. He still looked like himself. Safe enough. He'd locked down both his quarters and his floo, enabling the magical equivalent of an answering machine. No house elves, portraits, teachers, or students were allowed without him granting them admittance. The best part...Dumbledore allowed him to erect high security wards around his office and personal quarters that required either Crouch's magic or an invitation to pass through because the real Mad-Eye was that paranoid. Crouch didn't leave everything locked down all the time, but he did make a habit of locking the wards whenever he slept and during the weekend, including during our lessons. No one would question him leaving them locked all day.
"Yes, sir. Why did you agree to this? Does he know?"

"If you mean my master, yes. I'm not as isolated as you think, Potter. We have multiple means of communication. Do you remember the first day? When you smashed bottles with a seventh year charm spoken in parseltongue? I still haven't asked where you learned it," he said the last to himself. "Dumbledore visited me about ten minutes after you left and specifically reminded me of the charter provisions. I sent my master my memories of the night your name came out of the goblet, your meeting with Dumbledore, your anger management exercise," his eyes shone, "and my meeting with Dumbledore. We both acknowledged helping you might change our plans, but I believed, and my lord agreed, that if you were left to your own devices, the consequences would be fatal for you and potentially disastrous for us."

"You couldn't refuse Dumbledore because the real Moody wouldn't. The more time I spent with you, the higher the chance I'd figure out you weren't Moody and tell Dumbledore."

"Exactly," he said, pleased I figured it out. "The apprenticeship prevents either of us from directly harming the other."

"Since telling Dumbledore would likely result in your death, the contract protects your identity," I said in a rush. The contract prevented him from outright killing me or portkeying me to Voldemort without a wand, but it didn't protect me as much as it protected him. If he orchestrated a meeting, he'd be fine as long as he had a reasonable expectation I knew enough to get myself out of it. "What about legilimency? If Dumbledore broke through my shields and saw…" I trailed off.

"That's why we focused so intensely on occlumency the first two months."

"But I still can't keep him out."

"You can detect his invasion. I'm also convinced you would recognize any attempts to modify your memories or alter your personality. If he were any more forceful than he was when we met with him over the holidays, what would you do?"

"Call the DMLE, send Dobby with a letter to Silas, and contact Rita Skeeter." Skeeter wasn't my favorite person, but a well-timed scoop would prevent Dumbledore from hiding his actions.

He grinned like a proud parent. "See? I never mentioned the last two. You added them on your own. If Dumbledore were to attack you with legilimency, you now have the knowledge and resources to make him pay."

"But he's still my legal guardian. He'll argue he was within his rights."

"Unless I miss my guess, your solicitor will counter that argument with your mother's codicil."

"I don't know."

"Why not?" he said, resuming his work. He flipped through both muggle and magical text books, stenciling notes in the margins, and writing his own observations on a fresh sheet of parchment.

"It's complicated. I'll explain after you finish."

"More complicated than this?" he asked.

"I'm not sure."

"I'll be a few more hours. Why don't you work on your runes?"
"Okay," I replied. Over the last month, the language changed from unduly difficult to hard, but interesting. I no longer grumbled about studying it.

Three hours passed before Barty set his pen down and scooted his chair over. "Bring your chair over here," he said, indicating the blank spot on his left.

I dragged my chair across the floor, hanging it on the rug. Barty freed it and repaired the rug with a flick of his wand. I set it where indicated and took a seat. "Am I imagining things?" I asked.

"It's difficult to say. Based on what I've personally observed and experienced, I don't think you are, but objectively, it's difficult. Your entire theory is based on two key assumptions. If either is wrong, so is your theory. What are the weak points?"

He would turn this into an exercise. "The first assumption is Dumbledore is self-interested," I answered. "He's only concerned with his personal power, not what's in the best interest of either myself or the magical world."

"Your theory about the Order of the Phoenix does coincide with the voting record and with my personal observations both during and after the last war, but I'm biased."

An understatement. Dumbledore and Crouch's law combined with Dumbledore's abrogation of duty and his father's zealotry convicted him on such flimsy evidence the muggles wouldn't have managed an indictment, much less a trial. "What about his actions during the fifties and sixties? He waited five years after Grindelwald to accept any 'unnecessary honors', but his voting record speaks for itself. Banned books. Political censorship. The Quibbler's the last free press in the magical world. Legal discrimination against werewolves, vampires, centaurs…Basically, any creature that can think for itself and might speak out against him. False imprisonment. His political opponents are all either disgraced, dead, or have disappeared."

"True. Most of his political opponents from that time period either died during the war or in Azkaban. I'm fairly certain my master and Nott are the only ones left."

"Nott?"

"His son's in your year."

"So do you think my assumption's valid?"

"I do. Have you spotted the second?"

"Dumbledore used legilimency to either alter my personality or compel me to stick my nose in situations where it was liable to get cut off."

"Not how I would put it, but yes. Without having a master legilimens check your mind, it's impossible to say if it's true or not."

"But you—"

"I'm just someone who learned the spell, and your mind is more difficult to read than most." My confusion must have shown on my face because he continued. "When I enter your mind, I can watch your memories and sometimes feel your emotions, but I can't understand your thoughts. Our minds are fundamentally incompatible because you think in Parseltongue, not English. I doubt you ever noticed because to you there's little difference between Parseltongue and English."

I quirked an eyebrow at him. "But—"
"—I asked my lord after our first occlumency lesson. He said every parselmouth's first language is parseltongue. Leeds said the same thing. You think in your first language, not your second."

"That's why I noticed," I said, stunned. "When I started unraveling everything, it was almost like I could see seams where someone had pasted something new inside my head." I closed my eyes, remembering my first occlumency exercise and the odd feeling I got when I recalled the situations, memories, and emotions I later labeled 'Dumbledore tampering'.

"Cast legilimens on me," I said excitedly.

"What?"

"Just do it. You'll see."

With a dubious expression on his face, Barty pointed his wand at me and muttered the incantation. I felt his mind brush against mine and let him in, drawing him to my memories of First Year Halloween.

Quirrell ran into the Great Hall, shouting troll. Pandemonium erupted. Barty touched the edge of a seam and withdrew.

I blinked rapidly, trying to moisten my eyes.

"Bizarre," he muttered, shaking his head. "Such a strange sensation. I could see and hear everyone around me, but your inner thoughts were utterly incomprehensible. That's normal. The only time I've ever heard your inner thoughts was when you informed me you knew I wasn't the real Moody. Then, it changed. You were worried about Granger. You thought no one would find her in time. That you were the only one who knew where she was."

Another piece clicked in place. "If I were to guide you to each incident, you could identify if my thoughts shifted from Parseltongue to English."

"Yes. That one…By Hecate, Potter. He did it. He really did it. How did you figure all this out?"

"I went through my memories, back issues of The Daily Prophet, and Wizengamot records."

"Who else knows besides Granger?"

"You. Hermione doesn't know everything. She caught me working on my Order of the Phoenix theory, but I didn't tell her about the other."

"Did you do all your research in the library?"

I nodded. "I checked for portraits and cast the spells you taught me."

"I told you those spells aren't fool proof," he said. His eyes were wild and his fingers clenched his wand like he would curse me any second.

"No one caught me."

"That you know of. You stupid little…" he trailed off and took a deep breath, calming himself. The mad glint in his eyes disappeared. "If Dumbledore suspected you knew, he would have either obliviated you or shown you contradicting evidence. He's put too much effort into grooming," he said the word with distaste, "you to let it go to waste. Do you have any idea how insane this is? Albus Dumbledore caught by a school boy."
"I doubt I'm the first school boy to catch him."

He frowned. "Who else?"

"When Mr. Riddle said Dumbledore never liked him, he seemed to return the favor."

"With good reason, but I don't think he ever stumbled across anything this big. And since when were you respectful?"

"People grow up."

"So they do." He drummed his fingers on the table. "I don't need to tell you how dangerous this is, but I will. In your notes, you called Dumbledore a benign dictator. He's not benign. The ministry also believes he's your guardian, which means he can do anything he wants short of killing you, say it was all within his rights, and everyone will believe him because he's Albus Dumbledore. If he does kill you, it will either look like an accident or a death eater attack. Teaching you occlumency lessons may have made things worse.

"Before, he would have used legilimency to force you to act a certain way, follow him blindly. Now, he can't, which puts you in more danger than either of us suspected. I fear the only thing standing between him and you now is his belief that I am Alastor Moody. I bet you've noticed I seem to know Moody's life and mannerisms quite well."

"Yes, sir," I said, wondering if he'd volunteer the information.

"Alastor Moody graduated Hogwarts with my father. They went to the Auror Academy together and partnered for thirty-five years. He is my godfather." My eyes widened. "I spent most of my childhood following him around and mimicking everything from how he combed his hair to how he talked. We stopped speaking to each other around the time I graduated Hogwarts, but our relationship had been strained for years." Bitterness crept into his voice. "He always picked my father over me. Regardless, the real Alastor Moody trusts Dumbledore, but not implicitly. If he ever learned Dumbledore was using illegal mind magics on a minor, he'd throw Dumbledore in Azkaban faster than you can say Quidditch."

"You threatened him with Azkaban during our first meeting because that's what the real Moody would do."

"Precisely. The way I see it, you only have two choices: get Dumbledore removed as your guardian or run to the Dark Lord. Of course, you could always go back to being in Dumbledore's back pocket."

"I'll pass," I said dryly.

"I figured." Barty flipped to my more recent self-observations. "Worse, your personality's splitting."

"It's more than splitting. If I don't get help, and I mean real dig through my mind and put everything back where it's supposed to be help, soon, I'll either go insane or commit suicide."

"How long?"

"Two months if I'm lucky."

He rubbed his eyes. "You won't make it to the third task."
"I won't," I agreed. "I thought about slipping out of the castle and taking the floo from the Three Broomsticks to St. Mungo's, but they won't treat me without my guardian's consent, which Dumbledore will never give." I gnawed on the inside of my cheek.

I'd considered all the angles, analyzed my situation ad nauseum, but I was still a fourteen-year-old kid. I'd learned a lot over the past four months with Barty. Not just spells, runes, and magical theory. He taught me that sometimes adults will help you. Sometimes, your trust isn't misplaced.

I almost laughed. The adult I trusted most in the world was a Death Eater Azkaban escapee. When I knocked on his door, I had already made my decision. I would trust him because he was the only adult I knew who hadn't completely sold me out, yet.

I would trust him because I didn't have a choice.

"Do you think you can help me patch things together so I can make it until the summer? I know I've only just begun occlumency, but I am a genetic legilimens, even though I don't know how to use it. If you learned the theory, could you use my magic to hold my mind together?"

Head cocked, he considered it. "No. Any repair work I managed would still be in English. Your mind would reject it."

My shoulder's slumped. So much for that brilliant idea. "What's your opinion on Severus Snape?" I asked, moving on.

"He's either a spy or a double agent. Since he's deeply indebted to Dumbledore for keeping him out of Azkaban, my money's on spy."

"He's Dumbledore's man," I said to clarify his statement.

"Bought and paid for."

Damn. I was out of options. I summoned my lock box and removed my mother's codicil. "Mr. Norton has already read this and explained everything to me. I haven't shown it to Silas because Mr. Norton is the person who would represent me if this ever goes to court, which it probably will. Especially if I use it to challenge Dumbledore's guardianship."

"Okay," he said slowly, unsure why I transitioned from Snape's loyalties to my mother's wishes.

"Before she filed her codicil with the ministry, my mother paid Gringott's 1000 Galleons, advance payment to serve as her institutional executor."

He wrinkled his brow. "Gringott's? I know they'll do it for a fee, but even the most paranoid can usually find someone, a solicitor or close friend, who'll abide by their wishes."

"I believe she knew Dumbledore would interfere. She picked the goblins because they are strictly neutral."

"You make it sound like she left you with the Lestranges."

"They are on the list."

"What?"

"Third, tied with the Malfoys and Tonks. At least until you add up their combined NEWT scores." He gaped like a fish. "My mother didn't list my father, Sirius, or Dumbledore. She also excluded
any non-magical family members. Apparently, my mother did a little genealogy research before she died. My testamentary guardian is my closest wizarding relative on my mother's side. In the event, there are two or more relatives with the same degree of kinship, the guardianship goes to whoever had the highest overall NEWT scores. In the event there are no wizarding relatives on her side closer than fifth cousin, the same provisions apply to James's side, but only couples are eligible."

"That's why the Lestranges are tied with the Malfoy's, but I thought Andromeda was disowned."

"She said blood relative and defined it so it didn't matter if they were disowned or illegitimate. On her side, she didn't care if they were single."

I unrolled the codicil and separated two sheets of parchment on the back. "She included family trees for both sides of my family notarized by the Department of Family and Children's Magical Lineage Office."

"That cost a pretty knut."

"I wasn't aware they charged for the service."

"They do," he said shortly. "I always wondered why the Potters permitted the marriage. They weren't vocally anti-muggleborn, but they were adamant about marrying their sons and daughters into family's proven to produce magical children. Your mother was the only muggleborn to ever marry into the Potter family that didn't have at least two magical siblings. I bet they ordered the research before your father proposed. It also explains the divorce petition. If she knew she could claim magical descent, she wouldn't have feared any of the anti-muggleborn laws. She could divorce your father without losing custody."

"Muggleborn laws?" I asked, feeling queasy. Did she want to get rid of my father so badly she'd risk losing me?

"Everyone knew your mother was a mudblood." I bristled. "Muggleborn," he corrected. "Had she filed for divorce without any proof of her heritage, the court would have awarded custody to your father unless he didn't want a half-blood child. In which case, he would have disinherited you. Even then, she'd have to have had one hell of a lineage if she thought she could trump Potter's."

"I didn't realize blood mattered so much."

"It does."

I unrolled my mother's family tree and cast sticking charms on the corners to hold it open. I pointed to my mother's name. "My grandmother Anne's first husband, Jonathan, died in a car crash when my aunt was a year old. She remarried my mother's father Harold Evans. If you trace Anne's line back, you'll find Marius Prince. I drew another line down the Prince family tree to the name Severus Snape. "Now do you know why I asked who Snape's loyal to?"

He whistled under his breath. "You'd be no better off with him than you are now."

"Worse. He'd either chop me up for potions ingredients or force me to obey Dumbledore's every whim."

"Is he first on the list?"

I shook my head. "He's my fourth cousin once removed, but he's only second on the list and, unlike Mr. Malfoy, the charges against him were never dismissed. Instead, he was officially released into
Dumbledore's custody. There's a chance they wouldn't grant him custody." I placed my finger on my grandfather's name. "Here's where things get extremely complicated."

"More complicated than your family tree on the Potter side reading like a death eater guest list?"

I chuckled and some of the tension bled out of the room. "I think so, but I'm not sure you'll agree."

"How bad is it?"

"Harold Evans was the only child of Maia Evans, a supposed squib."

"Do I even want to know how high her inbreeding coefficient was?"

"No idea, but since her family was notorious for marrying their first cousins and even had a few half-sibling marriages, I'd say Hapsburg-esque."

He winced. "Do you have any idea how happy I was when I realized that my mother's family hadn't intermarried with the Blacks?"

"Ecstatic?"

"Very. Continue."

"Maia Evans was born Maia Gaunt, the youngest daughter of Marvolo Gaunt. From what little I've heard about her at the Dursleys, she was kicked out when she was twelve, made her way to London, and found work as a domestic. Later, she married Peter Evans, a dock worker."

"Marvolo?"

"It's your lord's middle name. He was named after his grandfather."

"Fuck! That's why you're a parslemouth."

"I'm a parslemouth because I'm descended from Salazar Slytherin," I said, admitting out loud what I hadn't dared admit to anyone else. Barty wouldn't judge me. I hoped. "I suspect one of Dumbledore's adjustments was intended to keep me from researching my family tree. I was curious about it before I came to Hogwart's, but I never even bothered to look up the Potter side, much less my mother's."

"Who's first?" he whispered.

"My first cousin twice removed, Thomas Marvolo Riddle, Earl of Wychwood, known as Tom during his school days," I glanced at his left forearm, "but I believe you know him by another name title."

"Sweet Lily Evans named the Dark Lord as your guardian," he said in disbelief. I understood completely because I had the same reaction when I found out.

"She did. Him, then Snape, then my Father's side, which includes the Lestranges, Malfoys, and Tonks. So you see, I have a dilemma. I can't file the codicil. Snape and the Tonks are both loyal to Dumbledore. All Dumbledore has to do is push for Snape. If he's disqualified, then he can put all his weight behind Andromeda. Given his positions, he could even modify their NEWT scores, if necessary."

"None of this mitigates your antagonistic relationship with my lord."
"It doesn't," I agreed. "If I wanted to stay under Dumbledore's thumb but leave the Dursleys, all I need to do is file the codicil. Right now, your lord's about the same size as a three-year-old, not someone they'd grant custody to."

Barty grabbed me by the shoulders and gave me a small shake. "Potter, this is important. Do you consider the Dark Lord your enemy?"

"No." My sole enemy was Albus Dumbledore, the man who thrust my parents onto the front lines, left me in an abusive home, threw me into deadly situations, and meddled with my mind so badly I feared I'd turn my wand on myself. I wanted out. I wanted to be completely neutral, but I suspected neutrality was a just a pipe dream. My guts twisted into knots.

"Keep an open mind," Dyfi told me when I woke her up to discuss my dilemma. I feared I was being too open-minded.

Barty leaped out of his chair and began pacing, cursing under his breath. He stopped and rubbed his temples. "Shit. All this effort for a plan that won't work. Waiting until the third task was already cutting it close. If that body gives out, it will be three years before he's strong enough to try again."

"What plan? Does this have something to do with the reason you put my name in the Goblet?"

"It has everything to do with it. How did you know he has a body, anyway?"

"Dreams," I said, giving away what could have been Dumbledore's biggest advantage.

"I must inform my lord."

"I wouldn't have told you otherwise."

He took a deep breath, calming himself. "Since you already know the basics, I'll fill in the rest. My lord needs your blood for a ritual to recreate his adult body."

"Why mine?" I asked, recalling our ritual discussions, Dr. Leed's book, and the restricted books Barty lent me over the holidays when we covered the basics of ritual magic.

"If my master uses your blood, he will gain your bond of blood protections to an extent. Mostly, it will negate the protective spells Dumbledore cast on you."

My eyes widened. Fascinating, yet horrifying. "What are the requirements?"

"You were blood of the enemy."

"If I thought it would work, I'd help you kidnap Dumbledore for the ritual, but the ritual's strength depends largely on the enemy undergoing various trials, correct?"

"Correct," he said, shoulders slumped in defeat.

"Aren't there any other rituals he could use?"

"It's not like there are many rituals out there for growing a new body. Damn it. I should have seen this coming the first time you argued with Dumbledore."

"Are you sure there aren't any other options?"

"The Dark Lord only mentioned three. Blood of the enemy, shared blood, and one that amounted to
possessing a decaying body," he said, ticking them off on his fingers.

I wrinkled my nose at the latter. "Shared blood?"

"A relative, Potter, but the Dark Lord's an orphan, as you well know. Even a cousin would work, but..." He spun on his heel and hunched over the table. "You're close enough. Barely, but it might still work."

I considered my options, again. Dumbledore or Voldemort? Dumbledore would never let me stay neutral, not even long enough to figure out why everyone was fighting. Voldemort might. Big might. "The Potters are descended from the Peverells, same as the Gaunts. The relationship is very distant, but it is there. Would that make a difference?"

He sat down and unrolled the Potter family tree. He skimmed through it, tracing it up the line until the name changed to Peverell. The tree terminated shortly above that point so you couldn't see where the name originated. "It might. I'll have to ask my lord, but the blood must be willingly given. You also have to want the ritual to work."

"Would my competing in the Triwizard still add to the ritual's strength?"

"Yes. Why?"

"Because I'd hate for Dumbledore to push me into the Black Lake for nothing."

"Remind me to add some muggle hand-to-hand to our lessons next week. With a little know how and practice, you could have taken him with you."

I smiled at the image of Dumbledore crashing into the icy water. Nice. I hesitated, wondering if I was even in a position to ask this. Why not? I decided. "If the shared blood ritual will work, I will freely offer my blood and whole-heartedly wish for his return to an adult body, but I have conditions."

"Of course," Barty said as if he expected nothing less. I had to give him credit. He knew me better than anyone else did.

"I will require his assistance putting my mind back together."

"That's a given."

"An unbreakable vow to not kill me, order anyone else to kill me, or punish me with any curse the effects of which cannot but totally reversed. No unforgivables."

"I don't know if he'll agree to a vow."

"I'll make it reciprocal. Then, no matter how the guardianship issue works out, neither of us can harm the other regardless of what Dumbledore wants. I would like him to petition for guardianship, but I realize that's asking a lot of someone I've only met in person twice and never been formally introduced to. I would also like to remain neutral, but I understand neutrality may not be feasible under the circumstances."

Barty regarded me thoughtfully, a private war raging in his eyes. Finally, he raised his wand. I thought he might curse me, but he waved it and fresh parchment landed on the table. "Write and ask him yourself. I'll spell a copy of your notes, the wills, and Evan's codicil so you can include it."

"My notes?"
"Yes, Potter. He won't believe you without evidence. Your notes aren't evidence, but they are a start. I'll also send him my memories from today. If you want him to take you seriously, be formal and respectful. Do not mention the night your parents' died. That was a bad night for both sides. Be straightforward, but not Gryffindor stupid. Got it?"

"Yes, sir." I uncapped my pen. "Professor, will you get in trouble for telling me about the ritual?"

"No, Potter. We knew there was a possibility it wouldn't work. He told me to tell you if it ever looked you would change sides."

"I'm not changing sides."

"Neutral, but living under his roof is close enough, Potter. Start writing. I will read it before you send it. I won't be cursed for your stupidity."

Chapter End Notes

Thank you all for your continued support.

This is one of those you'll either lynch me or understand why my Harry did it chapters. I don't think there's much else to say other than I took advantage of Moody and Crouch (Sr. and Jr.) sparse back stories to insert a plausible explanation, which I'll expand on in later chapters.

Please read and review.
Chapter 14

Chapter Notes

Disclaimer: Harry Potter and related characters, situations, settings, and plots is the original work of J.K. Rowling and under copyright. While I enjoy playing/experimenting in her sandbox, it's not mine and never will be.

See the end of the chapter for more notes.

The first letter from Lord Wychwood—Barty corrected my address by pointing out that as an earl he actually was a lord—was distant, but more cordial than I expected. It also included a separate page with detailed instructions that he expected me to follow in future communications.

Apparently, he had kept his Tom Riddle and Voldemort identities mostly separate after graduation. A few people knew, including Dumbledore, but the only 'evidence' tying Tom Riddle to Voldemort was hearsay. Thomas Riddle was a reclusive academic with papers published in multiple journals, fifteen books, including our current DADA text (chosen by the real Alastor Moody, not Barty), and a bimonthly column in Transfiguration Today, which was still ongoing. Blackballed by Dumbledore following his graduation, he took a job at Borgin & Burkes and saved up his money to hire a solicitor to sue for his deceased father's estate. After winning his suit and claiming his muggle grandfather's title, he began writing under various pen names, always using his solicitor as a go-between to protect his editors from Dumbledore's personal vendetta. When he lost his body, he had fifteen years worth of material backlogged.

Between the publications, letters to various individuals, and his house elf, he had a pretty solid alibi for the past thirteen years. After all, his editors received regular hand-written articles from him. Ghosts, or body-less wraiths, can't turn pages, much less write. Considering the transfiguration magazines in the library all discussed his alias Bran Kerrich's theories as if they were cutting edge research, the ministry might believe him when he claimed he spent the last thirteen years holed up with his house elf, researching, instead of hiding in an Albanian forest.

Thus, we both wrote two letters per envelope. The first contained our on-going Dark Lord/Boy-Who-Lived negotiations. The second was a general getting to know you letter, exactly what the court would expect me to receive from a relative I'd never met. My letters from 'Cousin Thomas' went into my lock box. The letters from Voldemort were incinerated and the ashes scattered around the grounds.

Over a month passed with letters delivered via house elf every other day. In the aftermath of the second task, Ronald sulked about the second task and made snide comments about my lessons with Moody, calling them remedial, but our conflict never escalated beyond minor taunts. Hermione spent every waking moment with Krum. I devoted my spare time to studying, mostly with Neville, but sometimes alone. I even produced E and O potions. (The class was much easier now that Snape was on his best behavior. If all else failed, I planned to tell him he was my cousin on my mother's side. Wizards aren't immune to fatal heart attacks.) Dumbledore hadn't called me to his office again. Everything was calm.

Exhausted after a two hour, transfiguration only, practice duel, I climbed the stairs to my dorm and
I grabbed my pajamas and hit the showers. The tension from the training session oozed out of me as the hot water hit my back. My guard dropped. I leaned my forehead against the cool tiles. The real Barty was as paranoid as the real Moody. He ate, slept, and breathed constant vigilance and demanded the same from me. We relaxed over meals, but not completely. Everything on the table was checked for potions and charms before we touched it. Checked thrice when I ate in the Great Hall. I couldn't bring my bag into his office without removing everything and disarming the tracking charms some idiot kept casting on my things. Lessons were an unrelenting combination of lectures, independent study, practicals, duels, and ambushes.

My dorm was my first safe place. Ever. Within the confines of Gryffindor Tower, I could relax, play a game with Neville or study with Hermione. My housemates were fickle, but they never physically attacked me. I felt safe under the elm tree and in Barty's sitting room, but not as safe as I did within the tower.

Smiling to myself, I silently thanked the sorting hat. The boy who lived could never feel completely safe in Slytherin. His parents made too many enemies. I paused.

That was an interesting shift, I thought as I poured shampoo in the palm of my hand. At one point, I, grudingly, considered myself to be the boy who lived. We were an 'I'. Now, I refer to the identity Dumbledore manufactured for me as 'he', an impersonal, third person pronoun. As I massaged the shampoo into my scalp, I wondered if this meant I was recovering.

I closed my eyes and ducked under the shower head, rinsing the suds out, sinking into my consciousness. Barty said I should take things one day at a time. Maybe if I wasn't convinced I'd go insane, I wouldn't. I didn't have the heart to tell him I feared I was already there. Sometimes, I'd say something and I'd hear another voice inside my head give a different answer. Others, both voices tried to talk at once.

I shut the water off and dried off. Relaxed, I entered the deserted dorm, toweling my hair dry. I tossed the towel into a hamper, set my wand and glasses on my nightstand, and pulled my bed covers back.

"I said I was sorry."

I sighed. So much for a peaceful evening. "Not good enough," I snapped. "You were my best friend, my brother. I depended on you, and you threw me to the wolves. Now, you think I'll forget what you did to me just because you said sorry. You tried to throw me into the Black Lake."

"Dumbledore said I was the person you'd miss most. You rescued me. What's another dip in the lake to rescue Fleur's sister? We were supposed to save her."

"Ronald," I said through clenched teeth, "she didn't need rescuing." I threw up my hands. "It's called veela allure, Ronald. Perhaps you've heard of it. It's the reason you nearly jumped over the railing at the World Cup. Even if you rescued," I said, making air quotes, "her little sister, Fleur's three years older than you. She will never notice you as anything more than an annoying little boy."

"Ron," he corrected. His ears turned red. "You called me Ron for years and suddenly its Ronald. Ever since your name came out of the Goblet, you've been acting like a stuck up, Slytherin prat. You don't belong up here anymore."

"Maybe I never did," I muttered under my breath. "Now, if you don't mind," I said with a tight
smile, "I'm going to bed. If you do, keep it to yourself, will you?"

I tossed my bathrobe over my trunk and toed off my slippers. A blurry figure slammed into me. I fell, hitting my head on the bed post, a fist connected with my jaw, and I passed out.

Voices, like those from a badly tuned radio, assaulted my ears. I struggled to open my eyes. Light stabbed my brain. I groaned, rolled to my side, and vomited in a waiting bucket. Someone lay a damp cloth on my neck and rubbed my back.

I turned my head slightly. Moody was helping me while Dumbledore, Hermione, McGonagall, and Pomfrey argued.

"Easy, Potter," Moody said.

I tried to ask what happened, but it emerged as a groan.

"Ronald Weasley attacked you. Can you think of anything that might have set him off?"

"Only the usual," I whispered. He raised a glass to my lips and I took a sip of water. "Ever since the second task, he's been on my case."

Hermione glared at Dumbledore. "This is your fault!"

"Nonsense, my dear. This is a just a minor tiff. I'm sure once Mr. Potter apologizes—"

"Apologizes!" Hermione shrieked. "For what! If anything you are the one who should apologize, headmaster. Harry has done nothing wrong."

I wished I could see his face. I bet his expression was front page worthy. "I fail to see how I had anything to do with this, Ms. Granger."

"Oh, and you weren't the one who picked the person for each champion to rescue? Did you forget that I was there, professor? I heard you arguing with McGonagall over who Harry should rescue. You picked Ron, despite McGonagall, Moody, and me telling you they aren't friends anymore."

"You were already taken, Ms. Granger. My only other choices were Professor Moody or Dobby the house elf. I hardly think either of them was appropriate."

"Not to mention Alastor would have taken you with him," McGonagall said.

"After considering everything they've survived together, Mr. Weasley was the logical choice. As I'm sure you know, Harry's always been a rather private person, Ms. Granger. He simply isn't close enough to anyone else."

"Then you should've obliviated the bastard," Hermione said, sounding more like a growling cat than her usual self.

"Enough," Madame Pomfrey declared. "Mr. Potter needs his rest. Out. All of you." I raised my head enough to see her, Hermione, and McGonagall all glaring at Dumbledore.

Madame Pomfrey literally pushed them out and slammed the door in their faces. She spun around. "Alastor, that includes you."

"Boy's my apprentice. I'm not going anywhere."

She glared at him half-heartedly. "Fine, but be quiet and stay out of my way." "How are you
feeling?" she asked, bustling over.

"Head hurts."

"With a concussion, cracked jaw, and four bruised ribs, you're lucky that's all that hurts. Take this," she said. She handed me a draught, which I swallowed. My head hit the pillow seconds before I passed out.

The days blurred together, consumed by potions and healing charms. I slept, studied for potions and history, and slept some more. Moody snuck my lock box in under his cloak one night and helped me open it. After a whispered conversation, Dyfi crawled up his sleeve and coiled around his arm. The little snake had woken the day before and claimed she was famished.

I doubted it. She had a mouse-sized bulge in her middle—the remains of the live one I left inside her habitat.

Moody, McGonagall, and Pomfrey were meeting in Pomfrey's office when Dumbledore entered, magic crackling in anger and a benign smile pasted on his lips. I watched with trepidation as he approached my bedside.

"How are you, Harry?" he said, summoning a wooden chair. With a flick of his wand he transfigured it into a orange and purple polka-dot, cushioned monstrosity and sat down. "Still seeing double?"

"My vision's back to normal, professor, but I still have a killer headache," I said, closing my eyes before he tried anything. "Thanks for asking. What about Ronald?"

"Alastor tried to expel him, but I intervened. These things happen, especially when you live in close quarters. I saw no reason to permanently blemish Mr. Weasley's record, and as his friend, you should call him Ron."

Like his grades weren't blemishes, I thought, ignoring the friend comment. I called him Ronald because we weren't friends. "So he gets away with attacking me."

"Of course not, dear boy. I assigned three weeks detention with Mr. Filch."

"Meaning now Ronald holds a bigger grudge than he did before," I said dryly."

"Now, Harry. I'm sure this is just a misunderstanding. Once you apologize, Mr. Weasley will forgive you and everything will go back to the way it should be."

"Ronald Weasley is a self-absorbed git. He betrayed and abandoned me. Then he attacked me, twice. I don't care if he crawls across the great hall on his knees to beg my forgiveness. Under no circumstances will I forgive him nor will I ever apologize for being honest. The only thing I am guilty of is being naive. When this madness started, I thought Ronald would side with me, but I should have remembered what he saw in the Mirror of Erised."

"People change, Harry."

"Sadly, he hasn't. He's still the same jealous little boy he was three years ago, and it's Mr. Potter, professor."

He sighed. "Harry, forgiveness is the highest form of love. Don't shut yourself off."
"Professor, if he betrayed me once, odds are he will do it again. This time, it just hurt emotionally. Next time, he could pull a Wormtail. If you care to notice, I haven't sought retribution for his betrayal. That is as close as I will ever get to forgiving him. I must ask you again to not address me so informally. You are my headmaster, not a classmate or close friend. Please maintain the appropriate distance."

Fabric rustled and he sighed, again. "I'm sorry I've failed you, my boy."

"Is there something else I can help you with, professor? My headache potion's wearing off," I said before he launched into a long speech about what my parents would have wanted. After reading my mother's codicil and divorce petition, I knew at least one of my parents wasn't a Dumbledore worshiping sociopath. I still hadn't the foggiest idea what drove my mother to such desperate actions. Given the way Dumbledore's name featured prominently in her petition, I'd say my mother would sooner die a second time than have me follow Albus Dumbledore like a baby duck trailing behind its mother.

The chair creaked, more rustling. "Madame Pomfrey petitioned for a private room, which is, forgive me, a tad extreme. You need to be around your friends. A few more days in the hospital wing and this mess will blow over and everything will go back to normal. You'll see."

"Professor Moody said apprentices normally have separate rooms. It's in the charter," I pointed out. "Madame Pomfrey also told me she wanted me out of the dorms because my lessons start several hours before anyone else wakes up. My early mornings are disturbing my housemates, and their late nights are disturbing me. I hate to admit this. I love living in the dorms, hanging out in the common room and playing games with my mates, but I need to face reality. I spend most of my time either studying under Professor Moody or doing homework. Sure, he gives me time off, but my schedule is significantly different from my housemates. Imposing my early hours on them isn't fair to them, sir," I said, countering his manipulative statements with logic.

"Still, I feel you should spend at least sometime with your dorm mates. You've always been so close with Miss Granger and Mr. Weasley. I'd hate to see your friendship damaged by this." Why was he pushing Ronald? We hadn't hung out since my name came out of the goblet.

"Maybe it escaped your notice, professor, but I don't exactly have a lot of friends. My best friend Hermione spends every waking moment either in the library or taking walks with Victor, which I think is great. I've never seen her this happy. Since I live in the boy's dorm, not the girl's, even if I move out, I'll still spend the same amount of time with her as I do now."

"True," he conceded, "you have taken to haunting the library this year, but what about young Neville?"

Neville and I were friendly acquaintances, not best friends. One day, we might be good friends, but we were both too cautious. Plus, we shared a room with Ronald, who spent three years ignoring Neville and encouraged me to do the same. Until recently, Neville and I were dorm mates and occasional study partners. Nothing more. "We will still meet and study together. Nothing's changed." Except a few warnings about his parents' involvement with a vigilante organization. I hadn't shared the prophecy, yet. I would as soon as I had something more concrete than 'Voldemort wasn't that stupid'.

"Still, as your guardian, this makes me uncomfortable. I knew when I asked Alastor to tutor you things would change, but not this much. You need contact with people your own age, not more time listening to Alastor's war stories."

"And what's wrong with my war stories?" Moody growled.
I looked through my eyelashes at the shadowed blob, standing at the end of my bed.

"Nothing, Alastor, but Harry's a growing boy. He spends precious little time with his friends as it is. Maybe if we relaxed his schedule a bit, he could smooth things over with Mr. Weasley."

"Professor Dumbledore," I said. Anger welled inside me. I struggled to control my lisp. Reminding him of Riddle wouldn't help my case. "I will never smooth things over with Ronald Weasley. Please accept that and stop trying to force me to take him back. I assure you it will not happen. Forcing me to share dorm space with him after you assigned a punishment that will only anger him further will land me back here." I lowered my voice to a whisper. "And between you and me, professor, Madame Pomfrey's an excellent nurse, but she's not a healer. If I get another concussion, she'll have to send me St. Mungo's. I don't know about you, but I'd like to avoid the hospital at all costs," I said, suspecting a deeper scan, like the ones used by healers, would show evidence of chronic malnutrition and a basilisk bite Dumbledore had kept hidden.

"Very well," Dumbledore said, defeated. "Alastor, will the standard arrangement be acceptable?"

"No door to the outside. He can enter through my sitting room. I'll extend the wards to cover the new rooms and grant him permanent access."

"Surely not, Alastor," Dumbledore said. His pitch changed as he turned to speak to Moody. I watched the impending confrontation. Moody stood at the end of the bed, flanked by McGonagall and Madame Pomfrey. McGonagall's lips were pursed in disapproval and Madame Pomfrey had her patented disobedient patient glare fixed on Dumbledore. "As I've told you time and again, Hogwarts' wards are more than sufficient."

He snorted. "Someone's after the boy, Albus, and your vaunted wards haven't done a thing to protect him. I'll see to Potter's security, and if I can't secure him, I'll make damn sure he can protect himself."

"I've been meaning to speak with you about that, Alastor. Your dueling lessons are a bit excessive," Dumbledore said in the same friendly tone he used before he ate an earwax flavored jelly bean.

"You hired me to teach, and the only student you let me teach is Potter. All the others learn some namby pamby curriculum that wouldn't save them from a flobberworm. Now, that the boy's finally learning how to protect himself, you want me to back off? No, Albus. You asked me to take the boy as my apprentice, and I did. As his master, I decide what lessons are appropriate, not you."

"Very well," Dumbledore said, rubbing his temples. "I'll arrange a bedroom and bathroom for Mr. Potter. Minerva have the house elves pack his belongings and see what we can do for furniture." He stood, dusting his robes off.

"Wait one minute, Albus. You're not entering my quarters without me."

"Of course not," Dumbledore said, exiting the hospital wing with Moody limping behind him. "I have no interest in melting the defense suite."

I raised my eyebrow and made a mental note to ask about warding. Wards that would melt stone if they were tampered with sounded fascinating.

"Here you are," Madame Pomfrey said, handing me a headache and an anti-nausea draught.

Grimacing, I chugged the potions, grimacing. They tasted like rotten tomatoes mixed with pea soup. Snape must make them taste horrid on purpose.
"Get some rest, dear."

I opened my eyes, blearily regarding my new room. About the same size as Dudley's room, it wasn't overly large by Hogwart's standards, but it felt palatial to me. The elves had moved my four post bed, trunk, and nightstand, but someone had changed the bed hangings to a neutral ivory that went well with the beige walls and brown rug Dobby scrounged for me. A desk and comfortable chair, both contributed by McGonagall, was on my right underneath a small window, allowing me to look outside on occasion. A bookshelf, courtesy of Professor Flitwick, lined the wall beside it. It was a very comfortable space, but I couldn't invite anyone in without Barty's express consent.

It didn't bother me. Hermione was the only person I knew well enough to invite over, and the large habitat Barty set up for Dyfi after McGonagall, Flitwick, and Pomfrey left meant having Hermione over would result in some uncomfortable questions that might land me back in Dumbledore's office and Dyfi dead.

I also had my own bath. All very nice, especially when compared to sharing a bath with all my dorm mates and Ronald's snores. However, it did not make up for spending spring holidays on bed rest or having limited activities for the next two weeks.

In other words, no dueling practice, running, flying, or contact sports of any sort. Madame Pomfrey even restricted attempting new spells in both transfiguration and charms and no potions for the first week. The first two restrictions didn't bother me. I'd already studied the spells with Moody, sort of. Genius that he was, he didn't teach transfiguration with a list of spells out of a book. He taught intent and concentration, not words and fancy gestures. His method worked beautifully, but non-verbal spells are a NEWT skill, so I downplayed my abilities in class. I would intentionally "get" the spell sometime between the second and fifth attempt, leaving my teachers and classmates unaware of my non-verbal abilities. Apart from the theory, transfiguration and charms classes were rather useless. Not potions.

Although I no longer struggled, my brewing skills were not the same caliber as Hermione's. I could read the recipe and follow it, just like I did in my aunt's kitchen. Beyond that required serious effort and many hours digging through old potions texts. If I wanted an O on my Potion's OWL, I needed all the practice, both in and out of class, I could get. Snape didn't offer brewing make-up sessions.

I spotted an envelope on my nightstand underneath my glasses. Sighing, I put them on, broke the nondescript wax seal, and removed a letter wrapped around another hand-folded letter, sealed with wax embossed with the now familiar coat of arms—a yew, snake, and two fire symbols.

I unfurled the first letter and began reading.

_Potter,_

_As indicated in my previous letters, I have continued investigating both the shared blood ritual and our family trees. It is my opinion that the shared blood ritual will be stronger and have a higher probability of success than blood of the enemy; provided, you are fully committed to this course of action._

_Although we will both execute unbreakable vows prior to beginning the ritual, I agree that executing a binding magical contract prior to meeting is in both our best interests. Please have your barrister draft the necessary documents and forward them to Sorrel, Matson, and Sons. Once the documents are finalized, we will execute the contract via Gringotts Representatives, signing in both magic and blood._
I let out a breath I didn’t know I was holding. A grin spread across my face. Progress. As he correctly pointed out in his first letter, he could use Cedric Diggory for blood of the enemy. He’d abandoned the second ritual after only a cursory examination and was understandably reluctant to change his plans without comparing both rituals.

Against all odds, he agreed. When we met, we would have a binding magical contract in place for our mutual protection. We would swear an unbreakable vow that neither of us would kill or permanently maim the other or order/ask someone else to do so. He would also order his followers to leave me unharmed. Then I would help him make a new body. I would leave a free man. Well, not quite.

Dumbledore was still my guardian, and my Dursley problem wasn’t entirely fixed. Sighing, I broke the wax seal on the seal on the second letter and began reading.

Dear Harry,

I fear I cannot accede to your earlier request. Assuming legal custody of a fourteen-year-old and then dumping him in a foreign country is most emphatically not something I am willing to do. However, I agree that your current situation is untenable. After much consideration, I wish to offer you a home.

Do not become overly excited. I have conditions, but I am open to negotiation, within reason. (Do not send me another visa request.) Even though you are my heir presumptive, I do not believe our family's traditional paterfamilias oaths are suitable, given that we only know each other through letters. Thus, I asked my solicitor for sample guardianship agreements. He provided both the standard contracts used by the ministry and in the muggle world and the more restrictive contracts employed for orphaned pure-blood heirs. After reviewing both these and our family oaths and keeping in mind our family's position, I believe the following provisions are necessary.

Until you are 17, I will make all education, health, welfare (including food, clothing, and shelter, and magical development) decisions. Unlike your current guardian, prior to making any life altering decision, I will discuss it with you and consider your opinion. In the event I overrule you, I promise I will explain my reasoning. Although I would greatly prefer you did not question my every decision, I will be understanding if you do.

I will also sign off and attend all interviews, receive a copy of term or semester, whichever your school employs, grade reports, health records, and medical reports.

After attaining the age of 17, you will be allowed to make limited education decisions, including selecting advanced study programs and applying for them. I will retain final say in all other areas.

While I will not have final say over any career decisions, I expect to be consulted prior to the scheduled fifth year conference with your head of house.

After attaining age 21, you will have final say over all education and health decisions, but I still expect you to consult me. If you ever come home covered in tattoos or with a prostitute on each arm, you will learn that there are curses much worse than the cruciatus. Consider yourself warned.

At this age, I will also let you manage your own public relations; provided, you discuss all scheduled interviews and any impending negative publicity of which you are aware with me in advance. Damage control should be preemptive, not retroactive as was The Daily Prophet’s recent
retraction.

Until you reach the age of 25, you will either reside with me or at a school of your choice. I will not risk you gallivanting around and ruining our family name. I assure you our predecessors have already inflicted enough damage. In the event your school is a boarding school, you will return home every scheduled holiday, including winter, spring, and summer holidays.

In the event the court follows your mother's trustee provisions and I become a co-trustee of your trust, upon attaining age 25, I will expect you to attend trustee meetings and begin assisting me with managing your investments.

By age 30, I will turn over complete control of the trust and your personal life.

Regardless of your age, you will have a qualified healer employed by our family check you for love potions prior to any engagement or marriage. This is not negotiable. Personally, I would prefer you be checked after 3 months of dating, but I suspect you'll go through quite a few girlfriends over the few years and that may not be feasible.

Make no mistake, Harry. I will have high expectations and I will expect you to fulfill them or there will be consequences.

I prefer 0s in every class, but I am willing to accept an E in Herbology and Astronomy. I would greatly prefer you drop Divination and invest your time in another area of study. In the event your current arrangement with Severus Snape falls through, I will allow you to drop Potions, but you will continue to study the subject under a private tutor.

You will behave in a mannerly fashion. Don't misinterpret this as snobbish. I merely expect you to chew with your mouth closed, use a napkin, and treat your classmates and professors with respect. I will be sorely disappointed if you take to pranks and unprovoked dueling in the hallways.

You will keep yourself and your room neat and take care of any pets you may have. Under no circumstances will you raise your hand or your wand against my house elf.

As for extracurricular activities, I am pleased you enjoy quidditch and dueling, but your grades and health will come first. Even if you make straight Os, I cannot promise you will be permitted to play quidditch as your healer may recommend against it.

Given what little I know about your present home life, seeing a therapist may also be necessary. If the healer recommends you see one, you will.

As I have said before, I am a recluse. I last visited Diagon Alley in 1968. I live a solitary life with my house elf Lolly and my familiar Nagini. A few friends visit on occasion, but my days are filled with researching, experimenting, and writing. I am quite boring. If you have no objection to living a quiet life, you are more than welcome in my home.

I fear I have been too demanding by asking that my control exceed the magical world's nominal legal age. Given the circumstances, asking for anything less seemed grossly irresponsible.

If, after considering my offer, you would still like me to pursue guardianship, let me know. Regardless of your decision, I've enjoyed our correspondence and would like it to continue. Your letters are a pleasant respite from my dusty tomes.

Sincerely,

Wychwood
Stunned, I set the letter aside. He implied he was giving me some great concession, but he was the one asking for twelve bloody years. All I asked for was a visa.

Barty rapped on the door.

"It's open," I called.

He entered the room, but I didn't look up until he dragged my chair over to the bed.

"What happened to Moody?" I asked, needing a distraction.

"I drop the disguise before bed. Transitioning with an artificial limb is most unpleasant. Best to take it and the eye off and then let the polyjuice wear off," he said, sitting on the edge of the bed.

"Oh."

"Talk, Potter," he said after several minutes of oppressive silence.

"He didn't tell you?"

"My lord wrote me regarding the second ritual and indicated I should be nearby when you read his second letter, but he didn't tell me why. I assume this has something to do with your guardianship."

I nodded.

"I'm sorry, Potter. I told you it was a long shot, but I really did hope—"

"—he accepted."

"From the way you were acting, I thought…This a good thing."

"No, it's," I hesitated. "What right does he have to demand twelve years of my life? All I ever asked him to do was sign a few papers and get me a visa."

"May I?" he asked, resting a finger on the second letter.

"Go ahead."

Leaning against the headboard, he skimmed the letter. "This is an extremely generous offer."

"Twelve years? I'm of age in less than three."

He chuckled, shaking his head. "Sometimes I forget that for all intents and purposes you're a muggleborn. Have you ever heard of a paterfamilias?"

"Sure. It's Latin for head of the family."

"It's a great deal more than that." I wrinkled my brow in confusion, and he continued. "Paterfamilias oaths predate the Republic of Rome by at least five hundred years. It's ancient magic employed by some lines to both bond extended families together and ensure heirs do not dishonor the family. The vows are passed from parent to child in an unbroken line. They're a complicated bit of magic. In theory, they could explain why your parents were unable to kill my lord. Some paterfamilias rituals imbue the current head with protections against assassination by family members, but that's an unsubstantiated theory as I don't know which combination of rituals and oaths your family used."
"But I never swore an oath."

"It's not that different from the Goblet of Fire. You don't necessarily have to swear an oath to be bound by someone Else's actions. The bonds were designed to pass through blood and magic."

"Still, twelve years?"

Barty sighed and ran his fingers through his hair. "My grandfather swore fealty to the Blacks when he married my grandmother Charris. His oath covered all his descendants. Since my grandfather was head of the Crouch family at the time, his oath essentially transferred his rights as family head to the head of the Black family. I was able to go against my father and join the Death Eaters because the head of the Black family, Arcturus Black, didn't oppose my actions. By the same token, Sirius Black was able to defy his parents wishes without being legally disinherited because Arcturus allowed it.

"Ministry laws, including the legal age, only apply to the younger families because the older ones are already governed by ancient magic. If he pushed the issue, my lord has the legal and magical right to determine who you marry, when you have children, what names are appropriate for your children, at what age they should begin their magical education, the subjects both they and you should study...The list goes on. Most pure bloods would demand complete control. In comparison, he's asking for very little."

"But twelve years?"

Barty rolled up his sleeve, revealing the vile mark. "Potter, do you understand what this represents?"

I pondered his question. That Barty supported Voldemort had to be wrong. Barty never went for the obvious. "I'm not sure, sir."

"Fealty. The moment you showed me your mother's codicil I had a sworn duty to share it and everything I knew about your situation with my lord because he is both my liege lord and your head of house."

"But the Potters and Gaunts are both descended from the younger Peverell brothers, not the eldest."

"The eldest died without issue, leaving his title to his younger brother. My lord holds three titles: Earl of Wychwood, Baron Peverell, and Baron Wicken. He's head of both your father's and your mother's houses. If he wanted, he could call on you as your paterfamilias and you would have no choice but to obey him. He could control your entire life until one of you dies."

"He said the paterfamilias oaths weren't suitable."

"Because there's little difference between strong paterfamilias bonds and slavery. Despite how Dumbledore portrays him, my lord desires free thinking followers, not slaves. What did he ask for?"

"Complete control of my health, education, and welfare until I'm twenty-one," I answered and began ticking off his other demands on my fingers. Barty regarded me thoughtfully, tapping his chin with his finger.

"In essence, he wants you well-provided for, healthy, and safe. He also wants you to learn how to manage your own finances and publicity. That sounds reasonable, Potter."

I started to protest, but he cut me off. "Say my lord does as you ask? He gets custody, sends you to
the US or Japan, enrolls you in another school. What do you think will happen afterward?"

"Dumbledore will follow me," I said glumly.

"Exactly. Right now, with a lot of luck, you could take down a lower rank death eater or someone like Mundungus Fletcher. That's amazing for a fourteen-year-old, but it's a far cry from going toe to toe with McGonagall or Flitwick, much less Dumbledore. What you want will land you right back in your current situation inside of a year."

"Maybe." I stared at the floor.

Barty rested his hand on my shoulder. It felt warm and comforting. Better than a hug because he didn't expect anything in return. Hugs weren't my thing. Whenever someone hugged me, I froze for a few seconds before raising my arms in a mimicry of what I'd observed others do. "List out the pros and cons, Potter. Consider his offer. I know it's not what you wanted, but maybe it's what you need. If you have any questions about what living with him would be like, ask me."

"You?" I said in shock.

"My father was head of the DMLE, a respected ministry official. Most of the time, he ignored me, but sometimes he brought his work home. The summer before my third year, a prisoner escaped during an interrogation, stole his wand, and killed an auror. He was in a foul mood that night. I don't remember what I said, but my father tried to curse me. Mum jumped in front of me, taking a dark cutting curse in my stead. That curse killed her, you know? My father called a private healer and paid a hefty bribe to keep it out of the papers, but the healer couldn't remove the curse, just patch her back together. It eventually spread into her lungs. She died when I was twenty." He blinked back tears and took a moment to collect himself before continuing. "The next day, my father went to work early, as usual. My mother told me to pack my school trunk. Just the important stuff, she said. Then she taught me how to ward my room against house elves because my family's house elf, Winky, belonged to my father, not us. My mother feared my father had ordered her to stop me if I tried to leave. I don't know if he did or not.

"Mum fire-called my lord while I was packing. I found out later they went to school together. He picked me up and I didn't return to my father's house until my father broke me out of Azkaban. My freedom was my mother's dying wish. She blackmailed my father to get me out, but I doubt she wanted my father and Winky to hold me prisoner. For ten years, I lived under the imperius curse, forced to hide underneath an invisibility cloak least anyone discover my father's deception. I shook the curse off during the world cup, but he captured me again."

"You cast the dark mark."

He nodded. "I did. I wanted to scare the others, the ones who escaped and denied my lord."

"Next time you need a wand, please steal Ronald's."

Barty laughed. "I'll try to avoid stealing your wand in the future, Potter." He sobered. "My lord is a strong wizard with equally strong convictions. He won't abandon his ideals for anyone, but I know from experience he won't force you onto the battlefield or even insist you support his views. He's a strict guardian, but fair. Please promise me you'll consider his offer."

"I promise." Of course, I would. Twelve years versus the odds I'd starve to death before I graduated…I had no idea who'd win that complicated bit of human calculus.

He put his hand underneath my chin and slowly turned my head, mindful of my concussion. Then
Barty took his wand and pointed it between my eyes. With quick flicks and mumbled incantations, he ran through a series of diagnostic charms Madame Pomfrey insisted he learn before she released me. He stared at the air over my head and nodded tightly. "Better."

"Thanks for not leaving me in the hospital wing all week."

"That wouldn't benefit either of us. Take your potions and get some rest, Potter," he said gently.

Chapter End Notes

A special thank you to Evil Genus, without whom I wouldn't have gotten this chapter out.

Please read and review.
May marked the calmest month I'd ever experienced. Away from the chaos of Gryffindor Tower, I settled into a daily routine—a first since I started Hogwarts. Breakfast remained at 5 in the morning, but I now slept without interruption. No one woke me by stumbling into my room at midnight. Unlike Ronald, Dyfi didn't snore. I did my homework in the same place every day. No more swapping tables at the library or rushing back to the common room to snag a seat before the upper years took them all. I could even leave unfinished homework on my desk without worrying about someone stealing it.

Barty's rules were simple. Knock—a rule I appreciated because it granted me more privacy than I'd ever had. Stick to your study plan. Wake up on time. Ask permission before moving test papers off the kitchen table. Pick up after yourself, which included a few lessons on household charms. On Wednesdays and Fridays, he asked me to help cook. As in help cook and eat, not prepare everything yourself and then watch everyone else eat.

I never realized how much stress living in the dorms added to my life until it was gone.

The new living arrangements provided another benefit: a secure location to practice occlumency whenever I needed to.

Three days before they revealed the final task, I finally identified the second year additions and what was actually me well enough for Barty to pass on Riddle's instructions. I was essentially a human guinea pig. No one knew if his suggestions would work, but he believed they wouldn't make my situation worse, either. Even if they did, I didn't have much choice. For my own peace of mind, I needed to do something. Anything.

Eyes closed, I pictured my instructions.

Find a seam and peel it back just like you would a band-aid. Compare what you removed to what lies underneath. Is the memory blank? Are your senses different?

Then, imagine a bottomless box. Slowly, transfer the addition to the box, but leave your memories, senses, and personality behind.

No one in their right mind studies combined occlumency and legilimency, worlds more advanced than what Barty taught me, alone, but I didn't have a choice. In a moment of desperation, I even asked Ralmuth if my trust fund would pay for travel overseas and a master legilimens consultation. He answered no. Even if Dumbledore wasn't my guardian, he was still my co-trustee and a master legilimens. Ralmuth couldn't authorize an expenditure he knew I could get for free. Luckily,
Ralmuth swore he would never mention my request to Dumbledore. My other master legimimens option would be the best choice because he was also a parslemouth, but he wasn't adult-size, yet. However, Thomas Riddle was a superb writer.

With written instructions, including visualization exercises, and a ton of luck, preventing the split from getting worse was possible. However, practicing mind magic without a qualified instructor on hand isn't safe. I barely knew enough to find my way out of my own mind. Sometimes. At least twice a week, Barty doused me with ice water. When that failed, he started hexing and cursing, which only failed once.

That time I heard a distant voice hissing instructions. A palm struck my back, shoving me back into reality. I woke feeling sore and nauseous with a white-faced Barty bent over me. I found out later that he sent an emergency note to my instructor, who somehow twisted the connection I normally blocked just enough to give me a healthy push. The act exhausted both of us, but it kept me from turning into a vegetable.

Sighing, I plucked residue off my memories from second year and boxed it. Such an unpleasant sensation, like cleaning your brain with a blast sander. Underneath, I found my true feelings from second year, including a burning desire to transfer. No wonder Dumbledore squelched it.

Ice water trickled down my spine. My eyes snapped open and I glared at Barty, still dressed in his Moody suit. "Damn it. I almost had it."

He cast a drying charm and inclined his head towards Ralmuth, who stood in the doorway with a briefcase in one hand and an onyx box in the other. I unfolded my legs, stood, and bowed politely.

"Greetings, Trustee Ralmuth."

"And to you, Mr. Potter," he said, setting his briefcase on my desk. "I see you're working on what we discussed."

"I am, sir, but it's slow going." Goblin/wizard relations were funny. Most wizards scorned goblins, but adored their bank secrecy laws. If the goblins said a document or vault would never again be seen by human eyes, they meant it. I wasn't particularly fond of them myself, but the etiquette Crouch forced me to learn indicated Ralmuth wasn't just a goblin; he was my mother's trustee. As such, he had authority over me and should be treated with the same respect I granted McGonagall.

"No progress? Pity."

"None, but it's not worse either."

"That's something," he said, neatly stacking the scrolls and placing the case to one side. He glanced at Barty. "I hesitate to mention this, Mr. Potter, but your companion isn't…"

"I know."

"Just checking." Ralmuth unrolled the first scroll and stuck it to the desk. "This is the Non-Aggression Agreement, signed by the Dark Lord," he checked his gold pocket watch, "twenty minutes ago. Verify the magical signature. If it's acceptable, sign and date here," Ralmuth said, pointing to an 'X'.

I crossed the room. The second my fingers touched the parchment my scar burned. I gritted my teeth. "It's his."

Ralmuth stroked the box, which looked like it was carved out of solid obsidian, with his fingernail. The lid separated in two, lifted. A red and white quill lay inside, thrumming with magic. I reached
tentatively for it. With shaking fingers, I caressed it. My blood rushed through my veins, channeled by its spiraling magic which mingled with my own. Exhilarating.

Ralmuth cleared his throat and pointed to the document.

"Sorry," I said, picking up the quill. I touched it to the vellum.

"Mr. Potter," Ralmuth said, "did you take the steps we discussed?"

"Yes, sir." Mr. Norton and Ralmuth had both explained numerous times the contract would not accept my magic unless I signed my full name, not the name my parents shared with the world. Barty hid a smirk behind his hand. I knew what he was thinking.

Two weeks ago, he finally judged my occlumency sufficient to learn my full name. Three potions, a quarter pint of blood, and a ten galleon scrap of tapestry cloth later, I had it. Haraldr Iacomus Evans Potter. Barty laughed his ass off, while I slunk away, muttering that only insane wizards would saddle their child with a name that dreadful. Iacomus, the late Roman variant of Jacob, also known as James here in the UK, was after my father and followed the Potter family naming traditions, I sort of understood. But Haraldr, old Norse, last used in the magical world by Salazar Slytherin's grandson, according to Barty who had forgotten more about such things than I ever wanted to know. What were they thinking?


"Forget how to spell it?" Barty quipped. I narrowed my eyes. Even Bartemius Crouch, pure blood scion, had a relatively normal name. He verified my potions work by testing himself before I used it.

Scowling, I signed my name beside the 'X'. The quill sucked magic and blood from me without cutting my skin. The contract glowed red, finalizing the agreement. An instant later, a neighboring roll of parchment glowed blue.

Ralmuth unrolled it and skimmed the still glowing parchment. "Good, both signatures were accepted. Here's your copy. Gringotts will retain the original," he said, swapping the glowing blue parchment for the red. I rolled up my copy and set it aside.

He unrolled the second parchment and fixed it to the desk. "This is a formal statement of the Earl of Wychwood's obligations to you as your closest magical relative and your obligations to him as your paterfamilias. I am required to inform you that while it does not grant him legal guardianship, it does grant Gringotts your permission to file your mother's codicil with the probate court and inform him of all correspondence and hearings regarding her codicil. In the event the court rules against him, you will still become his ward upon attaining your seventeenth birthday. Do you understand?"

"I do." I scribbled my name beside the 'X' quickly, fearing I'd lose my nerve. He did negotiate, just not on the original provisions. Friends weren't part of the original agreement. After several letters, he agreed I could invite no more than two friends over at a time. Barty, Dyfi, and Hedwig didn’t count. I thought he would have an aneurysm when I asked if I could wear muggle clothing around the house. He didn't. For a muggle-hating Dark Lord, he gave in way too easily on that issue. At his insistence, no funds would be drawn from my trust for my school fees, books, or clothing. If I desired, I could withdraw pocket money from the trust, but he was perfectly willing and able to supply anything I needed, including spending money.
It was an odd document. Half financial agreement. Half familial obligations. Neither Silas nor Mr. Norton had ever worked on anything like it. Several times, Silas argued it was unnecessary, but Mr. Norton overrode him. At first, I didn't understand why Mr. Norton believed it was necessary when Silas didn't. Then Mr. Norton arranged a private meeting in Hogsmeade, citing unfinished business with The Daily Prophet. The moment I sat down, he shoved my family tree under my nose and pointed to Riddle. Then he proceeded to ask very detailed questions concerning just how much I knew about my cousin. When I gave him the correct name, he nearly fell out of his chair. After he collected himself, he asked why I had chosen this course of action. I told him the truth about Dumbledore and the Dursleys. He questioned me for three hours before leaning back in his chair, eying me the same way Barty did when I was still an interesting specimen.

Then Mr. Norton rubbed his hands together, asked if I had any correspondence from my potential guardian stating what terms he wanted, and set to work. Unfortunately for me, Mr. Norton flat refused to negotiate on the age thing. He shared Barty's opinion, completely. But, all things considered, the document was more in my best interests than Riddle's.

The document glowed red. The copy glowed blue. After exchanging them, Ralmuth plucked the quill out of my hand and cleaned the nib, acting like my touch contaminated it. He packed up the quill and his originals, bowed once, and left. He was half-way to Hogsmeade when I realized I forgot to ask what excuse he gave Dumbledore.

"Sir," I asked, addressing Barty as sir avoided the feared name mistake, "did you catch the reason he visited?"

Barty shot me an amused look. "Finalizing your settlement with The Daily Prophet."

"But we did that in December."

"Dumbledore doesn't know that."

My mind turned back to the unusual quill. I'd never seen the like. "The quill?"

"Simurgh feather. Extremely rare and only used for the most dangerous and binding agreements. Supposedly impossible to counter. You must have made quite the impression. I doubt that artifact's left storage since Hogwarts was founded."

The day they revealed the third task, Hermione told me I looked happier. I wouldn't call it happy, but I felt lighter like Hercules after Atlas re-shouldered the world. For the first time, I believed I'd survive the school year.

Then I heard Bagman say "Hagrid's providing creatures." Dread pooled in my stomach. Just what we needed further proof the judges should all have beds on the Janus Thickney Ward. Hagrid's a dear friend. (He'll probably disown me when he learns about my new relative, but I treasured our time together.) However, I didn't fancy facing whatever creatures Hagrid decided were a) warm and cuddly, b) misunderstood, c) interesting, or worse d) all of the above. Between keeping an acromantula in the castle and later telling two students to seek the creature out, hatching a dragon, and breeding blast-ended skrewts by illegally crossing a fire crab with a manticore, Hagrid's creature judgment was highly suspect.

I counted my blessings he didn't know I knew where the chamber was until after the basilisk was dead. Otherwise, he would've conned me (with Dumbledore's blessing, of course) into helping him coax the creature out for a few lessons and maybe a quick hunt in the Forbidden Forest. I shuddered. A maze filled with obstacles and Hagrid's "interesting" creatures. These people were
I glanced at Cedric and noted his shaking hands and pale face. We were the only ones who feared Hagrid's selections. I made a mental note to have Hermione warn Krum. Death by Aragog wasn't a fate I'd wish on my worst enemy. Well, maybe Dumbledore.

Bagman dismissed us. I remained frozen in place, images of Hagrid's favorite beasties dancing across my mind. Why couldn't Professor Kettleburn have stayed on two more years?

The other champions and Bagman ambled across the grounds. Krum kept shooting furtive glances towards Gryffindor tower. Thinking of Hermione, no doubt. I still wondered what he did to Ronald. Last month, practically overnight, Ronald stopped verbally assaulting Hermione. His face turned beet red when he saw her, but he held his tongue.

Amazing. Krum should give lessons in Ronald management. Half of Gryffindor would sign up.

Now, Ronald focused all his efforts on me. The first time Ronald shot a curse at my back, I retaliated with a silent disarming hex, pocketed his wand, stunned him, and left him lying on the floor. As I told McGonagall when she hauled me into her office, it wasn't my fault Ronald broke his nose when he fell, and I couldn't return his wand because, like a good little student, I followed the rules and gave it to a teacher.

Snape was highly amused when I dropped Ronald's wand on his desk and reported the incident. He missed torturing my fellow Gryffindors and I thought I should reward his good behavior. Snape returned it. Eventually. After Ronald dissected two barrels full of dead rats, scrubbed the cauldrons, and earned himself five more detentions for mouthing off.

Unfortunately, Ronald knew exactly who gave his wand to the Dungeon Bat. Getting around the castle without being hexed, cursed, or hit would've been impossible without my father's cloak, which I now carried everywhere.

I stared at the main entrance, trying to discern if Ronald lay in wait. Cedric approached the entryway. A shadow wavered. When he opened the door, lamplight gleamed off suspiciously red hair. Decision made, I tossed my cloak over my shoulders and headed for the Forbidden Forest.

About twenty feet inside, a hidden path led to the back entrance. From there, a combination of trap doors and hidden passages would spit me out ten feet from my door.

A shadowy figure emerged from the trees. Recalling Voldemort's attack back in first year, I froze. Clutching my wand like a life line, I crept closer.

"Must tell Dumbledore. My son..." the man trailed off, tilting his head and staring at the castle like he'd never seen it before. He waved his arms in the air and stuck his hand out like he was shaking hands with a ghost. "Twelve OWLS," he said, bragging to an invisible colleague about his son. A few seconds later, he shifted tracks, ordering Weatherby to write Madame Maxime. I froze. Didn't Mr. Crouch call Percy Weatherby?


Damn it. This wasn't supposed to happen. I didn't want to hurt anyone or pick sides, but if
Dumbledore found Senior and learned Moody wasn't Moody, I was screwed. I had to stop him.

I crept closer, gripping my wand under the cloak. When I was close enough, I shot him in the back with a stupefy, followed by an *incarcerous* and a silencing charm. Then I dragged him into the undergrowth, covered him with my invisibility cloak, and sprinted to the castle.

Portraits shouted at me to slow down. Ignoring them, I slipped into a passageway hidden behind a tapestry of a dragon battling a chimera and ran to my rooms. Breathless, I pushed the door open and stumbled inside.

The door slammed behind me. Barty looked up from his book. "Where's the fire?" he drawled.

Gasping for air, I flicked my wand, wordlessly summoning the Marauder's Map. The map flew into my outstretched hand. I tapped it with my wand and whispered the pass phrase. Then I flipped through it until I found the edge of the Forbidden Forrest and the little dot labeled "Bartemius Crouch". I shoved it under Barty's nose.

"Did anyone see him?"

"Don't think so. I caught him in the forest. He's stunned and bound. I hid him with my dad's cloak."

He shoved a compact mirror into my hands. "Stay here and lock down the wards. If I'm not back in thirty minutes, call my lord."

"How?"

"Open the mirror and say his birth name. Use Thomas, not Tom," he said. An invisibility cloak flew into his hands, and he slung it over his shoulders, disappearing from sight. The door opened and shut behind him.

With unsteady hands, I took the silver knife off the mantle and cut the palm of my left hand. I pressed my bloody hand on the disillusioned rune stone. Wards snapped into place, coating the walls with a strong layer of protective magic. They weren't foolproof, but they should hold long enough for at least one of us to escape. As soon as Madame Pomfrey allowed me to practice magic again, Barty taught me how to work them. I lacked both the knowledge and the experience to completely control them, but I could turn the protections on. Turning them off was far more difficult. I tried, but Barty normally stepped in before I accidentally melted the walls. He always laughed and told me to keep practicing. If, after two more years of practice, I still couldn't manage, I'd have a problem.

With my hands clutched behind my back and shoulders hunched, I paced. Dumbledore had cornered me twice in the past week. Since I refused to meet his eyes, his legilimency failed. Each time, he said he understood I was struggling with "my inner demons", and he would help me if I let him. Fat chance. He caused the blasted demons.

Both times, I went missing, Moody found me, berated me for being late, and dragged me off. I wasn't late, but as Barty said Dumbledore didn't know that. I lived in fear that Dumbledore would catch me alone and break into my mind, rewiring it as he saw fit. Erasing me. If he did, the only people who would suspect anything were Barty, Voldemort, Ralmuth, and Mr. Norton.

"What troubles you?" Dyfi hissed. I knelt and offered her my hand. She climbed up my arm and coiled around my neck like a scarf.

"Dumbledore. Barty. This entire mess."
"Patience," she counseled. "Stick to your plan."

"And if all else fails, figure out how to milk a dead basilisk and spike Dumbledore's lemon drops," I said. Our option of last resort was only appealing if I didn't mind a life sentence. I scratched the top of her head.

"How long did he say to wait?"

I glanced at the clock on the mantle. "Ten more minutes."

The door opened and closed. I fingered my wand, fearing Dumbledore had circumvented the wards and come to 'repair' my mind. My initial refusal didn't deter him. In recent weeks, he sent three or four notes a week, each offering assistance with my lessons. A small favor for an old friend, he called it. Yesterday, I burnt his note in the Great Hall, which earned me a frighteningly calm howler from Wychwood and a stern lecture from Barty. The gist was do not antagonize Dumbledore. Pretend to consider his offer.

Thus far, Barty held him off by claiming I had many unpleasant memories and our occlumency lessons were closer to talk therapy than beginning occlumency. True. I had progressed to intermediate occlumency. Still, I feared Dumbledore would get me alone or catch Barty and have my main defender (again, Barty) kissed.

Relief swept through me when Barty removed his invisibility cloak and tossed it on the chair. Then he handed me mine. He crossed the room, yanked a large book off the shelf, and removed a tumbler and bottle of firewhisky hidden behind it.

He poured himself a shot and tossed it back. "It's taken care of," he said.

Intense emotional anguish lingered in his good eye. Barty slumped down in his chair, unbuckled the leg, and took off the spinning eye. "Mirror," he ordered.

I handed it to him. "Do you need anything?"

"Not tonight. Morning lessons are canceled tomorrow."

"Yes, professor."

"Get some rest." He poured himself another shot and I retreated to my room. A few minutes later voices filtered through the door. I caught snatches of Barty and Riddle debating whether Dumbledore knew Crouch Sr. had entered the grounds and if anyone else had access to an artifact like my map. Barty confirmed his father was dead, but I already suspected that.

Despite everything, Barty cared for his birth father. If he hadn't, he would have killed him when Riddle freed him from the imperius. Strategically, leaving Crouch Sr. and Winky alive represented a huge risk. One wrong word from either of them and everything would fall apart. Even though I suspected Crouch Sr. was held under the imperius, the curse could be thrown off. It wasn't a sure thing. If Barty and Voldemort were driven by cold-blooded logic, they would have arranged an accident and killed everyone who knew Barty was still alive.

If Barty didn't care for his father and Winky, they would have died before September 1st.
In response to several reviews and PMs over on FF, the only pairing in this story is Hermione/Krum. As this is her first boyfriend, do not expect their relationship to last. I classify this story as an angsty drama, not a romance. Harry's only relationships will be friends, mentors, and family. He's not ready for a girlfriend, yet. After part 2, I might write a one shot or two set after part 2 that is a romance, but I probably won't.

Please read and review.
Chapter 16

Chapter Notes

Disclaimer: Harry Potter and related characters, situations, settings, and plots is the original work of J.K. Rowling and under copyright. While I enjoy playing/experimenting in her sandbox, it's not mine and never will be.

See the end of the chapter for more notes

Armed with a four point spell, numerous hexes and curses, and a memorized map, I entered the maze five minutes before Diggory, my nearest competitor. Just in case they were monitoring our spells, I muttered, "point me," and began running in the cup's general direction. The maze split many times. Twice, I deliberately chose a dead end path. No need to make anyone think it was too easy.

Then I turned right. A blast-ended skrewt blocked the path, stinger unfurling. "Impedimenta!" I yelled. My go-to spell bounced off the armored shell. I continued firing spells and dodging while I racked my brain, searching for something that would work without inciting an inquisition or backfiring.

Nothing. Hagrid bred the thrice-cursed beast from a firecrab and a manticore. Save for its underbelly, it was impervious. Damn. Think. I needed a strategy. Come on.

Play dead.

Ludicrous, but if I was on the same level as the tender underbelly…I fell backwards, breaking my fall with my left arm while keeping the skrewt in sight and maintaining a tight grip on my wand.

The skrewt rushed forward. The underbelly appeared. "Confringo," I yelled. The shell contained the blasting curse, propelling the skrewt away like a rocket. Viscera showered the area, coating everything, including me, in a thick layer of slime. A quick cleaning charm transformed it into dried slime. Another broke the worst slime cakes up enough so they wouldn't impede my movement. The self-cleaning feature on my glasses kicked in and the streaks disappeared. It would have to do.

I sprinted down the path. Moments before the first whistle blew, I encountered golden mist and gravity disappeared. Two minutes after I escaped, I ran into a sphinx. After answering a riddle a first year could manage, I dodged two boggarts and another skrewt before I emerged in the center of the maze. I breathed a sigh of relief. I did it. I beat the others here. Everything was going according to plan.

A shadow fell over me. I spun on my heel, narrowly avoiding being impaled by an acromantula. "Impedimenta." Nothing. "Reducto." The spider stumbled, but kept coming. I fired more spells. A severing curse etched the carapace, but didn't penetrate it. Same for the blasting curse.

Fangs clipped my left shoulder. Numbness and pain. Memories of the Forbidden Forest and Aragog intruded. A chart of possible creatures and spells appeared in my mind's eye. Barty taped a
picture of an acromantula with his wand. Two spells: one to knock the spider back and the other to kill. Knocking the spider back enrages it. If you think you might face it again, kill it before it kills you, he said.

Determination flooded my mind. If I was going to die here, so was the bloody spider. "Arania occidio," I said. Light erupted from my wand and the spider flew across the clearing, fluid leaking out of multiple holes.

Exhausted, I grabbed the cup. A hook jerked behind my navel. The maze spun for an instant and disappeared. Pain exploded behind my eyes, and to my eternal chagrin, I passed out.

I came to coughing and sputtering with my lungs burning like the time Dudley tried to drown me in the toilet.

"Drink," a vaguely familiar voice said. A bottle was pressed to my lips. He poured a thick sludge that tasted like rotten eggs mixed with vomit into my mouth, pinched my nose shut, and covered my mouth, forcing me to swallow. The pain dulled. I cracked my eyes open. Grass and booted feet. I struggled to sit up.

"Rest a minute." I followed the legs up and groaned. Wormtail. I should have guessed.

"What did you give me?" I demanded.

"Generic anti-venom," a child-like voice said.


Wormtail (perfect name for a sniveling rat) scurried to a wooden table, fetched a draught, and handed it to me. Puzzled, I searched for a label.

"It negates the bond of blood for two hours," the child said.

Understanding flashed through my mind. Unbreakable vows require clasping hands. If he touched me with the bond still active, I might accidentally destroy his body or my own. I learned during first year the bond was just as likely to hurt me as it was him. I propped myself up on one elbow, casting about for a knife or…My wand lay beside me. Why didn't they confiscate it? I expected them to.

I reached for it, hesitated, and received a wary nod of consent from the child. "How many drops?"

"Three."

I cut my finger, added the drops to the potion, swirled the bottle to mix it in, and handed it to Wormtail, who passed it to his master. Several minutes passed before my headache disappeared. "It's gone," I said softly.

The child settled on the ground beside me and brushed my hand with the back of his. "For now," he said. "Wormtail will act as our binder."

His tone implied he would prefer someone else. I knew I would, but we didn't have a choice. The fewer people who knew about our deal or his current state the better. He gripped my hand in a
surprisingly strong hold. Wormtail crouched on the ground and pointed his wand at our hands.

"Who goes first?" I asked, licking my lips, suddenly nervous. Was I really going to do this?

"I will," he volunteered.

"Birth names?" I asked, glancing at Wormtail.

"Of course," he hissed. "Even if someone breaks my memory charm, odds are they won't understand it. I sincerely doubt another parseltongue would translate the memory for them."

"Do you, Thomas Marvolo Riddle-Peverell, Earl of Wychwood, also known as the Dark Lord Voldemort, swear you will not intentionally kill or maim, either mentally or physically, Haraldr Iacomus Evans Potter?"

"I do."

A tongue of flame surrounded our hands, binding us together.

"That you will order all your supporters, including past, present, and future Death Eaters that he is not to be physically maimed or killed, including but not limited to unforgivable curses, kidnapping attempts, and hired hits?"

"I do."

"That you will punish anyone who attempts to harm or kill him?"

"I do."

"That you will protect Haraldr Iacomus Evans Potter as his paterfamilias until Haraldr Iacomus Evans Potter attains age 30?"

"I do."

The flames binding our hands turned killing curse green. I jerked my hand back, but he held on tight. The flames disappeared and he released me.

"Family thing. I'll explain later." He held out his hand and I reluctantly took it for a second time. Wormtail knelt beside us, holding his wand over our clasped hands. Sweat dripped down his forehead.

"Do you, Haraldr Iacomus Evans Potter, swear you will not intentionally kill or maim, either mentally or physically, Thomas Marvolo Riddle-Peverell, Earl of Wychwood, also known as the Dark Lord Voldemort?"

"I do."

"That you will not take up arms against him?"

"I do."

"That you will not share information about family magics or his secrets with anyone without his permission?"

"I do."
Silver outlined the flames surrounding our hands. His grip tightened. Too fascinated by the flames and the weight settling over my mind, I didn't jerk my hand back. The bond felt like a warm blanket, but not suffocating. When Hermione took hers, she said she felt like she couldn't breathe. Barty later explained the feeling varied based on your inclination. If you were inclined to break the vow, it felt uncomfortable. I wondered how the man sitting beside me felt. Suffocating or just warm?

"Wormtail, finish preparing the potion. Harry, how are you at parsel runes?"

"I just finished Language of the Naga and am now translating Divine Healing, but my work still bleeds after Dr. Leeds gets through with it."

He handed me a sheet of parchment. "How much can you manage?"

Studying the triquetra inscribed with parsel runes, I pursed my lips. Parsel runes predated modern civilizations and the scholars were divided on where they originated. Mixing them with an ancient Norse symbol seemed like an odd choice, but it fit our heritage. I recognized the outer runes. They invoked maternal blood and familial bonds, but the center runes mystified me. "I understand these," I said, tracing the arms.

"The symbol's finished. Draw these on the ground with your wand. I'll handle the center."

While Wormtail dropped ingredients into a massive cauldron, Riddle and I etched runes into the ground. Then, Riddle inspected my work. He made a few corrections and beckoned me over. "Are you sure, Harry?"

"Yes, sir."

"Wormtail! Get out." Wormtail squeaked in surprise and scrambled out. Riddle stripped off his little robe, socks, and shoes. He waved his hand at his feet and hovered a few inches above the ground. Then he wandlessly banished his clothing. Once Wormtail was a fair distance away, Riddle stretched his arms up.

My lips quirked. Did he seriously expect me to carry him? He glared. Apparently so. Sighing, I picked him up underneath his arms and held him at arms length. Now what?

"For the record, Harry, this is not how you hold a child."

I glared at him. Was he mocking me?

"The spell's on the back of your parchment. Add seven drops of your blood to the cauldron. Place me in the potion and say the spell in parseltongue."

I stared between the thing and my hand. How was I supposed to hold him while I added my blood to the potion? I bent to set him on the ground.

"Don't. The dirt may contaminate the potion."

Damn. Feeling extremely uncomfortable, I tried to settle him on my hip without actually touching him.

"Have you never held a child before, Potter?" he ground out between clenched teeth.

"No."
"I suggest you learn." He wrapped his little legs around my waist as best he could, clinging to me like a burr. Reluctantly, I put one arm around him, holding him to me while I cut my finger and added the blood. The clear potion hissed and turned a blinding white. Then I unceremoniously dropped him in.

I flipped the parchment over and read, "Blood of the family, willingly given, renew my cousin." A simple incantation that had instant and unexpected results. The cauldron hissed. Fluids boiled and a normal human head, hairless as a newborn babe, grew out of the soup. Dark eyes met mine. "Wand." he hissed.

My eyes scanned the ground in ever increasing circles. No wand.

"With Wormtail. I need yours."

I hesitated. Giving him my wand wasn't part of the deal, but I hadn't expected to still have it either. Reluctantly, I stuck my wand in the cauldron. He took it, rolled it between his fingers, and transformed.

His nose sunk into his face, the bridge disappeared and the nostrils turned into slits. Blue and yellow bled out of his eyes until the irises became red. The pupils narrowed into cat-like slits. His lips disappeared, making his mouth a wide maw filled with pointed teeth. By the time he stepped out of the cauldron, he had transformed from a normal, albeit bald, human male to a demonic creature who would only blend in on a horror film set.

"Wormtail! Robes!"

Wormtail slunk over to us and knelt, offering him a pile of black fabric and a pale wand. He quickly dressed himself. (I certainly wasn't going to help with that, and I doubted he wanted Wormtail's hands anywhere near his person. I wouldn't.)

Riddle rolled the two wands between his fingers and cast several spells with each. "Interesting," he said, returning my wand. "Only marginal resistance. Wormtail, take the equipment back to the house and stay there."

"Yes, my lord."

Wormtail packed everything up and carted it off, acting more like an inept house elf than a wizard. After he left, Riddle transformed again, regaining his human appearance and losing two inches in height. He still towered over me, but he no longer had the physique of an anorexic basketball player. His robes wiggled, automatically altering to fit. He cast a tempus. 8:00 pm. An hour since I entered the maze.

I cocked my head, running through the different spells that alter appearance.

"Barty's right."

"Sir?"

"Your curiosity's practically contagious, but you won't ask questions."

I shrugged. "I'm used to looking up my own answers." The Dursleys approved of Dudley's questions, not mine. As a child, asking questions was a quick route back to my cupboard. Then I started school and my teacher introduced us to the library. At first, I loved the library because Dudley hated it. Later, I realized the card catalog existed to help answer questions and a new world
opened for me. For the first time, I had answers.

"A laudable trait, but sometimes you need more information than you can piece together from library books, school friends, and old newspapers." He raised my chin with a fingertip. "Curiosity tempered by good sense will take you farther than you ever imagined, but unfettered curiosity can be deadly. My home is filled with curiosities from all regions of the globe, Harry. Some make the Mirror of Erised look like a child's toy. I will always prefer you ask questions. I'm sure you have a few."

"Did you use transfiguration?" I asked, nibbling on my lip. I was the child who sat in the back of the room, observing everyone. Even after I began studying under Barty, I rarely asked questions.

"A partial animagus, actually. During the early 50s, I began researching consciously choosing your animagus form instead of letting your magic and personality dictate it. At first, I looked distorted like a wax figurine too close to a fire. Forty years later, it's still incomplete, but the changes to my eyes, nose, and skin prove the theory's sound."

A question hovered on the tip of my tongue, but I held back.

"Ask," he prompted.

"You can't research choosing your animagus form without knowing what your animagus form is and then selecting a different animal, can you?"

"No."

"Yours isn't a snake?"

"It's not. I'll show you mine when you're ready to study the transformation. After your OWLs."

"The colors during our vows? When Hermione swore hers—"

"—I heard about your friend," he said. "It's ancient magic unique to our family line. Green for the heir. Silver for the head. I didn't warn you because I didn't think the paterfamilias magics retained sufficient power to strengthen our vows. I'm the first in our family to complete the paterfamilias rituals in 400 years."

"Rituals?"

"Later. We're running short on time. Sit," he ordered, pointing at the ground. "I'll fix what I can in fifteen minutes. Then, I need to plant the memories for Dumbledore and get you back to Hogwarts before that potion wears off. Generic anti-venom works in a pinch, but you still need the actual anti-venom for whatever bit you."

I sat down and crossed my legs, assuming my occlumency practice pose. "Acromantula. I really wish you hadn't let Aragog escape."

"The oaf would have either found or created something worse. Look at me," he said and pointed his wand between my eyes. "Keep your mind completely open. Don't try to guide me to one incident or another. We'll work through everything later. Right now, I need to glue your mind together as best I can. This won't be pleasant, but it will buy you another six months."

I steeled myself and met his eyes.

"Legilimens," he whispered.

Hagrid placed a letter in my hands and I started trusting him. He presented me with a butt-printed cake and I trusted him even more.


Then it stopped.

I turned my head and vomited. More pieces fell into place.

Dear Merlin, Dumbledore was so subtle. If I hadn't performed accidental mind magic, I never would have noticed. Parselmouth or not. Even then, the incidents I noticed were just the defining moments characterized by big shifts in my thinking or personality, but those weren't the real damage. It was little things like me taking Malfoy's bait, not investigating the Potters, never asking anyone other than Ronald how to hold a quill, never looking up a book on how to use said quill, and not recognizing that Ronald's antique chessmen were the ones who won most of Ronald's chess matches, not Ronald himself.

"Harry?"

I raised my head. "I thought I already knew, but..." I didn't know what to say.

"We'll fix this, Harry. It will take time, but it's doable. Anyone else and it would be permanent."

"How do I know you're not doing the same thing?"

"I'm not dead," he replied.

Oh. Changing my personality did fall under mental harm. "Sorry."

"You have every right to be suspicious." He handed me a handkerchief. I wiped the blood off my face. "You were right about a trigger, but wrong about the number. I found three. There could be more, but I can't risk going any deeper. If you can pretend like they're still there, I'll remove them. Otherwise, it's not worth the risk."

I nibbled on my bottom lip. "What are they?"

"The worst is the one you noticed, but the trigger is questioning Dumbledore, not knowing about his alterations." My eyes widened. "I believe he discovered you knew about his alterations when you began acting differently. The closer you get to your original personality, the more obvious your knowledge is. Acting like yourself was a mistake we can't fix."

"The others?" My stomach flipped inside out and sank into my shoes. I screwed up. What if Dumbledore...no, he won't do anything overt. He still has an image to maintain.

"Considering Dumbledore a trusted source when confronted with contradicting information. It feels older than the others, less precise. I think you've already overcome it on your own, but I should still remove it." He grinned. "The last is to seek help from either Dumbledore or someone trusted by him if your mind ever begins splitting."
I snickered. "You mean he encouraged me to ask Barty in a Moody suit for help."

"Precisely."

"Glad I'm not the only one who screwed up." I sobered. "Remove them. No point pretending the second exists, but I can work with the others without giving anything important away."

"All right. Ready?"

Bracing myself, I nodded and met his gaze. Another prod. Needles pricked my mind followed by a soothing sensation I didn't recognize.

"Rest a minute."

I closed my eyes and let my mind fall into a meditative state. His mental touch was gentler than I expected. Dumbledore's always felt like a sledge hammer. I wondered at the difference. Was Riddle more skilled or did Dumbledore not care?

He grabbed my shoulders. "Are you sure about returning to the muggles? Once you leave King's Cross, I can't guarantee I can get you out before school starts."

My hands shook. The Dursleys repulsed me. I despised my life there and desperately wanted it to end. But it wasn't worth the price. "Yes. Please don't file an Emergency Protection Order*. I know what they'll find. If the Dursleys are charged with neglect, it will be splashed across every newspaper in magical Britain. You have no idea what they'll do to me if they know."

"If you're worried about the muggles," he sneered, "don't."

"Not them. My classmates. It will become another reason for them to curse me in the hallways. The teachers won't stop them. They never do. Ten weeks with the Dursleys is less risk."

He tilted his head back and stared at the clouds. "I don't agree, but I won't force you to press charges. I fear this is the only protection I can give you." Riddle touched his wand to my temple and closed his eyes. A cold liquid encased my mind, but I didn't feel any different and my memories hadn't changed. I cocked my head quizzically.

"You'll see it when Dumbledore does. Our 'meeting' is all he will see. He won't get any further. It should wear off a few days after term ends. Use it well."

"Thank you."

"You're welcome. Keep practicing your meditation, but let everything settle before you restart your occlumency lessons."

"Yes, sir." I hesitated, gnawing on my lower lip. "What should I call you?"

"Thomas. Wychwood, if the situation's formal." He helped me to my feet. "Gringotts filed the codicil yesterday. With a little luck, the tournament kept Dumbledore too occupied to notice. Ask Barty to make you two emergency portkeys. One to St. Mungo's. The other to the Ministry. I'll do everything I can to get a residency hearing** before school starts, but Dumbledore can and will delay the hearing date. If anything happens, use a portkey and tell them to fire call your paterfamilias Thomas Riddle of Woodwalton Hall. My home's under a variation of the fidelius charm. They won't be able to do anything other than fire call. Make sure you tell them I am your paterfamilias. That trumps unrelated guardian."
"I understand."

"Go." I grabbed the portkey. The world spun around me. I crash landed in front of a worried fake Moody and Professor Dumbledore.

Moody hauled me to my feet. Then Dumbledore did the unthinkable. Without warning, he grabbed my chin, forcing me to meet his icy gaze. Then he broke into my mind. No warnings or whispered incantations. Just a battering ram that knocked me to my knees. I watched in undisguised horror as I was tied to a headstone and cut in the exact spot I scratched my arm when I was fighting the acromantula. Wormtail chopped off his own hand, spoke an incantation, and Voldemort, the scaly snake man he transformed into before Wormtail saw him, emerged from the cauldron. Taunts were exchanged. He started to call his death eaters to witness my demise, but thought better off it.

"Resting my feet on your corpse will send the proper message," he said and threw the first curse. A cruciatus, I thought. More curses flew, but none hit. Then an avada kedavra and expelliarmus (why I was using second year spells when I had stronger ones in my arsenal I didn't know) collided. Our wands joined together. A golden cage formed and ghostly figures emerged from the end of Voldemort's wand. The last deaths. An old man. A woman. My parents. I ran for the cup.

With a triumphant gleam in his eye, Dumbledore turned to Fudge and announced Voldemort's return. I remained silent. With Fudge still wringing his hands and muttering nonsense, Dumbledore turned me over to Moody, who kept an eye on me while trying to demand answers from Dumbledore. All in keeping with how the real Moody would react.

The anti-venom potion wore off. Numbness crept down my spine. I swayed on my feet.

"Potter!" Moody caught me underneath my arms.

"Need Madame Pomfrey," I whispered.

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* Emergency Protection Order (EPO): allows a child to be removed or detained for their own protection. Anyone may apply for this order. The first order lasts for 8 days and can be renewed for an additional 7. In the UK, approximately 90% of EPOs are granted.

** Residency Hearing: I'm not certain this is the correct term. However, the paperwork is called an Application for Residence. Private applications do not have to include the child as a party. Based on what I've read, public applications include the child and are commonly seen when EPOs are involved. Public vs private is a legal distinction and has very little, if any, relation to whether the case will be publicized.

Chapter End Notes

As you can see, Harry's healing session is a bit rushed and incomplete. He has a temporary fix, nothing more.

After reading all your lovely reviews, I hate telling you that Part 1 only has two chapters left. Then there will be a 4-6 week wait for Part 2, which will also be posted one chapter a day. Last night, I finally merged my four Part 2 outlines into a workable timeline. (I have scenes written, but the timeline was giving me fits until I realized moving 1 scene would make everything work.)
As of this posting, AO3 is caught up with FF and will remain caught up.

Your reviews fuel Part 2. Please read and review.
Pomfrey held me for two days. She ran off the well-wishers, told my would-be interrogators where to stick it, and protected me as best she could. Moody stayed by my bedside the first night, but retired to his own bed for the second. I didn't blame him. Barty's watch woke him every hour on the hour to take his polyjuice. He needed sleep. Plus, he needed to carefully monitor his polyjuice intake so he didn't run out before the school year ended. However, Madame Pomfrey couldn't keep me forever, not with Dumbledore insisting she release me as soon as I could walk half-way across the room.

His actions after the tournament underscored the fact that he did not care about my welfare. I was bitten by an acromantula, supposedly fought a Dark Lord, escaped, and returned still covered in skrewt guts with blood dripping out of my nose and instead of doing the responsible thing and calling for a nurse or shipping me off to St. Mungo's, he illegally invaded my mind, started spreading unsubstantiated rumors and debating with the minister of magic. All while I stood there dying from Hagrid's blasted spider!

Over her objections, Dumbledore insisted Madame Pomfrey treat me on-site while he and Moody searched for the perpetrator. The only good thing about that evening was Karkaroff fled before anyone checked him for the imperius curse or potion influence, meaning the person Barty pinned everything on wasn't there to defend himself. So naturally, Karkaroff was guilty.

Saturday evening, two hours after Madame Pomfrey released me, I found myself in Dumbledore's office with Moody on one side and Sirius Black, who Moody still grumbled about accepting solely on his word, not the evidence, on the other. Dumbledore sat behind his desk, playing his wise, elderly headmaster role.

"Do you believe me, now, Harry?" Dumbledore asked with a sad smile. "The prophecy is very real. Even Voldemort knows. That's why he keeps targeting you."

I snorted. "Professor, there are so many problems with your statement. Where to start?" I tapped my chin thoughtfully. "Let's begin with Voldemort's return. The only person I recognized was Pettigrew, and for all I know, he works for you." I kept the smirk off my face. According to Thomas, who wasn't entirely trustworthy, when I questioned Dumbledore, I was supposed to confront him with my questions and reasoning, giving him the opportunity for rebuttal. Careful what you wish for, headmaster, I thought. As long as I didn't reveal anything Dumbledore couldn't reasonably know, I was golden.

"Harry!" Sirius protested, but Dumbledore kept his smile pasted on his face.

"Sirius, the only time I recall meeting Voldemort was when he was on the back of Quirrell's head. I have no clue what he looks like."
"That's not true, Harry. You met Tom a third time," Dumbledore said.

"Professor, you sat in that chair and told me to never trust anything that could think for itself. (1) The diary told me it was Tom Riddle, but I've never seen any evidence that suggests that's true. Therefore, I know who the diary was supposed to be, not who it actually was."

Dumbledore opened his desk drawer and tossed the cursed book in my lap. "It has his name on it. If you look in the inside flap, you'll see the name of a muggle print shop on Vauxhall Road. If memory serves me correctly, and I'm certain it does, it was less than three blocks from his orphanage."

I laughed. "Professor, I realize wizards aren't always the most logical beings and that most are completely ignorant of muggle affairs, but I never believed you were. Until today. Do you know what we learned in muggle school?" He appeared puzzled. "No? In fourth year, we learned all about rationing. You see, sir," I said scathingly, "in 1940, the Germans invaded France. Shortly after the invasion, we began running low on a few items, including paper, which the muggles began officially rationing in 1942. The old lady my third year teacher brought in to talk about it said it really didn't matter because by the time they started rationing, certain products were simply too expensive for the average consumer. Basic supply and demand really. The civilian population was served after the newspapers and the military, not before. What little paper was available was about the same quality as cheap toilet paper." I held the book up between thumb and forefinger. "I have no idea who this book belonged to, but I doubt it belonged to a school age Tom Riddle because you couldn't buy a blank book of this quality in muggle London during World War II. (2)"

Dumbledore gaped like a fish while Sirius opened and closed his mouth, obviously searching for a proper, guardian-like, reprimand. Moody maintained his stoic silence, but his good eye crinkled with humor. Glad someone found this funny. I didn't. Honestly, Dumbledore lived through the 30s and 40s. I shouldn't have to remind him.

"Maybe he bought it before he started Hogwarts."

I snorted. "With what money?"

"Maybe he found it on the street or stole it."

"Then it wouldn't have his name engraved on it, would it? Of course there is another possibility. Maybe you pinned Voldemort's crimes on an innocent man." He wasn't innocent, but only two people in the room had concrete proof Voldemort and Riddle were the same man. Barty and I weren't talking. "As I've told you before, Headmaster, I will not believe anything without evidence. Yet, you continue to present me with conjecture and unfounded accusations, not evidence."

"Myrtle's not evidence?"

"No, professor. Myrtle heard a voice and saw the basilisk. She never saw who the voice belonged to, and the ministry snapped Hagrid's wand for that incident, not Riddle's. All Myrtle knew was the voice belonged to a boy. That covers about half the school."

"But he was the only parslemouth."

"That you knew of. Given the way British wizards treat parslemouths, any parslemouth who grew up in wizarding society knows to keep their mouth shut. Again, professor, where is your proof?"

"Before he came to Hogwarts, he hung a little boy's rabbit from the rafters." Spittle flew out of Dumbledore's mouth. I wondered if he was related to Snape. Bad thought. Then he stood a fifty-
fifty chance of being related to me. I wiped the spit off with my robe sleeve and shook my head.

"Professor, I think you are forgetting that I grew up in a magic hating, muggle household. I can envision many scenarios in which killing the rabbit was necessary. For starters, the United Kingdom was in a depression before World War II. Perhaps the rabbit was the only pet in the orphanage, a plausible scenario, and the rabbit was eating what little food they could afford. Killing the rabbit and eating it would be perfectly logical. Hanging it from the rafters merely ensured the cook found the rabbit in time for dinner."

"He killed it to hurt another child."

"Let's say you're right." His smile turned genuine. "In that case, the other boy probably made his life hell because weird things happened around him or killed Tom's pet first. You forget, professor, I grew up with Dudley. I can envision many scenarios in which killing the rabbit was justified."

Dumbledore sighed. "Perhaps, but the boy was a thief."

"Is theft wrong?" I asked, baiting my next trap.

"What kind of question is that?" Sirius yelled.

"A perfectly logical one. You didn't raise me. Not one of you has the slightest idea what the Dursleys taught me. For all you know, they raised me to be a cat burglar."

"They are perfectly decent people," Professor Dumbledore said, "and I'm confident you have never stolen anything in your life."

I gave him a Cheshire grin. "To date, I've stolen crayons, books, toy soldiers, a yo-yo, food, shoes, and chocolate among other things. Does that make me a bad person, professor?"

"No, you couldn't," Sirius whispered, reminding me of Fudge wringing his hands and wailing that Voldemort couldn't be back.

"Sirius," I patted his leg, "stealing food's my personal specialty. Come see me before you leave. I'll give you a few pointers."

"Perhaps you were a little misguided," Dumbledore said.

"Misguided like the man who left me on a doorstep in November, the same man who filed for guardianship under the wrong will, who abandoned me for nine and a half years with muggles who treated me worse than they would a stray dog? I'm sorry, professor, but I have difficulty with someone like you calling me misguided. I did what I had to to survive. It wasn't like you were willing to help."

Sirius frowned, his mouth moving as he worked through the accusations. "Professor?"

"I admit leaving you on the doorstep wasn't my best idea, but Petunia found you and took you in."

"You never thought, not once, that you owed the sister of one of your order members an explanation? You didn't think you needed to tell her that her sister died in your war, under your leadership, and she would never see her again."

"I couldn't tell Petunia her sister died fighting in a war she didn't know about without breaking the statute of secrecy."
"Of course you could, professor. Apparently, you wrote it in a letter. You had Hagrid inform my aunt, uncle, and cousin that I'm a wizard. The statute doesn't prohibit death notifications, just exposure to non-involved muggles. You didn't tell her in person because you didn't want to."

Silence filled the room. Even Sirius didn't object to that accusation. Indeed, he was staring at Dumbledore like he'd never seen him before. Moody leaned back in his chair, watching the battle like it was a tennis match. My behavior wasn't new to him, but Sirius had never witnessed me using the brain cells my mother blessed me with. He didn't know how to react.

"Professor," I said, breaking the silence, "I think you missed the most important point."

"Which one?" Dumbledore asked. His adam's apple bobbed, moving his entire beard.

"Now that Sirius is here, there's something I've wanted to know for months. When I met my Gringott's team, they showed me your guardianship application." Dumbledore's nostrils flared. "Sirius, when were you arrested?"

"November 3rd. Took me two days to track down the rat."

I narrowed my eyes at Dumbledore. "Professor, why did you file for guardianship on November 1st when Sirius was still considered innocent at the time?"

"What?" Sirius knocked his chair over. Moody righted it with a wave of his wand.

"Sit, son. I want to hear his answer."

Sirius sat on the edge of his chair, glaring at Dumbledore. "Professor, how could you?"

"I did what I had to do. The court wouldn't have given a Black custody of the boy who lived."

I raised my eyebrow. "Before you say anything else, professor, you should be aware that I've seen my parents' wills. Both of them." I left out the codicil. The filing was buried in the legal section of Wednesday's newspaper. If Dumbledore wanted to know, the information was freely available. I wasn't going to tell him. "The order went each other, Sirius, Pettigrew, McKinnon, you, McGonagall. I would dearly like to know why you believed a bachelor centenarian was more suited to raise a small child than either Sirius or Pettigrew." Months ago, Norton informed me that unsealing the wills was a matter of public record. As Chief Warlock, Dumbledore was formally notified. He believed Dumbledore didn't hide my mother's documents or order someone else to. A clerk probably read them, thought Dumbledore would make a better guardian than a bunch of unconvicted (at the time) death eaters, and hid them as a favor to both me and the headmaster. Mr. Norton said Dumbledore would've ensured the documents were destroyed, not stuffed in the wrong filing cabinet.

"I thought Sirius was a traitor."

"Not Pettigrew?"

"Of course not. Everyone believed Sirius betrayed the Potters."

"Sirius, who cast the fidelius charm?"

Sirius scrunched his brow. "Lily," he answered.

"Doubtful. I suggest you look up the fidelius, Sirius. Regardless of who cast the spell, I still had one testamentary guardian who was innocent in Dumbledore's eyes. You should ask yourself why
he sealed the wills and overrode my parents wishes by appointing himself when it should have been either you or Peter."

"That is enough, Mr. Potter." Dumbledore banged his fist on his desk, standing in his fury.

"There's an even bigger problem, professor," I said calmly. "Your guardianship is invalid."

"It most certainly is not!"

Time for stage two of Thomas's insane plan, concocted the week after we signed the contracts. I called it 'keep Dumbledore too busy to bother with Harry'. In theory, I was safer if Dumbledore spent his summer worrying about Voldemort and my barrister. I hoped it worked.

"Professor, my legal team researched this issue very carefully before I petitioned Minister Fudge to unseal the wills. When my father died, his will came into play, appointing my mother as my sole guardian. According to both your testimony and my memory, my mother died last, meaning her will appointed my testamentary guardian, not my father's because my father appointed her as my sole guardian. Admittedly, the wills are mirror wills, but you filed under the wrong document, meaning you committed fraud when you applied for guardianship." I said with a sneer. "Let's review. Taking me from my appointed testamentary guardian is kidnapping. At the least, sealing the wills concealed evidence of your crime, but I'm sure Minister Fudge will be understanding when I push for prison time, especially considering you abandoned a child under two, which is punishable by up to ten years in prison. By leaving me with the Dursleys, you made them accomplices to kidnapping and yourself an accomplice to false imprisonment and multiple violations of both the Children and Young Persons Act of 1933 and Children's Act of 1989. You really should have stopped Aunt Petunia from teaching a five-year-old how to watch the bacon. Not to mention the child endangerment charges I have every intention of filing for the sorcerer's stone, basilisk, and this year's tournament."

"What I did kept you alive."

"Maybe. Maybe not. We'll never know, and I'm quite serious about the charges, professor. My solicitor tells me I will have to return to my relatives this summer, but guarantees things will change by Yule. I doubt Professor McGonagall will send me to stay with you and the Dursleys in prison."

"But Harry," Sirius said in disbelief, "you can't bring Dumbledore up on charges. Not with Voldemort back. Our world needs Dumbledore. He's the only one standing between us and him."

"Sirius, I really hoped your years in Azkaban would make you think critically and analyze exactly how you got in your present situation. So much for hope."

Dumbledore's eyes twinkled, making him a look insane. "Harry, the prophecy is true. You're the hope, not me."

"Then I suggest you find another one. Really, professor. I can't be the only child born at the end of July. Not to mention, Trewnelane's stoned ramblings didn't mention which calendar she used. Under the Islamic calendar, I was born in the eighth month. Seventh under the Julian, but the second to last day, which isn't technically the end of the month. Under the Hebrew calendar, I wasn't even born in July. I was born in August. Not that it matters because I was born in either the fifth or the sixth month, depending on whether I was born at night. Under the Chinese, first day of the seventh month. Had she said the 211th day of the year, as measured by the Gregorian Calendar, it might be different, but I still wouldn't believe a khrēsmoi, especially not without evidence it applies to me."
"The one with the power to vanquish the Dark Lord approaches," Dumbledore said, obviously quoting. "Born to those who have thrice defied him, born as the seventh month dies, and the Dark Lord will mark him as his equal, but he will have power the Dark Lord knows not. And either must die at the hand of the other for neither can live while the other survives. The one with the power to vanquish the Dark Lord will be born as the seventh month dies. (3)" He jabbed my scar with his wand. "He marked you."

"Really? Can you prove that? For all I know I got this scar when the ceiling fell on my head. Although, the Dursleys have an excellent explanation involving a car crash"

"It's a curse scar." Dumbledore bowed up, obviously displeased with my game.

"Let's say you're right," I said, lifting my bangs. "This is a curse scar. By your own admission, your prophecy is still wrong."

"It's correct."

"Come on, professor. I'm trying to give you an easy out. Why won't you take it?" He glared at me. I leaned back in my chair, arms crossed across my chest like I hadn't a care in the world. "I can't believe you forgot, professor. At the end of second year, you told me Voldemort transferred some of his powers to me the night he died. Isn't that how I became a parslemouth?" Stupid trigger. I'd rather mull over my theory for a few weeks, maybe look a few things up in the library or steal some of Barty's books. But no, I had to act the part. I hoped my on the spot analysis didn't bite me later.

Sirius frowned and opened his mouth, but no sound emerged. He kept trying, his face twisting and changing colors under the strain. Who cursed his tongue?

"Yes, Harry," Dumbledore said in a long-suffering tone.

"Parseltongue is one of the oldest human languages. Spells cast in it are incredibly difficult for non-parsemouths to remove. Most importantly, it can't be taught. Correct?"

"Correct," Dumbledore replied, shooting a nasty glare at Moody. "Been discussing my students with Joseph Leeds?"

"My apprentice, Albus," he replied. "I thought it was high time someone examined things with a more scientific eye. Philosophy is all well and good, but the boy needed to be grounded in the real world, not wishful thinking."

"You dare!"

"Fully investigating my apprentice's abilities is part of my duty. I may not be much use to anyone these days, but I will do what's right by Potter."

Dumbledore glared at Moody before forcing a smile. "What's your point, Harry?"

"The prophecy says mark, not make."

"How many times must I warn you, Harry? Word games can be very dangerous, especially when you don't understand all the magics involved."

"Like legilimency?"

Dumbledore recoiled.
"Did you think I wouldn't notice the gaps in my memory or the way my personality completely changed the moment I entered your thrice damned castle?" I leaned forward, looking Dumbledore in the eye with my occlumency shields firmly in place behind the handy bubble Thomas constructed in my mind. His construct wouldn't last forever, but I would use it while I had the opportunity. "I noticed," I said, letting the lisp enter my voice. "I let you see what happened yesterday, but I'm warning you, Dumbledore. If you ever enter my mind without my permission again, I'll go to Voldemort and beg for the dark mark. Then I will give both the prophecy and my mother's divorce petition to the Daily Prophet. I'll even pay them to run it on the front page. I'll bare my arm and tell the world that my mother defied you. She saw you for what you really are and when you announced me as the only survivor of the killing curse, the Dark Lord Dumbledore marked me as his equal, and I won't rest until I dance on your grave."

"But Voldemort killed your parents," Siriu yelled.

I rounded on him. "Prove it. My biggest problem with that night is that Dumbledore somehow knows everything that happened and to the best of my knowledge there were only two survivors. Myself and Voldemort. I didn't remember what happened until last year. From where I'm sitting it looks like Voldemort is really Albus Dumbledore with a time turner and a glamor charm. Personally, I more inclined towards some sort of human transfiguration. That is, after all, your specialty."

Moody choked on his tea while Sirius stared at me like I'd just told him muggles were actually disguised martians and Dumbledore looked completely bewildered. I imagined he looked the same when his brother was arrested for using "inappropriate" (translation sexual) charms on a goat.

"That does bring me to my last question. Why didn't you tell me my mother filed for divorce?"

"You didn't know?" Sirius whispered.

"No. Fudge included her divorce petition with the wills because it had a fresher magical signature. That was the first either of us knew about it. You knew?"

Sirius nodded. "James told me."

"Professors?"

"I found out the same day you did, Potter."

Dumbledore glared at Moody, again, but confidential family information fell under the contract. Moody couldn't tell Dumbledore about the petition because I asked him not to. Judging by Dumbledore's pinched expression, he knew that as well. "Yes, your father fire called me the day he received the notice."

"How did he react?" I asked, genuinely curious.

"He was crying," Dumbledore said. Sirius furrowed his brow. "You and Lily meant everything to him. I feared he would commit suicide."

"He wasn't that broken up when I saw him," Sirius said muttered.

"You must've seen him after I did."

"Perhaps." Not an answer. Sirius knew something.

"Professor, do you know why my mother filed for divorce?"
"They were so young and the stresses of war…" Dumbledore trailed off, playing with the flashing red and purple trim on his sleeve. "I thought they just needed a little time. Once everything was over, they would patch things back up. I had the utmost faith in their love."

"Then my father didn't tell you that his relationship with you and involvement in your illegal, vigilante group were the number one and number two reasons my mother cited for divorce."

"No," Dumbledore said. Sirius's clenched fists indicated differently.

I stood and dusted off my robes. "If you'll excuse me, professors, Sirius. I'm due potions and bed rest. Madame Pomfrey's orders. Good night." Moody followed me out the door.

We walked back to our quarters in silence. Once we were safely inside and the wards were reset, my companion collapsed in his chair, shoulders shaking.

Then he laughed until he cried. Wiping tears out of his good eye, Barty tried to muffle his snickers, but failed. "Dear Merlin, Potter. I thought the old fool was going to have a heart attack."

I gave him an unrepentant grin. "I hope not. My personal goal is to give Dumbledore a stroke before my twenty-first birthday. I would dearly love to see his mind imprisoned in his body."

He summoned a glass vial and extracted a copy of the memory. Raising it as a toast, he said, "Carry on, Potter," he said, raising it as a toast. He sobbered. "You came pretty close to giving away the game."

"I know, but I kept back the codicil and our vows. All things the trigger would've revealed."

For the tenth time, I tweaked my translation and reread the passage in Divine Healing, the untranslated runic book Leed's sent me as a translation exercise. He and Thomas both contended it was for translation only, not learning healing magic, but it was so fascinating. Frustrated, I tugged my hair. Damn. Still wrong. Focusing healing magic on the heart wouldn't heal a damaged liver. It wasn't anatomically possible. Unless...I drummed my fingers on the desk. What if focusing on the heart meant you magically charged the blood, not the heart muscle. When the heart pumped the blood through the body, the blood carried the healing magic to the internal organs.

Excited, I summoned the anatomy and physiology textbook Barty purchased during his shopping spree and checked the index. Cardiovascular system, page 617. I flipped to the page and began reading the chapter. If I was right, the magic worked hand in hand with oxygenated blood.

"Did you forget to tell me something?" Dyfi hissed.

Puzzled, I set my pen down and regarded the snake, who was sunning herself on the window ledge. "What?"

"First owls, then those things you live with, now a four-legged beast. If you weren't mine—"

Knocking cut off her rant. I sighed with relief. I didn't care what she smelled. I was so close to finally understanding this passage and maybe trying my first healing spell before school let out when she derailed my thought process.

Another knock.

"Come in," I called. Assuming Barty needed one of the books I'd borrowed, I picked up my pen. Dr. Leeds was right. Healing magic was absolutely fascinating. I wondered if I could compare
notes with Madame Pomfrey, maybe get a few tips on how magic interacted with the body.

"Potter, you have a visitor," Barty said in Moody's voice.

I frowned. Durmstrang and Beauxbatons were scheduled to leave after the feast, so Hermione and Victor were somewhere on the grounds, alone and snogging. Neville was pruning the venomous tentacula while he tried to con Sprout into an apprenticeship next year. I wished him luck. He needed someone who looked after his interests almost as badly as I did. "Who?"

He stepped inside and shut the door behind him. "Black. He's waiting in the sitting room. I didn't know how he'd react to Dyfi, and I'm not sure you should trust him with her."

"I don't trust him with anything."

Barty raised an eyebrow. "Remember what we talked about, Potter. Your mother didn't want him to raise you, but he's still your godfather. Dumbledore hasn't challenged my methods too much, but if you don't talk to Black, he will question us both. Besides, Black won't leave until he talks to you."

After marking my spot and capping my pen, I bowed my head. "Okay. I'll talk to him, but not in here."

A leather case slid across my desk. "He borrowed Dumbledore's chessmen. I think he just wants to play a game with his godson."

Reluctantly, I picked up my chessmen, a pewter Stauton set I acquired from a Christmas cracker during first year. After getting my set mixed in with Seamus's, I painted white and black hatch marks around the base. I liked them well enough, but young chessmen combined with a new player spelled disaster. Ronald won his games because his antique chessmen knew the game backwards and forwards. They stopped him from making mistakes and taught him new strategies. Mine couldn't do that.

Barty and I played several times a week, but he spent more time teaching me how to play than he did playing. At least, he explained the different openings, classic moves, and strategy, unlike Ronald who was thrilled every time he beat me. I wondered if Ronald viewed his victories as defeating the boy-who-lived, not the boy who had never touched a chess set until he started Hogwarts. Even though I had improved, I wasn't sure I wanted to play chess with Sirius.

Barty clapped me on the shoulder. "Black and I had a long talk this morning. If he laughs, I'll hex him."

"Thanks, professor," I said, smiling.

"Get out there."

"Back in a bit," I hissed to Dyfi and slipped out the door. Barty exited and warded my room behind me.

Sirius had a chessboard half set up on the rug in front of the fireplace. Leaning against a stack of red cushions, he made a grand gesture at the gold cushions across from him. Conjured by Sirius, most likely. As Moody, Barty was a true Gryffindor, but Moody himself admitted he preferred a more muted color palette. Barty seated himself in his customary arm chair and picked up a book, looking pointedly at the gold cushions.

Hiding my fears behind a friendly mask, I slid to the floor and sat, cross legged, across from Sirius.
"Hello, Sirius," I said politely as I opened my set and placed them on the board, ignoring their grumbling. Yes, we had a new partner. Yes, losing was in our future. Get over it. At least my chess pieces didn't know Barty wasn't Moody. When we played, he always wore his Moody suit, just in case.

"It's good to see you," he said stiffly. He glanced at Barty/Moody and back at me. "Still don't trust me, I see."

I rolled my eyes. "Don't take it personally, Sirius. Professor Moody doesn't trust his own father."

"Too true," Moody growled, reading his book with his good eye while the other watched us. I wondered how Barty managed that. Going from two normal eyes to Moody's prosthetic had to be disorienting.

Sirius glared, but didn't comment. He turned his attention back to the board and reached for my bishop. "May I?"

I compared his side to mine and flushed. Once again, I mixed up the knights and the bishops and my pieces didn't know enough to correct me. I flipped them around, hoping no one else noticed.

"Black or white?" Sirius asked.

"Doesn't matter."

"White, then. I'll play my name."

"Pawn to E4," I said, beginning the game.

"Pawn to E5," Sirius said.

"Knight to F3," I looked up from the game. "Sirius, did anyone know my mum wanted a divorce before she filed?"

He leaned back against the cushions, one leg bent. "Straight to the hard questions. Knight to C3. I didn't know until after Lily filed, but I think James expected it."

"Bishop to B5. Were they happy?"

Sirius sighed. "In the beginning, but then they joined the Order and you were born..." He trailed off and turned his attention back to the board. "Knight to F6."

I glanced at the board, trying to remember Barty's lessons and focus on our discussion at the same time. "Bishop to..." Sirius pointed at my rook. "Sorry, king-side castle."

"It's okay. Take your time. Bishop to C5."

"Did they fight?" I asked, fearing the answer.

"Until you were a year old, they were the perfect couple."

The game forgotten, I studied his face. Premature lines, like Barty's, but Sirius's cheekbones were hollow from living on the run. He appeared sincere. "What happened?"

"Harry, maybe it's best if we—"

"—I did it. Didn't I? My parents split up because of me."
Sirius's shoulders heaved. "I'm not sure I should tell you this."

"I doubt it's worse than thinking your parents were the perfect couple, in love with each other and loved by everyone, for years and finding out your mother filed for divorce a few weeks before she died."

"James was my cousin," he said. "Our fathers were political opponents, but our families didn't hate each other. Still, there was a lot of animosity. You have to understand, Harry. With the exception of your grandmother, all the Potters and their spouses for the last four hundred years were Gryffindors. Your mother was James's perfect bride. Beautiful, Gryffindor, and muggleborn. Inbreeding wasn't yet an issue, but Mr. and Mrs. Potter wanted James to marry new blood. Every six generations or so, the Potters marry a muggleborn. It preserves the blood line."

"I understand." Bile rose in my throat. Was my mother just new blood?

"I've never held with the blood nonsense myself, but I'd say the Potters had it right. Marrying your cousin is never a good idea." Seeing as my only close cousins were male, that wasn't a concern. "On paper, Lily was perfect. Head girl. Brilliant witch. Snivellus was her only black mark. James fell head over heels. Then, right before they married, he got cold feet. I never knew what happened, but something really freaked him out. I thought the wedding was off, but two days before, James said they worked everything out. Then they were married. I thought everything was fine. Just a bad case of pre-wedding jitters, you know?"

Sirius played with a pawn on the board, face pinched in thought. "When you were born, James was the happiest I'd ever seen him. He worshiped you and your mother. I thought they would be together forever. Then a few weeks after your first birthday, Lily invited me and Peter over for dinner. We exited the floo into the middle of a war. Hexes and curses were flying everywhere. It's a miracle they didn't kill each other. James ran out the door. I went after him while Peter stayed with Lily." Worrying the hem of his sleeve, he stopped and stared into the flames flickering the fireplace.

"What happened?" I asked.

Clenching his fists, Sirius stared blankly at the board.

"Please, Sirius. I need to know."

"I'm sorry, Harry. I swore a vow. I can't say."

"What can you say?"

"Not much. The next time I saw you was the day before your parents went under the fidelius. Lily kept you away from everyone. She even stopped attending order meetings. James called me after he was served, but I can't say anything beyond what's written in the divorce petition." He returned the pawn to its previous position. "Your turn."

Disappointed, I tried to focus on the board and remember my next move. "Pawn to C3," I whispered. Barty's eyes bored into me. I knew we would be discussing this later. When Sirius reacted to the parseltongue thing, I had such high hopes that he would tell me what set my mum off, but the idiot swore a vow. He either couldn't or wouldn't say anything beyond my parents were divorcing. "Sirius, did you know I was a parslemouth?"

His sigh echoed off the stone walls. "I can't say," he said, looking me in the eye. "That should be answer enough."
Translation: he knew, but my parseltongue was covered by a poorly worded vow.

Leaning over the board, he said, "King side castle."

"Pawn to D4."

Our game resumed. After I lost two pawns and a knight, I leaned forward, studying the board, trying to map out all the possible moves so I wouldn't lose another piece. My hand hovered over my queen. If I didn't move her, she'd lose to a pawn. "Queen to—"

"You can't place yourself in check," Sirius said gently. "Look at your knights. Picture the 'L'."

One of my knights could take the pawn. I sighed with relief and directed the piece. Four turns later, Sirius placed me in check. Then he pointed out my various options and helped me think my way through the game much like Barty normally did.

"Check mate," he said, finally. My king bowed in surrender. Stauton sets were simpler than Ronald's and didn't have swords.

Sirius reset the board and made the first move. I countered and soon we were in the middle of a new game. Forty minutes later, I lost, again. No surprise. Sirius pushed the board aside and sat up. "Harry, we need to talk about what happened yesterday."

"What about it?" His tone put me on edge. Did Dumbledore get past the bubble? Did he know about the deal or that I knew more about my mum's will than I let on?

"Professor Dumbledore's worried about you, so am I. I don't know what's going on with you, but you've changed almost overnight."

I stared at him incredulously. "All I did, Sirius, was open my eyes and look at the world around me. It's not my fault Dumbledore fucked up."

"Potter," Moody barked.

I winced. No cursing and mind your manners weren't Barty's rules, but he enforced them like they were. "Sorry, professor."

Humphing, he turned the page on his book. "Mind your language, Potter. I'd hate to reinstate early morning dodging practice."

"Yes, sir," I said, cringing. Dodging practice was a classic Moody training method that Barty adored as long as someone else was on the receiving end.

"No need to be so harsh," Sirius said. A stinging hex hit his hand. Rubbing it, Sirius mumbled curse words.

"Same goes for you, Black."

"It's not like you—" Another stinging hex cut Sirius off. He glared at the relaxed auror, but didn't retaliate. My eyes roved over his body, searching. No wand. Barty must've pulled the paranoid ex-auror card, again.

"Harry," Sirius said, leaning forward, "how much of what you said last night is true?"

"Every word." Twisting a few facts, like Voldemort and Riddle being completely different people, didn't make my points less valid. Contrary to Dumbledore's opinion, conjecture wasn't evidence.
His suspicions about Riddle wouldn't stand up in a non-biased court, but what he did to my mind would land him to Azkaban in same court, which didn't exist in Magical Great Britain. Not that it mattered. Thomas preferred we fix my mind outside of ministry influence. His plans kept Dumbledore's mental machinations out of the papers and off the public record. I understood his reasoning. The ministry might use my situation to plant a few suggestions of their own, but I didn't like Dumbledore getting away with it.

Regarding me thoughtfully, Sirius leaned back on his cushions like a Sultan holding court. "I don't approve of his methods, but given the situation, his actions were necessary."

"Pitting a twelve-year-old against a basilisk was necessary?" My voice dripped with sarcasm. Sirius winced. "I know he's made some questionable decisions, but his heart was in the right place."


I closed my eyes, focusing my mind on the task at hand. The magic boiling underneath my skin receded. I opened my eyes and met Sirius's eyes. His eyes were wide, fear glistening in their depths. His breath sounded harsh like he'd just run a marathon. "Sirius, I want you to close your eyes and imagine something. Can you do that for me?"

"Why?"

"Because I'm your godson, and I'm asking you to humor me."

His mouth set into a grim line, but he closed his eyes.

"No peaking," I said when I spotted the whites of his eyes through his eye lashes. "Can't blame me for trying."

Actually, I could, but I understood that my request made him uncomfortable. Dropping your guard around Moody wasn't a wise idea, but I trusted Barty to hold his inner Moody at bay long in enough for me to make my point.

Gritting his teeth, Sirius shut his eyes completely. "Now what?"

"When you were my age, what made you you? What aspects of your personality did you treasure?"


"Okay. Now, imagine that you were the most rule-abiding student in the school. You were a regular teacher's pet, studious, hard-working. Friendless. Your greatest source of amusement is answering questions first and earning house points. You aren't friends with the other marauders. In fact, you're a Slytherin and a frequent target for their pranks."

He paled. "You're turning me into Snivellus."

"If Snape was your polar opposite, good. Now imagine you changed from a prankster to teacher's
All of those changes to your personality, everything that made you you, were the work of a single man—your illustrious headmaster Albus Dumbledore. For some reason, he wanted you friendless and obedient, so he tweaked things. At first, you don't notice anything is wrong. Then, one day, you wake up and discover there's an impostor occupying your body. Your headmaster, the man who was supposed to protect you, overwrote your entire personality to turn you into who he thought you should be because he didn't like who you were. Now imagine you have two people inside your head—the real you and the impostor—fighting constantly over which should be in control. You feel yourself splitting apart, unraveling at the seams. On bad days, you think your insane. You probably are. Open your eyes.

Sirius's eyes flew open. He stared at me like he'd never seen me before. "Last night was the first time you met the real Harry," I said calmly. "Dumbledore changed nearly everything about me. How I feel about my parents, the Dursleys, my friends. He changed me from a kid who kept his head down and disappeared into the woodwork to a reckless boy who charged into situations with no concern for his personal safety. Every year, he upped the ante, made me a little more reckless while the danger increased. He subtly encouraged me to cling to Ronald, to equate being good at chess with being a good strategist. I think he wanted me to turn to Ronald for help because Ronald's family supports Dumbledore. Plus, Ronald has an abrasive personality. Without Ronald, I wouldn't have half the enemies I do today. Dumbledore played favorites, which further isolated me from the school population. When I lay everything out, look at Dumbledore's actions, my own, and what I now understand was illegal mind magic, it really looks like Dumbledore wants to turn me into a martyr."

"That's not true. He cares about you." Sirius's protests fell on deaf ears.

"Actions speak louder than words, Sirius. If I hadn't performed accidental mind magic, I'd either be dead or in a mental ward. If you don't believe me, ask Professor Moody. He can tell you how badly Dumbledore messed up my mind."

Sirius looked to Barty for confirmation. He nodded once. "What Potter described isn't half of it."

Sirius snarled low in his throat before giving himself a small shake. "I meant what I said. I don't approve of Dumbledore's method, but I understand his reasons. After you left, he explained the prophecy. I'm sorry, Harry, but he's right. You're the only one who can defeat Voldemort. You have to. For your parents. For everyone."

Barty shot me a warning look, and I bit my tongue. Grudgingly, I swallowed my retort, opting for a different argument. "Sirius, when Dumbledore told you the prophecy, did you ask any questions?"

"There wasn't a need," he said stiffly. "The prophecy is self-explanatory."

I rolled my eyes. "So he didn't tell you that he received this so-called prophecy from Trelwlaney, a known alcoholic, while interviewing her for a teaching position? Or that her job interview was the only interview he has ever held at the Hog's Head? Or the very minor detail that the ability to see the future is called the inner eye, not the inner voice? You don't hear real prophecies; you see them."

Sirius winced. "He explained your arguments. He also said the prophecy has already begun. No matter how much you want to, you can't stop it, Harry."

"Sirius, the prophecy hasn't begun because a khrēsmoi isn't a prophecy. You were a teenager during the seventies. Ever try any muggle drugs?" I asked.

"Yeah," he said, reluctantly.
"In simple terms, Trewlaney took LSD. Then Dumbledore recorded her ravings and called it a prophecy."

"But—"

"—it's not real," I enunciated each word. "It was a trap for Voldemort. When he didn't take the bait, Dumbledore talked my parents into doing something stupid that put them back in the cross hairs. I still don't know why he attacked my parents, but I guarantee you he did not wait nearly two years to target his prophesied vanquisher." He still looked doubtful. I threw my hands up. "Sirius, maybe it's escaped your notice, but I'm only fourteen. I have no business fighting a wizard over four times my age. A wizard who by all accounts is one of the best duelists in history. If I follow Dumbledore, I will die before my seventeenth birthday. Mum died so I could live, not die fighting for an old man who has harmed me more than Voldemort has."

"Voldemort killed your parents."

Part of me would always hate Thomas for taking them away, but Sirius was living proof of what happens when you live for revenge. I had to trust that one of my parents had my best interests at heart. My father left me with someone who handed me over to man who couldn't defend himself much less me, then chased after the betrayer, who my father also left me with. In the end, I was given to a centenarian, who abandoned me on a muggle doorstep. My father's choices all struck out. So far, Mum's first choice was trying, which was more than I could say for the others.

I sighed. "Sirius, please trust that I know more about my parent's deaths than you do. I may not know why he targeted them, other than being in the Order, but there were mitigating factors that led to their deaths."

"You barely remember their deaths."

"Please drop it. Dumbledore's mind magic nearly killed the real Harry Potter. You will never convince me to fight for him." I closed my eyes. Last night, Thomas said telling Sirius I was neutral was my choice. He counseled against it, but he also explained that spending more than five years in Azkaban is considered a death sentence. Even though Sirius's animagus and unhappy thoughts protected him to a degree, he could have fifty clean psychological evaluations and still be considered crazy. Not worth the risk, I decided. I tried a different attack. "Sirius, have you considered what would've happened if the cup wasn't a portkey?"

"You'd be in Gryffindor Tower still celebrating."

"You'd be attending my funeral." Blunt, but true.

"How do you figure that?"

"The original cup wasn't a portkey. The judges were notified when I touched the cup, but a teacher was supposed to fetch me from the center of the maze. I guess they planned on escorting the triumphant champion out, but for the third time this year, they failed to provide for our safety."

"You can't apparate inside Hogwart's grounds. They had to fight their way there, just like the champions. With acromantulas, if you don't get anti-venom within fifteen minutes, you die. Odds are they wouldn't have made it in time. Without the potion Wormtail poured down my throat, we wouldn't be having this discussion. If you don't believe me, ask Madame Pomfrey. She'll confirm that I still had a generic anti-venom in my system when she treated me."

"So? If it wasn't for Karkaroff and Voldemort, you wouldn't have even been there."
"Don't forget Dumbledore. Karkaroff circumvented Dumbledore's protections around the cup, not mine or Voldemort's."

"And Dumbledore asked Moody to help you."

"To control him," Barty said softly. "Don't kid yourself, Black. Albus asked me to take Potter as my apprentice because of the apprentice contract's emotional aspects. He didn't count on me being a bit of an anarchist who prefers teaching students who can think for themselves."

Thank Merlin for that.

"Stop blaming Dumbledore for Voldemort's actions, Harry. You can't keep doing this. You have to face reality before Voldemort hunts you down and kills you. " The hunting me down part would be extremely easy. He already had my address. Killing, not so much. Unbreakable vows are nasty beasts. Ours were reciprocal for good reasons. "Dumbledore is trying to prepare you the best way he can. Look at your history. Dumbledore's always been there for you."

"Funny, I don't recall seeing him in the graveyard." Of course, my memories of the graveyard were a distant nightmare, not reality.

"Stop this, Harry. I know Dumbledore hurt you, but Voldemort won't let you stay neutral. If you don't fight him, what do you think will happen to Hermione? If he wins, he'll kill her just because she's a mud…muggleborn."

No, he wouldn't. Hermione was part of our written contract. As long as she didn't fight against him, she was safe. Persuading her to keep her butt off the battlefield was my problem, but I had a few ideas. She would be safe. Plus, Thomas's last letter discussed The Muggleborn Myth and how he planned to incorporate modern genetic research into his campaign. I made a mental note to beg for pensieve memories of Lucius's face when he informed him.

I rested my chin on my hand and regarded him coolly. "Sirius, does the word 'brainwashed' mean anything to you?"

Affronted, he glared at me. "You-know-who," he spat, "does that sort of thing, not Dumbledore."

"Really?" I drawled. "You seem awfully loyal for a man who spent over a decade in prison because the Chief Warlock of the Wizengamot couldn't be bothered with fulfilling his duties." When he started to object, I hissed, a meaningless noise, but it stopped him. "Sirius, I know you see Dumbledore as head of the Order of the Phoenix and Headmaster of Hogwarts. However, he is also Chief Warlock of the Wizengamot and Supreme Mugwump of the ICW. You cannot divorce him from these roles. They are as much, if not more, his responsibility as his other duties. Messing with my mind is a life sentence in Azkaban. It's worse than murder. When you can wrap your mind around that, maybe we can talk like rational beings. Right now, you sound distressingly like a muggle vicar proselytizing on a street corner. When you want to argue based on logic and fact, not propaganda, you know where to find me."

"Voldemort's evil, Harry. You can't ignore this. You have a duty to fight for good like your parents did."

I ground my teeth. How dare he drag my parents into this! "My mother died so I could live, and by your own admission, she had precious little to do with the Order in the months immediately preceding her death."

"But James…Harry, you're his son. James would never be neutral. He would want you to fight."
"Which explains why my father is no longer among the living," I said coldly.

"You don't understand the dark, Harry. They're evil."

I tamped down my rage, barely containing my magic. "Sirius, there is no good or evil. There is only power. Right now, Dumbledore has it. I refuse to die so he can keep it. The sooner you accept that, the sooner you can be a part of my life. Until that time, good day. Have a safe trip back to wherever it is you're staying."

I stood and strode to my room where I tripped the wards, entered, and reset them. I flung myself on my bed and buried my face in my pillow, trying to stifle my tears. My only link to my parents and I severed it. Permanently. Sirius would never accept my choice. I knew he wouldn't when I showed Barty the codicil, but I didn't expect this pain. It was like I cut out a piece of myself and set it on fire. Would it feel like this when I told Hermione? She accepted me now, but would she hate me, too?

My tears soaked into my pillow. Dyfi crawled over my arm and hissed in my ear. "Did the beast hurt you?"

"No," I answered between sobs. I hurt myself.

"Want me to bite him? I can't kill him, but if I get him in the right spot, he'll think twice before he does anything to you again."

"Don't. If you bite someone, they might kill you. You can't. You're all I have left."

"What about Barty and Hermione?"

"Hermione will abandon me when she finds out what I did."

"Ah." She rubbed her head against mine. "They still want you to fight."

"Yes." She curled up on my pillow, her tongue flicking out to taste my tears. I was intensely grateful she stayed after she healed instead of returning to the park. My life was disintegrating. Thomas's quick fix kept my personality from splitting further, but it also made me see the real damage to my psyche. What Dumbledore did to me was the worst personal violation imaginable. Thomas assured me I would recover in time, but I didn't share his confidence. Inside, I felt like Dudley's favorite toy the day after his birthday, broken beyond repair.

Barty knocked on the door, but I didn't answer. I couldn't. The door creaked open. Even footsteps approached the bed, indicating his polyjuice had worn off. The mattress dipped and a hand covered my shoulder. "You all right, kid?"

I shook my head, keeping my face buried in my pillow, embarrassed by my tears. Boys don't cry. Vernon's first rule.

"I'm sorry. When he asked if he could spend some time with you, I thought...Never mind. I was wrong. I'm sorry I put you through that."

"It's okay. If Sirius hadn't cornered me here, he would have done it at the station or at my aunt's. It's safer this way. At least, you won't report me for consorting with a known criminal," I said with a faint smile.

"Oh, yes. I can see the headline now. Sirius Black Spotted by Azkaban Escapee."
I snickered. "Don't forget Black and Crouch Masquerading as You-Know-Who."

"I'll have to tell my lord that one. Maybe he can use it."

I turned my head enough to peak out. "Thanks, Barty." I hesitated. Living under the imperius curse was similar to what Dumbledore did to me, but I wasn't sure I should ask. "Does it ever get better?"

He sighed and rubbed my shoulder. "I think we have to believe it gets better because if it doesn't, life's not worth as much. Or maybe it gets better, but we're too focused on the past to notice. Tough to say. How about I let you know when I find out?" He stood. "When you're ready, join me in the sitting room. We need to go over your summer schedule and review the plan.

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(1) Technically, Mr. Weasley said this in Chamber of Secrets, Chapter 18, but Dumbledore seemed to agree with the statement.

(2) The paper shortage in the UK began shortly after the Battle of the Atlantic began in 1939. (German u-boats frequently targeted merchant convoys.) The Battle of France in 1940 made the situation worse. You may've noticed Riddle began Hogwarts in 1938, so there is a year unaccounted for. However, the odds of him purchasing a diary when the Hogwarts fund only provided him with enough money to buy a wand with everything else being second or third hand, according to what Dumbledore tells him in the memory, are extremely low. (To have his name engraved on the diary would've also been an additional expense well outside the means of a 1938 (Depression Era in both the UK and the US) orphan. Not that this matters because in information revealed in the 2nd book, Rowling tells us the diary was manufactured by Winstanley's Bookstore and Stationers in 1943. This IS NOT possible because paper rationing began in 1942.

Even if you argue the diary was made out of the tissue-like paper available in the UK after the fall of France so you can establish it exists, quills leave slight indentations on the writing surface. Additionally, consider that quill-appropriate inks are wet. A ball-tipped fountain pen might not go through it, but if you used a quill or italic nibbed fountain pen, your paper would quickly resemble Swiss cheese. In other words, Albus Dumbledore based his horcrux theory on an item that can only exist if WWII/the War with Grindelwald never occurred or there's not a muggle world.

(3) Order of the Phoenix, Chapter 37

Chapter End Notes

Harry's playing word games throughout most of this chapter. Giving both sides of every argument isn't in his best interest. He certainly knows Riddle could've stolen the money and bought the journal before he started Hogwarts, but the words will never leave his mouth.

I've always wondered if Rowling's fact checker fell asleep while reading Chamber of Secrets. (Or maybe I spent too many summers reading history books and talking to my grandparents.) The diary's history means it technically shouldn't exist as the book describes it. This saddens me because all she had to do was have him buy the stupid book in Diagon Alley. Problem solved. Since he didn't, I intend to exploit it to the fullest extent both in Part 1 and Part 2.

Evil cackles aside, writing this with Harry unable to outright lie to Dumbledore was
quite the chore. What he says about McGonagall is true. Notice, he never says she will be his guardian. He just implies it.

Sirius isn't irredeemable. However, it will take a lot to persuade him to put Harry's interests first. He didn't in the books. He won't rush to do so in my story either.

One chapter left for Part 1.

Please read and review.
As usual, the leaving feast was bittersweet. Great food, excellent company for the most part, a disturbing speech courtesy of our esteemed headmaster. The usual, but not. There was an air of finality about the Great Hall that no one sensed but me. Barty already had next year's study schedule outlined. When he left, I wouldn't fall behind in my studies, but it wouldn't be same without him.

Thomas and I spoke by mirror nearly every evening, ironing out guardianship strategies, how we'd keep in touch, and his plans for ensuring my safety. According to him, the Order of the Phoenix already had guards stationed outside my aunt's house. Between them, daily meals delivered by his house elf, and food packages from Moody (aka Barty), I should be safe enough. Plus, Barty's mirror became an early birthday present. Even if owls and house elves failed, I'd still have a way to contact them. I didn't think I'd need the mirror, but I appreciated the sentiment.

We were both concerned about Child Services learning he knew enough about my situation to send food, but I ate a very different diet than the Dursleys. Mr. Norton said as long as I didn't accuse the Dursleys of not feeding me in writing, he could spin the meals as supporting my usual diet plan. In other words, Thomas sent me lighter fare because their heavy meals made me sick. A plausible explanation that I both feared the court wouldn't accept and they would.

Breathless from the quick jog up the stairs, not surprising considering I'd spent the entire week lazing about, I entered the sitting room for the last time. The shelves were bare. Books already packed away in Moody's trunk. The rug was rolled up, waiting to be shrunken and packed. Even the kitchen was down to a tea pot, two cups, spoons, and bowls, a stew pot for our morning oatmeal, and the yogurt crock.

Over the past eight months, these rooms became my home and refuge. Leaving them to return to the Dursleys felt wrong.

The door to Barty's room opened. He entered, levitating a pile of potions equipment, probably from the small lab he built in his closet. The trunk lid opened and the equipment neatly packed itself inside.

"Back already?" he said. "It's barely after dark. I wasn't expecting you until midnight at the earliest."

I shrugged. "I'm still a little tired from the potions."

He cocked his head. "Are you sure it's just the potions?"
"Positive. Madame Pomfrey said it's a common side effect of acromantula anti-venom. Nothing to worry about."

Barty flicked his wand and stacks of towels and toiletries flew out of his bathroom and packed themselves away. "All packed?"

"Almost. I left out my good muggle clothes and my school supplies though. I was wondering if…" My gaze landed on his trunk.

He sighed. "Keep your wand and everything you need to do your homework over the summer with you, but I'll take the rest. Worst case scenario, a house elf will deliver everything to Hogwarts on September 1st."

"Thanks."

The trunk lid slammed shut. Barty lowered himself into his arm chair, leaned back, and closed his eyes. "Are you sure about this, Potter? An EPO isn't the end of the world. So everyone knows you're relatives are kappas dressed in human skin? It's not your fault."

"It's not worth the risk, Barty."

"The only risk I see is from you returning to those horrid muggles."

I took the chair across from him and drew my knees up to my chest. "It's more complicated than that. At first, I didn't want Thomas to file an EPO because then everyone would know, but now I understand. Going solely through Family Court reveals mum's divorce. Filing an EPO involves the DMLE and will put my home life on display. Either way we do this, the press will learn far more about my private life than I want anyone to know. When Thomas met with Mr. Norton Wednesday, Mr. Norton said if the DMLE gets involved and removes me from the Dursleys, they might return me to Dumbledore's custody, pending an investigation and trial. Thomas can fight it, but odds are I will spend two to eight days in Dumbledore's custody. For my age, I'm a decent occulmens, but we both know I'm neither skilled nor experienced enough to keep Dumbledore out. Returning to his care is a death sentence. Returning to the Dursleys and letting Thomas work the family court angle is the best option."

"I still don't like it." He gnashed his teeth. "You're sure you'll be fine," Barty demanded.

"Positive. Didn't you hear?" I smirked. "My godfather's a muggle-hating, mass murderer. As long as he's on the run, they won't lay a finger on me."

My breastbone twinged. I rubbed it absently until the ache faded.

"All right?"

"Ate too much," I answered.

Barty snorted and ruffled my hair. "More like you gorged on treacle tart and ignored everything else." Stifling a yawn, he stood. "I'm off to bed. See you in the morning."

"Professor," I called when he reached his door, "are you riding the train tomorrow or is this it?"

"You're a good kid, Harry, but I don't like anyone that much. Bloody train. Why would anyone in their right mind spend nine hours trying not to vomit when they could apparate in less than thirty seconds?" He shuddered.
"So this is goodbye."

"We still have breakfast in the morning, and I'll see you plenty after the custody hearing. Good night."

Persuading Hermione and Neville to share a compartment was easy. Warding the door so we wouldn't be disturbed wasn't overly difficult, save for Hermione's incessant questions. She hated someone using runes she didn't recognize. Not that I blamed her. If something went wrong, she might be stuck in here until someone identified and countered the rune. Dealing with my nerves and fears was significantly harder.

Barty said I should show them the real me. If they were really my friends, they wouldn't abandon me. What if they weren't?

Hermione reached for Crookshank's carrier. I took a deep breath. They stood by me throughout this wretched year. They deserved to know. "Wait a minute," I said softly. "There's someone I want you two to meet." I pushed up my sleeve, revealing Dyfi. "This is Dyfi. She's been with me since third year." The rest of the story poured out to my surprised audience. Mrs. Figg, the lock box, her hibernation. I told them everything about her interspersed with hissed conversations as Dyfi ordered me to tell them about Hedwig's mouse delivery service and how well she protected me. Hedwig shot me a mock glare before tucking her head back under her wing. When I finished, stunned silence descended over our compartment. Then Neville held out his hand.

"May I touch her?" he asked.

I relayed his request to Dyfi, who agreed. Anything for a back rub. "She says it's okay."

Her tongue tickled the back of his hand, making him smile. She extended her neck, coiling around his hand. When Neville didn't jerk away, Dyfi took his inaction as an invitation and crawled up his arm. His eyes widened and he gulped, freezing.

"Tell him to scratch my head," she said imperiously.

I reached across the aisle and rubbed her head. "She likes having her head and back rubbed."

"Okay," he said, tentatively mimicking me.

Once Neville and Dyfi were settled, I turned to Hermione. "Do you remember that thing we talked about in the library? You may speak about it with Neville."

Neville frowned, looking between us. "What thing?"

"Harry has the theory, but it's—"

I cut her off before she said 'ridiculous'. "Hermione, did you investigate it on your own?"

She nibbled on her bottom lip and nodded. "But I didn't tell anyone."

"I'm glad," I cut her off. While I had good reasons for sharing my findings with Neville, I didn't want Hermione blabbing that I asked my best friend for an unbreakable vow. "Now that you've had time to think about it, what do you think?"

"I just don't know, Harry. It seems so far fetched, and now that Voldemort's back…" She trailed off.
"Harry," Neville said, drawing my attention away from Hermione, "Dumbledore says he's back, but Skeeter's article this morning supposedly quoted a letter from you, stating you never said anyone was back from the dead. You have no idea what you saw that night and anyone who says otherwise is lying. But the other articles all say you told Dumbledore Voldemort was back."

"Skeeter lied," Hermione cut in.

"Actually, she told the truth. I have a good working relationship with Rita, and I intend to keep it. I sent her a letter through my solicitor, explaining my side of things. You two weren't close enough to hear, but when I returned, I didn't say anything. I couldn't. The acromantula venom rendered my entire body numb. I barely managed to ask for Madame Pomfrey, much less tell some crazy story about Voldemort coming out of a cauldron and a duel."

"But Dumbledore said you fought him," Hermione said.

I sighed. I loved her like a sister, but she had too much faith in certain people. "I asked you guys to ride with me because you deserve to know the truth. I can't tell you everything because there are some legal issues pertaining to my late parents that still aren't settled and my solicitor told me not to discuss them yet, but you guys deserve to know the rest."

With one hand, I pulled my invisibility cloak off my lock box and summoned it. It landed in my lap. Hermione gasped. "How'd you learn wandless summoning?"

"When he wants to be, Professor Moody's an excellent teacher," I replied. Barty's secret wasn't mine to tell. After many discussions via two-way mirror, Thomas agreed that I should divulge what I'd learned about Dumbledore, my personal experience with Dumbledore, and limited details of his return, but not my relationship with Thomas, my mother's codicil, or my true mental state. If I shared Dumbledore's mental games with them, it needed to be in the context of something I accidentally repaired on my own. I cut my finger, coated my wand with blood, touched it to the lock, and hissed the password.

"What did you say?" Neville asked.

"Dudley looks like a pig with a wig," I answered. Hermione hid a smirk behind her hand, her eyes dancing, while Neville snickered. "It's true," I said defensively.

"So I've heard," Hermione answered, peering over my shoulder at the open box. "I've never seen a trunk like this before."

"Because they're barely legal. If the wrong person saw this, they'd arrest you," Neville said, wide-eyed.

I shrugged. "I know, but I needed something safe and my trunk isn't exactly private." I reached inside the second compartment and removed two individual packets of parchment, which I handed to them. Pointing to the parsle runes in the upper right-hand corner, I said, "I hate to ask this, but I need you to put a drop of blood in the corner of each parchment. Otherwise, anyone can read them."

"Who taught you blood magic?" Neville asked. Hermione, who already had her wand in her hand, paused, looking at Neville questioningly.

"I didn't. Moody arranged a parsle runes correspondence course with an American professor he met when he worked for the Ministry. I needed a way to hide those parchments and protect the information inside your minds. It's not a perfect solution," I cautioned them. "It just scrambles the information. A determined legilimens can still find it, but it'll take them a month or two to put the
jigsaw puzzle together. I don't want what happened to me to happen to you, so I asked Dr. Leeds for help."

"As in Joseph Leeds?" Hermione asked, looking green.

"Yes. Brilliant teacher, but strict. Snape's grading is gentle in comparison."

"He teaches Dark Arts," Hermione protested.

"He's an archaeologist and a scientist, not a dark wizard," I said.

Neville placed a hand on Hermione's arm. "My great-aunt told me once that other countries don't feel the same way about the Dark Arts as we do. Uncle Algie said it was because their ministries aren't allowed to line edit the dictionary. Dark doesn't necessarily mean evil. To some, it means old, unknown, or even secretive. Most family spells are technically dark arts because they aren't shared with anyone outside the family."

"Oh," she said, still appearing unsure.

In a bold show of good faith, Neville pulled a knife out of his pocket, pricked his finger, and placed a drop in the corner of each of his parchments. The sheets glowed purple for a few minutes. Then the spell set and he handed the parchments to Hermione, who stared at them blankly.

"They're just old herbology notes," she said.

"I set the spell to show something I thought you would keep. Neville's is herbology notes. Yours is transfiguration."

"Is it safe?" she asked. Neville and I both nodded. Resolutely, Hermione copied Neville, using her wand instead of a knife, and set the spell. "Now what?"

"Read them. Everything's there, including Dumbledore's insane prophecy and all the reasons I think it's crap. Neville, I hate to dump this on you, but Moody told me your parents were in the Order of the Phoenix along with mine." He eyed me warily. "With the right spin, the prophecy could apply to you. If you don't want to be sucked into a war, you need to know about it and how to counter it."

"He's really back," Hermione said breathlessly. She would fixate on the most irrelevant point.

"Read first. Then I'll answer your questions as best I can." Neville transferred Dyfi back to my lap and turned sideways in his seat, drawing his knees up to his chest and leaning his back against the wall. I kept an eye on Hermione, but focused most of my attention on Neville, the other potential Dumbledore pawn. I wondered if his timid nature was the result of his upbringing or Dumbledore's meddling.

Hermione gasped and looked at me with tears in her eyes. "Harry? Did he really…"

I nodded, wondering if she referred to the mental violations or the prophecy.

"But why would anyone change your personality? Are we really friends or did he make you befriend me?"

I reached across the aisle and gripped her knee. "I don't care how we became friends. You're still my best friend. I'm glad he did that because otherwise, I wouldn't have gotten to know you."
Neville snorted. "Or maybe you would have talked to her on the train like I did. You're right about
Ron. No one wanted to be friends with you because it meant getting hexed by the Slytherins
whenever he couldn't keep his big mouth shut."

I winced. "Sorry."

"Not your fault. The prat stuck to you like spello-tape for three years. I'm just happy you wised
up," Neville said and returned to his reading.

Over the past six months, his timidness mostly disappeared around us, but it still showed
sometimes. I was both pleased that he felt safe enough with us to speak his mind and dismayed that
it took me three years to realize the truth.

"Yes," Hermione squealed, pumping her fist in the air. "I was right. I knew it!"

"Knew what?" I asked.

"Parseltongue is genetic."

"You should read The Muggleborn Myth. The Canadians did some fascinating research into
muggleborns a few years ago. The study's primary author was a vampire, so it's not exactly legal in
the UK. If you promise not to get caught reading it, I'll lend it to you."

"You have it?" She nearly drooled at the prospect.

"Not at the moment. I lent my copy to an acquaintance. You can borrow it after he returns it."

"How long will that be?" she asked, clearly intending to beg, borrow, or steal another copy if the
wait was too long.

"A few weeks." Long enough for Lord Voldemort to give Lucius Malfoy a heart attack.

Neville watched our exchange with interest, but didn't comment. An hour passed. I bought
pumpkin pasties off the trolley and a few sweets to supplement the lunch I paid Dobby to pack for
us. After re-warding the door, I set the food out and waited for them. Neville was pouring over the
parchments for the fourth time, occasionally frowning or nodding his head. Hermione was cross
referencing my notes with her old divination textbook, which was almost useless, and bound back
issues of the prophet that she had owl ordered. I cleared my throat. They both looked up, startled. I
extended my hand towards our lunch.

Neville's eyes widened. "Where did you get this?"

"Bought it from Dobby."

"For how much?" Hermione asked.

"Five knuts. He didn't charge me for the food. Said Hogwarts wouldn't miss it." I gave her a
pointed look. "The elves would have given it to me, but I didn't want you to waste perfectly good
food."

"Prat," she said, punching me on the arm.

Neville merely rolled his eyes and fixed a plate. "Harry," he said between bites, "you know about
my parents, right?"

"Yes," I said after I swallowed.
"We've had mind healers, including three master legilimens, examine them. I can't perform mind magic, but I'm very familiar with it. I don't know if mind magic's genetic or not, but it's almost like some have the potential to master it while others merely learn the basics."

"It's genetic." I fished in my lock box for the genetic test and passed it to Neville. Hermione looked over his shoulder, eyes widening when she saw my results.

"I saved some potion and test sheets for you guys. You can take them later."

Hermione grinned, but Neville remained sober. He set my test aside. "Accidental magic is powerful. Noticing Dumbledore's changes is believable, but fixing it requires a master. If you tried on your own, you'd go insane. At some point, you met with someone who either fixed your head or patched you together enough to function. If it's a patch, how long will it last?"

I inhaled deeply. Thomas warned me about Neville. He was wizard raised. Given his parents' situation, he might know a great deal more about mind magic than we suspected. If that happened, he said he trusted my judgment, but not to give away the farm, meaning spin things as best I could. "I don't know how much I can tell you."

"Why not?" Hermione demanded.

"Before I left Hogwarts, I was advised by someone—"

"—Moody?" Hermione asked.

"No," I answered. "He said if I trusted you two, I should share this with you, but it might put you in danger. Dumbledore went to great lengths to change me into who he wanted me to be. He was extremely subtle. I only noticed because English isn't my first language. When I meditated, I sensed things he changed. Then I'd show Moody the spot and he'd help me identify what changed by pinpointing the spots where the language shifted to parseltongue. On my own, I acquired instruction from a master legilimens, who walked me through some exercises I could safely do alone. They helped me hold my mind together, but the bulk of the repairs happened after the third task."

Hermione covered her mouth with her hand, and Neville stared at me in shock. "By Circe, you arranged the portkey," Neville said in disbelief.

"What choice did I have? Dumbledore kept asking me for meetings, pulling me aside after class. He all but volunteered to help 'fix' me. My trust wouldn't pay for a master legilimens because Dumbledore's a co-trustee and he is a master legilimens, not to mention my guardian. I was scared that if I let Dumbledore in, he'd kill me and replace me with the boy-who-lived. I didn't know what else to do." It came out in a rush. Finished, I hung my head. Arms wrapped around me. I stiffened, unaccustomed to hugs. Curly hair tickled my nose. I raised my arms and touched Hermione's back.

"I don't hate you, Harry." Over her shoulder, I eyed Neville. A little pale, but not ballistic. Better than I expected.

"I don't forgive you for scaring me half to death, but you didn't have a choice," he said at last. "If even half of what you figured out is true, our society might be better off if he's really back. Dear Merlin, I knew Gran disliked Dumbledore. She blamed him for Dad and Mum, and she gripes about his politics sometimes, but I never imagined...You traded, didn't you? A body for your mind."

I nodded tightly. "And an unbreakable vow. Prophecy or not, we can no longer kill each other."
Neville's jaw dropped. "You didn't join him, did you?"

"No. I'm neutral. Totally neutral. I might have to choose a side eventually, but not yet."

"You-know-who allowed that?" Neville asked, voice dropping to a whisper.

"He was surprisingly reasonable. There were mitigating circumstances, so I don't know how he'd treat anyone else. Although I did include you two in our contract. As long as you don't take up arms against him, he'll leave you alone."

"And you believe Voldemort?" Hermione screeched.

Neville pursed his lips. "Hermione, I'm not saying I trust You-Know-Who, but think for a minute. If they swore an unbreakable vow, then they didn't have one when Harry arrived. He had ample opportunity to kill Harry, but he didn't take it. But Dumbledore... Why do you trust him? You're a muggleborn. You only discovered the magical world four years ago. Dumbledore's just the headmaster of your school. You know him by reputation and a few chance interactions, but he's not a member of your family. You haven't known him your entire life. You know very little about him, but your willing to trust him over your best friend. I admit some of Harry's theories are far fetched, but they're plausible. Harry makes some very valid points. You haven't given any rational reasons for dismissing them, so why are you?"

"I don't know," she said. Pensive, she stared out the window at the passing moor. "Harry, do you mind if I let Crookshanks out? I won't let him attack Dyfi."

"She can let the fur ball loose, but one wrong move and I bite," Dyfi hissed. I relayed the message much to Neville's amusement. Hermione huffed and released Crookshanks, who she clutched to her breast as she stared out the window, silently watching farm fields flash past. Neville set up a chessboard on the seat across from me and showed me a sticking charm he'd learned from an older student. It kept the chessmen from sliding, but left them free to move. Lovely charm. For the remainder of our journey, we played chess, Neville chatted about his summer plans, which all involved his Uncle's greenhouse, and Hermione alternated between staring out the window and skimming through my parchments.

As the train pulled into the station, she situated Crookshanks in his basket and turned to me. "I'll try, Harry. If they start attacking muggles and muggleborns, I can't promise I'll stay out of it, but I'll try."

"Thank you," I replied, knowing her answer was the best I'd get from her.

Chapter End Notes

Part 1 is now complete.

Early this morning, I realized I had two Part 2 opening scenes. Although both had similar plots, they were extremely different. Mirabelle P kindly read my ramblings about why I liked one option over the other and helped me pick what I'm now convinced is the right direction. Of course, two different openings meant two different Part 1 endings, which is why I'm a little late getting this out.

A few of you already know this from review responses, but now that Part 1 is finished,
I thought I would share what I feel is the most disturbing scene in the series. I'm sure a few of you are thinking 'it's when Voldemort does the creepy I can touch you know thing when Harry's tied to a gravestone'. That made the main villain look like a pedophile and was in questionable taste, but it didn't disturb me half as much as what happened later.

To me, the summary execution of Barty Crouch, Jr. at the end of Book 4 is the most disturbing scene in the entire series. We don't see the execution. We're told about it by Minerva McGonagall, but it's still the most disturbing. In later books, especially when Fudge loses his office, Rowling implies that the Ministry of Magic functions as a liberal democracy operating under a constitutional monarchy. In that political structure, summary executions are almost impossible unless they're carried out by vigilantes or you lose control of your police force. That one was committed by the highest level of government and went unpunished tells me more about the magical government than I ever wanted to know. (Actually, it made me wonder why Voldemort didn't have hordes of people joining him.) I realize Rowling likely wrote this improbable scene as a means to distance Fudge from Dumbledore. In many ways, it set up the rift between the two in Book 5. However, what it says about their society...

It was a clear case of politicide, which means either the government she described in later books (especially with the minister's being elected, a sticky issue I'll tackle in Part 2) is a carefully constructed front for a greater authority or doesn't exist at all.

Part 2 will be posted on FF as a continuation of The Well Groomed Mind, not as separate document. On AO3, I plan on using their series feature to group the two stories together.

Thank you all for sticking with me so far.

Please read and review.

Works inspired by this one: Cover for "The Well Groomed Mind" by Makoyi

Please drop by the archive and comment to let the author know if you enjoyed their work!